

## Repressed? You Brits are getting better now



**Goedele Liekens, the co-presenter of Sex Box**

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By [Damian Whitworth](#)

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“Would you?” Goedele Liekens’s question is characteristically direct. She is asking if I would consider entering the “sex box”. That means suggesting to my wife that we go to bed in a box, which has been kitted out like a hotel room, with a crowd of people waiting outside speculating on what we are doing in there. And that afterwards we subject ourselves to Liekens’s probing questions about the experience. On national television. The answer, I am afraid, is “no”.

The good news for Liekens, a psychologist and sex therapist, is that numerous other people have volunteered to do exactly this for a new Channel 4 series. Either the *Sex Box* researchers are extremely good at their jobs or there are a lot of people out there who want to have sex in a TV studio then tell everyone about it.

Take Kayleigh and Fay, who met “very recently” and are the first couple viewers are introduced to in the first episode. Kayleigh has slept with men and women, but Fay, whose partners have only been men, wants to “lose my lesbian virginity”. Liekens gives the couple some tips — “it’s much more about enthusiasm than skills” — and sends them into the box.

*Sex Box* is a reworking of a one-off Channel 4 show from three years ago where volunteers entered a similar box and emerged to be grilled by Mariella Frostrup and a panel of sexperts. It made for toe-curling television and that seemed to be that. Now, however, the format has been rejigged with two boxes in the studio to speed things

along. The panel has been replaced by Steve Jones, the Formula One presenter, who does the jokes, and Liekens, who digs much deeper into the intimate lives of the volunteers than the previous interrogators. To be clear: they don't film what goes on under the duvet, but we do get a lot of discussion of cowgirls, and reverse cowgirls, and some vigorous, occasionally baffling, hand gestures.

Liekens is a former Miss Belgium and a celebrated TV sexologist in her country. Last year she made a good documentary about sex education in British schools, arguing powerfully that it should be compulsory and outlining what a GCSE in sex education would look like. She is dismayed by the government's recent decision not to introduce compulsory sex and relationships education in all schools — currently it's mandatory from the age of 11, but not in academies and faith schools.

I admit to her that at times during my viewing of *Sex Box* I attract the attention of colleagues by shouting "I don't want to know that!" and "Please don't let them go in the box". We live in a sex-saturated culture — isn't there more than enough talk about sex without hearing strangers telling us the most intimate and mechanical details of their personal lives?

"There is too much talking about sex," she admits, "but in totally the wrong way." She wants couples to talk about their sex lives in a way that is "a counterbalance to the pornographic 'harder, harder, more, more, higher, higher' approach."

Frequently she encounters in therapy sessions clients who do not talk to each other. "There is a lack of communication; they don't know what each other's real desires are, what really arouses the other one. They are not being open enough. People may say, 'Oh, my God, they are talking about their sex life like this on TV,' but I do think it is necessary because you have to think about it for yourselves. You have to get in touch with your own desires, the tiny, little kinky things that everybody has in themselves. And if you are open enough to discover them, you use them in your love, in your relationship. And a good relationship is so important to be happy."

Watch the programme, she says, and "start talking at home. I am sure that evening at least you will say a few words about your sex life."

That makes sense, but I am struggling with the people who are on the show. At the start of the programme Jones asks: "Why are we so repressed? How can we learn to have more fun in the bedroom like our European cousins?" The volunteers certainly aren't repressed.

I can understand why people would go to Liekens to discuss in the privacy of her consulting room how they might improve their sex life. Why would they want to go on television to have sex, even if it is out of sight of the cameras, then gabble away about it? "It's not for everybody," she says. "You need brave people to do that and to open up." She likens them to the boundary-pushers of the gay rights movement.

This business of having sex in the box, though: that's just a stunt isn't it? "Of course it's not just a stunt. It's a way of showing, 'Hey, come on, let's open up about it.'" Why not just let them do their thing at home and then talk about it? She says it is necessary to see them fresh out of the sack. "We need to see their immediate reactions. We can't give them the chance to clam up and become too British again." Also: "If you want to make a

TV programme you want the viewers to get something out of it.”

For some of the sex boxers the whole business of the box, the TV audience outside and the post-match analysis is a thrill that enhances their sex lives. “They want to try something new. They understand the importance of experimenting, they need this extra stimulation.” Whatever floats your boat, I suppose.

One woman who came on the show couldn't cope with the knowledge of the crowd outside and had to leave. Others found it exciting. When Fay and Kayleigh emerge, the latter says that she could hear the audience and that caused a little frisson that made the experience “even better. I thought, ‘There are people out there — it's great.’” They seem to have had a very nice time. “She goes at a constant pace,” says Fay. Hang on, have we switched over to *Channel 4 Racing*? That's not Clare Balding presenting, though, it's Steve Jones, the wisecracking Welshman, again, and he has a result: “Fay just lost her virginity on *Sex Box!*” Thunderous applause.

Another couple come on. Julian tells us how much Courtney, his longterm partner, likes it when he puts her legs above her head. Liekens sends them into the box with a gallon of oil and suggests they slow down and do some body-to-body massage and avoid intercourse. While they are away the hosts and the audience speculate on what the outcome will be. Now it's like a *Daily Politics* preview of a particularly tricky ministerial statement. “It's going to be so hard to avoid his penis and I think she is not going to be able to avoid it,” says Liekens.

There are some gruesome vox pops with young people in confessional mode, including a woman who says she made a decision to sleep with 100 men. She's reached 58, she says proudly. I really start groaning and shouting at the TV when Rosemary and Luke appear. They have been platonic friends for 11 years, since they were at school. Neither has had much luck with relationships, which they both claim to find “boring”.

However, they have decided that after all these years it might be time to have sex with each other. On TV. What is more, when Liekens asks them, separately, if they want this to be more than a one-night stand, he says yes but she says no. They both seem vulnerable and this feels horribly exploitative. At this point did Liekens not consider sending them home to work things out in their own time?

No, she says, because she could tell Rosemary was only saying no to protect herself from getting hurt. “I could see in her eyes she really loved that guy.” And you know what? Liekens was probably right. A little bedroom camera shows the couple laughing and blushing and looking genuinely happy after their box sex.

I wonder if Liekens would go in the sex box. “No, no, it's not for me,” she says, then gives it a little thought. “Let me try to imagine: would I go in? As therapists we are trained not to talk about our own sex life so I try to imagine if I would do it in a country where nobody knows me and that I do not have this profession. I can't imagine this. As a therapist you are trained not to talk about your own sex life because it becomes the norm whatever you say. So you can't do that. So no, I don't think it's for me.”

The show indicates that Britons' long-established reputation for being repressed may not be entirely accurate. “I have the idea that the younger generation is starting to open up. Could that be possible?” says Liekens. She wonders if a generation that has grown up in the age of internet pornography may be fed up with it. “They have figured out ‘We know

nothing from what we have been watching. That is not giving us the real good sex and the satisfaction.' They are opening up and they are getting more emotionally involved, more emotionally intelligent. I see that difference, especially among young men."

Yeah, it's just the sad middle-aged men like me who don't want to hear some couple taking us through what they did with all that oil. Sorry, yes, the oil. We haven't cleared up whether she was able to avoid his penis or not, have we? Well, if you really want to know, watch the programme. There are some things I can't face going into. I'm feeling a little tired and repressed.

**Sex Box starts on Monday, April 4, at 10pm on Channel 4**