

## Owning My Pleasure – Jessica Spratt

“I don’t want a woman who takes drugs.”

Over the past 10 years of being a drug user, I have come to anticipate and expect this statement. Either from a man I’m dating, or from one who feels the need to tell me anyway. What’s always interesting is that 9 out of 10 times, the person who has said this is a drug user themselves, be it licit, illicit, or a combination of the two.

This therefore begs the question; why in 2022 are we still subject to this polarising view that what’s okay for a man isn’t okay for a woman? From a personal perspective, it could in part be due to the largely conservative Northern Irish society that I live in. Here drugs are still very much a taboo subject, heavily criminalised with very little understanding of the lived reality of drug use within wider society. This has been attributed to the legacy of the political conflict in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, known as “The Troubles”. The nature of the civil war meant that the integration of drugs into society was slower than our neighbours in the UK and Ireland.

Initially, I felt that I should hide my drug use, or at best downplay the role drugs play in my lifestyle. However, I found this almost impossible to achieve. I felt I was living a lie. This is because I understand and appreciate the potential for pleasure and enjoyment that drugs can reward me. The beauty of drugs is their ability to enhance. To enhance pleasure, connections, confidence. The ecstatic joy we feel when we combine them with music and dancing, the disinhibition during sex, the warmth and intimacy of new friendships. Of course, with all pleasures there are risks, but the potential for sublime experiences almost always encourages us to navigate these risks, responsibly, but with an anticipation of the freedom and the pleasure awaiting us.

It is this acceptance that drugs play an integral part in my pleasure and leisure time that has motivated me to be open and honest about my drug use and to encourage other women to do the same. Throughout history, women have been prevented from pursuing pleasure. They have not had the opportunity to selfishly own their desires and feed their passions. Owning our drug use is a modern-day act of rebellion in recognising that we deserve enjoyment, pleasure, relaxation and escapism.

I have been lucky enough to be able to pursue my interests academically. Influenced by my weekends spent taking ecstasy and dancing the night away at raves, I investigated the re-emergence of the rave culture in Northern Ireland for my undergraduate research. Talking about this with friends and family I realised that through academia and research I could open the floor for conversations on the pleasure and benefits of drug use. My masters focused on the presentation of recreational or non-problematic drug use in drug policies in the UK and Ireland (spoiler: it’s non-existent!) That brings me to the current day, and I have just started my three-year journey as a PhD researcher, investigating drug consumption amongst members of LGBTQ+ communities in Northern Ireland.

Already I have experienced stigmatisation as a woman in academia and drug research:

“Are you gay?”

“What drugs do you take?”

“Are you not worried about what people will think?”.

As a young woman who both uses and researches drugs, I have come to expect negativity and stigmatisation. But just because something is expected, does not mean it is right.

In my experience, the best way to overcome stigmatisation is through self-acceptance. I accept that I am a drug user. I accept that this lifestyle may not be to everyone's tastes, but it has allowed for moments of happiness, pleasure and friendship that I would not have experienced without drugs. I recognise that drugs have, and continue to, enhance my life and my experiences. I feel incredibly fortunate that I have been encouraged to pursue my passion, that I have the platform to add to the existing body of knowledge on drugs and drug use, particularly in relation to leisure and enhancement. I hope to encourage more women, men, people, to consider their own relationship and attitude toward drugs. To accept themselves where they are, and consider what they can do to support each other, whilst opening the conversation on the lived pleasures and benefits of drug use.

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