

Consent and Choice: Re-Thinking PIV Sex  
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Recently I came across multiple radical feminist articles and blogs about something that I had not even recognized as a controversy: heterosexual PIV sex (penis-in-vagina sex). The article that had me the most gripped was titled “PIV is always rape, ok?” written by blogger Witchwind<sup>1</sup>. Now, this is a massive and heavy claim to make, as it condemns the majority of sexually active people in the United States as either rapists or victims, when they may not self-identify as such. It’s easy to read the title and immediately reject it as radical extremist ranting, and give it no more thought. But I believe that it is a feminist’s duty to hear all sides of the arguments within the ideology of feminism in order to make a well-informed opinion.

So, that’s what I did. I read the article, and several others, all of which claim that PIV sex is inherently rape. The interesting part for me was that I agreed with much of the argument being made, which was heavily upsetting to my own personal sexual identity and currently heterosexual relationship. As a fairly liberal feminist, I’ve always believed in self-empowerment through acceptance and ownership of your body. I’m also a proponent of sex-positivity, and actively fight slut shaming practices that place women in unhealthy and difficult double standards. But despite agreeing with parts of the arguments against PIV sex, and after many hours of situating my opinion, I conclude that not all PIV sex is rape. This article is my rebuttal.

First, let’s lay out the general argument that radical feminists use for their claim that all PIV sex is rape. I think it will be useful to separate arguments I agree with from those I disagree with. The argument claims that PIV intercourse is inherently harmful to women because with every act, even when using protection, there is the risk of disease, pain, and pregnancy, which can cause further illness or death. Even women on birth control such as the pill, patch, or an IUD are risking dangerous side effects in order to protect themselves from pregnancy. The argument then follows that if PIV sex is inherently harmful for women, and that knowingly placing someone in a harmful position is bad, then it must also be true that PIV sex is bad. Secondly, radical feminists point to the systematic oppression of women to say that in the patriarchal society in which we live, women cannot give consent. Women do not, in fact, have choice in any

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<sup>1</sup> Witchwind, “PIV is always rape, ok?.” *radical wind: blowing through female outerspace* (blog), Dec 15, 2013.

matter, precisely because of the oppressed nature in which we live, where our choices are already so limited. And of course, any intercourse without consent is rape. As a sort of additive to the argument, Witchwind mentions that the purpose of the vagina is not to be penetrated, but rather to expel a baby, and that penetration is not necessary for pregnancy<sup>2</sup>.

An overall flaw with this argument is that it ignores many people. The first part claims that PIV intercourse is inherently harmful for all women due in part to the possible result of pregnancy. It is an argument biased toward able-bodied people as it assumes that all persons engaging in PIV sex are able to bear children, which is of course not the case and is a real problem for many people. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services approximately 10 percent of women in the United States cannot conceive naturally and need to rely on technological assistance for pregnancy<sup>3</sup>. The argument also leaves out any non-heterosexual sex acts, but is unclear if this omission is because this form of sex is not considered rape or if the author simply didn't consider the possibility. Similarly, any non-penetrative forms of foreplay are neglected. This definition of rape also makes it impossible for women to rape men, which is problematic as it omits the experiences of many men in this country.

Either way, I disagree with these initial two parts of the argument, the first of which describes possible harm to women through PIV sex. It is true that engaging in any form of sex runs the potential risk of contracting some sort of disease. But then again, any time we come into contact with doorknobs, or shake someone's hand, or eat a hamburger, or take the subway, we are subjugating ourselves to the possibility of contracting some disease or another. We cannot prevent all disease; we can only do our best to protect ourselves using the knowledge we have available and try to live responsible lives. This could range from washing our hands regularly to consistently using condoms. Next, there is the part of the argument that claims that knowingly placing someone in a harmful position is inherently bad. Although it may be bad, knowingly placing others in potentially harmful positions is something that we do all the time. For example, when a parent puts their child in the back of their car to bring them to school, even with seatbelts

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<sup>2</sup> Witchwind,. "PIV is always rape, ok?." *radical wind: blowing through female outerspace* (blog), Dec 15, 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Office of Women's Health, "Infertility Fact Sheet." Last modified July 15, 2012. Accessed March 20, 2014.

and careful driving there is always the possibility of injury or death through a car accident. Tens of thousands of people die annually from car crashes<sup>4</sup>, whereas only 650 women die annually from pregnancy-related complications<sup>5</sup>. But this does not mean that we should stop driving cars, and it does not mean that we should stop having PIV sex.

The next part of the argument that I disagree with states that in a society that systematically oppresses women, women cannot truly have choice. As a feminist (as a person) I cannot make the argument that women are not oppressed in the US. Women are paid significantly less money than men for equal work<sup>6</sup>. Women are systematically objectified in the media, which has very real everyday consequences such as the prevalence of street harassment. Women are confined to restrictive gender roles that influence our appearance, opinions, career choices, and just about every aspect of our lives. But the totalitarian argument that women have no choice is strategically a bad feminist argument to make. Women may have fewer choices than men, but to say that they have none whatsoever ignores any activist progress that has been made and defeats the purpose of any further activism. In any situation in which there are people fighting against a collective cause, claiming that their cause is hopeless both defeats the purpose of fighting and denigrates all of the strides that have been made in the history of fighting. We should avoid talking about choice in a way that is so entirely removed and macro-level, because in doing so we belittle the choices women make on a daily basis. As feminists we should fight to further liberate one another, not to place more restrictions on one another by manipulating the meaning of the word choice.

Witchwind argues that another problem with PIV sex is that it is misusing the vagina. "The vagina's primary function," Witchwind writes, "isn't to be penetrated by a penis but to eject a baby for birth."<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Witchwind asserts that penetration within PIV sex is

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<sup>4</sup> Hitti, Miranda. "Car Crashes Kill 40,000 in U.S. Every Year." *Fox News*, Feb. 03, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "Reproductive Health." Last modified March 07, 2013. Accessed March 20, 2014.

<sup>6</sup> *The Simple Truth About the Gender Pay Gap*. Washington, DC: The American Association of University Women, 2014, 3.

<sup>7</sup> Witchwind, "PIV is always rape, ok?." *radical wind: blowing through female outerspace* (blog), Dec 15, 2013.

“completely unnecessary for conception,”<sup>8</sup>. Both of these arguments rely on the assumption that using an organ in any form other than what it is biologically intended for is a bad thing. I find this sort of policing of the body to be very problematic. We often tell one another what we should and should not do with our bodies, from dieting advice to how to avoid yellowing teeth, but ultimately how we treat our bodies is a personal decision. Relying solely on the biological function of our organs to dictate how we act is unnecessary and limiting. In any case, we misuse our organs all the time. Piercing our ears has nothing to do with the ear’s function for hearing, it’s painful and purely aesthetic, but it is our right and our choice. We get pleasure from the way it looks. Similarly, although the function of the vagina may not be for penetration, some people take pleasure in the act, and it is their right and their choice to participate.

There are parts of Witchwind’s argument with which I agree. I feel that the construction of PIV sex is highly problematic. Witchwind writes “men need to groom us into it,”<sup>9</sup> referring to the cultural propaganda that we are exposed to from a young age that emphasizes PIV sex as attractive and desirable. I think that these actions cause people who are not emotionally or physically ready to feel pressured to have PIV sex. Common slang language about PIV sex leaves little room for the idea of a shared or mutually pleasant experience. And, as Witchwind points out, women spend far more time and money, not to mention emotional stress and societal pressure, to “make ourselves decorative for male sexual consumption,” often doing such painful and expensive things as hair removal, wearing make-up, going on diets and working out, buying expensive clothing, and so on<sup>10</sup>. It makes up much of what we have societally known to constitute sex. Male pleasure and the male experience often define sex, validate sex, and have control over sex. It’s common for women to experience pain and discomfort during consensual sex<sup>11</sup>, and difficult for women to voice this truth, often leaving them less satisfied than their male partners.

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<sup>8</sup> Witchwind,. "PIV is always rape, ok?." *radical wind: blowing through female outerspace* (blog), Dec 15, 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> "Frequently Asked Questions and Gynecologic Problems." *The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists* (blog), May , 2011. [www.acog.org](http://www.acog.org) (accessed March 23, 2014).

Instead of such a condemning model of sex, in which it is necessary for persons in sexually active heterosexual relationships to be labeled as either rapist or victim, I suggest that we consider sex in a way similar to that proposed by feminist Thomas Millar, who writes of a performance model of sex<sup>12</sup>. In this model, sex is a collaboration that requires two consenting and enthusiastic partners to perform. Millar uses the metaphor of a musician or dancer, who would never be out of step with their partner, at the risk of ruining the song or dance. The commodity aspects of Witchwind's give-and-take portrayal of sex are inconceivable in Millar's model of sex, because this model is more about teamwork and partnership than conquest and ownership<sup>13</sup>. Using this model, we should push for a society that equally values female pleasure and male pleasure. We should fight for respect and openness, and an atmosphere around sex that allows for complete honesty and trust. In short, we should continue fighting for all of the things that our fellow feminists have been fighting for all these years: equality.

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<sup>12</sup> Millar, Thomas M. "Toward a performance model of sex" in *Yes Means Yes! Visions of Female Sexual Power and a World Without Rape*, eds. J. Friedman and J. Valenti. (Seal Press), 25-41.

<sup>13</sup> Millar, "Toward a performance," 38.

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