

Reviews

The Need for Love as a Health Hazard

A review of Jane Wegscheider Hyman and Esther R. Rome's *Sacrificing Ourselves for Love (Tenth Anniversary Edition 1997)* by Ma.Teresa Hocson

"Though we are appalled when we read about foot binding or painful tattooing, we often do not see that with starvation diets and cosmetic surgery we also risk our health, and sometimes our lives, to look acceptable."

Health is wealth, so goes the expression.

Indeed, good health enables a person to experience and enjoy life to its fullest and be a productive member of society. It is, therefore, very disturbing that every day, the majority of women risk their health and well-being in order to be pleasing to others. Millions of women fall prey to the lure of self-starvation, dieting and cosmetic surgery to conform to the unattainable "ideal" body image. Many more put themselves at great risk by putting up with abusive relationships. *Sacrificing Ourselves for Love* explores these health hazards that arise out of the need for love and acceptance.

According to Hyman and Rome, women's willingness to risk their health in order to please others is a result of three intertwined forces: the caring attitude that characterises many women; centuries of subordination; and the cultural traditions about how she should look, behave, and be treated.

Traditionally, an important part of women's roles has been to accommodate, mediate, adapt and soothe. Care and concern for others are part of her moral strength and form the basis on which she makes many of life's decisions.

Women define themselves in the context of relationships and these traditional roles. Aggression, therefore, is perceived as fracturing human connections. Some fear conflict because they are afraid of others' displeasure, disapproval, anger, and sometimes, physical abuse.

Part I of the book, "Trying to look different," deals with problems that women face in the attempt to conform to a standard that is externally defined and constantly changing. In the early '60s the goal was to be skinny and flat chested with long straight hair. In the '70s, the only way to be acceptable was to have curly hair and full breasts. Just as styles in clothes change seasonally, so women's bodies are expected to change to fit these fashions.

There is a prevailing message that the woman's body is not satisfactory the way it is. There is an emphasis on presentation as the central aspect of a woman's existence that makes her extremely self-conscious. It demands that she occupy herself with a self-image that others will find pleasing and attractive. She must observe and evaluate herself, scrutinising every detail of herself as though she were an outside judge. She attempts to make herself in the image of wom-

anhood presented by billboards, newspapers, magazines and television. This makes her prey to huge fashion and diet industries that first set up the ideal images and then exhort women to meet them.

Cosmetic surgery has now become a natural "answer" to our lack of control over our body shape and size. Medical interventions, however, are not part of the solution but are a part of the problem. They are a medical "solution" to a purely social problem. The situation requires a major reorientation of medical and scientific education, organisation and practice based on the demands of the women's health movement.

Cosmetic surgeries have come to be accepted as a normal, low-risk part of women's lives. One reason for this is American culture's narrow standard of beauty. Moreover, little information about the risks involved is readily available because the industry, with its large advertising budget and poor research, finds profit in a woman's inability to make thoughtful, informed decisions.

The saga of breast implants is a glaring example of how beauty stereotypes have combined with suppression of information to endanger our health. We have been seduced into believing that we could surgically alter our bodies

to heighten our self-esteem and sexual appeal at no cost to our health.

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Part II, “Living in Abusive Relationships,” identifies the cultural myths that encourage women to pick the wrong partners as well as the beliefs that help perpetuate abuse. It shows how women become increasingly trapped and outlines the health effects of abuse. It also discusses how abusers think, showing the inadequacy of what we have been taught about relationships.

The belief that men are supposed to “dish it out” (be strong and aggressive) and woman are supposed to “take it” by enduring pain and maintaining relationships at any expense carries a great health cost to women. And major changes within institutions are needed to enable them to respond better to women who are mistreated by their partners.

According to Hyman and Rome, “we must remember that saying no to violence is not a sign that we are trying to destroy or emasculate our partners. We are simply asserting our right to safety and to a supportive, loving relationship.”

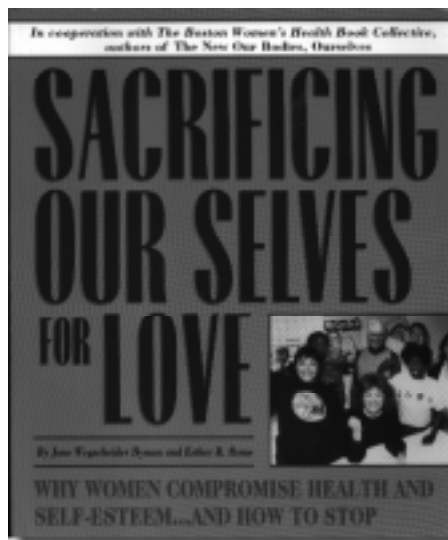
The last part, “Dying for Love” deals with health problems that arise from the tradition that women should be receivers and men the initiators during heterosexual lovemaking. Three diseases (cervical cancer, pelvic inflammatory disease and AIDS) which can be fatal are discussed along with how these diseases can be detected and treated.

Everyday, women put themselves at the risk of infertility, illness and death by having sex without protection against diseases. Subordinates in lovemaking, women are less likely to insist on protection against diseases during sex, even though they are more likely

than men to be infected from a single exposure to certain harmful organisms causing sexually transmissible diseases.

This section also examines the difficulties women have in approaching the subject of safer sex, the government’s inadequate approach to prevention; and some of the larger social forces that have slowed efforts to halt the spread of these diseases.

Traditional culture encourages us to do everything possible to be attractive and “lovable,” even at the price of physical comfort, mobility and health. *Sacrificing Ourselves for Love* is an inspi-



rational message that with information and encouragement, we can help ourselves in counteracting social traditions that are detrimental to our health. It is a wake-up call for us women to discourage our own self-sacrificial thoughts and to learn to take care of ourselves so that others may take our needs seriously.

Hyman and Rome provide us with a comprehensive and well-integrated source of information that is exhaustive yet not too overwhelming. Language is simple and medical jargon is kept to a minimum. Thus, a wider audience of women can be effectively reached. In fact, the book seems to be designed both as a self-help manual for victims as well as a useful guide for others to recognise dysfunctional behavior in friends,

relatives and other women.

The authors’ use of the first person is crucial in the effectiveness of the message. The book is sensitive without sounding too preachy. The use of “we/us” gives the impression of solidarity and the reassurance that these health problems do not just happen to a few, maladjusted women but are a symptom of the grave effects of society’s unjust social arrangements that affect us all. Side-quotes throughout the book not only clarify some of the issues being discussed but also serve to assert that these health problems affect real women.

Sacrificing Ourselves for Love is factual and statistics are used throughout the book. While scientific in its approach to these health problems, it also emphasises the social and psychological aspects of the problem.

The book is useful because it does not bombard us with facts to overwhelm but immediately follows through with specific ways and strategies to cope. The sections are arranged logically such that each health problem is discussed extensively along with the cultural traditions that encourage us to endanger ourselves, followed by suggested actions to avoid or overcome the problem. Accepting the existence of strong societal pressure to conform to the prescribed ideal, the book also includes self-esteem exercises.

Thus, Hyman and Rome are successful in pointing out what is inherently dysfunctional in society today—yet, by being introspective, they manage to empower women to change their attitudes towards themselves. They do not deny that achieving this can be a difficult, lifelong process; even women in the women’s health movement are still teaching themselves not to be objects of sacrifice. Still, *Sacrificing Ourselves for Love* encourages us to work together, even as we help ourselves fight the abuse in our culture. ♡

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