

Can You be a Feminist and be Sexy?

Alison Piepmeier

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In my office, I have two posters of women in states of undress. One shows a naked woman's torso, with her hands clutched—I think gleefully—between her legs. The other shows a woman's calves, with her jeans bunched on the floor, as if she's just pushed them down. The one bright splash of color in this image is the woman's red thong nestled in the folds of her jeans. Both were posters for productions of *The Vagina Monologues*, the play that celebrates women's bodies and women's empowerment while raising money to combat violence against women.

My students love the posters. They see them as playful, sexy, fun.

But some of my colleagues are uneasy. One actually gasped in horror when she saw the jeans-and-thong poster for the first time. When I showed it to my brother, a twenty-something who grew up with me and is a card-carrying feminist like the rest of my family, he said, "It's the best *Vagina Monologues* poster I've ever seen—but at first I thought you were showing it to me to say how sexist it is."

Sexy, therefore sexist. There's clearly this idea out in the world that if something's a turn on, it's anti-feminist. A woman with her pants down, or with her hands between her legs: that's titillating, so it's bad for women, right?

It's easy to see how people can get confused. Our culture's definitions of "sexy" have, in fact, tended to be pretty damned sexist. The idea of sexiness that's foisted onto girls and women these days often has more to do with turning men on than with women themselves getting to enjoy their own sexual pleasure. For examples, look no further than the "beautiful corpses" of *America's Next Top Model*, or the girl who gets a credit card swiped down her crack in the Nelly "Tip Drill" video, or the whole *Girls Gone Wild* enterprise. Or how about injections that paralyze facial muscles to get rid of wrinkles, or the kind of pathological thinness that gets paraded around every woman's magazine? These aren't sexy—they're sexist.

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Women's bodies, in all their incredible variety, are women's best playgrounds, and we should enjoy them. Feminism is all about that. It's about consensual physical fun, experimentation, and great egalitarian sex. It's about women getting to *feel* sexual rather than just performing some stereotyped version of sexist sexiness for men.

And for me feminism is also about rethinking sexiness—broadening it, radicalizing it, and actually experiencing it. Another *Cosmo* list of "40 ways to drive him wild in bed" is tired. But stores like Babeland and Good Vibrations that sell sex toys and sex education to help women get off in bigger and better ways? Educators like Betty Dodson whose columns and films (like *Viva la Vulva*) celebrate women's anatomy? Posters that show women as sexual agents, having fun with themselves? Yes, yes, yes!

*Alison Piepmeier is director of the Women's and Gender Studies Program at the College of Charleston. Her books include *Catching a Wave: Reclaiming Feminism for the 21st Century* and *Out in Public: Configurations of Women's Bodies in 19th Century America*. For more information, visit www.cofc.edu/wgs.*