

How do Iranian women from Rafsanjan conceptualize their sexual behaviors?

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Abstract In Iran, women’s sexual behaviors have not been studied in detail. The aim of this study was to explore the sexual meanings generated through the lived experience of women residing in Rafsanjan, a city in the Kerman province, where interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with 51 Iranian women. Content analysis was adopted to extract the meanings and perceptions. We categorized the findings into three aspects: sexual capacity, motivation, and performance. Sexual desire was the most important concept that women used when they were referring to their sexual capacity. Marriage was the main institution in which women’s motivation for sexual relationships and encounters resided, and “the priority of men’s sexual needs and characteristics” was identified as the core principle of marriage. The concept of sexual performance was more salient and tied to the husband’s sexual initiation. Analyzing the women’s narratives revealed that women’s sexual self-understandings and their sexual behaviors are strongly determined by “androcentricity”, this being relevant both to sexuality education and reproductive health. Recognition of this issue will facilitate understanding of the cultural foundations of sexuality among Iranians and help health providers in suggesting culturally appropriate and compatible forms of health care.

Keywords Iranian women · Sexual behaviors · Qualitative inquiry

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Introduction

This paper focuses on the meanings of sexual behaviors for Iranian women living in Iran. This paper does not intend to represent or describe core Islamic perspectives, and does not speak for all Iranian Muslim women, just a small population of Iranian women living in the city of Rafsanjan, in Kerman, a central province of Iran. In recent years, many studies have been conducted to explore women's sexual behaviors in Iran (Goshtasebi et al. 2009; Hashemi et al. 2013; Shirpak et al. 2008; Shirvani et al. 2010). The majority focus on the functional or practical aspects of women's sexuality. A study of Iranian women in Australia revealed that only the physiological function of sexual behavior was the center of attention, and this was not connected with women's sexual pleasure or practices (Merghati-Khoei and Richters 2008). Similar to other contexts (Anarfi and Owusu 2011; Beckmann 2010; Lodge and Anderson 2012; McDougall et al. 2011), however, Iranians' sexuality is strongly embedded in the culture of silence, meanings, and customary scripts.

In Iran, the cultural gendering of sexuality functions to regulate women's sexuality and to silence their views on it (Merghati-Khoei 2005). Based on her findings, Merghati-Khoei (2005) suggested that women's understanding of sexuality is heavily influenced by androcentricity. The androcentric doctrine develops and provides only a vague image of women's sexuality through their entire lives.

Theoretical framework: Sexual Understanding in the Context of Androcentricity

The basic idea of androcentricity is the premise that the male is a reference point on which all other understandings depend. Androcentricity is defined consistently with the work of Webber and Bezanson (1991):

Androcentricity is essentially a view of the world from a male perspective. It manifests itself when ego is constructed as male rather than female, such as when "intergroup warfare" is defined as a "means of gaining women and slaves." In this case, the "group" is defined as consisting only of males, since the women are what is "gained." From an androcentric perspective, women are seen as passive objects rather than subjects in history, as acted upon rather than actors.

A review of literature was initially undertaken to examine what had been written about sexuality in the context of androcentricity. In this paradigm, masculine sexuality is the main scale on which feminine sexuality is measured, and the essential purpose of sexuality is by definition male gratification. Through the lens of androcentricity, female sexuality is identified as an accessory (Tiefer 1995).

The literature indicated that the expression of sexuality in an androcentric context is mainly based on the work of Maines (1999), who launched the "androcentric model of sexuality":

The androcentric definition of sex as an activity recognizes three essential steps: preparation for penetration ("foreplay"), penetration, and male orgasm. Sexual activity that does not involve at least the last two has not been

popularly or medically (and for that matter legally) regarded as “the real thing”. The female is expected to reach orgasm during coitus, but if she does not, the legitimacy of the act as “real sex” is not thereby diminished ... in reading the premodern literature of gynecology ... Female sexuality is often referred to in masculine terms, such as the references to the secretions of the Bartholin glands as “semen” or “seed”. Thomas Laqueur says that physicians writing of anatomy “saw no need to develop a precise vocabulary of genital anatomy because if the female body was a less hot, less perfect, and hence less patent version of the canonical body, the distinct organic, much less genital, landmarks mattered far less than the metaphysical hierarchies they illustrated” (Maines 1999, p. 5).

Not only subjective meanings of sexual behavior are challenged in androcentric contexts but sexual behaviors from biological perspectives are also debated. Feminist scholars have challenged Masters and Johnson’s original model of the human sexual response cycle and have criticized it. These scholars believed that biological aspects are privileged in this model and cultural or historical aspects of sexuality are denied (Tiefer 2001). They have also disputed its androcentric bias, universalist claims, and reductionism (Potts 2005). Reductionism is an approach that describes systems out of the subsystems of which a system is composed, and ignores the relationships between components (Yam 2011).

Some Iranian scholars have discussed sexuality-related matters in an androcentric context. For example, Hanassab parallels androcentricity with patriarchy and argues that Iranian women’s sexual socialization occurs in a patriarchal context (Hanassab 1998; Hanassab and Tidwell 1996). Merghati-Khoei (2005) argues instead that those women’s sexual understanding lies in the male supremacist structure of Iranian society. In this context, the proper or respectable woman was one who regarded sex as her duty or responsibility. However, such a duty and responsibility make women less agentive in their sexual partnership. Apparently, women themselves have a significant role in making men the supreme agent. Women not only protest this doctrine, but aim to strengthen and support the androcentric belief system (Amini 2011).

Emerging from the debates is the question of what determines the sexual subjectivity of women, both in their everyday social interactions and in their engagement in their sexual life. The aim of this study was to determine the meanings generated through the lived experiences of a group of Iranian women, which may expand the existing explanatory framework of sexuality and add to the literature concerning sexuality of women in patriarchal contexts.

Study setting

The Islamic Republic of Iran was proclaimed in April 1979 and since then has been governed as a theocratic republic. Administrative divisions include 31 provinces, with Tehran as the capital. People speak various dialects, but Farsi (Persian, 58 %) and Azeri (26 %) are the main language groups and only 1 % speaks Arabic. People mainly practise Islam (98 %). The city of Rafsanjan is in



Fig. 1 Kerman province in Iran. URL: www.Wikimedia.org



Fig. 2 Rafsanjan in Kerman province. URL: www.mapzones.com

the Kerman Province, the central part of Iran (see Figs. 1, 2). In 2012, Rafsanjan's population size was an estimated 300,000. The sex ratio in this city is 103 male to 100 female, and more than half the women over the age of 10 are married. In 2012, 3,000 marriages and about 300 divorces were registered in the city (Statistical Centre of Iran 2012).

Box 1 Demographic information of the participants

Mean age (years)	35.7 ± 8.5
Average length of marriage (years)	14.2 ± 8.9
Average number of offspring	2 ± 1.4
Education	38.3 % high school, 14.9 % primary school
Job	70 % housekeeper

In this province, people strongly follow traditional customs. One of these traditions is the institutionalizing of the family by marriage. Similar to other provinces in Iran, due to economic burdens as well as cultural and attitude changes among the young population toward marriage, the age of marriage has increased in the city (Statistical Centre of Iran 2012). Nevertheless, marriage at a young age is still considered as a cultural value, and arranged marriage is widely practised. In this province, such as other areas in the country, the ‘wedding ceremony’ is among the happiest social events; the bride is given specific attention, and, in this cultural show, little girls practise and learn their gender roles as scripted in the community.

Methods

In a mixed method paradigm, a qual/quan method, qualitative approaches were employed to collect data in the present study. The aim was to explore the meanings by which women conceptualize their sexual behaviors. Fieldwork began in 2012 and was completed in January 2013. Approval for the study was obtained from the Isfahan University of Medical Sciences. Women aged 15–49 were selected using a combination of purposive and convenience sampling. Women from both urban and rural areas of Rafsanjan, and from all generations and various socio-demographics and educational status, were sought. Of 51 participants, 4 people participated in individual interviews and 48 in focus group discussions (Box 1).

Access to the participants was facilitated by midwives who were working in the public health centers. It is assumed that people with a low to moderate level of socio-economic status are referred to the public health centers, but in Rafsanjan women from all classes seek health care services from these centers, including immunization for their children and contraception. Furthermore, newly-married couples from all societal levels have to attend premarital education as well as having clinical tests to get approval for their marriage. Therefore, our recruitment was not opportunistic; the researcher could achieve maximum variation in sampling. All participants were invited by midwives, who were working in the center and quite familiar with the clients and their characteristics. Midwives are considered to be the key health care providers in the centers. They helped the researcher (Z.G.) to access the participants and to invite women to attend the FGDs. All participants were informed verbally about the aim of the study at the commencement of each session. A written consent form was obtained prior to the interviews and FGDs. Participants were given pseudonyms and reassured about anonymity and data security.

Work was carried out by the main investigator (Z.G.), who is Rafsanjani herself. The rationale for choosing Rafsanjan derived from the assumption that Z.G. was a well-known midwife in the city. As an insider, she would be able to develop a rapport and easily discuss sexuality with the women (Morse 1995). The trustful relationships had been built when Z.G. used to be present at gatherings, ceremonies, and religious rituals as a member of the Rafsanjani community rather than as an academic.

The main data collection technique was focus group discussions (FGDs) and individual face-to-face interviews. At first, conducting 4 individual interviews helped us in several ways: expanding our understanding of context; testing for acceptability of the topic in the community; and assessing the feasibility of the methods. After the interviews, seven FGDs were conducted over a 6-month period from January to June 2012.

The rationale for employing FGDs was our desire to seek participants' understanding of the context in which their sexuality was constructed. Iranians are always hesitant to talk about sexuality. However, women were more forthcoming when they were speaking in groups than they would be on their own, without fearing of being judged or stigmatized. They even motivate each other to speak out their sexual interests or concerns. Each FGD lasted between 55 and 80 min, and between 3 and 10 people participated in each session. "How do you define sexual behavior?" was the question we asked to open the discussion at the first and second sessions. Based on our preliminary analysis, we developed inventories to conduct other FGDs. "How are women different from men in their sexual behaviors?" and "Why do women act sexually differently from men?" were the core questions used in each FGD.

Focus group discussions were conducted in urban and rural health centers. These centers provide families with primary health services, including maternal and child health care and family planning programs (Shadpour 1994). We structured the discussion with questions such as: "What is sexual behavior?"; "How do you think women and men are different in sexual behavior?". Other questions grew out of the discussion and interaction that occurred among participants. The sessions were facilitated by using a semi-structured inventory based on preliminary findings from an earlier phase of the project. All the sessions were recorded and transcribed.

Content analysis was adopted according to the Graneheim approach (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). Accordingly, all transcribed texts were broken down into meaning units. Meaning units are simply small pieces that are created from breaking down the main text. Then, each meaning unit was abstracted to a "condensed meaning unit". Based on these units, codes were extracted. For the first session, coding was independently conducted by both E.M.K. and Z.G.; then, we compared all transcript passages to identify codes similarities and differences. In the next step, the differences were discussed, resolved, and ultimately re-coded. Then, the emerged hypothesis were reevaluated in subsequent FGDs. Coding of these subsequent FGD transcripts was conducted as for the first.

Discussion of findings

The participants' sexual behaviors were categorized into three aspects: capacity, motivation, and performance. Analyzing the women's narratives revealed "androcentricity" as the main basis from which women derived meaning for their sexuality.

Women's sexual capacity in an androcentric context

The sexual capacity is defined as “what one can do.” Sexual capacity is dependent on biology: growth and development and the events that one experiences during life, such as pregnancy, breast feeding, menstruations, illnesses, surgeries and treatments, etc. (Haeberle 2007).

In our study, sexual desire was the most important concept that women used when they were referring to sexual capacity. From the participants' viewpoints, a high sexual desire is a dominant characteristic of men. The majority believed that having high sexual desire and expressing it is not only the nature of masculinity but it is also considered a value for men. The women utilized this high sexual desire as a value for a man because it validates the desired woman as precious. Therefore, a man who has low sexual desire is considered aloof and, ultimately, less masculine. In contrast, women viewed sexual desire as a non-deniable phenomenon among women. However, they also felt it should not be expressed. Seemingly, the participants differentiated men from women's sexual capacities based on a cultural belief rather than on their personal life experiences.

Nona, 25 years old, has fully accepted the essentiality of sexual instinct and excessive sexual needs in men. It seems that the religious teachings are the main cause for her acceptance:

Men need it ... It is commonly accepted that men have high lust. We have lots of Rewayat [religious narratives] that say (for example) if the woman is riding on a camel and the man urges [for sex], the woman should reply to his need even in that situation. However, there is no rewayat for women, that if a woman asked for [sex] the man has to reply. All the narratives and sayings that we have are about men and fulfillment for their sexual desire... (FGD2)

The participants believed that the sexual desire of men originates from their sexual instincts and can arise rapidly, while women's sexual appetite depends on other factors such as the quality of marital relationship, a mental and true desire for the sexual interaction, and receiving respect and glorification from the husband.

Leyla; (37 years) sees the love of her husband as an important pre-condition for her sexual expression:

Men show more desire ... women need to receive love in order for them to be able to show [their sexual desire]. One's husband should show more love than just sexual desire. You can't show your desire if he doesn't express love.(FGD2)

In line with Leyla, to Foroq (30 years), the cooperation, love and attention of her husband are all preliminary requirements for her response to her husband's sexual needs. The absence of these factors not only explains her lessened sexual appetite, it normally makes her sexually dissatisfied:

The reason that women delay in their response is because they had a fight with each other beforehand. That is why she responds late or responds with dissatisfaction. The dissatisfaction is not with the sexual relationship; it is because of the lack of love and attention... (FGD6)

However, in women, the flourishing of this capacity (sexual desire) requires a mediator, the husband.

Shaqayeq, a 33-year-old woman, observed that men's sexual capacity and desire is almost twice that of women. Therefore, she considers the incompatibility of her own sexual capacity with her husband's as a natural fact. Although Shaqayeq sees her sexual capacity as insufficient compared to her husband, her sexual motivation is to satisfy his sexual need.

It's not that the women don't want it, but it's more like, if men want 3 or 4 times, one time can be enough for women. [Women] are more interested in satisfying (their husbands). They do not want it; however, they compromise to respond for the sake of them (their husbands). (FGD7)

The majority of women believed that, to protect physical health, men need regular and constant sexual fulfillment. This analysis led women to conclude that men need to be satisfied sexually, and their spouse is the only and the best option for men to achieve this satisfaction. If men do not reach sexual fulfillment, their sexual desire will be withheld, which can lead to physical and mental side effects. These side effects not only put their individual health at risk but also their marital and family relationships.

Bahareh, a 42-year-old housewife, seems to force herself to fulfill her husband's needs even when she is not ready for the sexual relationship. She holds that, for men, a non-constant sexual fulfillment or an ejaculation without the active cooperation of the woman can lead to male illness or side effects.

I believe that I should satisfy my husband's need under any circumstances so that he will not need it anymore ... I try to do something so that he does not face these problems and does not feel the urge for it. (FGD7)

Bahareh also pointed out behavioral–temperamental and physical problems caused by her husband's lack of sexual fulfillment and its bad effects on family life:

I know that if at times he needs me and I don't fulfill his need, he will become grumpy or may ignore me. His behavior will change and when he is at work, he cannot concentrate. Even once he got a disease, a problem in his testicles, and the doctor told us that we should not delay our sex. At that time, I cared much more about it.

The majority of the women believed that withheld sexual energy in men leads them to have more tendencies toward looking for sexual relationships outside the marriage. These women did not blame men for the unmoral affairs but blamed themselves as responsible people for preventing the unmoral affairs in men and the subsequent social disorder. They acknowledged women's sexual obedience as a means for improving men's health in physical, mental, and social aspects.

Forooq, a 30-year-old teacher, believes that men marry to release their sexual energy. It seems that Forooq not only sees herself as responsible for protecting her husband and preventing him from extra-marital affairs but also she blames other women in the society for men's extramarital affairs. She holds that the more freedom and fewer limitations that girls in their late teens and twenties experience

culturally may be the cause of a great concern and worry among married women her age and older. Considering the two important factors of sexual energy in men and increased sexual freedom among younger women, Foroq always tries not to let her husband feel pressure sexually:

If this need is not met in men, they will regret their marriage. The man would see that there are many girls in the streets and if his wife does not respond him ... if this behavior continues, he will be ended up licentious ... (FGD6)

Most women accepted “sexual obedience” toward the excessive sexual capacity of men. However, “sexual obedience,” to them appears to mean “caring about husbands’ sexual needs”, “the importance and necessity of fulfilling the sexual needs of the men,” and “responding to men’s requests as a characteristic and ability of good women”. All these descriptions sound consistent with androcentricity theory, in that men are considered the main and active party of the relationships and who expected to receive the benefits of the relationship.

Women’s sexual motivation in an androcentric context

Haerberle (2007) describes sexual motivation as “what the individual wants to do,” and the female participants in our FGDs described sexual motivation as what encourages or makes them interact sexually.

The narratives show the context of women’s motivation for sexual relationships and encounters to be “marriage,” “the priority of men’s sexual needs and characteristics,” “doing the best in responding to the sexual needs and requests of the husband as a duty,” “protection and taking care of the husband sexually,” and “satisfying God through submission and sexual obedience”.

Interpreting the data shows that the concept of sexual need and appeal is understood to be a specific masculine trait. Although women knew themselves to be sexual beings, their intrinsic sexual power can come true only when men want to use that power. Otherwise, the woman’s sexual appeal is regarded as always kept within, as a hidden energy. Therefore, sexual motivation in women has no accepted opportunity to appear before marriage. The narratives indicate that the sexual socialization of women before marriage insists that they not seek any kind of sexual information nor be recognized as sexual beings in the society. Therefore, only with and after marriage does a woman pass through the border between being an asexual entity and becoming a sexual one. The primary factor that encourages women to begin a sexual relationship is the essential principle for consolidating the marriage, the principle of sexual submission (*tamkin* تدمكین). Narratives of the female participants suggest that the woman’s own desire or willingness for a sexual relationship is not of concern; however, it is through the sexual submission principle that the sexual interaction between the husband and the wife may occur. Then, as our FGDs showed, after facing the “noble sexual desirous,” the woman gets the opportunity and permission to evolve into a real sexual entity, allowing the sexual motivation to appear. The process of this gradual evolution may sometimes be slow,

especially in first- and second-generation women and is often delayed for years after the marriage.

Although Tala, a 39-year-old woman, now has a satisfactory sexual and marital relationship and believes in her own sexual self efficacy, which means a perceived dominance which is a significant predictor of women's personal empowerment regarding sexual decision making (Soet et al. 1999), However, at the beginning of her marital life, in her pure androcentric sexual culture and socialization, the lack of sexual information and passivity is quite apparent:

It was not until I was pregnant with my first baby that I realized I did not have any idea about men having semen, the water ... However, I would ... never ... ask my husband about it, and I would feel shy to ask others. (FGD1)

Feeling proud of her ability and power plays the major role in Nona's sexual motivation. According to Nona's narratives, the sexual need and fulfillment of her man seems to be central; however, it also seems that she wants to apply all her sexual capacity in her interpersonal relationships. Even if she has orgasms and sexual pleasure, this is not satisfactory for her if her husband does not have orgasms. It is not the sexual act or sexual-physical performance itself that plays the major role in Nona's sexual pleasure and fulfillment, but the sexual fulfillment of the husband and the proud feeling that follows it that accomplishes her sexual satisfaction cycle:

When the man is sexually fulfilled, the woman will feel proud, that she could help the man to have the orgasm! If the woman doesn't have the orgasm, just this fact that her husband reached that point makes her feel released. But if the woman reaches orgasm and the man doesn't, then her orgasm is ruined for her. (FGD2)

According to the majority of the women, sexual submission is considered a religious duty. Although women show different levels of success in fulfilling this religious duty, depending on their sexual capacities or how much they are committed to follow religious beliefs, almost all of them seem to agree upon this belief.

Sima, a 39-year-old woman, believes in unconditionally complying with her husband's sexual demands. However, Sima reluctantly tends to exclude the conditions that women are ill or unable to comply, yet to her, the more and better the women try to comply, the more they will receive rewards from God and the more valuable they will be in God's eyes.

The feeling of guilt following not being sexually obedient is obviously apparent when analyzing the narrative. This feeling is especially more genuine in the women of the first and second generation.

However, besides the primary goal of fulfilling the man's sexual needs, the majority of women also benefit from intimacy and sexual fulfillment. Nevertheless, giving the second priority to this sexual motivation and authenticating men as the first are priorities consistent with the attributes of the androcentricity theory.

Women's sexual performance in an androcentric context

According to Haeberle (2007), sexual performance is that part of sexual behavior which is done by the individual (Haeberle 2007). Our participants defined sexual behavior as what happens between them and their spouses during their private moments.

To these women, the beginning point of the sexual performance is sexual initiation by their spouses. This sexual initiation of the men is a template and an old and completely accepted instruction for women. There was an absolute consensus regarding this issue among the women. This commencement begins with the verbal request of the husband, then it proceeds to physical closeness, intimacy, and touching, and, at the end, it leads to physical-sexual contact. For these women, it does not seem like the formation of the sexual behavior at the sexual performance level, made through the sexual stimuli, sexual-mental changes such as sexual fantasies, thoughts or self-stimulation. It rather originates from a script in which the physical closeness towards the woman and initiation of the sex by the man is the first stimulator of a woman to enter a sexual encounter. As a part of sexual activity, women's avoidance of initiating the sexual action for the sake of worthiness and modesty has been taken for granted as a prescribed agreement by both women and men.

This issue is compatible with the fundamentals of the androcentricity theory, which considers men as the main active entities of events. In an androcentric context, only the men's sexual need is authenticated by women, and the sexual need of women, even if an accepted and undoubted fact, at the same time is considered an unspeakable, denied, or hidden need behind the dominant need of the men. The majority of women prefer their spouses to assume that they never get sexually aroused, and they accept sexual interactions merely to respond and meet the requests of men. It is in such a context that women prefer not to directly initiate or request the sexual relationship under any circumstances. Darya, a 28-year-old woman, considers the differentiation between men and women in term of sexual interactions as the obstacle that makes her not be a sex initiator:

Since men request more, women prefer men to be the initiator. This is a kind of feminine modesty ... they like men to tell them something, [or] pamper them. It is not for them (women) to come first, request, and initiate... (FGD3)

Interpreting the data shows that, according to the participants, protecting their place and status in their husband's eyes can happen through hiding their own sexual desire behind the uncontrolled requests of their husbands. To them and deep inside them, they believe that the power of a woman, her ability to assert herself and her prepotency and dominance over the husband in the daily life, all depend on the husband's sexual need for them. It is this need in the husband that can be used by the woman to face a husband who has the absolute physical and cultural supremacy.

According to Zahra, 40 years old, the sexual power of a woman can also lead a husband to a permanent committed relationship and even to accepting the role of a father.

It is an old saying that says “respecting the child (by the father) depends on the belt (band) of the mother’s pants” (meaning the father would be a good father and respect the child if the mother sexually satisfies him). (Informal encounter)

Consistent with this historical and old interpretation, the majority of participants prefer men to stay in their needy, requesting position. Although some participants treated such a sexual interaction as a sign of their own power of femininity, some others intentionally avoid sexual initiation in order to keep their feminine position. Not only will a woman not receive any praise or encouragement by a request for sex but she will also be scolded and labeled as a result of this sexual request, which is apart from the femininity template. This template is even followed by the participants of higher education (e.g., university education):

Maybe requesting first causes reproaching later. They would say, “Do you remember how mousy you acted the other day when you were in need of me”. (Dina, 35-year-old, bachelor’s degree and a teacher, FDG6)

The theory of female sexual power against a husband, who is always expected to be in a sexually demanding condition, is consistent with the theorization of Merghati-Khoei (2005) regarding the sexual conceptualization of Iranian women in a western society. According to those women, “a woman” is also a strong sexual entity in contrast to the sexually weak men.

The characteristic of this sexual power with the shape of women’s sexual performance includes the special ability of women in controlling or suppressing their sexual desires, applying them at a suitable opportunity, and trapping the husband indirectly and subtly by producing sexual attraction and appeal. The blaming of unfaithfulness is another matter of concern. “Nona,” who had no experience of expressing her own sexual desire to her husband during her 6 years of marital life, is concerned that this attitude may result in bad outcomes for her. “Nona” knows how hard and unforgivable it is to even only imagine a married wife being unfaithful. She concluded that she should try not to give any excuse to anyone to find any kind of blame of this, just in case. Therefore, it would be better if her husband were not aware of her sexual desire.

This self-control of women can undoubtedly affect their husbands as the continually desirous. Although some of the participants pointed out their husbands’ dissatisfaction at the lack of sexual initiation on the woman’s part, it seems that experiencing the sexual power for these women is only possible through the man’s constant sexual need and thirst for them. There might have been women among the participants who based their power on their sexual skill and ability, but they did not express their method of achieving their sexual power because of the dominant template available to the women during their participation in our FGDs.

However, these women do not act completely passively if they feel a sexual need. They instead experienced a highly valued sense of self-efficacy in indirectly inviting the husband into the sexual relationship. Deeply holding that men are sexually weak entities regarding controlling their sexual instinct and that trapping them does not

require that much energy, the majority of our participants believed that they could easily pull their husbands into the sexual relationship whenever they wish to do so.

Setare, a 45-year-old rural lady who is strongly against the idea of suggesting sex to the man first, thinks that such an attitude is against a woman's dignity and modesty. She apparently denies her own sexual desires and claimed that, because of life difficulties, she did not have such feelings anymore, and pointed out, in another place, this strategy of trapping the husband:

Therefore, there was consensus, even shared by participants who explicitly denied sexual initiation or motivation, in the idea of applying hidden strategies to pull the husband into the sexual relationship, just as there was a consensus in the template of avoiding direct suggestions.

Overall, even in this indirect and discrete context, the sexual behavior of women is strongly attached to the man's demand and initiation. Without his claim, the woman's attempt to approach the partner to stimulate him would seldom be successful.

In spite of the fact that, in all three dimensions of sexual behavior, women centralize men's sexual needs and interests, women nevertheless experience sexual power, even this power of femininity does not exist without the men's will.

Such an authentication of men's existence as the genuine active entities and women as passive in sexual interaction are compatible with the features of androcentricity theory.

Conclusion

Gender differences were apparent in the description of sexual behaviors. Gender differences are explored in the various aspects of human sexuality including spontaneous sexual desire, having sexual fantasies, variety of sexual activity, enjoyment of erotica and pornography, frequency of desire for sex, initiating sex or refusing it, desire for multiple partners and extramarital partners, and masturbation (Baumeister 2000). Women are defined as having a mild and weaker sex drive. This is considered as evidence for female erotic plasticity (Baumeister 2000). Symons (1980) highlighted gender differences in sexual motivation. According to him, women are less likely become excited by seeing a naked body of the opposite sex. Gender differences are profoundly explained in the realm of eroticism (Kelley and Musialowski 1986).

In a study with 92 heterosexual couples, gender differences were evident in perceived interpersonal sexual behavior as well as in sexual preferences (Simms and Byers 2009). In Brain's (2009) study, men were also defined as sexual and women as the gatekeeper.

The sense of being different from men to some extent originates from our participants' perceived gender role scripts. These roles are relatively dictated by sexual scripts as well as by the ways that sexual socialization is processed (Byers 1995). Martin and Luke (2010) claimed that one's socialization takes place in a certain way through society and culture. Evidently, our participants' gender and sexual role had been scripted through androcentricity.

Our participants authenticate men's sexual capacity. Their main sexual motivation in engaging a sexual relationship was to satisfy men. In terms of sexual performance, women always expect the husband to initiate sexual behavior. Similarly, in a study of sex and sexuality in the Muslim society of Zanzibar, it was concluded that keeping husbands sexually satisfied reinforces a successful relationship and is the main responsibility of a powerful woman (Beckmann 2010).

Our findings are not consistent with Mernissi (1987) who believes that, unlike in western societies where women's sexuality is considered passive, in Muslim societies sexual desire of women is claimed to be high and dangerous. This exaggerated description of women's sexual desire subjects women to oppression. Despite Mernissi's claim, our data indicate that women are scripted to sexual submission due to being socialized in an androcentric culture; while others interpret it as women's subordination learned in a typical patriarchal society.

Our results indicate that women in Rafsanjan share a culture of androcentricity. In this androcentric context, being a nurturer and procreative is deemed a great honor for females. Women are taught to behave like a nurturer from an early age. Being a 'nurturer' is both a source of pride and a source of devoted submission. This claim reveals the extent to which the women had been constructed as the providers of male sexual gratification throughout their marital relationships. This is helpful in understanding women's sexual roles in their everyday lives by helping and nurturing men as the center of attention. As claimed by Minton (2000), 'women bore the responsibility for ensuring that, through their reproductive capacity, the future of civilization would progress and flourish' (p. 614). Other researchers have discussed androcentricity as showing the greater complexity of the understanding of sexuality. They saw patriarchy as the main determinant in the socialization of Iranian females from early childhood (Hanassab and Tidwell 1996; Hanassab 1998). From the women in our study, we learned that discourse on feminine sexuality, a private domain of life, was not only governed by obviously external social forces but by internalizing the culture of 'androcentricity'. The women themselves also played an important role in regulating their own sexuality and centralizing the husband. Women are praised in Rafsanjani culture for their devoted submissiveness.

In sum, our findings suggest that androcentricity is the core construction of Iranian women's sexual understandings. This construction concerning women's sexuality needs to be analyzed from a scholarly perspective, and professionals working in the fields of reproductive health and sexuality need to be sensitive to the notion that some Muslim women may have internalized and accepted the centrality of men's sexual needs/interests, and that this is an indicator of modesty and of being an ideal wife.

A natural extension of our study would be to investigate to what extent men share the culture of androcentricity and how it is transmitted from generation to generation.

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