

The Ideal Woman

Sexology, Sex Reform, and Engineering Marriage in Weimar Germany

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Abstract

The end of the first World War marked a period of profound change for the German nation, giving birth to Germany's first democracy, the Weimar Republic. The Weimar Republic ushered in one of the most creative and uninhibited periods of the twentieth century. This period witnessed advancements in the field of sexology and unprecedented change for German women as they flooded the workforce and gained full suffrage. As an increasing number of single women became financially independent and disillusioned with the prewar construction of the family unit, German men found themselves rendered impotent. Already humiliated by the loss of the war, men desperately clung to the prewar, Wilhelmine ideal of the quintessential real man by turning their attention to the sexual behavior of women and fostering a culture of systematically engineered marriages through sex reform. This article draws upon the works of several prominent sexologists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, most notably Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Theodoor Hendrik van de Velde, as well as a variety of articles published in German magazines during the 1920s. By comparing these works, spanning from the end of the Wilhelmine era to the 1930s, it becomes clear that the Great War fundamentally altered the way that women conceptualized female identity, sex, and the family.

Article

It was the women themselves, due to an easily understood hunger for air and life, who shattered the bell jar in which they were vegetating. They have become comrades in work in play, in pleasure and struggle, and among comrades everything is equal.¹

This short anecdote from the article, entitled "The Defenseless: A Conversation between Men," published in the progressive German magazine *Uhu* in 1928, narrates a conversation had between a father and son on a bustling streetcar in Berlin. The older man asks his son why he had neglected to get up and offer his seat to a woman who was forced to stand, noting that his son's aversion to chivalry made him feel unsettled. His son explains that the woman of his father's time was not the same woman who stood on the streetcar with them. The woman of his own time would not want or expect him to offer her his seat. If he did,

¹ Alfred Polgar, "The Defenseless: A Conversation between Men (1928)," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 204.

she would most likely refuse it, or possibly even be offended by the well-intentioned gesture. The modern woman of his time did not concede to weakness or accept that the structure of her body made her any less capable than a man. She had emancipated herself from the constrictions of marriage and motherhood and embraced the newfound strength that was given to her by the war and the Weimar Constitution. As the son states, "Gender, father, has become a secondary human characteristic."²

Between 1914 and 1918, nearly thirteen million German men were dispatched to the warfront to defend the Fatherland. By the time the armistice was signed in 1918, over two million soldiers had been lost.³ Those who survived were unaware that the homes and families to which they were returning bore no resemblance to those they left behind. Men returning from the war did not have the luxury of reclaiming their former existence. They limped their way back onto German soil as ghosts, unsure of how to navigate what now felt like foreign land. It quickly became clear to the soldiers that women had endured a war of their own. Food scarcity had called for strict rationing, and fuel shortages left women scouring rail yards for fallen coal when they were not working or standing in obscenely long food queues.⁴ The long, arduous work days and overwhelming shortages were especially burdensome for women with families, who were forced to shoulder the financial responsibilities associated with housing and feeding several children.

German women are often still lumped together in historical works as a collective and enthusiastic fighting force, despite the fact that many women were eager for the war to end. As Detlev J.K. Peukert points out, the most common portrait of the New Woman was a male-generated fantasy and did not reflect the way that most women conceptualized themselves during the war. "The 'vamp': the glamour girl, a bit too independent to be true, armed with bobbed hair and made-up face, fashionable clothes and cigarette, working by day behind the sales counter in some dreamland of consumerism, frittering away the night dancing the Charleston."⁵ In reality, most women working in industry more closely identified with the gender-specific notion of the woman as a substitute member of the workforce.⁶ Nevertheless, while married women and mothers anxiously awaited the return of their spouses, many city-dwelling single women became increasingly independent and uninhibited. For these women, the war was not a burden but an opportunity.

The "New Woman," as she became known, took root in the throes of the First World War and blossomed just as the haggard, defeated soldiers began to make their way home. The Germans had lost the war, and their failure ran alongside a surge of unprecedented female empowerment that dramatically reshaped the structure of Imperial German institutions and blanketed the male population with discontentment. As grueling as life on the war front was, there was also a sense of liberation pulsating beneath the boots of women working in metal and munitions factories. For many young, single women who were

² Ibid.

³ Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 8.

⁴ Ibid., 10.

⁵ Detlev J.K. Peukert, *The Weimar Republic: The Crisis of Classical Modernity* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1992), 98.

⁶ Ibid.

mobilized to support the war effort at home, Germany's circumstances allowed them a taste of independence without stepping outside of the boundaries of their customary social positions. The demand for industrial workers in cities pulled young women away from the watchful eyes of their more conservative communities and allowed them to experience the fulfillment that came along with earning their own money.⁷ As Mel Gordon notes in his study of Weimar culture, "No longer wide-eyed innocents, these newly enfranchised women had witnessed an implosion of moral values."⁸ After the war, these women quickly formed the bedrock of the Weimar Republic, and today the emancipation of the New Woman is tied inextricably to the birth of Germany's first constitution in 1919. By granting women full suffrage and declaring men and women equal before the law, a cause that feminists had been rallying for since before the Wilhelmine period, the Republic definitively declared that men no longer held authority over women. Still struggling to come to terms with their extraordinary defeat in the war and shamed by the provisions of the Treaty of Versailles, Article 109 of the Weimar Constitution was yet another twist of the knife for men.⁹

During the war years, German leaders watched apprehensively as they were forced to rely on female laborers to sustain the war effort. When the war came to an end, they were eager to push women back into their traditional roles as wives and mothers, but the utter devastation and loss of life caused by the First World War simply would not allow for that to happen. Germany was no longer a nation bonded by men; for the first time in history, the German economy was undeniably reliant on women. The introduction of a large female population into the workforce and sudden shift in gender-based labor division eventually triggered a resurgence of the scientific field of sexology and sex reform. As an increasing number of single women became financially independent and disillusioned with the prewar construction of the family unit, German men found themselves rendered impotent. Already humiliated by the loss of the war, men desperately clung to the prewar, Wilhelmine ideal of the quintessential "real man" by turning their attention to the sexual behavior of women and fostering a culture of systematically engineered marriages through sex reform.¹⁰

The Great War and its aftermath destroyed any lingering legitimacy that the German government may have had, and the lack of both order and authority created a collective sense of juvenile defiance, leaving young people asking, "What are you going to do about it?" Revolutionary soldiers abandoned their epaulettes and prowled city streets with shirts unbuttoned.¹¹ Women cut their hair and traded their long, conservative dresses for short skirts and silk stockings, unapologetically brandishing their slender, feminine figures. Describing the new attitude and clothing of women of this period, Gordon notes: "The light

⁷ Ibid., 11.

⁸ Mel Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic: The Erotic World of Weimar Berlin* (Port Townsend, WA: Feral House Publishing, 2006), 14.

⁹ Article 109 of the Weimar Constitution stated that all Germans are equal before the law and that men and women have the same fundamental civil rights and duties.

¹⁰ Norman Domeier, "The Homosexual Scare and the Masculinization of German Politics before World War I," *Central European History* 47, no. 4 (December 2014): 737-759.

¹¹ Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic*, 53.

clothing she wears moves like a wave over the line of her bright, free body. On this sunny day she takes in the wind the air and every male glance.”¹² The Wilhelmine bubble had popped. Centuries of sexual repression had been unleashed, and there was a palpable sense of eroticism in the air. As a result, the postwar Weimar era is commonly associated with a surge of unparalleled sexual expression. Thirty years earlier, however, Germany had been a different world. Dominated by nobility, elites, and the military, Imperial Germany was comparatively rigid and dull. In this era, “proper” women were seen as devoid of all sexual desires and shamed if they gave any indication such desire existed.

Diagnosing Sexuality

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the up-and-coming field of sexology was piloted by the antiquated sexologist Richard von Krafft-Ebing, one of the first and most influential figures in the field of human sexuality. Krafft-Ebing pioneered the study of sexual perversity in men, women, and children through a series of primitive case studies. These case studies, some of the first examples of the medicalization of sexual behavior, were revolutionary in that they characterized behaviors that had previously been labeled criminal, immoral, or unnatural as identifiable, diagnosable, and often treatable diseases.¹³ Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century, most of the discourse surrounding the relationship between science and sex was dominated by medical doctors, but by the turn of the century, the study of sexual behavior had been largely overtaken by psychiatrists who believed that “abnormal” sexual desires were a sickness of the mind rather than the body.¹⁴ Conceived within the constrictions of the exceptionally prudish Victorian era, late-nineteenth-century sexology pushed the limits of what was considered “moral” sexual behavior by acknowledging that female sexual impulsivity was a natural part of the biological process. Krafft-Ebing and his fellow sexologists subsequently utilized that information to deduce that the sole purpose of any female sexual desire was to encourage reproduction, not to experience physical pleasure.

Krafft-Ebing’s prior “diagnoses” were skewed to curb the changing nature of marriage and intimacy at the end of the nineteenth century, but by the 1920s his ideas were unable to withstand the Germans’ desire for uninhibited, enjoyable sex. Nevertheless, the goal of Weimar era sexologists, most notably Theodoor Hendrik van de Velde, remained the same: fortify marriage and birth rates and ensure the continuation of a male-dominated society. Krafft-Ebing and Van de Velde, both leading sex reformers of their times, had a similar objective but applied variable strategies to reach this objective. Krafft-Ebing, motivated by a desire to keep sex under lock and key, used his position as an established and respected doctor to present female sexual expression as a disease that required aggressive treatment and rehabilitation. In his study of Krafft-Ebing, Harry Oosterhuis has drawn attention to the problematical legacy of the reformer: “Because he wrote about sex when polite society was silent about it, and because he wrote about it as if it were a disease or medical problem, Krafft-Ebing has been mistaken as a progressive force in the struggle against sexual

¹² Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 309.

¹³ Harry Oosterhuis, *Stepchildren of Nature: Krafft-Ebing, Psychiatry, and the Making of Sexual Identity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 2.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 43.

prejudice and prudery.”¹⁵ But by 1926, when Van de Velde published his famed work, *The Ideal Marriage*, Krafft-Ebing’s blueprint for sexual repression was outdated and inapt. Recognizing that Krafft-Ebing’s approach was no longer effective, Van de Velde devised a new plan, incentivizing sex to encourage women to marry and bear children. Sex, Van de Velde discovered, was a valuable tool that if used properly, had the potential to repair a broken Germany.

The war and the Weimar Republic were not solely to blame for Germany’s convoluted attitudes toward marriage in the early twentieth century. Rules regarding dating, intimacy, marriage, and sex had begun to change long before the war. This shift coincided with the growth of modern city life at the turn of the century; between 1850 and 1900, Berlin blossomed into a vibrant metropolis.¹⁶ City life dramatically altered the ways in which people became acquainted with one another, and as a result, the concept of casual dating—or what Tim Carrington refers to as *Verhältnis*—became commonplace.¹⁷ If the women of the Wilhelmine era began to create a crack in the foundation of traditional family life, the women of the Weimar era definitively shattered Wilhelmine attitudes toward sex and motherhood. The cruel legacy of The Great War had mutated into a culture of experimentation, indulgence, and unconventional relationships. Those who survived the war were awakened to the transitory nature of life. New opportunity was ubiquitous. Sexual autonomy became obtainable. Much like the reactionary sexology that was produced in the late nineteenth century, twentieth-century sex reform was designed to retrench female sexual expression. As Detlev J.K. Peukert has observed, “The ideas and methods of the new sexual enlightenment were themselves still very much the offspring of the nineteenth century, particularly of its faith in science.”¹⁸ The gradual emergence of the surplus woman beginning in the nineteenth century became synonymous with sexual deviancy and disease, but after the war, the recently emasculated male populace became even more eager to find a cure. Science, some believed, was a viable recourse.

In an earlier effort to curtail the looming threat of female sexual expression that had begun to emerge before the war, many pioneers of the study of sexual behavior set out to determine the root cause of the degeneration of the traditional family unit. German neurologist P. J. Möbius, who published *Concerning the Physiological Feeble-mindedness of the Female* in 1907, focused his attention primarily on what he considered to be biological causation. Möbius asserted that the size of the female brain was far less developed than the male brain, causing women to be incapable of analytical thinking and thus driven entirely by instinct.¹⁹ In this treatise, Möbius asserted: “Instinct makes woman animalistic, dependent, naïve and cheerful ... Like animals have behaved from times immemorial, so too would mankind remain in its primal condition, if there were only women. All progress

¹⁵ Ibid., 8.

¹⁶ Tim Carrington, *Love at Last Sight: Dating, Intimacy, and Risk in Turn-of-the-Century Berlin* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 65.

¹⁷ Ibid., 17.

¹⁸ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 101.

¹⁹ Barbara Hales, “Woman as a Sexual Criminal: Weimar Constructions of the Criminal Femme Fatale,” *Women in Germany Yearbook* 12 (1996): 102.

originates from man.”²⁰ According to Möbius, the woman’s instinctual nature and lack of both intellect and restraint endangered the structure of German society and, as a result, threatened the very fabric of their nation. Prior to the war, there was a collective, clear vision of what the construction of the family should look like and what it should provide. That vision was driven by “specialists” of human sexual behavior like Möbius and Krafft-Ebing and, broken by the war, was resurrected in the twenties by prominent sexologists like Van de Velde and Magnus Hirschfeld to combat the postwar crisis of the family.

While Möbius’s theories were rooted in physiological science, most prominent sex reformers of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, like Krafft-Ebing, had backgrounds in psychology and natural sciences. Krafft-Ebing published the first edition of his major work, *Psychopathia Sexualis: A Clinical-Forensic Study*, in 1886, addressing for the first time taboo subjects, like masturbation, fetishism, masochism, and incest. *Psychopathia Sexualis* was assembled from a series of case studies in which Krafft-Ebing categorized a myriad of sexual perversions ranging from “abnormally” increased sexual desire and erectile dysfunction to violent and sometimes deadly sadism.²¹ Keeping with the widely accepted nineteenth-century belief that men had a more intense sexual appetite than women, Krafft-Ebing viewed a heightened female libido as a disease, deducing that “a predominating sexual desire in her arouses a suspicion of pathological significance. When this finds expression in desire for adornment, coquetry, or male society, which passing beyond the limits set by good breeding and manners, becomes quite noticeable.”²² Krafft-Ebing’s case studies effectively validated the widespread belief that women were more susceptible to psychological anomalies and insanity, especially when sex was involved.

In two case studies documenting “hyperesthesia,” which by his definition meant “abnormally increased sexual desire,” Krafft-Ebing likened an inflated sex drive to insanity, explaining that one of his female patients was sent to an asylum because “she was unable to control herself, so she would shut herself in a room until the storm had passed. At last she gave herself up to the men of her choice, but neither coitus nor masturbation brought relief.”²³ In another evaluation, he reported that a mother of five was driven to attempt suicide as a result of her sexual impulses, and was also sent to an asylum. Even once she had been “rehabilitated,” she refused to leave the institution because she did not trust her ability to control herself in the outside world.²⁴ Krafft-Ebing never explicitly clarified what constituted abnormally increased sexual desire, but based on his assertion that the female sex drive was “naturally small,” it can be assumed that in some cases, any sexual desire at all could be deemed increased and abnormal. Krafft-Ebing’s crude case studies were the embodiment of the Wilhelmine era. To him, women were merely vessels. Their existence was necessary for the continuation of the German race—and nothing more.

²⁰ Quoted in *Ibid.*

²¹ Richard Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis, with Especial Reference to Contrary Sexual Interest*, trans. Charles Gilbert Chaddock (Philadelphia: F.A. Davis Publishers, 1893), 57.

²² *Ibid.*, 48.

²³ *Ibid.*, 51.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 52.

Examining the way that educated men conceptualized female sexuality at the end of the Wilhelmine era is essential to understanding the complex social environment in which Weimar era sexology was conceived. Krafft-Ebing's belief that sexual females should be condemned to institutions and denied the opportunity to marry and have children indicated a desire to contain what he thought might be hereditary. In the majority of his case studies, he provided a brief family history of the patient and overwhelmingly established some form of mental illness on the mother's side, as seen for example in his description of the case of "D.": "Case 3. D., aged 33, had a mother who suffered with insanity of the persecution. The woman's mother became insane in the perpetual state. Three of her mother's children died in babyhood, and those that lived longer had an abnormal character."²⁵ The idea that "D." was sexually abnormal because there was a family history of what he very loosely defined as "insanity" is rooted in the theory of eugenics formulated by Francis Galton in 1883. Eugenics deduced that abnormalities caused by environmental factors could be passed down over time.²⁶ Viewed in this context, Krafft-Ebing's push to quarantine sexually explicit women was his attempt to dictate the direction of evolution. However, by the 1920s and 1930s, progressive sexologists like Van de Velde became less interested in eugenics and more focused on replenishing the German population after the war, meaning that women should be free to enjoy their marital sex lives, provided that the result was an increase of births.

While the Weimar era is often viewed as an era of radical sex reform, not all professionals who involved themselves with sexology advocated for female sexual emancipation as Van de Velde did. In 1923, state prosecutor and legal reformer Erich Wulffen published *Woman as a Sexual Criminal*, which argued that "female crime is rooted in sex." Wulffen contended that a woman's biological premise, caused by the processes of pregnancy, menstruation, and menopause, made her more susceptible to criminal behavior.²⁷ Like Krafft-Ebing, Wulffen believed that the male sex drive was naturally stronger than the biological female impulse, and the bedrock of his argument was reminiscent of Wilhelmine era attitudes toward women, sex, and the family. According to Wulffen, sexual submissiveness was the only way to prevent women from developing an "excess of sexuality."²⁸ Without the sexual passivity provided to a woman by her husband, she would undoubtedly collapse under the pressure of her congenital vanity and lust and turn to a life of crime. Echoing Möbius's early twentieth-century assertion that women were driven entirely by instinct, Wulffen believed that dominant women were unable to grasp the concepts of authority and justice, rendering them unable to control their compulsion to commit criminal offenses.

In *Woman as a Sexual Criminal*, Wulffen explicitly stated what more progressive sexologists later wrote more obliquely. The sexually emancipated, single woman posed a direct threat to the welfare of society as a whole. "As long as a woman has a connection to childbearing, she is in bondage to sex."²⁹ Without marriage, her unrestrained sexual instinct would cause

²⁵ Ibid., 42.

²⁶ Laurie Marhoefer, "Degeneration, Sexual Freedom, and the Politics of the Weimar Republic, 1918-1933," *German Studies Review* 34, no. 3 (2011): 530.

²⁷ Hales, *Weimar Constructions of Criminal Femme Fatale*, 104.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

her to become recalcitrant and depraved. Wulffen viewed female sexuality and vanity as a weapon, inspiring women to commit crimes like prostitution, murder, and shoplifting.³⁰ Her narcissism triggered extreme jealousy and hatred toward both sexes, resulting in a myriad of volatile relationships and unsettled vendettas. According to Wulffen, not only did the sexual woman feel drawn to engage in criminal behavior herself, she also had the ability to manipulate others into doing so as well. One of Wulffen's fellow criminologists, Hans Schneickert, shared his concern regarding the manipulative powers of women. Schneickert went so far as to condemn women for the vast majority of crimes that were committed by males, theorizing that woman devised devious schemes and enlisted men to provide the strength to carry them out.³¹ Criminologists and sexologists like Wulffen and Schneickert were the embodiment of postwar anxieties regarding sex and male incompetency. The idea that women were to blame for virtually everything, including the actions of men, reinforced the sentiment that Germany had lost the war because the nation had become weak and effeminate. It was not men who lost the war; it was women, and it was women who continued to tarnish Germany's former prestige.

The Ideal Woman

The conviction that women were responsible for Germany's exceptional defeat in the Great War exacerbated the already widespread fear that the New Women had become the majority. In reality, the New Woman was and continues to be an enigma. By some accounts, like that of Elsa Herrmann, the New Woman was a worker: "For the sake of her economic independence, the necessary precondition for the development of a self-reliant personality, she seeks to support herself through gainful employment."³² To others, like Else Kienle, she was an outspoken feminist and advocate for women's rights: "There is a law that stands above all paragraphs, and that is the law of human dignity and women's dignity."³³ To the mass media, she was a young, attractive socialite: "They were more lightly and provocatively clad or altogether naked, and they could be seen live onstage and at the beach, walking down the street, or in magazines or at the cinema."³⁴ She could have been one of those things, or all of those things, and as a result it can be difficult to gauge how many women were actually "new." According to Anton Kaes, women were often perplexed themselves about what behavior was expected of them throughout the changing times.³⁵ Rüdiger Graf suggests that the New Woman was more of an expectation for the future than an actual entity, an anticipated force that needed to be contained.³⁶

³⁰ Ibid., 105.

³¹ Ibid., 106.

³² Elsa Herrmann, "This is the New Woman (1929)," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 206.

³³ Else Kienle, "The Kienle Case (1931)," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 216.

³⁴ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 312.

³⁵ Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg, "The Rise of the New Woman," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 196.

³⁶ Rüdiger Graf, "Anticipating the Future in the Present: 'New Women' and Other Beings of the Future in Weimar Germany," *Central European History* 42, no. 4 (December 2009): 647.

Popular memory of the birth of the New Woman often gives the impression that in August of 1919 every single woman in Germany took a pair of scissors to her hair and all of the dresses of her closet. However, during the early years of the Weimar Republic, the idealized image of the New Woman that was popularized by the media was largely assumed by middle- and upper-class women who had the means to afford high-end clothing and city entertainment. But for the one-third of women who worked long hours in low-wage factory and office jobs, the glamour and excitement of modern nightlife was an unattainable fantasy.³⁷ To conservative onlookers, the New Woman of Berlin represented everything that was wrong with Germany. The Kaiser was gone, and to some, it appeared as though he had taken every ounce of Victorian morality with him, leaving Berlin to rot as “a new Hell on earth.”³⁸ For the first few years, financial demographic disparities had helped to keep the New Woman contained, but eventually the influence of city life began to seep into the countryside. The New Woman, growing in numbers and in capability, now threatened the future of the German race by ignoring her responsibility to replenish the population.³⁹ The “problem” had begun to spin out of control, and for conservative Christian sexologists like Van de Velde, the solution was an “ideal” marriage.

Only thirty years after Krafft-Ebing released the first volume of *Psychopathia Sexualis*, Van de Velde, a prominent Dutch physician and gynecologist, published a book that shocked the world by openly accepting and celebrating female sexuality. In 1926, Van de Velde went on a lecture tour of Germany. Massive crowds and reporters gathered in Berlin to listen to him speak, his words perfectly complementing changing attitudes toward sexuality in the Weimar Republic. Harkening back to the “real man” complex of the Wilhelmine era, Van de Velde introduced the idea that “real men” should be able to satisfy their wives’ sexual desires. *Het volkomen huwelijk*, or, *The Ideal Marriage*, published in 1926, was a detailed guide written to free-thinking married couples from an epidemic of what he deemed “sexual misery.” Van de Velde, a husband and father himself, was able to draw upon his own experiences with sexuality and combine them with his extensive knowledge of the female anatomy. In doing so, he was able to effectively blend his personal reassurances with physiological explanations for sexual impulses, creating a comfortable, safe environment for couples to explore and break the cycle of *sexuelle Not* (sexual misery). Moving away from the sexually repressive convictions of Möbius and Krafft-Ebing, Van de Velde encouraged women to find joy and pleasure in their sexual relationships. Van de Velde revealed his inspiration for *The Ideal Marriage* in his personal introductory statement, declaring that “[t]here is a need of this knowledge; there is too much suffering endured which might well be avoided, too much joy untasted which could enhance life’s worth.”⁴⁰ Van de Velde felt that it was not only his personal duty but also his responsibility as a medical professional to abolish unspoken sexual frustration in marriages, most importantly by telling women that they had a right to sexual fulfillment. The book became

³⁷ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 307.

³⁸ Gordon, *Voluptuous Panic*, 8.

³⁹ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 328.

⁴⁰ Theodoor Hendrik van de Velde, *The Ideal Marriage: Its Physiology and Technique*, trans. Stella Browne (Kingsport: Kingsport Press, 1926), 24.

immensely popular throughout Europe and the United States, where it was reprinted forty-four times between 1941 and 1966.⁴¹

Van de Velde likened a woman's sexual frustration to physical abuse, criticizing men for their rushed and sometimes "brutal" lovemaking. In the first chapter of *The Ideal Marriage*, he shared a lengthy quotation by a fellow doctor and mother of two, Gina Lombroso. Lombroso stated that, "The loneliness of mind and heart to which a man can condemn his wife, is much more painful and injurious than tyranny and violent brutality."⁴² She went on to promote the idea of comradeship within a marriage, encouraging husbands to involve their wives in both their work and personal lives. Any form of exclusion was a sign of inequality, and any inequality within a marriage translated to unequal and unsatisfying sexual relationships. This, Van de Velde believed, was both the sickness and the cure; but while he claimed that his intention was to heal the people suffering from sexual misery on a personal level, his ultimate objective was to rescue the institution of marriage as a whole. Van de Velde's innovation was hinged upon his recognition that the beliefs of sexologists like Krafft-Ebing were outdated and unsustainable. Women, especially those who lived in cities where casual dating and sex had been more common before the war, had become far less likely to believe that their sexual desires were worthy of a diagnosis. Van de Velde's modern theories regarding sexual emancipation were designed not only to revive maternal instincts but also to reinvigorate the masculine propensity that had been shattered by the war. He believed that fostering pleasurable sex within a marriage would bring happiness and productivity to the German people, and in turn create a more prosperous and robust German society.

Volkstod

Van de Velde's plan for a resurgent Germany went far beyond what most women saw when they flipped to Part III of *The Ideal Marriage*, where Van de Velde explained in vivid detail the act of intercourse. These women, eager to explore their bodies and enhance their sex lives, flocked to his lectures in large numbers, embracing Van de Velde as their trusted advocate. He preyed upon their dissatisfaction and loneliness, accusing their husbands of mistreatment and validating their vexation. Van de Velde, however, had his own aims. After all, healthy marriages produce healthy children, and marriage and birth rates had been in steady decline since the beginning of the First World War. Although it was predominantly women who blamed for the deterioration of the traditional family unit, there were a considerable number of women who did not marry simply because there were not enough men. Within the twenty-five to fifty-year-old age group, most notably men from ages thirty to thirty-five, the number of surviving men fell well below the level of 1910, a year that had experienced a significant population growth. Concurrently, there was a surplus of women born between 1865 and 1900. According to the 1925 Census, there were 1,067 females for every 1,000 males, resulting in observable demographic disparities.⁴³ As a result, many women that were of appropriate marriageable age had no choice but to remain single and therefore childless. Meanwhile, the average family size had been reduced to an average of

⁴¹ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 297.

⁴² Van de Velde, *The Ideal Marriage*, 4.

⁴³ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 305.

only one child per family, and by 1933, more than one-third of married couples remained childless, causing the German birthrate to plummet far below the rest of their European neighbors.⁴⁴ Many Germans, particularly conservative men, believed that the traditional family, the heart of conservative ideology, was in a state of crisis at the hands of female sexuality. The crippling humiliation brought on by the loss of the war and the Treaty of Versailles, coupled with the Germans' inability to cultivate a new, powerful generation, reinforced the idea that Germany's collapse had little to do with imperialism and much to do with a combination of femininity and sexuality.

In *The Ideal Marriage*, Van de Velde claimed that the most effective means of defense against marital woes, aside from sex, was strong mutual interest.⁴⁵ And what mutual interest, he asked, could be more unifying than children? As he wrote in *The Ideal Marriage*, "Children are the strongest mental link in normal married life, and those who ignore this ancient truth will often have occasion to repent."⁴⁶ The movement for health and hygiene during the Weimar era, a movement in which Van de Velde was a fundamental presence, advocated for healthy and normal marital sexual relationships, but it also ran alongside the principle of *Bevölkerungspolitik*, or population policy. Proponents of *Bevölkerungspolitik* harbored deep anxieties regarding dwindling birth rates, fearing that further decline would ultimately lead to *Volkstod*, or the extinction of the German race.⁴⁷ The stark decline in births during the postwar years was alarming for professionals like Van de Velde who felt compelled to uphold the welfare of the broader community by telling people how to behave in their marriages. What was marketed to women as a guide to freedom from sexual emancipation was, at its core, part of a much larger surreptitious plan to bolster the birth rate and ease natalist panic. By not upholding their duty to replenish the population after the war, women exposed male impotency on all fronts.

If Van de Velde's solution to a happy marriage was as simple as good sex, he certainly faced a quandary when it came to encouraging reproduction. Contraception greatly eased the anxieties of women who avoided sex in fear of unwanted pregnancies, but it also allowed couples to limit the number of children that they had, ultimately resulting in less births. For women who were against the use of contraceptives or did not have access to them, unintended pregnancies were of great concern. Many women were forced to work in factories in addition to their extensive housewifely duties. In the article, "My Workday, My Weekend," first published in Berlin in 1930, a wife and pregnant mother described her typical work week in a textile mill. The demands of the factory coupled with the responsibility of caring for a family barely allowed for women to sleep, leaving them both exhausted and desperate. "Six days of vacation once a year, but that's no relaxation, just the opposite. ... That's how the life of a woman working in a factory goes all year round."⁴⁸ For working women, multiple unplanned pregnancies were an enormous burden, and as a result, many women were forced to seek illegal abortions.

⁴⁴ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 86.

⁴⁵ Van de Velde, *The Ideal Marriage*, 5.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 102.

⁴⁸ Textile Workers, "My Workday, My Weekend (1930)," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, eds. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 208.

Else Kienle, a German doctor and writer, was briefly imprisoned in 1931 on charges of professional abortion that was uncompliant with article 218 of the Weimar Constitution, criminalized abortion without legitimate medical necessity.⁴⁹ In an article published in *Die Weltbühne* in 1931, Kienle challenged the stereotype of the typical woman who sought an abortion, shattering the notion that only debauched, city-dwelling women would reject an unintended pregnancy. In doing so, she revealed the true reason why many women chose to terminate their pregnancies; they were tired, poor, and indisposed. Kienle explained that 80 percent of all women who sought a doctor to terminate their pregnancies were mothers who had already birthed several children and were deeply ashamed of their decision to end their pregnancies. Kienle sympathized with the “modern woman” who had become modern because she had entered the workforce, but was still buried beneath her maternal responsibilities, rendering her unable to truly assume the identity of the New Woman. After having experienced the effects of war on the homefront firsthand, all women in Weimar Germany were “new,” but not all of them were liberated. Going against the male-dominated natalist sentiment, Kienle made the bold assertion that an additional child had no right to enter a family that was already struggling to feed itself: “Hunger and love have been and remain the primal drives of human beings, and love is quite likely the only diversion a family of workers can afford in 1931.”⁵⁰

Toward the end of *The Ideal Marriage*, Van de Velde did acknowledge the reservations that many couples felt toward pregnancy and advised them how to overcome this hinderance. “Fear of pregnancy often impairs sexual processes and reactions on the psychic side to such a degree that bodily reactions are sympathetically affected and even inhibited or checked.”⁵¹ Ironically, as a cure for this psychological block, Van de Velde prescribed more sex, claiming that it had “very happy” biological and anatomical effects that might help to outweigh the burden of anxiety concerning unwanted pregnancy. Yet Van de Velde either failed to recognize or ignored how encumbered women became by the demands of large families. Contrary to his professions in *The Ideal Marriage*, sex was not a cure-all for many woman, but especially not for the working poor. Van de Velde actively framed his work as being “for the women,” but he fundamentally failed to identify a root cause of celibacy that could easily be found in the hollowed eyes and slumped posture of any working mother: she was unbearably and irrevocably exhausted. In a botched effort to resurrect Germany’s diminishing birthrates by criminalizing abortion and encouraging married couples to have more unprotected sex, an estimated 4,000 to 12,000 women died as a consequence of back-alley abortions, and an additional 50,000 experienced various other health complications, many of which caused permanent infertility.⁵²

Communion

⁴⁹ Legal abortions were permitted if the pregnancy endangered the life of the mother or if the fetus was deformed or incompatible with life.

⁵⁰ “The Kienle Case,” 213.

⁵¹ Van de Velde, *The Ideal Marriage*, 265.

⁵² Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 305.

Working women rose before the sun and settled into bed long after it had gone down. While Van de Velde's stages of the ideal sexual communion—Prelude, Sexual Union, and the Epilogue or "After-Glow"—are designed to satisfy the sexual needs of women, if executed as Van de Velde intended, sex became quite a lengthy process. Once again, Van de Velde's flawless methodology has forgotten one crucial determining factor: When do women have the time for such a prolonged sexual experience? As expressed by the female textile laborer mentioned above: "I am always so tired. When I get home, I first have to sit down and rest for fifteen minutes. Often I just sit there and howl like a child for no reason. ... But I always have to pull myself together again."⁵³ For the many women who found themselves in similar positions, sex was a luxury that they simply did not have the time or energy for. The New Woman was not only the vivacious, uninhibited woman who dressed provocatively and danced in cabarets in Berlin. Often, she was a mother and a member of the workforce as well. This new way of life was an incredibly difficult adjustment for women, but men struggled to cope with changing gender dynamics as well. Soldiers were promised prosperity and endured the brutality of war for years, only to stand by as their wives were forced to go to work every morning to keep their families alive. They had not only lost the war, they lost the core of their male identity: the ability to provide for their wives and children.

Despite his lack of attention to the realities of the 35 percent of women who were a part of the German labor force, many of whom had children, Van de Velde continuously emphasized the importance of sexual satisfaction for both partners, arguing that women have become "sexually frigid" as a result of their suspended gratification.⁵⁴ Van de Velde attempted to combat this frigidity by framing the female orgasm as the ultimate objective of "sexual communion."⁵⁵ Again, sex always serves a purpose, and Van de Velde's gynecological training had taught him that the female orgasm did as well. In his exceptionally detailed chapter on sexual positions, he stated, "It may be said that every position in coitus which tends to promote the intensest possible orgasm in both partners simultaneously, or almost simultaneously, increases the possibility of conception."⁵⁶ As a result, he discouraged the practice of coitus interruptus as a means of preventing pregnancy, arguing that it leaves the man feeling satisfied but not the woman, implying that simultaneous orgasm was the only way for both partners to reach sexual satisfaction. For women, Van de Velde's methods had nothing to do with satisfaction and everything to do with pregnancy. With this, Van de Velde also harkened back to the Wilhelmine era ideal of the "real man" by indicating that the inability of men to please their wives was a sign of inadequacy. In this sense, the female orgasm was an opportunity for redemption.

Van de Velde's perpetuation of the importance of the simultaneous orgasm is rooted in the centuries-old belief that the female orgasm increased the likelihood of successful conception. This theory can be dated back as far back as the *Hippocratic Corpus*, which states, "Pleasure and warmth reach their height at the same time as the seed falls into the

⁵³ "My Workday, My Weekend," 209.

⁵⁴ Van de Velde, *The Ideal Marriage*, 7.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 194.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 211.

womb.”⁵⁷ To Van de Velde, any pleasure that a woman experienced as a result was merely a byproduct. Ideally, her husband’s attention to her sexual needs would encourage her to remain committed to both him and their mutual desire to produce a robust family. While Van de Velde dedicated twenty-five pages of *The Ideal Marriage* to “The Anatomy and Physiology of the Male Sexual Organs,” pages fifty-one through 114 revolved entirely around the sexual physiology of the adult woman, more specifically the processes of menstruation and ovulation. Out of the eight colored diagrams in the reference section of the book, only two were reserved for the male organs, while the other six, including two fold-out pages that chart menstruation and ovulation cycles, focused on the female anatomy. *The Ideal Marriage* was supposed to free women from *sexuelle Not*, but if that were true, this information would serve no purpose.

The sexual instruction that Van de Velde provides in *The Ideal Marriage* conforms to the standard gender ideology of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He instructed the man to take the initiative and the woman to respond accordingly. He established the process by which the man should dominate the act of sexual intercourse by nature and indicated that the woman should organically follow suit, stating:

What both man and woman, driven by obscure primitive urges, wish to feel in the sexual act, is the essential force of maleness, which expresses itself in a sort of violent and absolute possession of the woman. And so both of them can and do exult in a certain degree of male aggression and dominance—whether actual or apparent—which proclaims this essential force.⁵⁸

With this assertion, Van de Velde implied that any instance in which a woman denied her customary submissive role was somehow an abnormal sexual act that defies the laws of traditional “mating.”⁵⁹ He challenged the earlier theories of sexologists like Krafft-Ebing by concluding that the woman is an entirely sexual being, while the man is merely an accessory to her biological impulse to reproduce. Motherhood, the intended destiny of all women, could not exist without an innate dependence on the male sex. The essence of female dependence had been dismantled during the war years. Despite the absence of thirteen million men, women had survived. This reality could not be avoided, which is why Van de Velde worked to calculatedly engineer marital sexual relationships to ensure that women would promptly lose sight of their wartime independence and gracefully reintegrate into family life.

The Hell-Gate

Considering Van de Velde’s preoccupation with reproduction, it comes as no surprise that he denounced any sexual act that had no possibility of resulting in a child. Unlike some of his fellow colleagues, most notably the prominent German sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld, Van de Velde discouraged homosexual relationships in favor of what he called “normal” heterosexual relationships. In Part III of *The Ideal Marriage*, he explained to the reader that

⁵⁷ Ann Ellis Hanson, *Hippocrates: Diseases of Women I* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 582.

⁵⁸ Van de Velde, *The Ideal Marriage*, 159.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 145.

there may be rare cases in which he could not avoid referencing certain deviant sexual practices—but promised that he would emphatically state that they were abnormal to avoid any confusion: “But this will only occur very seldom, for as postulated above, it is our intention to keep the Hell-gate of the Realm of Sexual Perversions firmly closed.”⁶⁰ Concerned by the onslaught of unapologetic lesbian tendencies percolating in cities like Berlin, Van de Velde reassured men that there were ways to conquer such “abnormalities.”⁶¹ He promised that with enough instruction, a husband should be able to teach his wife to develop appropriate sexual desires. Perhaps even more important than the inability of same-sex couples to conceive children was the utter emasculation attached to lesbianism. Van de Velde was far more invested in preserving the male ego and containing female sexuality than he was with enhancing women’s sex lives. While popular memory venerates Van de Velde as a revolutionary sex reformer, his true crowning achievement was his ability to successfully disguise misogyny as feminism.

Despite his success, Van de Velde was not the first nor the most memorable medical professional to encourage radical sex reform in the twenties. Magnus Hirschfeld published his first work, *Sappho and Socrates*, under a pseudonym in 1895, but began publishing in his own name as early as 1900.⁶² Hirschfeld had been an outspoken advocate for sexual minorities and a pioneer of gender studies since the Imperial period, but his work was not as widely circulated or as well received as *The Ideal Marriage*. Hirschfeld’s emphasis on gender, or lack thereof, was unnerving for many, as it stood in direct opposition to the ideals that sexologists like Van de Velde were frantically working to reestablish. Hirschfeld, an openly gay man, was genuinely interested in sexuality and sex reform and did not have an agenda like Van de Velde; He was not concerned with preserving the family unit or healing damaged masculinity. He unabashedly fueled debates surrounding sex and gender following the war, while Van de Velde merely gave antiquated Wilhelmine ideals a makeover. Van de Velde’s work was exceptionally provocative for an audience that had just barely been exposed to the concept of sex reform, but it was just conservative enough to be considered tolerable.

In 1935, Hirschfeld published *Sex in Human Relationships*, which unlike *The Ideal Marriage*, is utterly devoid of gender. Hirschfeld focused more on the concept of love than sex, encouraging men and women to find spouses that complemented their personalities without regard for traditional gender expectations: “Contrasted temperaments may often complement each other admirably. A very active temperament, for instance, demands to complement it, a partner whom passivity predominates.”⁶³ Unlike Van de Velde, he did not establish which members of a relationship should assume either passivity or dominance, reinforcing the importance of comradeship between men and women in their relationships. Most importantly, he did not tell women how to behave in their relationships or accuse them of sexual deviancy. Unsurprisingly, Hirschfeld faced backlash for his ideas, which many people believed explicitly encouraged the degeneration of the family unit. Opposition

⁶⁰ Van de Velde, *The Ideal Marriage*, 144.

⁶¹ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 301.

⁶² Magnus Hirschfeld, *Sex in Human Relationships*, trans. John Rodker (New York: AMS Press, 1935), 12.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 54.

to Hirschfeld's beliefs became violent, and in 1920, he was beaten so severely that he was initially pronounced dead by police.⁶⁴ Nothing illustrates the postwar crisis of masculinity like Hirschfeld's near-death attack. It had been two years since the war, but many wounds remained unhealed.

Despite Hirschfeld's attempts to destigmatize sex, the notion that abnormal or devious behavior was inherent in unmarried women remained a common one throughout the first half of the twentieth century. While earlier sexologists, psychologists, and criminologists were more brazen in their assertions that unmarried women were prone to mental illness, feeble-mindedness, and deviant behavior, the core of Van de Velde's work was inspired by the conservative ideologies of the "sex experts" who came before him. Van de Velde genuinely believed that marriage was the only way to save women from their own sexuality, more palatably reiterating what Krafft-Ebing had concluded thirty years earlier: "normally developed mentally and well bred, her sexual desire is small. If this were not so the whole world would become a brothel and marriage and a family impossible."⁶⁵ While Van de Velde did challenge the consensus that women possessed very little sex drive, he had his own reasons for doing so. Van de Velde was concerned about the precarious position of the traditional family unit during the 1920s, but he also recognized that female sexuality had already been unleashed, and he knew that any attempt to force women back into their traditional molds would be met with resistance. In this sense, *The Ideal Marriage* served as an unspoken treaty between the contemporary sexologist and the New Woman. The sexologist would support the existence and normality of female sexuality with natural science and logic, and in return the woman would do what Van de Velde instructed her to do, get married, start a family, and preserve the patriarchy.

Van de Velde's apprehension toward the New Woman and concerns regarding the crisis of the family were not nearly as transparent in 1926 as they are today. As a middle-aged, Christian male, Van de Velde understood that he was putting his reputation at risk by releasing a book as provocative as *The Ideal Marriage*. He announced his martyrdom in the first sentence of his personal introductory statement writing, "This book will state many things that would otherwise remain unsaid. Therefore it will have many unpleasant results for me."⁶⁶ He went on to explain that his acquired knowledge of human nature had taught him that humans had a tendency to condemn anything that was considered unusual and unconventional, therefore he felt that it would be prudent to wait for the appropriate time, when he had gathered a sufficient amount of medical and personal experience, to publish a book about the joys of sex: "So long as a doctor has to meet the requirements of his practice, he cannot permit himself to transgress the bounds of custom."⁶⁷ He could have published under a pseudonym to avoid the inevitable backlash, he said, but as a scientist he felt that it was his duty to legitimize his work with his own name.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 5.

⁶⁵ Krafft-Ebing, *Psychopathia Sexualis*, 13.

⁶⁶ Van de Velde, *The Ideal Marriage*, 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

As Van de Velde had predicted, *The Ideal Marriage* was not readily accepted by all. Initially, it was predominantly the church that spoke out against sex reform. They viewed the New Woman and her “public display of her lightly clad body” to be a visibly ominous sign of spiritual crisis.⁶⁸ Conservatives were utterly horrified by this public display of sex, which was not only displayed by the clothing that women chose to wear but also in Van de Velde’s lecture tour of Germany that promoted a book about pleasurable sex. When conservatives conceptualized the sex reform movement, all they saw was an onslaught of illegal abortions, an epidemic of venereal disease, and the extinction of the German race. The church waged war on sex reformers like Van de Velde, campaigning for the preservation of the “holiness” of marriage, despite the fact that religion was present in every chapter of *The Ideal Marriage*. As Eric Weitz has observed in his study of the Weimar period, half of Germany celebrated the sexual emancipation that had been stimulated by the Republic, and “the other condemned it as the very fount of immortality, the cause of all that was wrong in German life.”⁶⁹ Whether they were trying to cultivate it, or bury it, Germans simply could not bring themselves to leave sex alone.

When German women were propelled into the workforce during World War I, the general consensus was that it was a temporary solution to sustain what they were told would be a quick and expeditious war.⁷⁰ The New Women, whether glamorous and vibrant or weary and maternal, existed as representatives of the excitement of the Weimar era and its legacy. While the concept of liberation is often considered to be the touchstone of the Weimar Republic, the sexologists that pioneered modern sexology in the 1920s, as demonstrated by Theodoor Hendrik van de Velde, were still very much intent on restoring Imperial German institutions and returning women to their traditional social positions as dutiful wives and mothers. What was marketed to women as “sexual emancipation” was, in reality, nothing more than a lightened form of sexual repression that was designed to safeguard the continuation of the German race. Men, still reeling from the horrors of World War I, were desperate to reclaim their virility and reassert their dominance over the very women who had carried the nation through the war. While sex and war are not always commonly associated with one another, the reactionary sex reform of the 1920s illustrates how a crisis of masculinity was able to bridge the gap.

⁶⁸ Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 323.

⁶⁹ *Ibid*, 327.

⁷⁰ Peukert, *The Weimar Republic*, 98.