

ns observations

businesswomen

Girls go out to play

KATE BEVAN

Kinsey proved it: women enjoy sex. But now women of the post-Aids generation are not only enjoying sex, they are taking it seriously, and even making money from it – though not in the old-fashioned way. Last month, Jacqueline Gold, chief executive of Ann Summers, the chain of high-street sex shops, was voted Most Inspirational Businesswoman of the Year in a survey by Barclays Bank and www.handbag.com, a women's internet forum.

There is a new mood of female-led decadence that canny businesswomen (and men) are tapping into – and you don't have to look too far to find it. The demographic is a marketing dream: young, affluent women and their partners, with high disposable incomes to spend on having fun. There are the shops, naturally, such as Ann Summers, now a fashion-conscious fixture on our high streets. More upmarket is Coco de Mer, a pleasure parlour in Soho launched by Samantha Roddick, daughter of the Body Shop's Anita, which sells elegant sex toys to the kind of cool young woman who is prepared to spend £115 on a beautiful glass dildo. Chic staff are on hand to offer unembarrassed advice.

Dressing up and display are what it's all about. Out on the wilder shores of clubbing in London are events such as Torture Garden, where well-groomed professional twenty- and thirtysomethings dress up in rubber, leather and corsetry for an evening of peacock posing and dancing. It's a turn-on for some, but it's mostly for show. The joy of dressing up (expensively: a corset will set you back at least £150) leads some to burlesque shows such as those put on by the Whoopee Club, a monthly cabaret experience started by two young women, Lara Clifton and Tamara Tyrer.

Some, however, dress up to impress – and to take all this a step further. Swing- ing, once associated with sad suburbanites chucking their car keys into a bowl, has



Hanky-panky: from the season of burlesque at London's Theatre Museum, which will explore the theme further to tie in with an exhibition on the 1950s in the autumn (www.theatremuseum.org)

leapt upmarket. Fever, a club set up by a group of fit young swingers who wanted to get away from depressing venues and the aforementioned suburbanites, is booming, throwing two upmarket "orgies" a month for up to a hundred people in glamorous locations. Would-be orgy-goers must apply with photographs and pay £75 a head to enjoy the free champagne, chilled music, erotic vibe and as much sex as they like. A selection panel ruthlessly rejects anyone fat or simply not beautiful enough.

Female members are so important to Fever that it is branching out. The club will be hosting Fever Girls Only parties this autumn, devised by Monique, a Fever-goer. The original plan was to hold women-only evenings featuring gossip, sexy make-up sessions and photography, but no sex. "But I really started getting a lot of interest once I decided to have a playroom," Monique says.

Offering a clubbier vibe is Rude Girls, a bimonthly event "creating dressed-up, lipstick-smearing nights of corruption for the fairer sex". According to Louise, a regular, Rude Girls are "21st-century, glamorous, self-gratifying women – straight, gay and bi. Some of the girls go in couples, others with big groups of friends. It's friendly and fun," Louise says, "and there's no feeling of being staked out

by predatory single males – a pleasant change from your average Saturday night." Perhaps this is the key. Young urban women are relaxed about their sexuality, and have the money and time to indulge it. There's even a magazine catering to the breed: *Scarlet* launched last year, and mixes male pin-ups with explicitly erotic fiction and articles on sex. WH Smith recently agreed to stock it – the assistant at my local

branch didn't bat an eyelid when I bought a copy. It seems sexy women are off the top shelf and out in the open.