The book *Sexual Salvation: Affirming Women’s Sexual Rights and Pleasures* by Naomi B. McCormick examines women’s sexuality through a feminist approach. Along with discussing the positive aspects of female sexuality, she also delves into issues of sexual victimization. Throughout the book she addresses the various assumptions and biases of sexuality, including a heterosexuality assumption, and a Caucasian, middle-class bias. Although she works hard to challenge these biases, she is not without her own, which include a feminist and Western bias. Even with these few faults, McCormick manages to present a perspective on female sexuality that few have yet to manage.

McCormick splits feminists into two categories, “radical” feminists and “liberal” feminists, whose different arguments are presented in her book in almost every section. The “radical” feminists take a sex negative view, especially when it comes to heterosexual sex, which they believe women need to liberate themselves from. They also tend to be anti-pornography or, at least, anti-certain types of pornography that they deem violent and subjecting to women. The “liberal” feminists tend to be more sex positive, believing a woman should take control over her sexuality and, by doing so, can liberate herself to be an equal to men. They are not against heterosexual sex or pornography. They believe that it is dangerous to censor any type of pornography for fear that it will inhibit people’s personal freedoms. Though both feminist encampments agree for the need to stop sexual exploitation of children and women, they may differ on what they view as exploitative. For example, “liberal” feminists do not necessarily think all prostitution is exploitative but “radical” feminists do (two feminists views are the views presented throughout the book.

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**SEXUAL SALVATION: AFFIRMING WOMEN’S SEXUAL RIGHTS AND PLEASURES**  
**NAOMI B. MCCORMICK, 1994**

Review by Rebecca Polmateer  
Department of Anthropology  
SUNY - Potsdam - Alpha of New York

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Sexuality is looked at almost exclusively as a social construct in *Sexual Salvation*. McCormick sees sexuality as determined by a person’s culture, not their biology. This is in stark contrast to researchers such as William Masters and Virginia Johnson. Masters and Johnson looked at sexuality biologically, and made a model of sex which was broken into four phases: excitement, plateau, orgasm, and resolution. This model saw sex as the product of biology and not something that culture played a role in. Because they constructed sex in this fashion, they did not separate male and female responses to sex (they were seen as having the same phases) and they also had a major heterosexual bias (Masters and Johnson 1966). On the other hand, since McCormick structures sex culturally, she sees sex as something that can deviate from these phases. Also, her social construction allows for men and women to have a completely different sexuality because it is dependent on culture, not biology. She can also allow for homosexuality and bisexuality in her model. She is allowed to see sex in a less biased manner by looking at it culturally. She also believes that almost all female sex problems are not biological but problems psychologically from past sexual abuse (McCormick 1994). According to McCormick, “childhood sexual abuse, rape, and other forms of sexual assault are so common among the general population that sexual trauma must always be considered as a possible cause of women’s sexual problems” (1994:194-195). However, it is difficult to separate sex completely from biology, so this social constructionist approach may not provide the complete model for female sexuality. It always puts the assumption on psychology when addressing women’s sexual problems, so when there may actually be a physical problem it could be ignored.

McCormick addresses the issue of prostitution in *Sexual Salvation*, where she addresses both sides of the issue of whether or not prostitution leads to the further degradation of women or is a way for some women to take control of their sexual lives. Though she presents both sides of the issue and seems to genuinely believe that not all prostitution is wrong, she seems to concentrate mostly on the victimization of some prostitutes and the issue of sexual slavery of children in other countries. She acknowledges that prostitution can be a safe, well-paying job for some women, as long as they are allowed to have rights to social benefits in countries and a safe working environment. However she states that prostitutes are not entitled to benefits, especially in countries like the United States, where it is illegal for the most part. Also, there is still a good proportion of women in the sex trade that have unfair and unsafe working conditions (McCormick 1994).

McCormick’s view on prostitution is moderate compared to that of women like Christine Overall. According to Overall, the problem with prostitution is that “sex work is an inherently unequal practice defined by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy” (Overall 1992:724). Overall believes that
prostitution will never increase a women’s power because it will always be mostly women who provide a service to fulfill men’s sexual needs, which by nature will always lead to inequality (Overall 1992). This view contrasts with McCormick’s in the sense that she believes it can increase a woman’s power, but only if the woman is able to have control of her own trade and have safe working conditions; without these it is still a form of victimization (McCormick 1994).

McCormick takes a moderate view when it comes to prostitution.

Along with her discussion of victimization in the sex trade workers chapter, McCormick has an entire chapter called “Sexual Victimization and Pornography”. This chapter discusses such topics as rape, sexual coercion, child sexual abuse and pornography. This chapter mostly focuses on male victimizing of women, but includes a small section about women who victimize men or other women. It discusses the results of being victimized and the effects it can have on female sexuality. It also, delves into the feminist arguments over whether or not pornography should be censored because of the fear that it may promote male dominance and rape. McCormick presents both sides of this argument, but in the end tends to lean towards the anti-censorship side. She believes that there is not enough proof linking pornography as a cause of violent crimes like rape. She also believes that promoting any type of censorship may be dangerous to freedom of speech and could lead to censorship of beneficial materials, like pamphlets on birth control. However, this chapter does seem out of place in the book, along with the chapter on prostitution. It causes the book to be broken up strangely, jumping from chapters on love and intimacy, to those on victimization, back to those on sexual fulfillment (McCormick 1994). This was a chapter discussing some important yet hard issues, and therefore seemed a little out of place from the rest of the book.

One of the main assumptions that McCormick states she wants to disparage is the heterosexual assumption of female sexuality. She includes discussions of lesbians and bisexuals in every chapter of the book. She also includes a whole chapter on them exclusively. Whenever she discusses an area of sexuality in a heterosexual perspective, she makes sure to include a discussion on the lesbian and bisexual perspective. She believes that to give a truly holistic account of women’s sexuality, women who love women should never be excluded. She also believes that the heterosexual model should not necessarily be applied to heterosexual women. The typical heterosexual penile-vaginal intercourse is not the only type of sex, and heterosexual couples should explore what makes them feel good, even if it is only kissing and cuddling. She also is a proponent of masturbation. According to her, knowing ones own body is important for sexual satisfaction (McCormick 1994). She believes that sex researchers need to study other areas of sexuality and abandon their heterosexual bias.
McCormick also states she wants to challenge the white, middle-class bias that has pervaded sexual research for many years. She includes in her book discussions of other cultures and classes within the United States. In her chapter called “Models of Sexual Fulfillment” she includes sections on low-income, urban women, African-American women, North American Indians and Inuit’s, Latinos, and Asian Americans. She even includes sections on middle-aged or older women, and women who are physically disabled and chronically ill. She looks at these groups culturally and relates to their sexuality (McCormick 1994). She believes in a holistic approach to the study of sexuality, so she includes sections on groups which have largely been ignored by researchers.

Like all researchers, McCormick is not without her own biases and assumptions. The whole book is written from a feminist viewpoint, with the understanding that, in general, the feminist approach is the right model for sexual research and therapy.

However, McCormick does realize her own bias and admits to it, “Feminist sexology is not the same as nonsexist research” (McCormick 1994:239). She goes on to speak about feminists researchers, “she or he is guided by feminist political theory” (McCormick 1994:239). The whole book may contain the viewpoints of two different groups (radical and liberal feminists), but both are feminists. She freely admits that feminist researchers usually study one sex (male or female) exclusively (McCormick 1994).

McCormick has a Western bias to her writing and ideas. Though she is culturally sensitive for the most part, she still offers up information that can be interpreted as biased in a couple of areas. Whenever she mentions female genital surgery, she relates it in a negative light. She focuses on the fact that female genital surgery, especially when the clitoris is removed, takes away from a female’s sexual pleasure. She also relates it to an increase of a woman’s chance of contracting a sexually transmitted disease because of bleeding from the wounds. She does not appear to be culturally sensitive to an ancient custom in many civilizations. Also, she is so careful to include all orientations in her discussions, yet fails to mention transsexuals at all. Therefore she has a two-gender bias in her book and never considers the sexuality of a genetic female who identifies as a male or a genetic male who identifies as a female (McCormick 1994).

McCormick is not careful about some of the wording in her book, which could alienate certain groups of women. She says in her book that she hopes it is “a step in the right direction” (McCormick 1994:239) in getting a woman-affirming sex education out in the mass media and therefore available to everyone. However, she is not sensitive to all groups of women with some of her
comments, and therefore will not get her message across to everyone. Throughout the book she is careful to include multiple sides to arguments and include groups of women usually left out of research, yet she makes a comment equating the popular magazines *Field and Stream* and *American Rifleman* to high frequencies of rape. According to her, these magazines are “macho” and associated with hyper-masculine men who are more predisposed to rape. She makes this correlation twice in the book, once even saying “sales of ‘macho’ outdoors magazines are more positively related to the number of reported rapes in a region than is the sale of sexually oriented men’s magazines” (McCormick 1994:163). The problem with correlating hunting magazines, and therefore hunting, to rape is the fact that there are many women who hunt and read these magazines who automatically feel alienated from the book. Also, many women know very loving men who read these magazines and hunt, who may also feel alienated by this comment. The comment is not backed by many sources, except one called the *Question of Pornography*, which appears to be more of a study of pornography not hunting magazines (McCormick 1994). This comment alienates an entire group of women who are hunters or loves someone who is a hunter. This shows how even one, seemingly small comment can turn a group of women against a book or an author.

*Sexual Salvation: Affirming Women’s Sexual Rights and Pleasures* by Naomi B. McCormick examines female sexuality. The book attempts to instill a feeling of power and control to women over their sexuality. Throughout the book, McCormick hopes to make clear the social constructions that are shaping female sexuality, and the assumptions and biases that are shaping female sexuality research. Although, McCormick does freely admits that she also has her own assumptions and biases while conducting research. The book attempts to enlighten women on why they think the way they do about sexuality, and with that knowledge empower them to change it.

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