

# Young Women's Experience of Sexuality: A Battle of Pleasure and Sexual Purity in the Context of Malaysian Society

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**Abstract** Little is known regarding the ways in which Malaysian women's sexuality is constructed, and how their personal experiences, culture, religion and society influence their feeling, attitude and sexual behaviours. This study explored the sexual experiences of young adult women in the developing context of the country. A qualitative phenomenological approach was adopted. Purposive sampling was employed, and a total of 20 participants were recruited, comprised of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia. Four main themes emerged through the phenomenological analysis of the data, including: conditional pleasure; social honour and women's purity; risk and responsibility; and transcendence of love and emotion. The findings

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of this study revealed that sexuality was experienced under the control of religion and society with the concern of conserving a woman's purity and social honour; and imposing risks and responsibility on women. Despite the awareness of women's right to experience sexual pleasure, it was commonly perceived that sexual activities beyond the social norms will result in social shaming and guilt. The authors recommend appropriate sexuality education regarding sexual assertiveness and communication, safe-sex practices, and improving sexual decision-making skills.

**Keywords** Women · Sexuality · Social shaming · Sexual health

## Introduction

Sexuality is an essential part of human life and plays an important role in people's general health status. Although sexuality is universal, sexual interactions and expression of sexuality should be considered within the cultural context (Burri and Graziottin 2015). "Sexuality is a complex and individual phenomenon influenced by social norms, culture, religion and personal experience", as defined to be socially constructed (Villanueva 1997). These factors affect the way individuals experience and perceive their sexuality. Women's sexuality is hence more complex than of men, due to the consequences that sexual acts may impose on women's social life (Lewin 2006). Although the sexual health issues have been widely discussed in the health literature, little is known regarding the ways in which Malaysian women's sexuality is constructed, and how their personal experiences, culture, religion and society influence their feeling, attitude and sexual behaviours. Since sexual experience is affected by society and culture, the socio-cultural changes influence people's experiences in different personal, interpersonal, and social contexts (Attwood 2006).

In recent years, Malaysia has seen a transformative change with a dramatic rise of young adults pursuing higher education (Morshidi and Chang 2016), delay in marriage (Tey 2007) and increased female involvement in the society and workforce (Noor Rahimah 2012). The multiple life transitions of young adulthood will precipitate into the development of one's identity. Young adults may now have many experiences before their identity consolidates (Settersten 2005), which include exploring their gender and sexuality through romantic relationships, with a significant involvement of sexuality (Suleiman and Harden 2016).

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic, multicultural and multi-religious country with Islam (the Sunni branch) being the most practiced religion (Department of Statistics-Malaysia 2015). However, the constitution of Malaysia guarantees the freedom of religious practice where Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and Buddhism have co-existed for centuries (Syed et al. 2011). Malaysia consists of three major ethnic groups: Malays who are the largest community and practice Islam, Chinese who practice Buddhism, Indians who practice Hinduism, with a small portion of Chinese and Indians practicing Christianity (Department of Statistics-Malaysia 2015).

According to Yusof et al. (2010), religion provides a framework that acts as a strong influencing factor that forms people's attitude towards sexuality. The Islamic and Asian culture have greatly affected the formation of sexuality in Malaysia (Stivens 2006). Religious belief, racial prejudice and political regulations prohibit open discourses on sexuality and sexual activity outside marriage will result in social shaming for being a deviant behaviour (Low 2009) or resulting in dishonour when engaged in sexual conduct that is beyond cultural expectation (Woo et al. 2012).

In this culture, women are valued for their ability to reproduce and the 'ideal woman' is respected as a symbol of purity (Blackburn 2001). Although there is increased attention on women's gender issues in the public sphere, such as women's leadership roles, gender equality in education and work opportunities (Ismail 2008; Nuraihan 1999), research on women's gender and sexuality issues in the private sphere is scarce in the Malaysian context, where sexuality is taboo in general (Siti Syairah and Ruzianisra 2012). Past studies have noted the traditional view of gender and sexuality among women that maps to poor sexual health (Allen and Smith 2011), and decreased sexual assertiveness and condom use (Curtin et al. 2011). Likewise, the power distribution in relationships among the Malaysian community, endorsed by the traditional heterosexual gender norms, has placed men in such a position that they have the upper hand in the relationship (Doull et al. 2013).

In Malaysia, being a developing country, the influx of more liberal Western culture and values is creating a struggle incorporating the more recent understanding of women's rights, especially on male-female interaction (Hirschman and Teerawichitchainan 2003), sexuality, and gender roles (Ahmadian et al. 2014). The impact of such was noted to have a tremendous effect on transforming the culture of sexuality in Malaysia, which resulted in discourse on sexuality that differs from the existing traditional norms (Khalaf et al. 2014). The cultural changes are such as an earlier onset of sexual practices (Lee et al. 2006; Cheah et al. 2016) and an increasing rate of premarital practice (Ahmadian et al. 2014; Folasayo et al. 2017). Concurrently, there is an increase of abandoned babies and teenage pregnancies (Lum 2010; Sukor et al. 2016) which precipitated into a social problem despite the availability of contraceptive measures over-the-counter. Rooted in cultural constraints, community unawareness, parental and religious objections towards a national sexual health program have formed the major barriers to the implementation of a national sexual health program in Malaysia (Khalaf et al. 2014).

As seen from the above, social and cultural aspects play roles in cultivating beliefs and attitudes in the perception of sexuality, gender role expectations, sexual behaviours, and the reinforcement of sexual norms (Merghati-Khoei et al. 2014; Rahman and Jackson 2010). As such, social construction theory is employed for its ability to include the interpersonal aspects of gender, behaviour and the wider social setting (Rosenberg 2008) and its ability in examining how we function in our social and cultural environment, collectively constructing meanings through experiences (Friedman 2011).

Considering the current social context of Malaysia, this study aimed at exploring how young female university students have experienced their sexual life, providing

insights into the perceptions and lived experiences of sexuality in the context of this developing country.

## Methods

To explore the experience of sexuality among young adult university women, a phenomenological approach was employed to gather the descriptive perceptions of reality and the essence of the respondents' subjective experiences while setting aside the researcher's presumptions toward the explored phenomenon (Groenewald 2004). Phenomenology is concerned with "conscious experiences," such as perceptions and actions to describe the reality from the views of the research participants, and to understand the deep meanings underlying these subjective experiences (Kafle 2011). Phenomenology is not only a descriptive method; it is also regarded as an interpretive process in which the researcher mediates between the meanings and makes interpretation of lived experience of individuals (Groenewald 2004).

A purposive sampling was employed through distributing research information sheets within a few public and private universities in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The inclusion criteria include being an unmarried heterosexual woman, aged between 21 and 29 years old (young adulthood), who have been or currently are in an intimate relationship regardless of the experience of sexual intercourse, from any religious affiliation and being a university student who is fluent in English language. A total of 20 participants were recruited in this study (Table 1), comprising of the major ethnic groups in Malaysia and undergraduate and postgraduate university students. The data collection halted upon reaching theoretical saturation where new participant does not provide further information to the data (Creswell 2007).

**Table 1** Demographic data of participants

Age	Minimum: 21 years	Maximum: 29 years	Mean: 25 years			
Race	Chinese (N = 5)	Malay (N = 6)	Indian (N = 7)	Others (N = 2)		
Religion	Christianity (N = 4)	Islam (N = 6)	Agnostic (N = 1)	Sikh (N = 1)	Buddhism (N = 4)	Hinduism (N = 4)
Relationship status	In a relationship (N = 8)	Previous relationship (N = 12)				
Living origin	Urban (N = 17)	Rural (N = 3)				
Highest education	Undergrad. (N = 13)	Postgrad. (N = 7)				

## Data Collection

Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethics committee of the University of Malaya Medical Centre, Kuala Lumpur. Pilot interview was done to check on the accuracy and sufficiency of the interview protocol (Kvale and Svend 2009). Prior to the formal interview, participants were briefed about the nature, objectives and procedures of the research which included the use of audio recording in the interview. The participants then signed a written consent form upon understanding the terms. In-depth semi-structured individual face-to-face interviews were conducted through asking open-ended questions. The interview sessions started with social conversation to create an inviting atmosphere (Denzin and Lincoln 2011) to facilitate more genuine disclosure of participants, then move into more specific personal questions with reference to the interview protocol to facilitate fuller description of experience in a space consisting only the researcher and the participant. However, the interview guide does not determine the conversation; instead, the conversation was led by the participants with minimal verbal input from the researcher. Bracketing was noted prior to the research to make aware of researcher's bias and assumptions; whereas field note and immediate understandings of interview was jotted down along the interviews (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). The interview sessions generally lasted between 50 to 70 min where sessions were conducted in English. Due to the highly sensitive and personal nature of this study, anonymity was strictly adhered throughout the data collection and analysis process, and pseudonyms were given respectively.

## Data Management and Analysis

The recorded interview sessions were transcribed verbatim, and the transcripts were sent to respective participants who agreed to review for accuracy. A summary of each interview was prepared for participants to reflect on the interview and to add comments if necessary. Although the participants expressed interest in attending the member checking on the generated themes during the debriefing session, only six participants attended.

Data reduction was performed during data analysis to transform the data into meaningful and clustered units, bringing insight to the statements and experiences of participants in the process of interpretation. The data analysis included reading and over-reading the transcripts to better understand the expressed meanings of the participants, highlighting significant quotes, listing every relevant statement of experience, and providing an insightful description of the respondents' experience through horizontalization (Creswell 2007). Experiences that were infrequently cited were eliminated in the process of data reduction to organize a more structural analysis (Wertz 2005).

Field notes were used to recall the researcher's reflexive comments and feeling during the data collection process, aid to avoid injecting personal views in the interview process which jot down the ideas and thoughts about the experiences and immediate understandings of the interview which helped inform on the coding, development of themes and data clustering.

To ensure credibility, reliability, transferability and dependability, a combination of Creswell and Miller's procedures and Maxwell's 'checklist of validity' was employed along with the recommended procedures for effective phenomenological research by Creswell (2007), which refers to having an effective interview protocol, strategies to avoid leading participants, carefully recorded interviews and member checking (Creswell and Miller 2000).

## Results

The findings of this study have been organized into four main themes: (1) a conditional pleasure; (2) social honour and women's purity; (3) risk and responsibility; and (4) transcendence of love and emotion. The themes will be displayed in greater detail, supported by representative quotes from the participants.

### A Conditional Pleasure

The respondents associated the concept of sexuality with a sense of sexual pleasure, referring to it as an innate desire, which is permitted under the condition of marriage, commitment and responsibility.

Most of the participants stated that sexuality is a part of human instinct that evolves naturally, and it is normally expected to be fulfilled in a heterosexual relationship. They considered having sexual experience as an important part of an intimate relationship, which is permitted within the marital context. Catherine, 21-year-old Indian Christian, viewed sexual pleasure as a gift of God that bonds men and women in maintaining a long-term relationship. However, she restricted herself to only experience the sexual pleasure after marriage:

People tend to stick to the negative aspect [of sexuality], which is just like having one-night-stands. But for me, sexual pleasure is something that God created to tie the two sexes together. For me, that kind of pleasure only comes after marriage. However, some people experience it before marriage... But I believe that it is forbidden by God.

She illustrated her redlines in the experience of sexuality by attributing them to the religious prohibition of non-marital sexual relationships that implies conforming to the existing rules of sexual activity. Although she acknowledged the biological enjoyment of sex, it is a forbidden path that one should not partake before marriage. Such a statement not only suggests control over enjoying sexual pleasure but also underlines the need for her to be permitted, which resonates with the societal expectation for women to be reserved about sex. This was also shown by her justification on sexual pleasure as a creation of God; although she understands that she has sexual needs, she concurrently alienates and moralizes the need as an impulsion that was beyond her control.

Accepting sexual activity within the constitution of marriage was common among the participants who attributed themselves to the faiths of Islam and Christianity, as reinforced by Aidah in the following statement:

I strongly disagree with that [sexual relationship], because firstly in my religion [Islam], it is prohibited to do sex before marriage, and socially, maybe in the society, it is also prohibited. I think that when we get married, we hold the responsibility... we have to take care of everything, and save it for marriage. Aidah, 22-year-old Malay Muslim

According to Aidah, sexual activity is controlled by religion and society; and women are responsible to protect their virginity for marriage.

Nina, another respondent, expressed a general belief that sexual pleasure should be equally considered for women in relationships, highlighting the awareness of women's sexual rights, yet pre-marital sex was generally viewed negatively when it does not develop into a committed relationship.

Women have the same sexual rights and desires as men. A woman must be satisfied sexually in a relationship, but there should also be a sense of responsibility. My boyfriend is not responsible at all... He is not committed, and I regret my relationship with him. Nina, 25-year-old Chinese Buddhist

Women are aware of sexual pleasure that they might experience, however, most of them believed that this experience is being estimated for its costs. For instance, there may be a high cost on initiating a sexual relationship when a long term and committed relationship is not guaranteed.

I do not think that having sexual relationship [intercourse] before marriage is good for girls. They usually look for long-term relationships and marriage so if they break up, it would be an irreparable loss. They will destroy their future by doing that and it would be very harmful to their mental health. Kartini, 26-year-old, Indian Hindu

This reflects the participants' belief that sexual activity should only exist in relationships that lead to marriage. When they realize that their current relationship will not lead to marriage, they would experience a feeling of being exploited, and being used for sexual pleasure.

### **Social Honour and Women's Purity**

The majority of the participants declared that sexual activities should be exclusive to a marital relationship, that to do otherwise would result in social dishonour and the stigma of sexual promiscuity, which is closely tied to women's reputation and family honour. The importance of virginity is so strong that it functions as a mechanism that influences the decision for women's initial sexual encounter.

Virginity is very important to a woman because it's a symbol of her pride, its proof that no one else has touched her before marriage. Catherine, 21-year-old, Indian Christian

In the collectivistic Malaysian context Catherine highlighted an important component, that despite one's sexual encounter being a very personal matter, her virginity will be informed not only to her husband, but also informed to the family

members. As virginity is a symbol of pride, they believe that their value as a woman depreciates upon losing their virginity. Such a viewpoint also highlights the belief that a virgin deserves more respect; whereas a non-virgin, to some extent, deserves to be not as highly regarded by their partner, for their value was depreciated. Such a belief could jeopardize women and raise the chances for them losing power, creating an imbalanced distribution of power in their romantic relationship. The participants referred sexual purity as an absolute that defines a woman's social honour and social stand. Such a view was endorsed by the majority of the participants, for instance, Sara further iterated:

If people get to know that you are no longer a virgin, your reputation will tarnished, and it would result in your family being dishonoured as well. Sara 22-year-old, Malay Muslim

This again highlights the high cost of a woman initiating sexual intimacy with another individual, as the loss of one's virginity does not only harm the woman's reputation, but the social shaming extends to the family members.

Virginity also corresponded to the idea that girls are "the precious beings" A number of the respondents emphasized this idea to imply the importance of virginity in determining honour and dignity of girls. According to the women interviewed, these precious beings need to be kept safe and sound. It means a woman is attractive and any man who wants to approach her has to pay the price, which means marriage. Suzi, 20-year-old Indian Hindu, related it to "high price of woman for marriage":

Being a virgin is like placing a high price on girls; it means that you are able to attract every man and choose anyone that you want. So you shouldn't lessen your price, you should give it to someone who deserves it, like your husband, because he will be responsible for you and take care of you for the rest of your life.

The importance of virginity was also linked to men's perception of virginity as a value of a girl at the time of marriage. These young adult women believed despite socio-cultural changes that provided freedom and liberation for women; that young men remained in their traditional beliefs and still prefer to marry a virgin. Elisa, a 21 year-old Malay Muslim, explained the importance of virginity at the time of marriage and believed that it would be important for the man to choose a virgin who hold a good reputation and honour.

When looking at these boys in the university, you may find them very educated and modern. They may respect women's freedom and accept their role in society but when it comes to marriage, they prefer a woman who is obedient and obviously a virgin; which is an important factor for marriage.

The young adult women also perceived a double standard as an indicator of sexual discrimination, and believed that only women's sexuality is observed by the society. They noted that men's sexual activity would not influence their social reputation, unlike women's. Ana, 26-year-old Chinese Christian, claimed that there is no trace on men for premarital sexual activity:



Women have been created to suffer, and to be blamed for everything. They have much more responsibilities than men do. They are expected to carry the family name and be faithful, but what about the men? How can we have proof that they abstained from sex

### **Risk and Responsibility**

Sexuality also corresponded to taking risk and responsibility. The participants insisted on the significance of responsibility in sexual relationships. They discussed the importance of personal responsibility and making wise decisions in initiating sexual relationships. Allis, 27-year-old Chinese Buddhist, who had been in a long-term sexual relationships, emphasized the young woman's personal responsibility and the extent to which she can identify the reasons and promote mental maturity in order to make decisions on premarital sexual activities. She argued that young women could be able to take responsibility and handle the consequences of sexual relationships:

Sexuality is all about responsibility; it does not matter whether you are married or not. To me, it is about whether you are responsible enough and have the right reasons for doing it. Everyone should be mature enough and responsible to handle any consequences such as pregnancy and STDs. Allis, 27-year-old, Chinese Buddhist

Allis called for women to only engage in sexual relationships if there is a reasonable state of trust of the potential partner and to be mindful of owning responsibility from such an encounter, referring to the potential risk to become pregnant or infected with sexually transmitted diseases.

Contradictorily, having known that contraceptive measures are widely available over-the-counter, the belief that women should be aware of the potential risk in sexual relationships, a prevalent concept across a majority of the participants also reflected on a more deeply embedded issue. In the description, it suggests that women have little control in their sexual encounters, in which contraceptive measures may not be used in actual sexual encounters.

What if you become pregnant or infected by sexually transmitted diseases? I think it takes a certain level of maturity and responsibility to be able to handle situations like this. Raha 24-year-old Malay Muslim

Having sex after marriage is legal, and so the man has to be responsible for everything and he cannot put any blame on his wife if she is a virgin. If he's violent towards you, you can ask for help. Or if you get pregnant. Suzi, 20-year-old Indian Hindu

Similarly, Raha and Suzi's comments resonate with those of Allis; concurrently pointing out that women do not see themselves as an interacting subject to consider preventive measures in their relationships. This indicates that they don't feel a sense of control over their intimate relationships and instead they focus on the disasters that may come after the sexual encounter. This highlights the inner struggle of

women for sexual pleasure while trying to keep sexual purity, to avoid the social stigma and risks.

### **Transcendence of Love and Emotion**

The majority of the respondents perceive sexuality as a transcendence of love and emotions that enhance sexual intimacy between men and women, emphasizing emotional intimacy as the prerequisite to having sexual activity.

Sex without love is meaningless, like animals; there is no humanity, no value.  
Shany, 23-year-old Chinese Buddhist

Shany emphasized the importance of love in sex, comparing casual sex to passionate sex, referring the former as mere animal compulsion as compared to the latter; an activity with purpose that is transformed through meanings and emotions of men and women, accentuating the importance of emotional intimacy prior to sexual advancement.

Some of the participants who engaged in sexual activity granted it as proof of love and commitment in the relationship:

To my boyfriend, he treats it [sexual intercourse] like a temptation, and I think if I don't give into him more he'll be tuned off, and won't love me as much.  
Shany, 23-year-old Chinese Buddhist

As seen above, Shany positioned herself to be in a passive stance when she complied with her boyfriend's request to show commitment in the relationship by granting sexual gratification. The idea of granting sexual gratification to another person may remove women from the equation of enjoying sexual pleasure.

This calls for attention to the vulnerability in their perception, opening to the possibility for emotional blackmailing where they thought having sex with another person is important to prove love. It also poses the danger of abandoning condom use to show commitment in the relationship, which may give rise to unexpected pregnancy and sexually-transmitted diseases.

The perception of granting sexual access to display commitment in the relationship is prevalent across a majority of the participants. With consideration to the importance of maintaining sexual purity and social honour, the participants rationalized and engaged in other forms of sexual intimacy which were not perceived as sexual activities by them. This was characterized by non-vaginal sex such as foreplay, oral and anal sex, with the belief that vaginal sexual intercourse is permissible only in the institution of marriage, as shared by Geeta, a 23-year-old Indian Hindu

For now we should control ourselves, satisfy ourselves in other ways...keep the intercourse for after marriage.

The majority of the participants shared similar views to Geeta, where they hold the belief that they maintained sexual purity through abstaining from vaginal sex, whereas non-vaginal sexual activity is acceptable after basic trust is established in the relationship. For instance, Sonia defined virginity as the condition where "a girl

has not experienced sexual intercourse". She elaborated that the experience of other kinds of sexual practices such as touching private parts, and oral sex are acceptable:

I only mean sexual intercourse; other kinds of touching are okay. As long as you have your virginity, people cannot blame you for having relationships. Because a woman's virginity is something that cannot be reversed once it is lost, it is a step into womanhood, and you are no longer considered as a girl.  
Sonia, 22-year-old Malay Muslim

## Discussion

The findings of the current study gave interesting insights to the experience of sexuality among Malaysian female university students. Sexuality was experienced under the control of religious and social rules with the concern of preserving a woman's purity and social honour, imposing risk and responsibility; thus sexuality is treasured and only initiated with meaning.

Due to the sexually-suppressive Malaysian culture, social shaming is introduced to women that are vocal about sex or to those who seem to be pro-sex. This depicts a strong collectivist culture where socially deviant behaviour or opinion is strongly punished (Darwish and Huber 2003). Through experiences from socialization, women learned the importance to regulate their sexual desire according to the social norms, but this does not remove the fact of their biological experience of sexual needs and the ability to experience sexual pleasure. They are required to maintain the status quo of the socially-constructed woman who maintains sexual purity, yet the biological experience of sexual desire and sexual behaviour remains. The discrepancy from the socially-constructed 'good' woman had caused them to be prudent about violating socially reinforced rules against sexual practices, depicting an inner struggle for women to experience sexual pleasure while securing sexual purity. A study on a sample of Chinese women found that a guilty pleasure occurs with sexual activity if it does not conform to the social norms. The social norms of sexual activities were found to play a pivotal role, which had superseded the participants' conscious stance of their right to sexual relationships and forged the feeling of guilt when participants experience socially-forbidden sexual activities (Woo et al. 2012).

According to our findings, women believe that sexual pleasure is conditional to religious and social rules. So to avoid social shame and stigma, they should conform to the existing social norms. The collectivistic Malaysian culture may have aggravated this belief, because it values conformity, where holding socially deviant thoughts or behaviour may be punished (Darwish and Huber 2003).

In addition, the study showed that young women engage in sexual activity to prove their love and commitment in the relationship. A study by Reddy and Dunne (2007) found that the desire to love and be loved had induced young female participants to adopt casual sex as a strategy to secure a possibility of love and a long-term romantic relationship. They believed that to advocate for condom use contradicts the innocent image of a "good woman" and undermines their love and

trust. It may impair the quality of romantic relationships, which could lead to loss of the partner, thus relating safe sex to the loss of love. Other studies indicated that women place more importance on emotional intimacy (Fletcher and Kerr 2010; Hodgson and Fischer 1999; Miller and Perlman 2008). Giles (1994) investigated how sexuality is mixed into romantic or passionate love, and found that intimacy, trust and self-disclosure form the basis of vulnerability; as sexual contact with another person is a form of vulnerability, that “we share our souls as we share our bodies”. We gauge the feeling of intimacy, trust and acceptance as we engage in sexual contact. Women may risk-take in sexual behaviours in order to stay in a relationship. Such a vulnerability to stay in a relationship exposes them to social pressure and violence, which calls for the importance of awareness on sexual health issues (Corbett et al. 2009; Kaestle and Halpern 2007; Lemieux and Hale 1999).

The importance of commitment and trust was also accentuated as a requirement that preludes to their initiation of sexual activity, in which most of the participants believed that the legitimacy of sexual acts was given as the manifestation of love in the committed relationship. They felt the institution of marriage is the best representation of commitment and trust for sexual intercourse. However, to gauge the gap between their sexual desire and need to maintain sexual purity, other levels of sexual intimacy such as foreplay, oral and anal sex were believed to be acceptable to preserve virginity after a basic level of trust is established.

Cultural norms of sexual activity for men and women have been broadly considered in past research, where different researchers explored the traditional norms of virginity of unmarried girls in different sociocultural settings (Breakwell and Millward 2002; Brewster and Tillman 2008; Lammers et al. 2000). Malaysia was found to be amongst the societies that continue to endorse a patriarchal culture (Hirschman 2016). Past research has shown that sexuality in the patriarchal context is constructed based on sexual purity, honour and loyalty, in which a sexual relationship is only accepted within the institution of marriage (Amin 2002; Edwards 2000). Such societies “exercise a double standard that puts women in a disadvantaged position”, wherein non-marital sexual activity of women is perceived “to pollute the family’s name” (Afary 2009). In addition, the traditional norms of virginity of unmarried girls in these societies have restricted access to sexual health knowledge and services because the act of asking for sexual information may imply potential engagement in sexual activity (Curtin et al. 2011; Daniluk and Browne 2008; Durán et al. 2010; Eşsizozğlu et al. 2011). As such, the demanding cultural scrutinizing of young women’s sexual activity may put them at higher risk of physical violence, sexually transmitted infections, unwanted pregnancies, as well as failure of sexual decision-making skills.

In patriarchal societies that emphasise the woman’s virginity, the society constructs a vast power distance between femininity and masculinity that places women in a subordinate and powerless position; creating forceful control over women’s sexuality and the loss of virginity is known to diminish a woman’s sexual value (Afary 2009). In these societies, “women’s sexual life is scrutinized and tied with their honour and shame as women” (Afary 2009). Double standards for virginity and premarital sexuality make female virginity significantly more important than virginity of males (Afary 2009; Eşsizozğlu et al. 2011). The culture

of honour that is constructed based on political, social and economic ideology plays an important role in constructing normative definitions to the gender roles of men and women (Awwad 2011; Dunphy 2000; Kehily and Nayak 2008; Merghati and Samani 2008), “exerting dominancy over the socially inferior gender” (Afary 2009). Such views resonated with the participants’ perspectives that regarded sexuality as a factor that determines their social honour, in which they believed that sexual activities prior to a marital relationship would result in social dishonour and the stigma of sexual promiscuity. They associated sexuality with women’s reputation, and it is important to protect a girl’s sexual reputation and her family’s honour.

## Conclusions

The current study highlighted that despite the awareness of women’s rights to experience sexual pleasure, it was commonly perceived that sexual activities beyond the social norms will result in social shaming and stigma. Women are encouraged to regulate their sexual desires for the sake of purity and social dignity. In such a context, women’s sexuality is restricted to marriage and unmarried women are silenced in terms of sexual health issues.

Having known that these young adult women have not received appropriate sexual health education during their formative years in school, we suggest a sexual health awareness program at the university level. This program can consider abstinence as an option; however appropriate knowledge should be provided regarding sexual assertiveness and communication, safe-sex practices, awareness of sexual rights, and improving sexual decision making skills.

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## Compliance with Ethical Standards

**Conflict of interest** All authors declare that they have not conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval** All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional 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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