



Neither 'incel' nor 'volcel': Relational accounts of UK women's sexual abstinence

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ABSTRACT

Amidst a proliferation of popular and academic interest in the celibacy and abstinence practices of men, women's sexual abstinence has not received the same attention. This paper is one of the only papers to empirically address women's sexual abstinence, and the first in almost thirty years. I provide a context of how, in early feminist thought, women's sexual abstinence had been theorised - and practiced - as liberatory, which is frequently left out of feminist histories of sexuality. However, my findings highlight how for the women in this research, sexual abstinence was seen as a necessity borne from surviving an aggressive and violent hetero-patriarchal milieu. Understanding gender as inherently relational, I also juxtapose the women's accounts with the accounts of men who took part in my research, and discuss their very different experiences of abstinence, including how 'control' was conceptualised, and the gendered ways in which sexual abstinence was encountered and negotiated interpersonally. I argue that the women's accounts also show us how we must problematise the distinction too easily made between 'involuntary' and 'voluntary' celibacy, and that focusing on women's accounts of their sexual abstinence starkly illuminate the workings of hetero-patriarchy in a way that must remain urgent to feminist thought.

1. Introduction

There has been increasing amounts of interest – both popular and academic – in the abstinence and celibacy practices of men. The phenomenon/subculture of incel (involuntary celibacy) has garnered much high-profile media attention in recent years as a number of perpetrators of mass killings in North America have been revealed to have had links to the online incel community (Srinivasan, 2022). Incel is profoundly gendered: the online spaces in which it flourishes are dominated by men (although the 'founder' of incel and of the original online incel space was a woman (Taylor, 2018)) and a cursory glance at any online incel space reveals how it pivots around the perceived injustice of women refusing to have sexual relationships with (some) men. It is often claimed that women cannot be incels but only ever 'volcels' (voluntary celibates; a term originating within the incel community) since there is a ready abundance of men available for women to have sexual relationships with should she wish (Maxwell et al., 2020; Sharkey, 2022).¹ Within incel

discourse, women tend to be characterised as shallow and callous, and often less-than-human (Chang, 2022). Academic literature on incels has begun to proliferate in the past 3–4 years due to this media attention, with much of it published in journals dedicated to violence, conflict, and terrorism (Baele et al., 2021; Helm et al., 2022; Hoffman et al., 2020; Moskalenko et al., 2022). There are also lots of cross-overs with other male-dominated and misogynistic online subcultures ('the Manosphere') such as Men's Rights Activism, Red Pill, Pick-Up Artistry and Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) (Ging, 2019; Johanssen, 2022).

There has also been some earlier studies on the *voluntary* celibacy (volcel) or abstinence practices of men. Unlike with incel, the men here are largely *choosing* to abstain from sexual activity, motivated by their involvement in Straight Edge culture (Haenfler, 2004), by their Christian faith (Wilkins, 2009; Diefendorf, 2015) or for health or relational reasons (Terry, 2012). Each of these studies are centred around the ostensible puzzle of sexual abstinence and masculinity: how can masculinity be 'done' when a key component of its hegemonic iteration is

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¹ Some women have disagreed with the assertion that women cannot be involuntarily celibate and have adopted the term 'femcel' to describe themselves. However, their presence is very limited in terms of discursive space. Jilly Boyce Kay (2021) astutely writes about how femcels are largely invisible since they are in many ways unintelligible given assumptions about women's sexual advantage over men, but also because the anger of the femcel is turned inwards rather than the politicised anger of the incel, which is based on an imagined lost right or entitlement. In recent years, femcel has undergone change in becoming a TikTok hashtag, referring to an aestheticized 'vibe' based on women's loneliness, but with an ironic knowingness (Johanssen & Boyce Kay, 2023).

missing: that is, an active (hetero)sexuality? Angel (2022: 67) reminds us that men are still required to be 'permanently up for it'. Indeed, a recent paper grapples with the question of whether or not we can speak of a 'sex recession' amongst American men (Bozick, 2021). The 'No Fap' community/online subculture also bears mentioning here – whilst this is not about abstaining from sexual relationships with others, and includes women in its membership, it centres around voluntary abstention from masturbation and pornography, and has recently been explored by Johanssen (2022).²

Much less attention has been paid to abstinent and celibate women – undoubtedly due to the lack of violence perpetuated by them, but also because they perhaps represent much less of a sociological conundrum than that presented by abstinent and celibate men. Whilst gendered sexual norms have arguably loosened over the past few decades, and indeed, a post-feminist imperative to be sexually adventurous has emerged in (some) spaces for (some) women (Gill, 2009), tropes of feminine 'chastity', 'purity' and constraint remain alive and well. For example, there is much evidence of the persistence of the sexual double standard in which girls and women are castigated for being too sexual (Farvid et al., 2017). Angel (2022: 63) also writes that women's investment in sex is understood as more 'cognitive', with reasons and incentives, whilst men's is more primordially 'libidinal'. This relative disinterest in abstinent and celibate women might also be related to a broader scholarly interest in masculinity over femininity (Budgeon, 2014). Women's sexual abstinence is not, it seems, a 'sexy' topic (see also footnote 1).

This article, by contrast, takes abstinent women as its focus (although in dialogue with the empirical experiences of abstinent men from the same dataset in order to highlight and throw into relief particular findings). It represents one of the only empirical examples which explores women's sexual abstinence, and the first to do so in almost thirty years. Although the data for this article was gathered shortly before the #MeToo moment, it speaks to the ways in which women's sexual relationships with men are too often sites of violence and fear – indeed to the extent that these women have opted out of sex completely. #MeToo, despite legitimate critiques made against it as a social movement (Angel, 2022; Phipps, 2020), has shown us the urgent feminist need to illuminate the continued and persistent injustices of sexual relations under hetero-patriarchy, of which this paper aims to do.

In this article, I begin by discussing some of the extant literature on women and sexual abstinence, before discussing the research upon which this article is based. I will then discuss my findings: first of all, I explore women's motivations for becoming sexually abstinent and how this was intimately related to hetero-patriarchy. I then discuss how abstinence was understood by the women as a way of regaining bodily control (as well as how the discourse of 'control' featured in male participants' accounts but in a very different way). Finally, I discuss how abstinence has been negotiated interpersonally by the women in my research – that is, it has proven an almost insurmountable obstacle to any kind of desired intimacy, in contrast to the men for whom it acted as a kind of gendered capital. The findings illuminate that the context in which the women in this study were *not having sex* remained the same as those in the research undertaken thirty years ago, but they also understood their sexual abstinence in different - less politicised ways - than in the past.

² With regards to the split I have made here between incels and men who are voluntarily abstinent, the Men Going Their Own Way community provides an interesting case as it blurs this boundary in some ways. MGTOW is borne from a context of hopelessness with regards to current gender and sexual relations, but there is a potential reassertion of agency as men actively decide to 'leave women behind' (Johanssen, 2022, 2023).

1.1. Women and sexual abstinence

It is important to locate women's sexual abstinence in the broader context of patriarchal control over women's bodies and sexualities. Controlling and restricting women's sexual activity has been and continues to be central to the organisation of patriarchy (Millett, 1970). Women's sexual 'purity' has functioned as a commodity in the traffic and exchange of women, and in ensuring patrilineal continuation (Abbott, 2001). Historically, much effort has been expended on ensuring that women do not have sex until they have been properly subsumed into the patrilineal order through marriage. Thus, sexual abstinence (usually in the form of virginity) has been demanded of women and girls – sometimes literally imposed through practices of cloistering, chastity aids and virginity aids, but more often through the operation of social norms (Abbott, 2001). As mentioned above, the persistence of the sexual double standard continues to ensure that women's sexuality continues to be constrained, and whilst expectations of virginity and abstinence may have loosened, women are still subject to more restrictive norms than men when it comes to sex. 'Slut' and 'whore' remain punitive epithets (Farvid et al., 2017). Therefore, for the vast majority of women, (enforced) sexual abstinence has been part of their *subordination* as women. However, sexual abstinence and celibacy also has a history of being liberatory for women, and it is to this literature I now turn.

1.2. Abstinence as emancipatory – first wave feminism

Celibacy has had a historical association with progressive politics and with women's liberation in particular (Kahan, 2013). For white, middle-class women, celibacy has at times represented independence and access to the public sphere in a way that would be otherwise unattainable. However, women's access to the public sphere has been contingent not just on their sexual abstinence, but also through their 'singlehood' (Vicinus, 1985). The ideology of separate spheres worked to confine (some) married women to the private realm of the home during the Victorian era (Jackson, 1992); furthermore the idea of *coverture* in marriage meant that a married woman's personhood was literally subsumed by her husband's (Dolan, 2003). Remaining single then was a way of retaining one's independence and ability to participate in the public sphere, but celibacy was an imperative element of this – to be single was to be celibate (Vicinus, 1985). Many suffragists and early feminists undertook vows of celibacy in order to carry out their political activism unimpeded by the demands of marriage, pregnancy and childrearing (Abbott, 2001; DuBois, 1999). Celibacy however was also about making a political statement in and of itself. Figures such as Christabel Pankhurst and Lucy Re-Bartlett, writing in the early 20th century, advocated the adoption of celibacy and singlehood as a way of protesting men's licentious and immoral sexual behaviour, and their abusive treatment of women (Jeffreys, 1982).³ Celibacy was also associated with the forging of intimate and often co-habitational partnerships between women, as in the phenomenon of 'Boston marriages' (Rothblum & Brehony, 1993). However, in this light, celibacy might be viewed as a way of claiming a place at the table on the master's terms. That is, to gain access to the rights enjoyed by white men, celibacy was employed as a strategy to move (some) women's bodies from the private to the public sphere, but without necessarily challenging that dichotomy, and diluting its radical potential.

1.3. Abstinence as emancipatory – (early) second wave feminism

Some of the arguments advanced by suffragists and first-wave feminists regarding celibacy re-emerged in some strands of early second-

³ This is not, however, to over-state the radicality of some of these early feminists: for example, Christabel Pankhurst's alignment with the Conservative Party.

wave feminism. It is important not to overstate this: second-wave feminists of varying theoretical orientations tended to see the political project as freeing women's sexuality from the grip of patriarchy through challenging the sexual double standard, and encouraging women to explore their sexualities, including through lesbianism, clitoral orgasms, masturbation, and non-monogamy (Gerhard, 2001).

However, as Fahs (2010: 446) points out, 'left out of this master narrative of liberation' are those feminists who disagreed with the notion that sex and sexuality were tools for liberation. Sexuality was a site of fraught tensions and deep divergences amongst feminists in this era. For example, Valerie Solanas (2004 [1967]) argued that sex was a distraction and a 'non-creative waste of time' which used up energy that might otherwise be spent mobilising and organising. Dana Densmore (1969) of the Cell 16 anarchist collective put it: 'The guerrillas don't screw. They eat, when they can, but they don't screw. They have important things to do that require all their energy'. Sex, according to Valerie Solanas, was male propaganda designed to distract women and to keep men in existence: 'when the female transcends her body, rises above animalism, the male, whose ego consists of his cock, will disappear' (2004: 60 [1967]). Furthermore, sexual desire was itself reconceptualised. Densmore (1969), echoing the arguments of Freudian psychoanalysis, made the case that there is nothing qualitatively distinct about sexual and erotic desire but is rather just 'life energy' that can be fulfilled through other 'interesting, absorbing things'. Sexual desire can therefore be channelled in other ways, or even conditioned away entirely (Solanas, 2004 [1967]; Dunbar, 1968; Densmore, 1969). This emphasis on celibacy was not carried forward into feminist writings and activism of the 1970s and 1980s, although we can discern the impact of these ideas on some feminism that followed. Political lesbianism and lesbian separatism, such as that of The Furies (Echols, 2011) in the US, and Leeds Revolutionary Feminists (1981) in the UK, called for giving up sex with men, rather than sex entirely, but there remained a de-prioritising of the importance of sex overall. Lesbianism was seen as a political commitment to devote one's energies to other women, rather than an expression of individual sexually embodied desire (Campbell, 1980), although this was also a site of challenge (e.g. Segal, 1994).

1.4. Abstinence as emancipatory – contemporary women

It is at this point that celibacy largely drops off the feminist radar, as feminism becomes increasingly pro-sex (Srinivasan, 2022). However, there remained a few isolated texts in the 1990s and 2000s which take up the case for celibacy as emancipatory for women. Sally Cline (1994) conducted one of the only pieces of empirical research on women's celibacy and sexual abstinence in interviewing women from the UK and US. Many of Cline's participants echoed the sentiment expressed above – that being celibate was a way of resisting male domination, and as a way of rejecting conventional forms and expectations of femininity where to be 'properly' feminine involved a willingness to co-operate in heterosex (Cline, 1994: 8). However, in Cline's findings, and in subsequent texts by queer feminist theologians (Gray, 1997; Isherwood, 2006) we also see emphasis on celibacy allowing for a new radical relationality. Celibacy is seen as a kind of radical 'non-possession' of others as well as a non-exclusivity, which allows one to love and relate more fully. As Isherwood says, celibacy "does not show one how to live alone but how to love together and to extend the edges of one's world beyond that of the family" (2006: 70). Isherwood links this to anti-capitalist praxis: celibacy acts as a revolutionary 'deprivatisation' of women and women's bodies through the dissolution of the family, which forms a cornerstone of the capitalist mode of production (ibid.: 171). In these understandings, celibacy is not about negation or denial of the body or sexuality (c.f. Solanas' call for women to transcend their bodies); but rather as a kind of abundance, or what Gray (1997: 153) calls a 'feminine jouissance' where there is a holistic appreciation of the whole body and person, beyond a narrow focus on the genitals. Celibacy becomes an orientation towards living and relating. Whilst similar ideas can be found

in the work of those writing on, for example, the priesthood and celibacy (e.g. Sipe, 1990), here it is argued that given our hetero-patriarchal context, celibacy most directly benefits women.

1.5. The incompatibility of womanhood and abstinence

However, celibacy and sexual abstinence is a complex space with regards to gender. Whilst we have seen how abstinence can be empowering for women, there are also distinct ways in which sexual abstinence is seen as incompatible with womanhood. Bernau (2008) argues that prior to the 18th century, it was women rather than men who were seen as sexually voracious with an uncontrollable sexual appetite. Thus, to be able to have control over one's body and abstain from sex was a distinctly masculine quality. Therefore, for a woman to do this, it meant the rescinding of one's womanhood. As the influential Church father Saint Jerome put it: "the woman who dedicates herself to Christ rather than the world, ceases to be a woman, and is called a man" since "we all aspire to the condition of perfect manhood" (as cited in Bernau, 2008: 34–35). For women to do so – in that it involved a 'masculinization' – was generally seen as a laudable act. However, from the 18th century onwards, Bernau argues that a sea-change occurs in which (white) women were no longer seen as sexually voracious but instead lacking any sexual desire whatsoever (ibid.: 56). Despite this, celibacy (beyond an expected period of virginity) was still seen as incompatible with womanhood. This was due to increasingly 'scientific' understandings of sexuality and gender, where a woman becoming masculinized through the adoption of celibacy was understood as eschewing her biologically-determined role of wife and mother. Bernau writes of the pathologisation of women who chose a life of celibacy through the medical term 'viragints', which meant living in a state of 'masculo-femininity' (2008: 20); and the prominent Victorian sexologist Havelock Ellis warned against disorders and maladies that would arise from female sexual abstinence (Jackson, 1983: 14).

There are also contemporary examples of the masculinization of women who choose to live a celibate lifestyle. For example, in an ethnography with celibate Buddhist nuns in Myanmar, Kawanami (2001) notes that within Theravada Buddhism, celibacy is masculinized by its association with spiritual power in that celibacy is seen as an essential step on the road to liberation from suffering and attachment. Women are seen as especially ensnared within the cycle of birth, suffering, attachment, and re-birth, thus:

"Celibate practice implies the shedding of femininity, which consequently allows the nun to transcend both the notion of female sexuality permeating Buddhist texts and the limitations prescribed to her by her reproductive faculties. By renouncing womanhood altogether, a nun is finally free to pursue her spirituality" (Kawanami, 2001: 137).

Sexual abstinence can thus be seen to occupy a complex and perhaps contradictory space within patriarchy: in the sense of regulating women's behaviour it can be seen as central to women's subordination, but it can also be adopted by some women who wish to resist or circumvent gender inequalities. But in doing so, in achieving 'empowerment', particular gender inequalities may themselves become reified: i.e. the divide between the public and the private, or women being forced to renege their very identities and lives as women. Indeed, celibacy as exalted masculinity can be seen in some contemporary examples of masculinity and celibacy – for example, the Hindu practice of *Brahmacharya* calls for semen-retention in men through avoiding any sexual practices, since the presence of semen in the body is thought to lead to Brahma (the Supreme God Head). Men who have fathered a lot of children are seen to be less masculine since they are depleted of semen (Alter, 1997; Khandelwal, 2001). Other studies of 'volcel' men, and men abstaining from masturbation and pornography, as mentioned in the discussion, also highlight the ways in which a 'higher' form of masculinity is seen to be attained through sexual abstention, as notions of self-

discipline and agency, central to hegemonic masculinity, are drawn upon by the men to discursively frame their behaviour (e.g. Diefendorf, 2015; Haenfler, 2004; Johanssen, 2022; Terry, 2012; Wilkins, 2009).

2. Methods

The data in this article comes from a broader study which explored the gendered dimensions of nonsexualities (Przybylo & Gupta, 2020), including asexuality, sexual abstinence, and celibacy (Cuthbert (2019, 2022ab)). I conducted semi-structured interviews with participants who identified or recognised themselves in one (or more) of these terms, including with six abstinent women and five abstinent men. Whilst I primarily use the data from the abstinent women participants in this article, I also draw on the data from the abstinent men given that gender is a fundamentally relational concept, and ideas of femininity cannot be understood without also considering masculinity.

All participants (both women and men) were based in the UK. All participants were between the ages of 20–50, with an average age of 29. Participants varied in terms of ethnicity and class backgrounds, and none described themselves as disabled. One participant described himself as gay; the rest as heterosexual. Four participants were religious (Christian, Sikh, Hindu, Mormon) and whilst there were different degrees of observance, no participant described their abstinence as being (primarily) religiously motivated. Although I used both 'abstinence' and 'celibacy' in my recruitment materials, I use the term 'abstinent' in describing my participants rather than 'celibate' as this was unilaterally favoured by participants, who felt that the term 'celibacy' was too closely associated with abuse scandals in the Catholic Church. I recruited abstinent participants from two main sources: an advert on Gumtree (a UK site for classified ads), as well as a message sent to all members of a UK based 'platonic' dating site (as it was described), via the site owner/moderator. Of all the participants, all but two were single – two of the men had non-cohabiting female partners, but some of the participants desired to be in non-sexual but romantic relationships. In my recruitment and introductory materials, I deliberately did not define sexual abstinence, aware that sex means different things for different people (Byers et al., 2009). However, when I explored meanings in the interviews, participants unanimously saw sex as anything comprising breast, genital or anal contact with another person, but kissing on the mouth or solo masturbation was not included by participants in this definition of sex. For participants, sexual abstinence was not qualified by type of relationship either – it included short term and casual sex as well as sex within long-term relationships. In my recruitment, I also did not set any constraints around time – either in terms of how long someone had been abstinent for, or how long they envisaged their abstinence lasting for. As a result, there was some diversity here (although no-one had been abstinent for anything less than 6 months). My interest was in what Mullaney (2006) calls 'markedness' – that is a conscious awareness that one is choosing not to have sex rather than *just happening* not to have sex. Or, to put it another way, I wanted to focus on 'becoming a non' rather than 'non-becoming' in Scott et al. (2016) terms, where the first refers to actively taking up a 'non' identity such as sexually abstinent, and the second is a state of unmarkedness. In a few cases, participants went through a period of *just happening* not to have sex before they saw themselves as *choosing not to have sex*; therefore it is also important not to draw such a strict boundary between *just happening not to* and *choosing not to*. The recruitment materials called for those who identified with a term like 'sexually abstinent' or 'celibate' or saw themselves as practising these things, or perhaps did not identify with these words but were choosing not to have sex. I did not recruit 'incels', but as we will see in the findings in relation to women's motivations for becoming abstinent, the issue of 'choice' is more blurred than the binary between involuntary/voluntary might suggest.

Interviews were undertaken in a range of places, including coffee shops, university offices, parks, and participants' homes. Data was thematically coded (Braun & Clarke, 2006), with themes identified such

as 'motivations for abstinence' and 'experiences of disclosing abstinence to others', out of which gendered fault lines emerged, as explored in the findings. In terms of my own subjectivity, I did not 'advertise' how I personally related to the research in the recruitment materials, nor did I offer this information without prompting in the interview setting. However, a few participants did ask where I stood in relation to the research, and here I disclosed that I had a personal identification with the asexual spectrum, but I did not see myself as sexually abstinent or celibate. To this extent, I was positioned as an 'outsider', and I often had the sense that participants went further in explaining their perspectives to ensure I understood. I also approached the research as a white, cis woman-presenting (although not fully -identifying) person, which undoubtedly impacted on how the research unfolded with different participants. For example, I believe my gendered positionality may have influenced the ways in which the interview site was also a site of 'doing' gender for some of the abstinent men, in terms of how they discursively emphasised their masculinity (Grenz, 2005). For example, some of the abstinent men highlighted quite strongly to me that they were still sexually desirable (and had empirical proof of this) *despite* their abstinence. This might be seen as a kind of 'compensatory manhood act' (Sumerau, 2012) in the context of being interviewed by a woman-presenting person, towards whom they may have felt they needed to maintain a level of (hetero)sexually active masculinity.

3. Findings

3.1. 'Women are just vessels for men': motivations for abstinence

All of the abstinent women in my research talked about how the main driver of their abstinence was the fact that having sex with men felt like it would be too much of a risk. The women described a feeling that having sex would be tantamount to a loss of self. Specifically, it was not that sex was inherently unsafe for women, but under current gendered arrangements with such marked power disparities, the women felt like they would be losing something of themselves. For example, Dona (aged 32) said:

"It feels like this, like, you're giving in... I feel like I'd be giving away a big part of me. For some females, sexually, it's a bigger thing that it is for males. So you are sort of giving in, your body and your personal freedom, your personal space and sharing that with someone. Whereas with men, I don't think they see it that way."

In this context, Dona saw her decision not to have sex as "*about protecting myself more than anything else*". Alora (aged 31) also felt that having sex with a man would have a deleterious effect on her as a woman. She had come to this judgement after witnessing the experiences of her mother's female friends when she was a child:

"I noticed even the very strong ones, when it comes to relationships, they lose it totally! One minute someone is all strong and mighty and the next minute she's like a weakling, crying and stuff. So I started thinking 'OK the problem is guys' so from then I just made up my mind, 'OK, no guy is going to get me all washed up'"

But also now as an adult woman herself, and reflecting on her own friendship group:

"I noticed those who are sexually active [with a man], who have been sleeping with him, they usually feel more broken than those who have never slept with the man. And those who do not, they walk out unscathed. You know, the guys do feel that the sex thing gives them control over you"

Alora specifically spoke of sexual relationships as a site where power was enacted between men and women. In Alora's experience, men used sex as a way of controlling women, and many of the women she knew were often left hurt and vulnerable after sexual relationships with men – they become 'weaklings' and 'broken'. This echoes some second wave

writings on the psychic harms of heterosexuality – for example, Firestone discusses how it results in no less than the ‘destruction of the individual’ for women (Firestone, as quoted in [Boyce Kay, 2021](#)). Alora had witnessed strong women lose themselves through sexual relationships with men and she did not want to have the same experience. Alora would only consider sex in the context of marriage because she felt that would give her a level of protection since her and her hypothetical husband would be committed to each other through the vows they had made. Alora's views on marriage was informed by her Christian faith, but she didn't necessarily see sex outside of marriage as a problem – it was more the damaging effect that it could have on women that motivated her abstinence, rather than her Christian views.

Ouka (aged 50) said something similar to Alora:

“Most men use sexuality to possess and dominate their partner...As long as I can remember I've always noticed that they behave differently before the first time they have sex with you and after. This has always disappointed me. They are not the same after they were finally able to reach their goal: have sex with you.”

Ouka also sees heterosexual relationships as sites of domination and possession on the part of men. Ouka had experienced this herself in the past – her male partners had acted in disingenuous ways in order to have sex with her, but once Ouka was no longer something to be ‘conquered’, they became less interested in having a relationship with her. As such, Ouka had decided she no longer wanted to have sex under these circumstances, and had “opted out” in order to protect herself. Yvette (aged 31) also felt very strongly about the current state of sexual relations:

“I hate how a man can have sex with a woman without feeling anything for them and being able to walk away after sharing something like that. It makes me feel sick inside just to think about it. I feel like I have to protect myself from that. I feel very guarded. I just cannot imagine a situation where a man would love me enough to stay with me without there being any sex involved.... I feel like women are completely disposable to men. I feel like I don't want to ever give any the opportunity to hurt me. I sometimes feel like women are just a vessel for men. Like it doesn't even matter what is below the surface. It makes me feel empty...Men know that if they say [I love you] to a woman they can win her trust - I still believe it is only ever truly about the physical aspect for men...they are willing to lie and manipulate to pursue women who they know feel differently and then abandon them whenever they feel like it.”

Like the other women in the study, Yvette's response to this situation was to no longer be sexually active with men. It was the persistence of deep gender inequalities amongst men and women with regards to relationships that led these women to become abstinent. As Catherine [MacKinnon \(1989\)](#) argued, it was indeed the case that (hetero)sexuality was experienced as a site of oppression for these women, and so abstinence was seen as the solution. In previous decades, political lesbianism might have been an alternative space to which these women gravitated (in that it represents a refusal of male sexual power rather than an innate attraction towards other women), but it is a discourse that has largely dropped out of sight, partially because it has been superseded by an understanding of lesbianism as a sexual orientation rather than as a form of political identification. The abstinent women in my study saw themselves as heterosexual (and in addition, did not see their refusals as necessarily political, as I will discuss in the next section) and so abstinence was the space that was available for them.

In these accounts there was a shared experience of danger and potential loss, and of male domination when it came to heterosexual relations. These experiences had been so significant as to bring about their abstinence. Their abstinence could in no way be understood without also understanding the conditions under which they were expected to be involved in sexual relations. Considering Vance's (1984) conceptualisation of sexuality as a site of both pleasure and danger for women, in the cases of these participants, sexuality was, at the time of

the interview, predominantly characterised as danger. It seemed to be the case that ‘the dangers of sexuality...make the pleasures pale in comparison’ ([Vance, 1984](#): 1). Tellingly, none of the men in my research cited motivations akin to any of those discussed above. Their motivations generally fell along the lines of self-improvement and attaining some kind of mastery of themselves and their desires, which I touch upon in the section below. Their accounts were largely individualised and focused on the self in isolation (echoing hegemonic masculinity formations ([Connell, 1995](#))), rather than the deeply social and relational accounts that the women gave, where their abstinence could not be meaningfully discursively separated from the wider hetero-patriarchal milieu.

3.2. ‘Now I have my power back’ – regaining control through abstinence

The above section highlights how the abstinent women in the research felt that heterosexuality under current gendered relations was a site of domination, and a place where harm could come to women. It was for this reason that they decided against having sex. However, some of them went further than this and articulated their abstinence as a way of retaining their gendered independence, or of retaining their power. For Alora, abstinence was practised as a kind of defiance: ‘it was just me wanting to be in control of myself and not wanting any man to dictate how I feel’. The same sentiment was discernible in Ouka's account:

“Now I have my power back, even if men still try to force me. I have my power back because I refuse to have sex... I am proud of my choice because I don't want to feel like a bitch or a female dog anymore. This is how I felt before. And very powerless.”

And Yvette too specifically invoked the language of resisting power and control: “[I'm abstinent because] I don't want to give anyone any power or control over me”. ‘Control’ also commonly arose in the narratives of abstinent men, but in very different ways. It is illustrative to compare the two groups here. The abstinent men spoke about control in terms of mastering their urges for sex, and how (easily) they were able to deploy this. For example, Jason (aged 32) said: “It's as easy as breathing...it's under control, it's never out of control”. Christopher (aged 27) also said “from the logical perspective I can just block myself up and just say, like...the desire is there but I can rationalise it away, easily”. Men participants also emphasised their control and mastery when I asked them about external pressures that may work against their decision to be abstinent. The abstinent men were firm in their response that they were unaffected by these: “I've never been one to buckle to peer pressure” (Jason) and “my life's my own and I'm going to live it the way I want and act the way I want to...if I take part in social norms I do them because I want to” (Travis, aged 21). These assertions can be seen as a particular formation of hegemonic masculinity: that is, the ability to exert control over one's ‘base’ bodily desires, and the mastery and conquering of the rational mind over the body ([Sydie, 1987](#)). Control was something they spoke about in relation to their urges rather than control over access to their own bodies, which was something that was taken as a ‘given’ and thus unquestioned. These findings echo those found in earlier work such as that of [Terry \(2012\)](#) and those discussed earlier, where self-control was very much connected to an idealised masculine self.

The accounts of abstinent women have direct parallels with early women's celibacy movements as discussed in the review of the literature, in which abstinence was practised by some women as a way of carving out a space of independence and autonomy in a male-dominated society. Rather than abstinence as a form of control over women, these women saw abstinence as a way of fighting off extraneous control. Indeed, Abbott's discussion of 19th century middle-class spinsters for whom “sexual intercourse and marriage were seen as a surrender of rights and personal independence” (2001: 251) still applies to the narratives of the abstinent women in this research in the 21st century. However, it is important to note here that unlike many of the celibacy movements wherein abstinence and celibacy was envisaged as a conscious *political*

decision, this was not necessarily the case for these women. Their abstinence was brought about because of their experiences of loss, danger and humiliation under hetero-patriarchy. And while they were critical of gendered relations between men and women and could see these as the result of an inequitable social system, in many senses their abstinence was still individualised. It was an ad-hoc and reactive decision, taken to afford them a feeling of safety rather than to make a political statement. In their accounts, we may see traces of what Seresin (2019) has coined “heteropessimism” – a contemporary mode of feeling where heterosexuality is acknowledged as broken yet there is also a deep sense of apathy towards any possibility of change.⁴ There was no mention of feminism in any of the abstinent women's narratives, or any sense of a wider collective struggle. For the participants in this research, abstinence was more an issue of forging a liveable life for themselves, rather than a feminist act. As feminists we may be tempted to argue that despite the women themselves not conceiving it as such, the women's abstinence was political. However, Cohen and Taylor (1992: 33) are instructive in this: they discuss how they as sociologists were keen to interpret the criminal activities of the prisoners in their research as rebellions against capitalism, yet ‘they [the prisoners] regarded [these activities] more as ways of *making out in the world* rather than radical techniques for confronting it’. The same might be said for the abstinent women in this research – whilst it is true that their abstinence cannot be understood outwith the gendered scaffolding of hetero-patriarchy, their abstinence was for them primarily ‘a way of making out in the world’ as women. The women did not have the same feminist consciousness that the participants in Cline's (1994) study did.

3.3. Blocks vs stocks: relational experiences of sexual abstinence

The women (and the men) who participated in the research also spoke about the relational and interactional experiences they had with others with regards to their sexual abstinence. Many participants, whilst wishing to stay abstinent, also wanted to find an intimate romantic partner. But here again there was a stark contrast between women and men. The abstinent women spoke of how difficult it was for them to find an understanding and accepting male partner. As Yvette said:

“I think there are more women who would be understanding of my situation than there are men. Men take it very personally when you won't have sex with them. Even if you tried to explain your feelings they would still feel inadequate. Whereas I think women would have more empathy.”

Here not only does Yvette speak of a lack of understanding, but also of the threat or danger of turning down a man's sexual advances. Yvette was not sure if she would ever have sex again but even participants who did plan on having sex in the future discussed the difficulties of finding a male partner who would accept even a temporary abeyance in sexual activity. Dona talked about how women had to have the ‘full package’ to offer men, which was conceptualised as a literal commodity:

Dona: I don't think they'd be willing to wait, really.

[Karen]: why do you think that the guys wouldn't be willing to wait?

Dona: Umm, I think for them it's... It's sort of, like, sex comes as a package. I mean, part of being in a relationship. And if you're going to buy just one item, I mean, from the whole package... It's like a big bag of crisps. I mean, if you just buy one bag, and then leave the others, then what's the point?

Dona discusses how women she knows have felt pressured into ‘giving’

⁴ However, unlike in Seresin's accounts of heteropessimism where there is still participation in heterosexuality since ‘nothing can be done’, the women in this research *do* ‘do something’ by withdrawing from (hetero)sex, but not in any activist way where future change is envisaged as possible.

sex simply in order to keep their boyfriends:

“Some of them [her friends] were thinking: ‘Well, if... If you don't indulge in sex, then the guy will look for it somewhere else...And then you'd be back to looking for another guy!’ They just think: ‘Well, being a female, you can't say you're not indulging in sex.’ That is part of the package of being in a relationship. I feel that as women, there is that pressure to indulge in sex. Because, emm, not indulging in sex in a relationship – before they knew it, the guy left; because the package wasn't complete.”

Men's threats to leave women if they do not have sex with them are found elsewhere in empirical research (e.g. Morgan & Zurbriggen, 2007). Here we can see what Stevi Jackson (1999: 129) means when she describes heterosexuality not just as a ‘normative construction of cross-sex desire’ but crucially as a ‘gendered hierarchy’, which is founded on ‘the appropriation of women's bodies and labour’. Heterosexual relations, as highlighted above, are frequently organised around the idea of a man getting something from a woman (Nicolson & Burr, 2003). As Angel (2022: 43) starkly puts it: women, quite simply “owe men sex”. In the women's accounts, sexual abstinence was seen as an obstacle or a ‘block’ in the heterosexual dating economy when it came to women. However, the men's accounts were again markedly – and tellingly – different.

Those men who were interested in finding a partner spoke about how their sexual abstinence was actually something that attracted the interest of women. For example, Connor (aged 20) says:

Connor: The majority of lassies – well, that have found out about it – have said to me they actually quite like the idea of it....

[Karen]: What is it – do you think – that makes them like the idea?

Connor: I think it's just the fact you're saving yourself for somebody...And they just didn't expect a guy to do it; they just think we're all pigs. The majority of women dae think that.

Jason also spoke about how his sexual abstinence appealed to women: “If anything, I'm going out of my way to hide from it [laughs]. I told them about being abstinent and I've had a few folk – girls -say they find it really nice and attractive.” Here, Jason presents himself as humorously beleaguered in fighting off the advances of the women who were attracted to his sexual abstinence.

Connor also talked about how being abstinent brought about benefits in his relationship with his partner, in that it had made the relationship stronger and more robust:

When you're in a good relationship you've been in ages and still no had sex you get to know each other – mental, physical, spiritual an aw that...Then youse have a stronger bond. If you don't need to dae that [have sex], then you can be in a happy relationship.

The idea that abstinence was something that improved relationships was also echoed by other men participants, who had found their women partners appreciated the particular kind of intimacy and closeness that not having sex could bring. In these examples, abstinence is experienced as not only attractive to women, but something which facilitates better, more mature relationships. Some of the abstinent women, who talked about their own abstinence as almost marking them with a scarlet letter, also spoke about how abstinence would ‘up’ a man's relational appeal. As Dona says:

I mean, if you meet a man who says: ‘Well, I'm celibate and... I'm not going to indulge in any sex until marriage or I'm not going to indulge in any sex until the relationship has developed until a certain stage’ I would love a man like that. And then, to me, I would think more like, I would think: ‘Well, this sounds like a serious person. This person sounds really committed. This person is really serious-minded and has got their head screwed on’. I would definitely love a man like that.

Curious as to whether this perception of a sexually abstinent man could be explained by Dona's own abstinence, I asked Dona if she felt that other women who were not abstinent might feel similar to her. She responded "Yeah, definitely, I think so, yeah, because I think it comes with the assumption that the person is really committed". Alora too spoke about how she would have an immense amount of respect for a man who was sexually abstinent. "He has gone through careful thoughts...I think a man who can abstain, and has given abstaining careful consideration, I would respect him because he is choosing himself; he chose to protect not only himself but also any future partners". For both Alora and Dona, abstinence in a man was encoded with qualities of responsibility, maturity and commitment, which made him particularly attractive – that is, have 'stock' – in the dating scene. It also seems to mark out abstinent men as *not like other men*. However, the temporality of their sexual abstinence may also be relevant. In all cases, the men quoted above (both real and hypothetical) are envisaged as not abstaining from sexual abstinence forever – but there is an imagined point in the future in which they will eventually have sex. This anticipated future behaviour perhaps safeguards these men from stigma as they have not dropped out of heterosexuality and heteronormativity entirely. Many of the abstinent women were however also in the same temporal boat (i.e. envisaging themselves as possibly having sex in the future), but this did not afford them the same 'stock' or gendered capital due to the workings of hetero-patriarchy. They were not upholding their end of the bargain as *women* to grant men sexual access to their bodies. Indeed, to assert you are not going to have sex could even potentially endanger one's belonging in the category of 'woman'. One abstinent woman spoke about being asked 'are you a man or something?' when disclosing her sexual abstinence to others (Pooja, aged 20). It could also affect participants' own self-understanding – for example, Yvette talked about how she sometimes feels she is not a 'real woman' due to her abstinence. For Yvette, a real woman is "very sexually capable and [does] everything expected of her". Whilst 'sexually capable' may imply a level of agency, the last part of the response makes clear this capability is really about fulfilling the imperatives of heterosexual femininity. To fail to do so – i.e. not have sex when expected – can therefore work to 'masculinize' abstinent women, both in terms of how others perceive them and in terms of their own subjectivities. As discussed earlier in how abstinence has been seen as incompatible with womanhood, here we have women who discuss how their abstinence involves a social 'cost' of masculinization.

4. Conclusion

This paper is the first to empirically address women's experiences of sexual abstinence and celibacy since Cline's work in the early 1990s, amidst a rapidly proliferating field interested in men who are not having sex. But examining women's accounts (particularly in relation to men's experiences, as I have done here), highlights the ways in which gender plays a hugely significant role in sexual abstinence and celibacy, as well as illuminating the persistent and ongoing structuring force of hetero-patriarchy. We saw how abstinence was a response to the psychic and often embodied loss of self under hetero-patriarchy for all of the women. It was *chosen* in that it was something consciously decided upon, but the women's accounts discussed here also work to blur the boundary between voluntary and involuntary. In many ways, their hands had been forced – they had 'dropped out' of sex, but this was because of the oppressive ways in which they had experienced sexuality with men. It behoves us then to more insistently probe this binary between choice and lack thereof, or to put it another way, between 'incel' and 'volcel', neither of which are sufficient to describe the women in this research's experiences.

We also saw how 'control' functioned in the narratives of both men and women participants – but in very different ways. For women, control was about keeping hold of a sense of bodily autonomy, where for the men, whose bodily autonomy was never at risk, control was envisaged

across the board as something they skilfully deployed over their own sexual desire, in a competent show of rationality and self-mastery. However, for the women, abstinence as providing bodily autonomy was not politicised in any way – whilst they spoke of inequalities in gender relations, they did not conceptualise their struggles in any way as outside of their own personal experience. For them, the personal remained the personal, which was different to the way celibacy had been practised in the past (Cline, 1994). This may be due to a context of post-feminism, which gained traction throughout the 1990s and has continued apace, where women are reluctant to identify with feminism more broadly or identify in individualised neoliberal forms (Fraser, 2013; McRobbie, 2004). In these women's lives, abstinence had been sought, or turned to, as a way of surviving, or getting by. Here there is tension between participants' accounts and my own desires as a feminist to interpret these as *feminist refusals and resistance*, with a historical lineage to the early women's liberation movement – but to do so would be to privilege transgressive interpretations over participants' own accounts. However, there is also something to be said for the mundane ways in which hetero-patriarchy operates – it's just *there*, and something to be dealt with, with whatever means a woman has to hand.

We also saw how sexual abstinence could act as a form of gendered capital for abstinent men when it came to relationships with women ('stocks'), but it was uniformly seen as an obstacle, or a cost ('blocks') for women encountering men as intimate partners, given that it upended heterosexual imperatives for women to *give* something up to men. Indeed, in a couple of cases, it was such a departure from normative heterosexual femininity that some women were 'masculinized' – either by others, or through one's own felt subjectivity. For men, there was no equivalent cost – indeed, abstinence could often be seen to reaffirm one's masculinity. Whilst this has been discussed in previous literature on 'volcel' men, comparing women and men's accounts as done here throws this into sharp relief, and introduces this as a form of gendered capital.

In many ways, this article goes against the grain of much work on women's sexuality produced in the recent past. As the 'Sex Wars' were seen to have been largely won by those on the side of sex positivity, accounts of women's pleasure and agency have been emphasised by the contemporary feminist movement (Phipps, 2014). The #MeToo movement certainly underscored the sexual fear, hurt and humiliation experienced by the majority of women in mostly heterosexual contexts, but Srinivasan (2022) argues that whilst this did much to re-politicise sex, it did so in terms of consent as the ultimate arbiter of ethics. Lacking from this was a wider critique of sexual relations under hetero-patriarchy – sex has become simply consented to or not consented to, without a wider politicisation and problematization of sex. Srinivasan reminds us of the radical impulse of feminist critique has been "to liberate sex from the distortions of oppression, not simply to divide it into the consensual (unproblematic) and non-consensual (problematic)" (2022: 95). This is not to deny that many women find pleasure, agency, and autonomy in sex under hetero-patriarchy, but this article has attempted to remain attentive to the ways in which the 'dangers' of sex under hetero-patriarchy for women remain very alive and real – to the point where some women (have had to) choose sexual abstinence. Ellen Willis' question, posed in 1981, remains an extremely pertinent one: "a truly radical movement must look...beyond the right to choose and keep focusing on the fundamental questions. Why do we chose who we choose? *What would we choose if we had a real choice?*" (Willis, as quoted in Srinivasan, 2022: 83; my emphasis).

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