In 1908, following five years of active involvement in the German Society for the Fight against Venereal Diseases, German feminist and social democrat Henriette Fürth finally felt compelled to publicly criticize the organization’s advocacy of premarital chastity and medically regulated prostitution as the best measures to prevent venereal infection and regenerate sexual life. In *The Sex Problem and Modern Morals* (1908), Fürth asserted that these measures were deeply flawed, and not merely because they supported men’s sexual pleasure at women’s expense. What was more troubling for Fürth, particularly in light of the many “well-educated representatives of science” who populated the society, was the fact that these proposals were premised, she claimed, upon unscientific beliefs regarding female sexuality.¹ Widely held beliefs within and beyond

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¹ Henriette Fürth, *Das Geschlechtsproblem und die moderne Moral* (Gautsch b. Leipzig: Felix Dietrich, 1908), 4. Subsequent citations of this work appear parenthetically in the text.
science regarding men’s greater sexual need—and women’s lesser sexual desire—were frequently mobilized to defend and legitimize prostitution. According to Fürth, the consensus regarding “the lesser sexual activity of the female and her resulting lesser sexual needs” was not “based on biological facts,” but rather upon male bias and male-centered morality (4–5). To counter prevailing views, Fürth drew upon evolutionary theory, physiology, and anthropology to show that the sciences had found no essential difference between the male and female sex drive in either the plant or the animal world (5). For Fürth, science had proven that men and women experienced equal amounts of innate sexual “need” (6, 14, 21).

On the basis of the existence of organic sexual impulses, Fürth argued that women had as much right to sexual experience and pleasure as men (14). Empowering women to act upon their natural sexual needs, Fürth asserted, would undermine the very need for prostitution as so doing would ultimately help to create conditions of sexual equality and establish a new sexual ethic grounded upon mutual love, responsibility, self-determination, and self-control (12, 17). For Fürth, acknowledging women’s sexual impulses and needs was not just important to the specific goal of ending prostitution: it was a matter of existential importance and social justice. As she insisted in her text, “Also in sexual things [women] must feel themselves as humans of flesh and blood and also in this realm demand their rights, their human rights” (16).

Henriette Fürth and the male physicians and scientists she challenged were part of a wide-ranging debate regarding the true nature of female sexuality in early twentieth-century Germany. The debate was an outgrowth of the long-standing scientific, social, and political interest in female sexuality that was reinvigorated beginning in the later nineteenth century, and gained in strength in the first decade of the twentieth century as a result of feminists’ challenges to the regulation of prostitution, women’s unequal status in marriage, and the rights and well-being of mothers, including unwed mothers. Reflecting the crucial role of Darwinian evolution, medicine, and psychiatry in these debates, these turn-of-the-century investigations into female sexuality centered on the female
sex drive, alternately referred to as a sex instinct, sex need, sex impulse, sex feeling, and libido.\(^2\)

The general concept of a sex drive was hard to pin down, and uncertainty surrounded its function and manifestation: how it worked, where it was physiologically or psychologically rooted, and whether it was a singular corporeal phenomenon were all unclear. These uncertainties were heightened when it came to the female sex drive: in 1902, British sexologist Havelock Ellis went so far as to characterize the female sex drive as an “elusive” phenomenon, and even as a “mocking mystery.”\(^3\) Part of the reason Ellis characterized the female sex drive using such terms stemmed from the fact that social prohibitions against female sexual expression made it extremely difficult to acquire accurate and comprehensive information about it—for male physicians, at any rate.\(^4\) Despite these difficulties, understanding the sex drive was viewed as a crucial task: in the words of German physician Magnus Hirschfeld, sexological writers viewed the sex drive as “the most important property of life.” It was responsible for “the happiness of the individual as well as the strength of society,” along with “the preservation of mankind [and] the survival of the whole world.”\(^5\)

To understand how the female sex drive worked, and what it required for its satisfaction, women and men alike investigated not only the drive itself, but also the effects of its repression on women’s physical and psychological health. Through their attempts to divine the true nature of the female sex drive, they sought to establish a standard or norm around which sexual life could be rationally

\(^2\) In German, the terms were Geschlechts- or Sexualtrieb, Geschlechts- or Sexualempfindung, Geschlechtsgefühl, and Libido. I have chosen to use “sex drive” (Trieb) instead of other terms such as “instinct,” “impulse,” “feeling,” or “libido,” as it was the term most often used by German commentators throughout the period under study.


\(^4\) Ibid., 47, 49–51.

and justly organized. For women sexologists in particular, this effort to scientifically determine female sexual norms had profound implications for women’s rights.

In this chapter, I show how German-speaking women engaged and expanded scientific knowledge to redefine the female sex drive. I specifically focus here on the work of Ruth Bré, Henriette Fürth, Johanna Elberskirchen, and Grete Meisel-Hess. In texts they wrote between 1903 and 1914, against the backdrop of growing feminist agitation for an end to the state regulation of prostitution and the rights of unmarried mothers, Bré, Elberskirchen, Fürth, and Meisel-Hess all represented the female sex drive as a simultaneously physiological and psychological phenomenon that was active, desiring, and naturally in need of satisfaction. Many of these women distinguished the sex drive from a maternal drive, and insisted that the drive for sex was distinct from the impulse to reproduce and nurture.  

6. This chapter does not investigate turn-of-the-century writing on the maternal drive or instinct. It is, however, worth briefly examining how physicians, scientists, and other commentators thought about this subject at that time. So doing provides further context for their invocations of the maternal drive/instinct, especially as they contrasted it with the sex drive. Reviewing German- and English-language literature from the period, it seems that, for many writers, the maternal instinct or maternal drive (Mutterinstinkt, Muttertrieb) was a primary signifier of sexual difference throughout the animal kingdom. The maternal instinct was believed to endow women with a particular psychology and set of behaviors. According to Charles Darwin, the maternal instinct rendered women different from men “in mental disposition, chiefly in [their] greater tenderness and lesser selfishness.” Darwin maintained that women displayed such qualities not only toward their children but also “towards [their] fellow-creatures”; Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871), 2:326. From the eighteenth into the early twentieth century, naturalists claimed evidence of the maternal instinct in many animal species, even among “females of supposedly cruel and ferocious species, such as the tigress and lioness,” who “would subdue their natural ferocity to take care of their young, often perishing with them rather than abandoning them when pursued by hunters”; Elisabeth Badinter, *The Myth of Motherhood: An Historical View of the Maternal Instinct*, trans. Roger DeGaris (London: Souvenir Press, 1981), 156. The maternal instinct was held responsible for women’s greatest virtues and altruistic feelings, above all their heightened capacity for sympathy, patience, nurturance, compassion, and care for the sick and vulnerable; see Max Runge, *Das Weib in seiner geschlechtlichen Eigenart*, 4th ed. (Berlin: Verlag von Julius Springer, 1900), 23; also Elisabeth Gnauck-Kühne, *Die Deutsche Frau um die Jahrhundertwende: Statistische Studie zur Frauenfrage*, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Verlag von Otto Liebmann, 1907), 9; Havelock Ellis, *Studies in the
In representing the female sex drive thusly, these women deployed ideas also put into circulation by their male peers, such as Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis. However, these women
elaborated upon and expanded men’s ideas, and extrapolated the political consequences of new understandings of female sexuality. All four of these women had particular political investments in redefining the sex drive, and their work sought to establish as normal a new female sexual subjectivity: that of the desiring, sexually autonomous woman who could engage in personally enriching (hetero)sexual experiences. The creation of this subjectivity is important, as it offered to expand the bounds of sexual opportunity for women beyond the spheres of prostitution, marriage, and motherhood, and to endow women with the same degree of sexual agency enjoyed by men.

The new views of the sex drive that Fürth, Elberskirchen, Bré, and Meisel-Hess offered were highly controversial. They challenged not only prevailing understandings of femininity but also gendered relations of power. Their ideas expanded and radicalized those put forward by male sexological writers and clashed with beliefs held by many within the broader German women’s movement. Moreover, their ideas were inflected with the eugenic and homophobic valences of early twentieth-century sexology, which ultimately limited the scope of their analyses and demands. According to Fürth and the others, although all women may have a sex drive, only certain women—above all, heterosexual and “healthy” women—ought to act upon their impulses.

The Female Sex Drive: An Object of Social and Scientific Concern in Early Twentieth-Century Germany

Whereas female sexuality had been characterized as rampant and voracious by previous generations, over the course of the nineteenth century this representation shifted, thanks in large part to

(Leipzig: Verlag von F. C. W. Vogel, 1905), 186. In light of the elusiveness of and uncertainty surrounding the concept of the maternal instinct, it is perhaps not surprising that anthropologist Sarah Blaffer Hrdy attributes older scientific views on the maternal instinct to “tensions between males and females” and to “conflicting interests between fathers and mothers”; Sarah Blaffer Hrdy, *Mother Nature: Maternal Instincts and How They Shape the Human Species* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1999), 12.
the consolidation of middle-class identity and power. Discipline and restraint regarding sex and sexuality became key defining features of the German bourgeoisie as it ascended to hegemony; as a consequence of this new paradigm, female sexuality became redefined as chaste, passive, modest, exclusively maternal, and essentially passionless.\(^7\) This standard, or rather ideal, of middle-class female sexuality would ultimately become normative for all women, and the standard by which true and virtuous womanhood would be measured.

Male medical and scientific authorities played critical roles in articulating and legitimizing this new bourgeois definition of female sexuality. From the mid-nineteenth century until the beginning of the twentieth, the prevailing view among German-speaking male physicians and scientists was that female sexuality was primarily meant for reproduction. For example, in *The Sex Drive* (1894), German gynecologist Alfred Hegar claimed that the human sex drive was composed of two distinct impulses, one directed toward copulation, the other toward reproduction.\(^8\) Hegar maintained that males exhibited a greater desire for copulation, whereas the females’ primary interest lay in reproduction. He attributed this gendered difference to evolutionary factors, specifically to females’ purportedly innate modesty, the menstrual cycle, and the fact that females bear the reproductive consequences of intercourse.\(^9\) Hegar also insisted that women’s sexual sensibility is weaker than men’s, a fact he claimed was demonstrated by frequent expressions of “disgust” toward sexual intercourse among “strong and healthy” women, even when it involved someone they loved.\(^10\) Hegar further argued that too much sex and too frequent pregnancies caused anemia, malnutrition, muscle deterioration, and nervous

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9. Ibid., 5.
10. Ibid., 5–6.
exhaustion in women.\textsuperscript{11} The medico-scientific definition of the female sex drive as naturally chaste and essentially maternal was reiterated in landmark sexological texts such as August Forel’s \textit{The Sexual Question}.\textsuperscript{12}

Contrary to women, men were seen as having a stronger urge and need for sex, and required regular sexual activity in excess, supposedly, of what their virtuous wives wanted or could sustain. It was for this reason that prostitution was a “necessary evil” in the eyes of many commentators. While chastity before and within marriage was treated as ideal for men, their recourse to prostitution was treated as understandable and forgivable in light of their stronger sexual natures. By defining the female sex drive as passionless and exclusively maternal, and the male sex drive as pleasure seeking and in need of regular satisfaction, many physicians posited a fundamental incommensurability between male and female sexuality, as Edward Ross Dickinson has observed.\textsuperscript{13} Some male sexual theorists and researchers insisted that men were by nature polygamous, whereas women were inclined to monogamy—a set of claims that female sexual theorists would attack.

By the early twentieth century, however, increasing scrutiny and activism surrounding prostitution helped destabilize such beliefs regarding female (and male) sexuality. As Lynn Abrams notes, prostitution attracted widespread interest and concern at least until the early part of the second decade of the twentieth century, when foreign policy began to dominate public discussions.\textsuperscript{14} The incredible growth of urban centers like Berlin and Hamburg as a result of recently unified Germany’s rapid economic expansion was largely responsible for the increased interest in sex work and its social

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 20, 46.


According to some statistics (which one must, for various reasons, take with a grain of salt—above all because these numbers only accounted for prostitutes registered by the police), the number of prostitutes in Berlin grew from 15,000 in 1871 to approximately 50,000 in 1900.

German states began regulating prostitution in the early 1800s, in accordance with Napoleonic law. The regulatory system, common to many European countries and U.S. states in the nineteenth century, did not make prostitution per se illegal, but criminalized the practice under certain conditions. According to the provisions of the regulatory system, only women who held a permit from the morals police (Sittenpolizei) and underwent frequent medical examinations could avoid criminal prosecution, and prostitution could be practiced legally only within designated zones. The morals police were authorized to arrest any woman they suspected of prostitution and subject her to an invasive medical examination. By the 1870s, bordellos were officially illegal yet tacitly sanctioned; clients and, before 1900, pimps were also exempt from legal punishment.

In the view of some conservatives, physicians, and hygienists, the regulatory system was the most effective way to control prostitution and, more importantly, the venereal diseases it was held responsible for spreading within the general population.

Prostitution attracted sensational public attention at the end of the nineteenth century as a result of the infamous Heinze murder trial of 1891, wherein it was revealed that the defendant was pimping out his own wife. The legal reforms prompted by the

15. Ibid.
16. Ute Gerhard, Unerhört: Die Geschichte der deutschen Frauenbewegung (Hamburg: Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, 1990), 249. As Gerhard notes, this number does not account for “secret” prostitution, sex trafficking, underage prostitution, and the sexual violation and exploitation of working-class women such as servants, factory workers, or barmaids.
18. Gerhard, Unerhört, 250. As Abrams points out, Hamburg was unique in maintaining state-run brothels. See Abrams, “Prostitutes in Imperial Germany,” 191.
Heinze trial, the notorious Lex Heinze introduced in 1900, not only heightened criminal penalties for pimping, but also exempted prostitutes’ landlords from prosecution. The latter move was meant to decrease the presence of prostitution on city streets; however, many feared that it effectively allowed for the revival of brothels, which had been banned since 1876. The Lex Heinze also allowed for the censorship of “immoral” art, literature, and theater.

Reformers across the religious and political spectrums disparaged prostitution for a number of reasons. Prostitution was alternatively framed as a threat to morality, social order, and public health; as a phenomenon produced by the contradictions of bourgeois society that criminalized the working classes; and as the most blatant, symbolic representation of the sexual double standard and men’s power over women. Both feminists and moral purity activists had been active in organizing around prostitution since the 1880s. Even at this relatively early stage, feminists promoted divergent approaches to prostitution: whereas Gertrud Guillame-Schack’s failed German League for Culture (Deutscher Kulturbund), established in 1880, advocated the abolition of state regulation over prostitution, Hannah Bieber-Böhm’s Association for the Protection of Youth (Verein Jugendschutz), founded in 1889, promoted increased punishments for sellers and clients of prostitution.

The number of organizations dedicated to solving the prostitution “problem” expanded considerably after 1898, during discussions of the Lex Heinze. At this time, progressive German feminists revived the abolitionist position, inspired by British feminist Josephine Butler and previously advocated by Gertrud Guillame-Schack. Leaders like Minna Cauer became converts to the abolitionist cause following the 1899 Congress of the International Abolitionist Federation held in London, and the abolitionist position was embraced by organizations such as “Frauenwohl” and the Union of Progressive Women’s Associations. Branches of the

International Abolitionist Federation were established in Hamburg (1898), Berlin (1900), and Dresden (1900). The German section of the International Abolitionist Federation was established in 1904, and 1905 saw the publication of the first issue of The Abolitionist, a journal coedited by Anna Pappritz and Katharina Scheven.

Abolitionists maintained that the regulatory system constituted a thoroughgoing attack on women’s civil rights and bodily autonomy. As leading abolitionist Katharina Scheven put it, the regulatory system helped secure “healthy women for dissipated men.” They blamed the existence of prostitution not on the existence of innately immoral, “work shy,” or sexually perverse women, but rather on men’s economic and sexual dominance over women. Abolitionist feminists pointed to factors such as women’s lack of education and professional opportunities, their low and unequal pay, their economic dependency upon men, and greater precariousness as single women; they also criticized prevailing beliefs regarding discrepancies in male and female sexuality, which rationalized prostitution by citing men’s greater sexual needs. For these reasons, abolitionists supported the decriminalization of prostitution, rather than its suppression, and demanded that the state retreat from involvement in prostitution. Such a liberal stance, they believed, supported women’s freedom and right to their own person. Abolitionists further advocated a common moral standard for men and women—although supporters of abolition did not necessarily agree what that standard ought to be.

Beyond legal changes, many progressive feminists agreed with sexual reformers who argued that the solution to the problems of prostitution lay in reforms to individual behavior via sexual education, particularly among youth. They maintained that frank, comprehensive, and scientific education regarding human sexuality would ultimately give rise to more authentic—and hygienic—relations

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26. Ibid., 251.
between the sexes. Where these actors disagreed was in their understanding of human sexuality itself—a disagreement that had implications for what constituted desirable sexual behavior and social reforms. In the eyes of many progressive women, false and biased beliefs regarding female sexuality underwrote not only flawed ethics, laws, and social policy, but also the reform programs advanced by some men, including their colleagues in groups like the German Society for the Fight against Venereal Diseases.

Growing activism surrounding the plight of unwed mothers and their children also raised provocative questions about the nature of female sexuality. Motherhood itself was a topic of considerable debate around the turn of the twentieth century, sparked by concerns over the national birth rate and, among feminists, by the subordinate status of wives and mothers under the newly revised Civil Code. In both demographic and legal debates, the unwed mother emerged as a potent symbol of the dysfunctions produced by existing arrangements: demographers and eugenicists decried the loss of valuable life and national strength that resulted from the stigmatization of “illegitimate” children, while feminist critics of the Civil Code saw in the unwed mother an extreme example of the vulnerability all women faced under patriarchal laws that gave fathers virtually all rights over children (and no obligations, in the case of childbirth outside of marriage). Incited by a 1904 statistic that estimated the number of single mothers in Germany at 180,000, the League for the Protection of Mothers formed in 1905. At various times, both Henriette Fürth and Grete Meisel-Hess played active roles within this organization. The league’s goal was the “protection of motherhood, married as well as unmarried,” and


the “improvement of the legal situation of unmarried mothers and their children.”

To this end, league leadership circulated petitions that they submitted to Parliament, and established the Office for Mother Protection (Büro für Mutterschutz) in 1906, which offered advice and information to unmarried mothers and working-class women. The league also advocated maternity insurance, the development of a system of crèches for working women, and better treatment of single mothers by gynecological clinics. Beyond these practical activities, the league sought thoroughgoing reforms to existing standards of sexual ethics and beliefs regarding female and male sexuality.

In part because of the social politics surrounding prostitution and unwed mothers—and in part because of new research and hypotheses—scientific understandings of the female sex drive started to shift around the beginning of the twentieth century. New theories regarding the very constitution and manifestation of the sex drive began to surface that had significant implications for conceptualizations of female sexuality. In what follows, I highlight key aspects of the emerging new paradigm of female sexuality through the works of famous male sexologists in order to show, first, that the women sexologists examined here were participating in a broader discursive shift in sexological understandings of female sexuality; second, that they shared certain beliefs and understandings with their male peers, while deviating from them in meaningful ways; and third, that they not only expanded but also radicalized the ideas circulated by men.

Around the turn of the century, physicians and scientists increasingly conceptualized the human sex drive as possessing a psychological, emotional component alongside a physiological one. The dual nature of the drive meant that in seeking sex, humans simultaneously sought emotional intimacy and physical contact. Whereas religious interpretations frequently represented love and

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30. Ibid., 71.
31. Ibid., 72.
32. Weindling, Health, Race, and German Politics, 256–257. Further details on the league’s practical activities can be found in Allen, “Mothers of the New Generation,” 429–431.
intimacy as spiritual and notably distinct from brute animalistic intercourse, physicians and scientists insisted that these emotions were an intrinsic element of sex and sexuality, and that they were materially rooted and inextricable from physical intercourse. Proceeding from German dermatologist Albert Moll’s *Research on the Libido Sexualis* (1897), British physician Havelock Ellis claimed in his *Analysis of the Sexual Impulse* (1903) that the sex impulse was comprised of two mutually constitutive phenomena: namely, “tumescence,” or physical sexual tension, and “contrectation,” an instinct to approach, touch, and kiss another person, usually—but, notably, not necessarily—of the opposite sex. Such reconceptualizations of the sex drive can be partially attributed to the emerging consensus in the late nineteenth century that the brain and the nervous system constituted the anatomical loci of the sex drive. In *Psychopathia Sexualis*, for example, psychiatrist Richard von Krafft-Ebing claimed that the sex instinct is a function of the cerebral cortex, which serves as the “junction” of paths leading to the sex organs and the nerve centers of visual and olfactory sensation. Krafft-Ebing represented the sex drive as connecting mind and body, sensations and emotions—although for him its function remained primarily reproductive.

The belief that the sex drive’s primary function was reproductive would come under fire around the turn of the century. As a result of this growing understanding of the sex drive as simultaneously physiological and psychological, sexual theorists increasingly decoupled sex and reproduction. Havelock Ellis was particularly emphatic in his insistence that the sexual impulse was not solely, or even primarily, a reproductive one. Pointing to the intellectual fallacy of defining an object through its ultimate end, Ellis cleverly averred, “We might as well say that the impulse by which young animals seize food is ‘an instinct of nutrition.’” He further suggested

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35. Ellis, *Analysis of the Sexual Impulse*, 16.
that the term “reproductive instinct” is “vaguely employed as a euphemism by those who wish to veil the facts of the sexual life; it is more precisely employed mainly by those who are unconsciously dominated by a superstitious repugnance to sex.”  

36. Just as Ellis insisted on the distinction between reproductive and sex drives in general, he also distinguished between women’s sexual and maternal instincts. According to Ellis, women’s maternal instinct, their “longing to fulfill those functions for which their bodies are constituted,” was not the same as the sex drive. Interestingly, he believed that the maternal instinct was ultimately of greater importance to women’s lives than the sexual impulse, asserting that “a woman may not want a lover, but may yet want a child.”

37. The conceptual separation of the sexual and reproductive drives was heightened in the early twentieth century as theorists and researchers began positing that the sex drive was not determined by inputs to the central nervous system, but was a more diffuse and complex psychosomatic phenomenon. In his *Three Contributions to the Theory of Sexuality* (1905), Sigmund Freud suggested that the sexual impulse emanated from “all organs of the body” beginning as early as infancy. 38. In subsequent editions of *Three Contributions*, Freud refined his conceptualization of the sexual instinct, characterizing it as “lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical.” The sexual instinct was a “psychical representative of an endosomatic, continuously flowing source of stimulation,” rather than a response to external stimuli. 39. According to Freud,

36. Ibid., 17.
37. Ibid., 16.
39. As footnote 9 in Peter Gay’s *The Freud Reader* (1989) points out, this characterization of the sexual instinct dates to 1915, meaning it did not appear in the original version of *Three Contributions*. In accordance with this translation, I use the term “instinct” in the text. See Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *The Freud Reader*, edited by Peter Gay (New York: W. W. Norton, 1989), 256. Notably, 1915 was the same year Freud wrote “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” which many scholars identify as one of the first comprehensive
instincts lacked intrinsic traits, but assumed particular qualities in relation to their somatic sources and their aims. In later editions of *Three Contributions*, he famously characterized the sexual instinct as a “demand upon the mind for work”—specifically, it sought release of sexual tension, and consequent attainment of sexual satisfaction.\(^4\) Thus, while Freud did not move away entirely from the notion of a (continual, self-generating) somatic source of sexuality, its realization required psychological effort and elaboration.

Freud was among the first to insist that the sex drive’s fundamental, essential aim was not reproduction, but pleasure. In his essay “Modern Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness” (1908), he asserted that “broad vistas open up for us when we bear in mind the fact that man’s sexual instinct is not at all primarily meant to serve the purposes of reproduction but is intended to furnish certain forms of gratification.”\(^{41}\) Like Ellis, Freud argued that the sex drive was distinct from reproduction; however, he took this argument a step further by implying that sexual pleasure was a physiological and psychological phenomenon, produced by physiological and psychological processes. However, Freud was not alone in highlighting the role of pleasure as the object of the sex drive. Swiss psychiatrist August Forel also identified a “pleasure principle” at work in the sex drive, and associated the desire for sexual pleasure specifically with women. In so-called normal women, Forel found “a certain sensual desire for caresses, connected more or less with unconscious and ill-defined sexual sensations.” Intriguingly, he insisted this desire was “not limited to the male sex but extends to other women, to children, and even to animals.” As Forel noted in *The Sexual Question* (1905), “Young normal girls


often like to sleep together in the same bed, to caress and kiss each other, which is not the case with normal young men.” While representing this impulse as a “peculiarity of the sexual sentiments of woman,” Forel, like Freud, recognized that the sex drive encouraged nonreproductive sexual behavior aimed at no purpose other than self-satisfaction.42

These changing scientific understandings of the sex drive clearly opened up new ways of thinking about female sexuality, and even led male physicians and scientists to suggest that the female and male sex drives may be similar in strength and intensity. According to Havelock Ellis, “We may fairly hold that, roughly speaking, the distribution of the sexual impulse between the two sexes is fairly balanced.”43 Ellis claimed that previous researchers had failed to grasp this fundamental truth because they had not understood that women’s “sexual mechanism” was less spontaneous and more complex, variable, and diffuse than men’s.44 On the basis of “a series of twelve cases of women [on] whose sexual development [he] possess[ed] precise information,” all of whom “belong[ed] to the middle class” and were “fairly healthy” (though he noted that “two or three might be regarded as slightly abnormal”), Ellis asserted that “all the more highly intelligent, energetic women . . . [are] those with strong sexual emotions.”45 Ellis even noted that of these twelve women, “nine had at some time or another masturbated (four shortly after puberty, five in adult life), but, except in one case, rarely and at intervals.”46 Quite radically, Ellis blamed men for women’s sexual unresponsiveness, insisting that “many women may never experience sexual gratification and relief, through no defect on their part, but through the failure of the

42. Forel, Sexual Question, 94–95.
44. Ibid., 53–54, 57. Ellis further argued that “a woman can find sexual satisfaction in a great number of ways that do not include the sexual act proper, and in a great number of ways that apparently are not physical at all, simply because their physical basis is diffused or is to be found in one of the outlying sexual zones” (56).
46. Ibid., 50.
husband to understand the lover’s part.”\textsuperscript{47} For these reasons, Ellis asserted,

>a state of sexual anaesthesia, relative or absolute, cannot be considered as anything but abnormal. To take even the lowest ground, the satisfaction of the reproductive function ought to be at least as gratifying as the evacuation of the bowels or bladder; while if we take . . . higher ground than this, an act which is at once the supreme fact and symbol of love and the supreme creative act cannot under normal conditions be other than the most pleasurable of acts, or it would stand in violent opposition to all that we find in nature.\textsuperscript{48}

Like Ellis, German dermatologist Iwan Bloch insisted in his influential \textit{Sexual Life of Our Time} (1907) that the intensity of women’s “sexual sensibility” was “at least as great as that of man.” Bloch claimed that he arrived at this view through consultation with “a great many cultured women” who “without exception . . . declared the theory of the lesser sexual sensibility of women to be erroneous.” Bloch reported that “many [women] were even of the opinion that sexual sensibility was greater and more enduring in woman than man.”\textsuperscript{49} Also like Ellis, Bloch maintained that the female sex drive was more diffuse, and that this trait inhibited the “spontaneous resolution of the libido.” He thus concluded that when it came to women’s true sexual nature, “behind the veil prescribed by conventional morality, behind the apparent coldness, there is concealed an ardent sexuality.”\textsuperscript{50}

Freud offered perhaps the most radical statement concerning the similarities of the male and female sex drive in \textit{Three Contributions to the Theory of Sexuality}. Freud maintained that both the male and the female libidos were essentially “masculine”—a term he claimed meant “active”—as a result of humanity’s fundamental bisexuality.\textsuperscript{51} Freud saw no inherent difference in the character,

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., 51.
\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 86.
\textsuperscript{51} During this period, “bisexuality” denoted the presence of both female and male physiological properties in the body, rather than a sexual orientation toward both sexes. In Freud’s words, “There is no pure masculinity and femininity either
purpose, or strength of the male and female sex drives; instead, he insisted that gendered differences in manifestations of the sex drive were a result of socialization.

These new theories of the sex drive, and specifically new claims that the male and female sex drives and needs were not essentially or fundamentally different, were bolstered by psychiatric research on the detrimental effects of prolonged celibacy on women’s physical and psychological health. Whereas physicians such as Hegar claimed that celibacy was physiologically and psychologically beneficial, contributing to longer life and greater intellectual and creative activity, in the 1880s psychiatrists such as Krafft-Ebing began to argue that women’s enforced celibacy caused a host of physical and psychological diseases, including hysteria and suicide. In the second edition of his *Textbook of Psychiatry* (1883), Krafft-Ebing unambiguously stated that women were by their nature as much in need of sex as men.

As scientists and physicians continued to link women’s forced sexual abstinence to poor mental and physical health, they became openly critical of women’s enforced celibacy. Although he had previously insisted that women were passionless, by 1911 Leipzig-based dermatologist and urologist Dr. Hermann Rohleder had become convinced that women’s sexual needs and feelings were equal to men’s; furthermore, he maintained that the diminishment of a woman’s sex drive was a product of culture, not nature. Rohleder actually considered celibacy to be impossible, except among the truly perverse. Like physician Albert Eulenberg and dermatologist Max Marcuse, he maintained that celibacy could never be an absolute phenomenon because sex permeated all realms of physical

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*in the biological or psychological sense. On the contrary every individual person shows a mixture of his own biological sex characteristics with the biological traits of the other sex and a union of activity and passivity.* Freud, *Three Contributions*, 79.

52. Hegar, *Der Geschlechtstrieb*, 7–8.


and psychological existence.\textsuperscript{55} According to Rohleder, even sexual thoughts and longings constituted a breach of celibacy.

Like Rohleder, Eulenberg, and Marcuse, Freud insisted in “Modern Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness” that most people were “constitutionally incapable of abstinence.”\textsuperscript{56} He insisted that all humans, regardless of their gender, required not only sexual activity but also sexual gratification for the sake of their mental and physical well-being. He declared that existing social restrictions on the play of sexual instincts were primarily responsible for causing nervous disorders.\textsuperscript{57} With respect to women, Freud argued that premarital abstinence, repression of girls’ sensuality, and enforced sexual ignorance all caused certain “functional disturbances” and inadequacies in women, including their mental inferiority.\textsuperscript{58} Freud was remarkably forthright in suggesting that society consciously repressed women’s sexuality to serve its own ends.\textsuperscript{59}

Changing understandings of the sex drive—as autonomous and separate from a reproductive drive, driven by desires for emotional intimacy and physical pleasure, and fundamentally similar in men and women—along with the growing belief that celibacy was harmful to women’s health, suggested the need to reform the organization of sexual life and constitution of sexual ethics. Nevertheless, male physicians and scientists continued to insist upon distinctly gendered roles and, importantly, power relations in sexual intercourse, despite finding commonalities between the male and female sex drives. For example, in holding men responsible for failing to arouse women’s sex drives, Ellis effectively reaffirmed men’s dominant and “more active part in coitus,” including determination of the conditions of sexual intercourse.\textsuperscript{60} Bloch’s insistence

\textsuperscript{56} Freud, “Modern Sexual Morality and Modern Nervousness,” 397, 394.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 392, 398.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 402.
\textsuperscript{59} According to Freud, “The double standard which obtains in present day society is the frankest admission that society, much as it may issue decrees, does not believe that its decrees can be enforced” (398).
\textsuperscript{60} Ellis, “Sexual Impulse in Woman,” 53, 54.
that women depend upon men to awaken their latent “erotic sensibilities” held similar implications.\footnote{Bloch, \textit{Sexual Life of Our Time}, 83–86.} According to some scientists like August Forel, women’s “sexual sensibility” was fundamentally submissive. In \textit{The Sexual Question}, Forel argued that the female sex drive is not just subordinate to the male, but seeks out and delights in its subordination. According to Forel, when a woman finds the man she loves and with whom she wishes to have children, she is driven “to give herself to him as a slave . . . , to play the part of the one who devotes herself, who is conquered, mastered, and subjugated.” Forel even insisted that these “negative aspirations form part of the normal sexual appetite of women.”\footnote{Forel, \textit{Sexual Question}, 93–94.} Although Freud did not believe women were innately sexually submissive, he nonetheless insisted that female sexuality \textit{must} be repressed to facilitate the development of the male sex drive. In Freud’s view, “The reinforcement of the sexual inhibitions produced in the woman . . . causes a stimulus in the libido of the man and forces it to increase its capacity.” If the female sex drive were liberated, it would undermine the power and potency of male sexuality.\footnote{Within the developmental schema outlined in \textit{Three Contributions}, sexual repression is represented as fundamental to both normal female and male sexual subjectivity. While defining all childhood sexuality as diffuse, or “polymorphously perverse,” and recognizing the clitoris as the girl’s central erogenous zone, Freud states that during the course of sexual maturation, the female youth must effectively abandon the clitoris, or the “male element,” as the central erogenous zone, and transfer this sexual excitation to the vagina in preparation for her future maternal role. Freud, \textit{Three Contributions}, 80.}

Male physicians and scientists also used the naturalization of women’s sexual drive and attendant needs to reassert male dominance and sexual privilege in other insidious ways: namely, by imputing alternative meanings and motives to women’s sexual behavior. In particular, women’s purported sexual passivity, once held as evidence of her passionlessness, became redefined as part of the courtship ritual meant to facilitate sexual activity—even to the point of inviting male sexual domination. In upholding this interpretation of women’s passivity, many sexual scientists referenced Darwinian sexual selection and the evolutionary role
Darwin attributed to female modesty. Ellis, Forel, and Bloch all insisted that women’s sexual passivity was only “apparent” or superficial.64 According to Ellis, “The true nature of the passivity of the female is revealed by the ease with which it is thrown off whenever the male refuses to accept his cue. . . . The aggressiveness of the male, the coyness of the female, are alike unconsciously assumed in order to bring about in the most effectual manner the ultimate union of the sexes! The seeming reluctance of the female is not intended to inhibit sexual activity either in the male or herself, but to increase it in both.”65 Male scientists’ recognition of female sexual need had the effect of stigmatizing women’s sexual disinterest in men as “frigidity,” which men like Ellis, Bloch, and Freud condemned as a sexual abnormality. Echoing Eulenberg, Bloch argued that female frigidity constituted a form of sexual “infantilism” that he attributed to multiple causes including heredity, masturbation, and women’s experience of male sexual violence.66 While at one time a virtue, female passionlessness increasingly became redefined as evidence of underlying pathology. In the hands of many male physicians and scientists, new views of female sexuality as similar in strength, need, and intensity to that of the male became used to support men’s sexual aggression and, to borrow from Adrienne Rich, “compulsory heterosexuality.”67 It not only upheld unequal power dynamics within heterosexual relations, but also bolstered existing gendered social roles and inequalities.

Perhaps not surprisingly, women interpreted the implications of new understandings of the sex drive differently. For women sexologists, these new scientific facts seemed to affirm the illegitimacy of the sexual double standard, and opened up the possibility that an equal, more liberal sexual ethic might be appropriate for both sexes. Rather than allowing male physicians and scientists to monopolize the discussion, women like Ruth Bré, Johanna Elberskirchen, Grete Meisel-Hess, and Henriette Fürth began writing and revising understandings of the sex drive, and published

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monographs, pamphlets, essays, and journal articles to express their ideas. Though these women agreed with male sexologists on many fundamental points, they challenged and expanded aspects of the emerging paradigm by drawing on their own experiences or the experiences of other women, which they suggested provided a truer, more objective perspective than that provided by men. The analyses these women put forward in their writing helped further the shift in understanding of the female sex drive that recognized its coexisting carnal and emotional aspects, as well as its active nature and innate needs. Unlike their male peers, women extended this view of the female sex drive to its logical conclusions in terms of women’s rights and sexual reform: that is, they insisted that women had a biological right to engage in freely chosen (hetero)sexual encounters. However, these new ideas would prove contentious, above all to other feminists. Moreover, the pathologization of female sexual frigidity and disinterest in heterosexual relations found in men’s writing would also inform women’s texts in ways that would profoundly impact women’s assertions of their “biological” rights.

Women Sexologists Redefine the Female Sex Drive

Ruth Bré, Johanna Elberskirchen, Henriette Fürth, and Grete Meisel-Hess all wrote on the “true nature” of female sexuality between 1903 and 1914. In their writing, they endeavored not only to define female sexuality through the concept of the sex drive, but also to delineate the social and political consequences of understanding women’s physiologically and psychologically determined sexual needs. Even though some male researchers such as Max Marcuse disparaged what they viewed as their feminine or feminist bias and eccentricity, as well as the “gullibility” (Gutgläubigkeit) of their ideas,68 many of the texts discussed in this chapter were reviewed in key prewar sexual scientific journals, such as Sexual Problems, Journal for Sexual Science, Journal for the Fight against Venereal Diseases, and Monthly Journal for Urinary Illness and

68. See, for example, Max Marcuse, “Rundschau: Johanna Elberskirchen, Geschlechtsempfindung und Liebe,” Sexual-Probleme 4 (1908): 153.
Sexual Hygiene. They were even included on bibliographic lists of contemporary sexual scientific literature.

Before turning to their ideas, it is worth briefly introducing these authors (although more comprehensive biographical details can be found in the appendix). Ruth Bré was the pseudonym of schoolteacher Elisabeth Bouness. The contested founder of the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform, she left the organization when it did not embrace her idea of settling healthy unwed mothers and their children in German colonies in eastern Europe as a key part of its program. Beyond eugenic convictions, Bré’s investment in the fate of single mothers and their children was personal, as she was the daughter of an unwed mother. In spite of her historical liminality, Bré produced a number of contemporarily influential and provocative texts, including The Right to Motherhood (1903). Johanna Elberskirchen was born into a lower-middle-class family in Bonn in 1864. After working as a bookkeeper in her early twenties, she moved to Switzerland to pursue a university education. Elberskirchen studied the natural sciences, anatomy, physiology, and philosophy at the University of Bern before switching to law and jurisprudence at the University of Zurich. Following her studies and return to Germany, she became involved in left-leaning organizations and campaigns for women’s suffrage. Unusually forthright and public about her same-sex desires, Elberskirchen became one of only four female chairpersons of the Scientific Humanitarian Committee in 1914, following a move to Berlin. Henriette Fürth (née Katzenstein) was born in 1861 to an upper-middle-class family.

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69. Notably, the exchange between Bré and Bluhm was noted in the May 1904 edition of the Monatschrift für Harnkrankheiten und sexuelle Hygiene, and Bré’s Staatskinder oder Mutterrecht was reviewed in the September 1904 edition of the same journal. Staatskinder oder Mutterrecht was also reviewed in the Zeitschrift für Bekämpfung der Geschlechtskrankheiten (January 1905), as was Das Recht auf Mutterschaft (November 1903). Meisel-Hess’s Die sexuelle Krise was reviewed in the January 1910 edition of Sexual-Probleme, and in the December 1909 edition of the Zeitschrift für Bekämpfung der Geschlechtskrankheiten. Johanna Elberskirchen’s contribution to the essay collection Mann und Weib was noted in the January 1908 edition of the Zeitschrift für Sexualwissenschaft.

70. See, for example, Sexual-Probleme 5, 8, and 11 (1908); Sexual-Probleme 2 and 8 (1909); Sexual-Probleme 1 (1910).
in Giessen. Before the First World War, she became involved in a range of sex reform organizations, including the German Society for the Fight against Venereal Diseases and the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform, and ultimately became a member and representative of the Social Democratic Party. Though lacking a formal university education, Fürth wrote approximately thirty monographs and 200 articles on topics including social and racial hygiene, women’s suffrage, home economics, women’s work, maternal insurance and welfare, infant welfare, and sexual morality. Finally, Grete Meisel-Hess was born in Prague in 1879. She grew up in Vienna, where she later attended university and studied philosophy, sociology, and biology. Following a move to Berlin in 1908, she became involved in various sex reform organizations, including the League for the Protection of Mothers and Sexual Reform. During her brief life she published numerous successful texts across a variety of genres, all of which addressed feminism and sex reform. Her 1909 study, *The Sexual Crisis*, was especially influential, eventually gaining an international readership.

All four of these writers conceived of the female sex drive as an autonomous and important physiological phenomenon and asserted that female needs, like those of the male, were wholly natural. Grete Meisel-Hess insisted that the sexual impulse constituted “the most primitive and most clearly expressed will in all nature.”  

In her view, “The demands of the sexual impulse are as imperative as those of hunger.”  

Similarly, both Ruth Bré and Johanna Elberskirchen described the sex drive as a function akin to eating, drinking, and sleeping. This analogy between the sex drive and

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drives for other forms of nourishment was in fact widespread. In her 1903 tract, *The Right to Motherhood*, Ruth Bré argued, “The sex drive is a natural drive like every other. It is neither moral, nor immoral. It is simply natural. To satisfy it is a natural law, like eating, drinking, and sleeping. It can only be made immoral through immoderation, like immoderate eating and drinking can become immoral.” Likewise, in her 1905 tract, *Sex Life and Sexual Abstinence of Woman*, Johanna Elberskirchen declared, “An active sex life is a function which is, of necessity, characteristic of all sexually differentiated individuals, and is as necessary as eating and drinking. This activity is a physiological feature, necessary for the creation of an individual person and for the preservation of our species—it is a basic law of biology. An individual’s sex life can therefore not be restricted or even prohibited, just like eating and drinking.” Elberskirchen went so far as to describe women as “sexually hungry,” and as possessing a sex drive so overpowering that it leads them to overlook and ignore all social prohibitions against extramarital sex.

Representing the sex drive as akin to eating and drinking enabled Bré and Elberskirchen to assert that the satisfaction of the female sex drive was a physiological necessity: just as eating required food, the sex drive required sex. In Elberskirchen’s words, “The active sexual life in itself can therefore be so rarely restricted or forbidden for the single individual, as is the case with eating and drinking.” She thus insisted that women’s forced sexual celibacy constituted a form of deprivation, declaring that “a sexually mature woman is naturally never voluntarily celibate.” Similarly, Ruth Bré made the case in *The Right to Motherhood* that sex itself could be moral because “in Nature all is moral.” In a rhetorical move

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78. Ibid., 4.
common at the time, she declared “primitive” peoples (*Naturvölker*) to be the happiest and healthiest, as their sex lives, especially the sex lives of women, were supposedly untouched by civilization, and most accurately reflected true, authentic sexual relations. The “basic evil” bedeviling sexual life, she claimed, was the “distance from nature, from natural laws” that plagued civilized people.\(^{80}\)

Women sexologists also argued that male and female sex drives did not differ significantly with regard to their strength or the degree of sexual need they created in men and women. As stated at the outset of this chapter, Henriette Fürth was adamant that the male and female sex drives were essentially the same in their features and equal in their intensity. In *The Sex Problem and Modern Morals*, Fürth insisted that “within the plant and animal world there are nowhere indications that the sexual instinct of the male would be completely different from that of a female,” as the instinct is essentially biological and functional (5). Referring to behaviors and processes within the “animal world,” Fürth maintained that the behaviors of certain animals demonstrated that “the females are stronger and also in sexual relations were the more aggressive [partner].” She cited “herring, bees and ants” as “obvious” (*naheliegend*) examples (5). Like Bré, she too invoked the example of primitive peoples, who, she believed, “show themselves to be closer to the condition of animals” and demonstrated the similarities between male and female sex drives (6). “And in the same way as with animals,” she argued, “we too find in some primitive people the woman to be the selecting one in a sexual relationship and . . . nothing that points to a difference in the sexual feelings and desires of both sexes” (6). Fürth implied that this lack of difference in male and female sex drives among “natural peoples” was the result of the fact that secondary sexual characteristics were “not as developed” (*ausgebildet*) as among “civilized people”—a common anthropological assertion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (6). “In regard to biology,” she concluded, “it does not give us, at least in regard to animals and primitive people, any indications that the sex drive is different” among men and women (6).

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 25.
By the end of the first decade of the twentieth century, feminists began to insist on the necessity of women’s sexual pleasure, often in terms strikingly reminiscent of Freud. In *The Sexual Crisis*, Grete Meisel-Hess held that sensual enjoyment was necessary for the individual, whether male or female, within the limits delineated by the need to release sexual tensions, on the one hand, and the need to preserve energy for social and cultural labor, on the other (36). She also recognized the political implications of this position: “The recognition that the need exists for both sexes,” she maintained, “would destroy the false foundation” of the sexual double standard (198). In Meisel-Hess’s view, “The sexual life is the focal point of every healthy being whose instincts have not undergone partial or complete atrophy”; indeed, within *The Sexual Crisis* sexual fulfillment is presented as the essential precondition of a balanced and whole personality (117). “Let us admit the truth,” Meisel-Hess insisted. “Let us recognize that there is full justification for the desire of every human being to love and to be loved; let us make it socially possible for everyone to satisfy this desire as may best commend itself to the individual judgment—so long as no other person is harmed, and so long as nothing is done injurious to racial welfare” (117). The eugenic qualifications embedded in Meisel-Hess’s rousing declaration attune us to the kinds of limitations that buttressed women sexologists’ understanding of the normal and desirable female sexual subject.

As part of their efforts to assert the similarities of the male and female sex drives, many women sexologists distinguished between the sex drive and maternal instinct as phenomena, although there was some ambivalence on this point among certain writers. In *The Right to Motherhood*, Ruth Bré characterized woman’s sexual drive in line with many male doctors, that is, as indistinguishable from a maternal drive. In making this claim, she offered medical citations from the likes of Richard von Krafft-Ebing. However, Bré

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81. Bré stressed the concordance between her views and those of male doctors in her 1904 article “Is Forced, Unwilled Sexual Abstinence and Childlessness Damaging for the Healthy, Normal Woman?” by noting the positive notices that her book received from male physicians, including Drs. Wilhelm Erb, Albert Neisser, and Max Flesch. See Ruth Bré, “Ist erzwungene, unfreiwillige Enthaltsamkeit
maintained that the fundamentally maternal nature of the female sex drive did not mean that women’s sexual needs are less than those of men; moreover, she leveraged her assertion that the female sex drive was a maternal drive to argue that women’s sexual satisfaction ought not be limited to marriage. “It seems to be quite natural for a true, loving girl to surrender to her lover,” she asserted; shame had to be taught to her later.\textsuperscript{82} For Bré, reproduction and motherhood were “necessary for the physical and spiritual flourishing of woman, as well as the full development of her sexual character”\textsuperscript{83} consequently, she believed that attempts to deny a woman the “right” to motherhood—and thus sexual expression and satisfaction—rendered her a “cripple.”\textsuperscript{84} In a nod to the eugenic convictions she shared with her fellow sexual theorists, Bré maintained that the more capable and “fit” the woman, the more she—and the race—will suffer from her denied instincts.

For Meisel-Hess, significant qualitative differences between the male and female sex drives existed. She maintained that women’s sexuality was complicated by maternal desires, writing that “in the case of women, the manifestations of sexual tension are complicated by an organic need additional to that felt for erotic stimulation and erotic satisfaction, the need for motherhood.” According to Meisel-Hess, “A healthy young woman who is unable to become a mother is likely to suffer from nervous disorder, for her organism feels the need for the stimulation furnished by the act of parturition, and suffers from the accumulation of tensions that should be discharged in lactation and in her love for her offspring” (322). Meisel-Hess further argued that whereas man’s love is individual, woman’s love is general: woman is, far more than man, an “instrument in the hands of the species, used for the purposes of the species.” She asserted that “by nature, woman lacks the direct pitilessly clear vision that man has of these things. This is just as

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\item und Kinderlosigkeit für das gesunde, normale Weib schädlich?,” \textit{Deutsche medizinische Presse} 4 (1904): 27.
\item Bré, \textit{Das Recht auf die Mutterschaft}, 28.
\item Bré, “Erzwungene, unfreiwillige Enthaltsamkeit und Kinderlosigkeit,” 27; and Bré, \textit{Das Recht auf die Mutterschaft}, 24.
\item Bré, \textit{Das Recht auf die Mutterschaft}, 24.
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well, for did women also see sexual relationships as they really are, the continued existence of the human race would become impossible” (124).

Conversely, in The Sexual Feeling of Woman and Man (1903), Elberskirken directly challenged gynecologist Max Flesch’s assertion that women’s sex drive was nothing more than a physiological impetus to motherhood. Allowing herself “weapons from the scientific armory of male intellectuals,” including zoologist Oscar Hertwig, Elberskirchen argued that motherhood must be viewed as a physiological effect of sex. Like Ellis, she asserted that the effects of sex cannot also constitute its origin. Moreover, she pointed out that if the female sex drive was merely a desire for children, there would be no abortion, infanticide, or suicide in the face of unwanted pregnancy or unwed motherhood—and that women would be less discriminatory in terms of their mates. Fürth also maintained that women’s sex drive was distinct from any maternal longing. Reversing Havelock Ellis’s ranking, she asserted that sexual desire is primary in women, and motherhood secondary. According to Fürth, the desire for a child sometimes only emerges after a woman holds her child in her arms for the first time: “A mother’s love and a mother’s longing, important and beautiful as they are, do not represent something fundamental. They are the obvious results which emerge from a heightened sexual desire caused by the urge to procreate, that feeling and longing innate to women as well as to men.”

These writers drew upon representations of the sex drive as simultaneously physical and psychological to stress that physical and emotional intimacy were natural phenomena. In “The Sex Life of the Female” (1908), Elberskirchen paralleled Albert Moll’s division of the sex drive into impulses of “tumescence” and “contractation” to define the normal female sex drive as comprised of innate

85. Elberskirchen, Die Sexualempfindung bei Weib und Mann, 13.
86. Ibid., 6–7.
87. Ibid., 26.
impulses to physical and emotional union.\textsuperscript{89} Elberskirchen maintained that the sex drive was fundamentally a “Vereinigungskraft,” or a drive to union, made up of a “Begattungskraft,” a drive to copulation originating from the sexual organs and nervous system, and a “Liebeskraft,” a drive to physical intimacy originating in the brain.\textsuperscript{90} She insisted that even if “the starting point of the sex drive or its origins is the power of growth or reproduction,” the sex drive must be considered a simultaneously spiritual and physical phenomenon that produces a “sex hunger” in all healthy individuals.\textsuperscript{91}

In making such claims, she directly and explicitly challenged male doctors who treated the female sex drive as congenitally weak and inhibited; here she named Otto Adler, author of \textit{The Inadequate Sexual Feeling of Woman}, as the worst offender.\textsuperscript{92}

For women sexologists, the dual character of the female sex drive ennobled sex and sexuality. “The prophets of gloom, those who refuse to recognize the sex relationship as a means of individual salvation, those who consider the sexual act to be justified solely when effected for the purposes of the species, must be ignored as fanatics,” Grete Meisel-Hess declared. “The processes of love, the tender mutual intertwining of the two human personalities, must be recognized as valuable, not merely in order to ensure the physical continuity of the species, but also for the development of the individual soul” (\textit{Sexual Crisis}, 120). In Grete Meisel-Hess’s view, the sexual impulses of both men and women were in their “essential nature not evil, but good,” although they may be “misused or repressed in our perverted sexual order” (322). She even asserted that sexual pleasure was “preordained” by nature, writing, “The source of our [sexual] misery is not the existence of such desires, but the denial of their satisfaction. If sexual pleasures were not ‘preordained,’ the ‘Divine Creator’ would not have provided

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\item\textsuperscript{89} Elberskirchen，“Das Geschlechtsleben des Weibes,” in \textit{Mann und Weib: Ihre Beziehungen zueinander und zum Kulturleben der Gegenwart}, ed. Dr. R. Kossmann and Dr. Julius Weiss (Stuttgart: Union Deutsche Verlagsgesellschaft, 1908), 194.
\item\textsuperscript{90} Ibid., 188–192, 195.
\item\textsuperscript{91} Ibid., 194.
\item\textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 210.
\end{itemize}
us with the organs of sex” (305). As evidenced earlier by Ruth Bré’s insistence that that which is natural is also moral, female sexual theorists invoked the supposed naturalness of the sex drive to prove that female sexual expression, even outside of marriage, was both positive and moral. Like Bré, Henriette Fürth declared that “every form of life is morally and aesthetically beautiful and perfect that develops harmoniously out of its natural preconditions and always remains in harmony with itself.”

For these reasons, many women sexologists insisted that women possessed what they termed a biological right to both sexual experience and sexual pleasure. Claiming for herself the status of a “Medizinerin,” or medical expert, Elberskirchen quite explicitly asserted that “every sexually differentiated individual has a biological right, that is, a natural right to an active sex life, that, logically and obviously, should not be limited or even abolished by any means or any outside influences.” Recognition of such a right, Meisel-Hess maintained, would constitute an important form of “erotic enfranchisement” that would “go far to restore [the] independence and self-respect [women have] lost in the modern perversion of courtship.” It would also enable women to free themselves from their emotional and erotic dependence upon men, and from their sense of “gratefulness” to men for their sexual satisfaction. Furthermore, it would produce what Meisel-Hess called an “oversurplus of sexual energies” that could be put to other creative uses. She drew direct parallels between intellectual power and

95. Elberskirchen, Geschlechtsleben und Geschlechtsenthaltsamkeit des Weibes, 3.
98. Meisel-Hess, Sexual Crisis, 305.
sexual intensity in women, asserting that “in art and in research the ardent woman is the receiver and interpreter of intuitions.”

Women sexologists further bolstered their claims regarding women’s biological rights by referencing the damaging effects of celibacy on women’s health. In *The Right to Motherhood*, Ruth Bré insisted that celibacy caused cancers of the ovaries, uterus, and breast, in addition to “sleeplessness, depression, hysteria, epilepsy, madness, and even suicide.” Bré declared such afflictions to be “nature’s revenge” for denying the female sex drive its innate needs and outlets. The manifold negative health consequences of abstinence led Meisel-Hess to bluntly exclaim, “Denial to the right of the life of sex—it is hardly possible to conceive the horror of such a fate!” (*Sexual Crisis*, 306). She argued at length in *The Sexual Crisis* that celibacy was responsible for producing hysteria and anxiety. As support, she invoked the research of Berlin-based physician Dr. Wilhelm Hammer to point out that sexual deprivation gives rise to hysterical symptoms in animals (306). She also referenced the work of Josef Breuer and Freud on hysteria in connection with women’s sexual repression: “These writers speak with no uncertain voice, and they add that the natural impulses are to such an extent forced into ‘abreaction’ that ‘the psychic unity becomes disordered.’ Thus a sexual psychosis is the widely diffused pathological consequence of our sexual misery” (331). To further press her case, Meisel-Hess cited Krafft-Ebing’s finding of a higher rate of insanity among single women between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five: that is, during the years when most women

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99. Ibid., 240. Elsewhere, however, Meisel-Hess argued that women’s sexual needs did not have as far-reaching effects upon women’s lives and psyches as some feminists and sexual scientists claimed. Instead, she insisted the exaggerated role of sex in women’s lives was a cultural product, created by the restricted life paths provided to women and their dependence upon man. See Meisel-Hess, “Sexuelle Rechte,” 185.

100. Bré, *Das Recht auf die Mutterschaft*, 32–33.

101. Ibid., 51. Following attacks by Dr. Agnes Bluhm on the validity of Bré’s claims, Bré published her article in the *Deutsche medizinische Presse* in 1904 to fully elaborate both the anecdotal and the medical bases of her claims regarding the negative health effects of forced celibacy and childlessness; see Bré, “Erzwungene, unfreiwillige Enthaltsamkeit und Kinderlosigkeit,” 27–28.
marry and presumably become sexually active (323). Like Freud, Meisel-Hess asserted the negative effects of celibacy on women’s intellectual development, claiming that women’s “artificial desexualization” caused a conflict between their “impulse life” and their reason, which in turn endangered women’s “psychic unity” (321). Meisel-Hess claimed that the repression of women’s sexuality was the cause of women’s purported lack of objectivity. According to her, “The incessant and heavy oppression of her sexual sphere disorders her critical faculties, weakens her power of resistance, obscures her whole intelligence” (317). “Those who have lived out their sexual experiences,” she maintained, “can use things according to their nature, objectively, that is to say, freely, independently, and capably; whereas those whose sexual life is in a state of continuous repression must always remain dependent, enslaved to themselves and others” (317).

According to women sexologists, female celibacy and sexual abstinence were both “unnatural” and “forced,” and not reflective of women’s own instincts and desires. Not surprisingly, many authors insisted that female sexual abstinence, and even their supposed sexual passivity, were simply the products of cultural oppression, and specifically products of the institutions that supported the sexual double standard: namely, prostitution and marriage. According to Elberskirchen, the “cultural phenomenon of the enforced abstinence of women is [simply] . . . the other side of the coin of prostitution.” In her view, prostitution was the central institution that upheld the sexual double standard not only by establishing gender-differentiated moral norms, but also by “standing in absolute contradiction to the biological rights and duties of love” and “separating woman from her natural right to love . . . while the man is allowed completely free love, whether healthy or sick.”

102 Boldly, Elberskirchen asserted that “if there are no external, artificial barriers or if these are overcome through an inner spiritual-sexual power, the question of copulation is only a question of opportunity. The entire organism of the woman is directed toward

102. Elberskirchen, Geschlechtsleben und Geschlechtsenthaltsamkeit des Weibes, 6, 11, 15.
her beloved man and ready, whether consciously or unconsciously, to tirelessly unite with him (sich mit ihm rastlos zu vermählen).”

Under prevailing cultural conditions, Elberskirchen declared that women’s sex drive had been “cramped and corrupted” into two forms of sickness: abnormal hypersexuality (here termed “mancraziness”) and abnormal hyposexuality (frigidity).

While Grete Meisel-Hess also viewed prostitution as a cause of women’s “sexual deprivation,” she blamed patriarchy generally. She asserted that the sexual double standard was a “vestige of a primitive institution, the best means available in former days to protect the weaker sex against the strong hand of the male.” A sexual double standard had emerged “as a protective wall round woman wherever her maintenance depends exclusively on the male, and wherever there is lacking any social provision for the upbringing of the offspring and for the care of women during pregnancy and childbirth” (Sexual Crisis, 89; emphasis in original). This “wall” was largely manifested in the form of contractual marriage and monogamic exclusivity—at the very least for women. It was “reasonable” in an early, less evolved time, Meisel-Hess offered, to demand strict monogamy for women to ensure “father-right” over progeny; in return, women secured material support for herself and her children. Meanwhile, men were freed from such a requirement, and could impose sexual restrictions upon women as “the breadwinner for wife and children” (97). This “vestige” persisted into the present through the dueling institutions of marriage and prostitution, the only available forms of sexual expression to women. In light of contemporary social, political, and economic conditions, Meisel-Hess insisted that the need for such institutions had passed: “A higher civilization can dispense with this means of protection, being competent to establish institutions that shall safeguard women without depriving them of their freedom as human beings” (89).

According to these writers, new scientific revelations regarding the nature and needs of the female sex drive and the detrimental

104. Ibid., 201.
effects of its repression required wide-ranging sexual reforms that would end the sexual double standard. If the male and female drives were similar and equal, and if sex was distinct from reproduction, these was no reason why women should not have the same sexual rights and privileges as men. Women should share men’s socially recognized and scientifically legitimized right to sexual experience and pleasure before, within, and independent of marriage. Moreover, these sexual theorists believed that all women who did pursue sex outside of marriage should not be socially ostracized: prostitution, they argued, should not be the only site for women’s extramarital (hetero)sex. At the same time, they recognized that currently, in Meisel-Hess’s words, “Because women have no permissible free outlet for their sexual need, they are exposed to misadventures of all kinds” (198). Beyond calling for the abolition of the state regulation of prostitution, they envisioned other reforms to the organization of sexual life. Some demanded the creation of conditions that would facilitate early marriage. Henriette Fürth maintained in *Prostitution: Its Origins and the Way to a Remedy* that early marriages would enable men and women at the height of their sexual powers to satisfy their needs within the (supposedly) disease-free zone of monogamous matrimony.\(^{105}\) Bré and Meisel-Hess went further and demanded recognition of nonmarital relations of intimacy as well as the legal recognition of children born to unmarried women. Bré advocated monogamous free love based on healthy and conscious sexual selection, asserting that a woman “will breed selectively in the interests of the species, not in the pursuit of her own interests.” These unions may not last a lifetime, but rather “perhaps a couple of years, perhaps a few months—or weeks. For some women, perhaps only a night.”\(^{106}\) Such a situation was preferable to prevailing conventions, which she claimed rendered the “union between man and woman today [either] a trade agreement or an exclusive sexual association.”\(^{107}\) According to Bré,

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107. Ibid., 66.
“If woman wants to be independent from man in sexual relationships, she must form her own moral laws in harmony with natural law and become independent of marriage. As long as patriarchal marriage remains the only legal way to have children, she will remain dependent as a sexed being.”

Beyond free unions, Bré called for the reestablishment of a revised matriarchy, which she characterized as “the earliest and most natural familial and legal form” that respected the “natural” and central bond of mother and child, regardless of marital status. Only within a matriarchy could women develop “free and proud.”

Although Meisel-Hess did not want to revive matriarchy, she did believe that “unfettering” sexual intercourse would help circumvent the need for prostitution and mercenary marriages within the middle classes that were based on money rather than love. She proposed what she called erotic friendships as an alternative to both contractual marriage and prostitution. In support of this ideal, she pointed out that “the need for sexual enjoyment without elaborate preliminaries or far-reaching consequences will never disappear . . . [and] as long as the woman is used as a mere means to the man’s end, she will in most cases be misused, and every possibility of true joy will thereby be excluded from the erotic process” (Sexual Crisis, 195). In Meisel-Hess’s view, “It is . . . far from impossible that a healthy, normal, and well-disposed woman should give herself to a friend, each freely choosing the other, in a union in which neither partner incurs any further and increasing responsibilities towards the other.” “By the simplicity of this process,” she insisted, “the whole sordid paradox of the duplex [double] sexual morality would be exploded once and for all” (198). In a rather impassioned appeal on behalf of intimacies beyond prostitution and marriage, Meisel-Hess wrote, in a passage worth quoting at length:

Are we to stifle that which so urgently demands expression? We have passions, not in order that we may stifle them, but in order that, if they injure no one, we may experience and enjoy them, as we enjoy any other good gift of fortune, as we savor a fine fruit. When two persons

108. Ibid., 31.
109. Ibid., 9, 12.
are inspired with passionate mutual desire, the future alone can decide whether their union is destined to afford them complete and enduring satisfaction. But the primary state, that of reciprocal passionate love, is in itself pure happiness, and deserves as such to be sounded to the depths. Time may show that the love is grounded on delusion but so long as the belief is real, real also is the happiness, and every chance of happiness must be taken when it comes, and not cast on the dust heap of life. Should the event prove, in any particular case, that the happiness was the fruit of illusion, let the sometime lovers regain internal and external freedom by dissolving their association, and let them do this without any interference on the part of society, without any public declaration of the fact that an intimate private relationship has been broken off, without any enumeration of the occasions on which either or both may have had earlier and similar experiences, and without the incurring of any obloquy. . . . What two human beings have in common, what draws them together, and what leads them to separate, can be understood by themselves alone, and are matters of purely private concern. (113; emphasis in original)

Meisel-Hess maintained that a number of essential preconditions had to be in place to realize the freer, less formal yet monogamous and intimate sexual arrangements she envisioned. These include economic security for women, particularly in the form of motherhood insurance; moral and social reform to ensure the recognition of free love intimacies; the primacy of the unity of mother and child as the basis of sexual order; and “absolute mastery of sexual hygiene and of the methods of preventing procreation” (326, 197). Such a conjunction of prerequisites for women’s sexual freedom was also articulated by Johanna Elberskirchen, who, in stressing women’s physiological need for sexual intercourse, also demanded women’s right to “preventatives” (by which she meant contraceptives) and women’s right of free sexual choice of partner.110 All the same, Elberskirchen insisted that on “hygienic grounds” all artificial external sexual stimulation should be avoided in order to enable the inner needs of the sex drive to direct human sexual behavior.111 According to her, it is only through the application of the feminine principles of love, strength, and motherliness that human

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sexuality can be redeemed and elevated to the higher, spiritual 
sphere where it belongs. Additionally, to ensure the healthy and “responsible” use of the 
sex drive, Henriette Fürth called for sex education, particularly 
among school-age youth, that would represent sex as a fact of life, 
undifferentiated from other human functions and drives. In Fürth’s 
view, how one teaches children about sex determines their future 
sexual behavior, as the early information they receive regarding 
sexuality shapes their attitude. While emphasizing the need for 
continued moral pedagogy in sexual education, she maintained in 
a series of articles published in the *Socialist Monthly Magazine* in 
1908 that children should receive factual and scientific sexual edu-
cation, based on comparisons with the plant and animal worlds. 
Sexuality, she claimed, should be stressed as a simple natural fact of 
human life; the dual spiritual-material character of sexuality ought 
to be especially highlighted in order to emphasize that the sex drive 
must be brought under control, via the power of the individual 
will, to fulfill our higher selves. Fürth boldly insisted that the erotic 
be represented as a vital energy source, both for the individual and 
for cultural life, and stated that the right of sexually mature adults 
to sexual satisfaction must be affirmed, even to the young.

Finally, the recognition of women’s biological right to sex also 
required legal reforms, namely, an end to the prohibition against 
the marriage of female Prussian civil servants and the celibacy it 
consequently enforced upon them. This demand was put forward 
most forcefully by the Association of Prussian Schoolteachers, 
which counted radical feminists like League for the Protection of 
Mothers and Sexual Reform member Maria Lischnewksa among 
its leaders. Although Henriette Fürth was not a member of this

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112. Ibid., 230.
113. See Henriette Fürth, “Der Aufklärungsunterricht: Ein Beitrag zur Sexu-
alpädagogik,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 12 (1908): 243–246; Henriette Fürth, 
“Sexualpädagogik und Sexualethik,” ibid., 564–568.
114. See, for example, Landesverein Preußischer Volksschullehrerinnen, *Die 
verheiratete Lehrerin: Verhandlungen der ersten Internationalen Lehrerinnen-
Versammlung in Deutschland, berufen im Anschluss an den Internationalen 
association, in her comprehensive *State and Morality* (1912) she concurred that the enforced celibacy of female state employees was “not only in the deepest sense immoral, because [it] involve[s] the forcible renunciation of a human right, [it is] also highly consequential for the efficiency of the race . . . quite often physically, mentally, and morally good and often outstandingly gifted individuals are thereby excluded from reproduction.”

Fürth’s critique of the de facto celibacy imposed on female state employees in Prussia highlights a key argument that runs like a red thread through female sexual theorists’ visions and arguments regarding the female sex drive and the unnaturalness of celibacy: namely, that sexual reforms endowing women with greater sexual freedom and agency were essential for the health and well-being not only of individual women, but also for the “race” itself. As Grete Meisel-Hess put it in an address to the 1912 Congress of the Monist League, “We demand the right to a healthy, natural love life also for the woman, to a healthy motherhood that would elevate the race, even in those cases where the road to marriage is blocked by a solid dowry or other obstacles.” Their invocations of the race here are vague, and it is unclear whether they are

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116. Among an older generation of feminists, the enthusiastic, eugenic pronouncements and demands of the radicals were viewed with great skepticism. In her 1909 article, “On Biological Love” (“Von der biologischen Liebe”), the progressive feminist Hedwig Dohm expressed pessimism regarding the claim, promulgated by Grete Meisel-Hess and Swedish feminist Ellen Key, that women’s greater sexual freedom would lead to “racial improvement” through the exercise of woman’s superior, sexual selective instincts, and through the ennobling effects of a child conceived through love rather than compulsion. Dohm asked, “Assuming that all obstacles of free selection would be eliminated, would a woman, guided by a superb biological instinct, then select as a husband the mentally and physically most suitable person for procreation purposes?” She emphatically answered in the negative, and instead insisted that love is “biologically blind.” Hedwig Dohm, “Von der biologischen Liebe,” *Sozialistische Monatshefte* 13 (1909): 1493. Dohm believed that “actually it is love which prohibits selective breeding; love especially has therefore to be excluded whenever a young woman selects her husband out of biological idealism for the purpose of procreation” (1494).
meant to denote humanity, Germanness, or whiteness; regardless, women sexologists invoked racial arguments as a kind of trump card in support of their demands for women's sexual rights. They argued that continuing to deny women their biological right to sexual autonomy and expression would have disastrous implications for the future of humanity. Grete Meisel-Hess cautioned specifically against the celibacy of the current generation of modern New Women; citing Ruth Bré, she warned, “If these intellectual and fearless women die without leaving bodily offspring, if they fail to reproduce their forcible individualities, the race necessarily suffers.” According to Meisel-Hess, “women of finer clay” must bequeath their finer qualities to the next generation (Sexual Crisis, 324). To realize such racial hygienic and sexual liberatory ends, Meisel-Hess insisted that both men and women must be free to “develop themselves as social and erotic forces,” to have the “possibility of being desired and loved,” to “propagate their kind under favorable biological conditions,” and to consecrate free and mutually determined sexual partnerships (343, 326, 343). For Meisel-Hess, sexual morality is, in the final instance, “based upon the interests of the species alone, and the only true sexual morality is that which leads to the procreation of healthy and beautiful human beings” (101).

For women like Bré, Elberskirchen, Meisel-Hess, and Fürth, the female sex drive held innate, powerful political implications. Empowering women to realize their sexuality as a right in turn required the social recognition of women as independent, desiring sexual subjects. However, the women discussed here were not representative of the majority of their contemporaries, including within the women's movement. Some feminists, particularly those affiliated with the moderate League of German Women's Associations (Bund Deutscher Frauenvereine, BDF), disagreed with sexological representations of female sexuality and questioned whether the liberalization of sexual life would benefit women. The scientized redefinitions of female sexuality examined here—and their concomitant demands for liberalizing sexual reforms—actually exacerbated existing conflicts within the women's movement.
The Natural Is Not the Same as the Good: Debates among Women on the Female Sex Drive

Many German feminists rejected attempts to redefine the female sex drive. In pamphlets, essays, and articles published in newspapers and journals affiliated with women’s organizations, moderate feminists rejected nature as an arbiter of moral truths, and expressed skepticism as to whether science was the best means of gaining knowledge about female sexuality. They also insisted on distinguishing emotional intimacy from “animalistic” sex, and argued that women ought to downplay the importance of sex and instead focus on developing their minds and personalities. Sexual freedom was a regressive goal in their view because it stressed the only aspect of women that men cared about anyway. Importantly, these critics did not entirely eschew scientific evidence: in fact, when prudent they appealed to facts and theories that supported their positions.

For some members of the moderate German women’s movement, the main problem with the new definitions of female sexuality was their reliance on medical and scientific evidence, much of which was produced by men. In her provocative tract Men’s Morals, German feminist Anna Pappritz criticized male gender bias within scientific pronouncements on female sexuality. Pappritz challenged male physicians’ claims that they had better insights into the “secrets of nature” because of their professional expertise, by pointing out the hypocritical contradictions in their assessments of female sexuality. Pappritz was one of the leading campaigners against the state regulation of prostitution, and vehemently fought against the idea, popular in scientific circles at the turn of the century, that there existed a class of “born prostitutes.”

What frustrated Pappritz was men’s rejection of women’s subjective experience as a legitimate source of knowledge:

This is what men, doctors, naturalists, and physiologists, whose eyes were opened to the holy book of nature, who were allowed to probe its

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secrets by all scientific methods, say. They commit an offense to the divine creative power of nature by stating that it created two categories of women, “abnormal creatures” for satisfying the extramarital needs of man and motherly types for the procreation of the species within a marriage. But if a woman had indeed only a desire for a child, should she not demand with equal right a fulfillment of this desire which a man demands satisfaction of this desire? A woman, however, who dared to express this objection, is not only met with Homeric laughter: we were then told that we do not understand that a woman experiences things quite differently. Therefore, only men know how women are feeling—we of course do not have the slightest clue!119

Through this critique, Pappritz intimated that women should be extremely wary of sexual scientific arguments, as well as the kinds of dividing practices they produced. Pappritz believed that sex was a matter of little interest to women, and was certainly less important to their lives and their happiness than other activities.

Many feminists also took umbrage at the claim that celibacy was damaging to women’s health. Pappritz for one maintained that negative views of celibacy gave medico-scientific support for the continued state regulation of prostitution, which she claimed facilitated male pleasure, recklessness, and irresponsibility at women’s expense. Pappritz was not alone among feminists in fighting the view that celibacy was necessarily injurious to women’s health. At the turn of the century, feminists publicly debated the desirability of female celibacy, not only in the feminist counterpublic but also in major medical journals. In a fascinating exchange that took place on the pages of feminist and medical journals, gynecologist and eugenicist Dr. Agnes Bluhm, member of the BDF and the Society for Racial Hygiene, rejected Ruth Bré’s assertions that celibacy contributed to physical and mental health problems in women. Over the course of their back-and-forth, Bluhm cited psychiatrist Emil Kraepelin’s *Textbook of Psychiatry*, as well as her own clinical experiences and those of other female doctors, to prove that sexual intercourse itself, not celibacy, was responsible for women’s

illnesses. According to Bluhm, childless women sought medical attention most often to deal with menstrual problems and, if married, to deal with infertility. In her various articles attacking Bré, Bluhm especially objected to claims that celibacy led to cancer. With her colleague Alfred Hegar, Bluhm maintained that women who had given birth (and had therefore had sex) suffered a higher incidence of uterine and ovarian cancer. Throughout her critique, Bluhm ridiculed Bré’s lack of formal medical and scientific training, mockingly writing, “Who would have thought that a question that serious researchers have fruitlessly sacrificed years of their lives attempting to solve would be answered seemingly overnight by a woman lacking natural scientific and medical knowledge?”

Bluhm pointed out the lack of experimental and statistical evidence in *The Right to Motherhood*, and in contrast asserted her own medical credentials and expertise. Yet despite her thorough rejection of Bré’s arguments, Bluhm arrived at the ambivalent conclusion that sex and motherhood, regardless of their perils, were inevitable for most women. For her part, Bré undermined Bluhm’s authority by asserting that truly authoritative female doctors ought to be “full [women], in order to help [other women],—a blossoming mother, who has experienced in her own body, what a child means for the

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The exchange appeared in the *Deutsche medizinische Presse* because, according to the editors of the journal, “The author would like to share her observations and thoughts about the above-mentioned topic with medical circles, after the editor of the *Frauenbewegung* cut off further discussions following Frl. Dr. Bluhm’s critiques. We do not take any responsibility for the aetiology of gynaecological disorders espoused by Ruth Bré. However, we ask our informed readers to express their views on the question raised by the author and offer them our columns for their comments.”


122. Ibid., 18.
woman. We do not need so-called naturally frigid, homosexual, or onanistic female doctors to solve this problem.”123 (Bluhm did not have children.) She went so far as to challenge medical expertise regarding sexual questions generally by noting that physicians are dependent upon laypeople, including ordinary women, for their knowledge. Citing a Dr. Gleich, she declared that “in the state of science, every educated man (and also every educated woman) is a citizen (stimmberechtigter Bürger), because the state is a republic in which there is no dictator, no subordination and no power other than the intellect, which alone rules; not through blind belief in authority, but rather through the foundation of truth, reason, and experience.”124

Beyond debates over celibacy, treating nature as an arbiter of sexual truth was a major point of contention. In her essay “Sexual-Ethical Principal Questions,” BDF member Marianne Weber vigorously argued that nature provides no firm basis for ethical demands. She accused nature enthusiasts of hubris, insisting that they were in no position to divine nature’s goals; furthermore, she criticized one-sided definitions of the natural as good, rightly pointing out that nature was also responsible for bad phenomena. According to Weber, nature had proven “consistently indifferent toward that which it created. It teaches us absolutely nothing about the meaning of our lives and leaves us eternally responsible for the question of how we should behave if we want to behave in a meaningful way.”125 Nature in Weber’s view was fundamentally amoral, and could not provide guidance when making moral decisions. Weber vehemently insisted that only culture and its stress on the spiritual and chaste elements of love could elevate human sexuality, as it was culture that assigned moral value. Demanding greater sexual freedom for women would only lead to a further brutalization of sexual feeling; in her view, sexual freedom could only ever be a purely masculine goal because women bore more burdens than

124. Ibid., 29.
benefits in sexual life. Instead of focusing on sexual freedom, Weber advocated training girls to be materially and existentially independent, and demanding a higher sexual-ethical standard of behavior from men.

Finally, many moderate feminists found the radical revision of the female sex drive undesirable and even dangerous because of the undue emphasis it placed on sex in defining womanhood. In her essay “The Women’s Movement and the Modern Critique of Marriage,” Helene Lange, one of the leaders of the BDF, insisted that the sex drive must be viewed as an individually variable entity and placed within the broader context of a woman’s total personality. Lange demanded a more comprehensive view of sex’s place in women’s lives and in society, noting that the overemphasis of any one drive is detrimental to the health of the others. “Of course we will protest against all approaches which result in a human being torn into two parts, forcing the sublimations of one part while the other is driven into the subhuman sphere,” Lange conceded; yet she maintained that the sexual sphere is only one part of an individual’s physical and emotional being, and must be subjected to the consideration of other “responsibilities.” The sex sphere, she claimed, requires the leadership and discipline of the will to bring it into harmony with other life powers. She further argued that sexual needs are dependent upon the nature of one’s personality, and even referenced science to combat representations of all women as sexually needful and desirous. According to Lange, psychology and physiology had proven that sex may be “a hindrance” to one person, while it may be one of “the highest achievements in life” to another; to a third person it could be “something non-essential and insignificant.” Finally, she stressed that the so-called sexual question does not exist apart from larger social questions, and asserted that treating sex independently from other sociopolitical issues supports a reorientation of ethics away from collective needs.

126. Ibid., 41.
127. Ibid., 42.
129. Lange, “Die Frauenbewegung und die moderne Ehekritik,” 82.
in favor of individual pleasures. For Lange as for Weber, sex was a profoundly social concern and a historical project, and for these reasons she also rejected nature as a moral arbiter of sexual life. In her view, “We have to consider . . . [that] the rules that [have] been handed down to us . . . [regarding] the form of marriage and family . . . are more than just the invention of one’s brain . . . ; life itself has shaped them through the experiences of many generations.”

Anna Pappritz similarly sought to downplay the role of sexuality in women’s lives in a private letter to Magnus Hirschfeld written in 1908. Here Pappritz argued that Hirschfeld’s views on female sexuality, which mirrored those put forward by the women sexologists examined in this chapter, were fatally mistaken because they were based exclusively upon “those softened and sensitive types of women raised in the big city.” According to Pappritz, such women not only misrepresented the norm of their sex, but also artificially inflated the importance of sexuality in women’s lives. She further chastised Hirschfeld for his diagnosis of “healthy, strong types of women” less interested in sex than in “intellectual matters or healthy movement” as “‘abnormal’ and ‘masculine.’” Pappritz maintained that Hirschfeld’s conceptualization of normal female sexuality hampered women’s progress because it inhibited them from developing intellectually and physically. In Pappritz’s view, it was absolutely essential for women’s progress that their interests broaden beyond sex.

Limitations to the Redefinition of the Female Sex Drive

The ideas of Fürth, Bré, Elberskirchen, and Meisel-Hess remain controversial and problematic today in light of the many limitations built into their understandings of the female sex drive—limitations that, as we have already seen, proceeded from the heteronormative

130. Ibid., 79.
biases and eugenic beliefs that existed within sexual science and society at large. Somewhat ironically, the engagement of these women with science inhibited their understanding of the full range of women’s potential sexual desires, experiences, and subjectivities, and ultimately restricted their demands for sexual liberation.

Though new approaches to the female sex drive released it from reproductive impulses, they reinforced heterosexuality as the purportedly natural norm. Women’s claim that the sex drive represented a “drive to union” that would strengthen monogamous bonds between men and women meant that the normal could only ever be heterosexual. Women writers went so far as to exclude as abnormal all sexual practices and forms of desire not directed toward men, specifically masturbation and homosexuality. Ruth Bré made this exclusion explicit in her 1904 article, “Is Forced, Unwilled Sexual Abstinence and Childlessness Damaging for the Healthy Normal Woman?” which she wrote to clarify the purpose of *The Right to Motherhood*. Here she stated, “I asserted in my book *The Right to Motherhood* that forced sexual abstinence and childlessness have damaging effects on the normal healthy woman. In claiming this, I of course did not mean the so-called naturally frigid (*sogenannte Naturae-frigidae*), nor did I mean women who disregard the lack of natural sexual relations through the thirst for life and glory on the one hand or masturbation or homosexual satisfaction on the other; rather, I speak for women who are really women, with healthy bodies and healthy desires for human and maternal happiness.”\(^{132}\) Bré even argued that homosexuality and masturbation were consequences of the denial of women’s sexual needs and drives: “The natural instinct cannot be smothered and artificially suppressed either in men or women without causing further severe damage to an individual,” she warned.\(^{133}\)

Some writers disparaged frigid or “sexually anaesthetic” women uninterested in sex: Meisel-Hess referenced Freud’s research on women’s anxiety neuroses to argue that the sexually frigid woman

\[\text{133. Bré, } \textit{Das Recht auf die Mutterschaft}, 57.\]
constituted an abnormal specimen.\textsuperscript{134} She further maintained that frigid women were “inapt . . . for social and artistic work” because they lacked “the fire of love.”\textsuperscript{135} While stigmatizing women’s frigidity, these writers nonetheless followed Krafft-Ebing in labeling sexually unrestrained women as nymphomaniacs.\textsuperscript{136} As Elberskirchen put it, “It is indeed obvious that, when I speak here as a doctor about a biological right to an active sex life, I can only refer to a sex life that is absolutely pure, modest, and healthy and does not lead to illnesses and unhealthy and dirty conditions.”\textsuperscript{137}

Elberskirchen’s clarification raises another crucial point: like their moderate feminist critics, women sexologists feared the eugenic consequences of untrammeled sexual freedom. Although many of them believed that the sex drive was not reproductively motivated, they were nevertheless conscious of the fact that reproduction remained a possible outcome of sex. In their view, conscious sexual decision-making, moderation, and self-control were critically important for sexually free women, and only certain women were capable of exercising good judgment when it came to sex.\textsuperscript{138} According to Meisel-Hess, sexual appetites must be limited in cases where individuals were “incompetent to estimate or provide for the consequences of sexual activity or passivity, and so long as there exists incapacity to control some of the pathological manifestations of the sexual life.”\textsuperscript{139} In her view, such limitations were justified to prevent “dangers to the offspring and to the race that may result from uncontrolled sexual indulgence” by irresponsible actors, and that such limitations fulfilled “the first principles of rational morality.”\textsuperscript{140} In her view, “It is obvious that a voluntary erotic self-surrender of the kind here under consideration is

\textsuperscript{134} Meisel-Hess, \textit{Sexual Crisis}, 334–337.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid., 240.
\textsuperscript{136} Elberskirchen, \textit{Geschlechtsleben und Geschlechtsenthaltsamkeit des Weibes}, 5.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{139} Meisel-Hess, \textit{Sexual Crisis}, 101.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid.
conceivable and desirable only in the case of women who are independent in character, self-controlled, and fully mature.” For Meisel-Hess, only advanced modern women could at present make responsible sexual choices within the prevailing conditions of sexual life; for all other women, sexuality at present represented a danger to themselves and to the race.

For Johanna Elberskirchen, however, the answer to the question of which women should exercise their sexual function was somewhat more complicated. In *Sex Life and Sexual Abstinence of Woman*, Elberskirchen clarified that her analysis pertained specifically to women of “middling sexuality.” According to her, they were neither “frigid” nor “hyper-sexual,” and constituted the majority. For women of “middling sexuality,” “a love life within physiological boundaries is for all people something normal and . . . for health reasons more beneficial than chastity.” However, Elberskirchen believed that the superior, intellectual (geistige) woman was meant for other, higher pursuits that left little energy for sex. Within Elberskirchen’s understanding, the heterosexual woman of “middling” sexuality was incapable of the sexual restraint required for intellectual pursuits; she needed sex to give her personality and to provide her life with a sense of purpose. Sexual fulfillment was a matter of indifference for the superior woman, as she was predestined to develop a personality independent of her sex instinct. Positing a sharp antithesis between the intellect and sexuality, Elberskirchen asserted that “highly intellectual and outstanding people are never very sexually active; on the other hand, highly sexual people are never very intellectual.” While Elberskirchen expounded the naturalness of the female sex drive and insisted upon its realization as a biological right, she nonetheless maintained that such demands were only relevant for women incapable of advanced intellectual pursuits. The tensions within

141. Ibid., 200.
143. Ibid., 23.
144. Ibid., 5.
145. Ibid., 17.
Elberskirchen’s writings demonstrate that the seemingly immanent political implications of sexological knowledge were neither clear-cut nor singular. Women sexologists’ texts also illuminate how the feminist potential of sexological knowledge could be undercut by particularistic caveats.

While the definitions of the female sex drive provided by Fürth, Elberskirchen, Bré, and Meisel-Hess responded to contemporary social concerns and were consistent with changing scientific understandings of human sexuality, they uniquely teased out the transformative political ramifications of scientific ideas in ways that offered to empower women sexually. By mobilizing scientific knowledge, they naturalized women’s sexual desires and legitimized claims that sexual activity was essential to women’s health and the creation of sympathy between the sexes. Ultimately, their efforts to elaborate the new understanding of the sex drive taking shape in sexology helped them define and legitimate a new female sexual subjectivity: that of the sexually autonomous woman who had a biological right to engage in personally enriching sexual experiences. Science thus endowed women’s efforts to enhance their sexual agency with legitimacy. However, this redefinition of the female sex drive and the concomitant demands it inspired provoked conflict, particularly among German feminists. Furthermore, the heterosexist and eugenic logics they employed built limitations into the redefined female sex drive. Female sexual theorists stigmatized and disavowed all forms of sexual desire and practice that did not seek satisfaction in intercourse with men, and argued that only certain women were in a position to make conscious, “racially” responsible sexual choices. Still others saw the sex drive and the rights it implied as valuable only to the average, heterosexual woman who was incapable of intellectual or spiritual self-realization. Women sexologists’ commitment to the scientific enlightenment of sexual phenomena both expanded and restricted the understanding and potential of female sexuality.

While many of the female sexual theorists examined here insisted on heterosexuality as the natural norm, scientific understandings and evaluations of what constituted natural or normal
sexual subjectivities were not fixed or stable at this time. In his discussion of the sex drive, for example, Havelock Ellis took care to note that the sex drive was usually, *but not exclusively*, inclined toward someone of the opposite sex. Likewise, August Forel believed that girls’ and women’s desires for same-sex intimacy were natural phenomena connected to their feminine constitution. Freud insisted that the libido did not necessarily have a predetermined orientation or object. In fact, the turn of the century saw the rise of theories that posited homosexuality as a natural and congenital phenomenon, and thus a legitimate subjectivity deserving social acceptance. In the next chapter, I examine how some women writers engaged theories of female homosexuality to articulate nonbinary gender and nonheterosexual subjectivities as desirable and superior alternatives to normal female (hetero)sexuality, endowed with their own set of “biological” rights.