



“Men’s Power can be Overridden by Women’s Sexual Power”: Married Women’s Talk About Gender and Sexuality in Contemporary Iran

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Accepted: 26 May 2021

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Abstract

Social and cultural contexts, as well as religious ideology, shape sexual knowledge and beliefs. At present, the Islamic Republic of Iran is going through social and cultural shifts with regards to sexuality. Yet, very little is known about the contours of these shifts. This paper reports on a qualitative study that explored the sexual beliefs of 15 young Iranian women (aged 23–33), in Tehran and Qom. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analysed using qualitative content analysis. Four themes were identified as encapsulating the women’s ideas, experiences and beliefs about their sexual lives: (1) *sexuality as a cultural and religious behaviour*; (2) *conservative sexual beliefs*; (3) *sexual objectification versus sexual power*; and (4) *the importance of sex within marriage*. These findings are discussed in relation to recent shifts in sexual mores in the Middle-East/Iran and their implications for identity, relationality and practice.

Keywords Sexuality · Gender · Married women · Islam · Iran · Middle-east

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Introduction

Iran has a rich, diverse and unique history when it comes to gender and sexuality (e.g., Najmabadi, 2005). Various liberalising trends during the twentieth century saw increased access to birth control and women's rights, as well as more permissive attitudes towards sex and sexuality (Ramezani et al., 2015). After the 1979 Islamic Revolution, however, sex and sexual mores became progressively more (publicly) conservative in Iran (Shadpour, 2000; Shahidian, 1996). Accordingly, sexual behaviour became increasingly more prohibitive and imbued with a stronger gendered double standard that held women to greater restrictions (Khalajabadi-Farahani et al., 2019). Early marriage and motherhood were encouraged by the new governing bodies, and the social status of women was increasingly defined by marriage. The marriage contract was considered a religious duty and a voluntary contract in which a woman offered her sexual and reproductive capacity, and obedience, in return for the man's financial support (Khalajabadi-Farahani et al., 2019). While such ideals were adhered to in a general sense, many continued with sexual and romantic contact, outside of marriage, and "out of sight"—in private domains and social gatherings. Recently, progressive shifts in the sexual attitudes and behaviours of younger people, as well as rejection of strict religious rules of sexual conduct have been identified in contemporary Iran (Khalajabadi-Farahani, 2008; Khorshidzadeh & Zangoee, 2006; Mohammadi et al., 2006; Motamedi et al., 2016). For example, a richer dating culture is increasingly visible (Sadeghi, 2008), along with pre-marital romantic relationships (Khalajabadi-Farahania & Cleland, 2015), cohabitation before marriage (Khalajabadi-Farahania & Cleland, 2015), and a greater acceptance and practice of sex before marriage (Azad-Armaki et al., 2012; Garmaroudi et al., 2010). Yet, very little research has examined the contours and implications of such shifts, particularly in the complex and contradictory terrain that is Iran. In this paper, we begin to address this gap, by exploring a small group of young Iranian women's experiences, ideas and impressions related to sex, sexuality, sexual relationships, pre-marital sex and sex in marriage in two major Iranian cities—Tehran and Qom.

Constructing Sexuality

Cultural context plays a fundamental role in shaping individual ideals and beliefs about sexuality which, in turn, shape sexual behaviour. Attitudes and values related to sexuality are often context-specific, meaning that sexual mores can differ across time and geographical location. Historical roots, philosophical differences, family structure and interpersonal relations—across individualistic versus collectivist cultures—also lead to different attitudes and beliefs regarding sexuality (Ng et al., 1990). For instance, although historically sexual behaviour was prohibited outside of marriage, and linked to procreation within the West, the same individualistic cultures now embrace sexuality as having

multiple meanings—such as recreational and a site for pursuing individual pleasure (Farvid, 2012; Hawkes, 2004). Within collectivist cultures, no matter what the sexual mores, the impact of an individual’s sexual behavior is typically linked to broader social ramifications regarding their own and their family reputations (Brotto et al., 2005).

Such idealised norms within culture are also heavily embedded in gendered ideologies, where social norms play a strong role in governing what is considered appropriate sexual behaviour for men and women (Maas et al., 2015), and their sexualities are constructed as vastly different (Blackwood, 2000). Sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) posits that these gendered sexual ideologies lead to different conceptualisations of men’s and women’s sexualities. For instance, sexual desire and sexual expression is gendered, in both individualistic and collectivist cultures. For the female sexual script, women are seen as more “relationally” driven in sex, expected to participate in less sex than men, and are judged more harshly for engaging in the same sexual behavior as men—such as having casual sex, engaging in infidelity, or generally having sex outside of a committed relationship (Farvid et al., 2017; Hyde & Durik, 2000; Sagebin et al., 2012). Whereas for the male sexual script, they are not only seen as more “naturally” sexually driven, but permitted greater sexual freedoms, such as having multiple partners and the capacity to display a more carefree sexual persona (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Lefkowitz et al., 2014).

Social and cultural norms further construct sexual knowledge and sexual values (Hendry, 2015). In strongly collectivist and patriarchal cultures, sexual activity outside of marriage is considered highly inappropriate (Okazaki, 2002). The socialization process within collectivist cultures, emphasised in the family as well as society and religious norms, tends to promote patriarchal practices and moral codes more overtly (Brotto et al., 2005). For example, men typically have more freedom to experiment sexually before marriage (Blackwood, 2000), whilst women are required to abstain from sex until marriage; a context where a woman’s “virginity” is highly valued and policed—while a man’s is not scrutinised at all (Askun & Ataca, 2007). After marriage, a wife is typically expected to satisfy the sexual desires of her husband and to be sexually passive and submissive to her husband’s sexual needs or demands; this is seen as part of her wifely duty as part of the marriage contract (Essamuah, 2005). In this context, men are positioned as the initiators of sex and setting the parameters for the sexual encounter, while women’s sexuality is strictly limited to their roles as wives or concubines to men, and more directly aligned to being passive and responsive as well as focused on reproduction (Farvid & Saing, in press). The expression of female sexuality outside of a heterosexual, married context is seen as a threat to the highly interdependent social order and integrity of religious, legal, social and family values (Abraham, 1999).

The Iranian Context

Iran is a non-Arab country located in the Middle-East and home to modern-day remnants of the ancient Persian Empire (approx. 550-330BC). It is inhabited mostly by Persians (interchangeably called Iranians, 65%) as well as Azerbaijani (15%), Kurds

(10%), Lurs (5%), and Balochs (2%). It is a diverse country that is mostly Shi'a Muslim and (90%), as well as home to other religions (Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrian). Whilst a predominantly Muslim country, Iran is socially and legally more liberal than neighbouring Arab countries, with women occupying various important public and professional roles. Education is seen as important for both girls and boys with 60% of university graduates are women. In average 4% of parliament's members are women, and in the last 30 years, there is a thriving women's rights movement, as well all many (feminist) public debates about gender equality and men's and women's roles within society (Khalajabadi-Farahani, 2019). Hence, the country presents with interesting paradoxes when it comes to women's rights, economic independent, as well as gender and sexuality. Such nuances are also complicated further depending on the rural or urban habitation, with urban centres typically home to progressive, highly educated and more secularised Muslims; and the rural areas typically home to those who hold more traditional values and practice stricter Islam). Iran has been through various waves of push and pull towards/from liberalising trends (socially and legally), particularly in the twentieth century. Hence, as Sarafan (2001) notes:

The nexus between Islam and Iran is a complex one. Islam was brought to Iran via Arab-Islamic conquest in 650 AD and has played a shifting, anomalous role in this nation-state ever since. The ideas of nationalism, secularism, religion, and revolution are unique in this Muslim country. Iranians, unlike many of their neighbors, hold on very strongly to their pre-Islamic roots and achievements; sentiments of nationalism are apparent throughout Iranian history and in the everyday conversations of Iranians.

Although Iranians identify very strongly with their Persian heritage, since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the country has established coherence between Islamic teaching and laws (Shari'a), in a way that is much stricter than before. This convergence has also sought to guide the basic (formal) framework for gender and sexual relations within the country (Moghadam, 1992; Shahidian, 1999). Since the revolution, a sexually conservative culture has dominated public life, and all legislation is required to be consistent with Shari'a law (Shadpour, 2000; Shahidian, 1996). The legal marriage age is currently 15 for men and 13 for women, which seeks to encourage early marriage and reproduction (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2009). Such pressure is compounded by religious rules that state premarital sexual relations, sexual relationships outside of marriage, and interactions between unmarried men and women are not permissible (Khalajabadi-Farahani, 2008).

In Iran, boys and girls are socialized, from early childhood, in line with gendered codes of sexual morality (Hanassab & Tidwell, 1993). For instance, Iranian boys are trained to command and protect, to be independent, work hard and enter a respectable profession (Shirpak et al., 2008). While education is also important for Iranian girls, they are taught to be obedient, to speak and laugh rarely, and are trained to assume the roles of good girls and wives, who comply with the social codes of chastity and virtue (Shirpak et al., 2008). Thus, prior to marriage, a 'good girl' is expected to be chaste, conceal her sexual desire from others, and from herself, and not to speak of or fantasize about sex (Shirpak et al., 2008). Indeed, among women,

having sex before marriage is considered a betrayal of their future spouse (Shirpak et al., 2008). The virginity of a woman (but not a man) at the time of marriage is considered of utmost importance (traditionally needing to be proven at the time of marriage). Therefore, ‘gold standards’ such as virginity (*bekarat*), chastity (*nejabat*) and authenticity (from a family with a good reputation) are often used when a man searches for a future wife (Hojat et al., 1999). However, research clearly indicates that not all girl, women, or their families follow these norms, and that sexuality is a rich battleground for individual and collective political resistance (Afary, 2009; Mahdavi, 2012).

In 1998, reforms were introduced leading to a gradual liberalization and increased autonomy and roles for women within families (Shaditalab, 2005). Yet, there still exist many gender-related laws and gender-based double standards regarding pre-marital sex (Khalajabadi-Farahani et al., 2019). For example, abstaining from sex before marriage and maintaining and a chaste sexual reputation has great value for women. Men are more likely to seek virgin brides, while being able to sexually ‘experiment’ before marriage themselves (Shirpak et al., 2008). Indeed, many young women also engage in pre-marital sexual contact, but the price is much higher if they are identified as doing so (Mahdavi, 2007). There are even reports of some sexually active unmarried women undergoing “hymen reconstructing” surgery before marriage (Kaivanara, 2016), which point to one way some women circumnavigate such a gendered system, using extreme measures (although cosmetic/plastic surgery is very common in Iran, Kalantar Hormozi, et al, 2018). Due to these contradictions, Iran has been described as a country torn between cultural norms and religious ideals; juxtaposed between liberalism and traditionalism, between individual freedoms and religious obligations (Khalajabadi-Farahani et al., 2019). There is typically a great divide between what happens in public or is socially revealed, and what happens in private—whether it be social (parties/gatherings) or intimate (sexual contact).

Publicly, the cultural and religious values in Iranian society position marriage as a system that plays a fundamental role in maintaining a specific social structure and as the pathway to sexual access. A set of rights and obligations for each party is identified under the marriage contract and sexual relations between a husband and wife validates such an institution of marriage (Khoei et al., 2008). Men are expected to be the head of the family and responsible for making important decisions. While not all follow these strict gendered roles, women are more likely to be positioned as the obedient ones in marriage (which, as a side note, is only heterosexual in this context). A man is expected to fulfil his main duty of providing financial stability and welfare for his family; in contrast, a woman is expected to be in charge of the domestic sphere—whether or not she works outside the home. With regards to sex, men are seen as sexually more (biologically) “needy” than women, and women are expected to meet this need as part of her marital role—in both a passive and responsive way, *as well as* in a seductive and sexy manner (Raisi et al., 2015). Ironically, women are seen as having quite a bit of power here in relation to their own sexuality and their capacity to meet men’s needs. Men’s sexual neediness—and their potential lack of control over needing sex—is at times positioned as a lack of sophistication towards sex and as “primitive” or even sad or “pathetic”.

Yet, there are expectations of woman to keep her husband sexually satisfied. For example, if a man has extramarital relationships, society blames the wife for her inability to meet the sexual needs of her husband (Raisi et al., 2015). Based on Islamic principles, sexual obedience and submission—considered one of the most important items of the marital contract—formally form the basis for Iranian women’s understanding of sexuality (Khoei et al., 2008). The concept of modesty (not being sexually expressive) is the most important ethical code applied to Iranian women, while for Iranian men the essential components of masculinity are virility and a strong sexual appetite. Religious teachings privilege vaginal intercourse, over masturbation and anal intercourse, as “proper sex” based on the interpretations of the Quran by religious scholars (Shirpak et al., 2008).

Moreover, Iranian laws regarding marriage differ for men and women. For instance, under Shari’a law, men are religiously and legally at right to have up to four permanent, and a limitless number of temporary, wives; while women are not extended the same rights (Shirpak et al., 2007). While a man is allowed to marry multiple partners, he is required to demonstrate that he is able to provide equally for each of his wives. However, although such polygamy is legally permitted in Iran, it is not a common practice. It is looked down upon as lustful, hedonistic or indecent (and a form of Islam Iranians should not practice)—it is not considered morally acceptable among Iranian people (Shirpak et al., 2007). As such, the laws and customs provide a basic framework for gender and sexual relationships; yet, marital relationships in Iran vary widely—from conservative and religious, to egalitarian and secular. Some couples respect and treat each other as equals, while others follow traditional teachings more strictly and reject egalitarian relationship styles.

Contemporary Trends in Premarital Sex in Iran

Over the last century, changes in sexual attitudes and behaviours among young people in Iran has seen a rise in premarital intimacy and sex before marriage (Azad-Armaki et al., 2012; Garmaroudi et al., 2010; Khalajabadi-Farahani & Cleland, 2015; Mohammadi et al., 2006). For example, a recent meta-analysis research in eight cities in Iran among a sample of 14,989 indicates that 29% of boys/men and 12% of girls/women have had premarital sex (Khalajabadi-Farahani, 2016). A study showed that 47% of female college students had their first premarital sex before entrance to university, while their parents were strictly against premarital sex (Khalajabadi-Farahani, 2008). Thus, there are many contradictions and double standards in a conservative society such as Iran in where maintaining virginity and reputation has great value. Therefore, involving in premarital sex make young women vulnerable to violence, abuse, and honor-related killing (Cinthio, 2015). For example, female college students reported that when Iranian men want to marry, they look for a virginal woman and they believe that virginity is a good marker for chastity (Khalajabadi-Farahani et al., 2019). There is a common belief among men that if a boy ‘deflowers’ a girl, he would never ever marry the girl because he believes that he should not marry a woman who easily agrees to have sex. Therefore, findings from previous studies showed a dominate gender-based double standard in premarital sexuality in

Iran and approve premarital sex for young men than for young women (Khalajabadi-Farahani, 2008; Mohammadi et al, 2006).

The research reported here was designed to explore issues of sex and sexuality among a group of Iranian women based on their own experiences and impressions. The aim of this qualitative research is to provide information that strengthens knowledge of gender issues and understanding of about culture, religion and sexuality, in contemporary Iran.

Method

The present study used interviews to understand the perspectives of Iranian married women in Tehran (the cosmopolitical capital of Iran) and Qom (a prominent city with deep religious roots) between February and August 2014. Study approval was obtained from the ethics committee of the host university in Tehran.

Participants

Fifteen women were recruited using purposive and snowball sampling methods via advertising in health centres, universities and public places (e.g., parks, shopping centre, restaurants). Potential participants were excluded if they were younger than 18 years of age, single or not living with their husband in a monogamous relationship. No money or incentives were offered to the participants for taking part.

Of the 15 women, 12 were aged 26–35 years, and three were aged 18–25 years. Seven women were from Tehran and eight from Qom. Six women identified as very religious, five as moderately religious, and four women were not religious (did not practice Islam) but believed in God (a position that is common in Iran). Seven women had obtained a Bachelor's degree, five women held Master's degrees, two women had Ph.D.'s, and one woman was a high school graduate. Participants were also asked to identify the number of years since they first engaged in a sexual relationship; five women, 1–2 years; five women, 3–5 years; two women, 6–10 years; and three women 11–15 years (Table 1).

Procedure

All participants were invited to take part in a face-to-face individual interviews in a private location, such as psychology clinic at universities, private clinics, their workplace, dormitory, or their home. Participants were assured of confidentiality, given the opportunity to ask questions and were informed of their right to withdraw from study at any time, before signing the consent form.

The interviewer asked questions about family characteristics, values and attitudes toward gender roles, religiosity and sexual and relational assertiveness. Participants were also asked to discuss attitudes or beliefs toward sexuality that exist in their family, culture and society, how they define sexual relationship in context of marriage, their attitudes toward premarital sexual relationship from theirs and society's point of view,

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample (N = 15)

	n	%
Age		
18–25 years	3	20
26–35 years	12	80
Educational levels		
High school graduate	1	6.6
Bachelor degree	7	46.66
Master degree	5	33.33
Ph.D.	2	13.33
Sexually active relationship (years)		
1–2 years	5	33.33
3–5 years	5	33.33
6–10 years	2	13.33
11–15 years	3	20

their attitudes toward virginity and how their family and society have defined this term when they were a teenager, the age of first sexual encounter and its circumstances, and their definition of marriage from both a woman and man's perspective. They were asked to explain their sexual roles, sexual expectations in their marital relationship, and define the role of a sexual relationship in their life. All interviews were conducted in the Farsi language. Interviews lasted 60–90 min. Interviews were digitally audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, then translated into English post-analysis by the first and second authors.

Data Analysis

The interviews were analysed using qualitative content analysis (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994). The recorded interviews were transcribed in Farsi and typed into separate Word documents. Thereafter, data were manually coded by researchers. In total, 380 open codes were assigned to the interviews and open codes were compared and categorized by 105 common concepts. According to Miles and Huberman (1984) common concepts are coded to produce categories that are then classified into sub-categories and major categories. Thus, codes were sorted and grouped into smaller number of categories and then, by comparing them, major categories were extracted. These categories were recorded in colour-coded tables with examples from the data. While all 15 interviews were analysed, data saturate was reached by the transcript 12—meaning that the stories being told were not revealing any new material and confirmed the previous narratives.

Results

The women's experiences encapsulated a complicated and contradictory terrain of gendered sexuality. A terrain where the women were negotiating pro-sex ideals, alongside conservative, gendered and religious beliefs. Four major categories were identified from the data relating to women's sexual beliefs. First, the women described sexuality as a cultural and religious behaviour. The second category concerned conservative sexual beliefs which were seen in premarital sexual relationships and the dignity of virginity. The third category addressed the sexual power and sexual objectification of women. The importance of sex within marriage was the fourth category.

Sexuality as a Cultural and Religious Behaviour

The majority of women interviewed believed that sexual behaviours are guided by cultural and religious norms. Iranian cultural values alongside religious rules act as a sexual mediator determining women's beliefs and behaviour. Sexual submission was extracted as one of the main factors in this category. According to Shari'a law, it is a woman's duty as a wife to meet her husband's sexual demands. Thus, good woman will endure sex, even if she does not necessarily want it:

In my culture, a woman is seen as a submissive human being and when a husband wants sex, the wife should comply. Moreover, there are Islamic texts such as Hadith which provide specific advice on women's sexual matters. For instance, if a man calls his wife to his bed and she does not respond, the angels curse her until the morning. While, in Islamic text, there are no such texts for men, and it is not mentioned what will happen to a man if he rejects a woman's sexual request. Thus, women's sexuality was strictly limited to their roles as wives which are responsible for satisfying the sexual needs of their husbands. (P13, 30)

Most women noted that sexual obedience is a Muslim woman's duty and viewed women's subordination as the imposed result of Islamic religious teaching. Hence, such women believed that, according to Shari'a law, that they have no right to refuse sex. In patriarchal societies, such as Iran, sex is seen as an essential need for a man. In the extract above, this is identified but also problematized—with the interviewee highlighting the sexist nature of Islamic scripture, when it comes to sexual advances and refusals. This awareness did not necessarily mean that women challenged the idea that men have more sexual urges than women, or the right to sex if/when they requested it. The emphasis on men's sexual urges meant that the women were positioned as responsible for his sexual upkeep:

In my society, sexual relationship is only for man and it is important that he is satisfied very well because he deserves this relation. Accordingly, if a man goes to another woman or has extramarital relationships, others blame

the woman who has not been able to satisfy the sexual needs of her husband and the man has the right for electing another woman. (P1, 27)

As indicated above, if a man ‘strays’, it was deemed the fault of the woman for not providing the man with adequate sexual upkeep—a double standard that is also evident within the West, but losing traction (Farvid & Braun, 2006).

Sexual repression was another factor considered in this category. Some women believed that a wife should not talk about sex or discuss her opinions regarding sex with her husband. Doing so, may lead to her husband thinking she is sexually experienced and, therefore, morally suspect:

In my culture, a woman is expected to remain silent about issues related to sex and sexuality. After a long-term relationship, if a wife wants to talk about her sexual impulses and needs, she was blamed by society (friends, family, etc). I think I grew up in the religious culture where sex for women does not have high status in society. (P10, 32)

Based on parental education and religious teachings, some women believed that assuming a passive sexual role was best, and as associated with modest and respectful behaviours. A modest Iranian woman is quiet, not sexually expressive and does not initiate sexual relationships:

Sexual feelings, impulses and desires should be concealed by woman. It is not only immodest and unchaste for woman to initiate sexual relationship, but also she must wait until her partner comes to her. I think if the wife proposes sexual relations, her husband maybe accept her suggestion, but this behaviour is very undesirable. (P2, 27)

In interviews, participants believed a good woman is expected to be a secret-keeper, modest and maintain self-respect sexually (by not instigating sex) in order to maintain a respectable sexual character and keep her marital life happy and peaceful (Khoei et al, 2008). In Iranian culture, Islamic teaching and laws (Shari’a) construct the basic framework for sexual norms and discourses relating to sexuality and marital relationships as strongly linked to religious values. Accordingly, these values and rules act as a legitimate and conventional instruction of sexuality which defines women and men’s sexuality and how they are expected to behave. This view applied in varying degrees within the women’s narratives—and was tied to how they were raised and how much they, themselves, identified as religious.

Conservative Sexual Beliefs

In this study, conservative sexual belief was reflected in the dignity of virginity and premarital sexual relationship. Participants frequently used the words modest and chaste for describing a ‘good girl’ who keeps her virginity until marriage. Accordingly, virginity was highly prized and linked to the concept of sexual purity and the honour of the woman, her family and community:

A modest girl is described by her virginity. If a girl loses her virginity in a sexual relationship with her boyfriend, she is completely immodest and unchaste. (P5, 29)

In patrilineal societies, a woman’s virginity is seen as the property of the men around her and is gift for her husband (Bennett, 2005). Participants indicated that prior to marriage, virginity is considered important social capital and, traditionally, needs to be proven at marriage. Therefore, when a man searches for a future wife, if he discerns the girl is not virgin, she is not chosen as a wife and further described as an unrestrained and ‘lewd’ girl:

I always say that a nice girl loses her virginity to her husband not with debauchery or by the “street guys” (people she dates/a boyfriend). I believe that virginity is the domain of the girl which should only be lost to the husband, not a boyfriend. (P2, 27)

If a girl loses her virginity to a boyfriend, she does not have any future because virginity is very important for marriage. (P8, 28)

Although over the last century, attitudes towards premarital sex have become more permissive, women’s virginity is still important at marriage for Iranian men and their families, and this was noted by the women. There was also a sexual double standard when it came to premarital sex—something that the women were very much aware of and discussed. The women knew that the cultural codes required different codes of sexual conduct from men and women before marriage:

In my society, one of the main criteria of marriage for man is that a girl has not experienced sexual relationships with others. Although men are free to experiment sexually at will before marriage, females have to preserve themselves only for their husband. Because men believe if a girl says yes to sexual relationship with them (before marriage), she certainly has said yes to others. Therefore, this girl is not trustworthy for marriage and her sexual relationship is considered as an act of betrayal for the future spouse. (P5, 29)

Much like (typically outdated) conservative and traditional discourses within the west, when dating, it was vital for a woman to avoid having sex, particularly if they wanted the relationship to progress to marriage. In this context, women needed to be assertive in *refusing* sex until married—she seeks to protect her moral worth by restricting access to her sexuality, prior to getting married. Sexual refusals thus became something women felt obligated to practice when dating, regardless of their own sexual desires, *if* they wanted the possibility of a relationship to progress to marriage.

Sexual Objectification Versus Sexual Power

Participants indicated that there were two approaches in their current sexual relationships. In the first approach, women were seen as objects to be admired for their beauty and as instruments for inciting and satisfying the sexual desire

of their husbands. Alternatively, sex was also used a bargaining chip or tool of power whereby women acquired control in their marital relations.

With regards to the first approach, some participants believed that women were viewed primarily as an object of male sexual desire or a commodity for men's sexual satisfaction:

My society has not allocated any sexual rights for women and they are considered as an instrument to provide sexual pleasure for men. From my point of view, a woman is assessed by her sexual attire and makeup and is as a men's toy in society. (P1, 27)

My husband gets excited when I wear provocative clothing or makeup. I believe for men, a sexual relationship is more important than daily food. (P5, 29)

Being attractive and desirable to men, especially one's husband, was identified as a very important component of a women's identity and sexual capital. There is an irony at work here that is not often discussed. Although sex is deemed as vital to men and naturally needed by them (hence ostensibly requiring little work in order to arouse/maintain such desire besides simply being a sexually available woman), women are expected to perform sexiness for the men in their lives, by adorning their body and face in specific ways (Fahs, 2011). Such processes represent the continued conundrums of patriarchy, globally, but as also identifiable in contemporary Iran. As a further example, some women described their belief that a woman's value is evaluated by her sexual function, being seductive and sexy, and fulfilling her marital duty of providing good sex or simply being sexually available.

If I have had a great sexual encounter with my husband, he considers me as a good wife... and asks me will you be very well in the other nights (being seductive and sexy). In other words, my husband expects that every night I should wear sexy dress and being seductive and sexy, therefore I will be a good wife for him. (P2, 27)

With regards to the second approach, some women believed that their sexuality is a pivotal factor that empowers them in their marital relationship. Some women described being aware of their husband's sexual weakness (dependence on sex), and using multiple strategies in order to override their power. One such strategy was controlling sex:

I believe that men are dependent on women and their biggest need is sexual desire. Therefore, men's power can be overridden with by women's sexual power. (P13, 30)

Whenever I had a fight with my husband, I would not allow him near me to have sexual relations. (P7, 32)

Women used sex as a tool for reward and punishment within marriage, offering them a tool for gaining power in marriage, in a patriarchal context (Khoei et al., 2008).

Conversely, some women used sex as a means of alleviating marital or relational tension:

Whenever I fought with my husband and he became angry, I attempted to relax him by sexual relations. For me, sexual relations are used as a tension reducing mechanism between my husband and I. (P12, 27)

Here the sexual relationship is considered an instrument for preserving and strengthening the marital relationship, in times of conflict. It is unclear whether sex is used as a tool to pacify the husband, or if it is beneficial for both parties. In Iranian culture, sexuality and marital relationships link strongly to patriarchal values. Some women circumvented such norms by using men’s supposed sexual neediness against them. Others simply accepted these values as a part of marital life. The underlying belief, however, is one of gendered sexuality—where women’s sexuality is much more muted than men’s.

The Importance of Sex Within Marriage

The majority of women interviewed believed that sexual relationship is a central aspect of marital relationships which influences life satisfaction and psychological well-being, for both men and women:

Having sex improves intimacy, kindness, and feeling of belonging in marital relationship, it increases calmness mentally and physically. (P14, 32)

From my point of view, sexual relationship has a key factor in life. Having a great sex life with your husband leads to more pleasure and exhilaration and as well as helping the couple who are old later and adjusting to diverse aspects of their life. (P1, 27)

The above is an important finding. It points to an unexpectedly ‘pro-sex’ attitude (albeit within marriage) among the women, but as applied to both men and women. Here sex is very much positioned as an intimate connector for a couple, as well as leading to physical and psychological wellbeing. Some women, however, believed that the main reason for marriage is sexual relationship:

I believe that marriage is occurred only for sexual relationship and sex includes the biggest part of marital life. In my view, the most people get married because the marriage is the approved pathway to sexual access. (P2, 27)

When I was married, I thought my husband married with me only to have sex. Therefore, I attempted to fight and reject his sexual needs. After a short time, I comprehended that my husband became inattentive toward me and my marital life was in danger. (P5, 29)

In Iranian culture, Shari’a law and doctrine denote marriage as the sole socially approved pathway to sexual access. Because of this, some of the women held more cynical views towards the marital union—believing that the goal was much more sexually oriented. This produces feelings of being objectification devalued, that lead to some marital discord for the women. Overall, it was clear that sex was very central to married life and played a vital role in shaping, improving and protecting the marital relationship.

Discussion

This study explored how married Iranian women talk about sex and sexuality, as well as reflecting on their lived sexual experiences. In a conservative society such as Iran, a range of issues come together to shape the meaning of sexuality for women within marriage. This study has highlighted the contradictions and complexities that make up the narratives of sex for married women. As demonstrated, married Iranian women negotiated a tenuous and complex terrain with regards to the marital sexual relationship. Patriarchal values, gender norms, a sexual double standard, religious norms, and unequal power relations between men and women have played a fundamental role in women's sexual knowledge and conduct. The meaning of sex within marriage were also shaped by religious values, perceived social and gender norms, and family values, promoting a more traditional sexual role that was taken on/enacted by the women. However, the conservative and gendered context was not all encompassing when it came to the women's understanding of sexuality and practices of sex within marriage.

In line with previous research (Khoei et al., 2008; Raisi et al., 2015; Shirpak et al., 2008), we found that patriarchal practices shaped and perpetuate gender inequality, giving more power to men to express their sexuality and demand sexual satisfaction. However, in line with other research, women were not simply passive recipients of men's sexuality (Mahdavi, 2012). While, conservative culture and religious teachings demand an unassertive and passive mode of female sexuality, the women interviewed here demonstrated an overarching critical awareness of such norm. That is, while aware of the conservative social norms and cultural demands, the woman did not simply buy into them and blindly act out what was expected of them. While they generally submitted to the sexual desires of their husbands, they also questioned automatic submissions, as well as using their sexual power when they needed to.

Women's views in this study revealed two approaches to sex: sexual objectification versus sexual power. On one hand, women conceptualized the meaning of sex as an instrument which gave them some control over their marital life. Controlling marriage through having sex was identified as a means to continue the marriage, prevent husband's infidelity, and punish a husband by refusing sex. In patriarchal and traditional societies, such as Iran, an unequal structure of power in the families leads women to using sexual relationship as a means to balance the power and achieve sexual dependence of men (Raisi et al., 2015). This finding confirms previous studies which have shown feminine sexuality as a vehicle to progress (Khoei et al., 2008; Raisi et al., 2015). On the other hand, women conceptualized feminine sexuality as an instrument for attending to the male sexual drive; wherein women are seen as "victims" of men's sexual desire and positioned as objects of men's sexual drive. Accordingly, women are evaluated greater importance via beauty and appearance as well as by sexual submissiveness and willingness to satisfy their husbands on any sexual occasion.

Finally, the women's views in this study support the concept that generally, sexual relationship within marriage plays a vital role in promoting positive mental

health and well-being within the marital relationship. Whereas having no sex or sexual problems impacts on quality of life and one’s overall wellbeing, family and societal health. Therefore, sexual relationship strengthens a couple’s emotional relationship which includes love, attention and respect, and fulfils physical needs. This finding confirms those of previous studies which have shown the beliefs of Iranian married women for having sex (Raisi et al., 2015).

The present study had some limitations. The sample was not representative of the population which limits the findings’ generalization. All the data come from only 15 women that were chosen using purposive and snowball sampling methods. In order to verify this study’s findings, additional replications using larger samples, and controlling for other important variables should be undertaken.

Conclusion

Overall, findings from this study suggest sexuality must always be defined in relation to the broad social and cultural context within which it occurs. Iranian women’s sexual beliefs are strongly determined by religious and traditional teaching. However, the women demonstrated critical awareness of the dominant ideologies, were able to play with these to suit them, and used sex as a bargaining tool, in situations where their power may have been limited. The most interesting and important finding was also the sex-positive perspectives of the participants. At least within the confines of marriage, sex was seen as creating greater connection, intimacy and reducing psychological and physical stress. This speaks to a form of female sexuality, among these participants, that is not solely focused on male satisfaction. But one that has various meanings, uses, as well as positive outcomes for them. What we argue is that the mode of female sexuality and sexual agency within marriage that is mobilised here is one that is quite complex. While on the surface it may seem like the women are sexually repressed—their narratives tell stories of critical awareness, playful as well as strategic sexual agency—*within* the confines of theocratic Muslim society (Azam, 2014). As others have argued (Mahdavi, 2007, 2012; Sadeghi, 2008), Iran provides a unique context for the examination of gender relations. On the one hand it is viewed as conservative, religiously and repressive (Rahbari, 2016). While on the other hand, it is a highly educated society with high rates of women as university graduates, working for pay and in public roles. Hence, traditional discourses of sexuality may take some hold, but as demonstrated by the women in this study, they do not fully eclipse the women’s capacity for critical thinking and sexual negotiation. Future research would benefit from examining such complexities in the Iranian context further, perhaps by examining, more broadly, the sexual beliefs and practices of both young women and men.

Acknowledgements This study was supported by Faculty of Human Sciences, Tarbiat Modares University, Tehran, Iran and the School of Public Health, Faculty of Health Sciences, Curtin University, Western Australia, Australia. We appreciate these institutions for facilitating the study sampling. Last but not least we thank all of the participants.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Human and Animal Rights All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional and/or national research committee and with the 1964 Helsinki declaration and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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