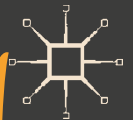Nafiseh Sharifi

Female Bodies and Sexuality in Iran *and the Search For Defiance*

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For my mother, Zhinous.

Preface

The topic of this book was first born out of my curiosity and personal interest in the differences between my mother and my own perceptions of our female bodies and sexuality. I wanted to see whether we, as two generations who grew up in different socio-political contexts, have different opinions about our bodies. If there are differences or similarities, how were they constructed? Do sex and sexual relation have different meanings in our lives? Through months of extensive fieldwork in Tehran, I started collecting personal narratives of Tehrani women who belonged to the 1950s and 1980s generations. The result was my PhD thesis and eventually this book.

Through an intergenerational approach, I discuss the contradictory definitions of womanhood in the Iranian context and how women's embodiment is constructed in the intersection of different discourses on women's sexuality.

This book also aims to fill the gap in the literature on Iranian women by addressing both the complexity of women's positionality in Iranian society and women's relations with different authoritative discourses that shape their sexual and bodily experiences. In contrast to the extant literature, in which women's agency is simply represented through their acts of resistance against the authoritative institutions, such as the Islamic Republic, here through a comparative analysis of the experiences of two generations of Iranian women, I discuss the necessity of moving beyond binaries—such as the defiance/compliance framework—in analysing women's bodily behaviours and strategies.

I would not have been able to finish this book without the aid and support of countless people. I must express my gratitude to my advisors and colleagues at the Centre for Gender Studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London. First of all, I would like to thank my advisor and mentor Ruba Salih. Her support, attention to detail, hard work and meticulous scholarship have set an example I hope to match someday. I am also grateful to Nadje Al-Ali and Laleh Khalili for their insightful remarks and valuable guidance throughout this project; Colette Harris and Kathryn Spellman-Poots for their constructive comments on my thesis which made it easier to turn it into a book. I should also thank Shaina Greiff for her excellent work in editing and proofreading the final manuscript and the editorial team at Palgrave Macmillan, especially Anca Pusca for her time and support since receiving the book proposal.

I am forever grateful to the women of this book—my interviewees—who trusted me, let me into their homes, told me their stories and shared their most private and personal experiences. I would not have been able to finish my research without their help and contributions.

Most of all, I want to thank my parents and my brothers for their love and encouragement, for supporting me and giving me the confidence in all my pursuits. Without them, I would never have gotten to where I am today. Special thanks to Amin, for his patience and care throughout all the hard, stressful days of finishing my PhD, and later this book.

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Introduction

BACKGROUND OF THE CONTEXT: THE TWO GENERATIONS

My mother was in her twenties when the Islamic Revolution happened in 1979. She is from an upper middle class, non-religious Tehrani family. My grandfather is a physician and my grandmother has always been proud that she attended high school, as many from her generation did not have this opportunity. With her family's support, my mother attended Sharif University of Technology (at the time, Aryamehr Industrial University), which remains one of the most prestigious universities in Iran.

My mother's generation, the 1950s, experienced the Shah's modernisation and gender reforms. In January 1963, Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi initiated a national reform called the White Revolution—later dubbed 'the Revolution of Shah and the People'—to orchestrate the modernisation of Iranian society (Keddie and Richard 2006, p. 145). The reforms consisted of a national literacy army which targeted women, and included women's suffrage (Afary 2009, p. 203). Iran's first family planning programme started in 1966 as part of this reform. The Shah's reforms also increased the legal age of marriage to 18 years for women and granted women more rights to divorce. In comparison to previous generations, 1950s women had a higher level of education and presence in the Iranian public sphere. As statistics show, from 1971 to 1978 women's college enrolment increased to 79 per cent (Shahidian 1991, p. 9; Tohidi 1994, p. 118).

My mother grew up in peak of secularisation and modernisation of Iran under reign of Mohammad Reza Shah, but turned to be a devoted Muslim and supporter of the Islamic Revolution. During the 1960s and 1970s, as part of the modernisation of Iranian society, women were asked to perform according to modern codes of conduct, which were represented in the images of socially active, fashionable, educated and modern women (Moallem 2005; Afary 2009). However, the clash between the highly sexualised representations of modern women in the media and the social norms of femininity and female sexuality—based on the notions of female charm and chastity—led to sexual anxiety in the Iranian public sphere (Najmabadi 2005; Moallem 2005).

As a prelude to the Revolution, *hejab* became the symbol of resistance against the Pahlavi regime. Veil signified the unity between women from different social and economic backgrounds in their protest against the Western hegemony (Afary 2009, p. 270). Like many of her friends, a few months before the Revolution, my mother started wearing *hejab* and practising Islam. In Chap. 6, I detail the construction of new forms of gender relations during the Revolution, as well as how these changed women political activists' perceptions of marriage, marital and sexual relations.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, during the Iran–Iraq war, women of the 1950s generation witnessed the state's establishment of new family courts based on *shari'a* and the solidification of new gender and sexual policies. These policies included: limiting women's rights in marriage and divorce and lowering the age of marriage for women (Mir-Hosseini 2000, 2004; Halper 2011); cancellation of the Shah's family planning programme and encouragement of large families (Paydarfar and Moini 1995; Hoodfar 1996; Hoodfar and Assadpour 2000; Moinifar 2007); and mandating the wearing of *hejab* in public places[1] (Paidar 1997; Sedghi 2007; Afary 2009). It is important to see how changes before and after the Islamic Revolution affected 1950s women's experiences of their bodies and sexuality, as well as how their experiences influenced the post-revolutionary generation's perception of female sexuality.

Opposed to my mother, I grew up under the Islamic Republic; I was schooled by the religious education system and learnt the accepted Islamic codes of and regulations for women's behaviour. In addition, my parents also asked me to act according to their religious value system at home. Throughout the years, I have internalised many religious rules and regulations, and performed according to them, but there are still huge differences between my mother's and my ideals of modesty and opinions about our bodies.

I belong to the 'post-revolutionary' 1980s generation who were educated to perform the state's gendered roles in both the public and private spheres. The Islamic Republic's policy has aimed to create a 'socialised, politicised and Islamised' female citizen, who performs her traditional familial role as well as participates in 'the modern demands of the country' (Mehran 2003, p. 270). However, this policy created a paradoxical position for women: on the one hand, women's main role is limited to the family and private sphere; on the other hand, women are encouraged to participate in the educational, social, cultural and political spheres (ibid., p. 271). The state's paradoxical approach has provided women with opportunities for their own advancement (ibid., pp. 285–286). For instance, women have increasingly entered higher education and the job market. By 2007, 'the majority of college students were women' (Afary 2009, p. 360). In addition, despite the lowering of the legal age of marriage, statistics show that the average age of marriage for women of the post-revolutionary generations had 'gone up to 24, while the fertility rate dropped to 2 percent' (ibid., p. 360). Especially amongst the conservative classes of Iranian society, women's increased participation has provided 'the personal and financial autonomy that the liberal Pahlavi regime had failed to offer to them' (Yaghoobi 2012, p. 72). Consequently, women of the post-revolutionary generations—from different socio-economic and religious backgrounds—have become more involved in various aspects of public life.

During university, I started noticing differences between my mother's and my generation, especially when attending gatherings with her university friends in Tehran. My mother and her university friends are similar in many ways, even though from different familial and economic backgrounds. Their political views have changed since the Islamic Revolution, as they have become more critical of the state's policies. Some of my mother's friends lost brothers or husbands during the war with Iraq, and some of their son's and close relatives faced imprisonment after the 2009 presidential election.

Despite all this, my mother and her friends still identify with the Islamic Revolution. Through clothing and behaviour, they try to live a modest, on the verge of anti-luxury lifestyle according to the 'values of the Revolution'. They still wear loose, modest clothes and no makeup, even in female-only gatherings. Their conversations mostly revolve about politics; even their jokes are politically charged. I have never heard them speak or joke about sex or their sexual relations. At times, they will discuss problems with their

children or husbands, but never sexual issues. This is in contrast with my observation of conversations in gatherings of women belonging to my grandmother's generation, or my own.

This book was born out of my curiosity about whether we, as two generations, have different opinions about our female bodies and sexuality. If there are differences or similarities, how are they constructed? Does sex and sexual relation have different meanings in our lives? How have the social and political spheres influenced intergenerational changes in notions of desire, bodily experiences and femininity? What can a comparison of these two generations' narratives tell us about the wider socio-contextual changes with regard to sex and female sexuality?

This book, however, is not about the differences between mothers and daughters in the same family, rather about their generations. It is about analysing how the rules of female sexuality are constructed; how, in each time period and generation, the 'normalised' and 'naturalised' perceptions of female sexuality and the body are changed, reproduced, negotiated and challenged. I also look at the role of different discourses in constructing and constituting women's bodily experiences. I highlight the underlying discourses and relations of power that control and discipline women's bodies and sexuality in the Iranian context.

Moreover in contrast to the existing literature on women in Iran, I argue that searching for acts of defiance and categorising women's behaviour in opposition to the Islamic Republic fails to recognise the existence of multiple and complex relations of power that operate in different social and economic contexts in Iranian society. Particularly, the use of resistance/subordination framework neglects the multiple ways in which women inhabit and negotiate such norms within the discursive boundaries that control and discipline their bodies. I emphasise the necessity of moving beyond the resistance/subordination binary in analysing and understanding women's decisions in relation to their body and sexuality. This argument will be even further explored in the next chapter of this book.

Youth, Sexuality and the Islamic Republic

In post-revolutionary Iran, despite the government's regulations and control, huge shifts have occurred in the public appearance of the young urbanites, especially women. During the time of Khatami's presidency (1997–2005), reformists managed to reduce the 'strictness of the *hejab* for children and high school students by allowing more colourful uniforms and

scarves' (Afary 2009, p. 329). Although the moral police are still controlling both men's and women's public appearances and private lives, younger generations have started to wear colourful clothes and use forbidden forms of modern aesthetics of the feminine body to resist the compulsory rules of modesty.

There is a new body of scholarship on sexuality in Iran that by focusing on youth bodily behaviour, argue that for the post-revolutionary generations fashion became a form of defiance against the Islamic regulations, as young women are in constant struggle with the morality police by wearing makeup, colourful clothes and having sexual relations outside marriage (Adelkhah 2004; Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2008; Afary 2009; Honarbin-Holliday 2009; Hélie and Hoodfar 2012).

In describing how younger generations approach and deal with Islamic regulations and state control, such scholarship highlights acts that undermine the state's authority. Consequently, any form of sexual expression and practice—by youth, especially women—outside the legal/religious rules is seen as a form of resistance, a subversion of the dominant Islamic discourse. For scholars like Mahdavi (2008), these practices signify the Islamic Republic's failure to control and regulate sexuality in both the public and private lives of its citizens. Moreover, this failure is considered a sign of change and potential reform, harkening a more 'liberated' and secular society (Mahdavi 2007, p. 2008). In addition, due to the large youth population in Iran, this body of literature posits younger generations as the agents of change and reform (Khosravi 2003; Mahdavi 2012).

For instance, Moaveni (2005) describes how the generation born just before or at the time of the Revolution is 'transforming Iran from below'. In 2000–2001, during the presidency of Mohammad Khatami, Moaveni lived in Tehran; she noted that, due to the state's moderation in dress code policies and inter-sex relations in public, the topic of sexuality had re-entered the Iranian public sphere (Moaveni 2005, p. 71). As she described: 'Iranians were preoccupied with sex in the manner of dieters constantly thinking about food. The subject meant to be unmentioned had somehow become the most mentioned of all' (ibid.). However, as Moaveni's book is based on her memoirs, the examples are limited to her circle of secular, middle class friends and family living in Tehran; she generalises changes in gender relations to the whole of Iranian society based solely on this limited, self-selected sample.

Khosravi (2008) also looks for representations of defiance in the popular youth culture of Tehran. Khosravi argues that the Islamic Republic has

failed in its Islamisation project and politicised the most private aspects of youths' lives. According to Khosravi, although there is no social movement, there are plenty of individual acts of defiance amongst Tehrani youth that undermine the dominant Islamic culture and regulations (ibid., pp. 164–165). Although he shows, through examples, the difficulty in distinguishing between 'traditional/modern' lifestyles in Tehran, he still defines behaviours based on Western lifestyles—such as having premarital sexual relation—as modern acts of defiance against Islam and the Islamic Republic (ibid.). Khosravi links modernity with Western culture and, consequently, liberal sexual behaviour; acts performed according to Islamic regulations and traditional values are considered conservative and subordinate. However, looking at women and youths' behaviour only on the basis of modern or traditional lifestyles fails to take into account economic contexts, material and familial relations, which are also very influential in shaping decisions about sexual relations. Indeed, as I show in Chap. 4, a modern lifestyle does not necessarily include liberal sexual relations; women's clothing or their family's religious and traditional lifestyle does not always dictate their opinions on premarital sex or even bodily practices.

Mahdavi (2008), in her study of Tehrani youth, describes the various strategies the 'children of the Revolution'[2] employ to demonstrate dissatisfaction with their social, economic and political situation in current Iranian society. She uses the term 'sexual revolution' to denote the changes in Iranians' norms of and moral attitudes towards sex. Both those who wear loose *hejab* and do not follow the Islamic codes of conduct and those who have premarital sexual relations and liberal sexual lives are defined as the agents of change in Iran. Such change is also defined in accordance with the Western liberal conception of bodily autonomy and sexual freedom, and in contrast to the Islamic/traditional conception of acceptable sexual behaviour. Therefore, throughout her book, Mahdavi looks for manifestations of youth resisting the Islamic structure through un-Islamic practices and behaviours. Consequently, in her description of young women's appearance in the streets, malls and parties of Tehran, Mahdavi glorifies women's modern and fashionable clothing as a symbol of resistance (Mahdavi 2008, p. 109).

Other literature also gives a similar reading of Iranian women's clothing/behaviour; in this literature, women's public presence in loose *hejab*—such as wearing colourful clothes, a tight *mânto* and not fully covering their hair—and reactions to the morality police are posited as forms of resistance against the Islamic forces that wish for women to remain 'invisible' (Hoodfar and Ghoreishian 2012).

Based on in-depth interviews with young, urban Iranian women in 2005–2006, Sadeghi criticises the 'common misperception(s)' in analyses of Iranian youth behaviour that 'misveiling is a kind of political resistance against the Islamic regime' (Sadeghi 2008, p. 260). She argues that Iranian 'youth culture is heterogeneous' and, although 'misveiling has some implications of political resistance, one can hardly interpret these new kinds of behaviour as directly oppositional' (ibid.). Based on her data, Sadeghi explains that 'few of misveiled girls' see their dress as 'being in direct opposition to the Islamic government'; rather, they emphasise personal taste and choice, 'including competition with their peers, as their real motivation' (ibid., p. 296). Moreover, although women—both misveiled and those who wear conservative clothes, such as *chador*—might engage in premarital sexual relations, they do so in a context that is still 'privileging male desire over female sexual expression' (Sadeghi 2008, p. 260). This analysis is missing from many of the above-mentioned ethnographies on the post-revolutionary generations, especially works focusing on secular, middle class youth. Such ethnographies look at 'inappropriate' veiling or behaviour—such as premarital sexual relations—as manifestations of resistance, but do not query the meanings and intentions of these acts.

In addition, I argue that to solely focus on the 'misogynistic' aspects of the Islamic Republic's sexual policies risks neglecting the social, cultural and historical context in which norms of female and male sexuality are constructed, as well as the ways in which the state appropriates or reinforces these norms to create and control its docile bodies. For example, Najmabadi (2014) emphasises the complexity and heterogeneity of 'the state's' discourses to control normative heterosexualities in Iran. She describes how the state's regulation and control of sex change surgeries has created new social spaces for transgender people by 'enabling certain articulations of desire' (Najmabadi 2014, p. 22). Similarly, throughout the book I discuss the complex and contradictory situation that the state's sexual policies create in the sexual lives of different groups of Iranian women. For example, I argue that while the use of scientific and medical language in state-sponsored publications and religious programmes is intended to ensure men's unlimited access to sex at home and to control sexual relations outside marriage, the use of such language also changes the sexual lives of more religious and conservative classes by introducing new concepts such as 'mutual sexual satisfaction'.

While the mentioned ethnographies are rich in examples of younger Iranian women's changing lifestyles and attitudes towards sex, the body

and sexuality, they fail to recognise the existence of multiple and complex mechanisms of control that operate in different social and economic contexts in Iranian society. In this book, I emphasise that it is necessary to understand the changes in younger women's perception of their body and sexuality in relation to their familial economic and religious backgrounds.

In addition, as Sadeghi (2008) argues, analysing women's bodily appearance and behaviour based on stereotypical prescribed and normative categories—such as modern and traditional—ignores women's own reasoning and meanings for such acts, for example, having premarital sexual relations or wearing loose *hejab*, in the context of their lives. Moallem's poststructuralist discursive analysis is also helpful in moving beyond the traditional (religious)/modern binary and seeing the construction of normative gendered and sexualised subjectivities in a more complex light—that is, in intersection with discourses of modernity, nationalism and citizenship before and after the Islamic Revolution. Moallem (2005) emphasises the modern basis of Islamic fundamentalism: 'religious discourses including fundamentalism are both constitutive and constituted by modern notions of gender and sexuality' (p. 24).

Although my book is informed by and owes a great deal to the work of Moallem (2005) and Afary (2009), their scholarship remains on the discursive level. These scholars analyse regimes of sexuality and their implications on women's lives, but make no reference to how women themselves experienced these changes in the context of their lives. I argue that, looking at women's own experiences, their approaches and feelings towards different discourses of gender and sexuality highlight how laws and regulations are practised. For instance, in Chap. 6 I describe a contradiction between the dominant religious discourse and my interviewees' attitudes towards temporary marriage (*sigheh*). While the state has encouraged temporary marriages as a religiously sanctioned practice in order to control sexual relations in the society, women from religious backgrounds still find it socially inappropriate and unacceptable for both men and women.

Categorising women's behaviour based on the 'resistance/subordination' binary, which equates liberal bodily appearance with bodily autonomy and posits such in strict contrast to religious appearance, simplifies both the context of women's lives and women's strategies in coping and communicating with social norms and regulations. In this book I look at how different socio-cultural, religious and economic factors produce the ideal female body and sexuality in different generations; this shows how female sexuality is constructed, reproduced, challenged or contested

amongst different generations of women and it highlights the limits of liberal presumptions in understanding and analysing women's autonomy over their body and sexuality.

Moreover, as previously mentioned, resistance is usually defined as youth acting against the state's gender policies and dominant religious discourse; by performing change in the Iranian social and political spheres, such youth are perceived as autonomous and active agents. To see the limitations of this reading of resistance, we need to understand the nuance and provide a more complex analysis of power in controlling gender relations and constructing subjectivities in Iranian society.

In this book, I question the categories of agency and resistance in my analysis of Iranian women's bodily and sexual behaviour. I discuss my female respondents own perceptions and definitions of 'agency' and 'resistance'. Echoing Mahmood (2001, 2005), who critiqued the liberal assumptions of agency and resistance in feminist analyses of women in the Middle East, I show that women's everyday practices are not always defined against the hierarchy of gender relations, in contrast to our liberal understanding of 'agency'.

The next section is based on my fieldwork experiences and the ethical concerns surrounding my research topic. Here, I outline my research methodology and its limitations. More importantly, I also discuss the complex issues of positionality and representation.

Research Method and Fieldwork Encounters

Throughout this book I look at women's practices through their narratives. Narrative is both about gathering women's stories and seeing how, through the narration of their stories, women construct and convey meanings and communicate emotions about unspoken aspects of their lives. Women's personal narratives are essential for feminist research. Feminist theory is 'grounded in women's lives', and women's voices and writings 'have been crucial to the feminist reconstruction of our understanding of the world' (The Personal Narrative Group 1989, p. 4).

In this book, personal narratives were gathered through in-depth interviews (Given 2008, p. 539). Amongst the different forms of qualitative interview, in-depth interviews try to understand the lived experiences of the individual (Fontana and Frey 2005; Given 2008; Seidman 2006). In-depth interviewing allows the feminist researcher to 'access the voices of those who are marginalised in a society' and 'those experiences that are

often hidden' (Hesse-Bieber 2013, p. 190). Collecting women's personal narratives on the taboo topic of bodily and sexual experiences can help us understand their lives as women in Iranian society in a number of ways.

Firstly, looking at women's personal narratives is helpful for understanding the interaction between the individual and society in the construction of gender and sexuality. In this sense, women's personal experiences can highlight the diversity of discourses that construct women's gender identity in the Iranian context. Through narrating their stories, women refer to social norms and rules that control and discipline their bodily behaviour. By telling their stories of menarche, marriage and sexual pleasure they describe the framework of power and their reaction to it. Therefore, listening to women's personal narratives also helps to understand their emotions and the ways in which they define their situation as a woman in the context of their lives. Moreover, women's stories can highlight the complexity and diversity of contexts in which their narratives of embodiment are shaped.

Secondly, women reconstruct their pasts in the narration of their stories, as 'the past is mediated through their contemporary constitution' (Farahani 2007, p. 44). By sharing their stories of puberty or first sexual intercourse, women refer to past events while simultaneously describing their current beliefs and attitudes towards these events. This process highlights the changes in their attitudes, as well as the changes in the social and cultural perception of sex and female sexuality in Iranian society. Women's personal narratives show how their perception of female sexuality has changed throughout different periods of their lives, and how these changes are related to the social and political events that followed the Islamic Revolution. In my interviews with women from both generations, they often also compared themselves with younger generations in the telling of their stories. For example, 1950s interviewees stated several times that in their youth it was inappropriate for girls to have boyfriends, but 'now [for the younger generations] it is not'. They even want their own daughters to be in contact with boys or suitors; however, as I discuss in the chapter on virginity, most of the 1950s women did not approve of any form of sexual contact with the opposite sex before marriage.

In this book, the format of women's narratives changes in my representation of their lives. While our conversations followed a chronological format—from family background to menstrual experience, relationships with the opposite sex, marriage, pregnancy and sexual pleasure—I had to excerpt from their narratives and exclude some information for a number

of reasons. Firstly, this book is organised around specific topics and themes, which I have defined and analysed. As I conducted a large number of interviews, there was simply not enough space to follow each story in the detail in which it was narrated. Secondly, in the interests of confidentially, I made no reference to parts of interviews that might reveal my interviewees' identities. However, these details helped me to understand and contextualise women's lives and shaped my analysis of each and every woman. I also use pseudonyms for all my participants.

In addition, while analysing women's narratives and voices it is important to identify the role of the researcher, as it is through the communication between the interviewer and interviewee that the narrative is shaped and constructed. I discuss the issue of self-reflexivity, my own positionality and its possible effects on the interview process in the following sections.

The Interview Process

I conducted fieldwork in Tehran in the autumn and winter of 2011/2012 and interviewed 76 women: 39 from the 1950s generation and 37 from the 1980s. Before starting my fieldwork in Tehran, I contacted friends, gave them a brief description of my research and asked them to introduce me to their network of friends and family. As a consequence, I received several phone numbers and email addresses of women in Tehran. From the outset, finding 1950s interviewees was my main difficulty, as I had many more contacts amongst the 1980s generation. It was easier for me to approach the younger generation through friends; while, for the 1950s generation, I had to ask my friends' mothers and my mother's friends. Due to sensitivity of the topic, which I discuss further on in this chapter, I decided to interview women with whom I had no previous contact prior to the interview. I was put in contact with most of my 1950s interviewees through women I had previously interviewed. It was helpful, as women who already knew the topic of conversation suggested friends and family who they thought might be interested.

My other concern was getting a sample group of women from different socio-economic backgrounds. I was worried that finding potential interviewees through snowball sampling might limit me to a group of women from similar religious and economic circumstances. After interviewing about 20 women from each generation, I became more selective in the remainder of my interviews, as I endeavoured to speak with a diverse group of women. However, it is important to note that I still have more

interviewees from the middle and upper middle classes than from lower economic backgrounds, primarily due to my own socio-economic background, which made finding middle and upper middle class interviewees easier. Later in this chapter, I explain the limits and difficulties of defining women's economic situations in Tehran.

Before starting my fieldwork, I was unsure exactly how to start such conversations with women. How should I ask these taboo questions about virginity, sexual experience and sexual pleasure? Even more so, how could I gain their trust and encourage them to talk about private and personal experiences?

At the beginning, I only had general information—such as age, education and sometimes religious background—about most of the women I contacted. Hence, I came up with a general, less controversial description of myself and my research project in order to begin the conversation. On the phone, I explained to women that I was working on different experiences of femininity between the two generations. Furthermore, I also defined femininity as experiences specific to the female body, such as menstruation. I explained that my main intention was to compare the approaches and bodily experiences of the 1950s and 1980s generations. I also explained that these generations corresponded to my and my mother's generations. As most women of the 1950s generation had a daughter of the 1980s generation, they were interested in meeting me and sometimes—either before or after the interview—seemed curious about the results of my research. The process of convincing interviewees was easier with the 1980s generation, as I was less worried about the language I used, they had more free time and seemed less concerned about the topic. Still, I preferred to explain my work similarly for both generations.

Similar to the experiences of other researchers (El-Kholy 2003), during fieldwork and in conversation, I found myself describing my research topic differently depending on my interlocutor. Also, when people queried my field of study, I often answered with women's studies, sociology or social sciences instead of gender studies. As gender studies is not a familiar field and the Persian word *jensiat* (gender) is not a common term, such an answer would have raised even more difficult questions, such as 'what do you exactly study?'

As I only became acquainted with my interviewees during the interview process, on many occasions I found myself compelled to conceal or disguise some aspects of my identity or beliefs. This happened primarily when

I wanted to exclude a sensitive issue from conversation, such as religious aspects of sex and sexuality. For instance, if an interviewee argued that the hierarchy of gender relations or men's superior position in sex is part of an Islamic tradition, I would ask them to explain further instead of challenging or arguing with them.

To ease the interview process and create a comfortable environment, I often began by asking interviewees about their family background, parents, siblings, where they grew up and their education, marriage and children. Some women, especially from the 1950s generation, gave more details about \their parents and childhood; some even showed me pictures of their family members. Talking about past experiences and family was an ice breaker, as it eased the rest of our conversation. In this part, I found a huge generational difference: most of my 1980s interviewees gave short, simple answers about their family, as most still lived with their parents; 1950s interviewees, on the other hand, often spoke at more length, as my questions raised nostalgia for the 'good old days' of childhood.

After the first few interviews with women of both generations, I realised that women talked more easily about their experiences of menarche. Therefore, I chose menstruation as the starting topic. In comparison to women's narratives of their first sexual intercourse, I received much more detail about their first experience of menarche: how they felt and reacted at the time. This shows that some aspects of female sexuality are less taboo. In Chap. 5, I detail the social and cultural aspects of menstruation and the differences in experience between the two generations.

Furthermore, it became clear throughout interviews that some women wanted to dictate the interview process by giving more information on some aspects of their lives, repeating themselves in response to different questions and providing short, vague answers to other questions. For example, on the topic of sexual pleasure, some of my 1950s interviewees kept returning to the fact that they were forced to marry or did not like their husbands, but would not give information about their sex lives or answer the question directly. I could see how talking about sex and sexual pleasure made them feel uncomfortable, so I often let them speak about their marriage and wedding ceremony at length, carefully asking my questions in between. Still, gaining women's trust and confidence remained integral to the interview process. In the next section, I outline my strategies to tackle this issue.

The Issue of Trust and Confidentiality

Gaining my interviewees' trust was my main concern both prior to and during the interviews, as sex and sexuality are very personal topics that are not necessarily easy for women to talk about. Contacting women through snowball sampling eased the process. Interviewees trusted the person who introduced us, which increased their trust in me. This was especially true when potential interviewees were introduced by previous interviewees.

Furthermore, meeting me for the first time at the interview, and knowing that I do not know any of their close relatives, made interviewees feel more comfortable speaking about their sexual experiences. For example, in answering my questions about her first sexual intercourse, Sorour—55 years old—replied while laughing: 'Do you go into such details for your research?' She then closed her office door and continued: 'I never speak about these issues. It's difficult for me to talk, but now [she pauses], [I only talk] because I don't know you and I might never see you again.' Others made similar comments—such as 'this is the first time I am telling this to anyone' or 'I haven't said this to anyone before'—especially 1950s generation women, because they felt more uncomfortable speaking with someone younger.

In addition, the fact that I was pursuing my research in the United Kingdom—not at one of Tehran's universities—eased some women's nerves during interview; they felt more comfortable in the fact that none of their friends or relatives would have access to or be able to read their words. However, women from both generations were also curious about the results of my work, and some asked me to send the final product.

I also used other strategies to gain women's trust. For instance, before turning on my recorder in interviews, I explained to the women that I would neither ask for nor use their real name in my work. In addition, I also told them I would stop recording if, at any point, they felt uncomfortable. From the 1950s generation, only one woman would not let me record our conversation; even without recording, my questions made her very uncomfortable, so she only gave short answers without explanation. Therefore, I decided not to use her interview in this work. I believe that, if it were not for her friend's introduction, she would never have agreed to meet me. During my interviews, a few 1950s generation women asked me to pause my recording, which usually happened when they were speaking about political activism during the Revolution or their current political views. In general, 1980s generation women seemed more comfortable talking; none asked me to pause

or stop recording. In addition, I noticed that sharing my own experiences during interviews made my interviewees feel that I understood their feelings or situation, which encouraged them to continue speaking. Especially with 1950s generation women, when I explained that my mother was of their age and told me similar stories, it eased the process.

In general, contrary to my original concerns—especially regarding the 1950s generation—about women's willingness to speak about sex and female sexuality, I found women eager to participate. To my surprise, I even received phone calls from 1950s women who had heard about my project and wanted to participate. I think this interest was mainly due to the opportunity to share secret, private aspects of their lives with a complete stranger. As I discuss in the next section, in relation to my own positionality, my interviewees looked at me as a 'specialist' in the field of 'marital' or 'sexual' relations, which also encouraged them to talk and share.

Positionality

Feminist researchers emphasise the necessity to 'consider and reconsider their own purposes and approaches [as a researcher] in self-reflexive critique' (Priessle 2007, p. 522). A self-reflexive methodology gives the researcher an opportunity to see themselves both as an object and the subject under study (Davies et al. 2004, p. 361). Self-reflexivity highlights that knowledge is also situated, as it is produced by situated 'actors' (Hertz 1997, p. viii). Indeed, researchers' positionality and personal experiences, as well as their use of language in asking, analysing and interpreting the collected data, shape the knowledge produced through the research.

For example, the age difference between myself and my interviewees—especially the 1950s generation women—affected our relationship during the interview process. With the 1980s generation, I felt more comfortable asking my questions from the onset, as the process of gaining trust was quicker and easier than with the 1950s generation. In addition, 1980s generation women and I share a similar language and use similar vocabulary in relation to sex and sexual organs. During my conversations with 1950s women, there were occasions when I had to ask for more information and explanation, as I was not familiar with the words or expressions they used. For example, instead of using the English word 'condom', some of my 1950s women used the Persian slang '*caput*' [cover], which I had not heard before and is not in usage amongst younger generations.

Reflexivity also relates to a 'style of research that makes clear the researcher's own beliefs and objectives' (Gilbert 2008, p. 512). In the context of my work, I realised how my personal opinions shaped the interview questions. For instance, when analysing my interviews, I realised that I neither asked about masturbation nor did my interviewees refer to it when speaking about sexual pleasure. This reflects that, for me, some aspects of female sexuality are still taboo. I also did not ask women about homosexuality, whether they had any such experiences—especially in sex-segregated environments, such as schools—or desires. Although homosexuality was never part of my research objectives, I think it could have added another dimension and deepened my analysis of the construction of female sexuality in the Iranian context.

Moreover, women have their own 'agenda' during the interview and 'consciously cast [you] in a specific role', which affects the interview process (El-Kholy 2003, p. 67). My interviewees also saw me as a doctor or specialist in the field; they felt I could counsel them on their sexual problems. At the conclusion of 1950s generation interviews, women would sometimes ask my opinion about their sexual lives: 'What do you think about my sexual relations with my husband?'; 'Do you think it is natural?'; 'Do you know any books or websites in Persian where I can find more sexual information?' For example, one of my grandmother's distant relatives—a 60-year-old woman—asked me to interview her several times at a family gathering. During the interview, she was very eager to talk about her sex life and sexual pleasure. She wanted to know how to increase her sexual pleasure and reach orgasm the 'way women have' in Hollywood movies. Although we discussed various aspects of her life—such as her pregnancies—I realised when listening to the interview that the focus remained on sex and sexual pleasure. I also acted as a 'specialist' in the field. While I asked questions about her experiences of sex and sexual pleasure, I also gave her information on orgasm and even drew the location of clitoris on a piece of paper.

Playing the role of a specialist was not always easy. With some women of the 1950s generation, I could not help as they expected. When some interviewees became emotional while describing their husbands' abusive behaviour, I felt incapable of helping them and changing their situation. El-Kholy (2003) criticises the claim that feminist research is 'inherently "empowering" or "liberating" for those being studied', explaining that in situations of extreme poverty and social inequality, '"empowerment" requires much stronger links between research and the commitment and ability to change material conditions and challenge power relations'

(ibid., p. 69). I realised that, although this research's use of narrative was intended to give voice to women to share their mostly silenced bodily and sexual experiences, it could not necessarily help them change their unequal positioning in relation to their partners, families and the wider society.

Overall, my positionality and the limits of discussing sex and sexuality affected the interview process with women of both generations, the collected data and the produced knowledge. In the next section, I describe the difficulties of defining women's religious and economic situations.

Mapping the Fieldwork

Throughout this book, I describe my interviewees' marital situation, level of education, religious background and economic situation; I found the latter two factors to be more influential in shaping perceptions of their bodies and sexuality. In terms of religious background, my participants are all Shi'a Muslims; I divided them into the categories of religious and non-religious. I intentionally did not use the word 'secular' to describe non-religious women, because of its political connotations. In recent literature on Iran (Varzi 2006; Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2008), 'secular' is often associated with a highly educated, modern, politically aware and sometimes fashionable person with the potential to challenge the Islamist state and create a more liberal society. This definition does not apply to many of my non-religious interviewees from either generation. Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, people use adjectives like *mazhabi* (religious) or *gheyr-e mazhabi* (non-religious) in everyday Persian to describe their level of religiosity; the use of 'secular' is not common outside academic or political arenas and is most used by people with academic backgrounds. Therefore, I decided to use an adjective that my interviewees can identify with and understand.

However, the categorisation of religious/non-religious still signifies different groups of people with various levels of religious belief. Here, the term 'religious' is applied to practising Muslims—such as those who pray, fast and wear *hejab* (different types of *hejab*)—and 'non-religious' refers to those who do no such practices. I also use the term 'traditional' to describe women who emphasise following the advice and regulations of traditional religious textbooks and *fiqh* (Islamic Jurisprudence). In addition, 'traditional' can also be used to describe non-religious people who abide by traditions and customs. Throughout this work, I describe my interviewees' social and cultural situations, which further clarifies the differences between these categories.

To understand women's economic backgrounds, I got a rough estimation of their wealth and income based on their addresses. When I was invited to their homes, it was easier to decipher whether they belonged to the lower middle, middle, or upper middle classes based on the location of their house and their lifestyle. However, I met most of my 1980s interviewees—especially those who are unmarried and live with their parents—in public places near their homes or at their places of work. Hence, I determined these interviewees' economic situation based on their familial backgrounds, such as their parents' level of education or occupation and dress.

In general, home address is not an accurate indicator of wealth in Tehran. Neighbourhoods in the north, northeast and northwest of Tehran—such as Niavaran, Zafaraniyeh, Darrous, Sa'adat Abad, and Shahrak-e Gharb—are known to be wealthy areas. However, in each of these neighbourhoods there are still areas that used to be villages, with small houses and narrow streets; families who live in these areas are not wealthy and do not belong to the upper middle classes. In addition, neighbourhoods near Tehran's Grand Bazaar, which are considered lower middle class, are also home to wealthy families. Such families live near the Bazaar for a variety of reasons, such as close proximity to work—if family members work in the Bazaar—or it being a family's historical place residence. For instance, Ensieh—26 years old—said that her family has been living in Nazi Abad, in southern Tehran, for over 40 years. I have never been to Nazi Abad, and my assumption was that it is a poor southern neighbourhood. I met Ensieh at the canteen on her university's campus in central Tehran; she said, 'not all the people who live in Nazi Abad are poor'. As Ensieh described, 'there are big houses and wealthy families who have lived there for many years and don't want to move to northern part of the city'.

Furthermore, northern neighbourhoods are stereotypically considered to be inhabited by 'secular', modern Tehrani families (Mahdavi 2008), but there are many counterexamples to that: rich religious people who leave in northern Tehran and secular educated people who cannot afford living there and chose to live in neighbourhoods traditionally considered to be religious. For instance, Darrous is one of the most expensive areas in Tehran; it is also the location of one of Tehran's most famous religious schools for boys and, hence, very religious families also live in the neighbourhood.

Therefore, it is difficult to distinguish women's economic situation based on their place of residence. In addition, as previously mentioned, economic and religious backgrounds are not the only factors that shape women's narratives; other factors, such as level of education and political views, are also very influential.

This chapter provided an overall description of both the two generations and the post-revolutionary shifts highlighted in current scholarship on Iran. In addition, I also provided an account of my fieldwork, methodological approaches and strategies for coping with complex issues of positionality, representation and interpretation. In the next chapter, I explain my conceptual framework and further argue the limitations of a binary analysis in understanding Iranian women's sexual and bodily behaviour.

Notes

1. *Hejab* became compulsory in the summer of 1980, although the full black *chador* was defined as the state's preferred dress code for women. In addition, compulsory veiling was imposed alongside sex segregation in the public sphere, such as in schools, buses, beauty salons, beaches etc. Throughout this book, I describe women's religiosity and changes in their clothing before and after the Revolution, however there is no chapter specifically dedicated to *hejab*, clothing and women's perception of their body. There has been an obsession with the rules of veiling and *hejab* in discussions on women's control over their body and sexuality in Muslim societies (Hoodfar 1991; Paidar 1997; Guindi 1999; Shirazi 2003; Moallem 2005; Sedghi 2007; Zahedi 2008; Afary 2009), and I think there are other more relevant, underexplored issues and themes to address. As I show throughout this book, there are other bodily and sexual practices—amongst both religious and non-religious women—that are hidden due to an overemphasis on women's clothing and veiling. Therefore, instead of following the current scholarship in finding women's acts of resistance and subordination in relation to compulsory *hejab* in post-revolutionary Iran, I look at other practices and mechanisms of control over the female body and sexuality, as well as women's reactions to such mechanisms, which are not limited to the rules of veiling. My empirical research shows a wider set of bodily practices and experiences that reveal a more nuanced reality than that posed by observations based solely on women's clothing.
2. Commonly used phrase to describe the generation that grew up under the Islamic Republic.

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Conceptual Framework

Introduction

In this chapter, I follow the debate raised in recent literature on gender and sexuality in Iran. Here, there are two main concepts to elaborate: power and resistance. However, instead of discussing different theories of power, I focus more specifically on feminist scholars' use of the power/resistance framework in analysing and understanding gender relations and women's strategies at the micro level. My main aim is to show the limits of concepts—such as 'resistance' and 'agency'—in understanding Iranian women's strategies of dealing with the dominant norms of female sexuality. As I argue in this chapter, analysing women's sexual and bodily behaviour through the resistance/subordination binary neglects the multiple ways in which women inhabit and negotiate such norms within the discursive boundaries that control and discipline their bodies. Similar to feminist scholarship on resistance, I also emphasise on contextualising women's experiences and coping strategies in relation to their varied religious and socio-economic situations.

I discuss my theoretical framework by first describing the recent shift in the literature towards highlighting women's active resistance and agency in Middle Eastern contexts.

The Emerging Concern: Demystifying Women's Passive Subordination

Feminist scholars criticise 'homogenising women's oppression' and the use of a 'monolithic notion of patriarchy' in studies on women from different socio-historical contexts (Mohanty 1988, p. 63). They argue that women both experience and react to oppression differently and the concepts of oppression and patriarchy are used without their specification in local, cultural and historical contexts (Hooks 1981; Mohanty 1988, p. 75; Abu-Lughod 1993; Collins 1999).

Consequently, we have witnessed the emergence of 'a vibrant and complex body of literature regarding women and gender in the Middle East' over the past few decades; literature concerned with exposing 'the myth of passive subordination' (Baxter 2007). Through case studies and rich ethnographic investigations, such works have criticised the Orientalist/colonialist conception of the Middle Eastern women 'as passive and submissive beings', bound by male authority (Mahmood 2001, p. 205).

In the literature on women in the Middle East, scholars emphasise the heterogeneity of women's experiences of oppression, as well as the importance of contextualising women's strategies and coping mechanisms. In her study of Bedouin community of Awlad' Ali in Egypt, Abu-Lughod criticises feminist assumption of a 'universal woman's experience' and conflation of terms, such as 'patrilineality with patriarchy and focus on it in debates about male domination, gender hierarchy, and sexual difference' (Abu-Lughod 1993, p. 20). According to Abu-Lughod (1993), the strategies employed by the women of Awlad' Ali challenge our presumptions, as they do not seem to directly oppose male authority. Abu-Lughod (1993) explains the 'sexually irreverent discourse' in which by narrating and sharing folktales, women subvert the control exerted over their sexuality and show disrespect to specific representations of masculinity; ridiculing such masculinities by making fun of men (ibid., p. 45). Abu-Lughod (1993) sees women reciting poems in ordinary conversations as challenging the dominant discourse, as well as representing how power relations influence personal emotions.

Kandiyoti (1998) contends that an analysis of women's strategies can help to 'capture the nature of patriarchal systems in their cultural, class-specific' context which can reveal how men and women 'resist, accommodate, adapt and conflict with each other over resources, rights and responsibilities' (p. 281). Kandiyoti also emphasises the different strategies

women use in dealing with male domination in patriarchal families, labelling such 'patriarchal bargains': 'these patriarchal bargains exert a powerful influence on the shaping of women's gendered subjectivity and determine the nature of gender ideology in different contexts' (Kandiyoti 1988, p. 275). According to Kandiyoti (1998), such bargains are the result of historical transformations opening possibilities for struggle and renegotiation between the genders. Bargaining 'always takes place in the context of rules of the game'—such as conjugal contracts, residence and inheritance norms in kinship systems; 'these rules informed both women's rational choices and the less conscious aspects of their gendered subjectivities' (Kandiyoti 1998, p. 136). For instance, Kandiyoti argues that younger women adopted the veil in Iran in exchange for 'the security, stability and presumed respect this order promised them' (ibid., p. 283).

As it pertains to women's sexuality in Iran, some recent works have employed Kandiyoti's concept of 'bargaining with patriarchy' in their analysis of women's strategies of coping with dominant norms of female sexuality. For example, Farahani argues that hymen-repair surgery can be seen as a bargaining strategy that empowers women, as it helps them negotiate their status within the existing patriarchal setting (2007, p. 91). However, such works still inscribe themselves in a resistance-oppression paradigm. In my work, I complicate this binary. In Chap. 4, for example, I argue that seeing hymen repair as a bargaining tool that empowers women can oversimplify the context in which women decide to repair their hymen.

Both Abu-Lughod (1993) and Kandiyoti (1988) argue that we need to contextualise women's strategies, analysing them in intersection with the various factors that control women's lives, in order to deepen our understanding of women's situation in patriarchal societies. My work also emphasises on the necessity of contextualising women's experiences. However, as I describe in the following sections, it also questions the simple understanding of gender relations in which women's practices are always seen as either submissive or defiant against different mechanisms of societal control. As I argue throughout this book, analysing women's lives should not only be limited to recognising and categorising their strategies of coping with patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality. Women are not always simply oppressed by or resisting the dominant norms; it is important to see how they define and see the social constraints and norms that control and limit their bodily behaviour. Similar to Mahmood (2005), instead of simply looking for acts of resistance,

I emphasise on the ways in which women inhabit and experience the norms of female sexuality in the context of their lives. For example, it is important to see how women define hymen-repair surgery and how they make decisions about reconstructing their virginity.

In the next section, I discuss the power and resistance framework, a framework more relevant to the context of my work.

POWER AND RESISTANCE FRAMEWORK

Scott's (1985) concept of 'everyday forms of resistance' is prominent in theorisations of the strategies of subordinate groups. Instead of looking at resistance as collective and public forms of revolt against society's more powerful classes, Scott (1985) looks at ordinary and everyday forms of peasant resistance. By conceptualising the term 'everyday forms of resistance', he emphasises both on the public and collective and on the private and passive acts of resistance by individuals (Scott 1985, p. 6). For Scott (1985), practices such as foot dragging, gossip, sabotage and slander are also 'weapons of the weak' in their class struggle (ibid.: xvi). Such 'weapons of the weak' have certain features in common: 'they require little or no coordination or planning; they make use of implicit understandings and informal networks; […] and they typically avoid any direct, symbolic confrontation with authority' (ibid.). Still, without making 'headlines', these practices are aimed at making change.

Feminist scholars have employed the concept of 'everyday forms of resistance' in analyses of gender relations in different contexts (El-Kholy 2003; Farahani 2007; Harris 2004; Okely 1991). For these scholars, Scott's approach to resistance, which focuses on daily practices of subordinate groups, 'allows [them] to view resistance as a shifting continuum of practices which must be empirically investigated in specific socioeconomic and historical contexts' (El-Kholy 2003, p. 12). Still, many scholars find the framework of power and 'everyday resistance' problematic in analysing gender relations, as power relations between men and women in kinship and familial structures are more complicated than in class struggle (Kandiyoti 1998, p. 144). For Kandiyoti, gendered power is not 'merely fractured by class, race and ethnicity but by the complicated emotional (and material) calculus implied by different organisations of the domestic realm' (ibid.). Therefore, in contrast to other social groups, it is difficult to differentiate between subordinate and dominant groups in the context of gender relations.

Although Scott's term is helpful in recognising and highlighting women's everyday acts of resistance against social norms and power relations aimed at controlling and limiting their bodily and sexual behaviour, my aim in this book is to highlight the limits of concepts such as 'resistance' and 'agency' in understanding women's coping strategies. I show that resistance-oriented approaches to analysing women's sexual and bodily behaviour, as we see in recent literature on Iranian women (e.g. Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2008; Afary 2009; Hélie and Hoodfar 2012), define resistance in opposition to power. Using Foucault's notion of power, I argue that this simple opposition between power and resistance should be problematised.

For Foucault (1980), power is not something that works negatively by prohibiting, restricting, denying or repressing; instead, Foucault (1980) defines power positively, as that which produces new forms of pleasure, systems of knowledge, and discourses (p. 119). In Chap. 5, I discuss how the scientific and medical information offered in schools has given young girls more power and authority to reject their mother's or grandmothers' 'traditional' role of controlling their bodily behaviour during the menstrual cycle. However, this new 'scientific' knowledge subjects young girls to new forms of control and discipline by 'normalising' and 'naturalising' specific forms of body and sexuality. In fact, the state's official education gives young women the possibility of resistance while simultaneously restricting and controlling their bodily behaviour.

Moreover, Foucault's definition of power—as something that 'circulates all the time rather than something which only functions in the forms of a chain'—offers insight into how power operates, especially through micro-mechanisms (Foucault 1986, p. 235). For Foucault, power is constantly produced and undermined in relations between individuals and in different contexts; it is not a 'commodity or piece of wealth' in the hands of special groups or individuals (ibid.). Power is everywhere, and should be understood as 'the multiplicity of force relations' that are unfixed and variable (Foucault 1980, p. 92).

In modern societies, Foucault describes, power works through disciplines based on discourses of truth, which are produced by specific forms of knowledge (Foucault 1980, p. 93). This new type of disciplinary power, which Foucault calls 'bio-power', is exercised through the creation of licit and illicit, normal and abnormal bodies (ibid., p. 106). The normal 'is established as a principle of coercion'; an instrument of power that homogenises the social body (Foucault 1977, p. 184). Bio-power's main

purpose is to create docile bodies, and the production of docile bodies relies on individual self-surveillance and monitoring. Thus, different strategies are used to ensure that individuals internalise the 'normal' bodies and sexualities in a particular society (ibid.).

In analysing women's narratives of menarche, virginity and marriage, I discuss how women have learnt the norm of passive female sexuality and the feeling of embarrassment and shame of their body and sexuality. Also, through years of behaving according to accepted norms of female sexuality, they have internalised and learnt to conceal their menstrual body and discipline their sexual desire. In addition, I also highlight the role of other women, as micro-mechanisms of control, in regulating and creating docile bodies.

In discussing relations of power, Foucault (1980) also mentions the 'paradox of subjectivation': the possibility of multiple, ever-present points of resistance in the network of power. However, Foucault (1980) points out that this is paradox, as the possibility of action is enabled by the same relations of power that subordinate the subject (pp. 291–292). He emphasises, 'resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power' (ibid., p. 95). According to Foucault (1980), neglecting the multiplicity of power relations at play will lead to a failure to recognise forms of agency not simply directed against the dominant discourse. Mahmood (2005) also argues that Foucault's theory 'encourages us to conceptualise agency not simply as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action' enabled by the specific relations of subordination (p. 18). Similar to Mahmood, my research emphasises women's capacity for action that stem from relations of subordination and the embodiment of normative feminine roles in the Iranian context.

THE LIMITS OF BINARY ANALYSIS: REDEFINING RESISTANCE AND AGENCY

In recent years feminist scholars have started to question the liberal assumptions underpinning definitions of freedom, resistance and agency. Abu-Lughod asks, 'we may want justice for women, but can we accept that there might be different ideas about justice and that different women might want, or choose, different futures from what we envision as best?' (Abu-Lughod 2002, pp. 787–788). Hamid (2006) also points out that Western feminists need to reconsider their idea of progress and freedom: 'what happens when women use their agency to refuse Western standards of progress?' (p. 83).

Abu-Lughod criticises scholars, including herself, for focusing only on 'resistance and finding resisters', and suggests we 'use resistance as a diagnostic of power' (Abu-Lughod 1993, pp. 42–43). Abu-Lughod argues that power and resistance are interlinked, and a system of power can itself produce forms of resistance. In Chap. 3, I also describe how through watching pornography and Western media younger generations of women become subject to overlapping systems of power.

Abu-Lughod (1993) explains that the romanticised perception of resistance—that is, taking resistance as an indicator of the failure of systems of oppression—overlooks the subversive discourses employed by women. For instance, Abu-Lughod (1993) points out that the younger generation of women of Awlad' Ali resist arranged marriages; however, such resistance is specific to particular matches, not the whole system of arranged marriages.

El-Kholy (2003) argues that, in the context of gender relations, it is difficult to discuss women simply as 'passive objects of oppression' or 'powerful agents who exercised authority and agency'—the two poles of a continuum on which women are often placed in ethnographic researches (El-Kholy 2003, p. 6). El-Kholy (2003) discusses how women in low-income neighbourhoods in Cairo 'develop different strategies for passive and active resistance in the face of oppression' (ibid., p. 24). She argues that women's everyday strategies are more complex than to fit neatly into a simplified, binary explanation of dominant and subordinate groups. For instance, El-Kholy discovered that, despite different regional backgrounds and levels of education, all the women she observed wanted their daughters circumcised, as they consider circumcision a rite of passage to womanhood (ibid., p. 88). Although women's circumcision forms part of the discourse of control over women's sexuality, also reinforced by religious myths, it mostly signified cleanness and purity to the women El-Kholy (2003) interviewed. El-Kholy (2003) argues that policy-making and analysis of 'other' women's situation often ignore the discourse in which 'other' women locate their acts (p. 92).

Asad (2000) also follows critique of 'anthropological use of resistance', stating that it underestimates the 'strength and diversity of power structures' (p. 31). However, he expresses further concern about the 'more inclusive category of agency', which is presupposed by the concept of resistance (ibid.). Asad (2000) argues that seeing resistance through confrontations with external power leads to a definition of the agent as an 'active subject' who 'has both the desire to oppose power and the

responsibility to become more powerful' (pp. 31–32). Instead, Asad (1996) posits that 'agency is not a universal property', as it operates 'through a particular network of concepts within which the historical possibilities and limit of responsibility are defined' (p. 271).

Mahmood (2005) also states that while Abu-Lughod's criticism 'marks an important analytical step', as it helps us 'move beyond the simple binary of resistance/subordination', she does not question the concept of resistance itself. Resistance creates a universal category of action that prevents 'us to see and understand forms of being and action that are not necessarily encapsulated by the narrative of subversion and reinscription of forms' (Mahmood 2005, p. 9).

Mahmood suggests that the liberal assumption of the universal desire for freedom and liberty from subordination, which is assumed by the concept of resistance, has been disregarded. She explains that in feminist scholarship on women's agency in the Middle East, 'even in instances when an explicit feminist agency is difficult to locate, there is a tendency among scholars to look for expressions and moments of resistance that may suggest a challenge to male domination' (ibid., p. 7). In this context, the concept of human agency most often invoked by feminist scholars is 'the capacity to realise one's own interests against customs, tradition, […] or any other obstacles' (ibid., p. 8). Therefore, for feminist scholars who search for these instances of resistance in order to confirm the failure of systems of oppression, agency is 'conceptualised on the binary model of subordination and subversion' (ibid., p. 14).

It is necessary to 'detach the notion of agency from [resistance and] the goals of the progressive politics' to understand women's involvement in movements such as the mosque movement in Egypt (Mahmood 2005, p. 14). Based on her ethnography of women's participation in the Cairo mosque movement, Mahmood suggests we look at agency 'as a capacity for action that specific relations of subordination create and enable', not as a synonym for resistance (Mahmood 2001, p. 210). Mahmood (2005) also argues that women's participation in mosque movement creates a contradictory position for feminist scholars, as it is difficult for them to understand women's eagerness to participate in a system historically considered as one of their main sources of oppression.

I base my argument on this aspect of Mahmood's theoretical approach. As described before, the existing literature on Iranian women is mainly focused on describing the misogynistic gender policies of the Islamic Republic, their resultant effects on women's lives and/or women's strategies

and autonomous or collective approaches to resisting and subverting these policies. However, in an effort to criticise the gendered and sexual politics of the Islamic Republic, it is also crucial not to hold onto a fixed understanding of the concepts of bodily autonomy, agency and resistance in analysing women's varied experiences of embodiment.

Although Mahmood (2005), by criticising the liberal assumptions in feminist scholarship, provides us with an astute approach to understanding women's participation in the mosque movement, she ignores the other aspects of women's lives that can shape their experiences—such as class and level of education. In the case of Iran, it is necessary to view the construction of women's embodiment in intersection with their religious, social, economic and educational background, as this allows for analysis of the multiple relations of power existing in each of these contexts; all together, these shape female sexuality.

Similar to scholars such as El-Kholy (2003) and Hoodfar (1997), who look at the effects of women's economic situation on marital and sexual relations, I highlight the importance of women's economic situation on their experiences of menarche, premarital sexual relations, and marital sexual relations. I argue that women's economic dependence on or independence from their fathers and husbands influences their sexual and marital decisions.

In this book I argue that women embody and inhabit the norms of female sexuality differently. For example, the meanings of virginity and the virginal body vary amongst different groups of women; these meanings are constructed in intersection with women's religious backgrounds and social and economic situations. As I observed amongst my interviewees, it is impossible to simply place women in existing categories—such as modern/traditional or sexually liberated/sexually oppressed. For instance, it is interesting to see how women use virginity as a bargaining tool for their own advantage, although this advantage might not conflict directly with authority.

This book tracks the changes in political ideologies and their gender regimes through women's personal experiences of embodiment. Furthermore, this book aims to fill the gap in the literature on Iranian women by addressing both the complexity of women's positionality in Iranian society and women's relations with different authoritative discourses that shape sexual and bodily experiences. Through a comparative analysis of the experiences of two generations of Iranian women, I discuss the necessity of moving beyond binaries—such as the defiance/compliance framework—in analysing women's bodily behaviour and strategies.

In the following chapters, by discussing women's narratives of virginity, menstruation marriage, and sex, I show how women understand and define their female body and sexuality in the context of their lives and in relation with socio-cultural norms of female sexuality, religious regulations as well as sexual and gender policies of the state.

The following chapters present the results of my fieldwork and analysis, each exploring a specific set of bodily and sexual experiences. The next chapter details the changes in the state's reproductive policies before and after the Islamic Revolution, and the two generations' shifts in sexual knowledge.

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Learning Sexuality

Introduction

Iran's first family planning programme started in 1966 as part of Mohammad Reza Shah's national modernisation reforms. The programme focused on young mothers and favoured 'child spacing over family limitation' (Fendall 1971, p. 1015). While the Shah's family planning programme found success amongst the urban and educated, it did not achieve much amongst the rural, more religious, traditional classes of society as it did not account for a social and cultural context that gives 'men greater authority in sexual matters' (Afary 2009, p. 220). In addition, akin to Ali's (2002) analysis of family planning in Egypt, the Shah's programme failed to understand both the role that reproduction (especially in rural areas) plays in the lives of Iranians and the social and economic aspects of family size. Nevertheless, religious leaders' disapproval was primary reason for the programme's unpopularity.

After the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the family planning programme was deemed irrelevant by the revolutionary leadership. They argued that 'the idea of fertility regulation is incompatible with the Islamic Ideology and revolutionary values' (Paydarfar and Moini 1995, p. 73). While rejecting the previous family planning programme, the new Islamic regime did not introduce any new population control policies. On the contrary, during the Iran–Iraq war, the state's policy put pressure on women,

limited their access to contraception and, in fact, encouraged bigger families by offering incentives—such as house loans—to families with four or more children.

However, due to huge increase in population, the state's general population policies did change after the Iran–Iraq war. The annual census shows that between 1976 and 1986 there was an overall rate of 3.8 per cent growth in population, from 33.7 million in 1976 to 50 million in 1986 (Hoodfar 1996, p. 33). The population explosion had become an economic burden by the end of the war, and a campaign was initiated to reintroduce family planning. In 1988, the state reauthorised contraceptives and made them available, or even free in some cases, for married couples in both rural and urban areas. While some of the new policies were based on the Shah's population control programme, the Islamic Republic also added new policies and had more success. In 1993, 'the Family Planning Bill removed most of the economic incentives for having larger families' (Mahdavi 2008, p. 239). According to the new policy, only 'the first three children in a family were subsidized' and mothers could not receive maternity leave, child care services, or health insurance for the fourth or any additional children (ibid.).

In contrast to pre-revolutionary programmes, when family planning was primarily an issue of urban educated women, by Ayatollah Khomeini's consent it became a concern for all social classes. In order to convince the population, a 'national consensus-building campaign' was introduced through which 'religious leaders and experts used accessible language to show the importance of self-sufficiency for an independent nation, so that it would not become a slave to the whims of imperialist powers' (Hoodfar 1996, p. 32). Religious leaders' participation in the campaign was important for legitimising the use of contraception and family planning in general.

The use of widespread public education campaigns was also key. Between 1987 and 1991, the Islamic Republic promoted a public debate around issues related to population in the Iranian media—specifically radio and television, which played a crucial role in shaping public attitudes towards family planning (Hoodfar and Assadpour 2000, pp. 23–29).[1]

The changes in population policies led to the construction of new approaches to sexual relations not limited to procreation. In this chapter, I look at changes in the sources of learning sexuality amongst the 1950s and 1980s generations, as well as how new sexual norms and concepts have entered Iranians' sexual lives as a result of these changes. I look at the use of medical and scientific discourses in institutionalising sexuality in the post-revolutionary era. I also examine how medicalising sexuality has helped the

state justify Islamic moral codes of behaviour and regulate and control Iranians' sexual lives. It is important to note, however, that the discourse is also shifting in relation to the younger generations' new demands and concerns, a result of their increased access to global media such as the Internet.

Population Policies and the Topic of Sex

Many of my 1950s interviewees expressed feelings similar to 'I didn't know anything about sex before my marriage'. Mansoureh, a 62-year-old housewife from a religious and traditional family, emphasised this: 'No, no, I didn't know. I knew that husbands and wives do something together, but I didn't know what it was.' Women of different religious, economic and educational backgrounds told me of such experiences. Fereshteh—a 60-year-old housewife from an upper middle class, non-religious family—also expressed that she 'did not know anything' about a married couple's sexual relations when she got married. She said, 'no one talked to me' about this relation; she was also embarrassed to ask.

1950s women made comments such as 'it was like this back then' when referring to the accepted social norms of behaviour for unmarried women of their time; norms that expected unmarried women to preserve a shy, sexually unaware and chaste image. Through reference to such social norms, 1950s women also drew a distinction between theirs and younger women's experiences. Some 1950s women described their own lack of knowledge of sexual relations with surprise, as in the current social situation it is 'normal' for young unmarried women to have some knowledge of sex, reproduction, etc.

For example, I met Esmat—a 54-year-old mother of four from a middle class, religious family—at her work place at a charity in the western Tehran. Esmat married at the age of 17 to her cousin and, after receiving her high school diploma, had two children. While describing her first sexual experience, which happened after her wedding ceremony, she mentioned: 'I didn't know anything, anything [she emphasises]. Can you believe it! I didn't know about giving birth, I didn't even know about marriage [she doesn't use the word sex[2]].'

As opposed to Esmat and many other 1950s women, most of my unmarried 1980s interviewees were knowledgeable about sex and methods of contraception. However, it is important not to equate knowledge of sex with premarital sexual relations, as women from different economic, religious and educational backgrounds still place much importance on virginity. I address this point in Chap. 4.

One of the main reasons is a shift in the state's policies towards family planning, which consequently affected the state's approach to sex education. As I mentioned before, the national family planning campaign publicised and legitimised the discussion of sex in Iranian public sphere. During my conversations with women of the 1980s generation, many of my interviewees referred to sexual knowledge they had received from the official educational system—mainly family planning courses in universities and religious or physiology classes in schools.

As part of the state's family planning campaign, undergraduate university students have taken an obligatory family planning course since the 1990s. During this course, students learn about the changes to population control policies both before and after the Islamic Revolution, as well as receive information about different methods of contraception. In most faculties, the classes are sex segregated. Students are usually provided textbooks that provide a general explanation of female and male genitalia. Many of my 1980s generation interviewees mentioned that they first learnt about different methods of contraception from the family planning courses.

The family planning course encouraged the post-revolutionary generation to learn more about sexual relations. Thus, the younger generation finds it not only 'appropriate' but also necessary to have more information about physiology, sex and methods of contraception. Many of my 1980s generation interviewees even mentioned that they would have preferred such classes be offered earlier in their official education. Zahra—a 25-year-old undergraduate student from a religious, upper middle class family—thought the course is offered too late; women should know about this topic sooner. Zahra has not yet attended the course, and she expects it to be informative.

> I think we are going to learn something [in the family planning course]. […] However, at the age of twenty-five you should know the general things […] especially because I have friends who are married. For example, I have a married friend who got pregnant when she was at university, and she became depressed because she didn't want to have a baby. Then I realised there are so many things that I should know before getting married, so these incidents do not happen.

The family planning course's purpose is to regulate and discipline the younger generation's sexual lives. However, it also simultaneously legitimises discussions of sex and opens a space for women—like Zahra—to

address issues considered culturally inappropriate for unmarried women. Women are asking for more information and criticising the inadequacy of the current, official sex education for their sexual lives. It is as if they are using this legitimate sphere—provided by the official education—to solve and improve their sexual relations, even when it might be indifferent or in contrast to the state's position on female sexuality. The contradictory effects of official sexual education highlight both the negative and positive aspects of disciplinary power: while it creates new forms of knowledge that undermine the taboo of public discussions of sex and increases women's knowledge about their body and sexuality, it also aims to discipline women's sexual behaviour in order to control fertility rates (Foucault 1980).

In addition to family planning courses at universities, since 1993 the state has organised compulsory pre-marriage counselling, where couples are taught about contraception, sexual intercourse and the ways of 'obtaining and giving pleasure' (Afary 2009, p. 341). As a pre-requisite for getting a marriage licence, couples must attend these one-hour classes, which are held in health centres across the country (Farnam et al. 2008, p. 159). Similar to university family planning courses, these classes are sex segregated. Married women of the 1980s generation had different experiences of these mandatory marriage sessions. Indeed, this experience is limited to Iranian women who married in and after the 1990s. Therefore, none of my 1950s interviewees attended such classes.

In order to receive my own marriage licence, in 2007, I attended one such class at a medical centre in a neighbourhood close to Tehran's Grand Bazaar. In order to enter the centre, couples must show a letter from a notary public as proof of their intent to register their marriage contract [*aqd*] within a month. Then, couples must undergo obligatory medical exams, such as blood and urine tests; while awaiting the results, they attend separate *kelâs-e moshâvereh ye ezdevâj* [pre-marriage counselling sessions] in two different conference rooms.

In the first half of this session, we watched a film that explained the body's erogenous zones. In the film, a clergyman also advised young couples how to prepare for sexual intercourse and how to make it more pleasant: he told young men to prepare their wives by using loving words and giving gifts (like flowers); young women, he advised, can help by paying attention to their appearance, such as wearing makeup. It was not guidance for lovers; there were no explicit sexual scenes or recommendations for physical positions or techniques that increase sexual satisfaction. Rather, the guidance was based on a binary framework of female/male sexuality,

where female sexuality is delineated solely within emotional relationships and male sexuality is limited to physical contact. In the second half of the session, a female nurse explained the advantages and disadvantages of various methods of contraception and answered women's questions. The men's session only involved watching the video; their session was shorter, as they were not allowed questions and no one talked to them about contraception. It seemed that issues of pregnancy and contraception were only women's responsibility.

Tara, a 29-year-old lawyer who married at the age of 22, remembered that the first time she saw condoms was at the pre-marriage counselling session: 'I hadn't seen condoms before. I had thought condoms come in masculine/feminine forms [she laughs], and that women also had condoms. Before that, I had only heard the name.'

In both family planning courses and marriage counselling sessions, the knowledge imparted revolves around reproduction and contraception. As sex is defined as a means of reproduction, the state teaches methods of contraception in order to ensure that young people know how to practise birth control by the time they marry. While inferences are made that sex is a pleasurable relation for a married couple, the focus is on controlling fertility and family size.

However, the state's approach to sex and sexual relations is changing as a result of younger generations' shifting sexual concerns, which are no longer limited to methods of contraception. I discuss this shift in the following sections through looking at two examples. However, first I turn attention to the globalised media's role in both producing new norms of sexuality and changing the sexual concerns of the Iranian public sphere.

There is usually a gap between when young people pass the family planning course and the time of their marriage, when they are again obliged to attend the pre-marriage counselling session. During this gap, the younger generations try to learn more about sex either through personal experience or finding information from non-state sources.

GLOBALISED MEDIA: NEW SOURCES OF LEARNING SEXUALITY

During the Shah's time, television programmes and journals were dominated by images of bikini-clad Western and Iranian women; sex was the main theme and subject of Iranian commercial cinema and television. Under the effects of the film industry, 'erotica and soft pornography'

emerged in literature even amongst 'respectable mainstream publications that supported modern reforms and even some women journals' (Afary 2009, p. 222). In the mid-1970s, a form of *Playboy* magazine appeared in which 'indigenous popular sexy stars were to accompany, not replace, the Western ones' (Talattof 2011, p. 36).

There was no reference to women's sexual pleasure in this public representation of female sexuality (Talattof 2011). Even magazines concerned with women issues produced stereotypical images of male/female relations: male power and control over their wives was defined as a sign of love, or a wife's emotional attachment to her husband, but not vice versa. This image was considered desirable in marriage and, as opposed to women, men could fall in love several times (Talattof 2011, p. 35).

However, contrary to my expectations, a few women amongst the 1950s generation referred to sexual images and information accessible in the public and national media as their sources of learning about sexuality. Women from both religious and non-religious backgrounds, who belong to more educated and upper middle class families, described how either their parents or schools forbid them from looking at or reading such publications; or they, themselves, considered such to be inappropriate behaviour for young unmarried women. Women had such a negative view of these publications, primarily, because the image of female sexuality represented in them contrasted with the accepted socio-cultural norms of Iranian society. Furthermore, seeing sexual scenes was considered a sin for more religious families, such as Sima's:

> During the time of the Shah, it was really bad. The *Playboy* magazines were sold in the shops. I had only seen the cover page, and it was really bad. It was ordinary in Iran. I knew that it is a sin, so I used to control myself not to look at them, because it is sinful.

Afsaneh—a 58-year-old woman from a traditional, religious and upper middle class family—did not have a television at her parent's house before the Revolution. Furthermore, she remembered that she 'couldn't' even look at pornographic magazines when her high school classmates brought them to school: 'I was very shy. […] Now we have satellite, and sometimes we [with her husband] want to watch [porn] when we are alone, but we can't find any channel [she laughs].' For these traditionally religious classes of Iranian society, forms of media consumption changed after the Revolution. The Islamic Republic's broadcasts legitimised the use of television and radio, which were considered *harâm* in pre-revolutionary time.

After the Revolution, the government took control over all the media distributed in Iran. The contents are checked according to *shari'a* law and approved by the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance. Satellite television is banned by the state. However, as it is impossible for the police to check every building in the country, satellites can be found in many houses (Alikhah 2008). Although websites with sexual content are widely filtered by the government, these have been popular sources of learning about sexuality amongst both generations.

Despite the state's restrictions on media consumption, most of my 1980s generation interviewees said that sex scenes in Hollywood movies were their first encounters with sex or sexual organs. However, there is a notable shift in terms of access to and use of media between those born in the early and late 1980s. Mainly because the number of people with Internet access has 'risen rapidly from the late 1990s. […] By the end of 2006, 11 million people had access to Internet' (Sreberny and Khiabany 2010, pp. 11–13).

The current socio-cultural context is characterised by widely accessible globalised media—that is, media is not only limited to a specific group of society, as it was during the Shah's time.

In the following paragraphs, I discuss the role of Western media in changing and shaping women of these two generations' attitudes about sex and sexual pleasure. It is important to look at how women's sexual relations with their husbands/partners have been shaped by the global images of female and male sexuality, as well as how this media has led women to start questioning and redefining their idea of 'normal' sex.

The Question of 'Normality'

In many 1950s women's descriptions of their sexual relations, men are referred to as 'selfish' beings who are only concerned with their own sexual urges and satisfaction. By using the adjective 'selfish' to describe men's behaviour in sexual relations, women also referred to the socially accepted gender norms and relations that position women in the service of men.

Parvaneh—a 60-year-old housewife from a non-religious, upper middle class family—has a similar attitude towards men. Parvaneh is a distant relative of my grandmother; I met her for the first time in a female gathering at my grandmother's house. When she found out about the topic of my research, she requested to be interviewed. During our conversation, she was more eager to discuss her sexual relations than any other topic:

I didn't like [sex] that much. Generally, I've liked kissing and hugging more. I can have kissing and hugging until morning, but not that part [penetration] [she laughs] because I've always had pains. Until I gave birth [to my first child], I was like a girl [virgin]; it was painful. My husband knew but *kåresh ro mikard* [he did it anyway] and was satisfied, *kheyli zood erzå mishod* [he had premature ejaculation]. It wasn't important for him, women's satisfaction wasn't important for men back then, that women should also ask for it [sexual satisfaction]. Now, they say that women should be satisfied first, but it wasn't like that back then. I thought this was the way it should be.

The Persian expression '*kåresh ro mikard*' that Parvaneh used—and I heard in both generations' descriptions of their partners' behaviour during sexual intercourse—literally means 'he did his job'. This phrase, in addition to putting women in a passive position, equates sex with embarrassing behaviour; the same expression can be used as a polite way of saying someone defecated.

In addition to defining her sexual role as passive, Parvaneh also justified this as 'normal' and 'natural' behaviour: 'I thought this was the way it should be'? Her comments demonstrate that it is considered shameful for women from her socio-cultural background to express sexual desire or initiate sex. For example, Parvaneh explained to me that she prefers not to discuss sex with her husband or ask him to perform as she likes.

However, Parvaneh also described a change in the social understanding of female sexuality, underlining that women are no longer defined as passive sexual beings. She made a distinction between men from her husband's generation and younger men, who care more about their wives' sexual pleasure. She also described how watching Western movies and reading books made her more concerned about her sexual relations and her own sexual satisfaction.

Simin—a 56-year-old housewife from a non-religious, middle class background—also thinks that 'oriental men', especially Iranians, are 'in general very selfish'. She spoke about how such men only think about themselves in sexual relations: 'if one night you don't want [to have sex], they do it anyway. I think a European man would never do the same thing; he respects his wife's *alåyeq* [desires].' Simin has seen that 'European' men in Western movies and television series are more considerate of their wives.

Global images of heterosexual relations challenge 1950s women's perception of 'natural' and 'normal' sex. Through comparing European and Iranian men's sexual behaviour, Parvaneh and Simin questioned their

husband's behaviour during intercourse. Under the influence of such images, these women see sex as not only something to satisfy their husbands' sexual needs but also a source of pleasure for themselves. This contrasts with the socio-cultural context that puts women in a historically inferior position by defining their sexuality as in the service of men. Parvaneh even asked me to draw the location of the clitoris and explain how she could have orgasm like in the movies.

Through comparisons based on the global media's images of heterosexual relations, new gender and heterosexual relations have also been constructed. However, these new normalised images create anxiety for many, as such images can stand in complete contrast with women's own sexual experiences. For instance, Shirin explained: 'sometimes in the movies I watch or the books I read, I feel that I don't have the same experience. I haven't had the orgasm that they talk about.'

During my fieldwork, I spoke with a family consultant at her office in the faculty of psychology at one of Tehran's universities. She mentioned that sex has become more important since the proliferation of the Internet and satellite television channels. The family consultant informed me that, although there are no official statistics, sexual dissatisfaction has become a common reason for divorce.

In 2005, studies on the correlation between sexual satisfaction and divorce in Iran revealed 'that 53% of [women] were dissatisfied with their sexual relationships' (Farnam et al. 2008, p. 161). A similar study on the sexual knowledge of 100 newly-wed couples indicated that 'their knowledge about different aspects of sexuality was very low', despite the fact that issues of sex and sexuality were very important in their marriage (*ibid*., p. 161). This study also pointed to the fact that, due to the lack of official sex education in Iran, the Internet, satellite television and peers are young people's main sources of learning sexuality (Farnam et al. 2008, p. 161).

The family consultant mentioned that she often sees cultural contradictions in referred cases; contradictions between the information and the sub-culture consuming such information. She spoke of new concepts—such as different 'forms of sexual intercourse' [indirectly referring to different sexual positions]—that have entered Iranians' sexual lives, even though 'the culture is not ready to accept them'. As an example, she spoke about a couple that became concerned they were not having enough sex because the films they watched indicated a higher level of sexual activity to be the norm.

The topic of pornography also came up unexpectedly during my interviews with women of both generations. Pornography seems to be more popular amongst women from the mid and late 1980s. Despite the fact that religious education—in families or at schools—teaches that it is forbidden [*harâm*] to look at another's genitalia (whether same sex or opposite sex), there is still a collective experience of watching pornography or listening to those who have. This experience is not limited to non-religious women, however, as I spoke with practising Muslims who had watched pornography either alone, with friends or their husbands. For example, Vahideh—a woman from an upper middle class, religious family—said, 'I always wanted to watch [porn]'. Thus, after her marriage, she asked her husband to get some and 'we watched it together' [she laughs].

While discussing their sex life, women of both generations also referred to pornography's effects on their sexual relations.[3] One of their main complaints was that their husbands compare their sexual relations to what they see in films. For example, Ozra—a 51-year-old divorced beautician from a lower middle class, non-religious family—remembered that her 'husband used to watch [porn]' and compare what he saw to their sexual relationship. He would say, 'in those films, it was like this or that'.

Firouzeh—a 50-year-old woman from an upper middle class, non-religious family—expressed that her husband's pornography habit has ruined their marriage. When he requested some sexual acts that she did not want to perform, and she resisted, he started having sexual relations with other women. She stated that her husband considers porn to be 'educational':

> He told me himself, 'you don't do things as I like'. I have told him that those who make these movies are not doctors. Even if it is for education, then they [those who make it] are sick people. It is not logical, it is sick.

These women expressed that watching porn is considered a masculine practice; one that women do not enjoy. Ozra and Firouzeh both felt embarrassed explaining their husbands' requests, and I felt uncomfortable to further probe this subject. They both referred to specific sexual acts as sickening and disgusting. Even in heterosexual relations, there are culturally and socially constructed acts that are considered 'natural' and 'unnatural'. As Butler argues (1990), social constraints and taboos play a

significant role in regulating the bodily behaviours we perceive as natural and given. As many women have internalised the norms of sexual intercourse, they can see the images represented in pornographic movies as abnormal or inappropriate.

I found similar expressions amongst the younger generation, however they spoke more easily about sexual acts they find 'unnatural' than 1950s women. Nava is a 30-year-old housewife from a religious, middle class family. She married at the age of 23 to her 40-year-old boyfriend. Although she grew up in a religious and traditional family, Nava is no longer a practising Muslim. She spoke about how her husband 'watches porn on satellite television every night. When he comes to bed I am usually asleep, but he wakes me up and asks for sex'. She told me, sometimes 'I am forced to do as he wants':

> He watches a lot [...] and he expects me to act like them. Sorry to say this, but he tells me 'why don't you suck [she uses the Persian term *khordan*] like them?' I don't like sucking, its ugly and I really don't know whether it's right or wrong.

Her questions about right and wrong refer to both the religiousness and naturalness of this specific sexual act. Still, Nava clearly articulated her feelings about oral sex and took a position against it.

There are women from the 1980s generations who indicated that watching porn helped them to see some sexual acts as 'normal' and 'not shameful' behaviour. Shiva is 30 years old from a religious, middle class family, but is no longer a practising Muslim. She described how she first learnt everything about sex from Persian websites, and how the information she gleaned there shaped her idea of sex:

> From 2000-2002, the Internet was not filtered. So there were websites, such as *limoo torsh* [lime] and *toot farangi* [strawberry] that explained sexual topics and gave space for young people to share their own experiences. I used to read them a lot. So in sex nothing was disgusting for me. For me everything was part of sex, as I used to read in magazines, books and websites. Later when I talked to my married female friends, I found out that no, not everything is part of sex [she laughs] (like what?)[She hesitates] Oral sex [she uses the English term] is not very common, many girls don't like it and think it's disgusting, but I don't feel that way.

Shiva's feelings about oral sex show how, through repetition, such acts can become normalised and naturalised. For Shiva's female friends—mostly from religious and traditional families, who either do not have access to such content or have religious barriers to watching movies with sexual scenes—oral sex is still a disgusting behaviour.

Women's divergent attitudes towards this sexual act reflect how specific sexual behaviours are constructed as 'normal' and 'natural' in different discourses. In contrast to her group of friends, Shiva sees oral sex as 'part of sex', mainly because she first learnt about intercourse from pornographic websites not religious or state-sponsored sources.

The younger generation's eagerness to watch pornography and learn more about sex and sexual pleasure highlights the shift in sexual concerns. As previously mentioned, interviews with women of both generations showed that women nowadays are more curious to know how to receive and give pleasure; information solely on different methods of contraception is no longer enough. While watching pornography and Western media might seem empowering, as such help women to question dominant social and cultural perceptions of sex and female sexuality, it also enforces specific norms of heterosexual relations. Therefore, seeing women's increased access to different sources of learning sex and sexuality without considering the normalising effects of such sources simplifies women's sexual behaviour.

In the next section, I discuss the emergence of the new religious discourse in response to Iranians' consumption of global media and the associated sexual anxieties, especially amongst the youth. I discuss how this new discourse aims to speak to a wider spectrum of Iranian society by appropriating the *hadith* and modern sciences. I also look at this discourse's normative and disciplinary effects on the sexual lives of women from different socio-cultural and religious backgrounds.

The Post-Revolutionary Discourse of Sexuality

The Religious Discourse and Women's Perception of Sex

Tamkin, or women's duty to satisfy their husbands' sexual needs, is part of women's religious duty in marriage. *Tamkin* or sexual submission, which is also submission to God's will, is defined according to legal marriage contracts as 'a husband's right and a wife's duty', and is not only limited

to the legal aspect of marriage (Mir-Hosseini 2002, p. 137). According to law, there are two types of *tamkin*: *tamkin-e ám* (general) and *tamkin-e khás* (specific). While the general *tamkin* refers to 'women's recognition of her husband's authority […] as a head of a household', *tamkin-e khás* is defined as 'the woman's readiness for her husband's demands for satisfaction' (Tizro 2013, pp. 101–102). A marriage contract 'defines a default set of fixed rights and obligations' for men and women, which revolve around 'the twin themes of sexual access and compensation[4]' (Mir-Hosseini 2010, p. 47).

A part from the legal aspects of marriage, women define *tamkin* differently in their everyday lives. For instance, Mahnaz believes that God will reward her for submitting to her husband's sexual needs. Mahnaz is a 61-year-old housewife from a traditional and religious family.

> It was always difficult for me. I didn't like it. I've felt sorry for my husband. It was like taking me to be tortured. Like a sick person, I didn't like it. I've been like this all my life, always like this. […] To be honest I've never showed it to my husband. I've asked God for help. He's [her husband] always told me, 'you're so like *mâst* [yoghurt, hinting low energy and cold]'; and I've told him, 'no, a woman feels embarrassed about this [sex]'. He says to me, 'who is closer than a husband' and I've replied, 'I know but I am like this, what can I do'. […] I've always told myself that God gives me more *savâb* [rewards], as it is so torturous for me. Not only is there no pleasure, it is also difficult for me. I don't show it and I even act as my husband likes. Although it's not enough for him, I've tried to be as natural as I could.

In studying the women's mosque movement in Cairo, Mahmood (2005) discusses how women use their bodies as a medium for being pious women. Mahmood (2005) observes that women do not see disciplining their bodies—such as the wearing of *hejab*—as a restriction; rather, women see this as a condition of being a good Muslim woman. There were similarities in my interviewees' religious justifications for *tamkin*; women, like Mahnaz, see *tamkin* as submission to God's will rather than simply sexual submission to their husbands.

Mahnaz believes that God will reward her for satisfying her husband's sexual needs, especially because she does not enjoy it. However, she also referred to accepted social and cultural norms in justifying her passive behaviour during sex. She spoke about how women showing sexual desires, even to their husbands, are not accepted. She has learnt to feel embarrassed about sex and sexual desire, as well as control her feelings during sex and bear it as a religious obligation.

Similar to Mahnaz, women from more religious backgrounds described feeling 'guilty' and sinful for rejecting their husbands' request for sex. Afsaneh, 58 years old, told me that whenever she says 'no' to her husband, she 'apologises' the next night. Homa, 51 years old, said: 'I believe [in *tamkin*], that's why after [I say no to him] I regret it. Other times when I accept, I say "it's only for God and because of my duties", since I don't want it.'

Fatemeh, one of my 1980s interviewees, expressed this guilt very clearly:

> My husband wakes up very early in the morning and he wants to have it. I nag because I don't want to wake up early. Especially since I got pregnant, I say that I will go to hell because at the beginning [of my pregnancy] I didn't want it [sex] at all.
>
>   Nafiseh: So what do you do?
>   Fatemeh: I try at least to satisfy him. […] I feel bad when I don't do it. I've told him [about my feeling] and he keeps telling me 'don't worry, I'm [sexually] satisfied'.

Mitra—a 32-year-old, unmarried woman from a wealthy, traditional and religious family—has a similar attitude towards sex: 'a woman can say that she is not in the mood, but if her husband insists she should *tamkin*. It's her duty. If [she rejects and] a man commits adultery, then it's her sin. […] There is no problem in Islam, we have difficulties because we don't follow it correctly.'

However, in contrast to Mahmood's argument, women's performance of *tamkin* or sexual submission to their husbands is not due only to religion; as Mitra's comments and other women's sense of guilt show, it is also about the socially accepted notion that men have more sexual needs. In other words, performance of *tamkin* is not only about being good Muslims, it is also done to preserve marriage relations. Here, the religious rule of *tamkin*, as Mitra put it, is seen as confirmation of the 'natural', 'normal' biological difference between male and female sexuality.

However, women's attitudes towards *tamkin* differ between the older and younger generations. Women of the younger generation who believe in *tamkin*, like Fatemeh, do not see it as a sexual submission; rather, they see it as a way of showing love and affection. Therefore, for women of the younger generations, 'guilt' is not only about behaving sinfully as defined in *shari'a*, but also about feelings of sadness and shame for rejecting their

husbands' request. I see this change in relation to younger generations' perception of marriage as companionship based on romantic love and shifts in the religious discourse and education.

In the context of *tamkin*, different disciplinary discourses work together to ensure that couples' sexual needs are satisfied at home. While discussing their perceptions of *tamkin*, my interviewees highlighted the religious and scientific reasons used to justify women's sexual submission to their husbands. In the following section, I look at how the state uses scientific discourses to validate the differences between male and female sexualities.

However, during my fieldwork in Tehran, I noticed a change in the state's use of religious justifications to encourage *tamkin*. For the state and its religious discourse, *tamkin* is still the main issue; couples' sexual dissatisfaction (mainly men) is considered a source of social problems, such as divorce and infidelity. Because the family is defined as the basic unit in the construction of Islamic community, preserving the wellbeing of the family has been crucial to controlling and regulating sexuality.

In recent media representations of *tamkin* and state-sponsored classes for married couples, there is an emphasis on women's active role in sex. Sex is defined as a source of pleasure for men and women. While male sexuality is still associated with greater sexual needs and desires, women's enjoyment of sex is also touched upon. Indeed, a woman who sees sex as merely her religious duty, and performs simply to satisfy her husband, is no longer a desirable image for younger men. Therefore, the religious discourse redefines the image of the stereotypical, sexually passive woman and stands in contrast with the Iranian context's socio-cultural norms of female sexuality. As a result, women are encouraged to be unashamed of sex, to show their affection and see sex as an enjoyable experience for themselves and their husbands.

The following example clearly shows how traditional religious advice about *tamkin* has been selected and contextualised in relation to society's new demands. In January 2012, I attended a one-day workshop organised by *Sâzmân-e Tablighât-e Eslâmi* [Islamic Development Organisation[5]] for married women. The workshop was held in one of the Organisation's institutes, which is situated in a historically religious neighbourhood in southeast Tehran. This institute organises regular lessons in Quran, hosts other religious education classes, and holds counselling sessions for married couples. This specific workshop is held two or three times a year and offers sex education to married and engaged women. I arrived around 9 am and noticed that there were only a few women not wearing *châdor*.

The entrance was crowded as the organisers were checking marriage licences before letting people enter the seating area.[6] I was amazed by the number of young women, mostly in their twenties, who showed up for the event, as well as their eagerness to learn and curiosity about sex. Based on the content of the lecture, I realised that most of these women were either engaged or in their first year of marriage. However, I was also told that there is a short session specifically for engaged women, which addresses sexual relations during the engagement period—from the signing of the marriage contract, *aqd*, to the wedding ceremony.

The main speaker was a religious consultant; she has a programme on national television and organises similar other governmental institutions. Her main aim, as she described, was to teach women how to improve their sexual lives. She repeatedly criticised the cultural perception of sex as a shameful and embarrassing act by quoting various *hadith* from Shi'a Imams that celebrate the joy in sexual intimacy for both men and women. She advised women to wear 'sexy' clothes at home, act shamelessly in the bedroom, and try new sexual positions to increase their sexual appeal. A young woman from the audience responded loudly, 'but this is very animalistic'. The lecturer interrupted her, and shrilly replied: 'don't ever say that again. [She giggles] It is indeed very humane and full of pleasure.' She warned that women 'should not look at sex as an animal act', as this is how women lose their husbands to 'second wives'.

However, she did mention several times that it is a man's religious right to have more than one wife; women can only compete with second or temporary wives by making their sex life more attractive for their husbands. For instance, in the Q&A session, an anonymous questioner asked: 'My husband wants to have anal sex, but I cannot, because I have constipation.' The speaker answered without hesitation, 'it is his right to take a second wife if you cannot satisfy him the way he wants'.

She also mentioned that wives must never say no to their husbands' sexual requests; otherwise, their place would be in hell. However, the speaker also emphasised: '*Tamkin* is your only religious responsibility in marriage. You shouldn't exhaust yourself with housework or working outside the home.' This was an implicit criticism of women with careers outside the home, particularly in mixed gender environments. For her, 'a female secretary' is simply a metaphor for a second wife; it is the mistress and loose women who are the real threat to the *nezâm-e khânevâde* [familial system] in Iranian society.

Her argument was based on the traditional religious discourse that highly values female sexual submission to husbands. However, she encouraged her young audience to look at sex not simply as their religious duty but as an exciting and pleasurable part of marriage. The lecturer encouraged women to play an active role during sex and experience new ways of giving and gaining pleasure. She defined sex in contrast to the general cultural view of shame and embarrassment, trying to convince her audience that openness to different sexual positions is not degrading or 'animalistic'.

Currently, there are many religious programmes on national television and radio that address issues of sex between married couples. Even in the workshop, the lecturer encouraged women to watch a national television programme where a clergyman discusses marriage and sexual relations. I once watched the programme live and was amazed by the cleric's explicit language when responding to listener questions about their sexual problems.

At that time, the programme had a Thursday daytime airing and a significant audience. I also heard about this programme in conversations with other religious women. This was interesting for me, as I do not remember seeing programmes such as this on national television in the 1990s. The state's production of such programmes demonstrates the extent to which satisfying Iranians' sexual needs at home and controlling their sexual behaviour in public have become central issues for policy makers and the dominant religious discourse.

However, changes in the religious discourse are also changing religious women's sexual lives, as new concepts—such as mutual satisfaction and legitimising different ways of gaining pleasure in heterosexual relations— are being introduced. In this context, the religious discourse is both simultaneously regulatory and emancipatory for young religious women. While recent changes in religious education aim to control sexual relations in the Iranian public sphere by encouraging *tamkin,* they also legitimise women's role in sex and their right to pleasure.

However, in order to compete with different sources of learning sexuality and appeal to a wider audience, the state is forced to employ a scientific discourse in its attempts to legitimise its religious sexual politics. As I discuss in the next section, it is in this context that authorising a sex education DVD and allowing its distribution gains particular significance.

Combining Hadith *with Science*

There is a tendency towards the 'scientification' and 'clinicalisation' of sexuality in the sexual knowledge produced in post-revolutionary Iran, which is based 'mostly on Western scientific sources'—from popular psychology to scholarly works in psychiatry and medicine (Shahidian 2008, p. 123). This use of science has helped the Islamic Republic create its own discourse of sexuality in order to regulate and control the sexual lives of its citizens.

For example, in both university family planning courses and marriage counselling sessions, the language used is that of science and the information is represented as fact. These classes present the binary understanding of female and male sexualities, referring to biological and psychological differences between the sexes. Hoda's account shows how sexological information is appropriated by the state in order to reinforce and justify the normalised understanding of passive female sexuality. Hoda is a 22-year-old, unmarried university student from a middle class, religious background. She spoke about the information she received in her family planning classes at university:

> A boy has sexual needs beginning at puberty, while for a girl it starts after her wedding. Before that, she only has emotional attractions to men, not sexual. When she has a relationship, then she starts having those needs and desires, so men have more desires. […] I think Iranian women have learnt to suppress their needs. Sexual needs are one of them, but for men it's easier.

The binary understanding of male/female sexuality, where men are active sexual beings and women are passive, has been a regulating force in controlling female sexuality. Many feminist scholars have shown how, in Western thought, binary understandings of female/male sexuality and biological differences have been used to normalise heterosexuality and regulate gender hierarchies (Ortner 1972; Rich 1980). Biology 'has had the longest and most tenacious grip on conceptions of sexuality in modern times' because it achieves the 'privileged authority and legitimation reserved for "science" in modern cultures' (Segal 1994, p. 73). While the knowledge produced by the scientific discourse is considered 'as eternally true or valid' and free from all 'political investment' that construct them, it is applied to preserve and reproduce specific relations of power (Grosz 1994, pp. 28–30).

As Hoda mentioned, science is used as further proof of the already known differences between the sexes. In addition, the general cultural view associates male sexuality with uncontrollable sexual urges, and thus gives men more sexual freedom. In order to allow men such freedom, young girls are socialised from puberty to understand that men are like 'wolves'; they have no control over their urges and, consequently, young women's behaviour must be disciplined. The Persian idiom *jâme'e por az gorge* [the society is full of wolves] is a common, everyday expression. Although 'wolves' does not directly signify men, the idiom is most often invoked as a warning to young unmarried women about the 'dangers' of being in the public sphere and coming into contact with men.

Moreover, young girls are socialised to believe that sex and physical relationships are important for men; girls are more 'emotional' and do not enjoy sex as much. For example, Azam—a 51-year-old woman from a non-religious, lower middle class family—said while laughing: 'I never wanted to seduce my husband.' She further explained:

> I have always had this feeling, why do we need this sexual relation? I've wanted to be more like a friend to my husband, but it's not possible, especially because men are different and women look at sexual relations differently. You know that men are different, don't you? [She pauses and waits for my reply] Men only think about sexual relations while women think more emotionally.

Although from a completely different socio-cultural background, Mehri—a 51-year-old high school teacher from a religious, upper middle class family—also expressed a similar opinion. A few years ago, she lost her husband and now lives with her two daughters in an upper middle class neighbourhood in northern Tehran. She remembered: 'my needs were limited to physical contacts that weren't sexual [for me]. It's more emotional, like when you hug someone strongly but not like [sexual]. [….] I wanted the physical contact to stay at that level and not go further [to sexual intercourse]'. She also added that since her husband's death, she only lacks his 'emotional support'.

I found similar references in my interviews with 1980s women. Mahboubeh, 26 years old from a religious, middle class family, explained that she enjoys 'the sense of dependency' that she feels during sex with her husband:

[Sexual satisfaction] is not that important to me, I like the sense of dependency. But to be honest, my husband sometimes asks 'you are horny again?' I can become like this, but it's mainly when I feel a lack from him, if I don't see him for a few days I feel that we are becoming distant from each other. During these times [during sex], I feel that I belong to him and he belongs to me. Physical satisfaction is not that important, the emotional part is more important.

The scientific and biological information is not new in this socio-cultural context, as both men and women are already familiar with the binary perception of male and female sexualities. However, the offering of such information in official education and through scientific sources legitimises the traditional perception of active male and passive female sexualities. As I discuss in women's narratives of menstruation, younger generations, armed with a scientific education, differentiate between 'scientific' information and the 'verbal' advice they receive from female friends and relatives. While information found in legitimate sources is seen as 'truth', women question the accuracy of traditional advice as it pertains to their body and sexuality. Furthermore, as shown throughout this book, women see changes in their bodily experiences as a result of sexual information received in official education and state-sponsored publications.

Still, science is appropriated to justify men's superior position in gender relations and ensure men's unlimited access to sex. The scientific language of justifications helps the state speak to a wider spectrum of Iranians, including educated, non-religious young people who have access to other sources of learning sexuality. However, as I show in the following example, while scientific knowledge is represented as factual and true, the state selects and appropriates this knowledge in order to regulate youth sexual behaviour based on religious tradition and Islamic ethics.

In the summer of 2011, a DVD about 'marriage and sexual health'[7] was widely distributed in pharmacies across Tehran. The DVD is authorised by both the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance and is suitable for those aged 18 and above.[8] The DVD covers 'sexual hygiene, sexual behaviour, *âmizesh* [intercourse], sexually transmitted diseases, sexual impotencies and family planning'. Male and female professionals in the fields of gynaecology, psychiatry and pathology discuss each topic. The first part of the DVD is instructional, and is intended to help young couples increase sexual satisfaction in their marital relations. The main speaker is a famous psychiatrist, who is also a lecturer at the Iran University of Medical Science.

He starts by giving advice about how men and women should take care of their personal hygiene and beauty as preparation for sex. He describes his sources as based on 'global knowledge, Islamic *hadith* and our cultural values', and adds that 'there aren't really differences between global knowledge and *shari'a* about sex'.

For example, he emphasises that in order to enjoy sex and attain pleasure, sex should only happen between married couples. He describes sex as a 'sacred relationship' that can only be enjoyed in a marital relation. He refers to the name of the DVD, '*âshnâ-ye mahboub*' or 'Beloved Companion', and indicates that 'companion' signifies 'someone that you know and have feelings for, not some stranger', highlighting that 'having sexual relations with prostitutes is not pleasant for either men or women'.

While teaching young couples how to increase their sexual satisfaction, he defines and legitimises sex in the framework of heterosexual marriage through the use of scientific results. This representation of sexual satisfaction is in accordance with *shari'a* and in line with the state's policy of regulating sexual relations amongst younger generations.

He gives explicit explanations, without showing any sexual scenes, about foreplay and how both men and women reach orgasm. He spoke about women's sexual pleasure and desire for sex. He explains to men that they can have sex 'whenever your wife is ready, not whenever you want'. In addition, he asks women to play an active role during sexual intercourse, and criticises women 'who only lie down without any movement during sex'. According to him, it is important for both men and women to participate actively during sexual intercourse, as it ensures a more pleasurable experience for both.

His emphasis on women's active role during sexual intercourse is similar to the advice young women received at the state-organised workshop for married women. While the workshop has primarily religious content and the DVD relies mostly on science, they both repeat and reproduce the same 'normalised' image of heterosexual relations. The DVD and workshop both approach sexuality as one of the aspects of marital life; define sexual acts only in the context of heterosexual relations between married couples; present masturbation as forbidden and harmful; and emphasise that sexual acts are *harâm* on specific occasions, such as during a wife's menstruation and in times of fasting. In addition, they both still posit men as biologically and naturally having different sexual needs.

Both the workshop and DVD acknowledge that reproduction is not the primary goal of marital relations these days. In addition, in contrast to

traditional religious sex manuals, both emphasise women's sexual desire and pleasure. It seems 'the primary concern [becomes] creating chaste-but-somewhat-satisfied women while perpetuating and enhancing men's pleasure' (Shahidian 2008, p. 106).

However, in contrast to the workshop, the content of the DVD is not only limited to married women; the speaker advises both men and women, whether married or not, and considers increasing sexual satisfaction as a concern and a responsibility of both part. Indeed, this DVD is very interesting: it is the first time the state has distributed such materials to the wider society. In order to speak to people from different religious and educational backgrounds, the main speaker avoids using jargon or professional terms. The image of the famous psychiatrist is used to legitimise the knowledge presented in the DVD for the modern, educated audience, who also have access to other sources of learning sexuality—such as the Internet and so on.

The same discourse shapes the DVD and workshop, their main purpose being to regulate young people's sexual behaviour and address new sexual concerns. By redefining the traditional religious rules of sexuality and combining them with science, this post-revolutionary discourse of sexuality creates a legitimate space for women to discuss issues of sex, sexual pleasure, satisfaction and problems in sexual relations.

Conclusion

The medicalisation of the discourse of sexuality should be seen as a response to the sexual anxiety caused by increased access to the Internet and satellite television. Although the state widely filters and controls these sources, they have still become popular ways of learning sexuality, especially amongst the youth. I showed how Western pornography is creating new categories of 'normal' and 'natural' sex, effecting Iranians' sexual lives.

The medicalisation of sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran has also affected the language of the dominant religious discourse, as an emphasis is now placed on linking scientific findings and *shari'a* when it comes to differences between male and female sexualities. In the workshop, the lecturer also mentioned that it is scientifically proven that women only need to satisfy their sexual desire every four nights, as opposed to men. This is in accordance with Islamic law, which allows men to have up to four wives so that both men and women's sexual needs are satisfied. Women are also encouraged to approach and seek advice from professionals—such as psychiatrists—if they have difficulties in sexual relations.

In contrast to previous religious literature, the combination of *hadith* and science in post-revolutionary Iran recognises women's active role in sexual relations and sexual satisfaction. Representing sexual relations as a source of pleasure for both men and women also stands at odds with the general cultural view of passive female sexuality. In addition, distributing a sexual guidebook in DVD format across the wider society—irrespective of the marital status—shows how, in order to regulate and control society's sexual anxieties, the state is also redefining its sexual norms.

As demonstrated thus far, the state's changing sexual policies and dominant religious discourse creates a contradictory situation for its young audience. While the use of scientific and medical language in state-sponsored publications and religious programmes is intended to ensure men's unlimited access to sex at home and control sexual relations outside marriage, the use of such language also changes the sexual lives of more religious and conservative classes by introducing new concepts such as mutual sexual satisfaction. In addition, the use of such language creates a legitimate space for women from different religious backgrounds to reference their sexual concerns to both religious and professional sources.

Therefore, in order to analyse women's responses to the Islamic basis of state sexual policies, it is important to acknowledge the state's new strategies and their complicated and contradictory effects on women's lives.

This chapter is an important background for the rest of this book. Throughout the remaining chapters, while discussing their sexual experiences and perceptions of female sexuality, women also highlight the role of the scientific discourse of sexuality in regulating and disciplining their bodies.

NOTES

1. The state's sexual policies have changed since I finished my fieldwork in Tehran. Ayatollah Khamenei publically announced that the family planning campaign was a 'mistake' and 'we have to increase the population to 150 million'. As a result, the Iranian Parliament abolished the laws limiting social welfare for families with more children (Deutsche Welle 2013). During the final months of Ahmadinejad's presidency, the state also increased female employees' maternity leave to nine months (ibid.). Since then, families have been encouraged to have more children; women have been encouraged to resign from full-time work and focus on their 'main' role of raising children; and, the state has limited couples' access to contraceptives. The effects of

these changes on women's sexual lives needs further analysis, especially to see how women respond to these new policies in the current economic and social situation.

2. During my interviews with women of both generations, the word 'sex' was rarely used; even the Farsi equivalents for marital or sexual relations—such as '*nazdiki*', '*zanâshooyi*' or '*râbete-ye jensi*—were seldom spoken. They referred to sex using the word '*râbete*' [relation], 'that thing' or 'it'. Especially when interviews took place in public spaces, such as coffee shops or parks, women seemed alert to the people around them, lowered their voices, and avoided using any words that referred to sex.

3. It is important to differentiate between pornography and explicit sexual scenes in Hollywood movies or television series. For the 1980s generation, porn means pornographic films; for the 1950s women, 'watching porn' means both sex scenes in films and pornography. The younger generations seem to be more aware of the meaning of the word 'porn', which is the same word used in Persian. However, my interviewees from the older generation sometimes referred to pornography as '*film-e bad* [bad movie]', which could signify different types of movies with sexual scenes.

4. Compensation or *nafaqa* is the husband's duty to provide his wife with shelter, food and clothing.

5. According to the organisation's website, the Islamic Development Organisation was established after the Islamic Revolution 'with the aim of developing great culture of the real Islam and manifesting the spiritual life and disseminating the belief & faith values'. For more information, see: http://old.ido.ir//en/en-default.aspx

6. The workshop started at around 10 am and continued until 5 pm. While the event was not free, it was very cheap: I paid about three US Dollars at the entrance, which included lunch.

7. Âshnâ-ye mahboub: Film-e Râhnamâ-ye Zanâshooyi va Behdâsht-e Jensi (2011).

8. However, the release of this DVD was not advertised or publicised in any way. I only heard about it through one of my interviewees, and later the DVD became a popular topic of conversation amongst Iranians on social networking sites, such as Facebook.

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Narratives of Virginity

Introduction

In the recent literature on gender and sexuality in the Middle East, the articulation of body and sexuality is seen as important to resisting social norms. In a society where women are forced to remain virgin until marriage, premarital sexual relations are seen as a form of defiance and challenging social controls over women's bodies and sexuality (Farahani 2007; Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2008). For example, Yaghoobi (2012) argues that young Iranian women view their bodies as a site of resistance to the government. Similarly, El-Feki (2013) discusses how the changes in people's intimate lives could lead to social reforms in Egypt.

Over the last few decades, the socio-cultural changes raise concerns about the sexual activities of unmarried youth in Iran. The age of marriage has increased, 'the costs of permanent marriage are high' and the rate of 'unemployed youth has also increased', making marriage unaffordable for many young Iranians (Farahani et al. 2011, p. 31). A number of large-scale quantitative researches have been done in Tehran and other major cities, by both the government and academic institutions, to discover and analyse the factors influencing and shaping the youths' sexual behaviour. For example, in a study of 2000 female college students in Tehran between 2005 and 2006, Farahani, Cleland and Mehryar discovered that 52 per cent of their sample group 'had boyfriends, 23% had had some type of sexual contact

and 10% had had intercourse' (2011, p. 35). Based on their results, they argue that girls from 'liberal families'—with higher income, educational level and access to Internet and satellite television—are more likely to have premarital relations with the opposite sex (Farahani et al. 2011, p. 35).

In both the literature that categorises the youths' sexual behaviour as a form of defiance against the state or social control and the studies that aim to discover how the state might better control the youths' premarital sexual behaviour, there is a link between young people's level of religiosity and their sexual behaviour. Consequently, those who have premarital relations are associated with more liberal backgrounds. For instance, by using a sample of 200 male college students in Tehran, Shirazi and Morowatisharifabad show a relationship between a student's religiosity and their 'self-efficacy in refusing sex': 'students who had higher religious scores […] were more likely never to have had a sexual relation' (2009, p. 34).

In this chapter, I look at how women weigh family, religion and culture in the context of their lives and in relation to having/not having premarital sex. In addition, I examine how women from the two generations define the concepts of virginity and marriage. How do women negotiate or challenge the rules of female virginity in their lives? Does having premarital sexual relations mean that women are defying the norm of female virginity?

In this chapter, I look at the role of different disciplinary discourses that control and construct the norm of female virginity. I show the importance of not simply categorising women who have premarital sexual relations on the basis of their religiosity. I argue that women's economic situation, familial relations, religious beliefs and the meaning of marriage in their lives are factors that influence their premarital sexual relations. Through comparing the experiences of the 1950s and 1980s generations, I discuss the changes and similarities in social norms and customs that regulate women's virginity in Iranian society.

Socialising Women About Virginity

Similar to the Turkish language, in Persian 'girl is synonym with virgin'; although there are other equivalent terms, such as *bâkere*, *dokhtar* [girl] is commonly used for virgin (Parla 2001, p. 66). From childhood, young girls are socialised about the importance of virginity in their lives. Other women impart the trope that in order to uphold their family's reputation and find a good husband from a respectable family, young women must retain their *dokhtaregi* [being a girl] until their wedding night.

I came to understand that young girls' first encounter with the notion of female virginity often occurs in childhood, through the control and disciplining of their physical activities. From childhood, young girls learn and internalise how to live with their virginal bodies by limiting physical activities considered inappropriate for young unmarried women. For example, many of my 1950s interviewees remembered their mothers' and grandmothers' warnings about specific activities—such as jumping, falling from a bicycle and so on. Women described how, without explanation, they were told to protect their *dokhtaregi* [being a girl] while playing. Fifty-one-year-old Azam remembered that she would climb and walk on the old bricks of a wall as a child: 'my mother used to say, "don't do this, you will fall and *dokhtaregit mirize*" [you will drop your hymen]. I would continue what I was doing [she laughs], and just reply "*khob berize*" [let it drop, so what]'.

The fear of lost virginity is used as a tool to regulate and control girls' behaviour. Through mothers and grandmothers' stories of falling and seeing blood in their underwear, girls also learn a connection between 'lost virginity' and blood. As discussed in Chap. 5, mothers often use the start of menstruation as an opportunity to further intensify the young pubescent girls' fear of seeing blood. Mahnaz's story shows the trauma and fear that women of the 1950s would have experienced in such cases. Mahnaz is 61 years old and from a traditional and religious family. I met her at her apartment on an old, narrow street in Gholhak, in northern Tehran. Her parents' home was close to Tehran's Grand Bazaar, but Mahnaz has been living in Gholhak since her marriage. She described herself as very shy during high school, even with regard to her mother. One day, Mahnaz got locked in a classroom and had to jump out a two metre-high window to escape. The fall caused pain in her abdomen; she went to the toilet and saw blood on her underwear.

> I knew that on your wedding night you bleed, and if you jump your hymen could break, but I don't remember who told me that. I told my friend [that I saw blood] and she said, 'definitely tell your mother and ask her to take you to a doctor'. Everything went black in front of my eyes. How could I tell my mum? I was very shy. Then, I told one of my engaged friends and she said, 'you think breaking the hymen is so simple?' I kept it to myself until my wedding. One week after my engagement [marriage contract], I felt more comfortable so I cried and told my mum. Even now, when I remember, I want to cry. She took me to a doctor. The doctor examined me and said 'don't worry you're healthy'.

For Mahnaz, blood signified damage to both her body and reputation. She explained that she did not know about the hymen or why it should bleed, she only knew that blood is a sign of ruptured or broken hymen. After the examination, the female doctor explained to Mahnaz that there are different types of hymen and some women do not bleed.

Most of my 1950s generation interviewees knew nothing about their genitalia. Many of these women said they did not know the location of the hymen and were even too scared to check themselves or use a mirror to find out. These women only knew that they should avoid certain physical activities, which boys were free to enjoy, in order to insure themselves (i.e. their hymen) for their wedding night. Such a view creates a contradiction: women see the hymen as part of their body and, at the same time, an external 'thing'; an object outside their control that they must protect.

The 1950s women whose mothers and grandmothers warned them about such things now criticise the older generation's gullibility and fear of the easily broken hymen. For example, 55-year-old Laleh remembers that her mother used to warn her that it was dangerous for a girl to jump from a balcony. She now thinks: 'It wasn't like someone had lost her virginity this way, but back then *in chizhâ too zehneshoon moondeh bood* [these things were stuck in their mind]. They used to scare us that if you jump, God forbid, you might break your virginity.' This description of the older generation also shows how women internalised the norm of female virginity; how they learnt to discipline their behaviour and perform according to the norm. Then, the women of Laleh's mother's generation passed their own mothers/grandmothers' advice to the next generation without questioning it. Through performing and repeating the norm, the older generation acknowledged that limiting girls' physical activities was a part of their gender role and identity.

Fewer of my 1980s interviewees received such advice from their mothers. This shift, as discussed in the previous chapter, was mainly due to increased access to learning resources on women's bodies and physiology. However, there are still cases of young girls being banned from specific forms of sport by their families. For instance, a high school friend of mine had to stop taking horseback riding lessons after only a few sessions because her mother's friend, a gynaecologist, warned: 'it is a dangerous sport for a girl, as riding can break the hymen.' The role of the gynaecologist, and her scientific and medical knowledge, is key to legitimising the 'dangers' of horseback riding for unmarried women. My friend was from an upper middle class family and, although highly educated, her mother was convinced; my friend also accepted this very easily.

As shown throughout this chapter, younger generations often justify their compliance with female virginity norms through the mantra that it brings 'no harm.' My friend, for example, did not resist her mother's decision because she believed her mother wanted the best for her. Indeed, in a context where marriage is central and girls are taught the importance of an intact hymen to their marriage opportunities, resisting or refusing to perform according to norms is not necessarily empowering. This aspect of virginity, which problematises the search for agency in bodily behaviours that resist the social norms of female virginity in the Iranian context, is highlighted in the following sections.

In the next part I discuss the cultural and religious aspects of virginity in women's narratives. I argue that women's sexual behaviour depends on how they weigh and approach these two aspects in the context of their own lives.

The Social Aspects of Virginity

Laleh made a distinction between her religious beliefs and 'familial traditions' in her attitude towards virginity; she emphasises on the social and cultural importance of virginity for young unmarried women. Laleh is a 55-year-old, retired employee who was raised in a non-religious, middle class family. While I sit at her kitchen table and watch her prepare lunch, we begin our conversation. She lives with her husband and three children—two boys and one girl—on the third floor of a four-storey building in a middle class, north Tehran neighbourhood. While we talk, her teenage daughter and niece are in the other room talking and laughing. The kitchen door is open and, occasionally, Laleh lowers her voice to make sure they cannot hear us. Her apartment is simply furnished and looks old. She removes her dark blue *mânto* and *rusari*, revealing simple clothes and no makeup. She later described that she only has a high school diploma; due to their economic situation, she had to work and could not continue her studies. Her husband is three years her senior, and they married through *khâstegâri*.[1]

> We really believed in these things [virginity]. They have told us, and in our family it was *eyb* [shame] if girl wasn't a virgin. Even though we didn't wear *hijab*, we observed the traditions, said our prayers and fasted [during Ramadan]. Maybe it is strange when I say that we used to wear *mini-jupe* [very short skirt], but we believed in these traditional things. A girl should be a virgin and go to her husband's home in a white dress; then, she should go to her second home [in the other world] while wearing white dress[2] [shroud]. […] We didn't know about sexual relations, but we knew about virginity.

In describing her family's beliefs, Laleh refers to accepted social and cultural norms. While Laleh still believes that a girl should be chaste until her wedding night, she justifies it as a social norm instead of a religious belief. Similar to Laleh, I observed that women of both generations draw distinction between religious beliefs and cultural customs in the context of virginity. For most of these women, virginity is a social and cultural concept; women from non-religious backgrounds also believe that it is socially expected for women to remain virgins until their wedding night.

I met Elham in her office at one of Tehran's universities. Twenty-nine years old and from a religious, upper middle class family, Elham lives with her mother and older brother in one of Tehran's wealthy northern neighbourhoods; her father passed away a few years ago. In her office, she wears a colourful *rusari* and a short, tight *mânto*. According to the university's regulations, Elham must wear a *châdor* when entering the university. However, she also prefers to wear *châdor* on many other occasions, as she finds it 'chic' and 'elegant'. She described herself as 'open' and 'comfortable' with her male colleagues and classmates, but does not call any of them 'boyfriend'. Although familiar with religious education, Elham argued that the importance of virginity in Iranian society is due to its social implications, not the religious ban on premarital sexual relations:

> It is not a religious thing. If you are living in a good, traditional family and the society is traditional and you want to find a good husband and have a good marriage, yes, you should keep it. It is the law in such a society, but if you're living in a Western society where it is not a taboo, then you can have experiences before marriage. […] In Iran, it damages you because if a man himself has had [sexual] relations but when he wants to marry, he marries a virgin. It is a rule whether you like it or not.

Although Elham is from a religious background and is still a practising Muslim, she sees virginity as a social rule of Iran's socio-cultural context. For her, virginity is an unwritten law that girls should follow if they want 'a good marriage'. Elham locates virginity in the context of her societal/familial expectations, leaving one to deduce that she would have acted differently if living in another country. In addition, by arguing that virginity is not religious, Elham refers to the double standard of virginity in the Iranian context. Like Elham, women of both generations believe that marriage is the only way a girl can ensure a fair exchange for her virginity.

Not only is premarital sex more socially acceptable for men, it is also easier for them to satisfy their sexual curiosity; unlike girls, there are no

physical indications of men's virginity, so men can have a variety of sexual experiences before marriage without anyone's knowledge. Moreover, many of the younger generation reminded me that though men are all having sexual relations, they 'lie' when they say that virginity is not important for them and they will marry a virgin girl. Amongst secular, modern youth in Tehran, Varzi observed that although young men 'do not think any less of girlfriends who agree to have sex' and their 'attitudes towards premarital relationships' is different from their parents' generation, they still 'want to marry a woman whose hymen is intact unless they deflowered the girl in the first place' (2006, p. 170).

Amongst 1950s generation, women also express that they want their sons to marry a virgin girl or a girl they have deflowered themselves. For example, 60-year-old Parvaneh, who is from an upper middle class, non-religious family, describes: 'Alhamdulillah [thanks God], my girls were virgins when they married. […] As a mother, I'd like to find a girl [virgin] for my son; not a girl, I am sorry to say, who has been with other men'. When I ask about her son, what happens if he has been with other girls, she responded without hesitation: 'If he is with the girl he is marrying [then it is fine]. My son might have been with hundreds of girls, but [she emphasises] the girl he is marrying shouldn't be with anyone else before him'.

Due to this double standard, women—especially those who have premarital sex—are often selective about what information they share with their partners about their past. For instance, Elham said that, if she had premarital sexual relations, she would not 'oblige [herself] to tell the truth to her future husband.' She even went so far as to criticise girls who do share 'everything' with their husbands:

> Whenever a girl tries to be 'intellectual' and decides to tell him the truth, it is a black spot in the mind of an Iranian man, which damages their relationship. So it is better not to tell. Why do you insist on telling him everything? Does he share his previous relationships with you?!

Elham describes women who do not perform according to the norm and talk about their previous relations with their future husband as 'intellectual girls'. However, she believes that being 'intellectual' does not work in the Iranian social context; honesty about virginity damages women's relations. Shiva, a 29-year-old woman from a religious, middle class background, is one such 'intellectual' girl. She told her boyfriend the truth about her virginity and was shocked by his reaction:

> He asked me, 'have you had sex?' And I told him 'yes.' He was offended and asked, 'why did you tell me [the truth]?' I said, 'did you want me to lie?' Then he simply told me, 'it is not acceptable for a woman to reveal this so easily.' He was educated and we were the same age. I told him, 'it is okay if your father thinks this way, because it wasn't customary back then, but it's really painful that you think this way.' Then he said, 'no, it is normal. Your way of thinking is abnormal even if you aren't [virgin]. Be clever, don't let anyone find out. Don't say it and act as if you don't have any experience.'

Shiva's account confirms the importance of virginity for men, even those who have premarital sexual relations themselves. Shiva's boyfriend believes that young unmarried women with sexual experience should conceal their previous relations and pretend to be virginal, sexually unaware women.

As Shiva's reaction highlights, the perpetuation of the norm of female sexuality and double standard of virginity creates a contradictory position for women who engage in premarital sexual relations: men want premarital sexual relations, but also want to engage in such with virgins. Therefore, women must pretend to be virgins even though their boyfriends could easily discover the truth (e.g. if there is no blood after penetrative sex, etc.). In order to conceal their past relations, women also use techniques—such as hymen-repair surgery—that create a contradictory positionality for them; I return to this later in the chapter. It is important to note that although the double standard of virginity is widespread amongst different sectors of Iranian society, not all men think like Shiva's boyfriend. His attitude towards female virginity should not be generalised to all Iranian men.

Virginity as a Bargaining Tool

Similar to findings from other Middle Eastern contexts (Cindoglu 2000; Baxter 2007; El-Feki 2013; Mernissi 2000; Sa'ar 2004), one of the main consequences of this double standard on Iranian women's lives is that premarital sex reduces women's chances of marriage. Women of different social, religious and economic backgrounds from both generations expressed that premarital sexual relations would negatively affect their marriageability. Forty-nine-year-old Hajar, who is from a lower middle class, uneducated and non-religious family, exclaimed with a look of shock: 'Who will marry her? A girl who is not virgin in Iran, no one will marry her'.

In order to ensure a good marriage, mothers play an active role in controlling daughters' relations with men. Some 1980s women, mostly unmarried from non-religious backgrounds, described an unspoken contract between mothers and daughters. This contract is based on the mutual understanding of the double standard of virginity and the importance of virginity for men. While mothers give their daughters permission to date freely, they expect them to avoid any form of sexual contact that might damage their virginity. Similar to Joseph's (1999) use of dynamic of love/power in describing relationships between brothers and sisters in Lebanon, I also observe that young women see and justify their parents' control over their sexual relations as a way of 'protecting' them, even in cases when young women do not believe in virginity and see the norm as a challenge to their rights over their body and sexuality. The love/power dynamic as Joseph (1999) argues complicates the simple binary that posits men as authority, thus privileged, and women as suppressed by authority. Because, as she observed, women realised that submission to their brothers' expectations will ensure their brothers' much needed, life-long support and protection (Joseph 1999, pp. 126–127).

Ensieh—a 26-year-old graduate student from a non-religious, middle class, traditional family—put it, 'having sexual relations is like abusing their trust, I feel like a hypocrite'. According to Ensieh, 'the institution of family still exists in our society, and establishes your position. […] If I didn't want to marry or I wanted to migrate abroad, I might not have observed it at all'. Hence, in her current relationship, the bodily and sexual contacts between herself and her boyfriend are limited to kissing and hugging. For Ensieh, virginity is *hazine* [a price] that a woman pays for her family's support in marriage. Although aware of her own contradiction, she repeated her position several times: she does not believe in virginity, it is a 'humiliation of her rights over her body and sexuality', but she has to keep it to function in Iranian society.

From the women's interviews, I realised that the role of the family is significant when conflicts arise in a marriage, especially if a husband claims his wife was not a virgin. In such cases, the young woman should be able to rely on her familial support.[3] Other issues—such as women's economic dependence on their fathers before marriage, taking into consideration that most of my unmarried 1980s interviewees live with their parents—also influence women's decisions to have/not have premarital sexual relations. As I argue in this chapter women's financial situation and their ability to afford leaving separately from their family give them more freedom in choosing to have premarital sexual relations.

It is interesting to see how the post-revolutionary generation has become aware of the role that virginity can play in their lives. Although Mona—a 21-year-old cinema student from an educated, middle class family—does not believe in virginity, she feels it is the price she must pay to preserve her status in society: 'If I decide to have [sexual intercourse], I have to see whether it is worth it [for me] or not'.

Ensieh and Mona both define virginity as the 'price' they must pay to secure marriage possibilities and retain familial support. For them, virginity is a bargaining tool. However, they are also both critical of the norm of female virginity and social expectations.

On the other hand, I also spoke to women of both generations who see virginity in a more positive light, as a marker of a girl's 'prestige' and 'value'. This conceptualisation is based on the social categories of good/bad, chaste/loose female behaviour, which mainly regard controlling female sexuality. The likening of virginity to 'prestige' also shows how women internalise the stigma associated with women who engage in pre-marital sexual relations. For example, Fahimeh—a 23-year-old university student from a lower middle class, religious family—emphasised: 'I feel that in our society, a girl [virgin] has more value and prestige'. Fahimeh thinks she will be a more 'valuable' prize for the man who can win her affection. Virginity is still a bargaining tool for Fahimeh, however she sees virginity as a signifier of her 'value' and 'prestige'.

From the 1950s generation, 60-year-old Parvaneh spoke about her younger daughter, who is in her mid-twenties, has a boyfriend, but has not had sexual intercourse. Parvaneh's daughter 'considers [her virginity] as her prestige, her lady-like characteristics'. Parvaneh spoke proudly of her daughter's attitude towards female virginity, as it proved that she taught her daughter how to behave well and preserve herself.

Seeing the norm of female virginity as either a 'price' or a 'prestige' shows how women differently understand and inhabit these norms. Women justify their compliance as the bargaining strategy they use to retain their social status within the community. However, this compliance should be defined in the context of their lives, as for them it is a sign of agency. Women highlight their own personalities, familial limitations and the importance of marriage in their lives through their justifications for performing the norm of female virginity. While they are aware of social expectations and perform according to gender norms, women actively decide and negotiate the limits of their relationships.

In these women's stories, the emphasis on virginity as a social rather than religious issue shows the role virginity plays in determining women's positionality in Iranian society. Although having premarital sexual relations is considered *harâm* or religiously forbidden, it is the negative social consequences of sex for unmarried women that seem to have more power over controlling women's sexuality.

In the next section, I discuss the stories of 1980s women who engaged in premarital sexual relations, expound upon the changing meanings of virginity and the virginal body and look at these women's concerns and strategies to cope with their new social status as unmarried non-virgins.

Losing Virginity: The Younger Generation's Experience

There is a change in the norm of female virginity for these two generations. For most of my 1950s interviewees, even those with no religious barriers to their relations with men, having a boyfriend—let alone having physical intimacy—was 'inappropriate' and against the rules of virginity. Most of my 1950s interviewees have experienced their first physical contacts with their husbands either during the engagement period or after their marriage ceremony. Due to the increase in both the age of marriage and women's presence in the Iranian public sphere, younger generations have more contact with the opposite sex before marriage than their mothers did.

Amongst my 1980s interviewees, there are girls from both religious and non-religious families who have had boyfriends and/or been in contact with men at university, their work place, etc. However, in Iran, similar to El-Feki's observation in Cairo, having a girlfriend or boyfriend does not necessarily equate to having sex. El-Feki quotes one of her interviewees, who points out that 'in Egypt, let's say 80 percent of unmarried couples, not sex but just having fun'; although they refer to each other as boyfriend and girlfriend, these couples do not have sexual intercourse (2013, p. 113). Likewise, many of my younger interviewees have been in relationships, but, while there might have been sexual contacts, they usually avoid vaginal intercourse.

Consequently, I notice a transformation in the meaning of virgin body and what defines women's virginity amongst the 1980s generation. While the word 'virgin' in Persian literally means 'unmarried woman', implying

no sexual contact with men, its meaning has now been reduced to simply a woman with an intact hymen. As I observed amongst my interviewees, a woman can have various forms of sexual contact with men; as long as she does not have vaginal intercourse, she is still considered a *båkereh*. Whereas for older generations virginity signified an appropriate feminine identity, such as the charm and chastity embodied in women's general behaviour, now virginity is linked only to the hymen. While *Shari'a* forbids any forms of physical contact between unmarried, unrelated men and women, its definition of virginity as solely an intact hymen provides unmarried women with opportunities to enjoy physical intimacy and sexual contact so long as they retain their hymens. Obviously, young, religious men and women who want to have sexual contact with the opposite sex can perform *sigheh* or temporary marriages.[4]

For instance, Melika—a 26-year-old secretary from a middle class, non-religious family—said that, since high school, she has had boyfriends and engaged in sexual relations. When I asked about her situation as a non-virgin, she corrected me without hesitation: 'No. I am still a virgin.' I then realised that, by the phrase *råbete ye jensi* [sexual relation], she meant forms of sexual relations excluding complete vaginal penetration. In societies where women's virginity is important, in 'premarital sexual encounters' women insist on other forms of heterosexual relation 'rather than vaginal intercourse to avoid trouble' (Lindisfarne 1994, p. 90). When I asked Melika why virginity is important to her, she responded: 'Why not? It brings me no harm.' Melika's mother knows about her boyfriends and has warned Melika that she will have a doctor's examination before marriage. Melika said, 'I think that she is worried about me;' and has promised to keep her hymen intact for marriage. She added that she wants to respect her mother's 'trust' by keeping her 'virginity'. Melika's justification for her mother's control over her sex life is reminiscent of other 1980s women's approaches to familial restrictions discussed in the previous section. Although Melika performs according to her mother's expectations, she also enjoys sex and satisfies her sexual desires.

However, some sexual relationships do involve vaginal intercourse and, hence, result in a woman's loss of virginity. Unmarried women's first experiences with sexual intercourse are shaped by the tensions between familial/societal constraints and sexual desires.

I met Mahtab, 31 years old, at her parent's house in Niavaran, a wealthy neighbourhood in northern Tehran. We sat in a flat with just a bit of furniture that her mother uses as a greenhouse. Mahtab is a lawyer at a

prestigious international firm, which has offices in Dubai and Tehran. I know that she attended a famous religious school in Tehran and both of her parents are from religious families. During our conversation, she narrated the stories of her boyfriends and spoke openly about how she lost her virginity. She vividly remembers the day she lost her virginity at the age of 23:

> The first time I formally became friends with a boy was when I was eighteen. This was when I had just entered university. At that time, online chat was in fashion, so I became friends with him via a chat room. […] I remember that when he once tried to hold my hand, I felt so bad that I thought I was fainting. […] The third person who entered my life […] went to sexual issues from the beginning, and I resisted a lot. […] I couldn't even think to have such a relationship before marriage. […] But, once we went to his friend's place and then he started to do stuff [she laughs and apologises]. He touched me and the taboo between us was broken. Then, it developed step by step. After four or five months, sexual things happened and I let him [do it], but I told him to do it in a way that I keep my virginity [she uses the same English word]. Until, one time, he did some move that *chiz-e man* [my thing which refers to her hymen]…

She did not complete her sentence, but from the rest of our conversation I understand that her hymen was broken on that occasion. In her description of the event, Mahtab put herself in a passive position, as if she did not play any role. She then described the difference between her first experience of intercourse and that of her cousin, who is from a non-religious family. Mahtab said, 'for me it happened unexpectedly'; her cousin, on the other hand, had the opportunity to talk with her boyfriend and decide how and when she wanted to have sex. Mahtab broke up with her boyfriend after the sexual incident. She blamed her boyfriend for 'losing her virginity', although she also enjoyed the sex. Mahtab then described the social pressure she experienced after sex:

> I felt really bad. The social pressure was horrible, especially my mother's family who were religious. They used to talk about the girls who did this [had premarital sex], which really scared me. […] For two years I was fighting with this issue. It was really [she emphasises] difficult. I didn't feel well and only one of my close friends knew. I was very nervous. […] Religiously, I didn't have a problem, as I didn't feel at all that I committed a sin. It was more because of the society, the social pressure was immense. I don't know

how a girl would be treated right now if she has sex, but our time was very different. Many of my friends were religious and, because they didn't know, they said [bad] things in front of me and judged [other girls]. That was unbearable for me.

Mahtab differentiated between the social and religious aspects of her experience; it was not religious belief but, instead, being part of a religious community that made her feel bad about her first sexual intercourse. Women like Mahtab, who belong to communities in which a girl's virginity has both religious and social implications, fear that their new unmarried, non-virgin status will marginalise them in their community. Her fear of revealing her sexual status to others became clear when she said, 'even if you had wanted to interview me at that time, I would never accept to talk'.

Mahtab knew that her chances for marriage could be damaged if her extended community discovered that she was no longer a virgin, especially if she wanted to marry someone from a similar familial background. This pressure is higher when a woman is younger and more dependent on her family. Mahtab even thought about hymen-repair surgery, especially because she had suitors who were introduced to her through her family: 'I thought that it [not being a virgin] could be problematic for me'. She still thinks that girls in their early twenties might choose to go through the surgery, but not unmarried women in their early thirties, like herself. By drawing a relation between a woman's age and the choice to have hymen-repair surgery, Mahtab was referring to the age of marriageability—the ages at which women receive more marriage proposals, especially through their families.

After two years of struggling with the clash between her own needs and the expectation and rules of society, Mahtab decided to get back together with her boyfriend.

I didn't feel that I was doing something wrong anymore, especially because I also had sexual needs. […] I didn't care anymore, let them say whatever they wanted to say. I thought I didn't want to offer [she uses a sarcastic tone] this [virginity] to my beloved husband. When men are doing it so easily, why shouldn't we?

However, Mahtab still struggles with how truthful she should be with suitors she meets through her family:

I won't tell him unless he asks, [so far] they haven't asked. […] But, if I see that a boy hasn't had [sexual relation] and has [religious] beliefs that don't allow him to have such relations, I can't let myself marry him. But, if he had thousands of [sexual] relations but wants to marry a virgin, then I don't feel *azâb vojdân* [guilty consciousness] at all lying to him about my virginity.

By raising questions about her 'right' and 'autonomy' over her body, Sepideh pointed to a dichotomy between her own bodily and sexual desire and social expectations:

I used to ask my friends, 'is virginity my right? Should it be that important for families? Do two or three drops of blood give me more value in front of a boy?' If this is the case, then I don't want him to want me for *sad sal-e siâh* [one hundred black years] […] Then I thought about whether I wanted to have sexual relations before marriage.

Sepideh grew up in a traditional, lower middle class and religious family; her father worked at a factory and her mother (who died last year) was a housewife. There are six children in the family: five girls and one boy. Sepideh is the fifth oldest child, and the only person in her family to be university educated; three of her sisters have high school diplomas. Sepideh is economically independent and, although unmarried, lives on her own in an apartment near Tehran's Grand Bazaar—the same neighbourhood as her family. I knew this neighbourhood to be quite religious and traditional, so I was amazed when she said that she had no problems renting an apartment as a young, single woman; also, her boyfriend visits her there often.

We were sitting in her office in one of Tehran's central business neighbourhoods. It was late in the evening but there were still clients waiting for her. It is a shared office of three female lawyers. In the waiting room, there was a bookshelf full of recent novels (in Persian) and poetry. I noticed a leaflet from a well-known charity that supports vulnerable women and girls. After nearly one hour of delay, Sepideh arrived. She wore a dark blue *mânto* and a black shawl loosely covering her hair. When I tried to ask about her familial background, she continued talking excitedly about why she studied law: 'I didn't want any other girl to grow up like me'. She told me that she wanted to be a musician, but her family would not allow it because they saw it as a degrading profession. She said, 'we had a difficult

childhood, because we grew up during the war and our parents didn't pay attention to their children'. Sepideh first had sexual intercourse at the age of 23; for the three years prior to that, as she put it, she had 'clitoral relations' with her boyfriend. In contrast to her friends, Sepideh's first experience of sexual intercourse was pleasant, mainly because she convinced herself that it was her 'right':

> I remember the first time I had sexual relations was one of the best days of my life. […] I asked my boyfriend to do it and it felt good. […] I felt that I became a woman. There are so many mental pressures on us. I tried to free myself and told myself that it's my right [to experience sex].

Divergences in Mahtab and Sepideh's first sexual intercourse experiences highlight the variety of meanings virginity can hold in women's lives, as well as their different personalities. While Mahtab feared losing her position within the community, Sepideh did not consider social consequences and saw sexual relations as claiming her bodily rights.

Amongst my 1980s interviewees, some women claimed that sexual relations were the main purpose of their current relationship. These women described their heterosexual partner as a 'sex buddy' or 'just for sex'. For example, Minoo—a 25-year-old woman from a non-religious, middle class family—described her current relationship as 'sexual partners', as they are not committed to each other. Similarly, Paniz—a 31-year-old journalist—spoke about her non-exclusive relationship with her 'partner'. From a middle class, non-religious family, Paniz still lives at her parents' residence. Her father passed away a few years ago; her mother and two married older sisters know about her relations. Paniz mentioned that in her group of friends, who are all from similar social and religious backgrounds, it is assumed that both unmarried girls and boys in their thirties have already had sexual relations. Paniz was 23 years old when she first had sex. Although she wanted to, she also had doubts:

> I told him that I needed to think. Then, I got angry with myself. Why did I need time to think, you know? Then I decided that it is not important for me, and I am comfortable with this [sex]. But I remember in that situation, I felt that I had doubts. Later, I was ashamed of myself for doubting [she laughs]. It was the pressure of my unconscious, which is the social pressure. […] Anyway, my first experience was really good.

It seems that even those who decided to experience premarital sexual relations had to deal with 'doubts' and concerns at some point. Based on their social and religious backgrounds, these women faced different anxieties when coming to terms with being a non-virgin, unmarried woman in their communities and larger society. The process of convincing themselves whether or not to have sex, which can take anywhere between hours and years, involves women evaluating their social status, chances of marriage and parents and family's support. The social position of Mahtab's wealthy family makes her a desirable match for many families, especially now that she is economically independent and, hence, has more power and authority over decisions about her sexual life. Women's economic independence—particularly for women from religious and traditional families, like Sepideh—allows them a degree of freedom from social obligations and provides a more powerful position in choosing a spouse. In marriage negotiations, such women can rely on their social position and good income, rather than virginity, to secure their position in marriage.

Confirming Bride's Virginity and Changes in Social Customs

The Blood-Stained 'dastmâl'

There is a rich ethnographic literature on defloration ceremonies in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern societies. Wedding night defloration is a public ritual associated with consummating a marriage; the groom proves his masculinity and the bride honours her family by bleeding from the hymen (Lindisfarne 1994, p. 91). Wedding night defloration is considered as a rite of passage for the young couple, 'symbolic transformation' into adulthood (Harris 2004, p. 159).

In Iran, traditionally a bride and groom were expected to show proof of the bride's virginity—that is, a 'blood-stained napkin'—on their wedding night; women from both families waited outside the *otâq-e hejle* [bridal chamber] until the marriage was consummated. Many of my 1950s women, from different social classes, witnessed or experienced this tradition and shared memories of their wedding night. However, the tradition is fading in 'large urban cities and among upper and middle classes'

(Farahani 2007, p. 82). Only one of my 1980s interviewees, who is from a small city in central Iran, performed the ritual on her wedding night; none of my 1980s interviewees have witnessed the tradition in their families. However, as I discuss below, this ritual is being replaced by more private and modern mechanisms, such as the 'bride's health certificate'.

I met Arezoo, a 55-year-old hairdresser, one evening after work in her beauty salon; she was very sweet and welcoming. The salon is located in an old, two-storey building in an upper middle class neighbourhood in northwest Tehran and is surrounded by highly renovated multi-storey buildings. Arezoo lives on the second floor of that building with her husband and her son; her three daughters are all married. She works alone in the salon, which is a small studio flat with simple and cheap furniture. She offered me a seat and prepared a hot beverage while I explained my research.

Arezoo is from a lower middle class, non-religious background. Her husband is a distant relative of her father, who arranged the marriage when she was 15. Arezoo and her mother were both against the marriage, but her father had the authority. She said repeatedly: 'I was a child. It was too soon for me to get married, but I didn't have any other choice. I think my father shouldn't let me get married'. Arezoo's 'unwillingness' to marry her husband was scatted throughout her description of the marriage and wedding ceremony. I describe her marriage in Chap. 6. She has vivid memories of her wedding night, which was not 'pleasant at all':

> Back then, we had this tradition that grandmothers from both sides waited outside the bridal chamber while the bride and groom *yek kâri mikardan* [did something [she means they consummate their marriage]], I am sorry to say. This was so they could show the blood-stained napkin [to those who were waiting] and feel safe [that they consummated their marriage without any problems], so they could go back to their homes [she uses a sarcastic tone]. For example [on my wedding night], my aunt and one of my husband's relatives waited outside our room. […] I was suffering, I was dying, and I had pain. Until morning he tried to do it a few times, but I couldn't [let him]. It was really painful; I thought I was dying. Then my aunt entered the room and asked, 'what happened?' My husband said, 'nothing, she cries and I can't do it.' Then my aunt told him, 'put your hand on her mouth and do it' [she shows me how]. I will never forget this. So he followed my aunt's advice and then he could do it [penetration].

Arezoo's aunt plays an important role in the story, as she controlled the performance of the ceremony. The aunt did not care about Arezoo's feelings or physical pain; she and the other women waiting outside only cared that the young couple perform according to tradition. When I asked about foreplay and whether her husband tried to prepare her for intercourse, she replied: 'I don't remember. I just remember that it was very bad'. The fact that her first sexual experience was 'bad' has had lasting effects on her sex life; later in our conversation, Arezoo said she has never liked having sexual intercourse.

Monir—a 50-year-old housewife from a lower middle class, religious family—has similar memories. Monir's aunt slept outside the room and 'showed the napkin' to her mother-in-law in the morning. She justified the tradition by saying, '*zakhm-e zaboon* [diatribe by the in-laws] was customary at that time'. Most of my 1950s women justified the tradition of the 'blood-stained napkin' as a method of protecting the bride against potential gossip about her virginity. In their stories, gossip plays the main role in controlling women's behaviour. Harris describes gossip as 'a way of uniting the community', requiring members to comply with the accepted gender norms (Harris 2004, p. 77).

Similar to Arezoo, Monir's painful memories of her wedding night have affected sexual relations with her husband: 'I was unhappy. I had pain. It wasn't good at all. My husband *kâresh ro anjâm dad* [did his part] and that was it'.

Both Arezoo and Monir had to perform according to social norms and customs against their own wishes and desires. Their familial/societal traditions forced them to consummate their marriage at the specific time and place without considering the couple's desire for the sexual intercourse. Under pressure from their families and under their supervision they had to consummate their marriage without experiencing any sexual pleasure.

However, still while complying with the tradition of showing the blood-stained napkin, women show their agency. Mahmood argues, to understand women's actions, we need to move beyond the binary of 'doing and undoing' norms and understand that 'norms are not only consolidated and/or subverted, but performed, inhabited and experienced in a variety of ways' (2005, p. 22). I see women's agency in their own justification of the tradition and how they perform according to social norms and expectations. For example, although Monir's narrative shows her powerless and passive position during the whole performance, she was

aware that performing according to the ceremony would confirm her respectable position with her in-laws. Therefore, for women like Monir, complying with the norms mean securing their position in marriage.

On some occasions brides are also involved in selecting the woman they can trust with the proof of their virginity. Mahnaz, 61 years old, spoke about the fact that some of her in-laws were against the marriage: 'the next morning when his aunts came for it [blood-stained napkin], I thought I couldn't trust them. I thought they might destroy it. So, I called my aunt and asked her to give it to my mother-in-law personally'. Mahnaz knew that, to establish her positionality as a chaste woman and prevent any future gossip or *zakhm-e zaboon* [diatribes], she needed to prove her virginity by presenting the blood-stained sheet to her mother-in-law. Women, like Mahnaz, negotiated their position within the boundaries of social constraints and norms of female sexuality and played an active role in performing according to expectations. Therefore, contrary to Arezoo and Monir, Mahnaz did not have bad memories of her first sexual experience and described the tradition as a customary practice in her family.

As women's narratives show, in performing the tradition of showing the blood-stained napkin, female relatives play the main role. Women themselves observe and control the patriarchal norms of female and male sexuality. As I discuss in the next example, even in cases that husbands were against the tradition women still insisted on showing the proof to their in-laws.

Fifty-year-old Mahin is from a small city in Iranian Kurdistan. When she and her husband were on their honeymoon, only a few days after the wedding, her in-laws arrived and asked for proof of her virginity:

> After a few days, my in-laws arrived and they turned the honeymoon into a vinegar-moon [she laughs]. When my mother-in-law arrived she asked, '*kardin*?' [Did you screw?], exactly like this [she confirms my surprise at the vulgarity and directness of her mother-in-law's question]. I asked, 'did what?' She again asked '*ezdeváj kardin* [have you consummated your marriage]?'

Mahin also spoke about vague childhood memories of brides who did not bleed on their wedding night and had to use other tricks to bleed. Although no one had told her about this custom before her marriage, Mahin already knew that bleeding or showing that you bled is important. Therefore, she decided to keep the sheet they had used on their wedding

night, even though her husband wanted to wash it. When her mother-in-law asked about the consummation of their marriage, Mahin knew she wanted to see proof:

> I didn't say anything. Even though I felt embarrassed, I went to my husband and told him, 'you wanted to wash the sheet but now your mother wants to see it'. My husband started to quarrel with me, and said 'it is not her business, you were like an angel to me and you don't have the right to show her anything'. But I kept [the sheet] and separated the stained part. Later, when we went back, I showed it to my mother-in-law and she said, 'now what good can it do me' [she laughs].

Mahin's intent to show her mother-in-law the sheet, even against her husband's wishes, shows the importance of this custom to women's situation with their in-laws. In disregarding her husband's opinion, Mahin demonstrated the central role that women play in regulating and disciplining this custom.

Firozeh's story also reveals how women exercise power through practising this custom. Firozeh is from a middle class, non-religious family and was married at the age of 18. For their honeymoon, the newlyweds went to northern Iran with Firozeh's new brother and sister-in-law, who had also just been married. Firozeh described what happened: 'The next morning, my sister-in-law came into our room and said, 'let me see it'. Then she entered our room and checked the sheet. I was very ashamed. […] I didn't say anything. I didn't ask her whether someone had asked her to do this or not'. Firozeh's sister-in-law is only a year older than her.

Kandyoti discusses how the 'cyclical nature of women's power in the household' is demonstrated through power relations between mothers-in-law and new brides, signalling how women have, themselves, internalised patriarchy (1988, p. 279). She goes on to describe how women practise their authority when they become mothers-in-law. Firozeh's sister-in-law's actions can be understood using this line of thought: she wanted to gain a more powerful position through asserting her authority over the new bride; the same way that it was likely asserted over her by one of her female in-laws.

Only one of my 1980s interviewees had to perform the 'blood-stained napkin' tradition. I was introduced to Mandana at a charity in a middle class neighbourhood in western Tehran, where she works as a cleaner. We sat in the conference room. Mandana wore a grey *mânto*, blue jeans and a black scarf with part of her brown hair escaping out the front. Her nail

polish was cracked from cleaning. She looked younger than 22; to me, she looked like a high school student. I was even more surprised when I found out she has a four-year-old son. Mandana comes from a large, uneducated, low-income family in Yazd, a small city in central Iran. She described her family as traditional, but not zealous in any way when it comes to religion: 'they practice their religious duties, but they are not extreme at all.'

Three years ago, Mandana moved to Tehran with her husband; they now live in the same neighbourhood as the charity. At the age of 16, Mandana married her husband who is a distant relative five years her senior. Mandana explained that, in Yazd, it is 'common that girls marry before they reach their twenties'.[5] She was engaged at 14; at the same time, 14 out of 17 of her classmates were also engaged. All of Mandana's older sisters also had early marriages, and some of them did not even attend high school. In contrast to her older sisters, Mandana has high school diploma. She describes that although her husband did not stop her, he was not very keen on her finishing because he did not have a high school diploma himself. Indeed, men from lower economic, less educated backgrounds prefer to marry women with either lower or, at most, the same level of education as them.

Mandana's wedding night was similar to those of 1950s women, who had to perform the tradition of 'blood-stained napkin'. Throughout her engagement, Mandana's mother advised her to keep her hymen intact until her wedding night: 'Men might resist or insist a lot, but even to death you shouldn't listen'. Mandana then described in detail the ceremony performed by female family members on her wedding night:

We were really tired. […] His aunts were staying at our home, and I said that no one could stay; they had to go and wait elsewhere. […] I was crying because I had pain, and because of my pain he couldn't. He didn't want to hurt me. I remember that, until seven am, we tried a few times, but he couldn't [penetrate completely]. It was really difficult; it is really a bad memory only because the next day was *pâtakhti*[6] and you have to be done with it [marriage should be consummated by then]. I was given an embroidered napkin. I had a lot of pain, you can imagine, and then there was a pale blood. Then, in the morning [the ceremony is that] women come while playing *tonbak* and dancing. They sacrifice a sheep and bring its liver for the bride and groom to eat. [In my own wedding] My older sister came with two of my husband's aunts, just imagine that they were behind our door at six am. They danced a little and saw the napkin and kept it for the afternoon ceremony. When I saw my sister, I cried a lot. I was in a lot of pain, so my sister and my husband took me to the hospital.

Mandana seemed very calm while narrating this story; she even made jokes and laughed at some incidents of 'common traditions'. By 'common traditions', she was referring to accepted social and cultural customs through which gender roles and identities are constructed in her community. In addition, she also distinguished between the social and cultural norms in Yazd and Tehran, as such early marriages or wedding ceremonies are widely practised in Yazd. Mandana's blood-stained *dastmâl* experience—an experience shared by none of my Tehrani 1980s interviewees—and being married at a much younger age than my sample group in Tehran highlight the differences between the experiences of women from the urban centre, Tehran, and other areas of Iran.

It is important to note here that not all of my 1950s interviewees experienced the 'blood-stained napkin' ceremony on their wedding night. All the women mentioned here are either from lower middle class, uneducated backgrounds or from traditional, upper middle class families. Their stories reflect the importance of marriage in establishing women's position and gender identity within their communities. As discussed in narratives of marriage, the socio-political changes of the 1979 Islamic Revolution transformed and shaped many 1950s women's approaches to traditional marriage ceremonies. Due to women's increased presence in the social and political events of this period, even women from traditional families chose their partners without familial supervision and decided about their own marriage ceremonies.

Moreover, none of my 1950s interviewees who experienced the 'blood-stained napkin' on their wedding night performed the custom on their own daughters. However, mothers now use another technique to ensure their daughters' virginity before marriage. In contrast to the previous tradition, which directly involved other female members of the family, the new custom is performed and controlled primarily by the mother of the bride.

The 'Bride's Health Certificate'[7]

Dr Shahidi, a gynaecologist I interviewed, described women who came to her practice asking for a 'bride's health certificate': 'Women used to come, in the company of their family and in-laws, asking me to examine the bride and confirm her virginity, which I have always refused to do'. Dr Shahidi's practice is located in a lower and middle class neighbourhood in central Tehran. She said that, nowadays, young women ask for a

written certificate and are accompanied only by their mothers. Dr Shahidi expressed her 'pride' at refusing to 'give this certificate' throughout all her years of practice; the certificate is anathema to her, as it goes against women's right over their bodies. The 'bride's health certificate' signifies that a bride's health is determined only by having an intact hymen.

I found similarities between women's reasons for obtaining this certificate before marriage and justifications for the tradition of the 'blood-stained napkin'. It is as if the tradition of proving a bride's virginity through a blood-stained napkin has simply been replaced by a more modern, scientific procedure.

For instance, 51-year-old Azam explained that her sister always had problems in her marriage due to her mother-in-law's false accusation. Therefore, for her own wedding, Azam obtained a doctor's certificate confirming her virginity:

> When my sister got married, her mother-in-law claimed that she was not a virgin. The morning after their wedding night, we went to the bridal chamber and my older sister saw the *dastmâl* [napkin]. It was the first time that I learnt about *dokhtaregi* [virginity] and that it is removed on the wedding night. Because I had a very bad memory of my sister's wedding, I went to a gynaecologist with my sister before my wedding. She [the gynaecologist] gave me a certificate that said that I was a virgin. On my wedding night, my sister gave it to my husband. […] When he read it, he became angry and said 'what is this *chert-o pert* [nonsense]? I don't like it.' […] But, I kept the letter just in case my mother-in-law or sister-in-law said something, so I could prove [she laughs]. […] We didn't have the *dastmâl* [napkin] because my husband didn't like it.

Similar to Mahin, Azam also kept the certificate against her husband's wishes. As previously discussed, both women emphasised that this was a means of self-protection with their in-laws.

For Sadaf the proof of virginity is to protect a woman from her husband's false accusation. She explained how her own experience affected her choices regarding her daughter. Sadaf is 56 years old and from a non-religious, middle class family. She divorced her husband a few years ago and now lives alone in a small apartment in a middle class neighbourhood in central Tehran. She gave me a detailed description of her sexual experiences. Against her family's wishes, Sadaf married at the age of 18 to her (now ex) husband, who she met on her way back from school. They first had intercourse while on their honeymoon at the seaside in northern Iran:

The night we married, we slept together but he did something incomplete. […] He was excited, so he [while she is laughing] *khodesh ro kharâb kard* [spoiled himself, had a premature ejaculation]. Then, we went on [our honeymoon] and all the sheets were white. Whenever he wanted to do I had pain and I didn't let him, but he could do a small move. Then I received the biggest mental damage. […] Because his penetration was incomplete, he thought that I wasn't a virgin. Just imagine that on the day of our honeymoon he told me, 'you aren't a virgin'. I was confused, I didn't know what to say. He told me, 'if you were virgin, I would have seen some blood. So come on tell me the truth, with whom have you been?'

Sadaf described how her husband had a 'stereotypical image' of how a 'woman should bleed to prove her virtue'. She joked about her ex-husband's virginity: 'He was twenty-nine years old, but hadn't been with any women. If he had been, he would have known that without complete penetration there is no bleeding'. While still on their honeymoon, Sadaf's husband took her to a gynaecologist: 'the doctor told him that my hymen was still intact, and then gave him some drugs so he could do it [penetrate]'. However, in all of their subsequent fights, her husband always punished her with accusations of not being a virgin. Due to her own experience, Sadaf took her daughter to a gynaecologist and obtained a certificate of virginity before her wedding day. On her daughter's wedding night, Sadaf gave the letter to her son-in-law and kept a copy for herself: 'I told him, "this is for your mother"'. Sadaf went on to explain what ensued: 'His mother called me that night, and she was angry. She said, "ma'am we trust you and there is no need for this [certificate], we don't live in pre-historic time any more blah blah". I told her, "you're right, but I don't trust my own daughter"'. Sadaf kept asking me, 'you see what I did?' Although her son-in-law was a 'good man', she felt more assured in the knowledge that he could never 'say' or 'claim' anything about her daughter's virginity.

In this context, 'the bride's health certificate' is used to protect women's 'virtue' and position in the marriage. Mahdieh spoke about how the certificate was presented in her family planning course at university:

In my family planning course at the university, they told us that we should [get the certificate] before our marriage. The lecturer told us to give the original to our mothers and the copy to our mothers-in-law [she laughs]. She told us stories about girls who didn't get the certificate and then, during the engagement, something [sexual] happened but the boy denied it [and

claimed that she was not a virgin]. No one [in my class] asked 'why should we get this certificate?' Everyone thought it is a necessary and obligatory thing to do.

Mahdieh added that in her own religious, middle class family, all her aunts and cousins obtained a certificate before marriage and gave it to their in-laws; it is the tradition in their family. Accusations about a bride's virginity can put her in a subordinate position in relation to her husband. Especially when it comes to family conflicts, claims and doubts about a woman's virginity can force her into a position of having to continue her marriage just to prevent such accusations being made public. The lecturer's advice also demonstrates the lack of legal support women have in marriage and the social stigma attached to divorce, which forces women to adopt such strategies in order to ease their situation in marriage. Therefore, when I asked about whether she will get the certificate before her own marriage, Mahdieh replied: 'I feel that [pause] it's not harmful'.

In addition, a doctor's certificate provides women with legitimate, medical proof in case they do not bleed during the first intercourse. However, men can still question the veracity of the 'bride's health certificate'. For example, 30-year-old Nava, who married her boyfriend at the age of 23, remembered:

When we had sex for the first time [after wedding ceremony] there was no bleeding. He was annoyed and said, 'you said you didn't have complete sex with anyone, so why is there no bleeding?' I showed him the certificate [that she obtained from a doctor during her engagement], and he said 'it [the certificate] can be fake. You asked them to write it for you'.

Nava said that she was to blame, because she told him about her previous boyfriends.

The younger generation jokes about the societal obsession with girls' virginity and lack of attention to boys' virginity. For example, Zahra—from an upper middle class, religious family—had heard from her friends about a new 'test' that can check men's virginity. While laughing she said: 'We were saying [with my friends] that we should ask him [a suitor] to bring his certificate and I bring mine; then we discuss [marriage]'.

The 'bride's health certificate' is a modern, scientific version of the 'blood-stained napkin' tradition; the certificate has freed women of the social pressure to consummate their marriage on their wedding night and has given couples the chance to decide when and where they have their

first sexual intercourse. Although the 'bride's health certificate' might help and empower women to medically prove their virginity, especially in cases of family conflicts, it also simultaneously reproduces the patriarchal control over female sexuality. Indeed, medical science has been appropriated by the patriarchal system in its control over female sexuality before marriage.

By performing this procedure and calling it the 'bride's health certificate', doctors legitimise and play into a modern way of checking girls' virginity. Gynaecologists have replaced older female members of the bride's family, who used to play the role of virginity checkers; instead of a 'blood-stained napkin', gynaecologists now examine a bride's hymen with modern instruments in private clinics. Although the ways of performing the custom have become more scientific, the underlying purpose has not changed; virginity is still important for families. In the next section, I touch on similar issues with regard to the role of medicine in hymen-repair surgeries, as well as how these modern procedures are reproducing the social norms of and traditional controls over female sexuality.

Hymen-Repair Surgeries and Fake Virginity

In the existing literature, hymen-repair surgery[8] is considered a 'sign of the weakening of traditional patriarchal control over women's bodies' (Ozyegin 2009, p. 112). Cindoglu, for example, argues that increasing demand for hymen-repair surgeries in Turkey shows 'women's utilization of medicine for her own needs' (Cindoglu 2000, p. 259). Through this method, sexually-active women can regain their 'virginity'; thereby, suddenly going from being a 'defiled' woman to a marriageable one (Farahani 2007, p. 91; Mernissi 2000, p. 204). In contrast, there are scholars who consider hymen-repair surgery as the 'intervention of medicine in the social fabric in a very patriarchal manner' which itself reproduces and establishes the norms of female virginity (Cindoglu 2000, p. 260; Ozyegin 2009, p. 112).

During my visit to Tehran in 2013, I was introduced—through a friend—to a midwife who performs hymen-repair surgeries in Shahrak-e Andisheh, a low-income neighbourhood in a suburban district of southern Tehran. She refused to meet me, but did accept to answer my questions through my friend. The midwife told my friend that she performs hymen-repair surgeries because, for her, this is about *orf* [mores] rather than religion; however, the midwife was clear that she does not perform abortions.

By defining virginity as a tradition rather than a religious prohibition, the midwife can justify her performance of the procedure. Therefore, while abortion is illegal and sinful, hymen-repair surgery is more about helping women to comply with tradition. Dr Shahidi also told me, in a sarcastic tone, what her male colleagues say about women for whom they perform hymen-repair surgeries. Mocking their tone, she relayed: 'When a girl comes to us to have her hymen repaired, it means that she does not want to have [premarital] sex anymore. So, we are giving her back her chastity'.

There are no official statistics, but—similar to other Muslim-majority societies (Mernissi 2000, pp. 204–205)—hymen-repair surgeries are popular amongst the young and sexually active Iranian women (Varzi 2006, p. 270). Hymen-repair surgery is a modern, medicalised strategy that functions similar to other historical strategies that women have used to preserve their reputation and family honour on their wedding nights.[9] Gynaecologists mostly prefer not to perform this procedure because, if any complications arise, they can easily lose their medical licence and reputation. However, as a midwife I interviewed during fieldwork in Tehran (2012) described, 'nowadays hymen-repair surgery has become a profitable business for some doctors'. The midwife described hymen-repair surgery as a 'simple but expensive procedure that doctors and midwifes can easily perform at their practice'.

Based on recent observation, hymen-repair surgery can cost between 200,000 and 7,000,000 Iranian toman [60–2000 USD], depending on the location of the doctor's practice in Tehran. Having the surgery done by a doctor in a wealthy neighbourhood costs more. In addition, if the procedure involves plastic surgery or laser treatment it becomes more expensive. Allegedly, plastic surgery masks any sign of surgery; even the Legal Medicine Organization cannot decipher if the hymen has been restored.

Similarly, Cindoglu observes that due to 'secrecy, the illegal status of reconstructive surgery and patriarchal values regarding women's hymen offer gynaecologists a tax free and highly lucrative income' in Turkey (Cindoglu 2000, p. 259). The midwife who performed hymen-repair surgeries in low-income neighbourhoods in Tehran also mentioned that 'abortion is cheaper than *dookhtan-e parde* [repairing hymen]'. In their neighbourhood hymen-repair surgery costs 500,000 Iranian toman [200 USD], and abortion can cost between 300,000 Iranian toman [120 USD] and 1,000,000 tomans [400 USD].

Hymen reparation is considered as a bargaining strategy that empowers women, as it helps them negotiate their status within the existing patriarchal setting (Farahani 2007, p. 91). However, as I discuss through the following examples, it is important to consider not only women's reasons for having or not having hymen-repair surgery, but also how they view and analyse 'fake' virginity in the context of their own lives.

I met 30-year-old Neda at a small private company where she works as a secretary. Neda is from an upper middle class, non-religious family. Neda's parents are aware of her boyfriend, but Neda also knows they do not want her to engage in sexual relations. Even so, she has been sexually active since the age of 21. When I asked whether she would consider having the surgery before marriage, she replied: 'No, *nemidoozam*[10] [I won't sew it, with a determined tone]. I prefer to tell [my suitor]. Right now I have many suitors, but I prefer to marry someone I can talk to about [my previous sexual relations]'. I discovered that her suitors are from 'good families', were introduced to her through her family [*khâstegâri*] and are from similar familial backgrounds. She stated emphatically that she will not have the surgery 'only to marry a good suitor from a good family'. Neda's cousin had hymen-repair surgery before marriage because her fiancé was her brother's friend: 'She couldn't tell [her fiancé] about [her virginity] because then her brother could find out, which was unthinkable. […] She had the surgery and he [her fiancé] didn't find out.' Neda was against her cousin's decision and is still critical of her.

For Neda, hymen-repair surgery means hiding a truth about herself, which is part of her subjectivity. My other 1980s women who had premarital sex gave similar responses: although hymen-repair surgery allows them to conceal past sexual relations, they feel the new identity this 'fake' virginity provides contrasts with their 'real' identity. Neda also sees her cousin's choice to have hymen-repair surgery as compliance with the social rules of virginity. By rejecting having her hymen repaired, Neda is also questioning the norms that force her to conceal premarital sexual relations.

Butler (1990) emphasises the role that drag queens play in destabilising the categories of real. She indicates that in the case of drags—men dressed as women or women dressed as men—people usually consider the first term to be the gender 'reality' and the second to be the 'artifice, play, falsehood and illusion' (p. xxii). She then suggests that difficulty in

recognising their 'real' sex shows the instability of the categories through which one sees the body. Butler (1990) does not call drag a subversive act, though she mentions they are raising questions about the 'reality' of gender. The 'fake' hymen blurs the line between what is 'real' and what is not, raising questions about how the 'hymen', as part of women's physiology, has gained such socio-cultural significance. In the long term, therefore, hymen-repair surgeries might help demystifying the hymen in the Iranian context (Talattof 2011, p. 226).

However, characterising women who repair their hymen as subverting the patriarchal norm—by faking their virginity and showing agency in having premarital sexual relations—is overly simplistic. Likewise, it is just as problematic to portray women who refuse to have the surgery—such as Neda, Mahtab or Paniz—as consciously resisting the social order, which values women's virginity before marriage. It can be argued that women who opt for the surgery are, in fact, complying with the patriarchal norm of virginity instead of questioning it. In addition, women could justify having hymen-repair surgery to preserve their family's reputation—such as Neda's cousin—or to take revenge on a suitor who is sexually active himself but wants to marry a virgin, like Mahtab. In general, the process of decision-making is very problematic. The complexity of socio-cultural and economic situations that either force women to go through the surgery or empower them to refuse are significant; such factors are often overlooked in descriptions of this practice's popularity in Iran and other Middle Eastern countries.

CONCLUSION

I want to emphasise that the complexity of different disciplinary and socio-economic factors makes it difficult to analyse women's premarital sexual behaviour based solely on their level of religiosity. Many women, from both generations, repeatedly mentioned that 'virginity is still important for men' or for families. For most of my interviewees, even women from religious backgrounds, having premarital sexual relations is a social stigma not a religious prohibition. The popularity of hymen-repair surgery in Iran also confirms the existence and continuation of the social norm of female virginity. Considering virginity a socio-cultural norm makes it difficult to simply label women who have premarital sexual relations as secular, non-religious or vice versa.

In addition, the creation of docile virgin bodies relies on individual self-surveillance and monitoring (Foucault 1977). Thus, different mechanisms of control are used to ensure that women follow the norm of female virginity in Iranian society. As I observed, women play the main role in teaching and disciplining young girls about the importance of virginity. From giving advice on how to behave and dress from an early age to confirming the bride's virginity before the wedding ceremony, either through traditional customs (e.g. the blood-stained napkin) or more modern forms of control (e.g. the bride's health certificate), women play an active role in regulating and controlling the code of female virginity. Similarly (2004), Harris posits that although honour 'maybe far from beneficial to women they are certainly not just passive victims of it' (p. 85). She argues that women play an active role in 'guarding' honour, which also gives older women more power over younger female family members (ibid.).

As I observed the social norms of virginity has changed for these two generations. It was clear from my interviews with 1950s women that they could not even think about having sexual contacts with men before marriage; they considered virginity to be indisputable and predetermined for women. My 1980s generation interviewees, on the other hand, clearly discussed the advantages and disadvantages of losing or keeping their virginity. As I discussed in the chapter, this change is due to the increase in both the age of marriage and women's presence in the Iranian public sphere.

However, I argue that changes in younger generations' sexual behaviour, rather than undermining the rule of virginity, in fact signifies a transformation in the meaning of virginal body. This change has given women more freedom in sexual relations before marriage, as they can keep their hymen intact while enjoying non-penetrative sexual relations. However, they do not necessarily question why the hymen is used to control their sexual activity or why it is so important to control female sexuality before marriage.

As I have shown in this chapter, decisions about keeping/losing virginity are made in the context of women's lives—including their religious beliefs, relationship with their parents, their family's social and economic situation and their family's marital customs and traditions. In fact, complying with the norm of virginity does not mean that women are without agency or unaware of the double standard of virginity in Iranian society; rather, the decision of whether to keep or lose virginity is based on their

economic and socio-cultural situation. Women of the younger generation still emphasise the social and cultural significance of virginity in the lives of Iranian women. While marriage is influential in determining women's situation in society, family still plays a main role in marriage and girls are financially dependent on their fathers or future husbands, virginity will continue to function as an asset and bargaining chip for women in marriage. Therefore, women see virginity as the 'price' they must pay to preserve their situation in marriage and the wider society. Here, women's economic situation can be influential. As I have shown amongst 1980s women, economic independence can free women from familial obligations and give them more authority in decision-making over their sexual relations. However, this cannot be generalised to all women who are independent from their fathers, as women's personalities and relationships with their families are also very influential.

NOTES

1. '(A)n old Iranian custom where khâstegâr (suitor) accompanied by his parents, guardians or elder family members, calls upon the bride's family to ask for her hand in marriage' (Farahani 2007, p. 297). The suitor can be a relative or a stranger who is introduced to bride's family by a third party. Even in cases where a man and woman know each other, the man should propose to the woman's family through a khâstegâri ceremony in order to make his marriage proposal official. In this work, I use semi-arranged marriage instead of khâstegâri cases where the woman did not know the groom before the khâstegâri ceremony.

2. *Dokhtar bâ lebâs-e sefid mire khoone-ye bakht, bâ kafan miâd biroon* (going to marital home in white dress and leaving it in white burial shroud) is a popular Persian proverb. It condemns divorce by saying that a woman should live with her husband 'till death do them apart'.

3. There are two phases in an Iranian marriage ceremony: the marriage contract and consummation (Mir-Hosseini 2000). The couple's relation is religiously, legally and socially acknowledged through the signing of the marriage contract. The consummation takes place at the marriage ceremony, after which the couple can live together and start their own family; prior to the ceremony, the couple continues to live with their respective parents. The period between these two ceremonies varies greatly—from days to years. During this time, depending on the family's customs, the couple can go out with each other and date freely. They also attend family gatherings and parties as a couple. However, as they live with their parents,

there are still obligations and rules they must follow; having sexual intercourse is the most common such restriction reflected by my interviewees. Even though they have opportunities to spend time together, the couple are expected to consummate their marriage only after the wedding ceremony. In many cases, the bride's father indirectly sets the boundaries by banning the groom from spending the night. Amongst my married friends, we used to joke: 'Why do parents think that everything happens at night!' Many of my interviewees who respected the taboo, from both generations, expressed that they did so in order to protect their future in case the engagement was called off. Legally, if it is proven that a woman is still a virgin after divorce, she can obtain a new shenâsnâme [national ID] with no mention of her previous marriage. In order to receive a new birth certificate, a woman is examined by doctors and gynaecologists licensed by the Sâzmân-e pezeshki-ye ghânooni [the Legal Medicine Organisation], which works under Iran's judiciary.

4. As discussed in Chap. 6, there is a stigma associated with temporary marriage. Still, I know many unmarried religious men who enter temporary marriages with, mostly non-religious, girlfriends to make their physical intimacy *halal*.

5. Tremayne describes Yazd as the 'most conservative town in the country' because it has the lowest rate of divorce (Tremayne 2006, p. 75). Based on fieldwork from 2004 with women from lower economic backgrounds in Yazd, Tremayne posits that marriage has a 'prime value' for women in this society: 'none of the women viewed early marriage as a stigma' (Tremayne 2006, p. 82).

6. A female-only ceremony held a day after the wedding in which women from both sides give gifts to the bride; it is a celebration of the consummation of the marriage.

7. Govâhi-ye salâmat-e aroos.

8. Hymenoplasty, hymen reconstruction or hymen-repair surgery: a simple operation that involves repairing the torn edges of the hymen with dissolvable stitches; it is usually performed under local anaesthetic. The Persian term is '*tarmim-e parde-ye bekârat*', which translates to 'repairing the hymen'. Thus, in this text I use hymen-repair surgery instead of hymenoplasty.

9. For instance, Bauer observes that women use 'chicken blood' as a substitute for hymenal bleeding in the villages of southern Tehran (Bauer 1985, p. 122). In general, women have learnt to use other means—such as taking pills to regulate their period, ensuring to have their menses on their wedding night or even scratching themselves during sexual penetration—in order to show blood on their wedding night (Afary 2009, p. 338).

10. The verb *dookhtan* or sewing is used as slang for hymen-repair surgery. The hymen is commonly referred to as *parde* which literally means curtain. For instance, '*parde nadâre*' is a Persian phrase used in everyday language, especially amongst youth, to describe a woman who is not a virgin.

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Narratives of Menstruation

Introduction

While reviewing the literature, I noticed that research on women in Iran and other Muslim contexts often overlooks the topic of menstruation in discussions of female sexuality. It is almost as if the taboo of menstruation, and shame associated with it, is carried over to the literature on women and sexuality in these contexts. Hence, in this chapter I look at menstruation as not only a biological event but also an analytical framework for understanding the socio-cultural construction of female sexuality in the Iranian context. Women's narratives of menstruation highlight social constraints and taboos that construct and discipline gender relations as well as women's relation to their body and sexuality.

Similar to Iran, in many cultural contexts, social customs and rituals are performed during menstruation; such customs show how women's 'natural' monthly bleeding bears particular significance, as well as how women's bodies and sexuality are socially coded (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Delaney 1988; Douglas 1984; Knight 1995; Lander 1988; Martin 2001). For instance, in analysing stories of menarche amongst 18- to 80-year-old women in Oregon, Lee defines menarche as 'a central aspect of body politics since it is loaded with the ambivalence associated with being a woman in Western society' (Lee 1994, p. 344). According to Lee (1994), to study menarche is to study the female body as it is constructed in the socio-political context of a specific society (p. 355).

Instead of merely focusing on the cultural rituals or socio-religious constraints specific to my context of study, I look at how my interviewees experience such limitations during their menstrual cycle; discuss how their relation with their menstrual body constructs their perception of the female body and sexuality; and examine how different discourses 'naturalise' and 'normalise' menstruation and its taboos for women of these two generations.

MENSTRUAL BODY

Menstruation is one of young girls' earliest encounters with their sexuality. At this time, girls not only learn about how to control their bodily flow, but also how to behave in public settings, their gender role and new positionality as pubescent women. As Butler argues, the physical body is part of a gendering process through which norms of female and male sexualities are marked on the body (Butler 1990, 1993b). In the Iranian context, menstruation is also used to teach young girls about taboo aspects of their sexuality. By the time of menarche, young girls learn about the meanings of femininity and female sexuality in the context of their lives. In addition, young girls also realise how to distinguish between what are appropriate and inappropriate behaviours for women through learning the specific rules of behaviour during menstruation.

As I observed, women's general understanding of their menstrual body and sexuality is constructed in intersection with different disciplinary discourses. In the following sections, as the women's narratives of menstruation highlight, I look at the role of religious discourses, scientific discourses and socio-cultural perceptions of female sexuality in shaping women's approaches to their menstrual body. I show how these discourses and their regulatory tools are intertwined and reinforce each other.

The Construction of Shame

When remembering menarche, women of the 1950s generation described a sense of guilt at 'committing' bad and inappropriate behaviour. Puri (1999) observed the same feeling amongst middle class women in Mumbai, as they felt 'they did something wrong or hurt themselves' (p. 50). In the Iranian context, 'doing something wrong' has specific implications for women; as I discussed in the previous chapter blood signifies a broken hymen, which women have learnt to keep intact until their wedding night.

Azam—one of my 1950s interviewees, who is from a non-religious, lower middle class family—vividly remembers the day she started menstruating and how she blamed herself. I met her at her apartment in a middle class neighbourhood in central Tehran. The apartment was simply furnished. She showed me her bedroom, which is also her office. Her father was a tailor and she started working with him when she was a child; now, at the age of 51, she is a self-employed tailor who works from home. We sat in the living room; no one else was at home. Azam's husband was at work, and her two children were at university. We talked very easily and she seemed eager to discuss her experiences:

> Before I started to menstruate, a girl on our street that I didn't know came to me and whispered '*regl shodi*?' [Have you *regl*[1]?] I asked her, 'what is *regl*?' And then she explained, '*az jelot khoon miâd*' [you bleed from your front, front refers to where urine comes out]. I was shocked and scared. After three or four days of my period, I didn't tell anyone because I thought I did a bad thing. That's why I was bleeding [she laughs], because that girl also asked me quietly. Then my mother found out, because it stained through my underwear and my legs. She asked me what happened and, while I was trembling with fear, I told her that I had been having this for two days.

Azam later added that she was a very naughty girl as a child. She used to climb trees and walk on the wall, even while her mother warned her about doing such physical activities. However, Azam said she did not know anything about hymen or virginity; she only knew that it was important and could be broken by jumping from the wall or tree. Therefore, when she saw blood on her underwear Azam blamed herself and feared her mother's reaction, as she had already been warned about the 'bad' consequences of her behaviour.

Mahnaz, a 61-year-old housewife from a religious family, remembered the day her daughter began menstruating: 'Poor thing [referring to her daughter]. I asked her, did you jump from somewhere? She cried and said no, and I told her not to worry, it is okay.' Mahnaz reinforced her daughter's feeling of guilt by accusing her of doing something that damaged her virginity; something Mahnaz had learnt from her own mother. She remembered that, as a girl, her mother had warned against physical activities that might threaten her virginity. This sense of guilt often makes women hesitant to tell others, including their mothers. When Mahnaz

bled the first time, she 'couldn't tell' her mother; it was their maid who first discovered it and informed her mother: 'then my mum gave me specific underwear and told me what to do. I was so embarrassed.'

Mothers play a significant role in both Azam and Mahnaz's narratives, as they use their daughter's 'fear' of blood to reinforce the importance of virginity and emphasise how easily it is damaged. The fear of blood, even for 'naughty' girls like Azam, is used as a tool to further girls' internalisation of appropriate behaviour. Mothers' reactions also intensify girls' fear and guilt, thus ensuring that daughters remember this event and perform according to the norms of female virginity. Moreover, Mahnaz's reaction to her own daughter highlights how women have internalised the patriarchal norms of female sexuality and continue to regulate young girls' behaviour through micro-mechanisms of control.

Not only did most of my 1950s generation interviewees refer to feelings of guilt and fear, but they also spoke of feeling shame and embarrassment at their bodies and sexuality. In narrating her story of menarche, Simin referred to her mother's generation's shame of sex and sexuality.

Simin is a 56-year-old housewife who spends most of her time taking care of her sick husband at home. She grew up in a non-religious, middle class family. Before I started asking about menstruation, Simin told me that her husband's disease had also affected her 'physical system'; she had gone through menopause when she was only 32 and therefore could not have any children. We sat and talked at a mutual friend's apartment. To me, she looked a lot younger than her age: she wore a pink blouse and dark blue trousers and was fully made-up. She laughed when remembering her menarche:

> My mum belongs to the *ghadimi* [older] generations and was a child when she lost her own mother, so she didn't have anybody to teach her how to be gentle and nice to her own daughter. When I started to menstruate I was at my friend's house. When I came back home I told my mother with a proud, indifferent tone [she shows how she put her hands-on-hips and stood in front of her mother]: 'Well, I have got my period'. She replied, '*khob hâlâ* [which means you have not done anything important or nothing important has happened] go and make some eggs for yourself". It was her harsh reaction that made it a bad memory for me. For my mum [and her generation] so many things were considered bad, even sex for them was *khâk-too-sari* [Persian expression of a shameful act].[2] We still haven't learnt to look at sex as a very beautiful action.

While Simin felt like a grown up, her mother's reaction reminded her not to feel 'proud' of herself. By silencing the conversation, Simin's mother also showed her that it is not appropriate to speak publically, with pride, about menstruation. Simin criticised both her mother's generation and the general cultural atmosphere, neither of which have learnt how to discuss sex and pleasure.

During my conversations with women of both generations, the English term 'period' was commonly used; however, similar to the topics of 'virginity' and 'sex', my interviewees mostly referred to their periods simply as 'it' or lowered their voices when saying 'period' or even 'blood'. Amongst her interviewees in the United States, Lee also observed that women use the passive voice in describing their menarche, as menstruation is 'something outside of themselves, referred to it as "it"' (Lee 1994, p. 349). Language is one aspect that indicates women's understanding of female sexuality and sex. Indeed, women's use of words to describe their bodily experiences shows the extent to which women have internalised the normalised concept of female sexuality. Paknahad-e Jabaruti (2002) analyses the sexual connotation of commonly used Persian idioms and expressions in arguing that the Persian language's sexist and gendered characteristics signify the power relation between the sexes in Iranian society (Paknahad-e Jabaruti 2002). For instance, women's role in the sexual act is always passive,[3] and their reproductive role and sexual organs are only mentioned faintly and with embarrassment.

Using *khâk-too-sari* as a code highlights how women perceive sexual acts as degrading and shameful. As discussed in Chap. 3, the general cultural milieu defines sex as something meant only to satisfy men's sexual needs. While it is culturally inappropriate for women to publically discuss sex, codes—such as *khâk-too-sari*—make it possible for women to share their experiences of sexual relations. For example, playing dramatic games and using explicit sexual jokes in female-only spaces are popular ways in which women share their sexual experiences (Bauer 1985, p. 122; Safa-Isfahani 1980; Torab 2006, p. 217). Safa-Isfahani's work on the sexual basis of dramatic games (*bâziha*) in Iranian women's gatherings shows that, through sharing erotically charged symbols, women communicate their 'desires, fears and concerns' with each other (Safa-Isfahani 1980, p. 52). Therefore, although using codes reproduces the norm of embarrassment at sex and sexual relations, women are also appropriating these norms to their own advantage. I explain later in this chapter that

women—especially younger generations—use a creative variety of codes to keep their menstruation a secret between women, especially in the presence of male relatives.

It seems that, for 1950s women, keeping 'distance' was also used as a tool to help familiarise young girls with the unspoken and shameful aspects of their sexuality. Daughters could not tell their mothers directly; there was always a maid, older sister or cousin who relayed the event, reinforcing the idea of shyness in relation to girls' femininity and body. For example, Esmat, 51 years old, remembered: 'We were *hesâb mibordim* [scared] of our mum. I saw her a few times sewing some sort of textile [cloth women used as sanitary pads] but she never told me what it was for. She used to say, "you will find out later".' The 'distance' in mother-daughter relations can be found amongst different social classes and families with different religious backgrounds. Afsaneh's description of her own 'time' and generation shows how this 'distance' taught girls to follow the rules of shyness and charm:

> We had *sharm va hayâ* [shyness and chastity]. We saw that my mum didn't pray for seven days, but we couldn't ask her. [...] My mother didn't have an intimate relationship with us, she kept distance between herself and us. [...] I learnt about *ghosl* at school [religious school]. At the end of seven days, my mother just asked 'do you know what to do?' And I just replied 'yes'.

As Afsaneh mentioned, in addition to older sisters and younger female family members, female preachers at *Jaraseh*[4] rituals also played an important role in informing young girls about menstruation. In a context where women did not have comfortable relationships with their mothers and were unable to address issues related to their body and sexuality without feeling shame and embarrassment, female preachers at '*jalase*'s were seen as legitimate sources with whom women could discuss issues from a religious perspective. Amongst 1950s women from religious families, who grew up in religious and conservative neighbourhoods in central and southern Tehran, *jalase*s were common sources of knowledge about menstruation.

With a bachelor's degree in educational management, Zahra—a 51-year-old woman from a low-income neighbourhood in southern Tehran—used to teach religious education in schools. I met her at the charity she currently works at in a middle class neighbourhood in western Tehran. When I asked about menstruation, Zahra recalled that her mother had to find

out, herself, about Zahra's period: 'I couldn't tell her.' She then talked about a woman in *jalaseh* [religious meetings] who gave them information about *ghosl* [5]: 'I was more comfortable talking to and asking questions of that woman.' Women, like Zahra, expressed that receiving information before menarche about their religious duties, both during and after menstruation, positively affected their experience of menarche.

Teaching young girls how to control the *nejâsat* [impurity] caused by blood and perform *ghosl* at the end of the menstrual cycle seems to be the main concern of 1950s mothers. As Torab also observes, the rules of ritual purity (*tahârat*) is the main topic of *jalase*s; the preacher educates women about religious rules and answers their questions (Torab 2006, p. 36).

I also spoke with Shahin at the same charity where Zahra works. Shahin is a 49-year-old mother of three girls, studied both seminary and social work courses and now works part-time at the charity. She remembered her menarche vividly, describing how she shouted from the toilet 'there is blood' and her mother's 'very bad reaction'.

> I didn't know about period. My older sister guided me. I remember that, at the end of my period, my mum came with me to the public bath, which I usually went to alone. Then, at the end, she told me that I had to do *ghosl*. But when I asked her what is *ghosl* and why did I have to do it, she didn't answer. Later at school, in our religious class, I learned about it.

Shahin's experience at the public bath was unpleasant, as her mother did not explain why she had to perform this ritual at the end of her menstrual cycle. In contrast to her mother, Shahin decided to explain *ghosl* to her three daughters before their puberties, ensuring that the practice was already 'normal' and 'natural' for them when they got their periods.

Shahin's account shows that mothers see teaching young girls the rules of *tahârat* as part of their religious responsibility. Furthermore, through repetition of the act, these rules become the 'natural' and 'normal' performance for women after menstruation. Comparing Zahra and Shahin's experiences with religious obligations also demonstrates how religious education from someone seen as an authority can help justify the ritual for young women, making it easier for them to accept.

As I observed, the religious discourse can also reinforce women's shame of and embarrassment at their body and sexuality. By learning about religious prohibitions and rules of tahârat, young girls also learn that blood is '*najes*' [impure] and polluting and therefore should be controlled.

Seeing themselves as impure during their menstrual cycle reinforces their shame and disgust of their menstrual body and their sexuality. Moallem discusses that in the construction of 'sexualised bodies and desiring subjects', cultural and religious discourses are 'inseparable'; they have influenced each other, and there is a need to look at the work of these discourses in a historical context (Moallem 2005, p. 24).

Indeed, learning about *ghosl* and religious prohibitions during the time of *heyz*[6]—such as reciting Quran, saying prayers, fasting and entering mosques or shrines—also justifies the socio-cultural perception that women's bodies, specifically their bodily flow, should be controlled, disciplined and concealed. The rules of *tahârat*, along with some implications about menstruation and sexual intercourse, started being taught in schools after the Islamic Revolution. Hence, girls from both religious and non-religious families are acquainted with the meaning of and regulations for menstruation in the religious context.

My interviewees from both generations also demonstrated how their perception of blood as 'messy' and 'disgusting' is reinforced by religious education. Women, even those from non-religious families, have internalised this conception of blood. For instance, Maryam—a 53-year-old, self-employed beautician from a non-religious, middle class family—remembered her menarche clearly:

> The first time I got my period, it was in the middle of the night. I didn't know what it was. I was scared. […] I put tissues and quietly told my sister. I didn't want my mother to know because she had a cleaning obsession and I knew that blood and *nejâsat* would make her angry.

1950s women also found that the sanitary products they had access to made it more 'disgusting' to control blood and *nejâsat* during their menstrual cycle. Mehri, from the 1950s generation, remembered that it was really difficult for women to keep themselves 'clean' back then: 'We had to use cotton and cover it with toilet paper. Just imagine! Even when I think about it now I feel terrible.' Like Mehri's experience, my interviews with women of the 1950s generation revealed that the use of materials, such as cotton and cloth, greatly influenced women's memories of menarche and their feelings towards their menstrual bodies. Azam, 51 years old, remembered that her mother gave her 'a clean and unused *dastmâl* [cloth], as they believed a *dastmâl-e âb-nakhordeh* [unwashed cloth, which means new cloth] should be used' when she started to menstruate.

Based on Azam's description, the cloth was folded into layers to prevent staining, and they had to wash it regularly and reuse it. Shadi also expressed feelings of disgust at having to wash the cloth every time she had her period.

For 1950s generation, it is also important to note that women's economic situation determined the type of materials used during menstruation. During the time of the Shah, women from wealthier backgrounds used sanitary pads bought either while abroad or from supermarkets that sold foreign goods in Tehran. Mehri and Azam were born in the same year, but Mehri is from a higher economic and social background; therefore, their experiences with issues of cleanliness during menstruation were different. Mehri could buy cotton for each time she menstruated, but Azam had to wash and reuse the same cloth. Had Azam been from a wealthier background, it is likely the maid would have washed and dried the cloths. Although the use of sanitary products for menstruation has changed over time, as the variety of both foreign and domestic products became more available in the market, I still found similar feelings of disgust towards dealing with menstrual blood amongst the younger generation.

Thus far, through narrating 1950s women's experiences of their menstrual body, I have discussed the socio-cultural perception of female sexuality and how young girls learnt to conceal and internalise shame in their menstrual body and sexuality through the use of different disciplinary tools. I have also looked at the role of religious education in intensifying this shame and disgust for their menstrual body.

In the following section, I look at how the scientific discourse played a role in disciplining and normalising experiences of menarche amongst the post-revolutionary generation. I discuss how medical and scientific knowledge replaced the information that young pubescent girls formerly received from their mothers, older sisters or female preachers in *jalaseh* rituals. More importantly, I also examine both the positive and negative impacts of this modern, scientific discourse on women's experiences of their menstrual body.

Medicalising Menstruation: Knowledge Versus Tradition

All of my younger interviewees were aware of and able to explain in general medical and scientific terms what happens to their reproductive system during menstruation. In the years after the Islamic Revolution, schools

organise a special hygiene class in which menstruation is explained from both a biological and physiological perspective. Most of my 1980s women, save those who began menstruating before middle school, share the experience of learning about menstruation from hygiene classes at school. Somayeh—a 23-year-old university student from a religious, lower middle class family—stated that she received 'complete information' about menstruation from the hygiene tutor at school. She remembered not being shocked or scared when she began to menstruate: 'I prepared everything [pad] and then told my mother and she congratulated me.'

In my first year of middle school, I remember a woman—who we later realised was a hygiene tutor—came to our class and explained the menstrual cycle using simple language. She showed us how to use and dispose of a pad; it was my first encounter with menstruation. I later discovered that some of my classmates had already started to menstruate at that time, so the school decided to organise this tutorial and also inform the parents. Elham also first learnt about menstruation from a hygiene tutor at school. However, she thinks that these tutorials exist in order to control sources of information: 'they don't want girls to find out from each other and create chaos.'

Mothers have also welcomed these tutorials, as they prefer their girls receive information about menstruation from someone with the authority and knowledge to discuss this issue with young girls. When I returned home after the tutorial, I remember being so excited, repeating everything to my mother and looking for her approval. I have heard that, today, some schools in Tehran even organise a session for mothers; they are taught how to react and what sort of information should be given to their daughters before menarche. In addition, there are also many parental guidebooks that address adolescence from both religious and psychiatric perspectives and discuss the topic of menstruation.

As I observed, mothers' level of education was very influential in both 1950s and 1980s women's experiences of menarche; those who grew up in educated families seem to have had a more comfortable relationship with their mothers. However, in comparison with the 1980s generation, very few of my 1950s interviewees' mothers had a high school education. Due to their lack of information, these women did not know how to explain menstruation to their pre-pubescent daughters. Roya's mother—uneducated, from a lower middle class and religious background, who grew up in a small city in central Iran—told her, 'we were educated like this; we were also embarrassed to talk with our daughters

[about menstruation]'. However, in contrast to her mother, Roya—a 50-year-old, university educated woman—had access to different types of educative and scientific publications, which helped her teach her daughters about their menstrual cycle. Roya described how she acted differently with her daughters: 'I bought books for them that explained everything, and my girls accepted menstruation very easily.'

Modern educational and scientific publications have medicalised the topic of menstruation and provided women with a scientific language to share their experiences. Roya also expressed that such publications helped her to communicate with her daughters during their menarche. Consequently, the scientific and medical discourse regulates women's ways of communicating with each other, putting scientific knowledge in sharp contrast to traditional advice. Indeed, the traditional information that women received from their mothers, grandmothers or female preachers at *jalaseh* rituals has been replaced by the modern scientific discourse presented in religious and hygiene classes at schools.

As Shahidian (2008) describes, the post-revolutionary scientific discourse has trained and produced skilled professionals who, nowadays, are the main consultative sources in the field of sexuality. The skilled professionals entered a domain that had had traditionally been 'oral and female', as women—mothers, daughters, sisters, female friends—had customarily passed on advice to each other about such topics (Najmabadi 1998, p. 106). My interviewees also mentioned that they prefer to discuss their sexual lives with experts—such as family consultants or gynaecologists—instead of their female friends or families, mainly because experts' knowledge is more trustworthy.

As I observed amongst my interviewees, under the influence of modern education, younger generations of women make a clear distinction between objective/factual knowledge and traditions learnt from women of older generations. This modern education is not only limited to universities or schools, there are references to medicine, psychology and other sources of 'legitimate' knowledge in television programmes and even religious gatherings.

Many of my younger interviewees and some women from the 1950s generation told me that after learning about menstruation in school, they started to question the information passed on by their grandmothers, mothers or older sisters. Mothers warning that during menstruation the womb is prone to absorb water and one should not take a bath or shower, especially in the first few days, is popular, 'traditional' advice that women

of both generations referred to in their stories of menarche. Zahra relayed that it was only after speaking with a female doctor at school that she started taking showers:

> When I got my period, I did not know anything. So my mum explained it to me and said I shouldn't pray during this time. She also gave me some traditional advice that I shouldn't take a shower […] at high school, the doctor came each week to answer our questions. I asked her and she told me there is no such a thing.

Hoda had a similar story:

> In our family planning course, they explained very well about hygiene [during period]. […] My mum told me that I shouldn't take a shower more than two times [during my period]. But, now that I obtained the knowledge, I know that it is not like what the tradition says. You can take a shower whenever you want as long as you care about your hygiene.

There are differences between the body as defined in these traditions and the body as defined in the scientific discourse. The female body is less restricted in the scientific discourse to which my interviewees referred. It became easier for these women to accept and live with their menstrual bodies when they realised that all the traditional regulations passed down by their mothers—such as avoiding physical exertion in the first days of menstruation or maintaining specific diets during their period[7]—are not scientifically proven.

Modern scientific knowledge has also influenced social customs and traditions. In the next section, I discuss how 1950s women's increased level of education and perception of the 'ritual of slapping' as superstition has led to its discontinuation amongst the 1980s generation.

Menarche and the Ritual of Slapping

Parvaneh is 60 years old and from a non-religious, upper middle class family. She studied at Tehran University, but is now a housewife and mother of four. She remembered: 'I didn't tell anyone, but when my older sister found out [that I menstruated] she asked me to come close and then she slapped me on the face. Then she told me that my cheek is pink now.'

Before starting my fieldwork, I did not know anything about the ritual of slapping. I first heard about the practice at a female gathering at one of my relative's houses, when I was asked about the subject of my research and content of my interview questions. We were sitting around a big table for lunch and everyone was listening to the conversation, so I decided to speak about one of the less taboo topics of my research: menstruation. When I did, they all suddenly started sharing their own stories. Interestingly, the first incident they all remembered was 'the slap'. Even the younger members of the group (1970s generation) experienced the slap. My maternal relatives, those present at this gathering, belong to non-religious, middle and upper middle class Tehrani families. They are of various ages and have different educational backgrounds.

I felt like an outsider, so I turned to my mother and asked, 'why didn't you slap me?' She laughed and replied, 'I wanted to, but at the time I couldn't'. I learnt from their stories that 'the slap' was performed by a girl's older, close female relatives, such as mother, grandmother or sister. The ritual was not a public event; it was usually performed in private, secretly. Its unexpectedness is what made the slap so unforgettable for these women, as it was not a harsh or hard slap. Slapping such as this is not unique to Iran. As Ilkkaracan describes, 'mothers slapping their daughters in the face when they have their first menstruation is an old customary practice in Turkey' (Ilkkaracan and Seral 2000, p. 188).

The ritual has different meanings for women of the 1950s. However, in line with my own experience, the vast majority (all but one) of my 1980s interviewees did not experience the slap after their first period.

Monir, a 53-year-old housewife, is from an uneducated and low-income family. She was living with her grandmother when she had her menarche:

> She, I am sorry to say this, slapped me [smiles] and asked, 'where have you been? Have you jumped from somewhere?' Like other older women at that time. Then she told me, 'don't worry you are going to have it each month'.

In Monir's story, the slap is a symbolic act that reminds young girls about their sexuality. It also creates a sense of shame and embarrassment about their body and sexuality, which accompanies the meaning of womanhood for young girls like Monir. By asking about her physical activities, Monir's grandmother was also regulating her behaviour, pointing out

what a young unmarried girl should or should not do. As previously discussed, menstruation is used as an opportunity to teach young girls about the importance of virginity to their lives.

The ritual marks girls' entrance into womanhood—a process in which female members of the family help them to familiarise with their sexuality and roles as women. For instance, Fariba—a 51-year-old woman from a traditional and religious family—remembered that her mother slapped her on both cheeks and said, 'it shows that you are a grown up now, don't be sad'. Her mother also explained that slapping makes 'your cheeks become pink'. Maryam—a 53-year-old woman from a middle class, non-religious family—explained the phenomenon further: 'The redness comes to your face because you are not a child anymore. You can marry and get pregnant.'

In Maryam's understanding of the ritual, menstruation is linked to women's ability to reproduce, which highlights how the social norms of heterosexuality are marked on the materiality of the female body. After menarche, girls achieve a new social status: they can now be a wife and mother.

Some of my 1950s interviewees described the ritual of slapping as *khorâfât* [superstitions]. For example, Zari—a 49-year-old teacher— remembered that her mother still slapped her even though she considered the ritual to be a superstition. Her mother thought 'there might be a *hekmat* [wisdom] in it that we are not aware of'. Others described their mothers as more *fahmide* [sensible]. Mahnaz, for example, said that her mother told her about the ritual, but 'said these are all superstitions, and kissed me instead'.

The proliferation of scientific and modern education about menstrual cycles has led women to view this ritual as a superstition. Najmabadi argues that, during the modernisation period, the introduction of new forms of scientific knowledge to women's private lives led to changes in their oral 'homosocial' world through the delegitimisation of traditional sources of knowledge (Najmabadi 1998, p. 106; 2005, p. 152). Therefore, 1950s women look back at the slap now and think of it as superstition; their modernised and scientific mind cannot recognise any logic behind the ritual. For their own daughters, my interviewees used biological language to explain the reasons for menstruation and its benefits for women's bodies. Fariba, for instance, laughed and shook her head to say 'no' when I asked about performing the ritual on her own daughter. Now, as a university educated woman, she finds it a ridiculous or funny tradition.

In contrast to women of the 1950s, only one of my 1980s interviewees experienced slapping. Sepideh is a 30-year-old lawyer from a lower middle class, religious family.

She laughed while describing the day of her menarche:

> I told my older sister because it was easier for me […] and she did something really funny. I remember that she slapped me [she laughs] which means that a girl should be careful not to get pregnant and should behave modestly. My sister then told me, 'you should be careful about your virginity' and other rubbish things.

It is interesting to note that women who experienced the ritual of slapping described it in a positive light. Sepideh, for instance, found the ritual funny, even though she criticised its underlying intents. In my family's female gathering, sharing the experience of the slap also created a collective identity and sense of belonging amongst women of different generations. I see this ritual as a rite of passage and a shared language amongst older generations of women. Through performing 'the slap', women communicated to girls the importance of both their newly-gained reproductive capabilities and remaining virgin until marriage.

The scientific knowledge has changed mother-daughter's relations and their ways of communication as well as the younger generations' perception of menstruation and their menstrual body. In the next section, I discuss the effects of the medicalisation of menstruation on the younger generation's attitude towards menstruation and their menstrual body.

Naturalising Menstruation

Teaching young girls about menstruation through a scientific discourse has both positively and negatively affected women's attitudes towards their menstrual body. The 'naturalised' understanding of the menstrual cycle is the main difference between older and younger generations' perceptions of menstruation. By learning about menstruation through science, younger generations have realised that menstruation is a requisite biological bodily function, which is out of their control, and limited to the female reproductive system.

The medicalisation and pathologisation of the menstrual body have helped women to distance from and objectify menstruation. As narratives of Ava and Paria highlight, women accept menstruation as something out of their control.

For example, 25-year-old Ava stated with an air of revulsion:

You are *kasif* [dirty] for a week. You have to change your pads all the time, it's difficult. I prefer for children to be delivered by storks [she refers to the Disney animation movie in which babies are delivered by storks to their parents instead of being born to their mothers].

As I mentioned before, the view of the menstrual body as dirty and messy has negative effects on young girls' experiences of their bodies and sexualities. In explaining her feelings during menstruation, Paria—a 21-year-old cinema student from a non-religious, middle class family—declared:

fohsh midam [I swear]. […] I think it is a ridiculous thing, because I never want to have a child so why should I bear it.
    Nafiseh: Do you think it is only for reproduction?
    Paria: No, I know that it is for other things, but for me it's just not worth it. Before menstruation, I am *pâche-gir* [irritable and ready to fight] and I became suicidal due to depression, and only a few people can understand how you feel. Men understand you even less.

In both Ava and Paria's descriptions, menstruation is something that happens to them. By looking at the construction of female sexuality in Western cultures, Young (2005) distinguishes between the 'feminine' and 'female'; she argues that femininity is a set of normative expectations imposed on the 'raw' materiality of the female body by male-dominated societies (Young 2005, p. 5). Through distinguishing between women's 'lived bodies' and the social expectation of femininity, Young (2005) argues that women become detached from the corporeality or reality of their bodies. In a similar context, Martin discusses how women tend to see their bodies as separate from themselves, as they have learnt that their bodies need to be controlled (Martin 2001, p. 89). Amongst her interviewees; she posits that women do not see menstruation as part of themselves, but rather as a process that is happening to them (Martin 2001).

Ava and Paria both see menstruation as a burden they have to endure in order to perform their biological role as a woman. Consequently, they both detach themselves from their body and see their own wishes in contrast to what their biology imposes on them. For example, Ava mentioned that instead of getting pregnant, she wished there was another way to

deliver a baby. For both Ava and Paria, reproduction is the purpose of female sexuality; a view wholly relevant to their social context, which values and considers motherhood as women's central role.

Tara also detaches herself from her feminine body; she sees menstruation as part of her sexuality, a part she cannot control. However, this detachment has helped her feel less ashamed of her menstrual body. Tara—a 29-year-old lawyer from a non-religious, upper middle class, educated family—explained that, for her, there is a distinction between the 'natural' or 'medical' part of female sexuality and other aspects:

> I don't feel embarrassed if a man finds out that I have my period. Period also means a *dore* [cycle]. I have seen women reacting with surprise when someone uses the word in a group of people. But condom is different. I haven't bought condoms yet. My husband even felt embarrassed at first, then it became easier for him to buy [condoms].

Tara sees menstruation as a 'medical' issue; therefore, she feels at ease talking about it, even in public. She distinguishes between those bodily functions that one cannot control—such as menstruation—and sexual intercourse, which is linked to pleasure and desire and, thereby, can be controlled. Thus, she is embarrassed to buy condoms but not sanitary pads. She stated that she prefer people to see her as a 'human being', not as a woman. Tara's comments must be understood in the context of her society, where sex is perceived as *havâ va havas* [carnal desire]—with all its negative connotations—and women as its main source; as *fitnah* in society (Sabbah 1984). Therefore, as Tara's profession requires her to be in contact with both men and women in different public settings, she prefers to hide the part of her sexuality that could make her an object of desire for men.

Amongst my other 1980s interviewees, I noticed that this medicalised perception of the female body has led to decreased feelings of shame and embarrassment from menstruation. Furthermore, many of my 1980s interviewees expressed that 'knowing [more]' about the menstrual cycle positively affected their feelings towards their body. For example, 30-year-old Negin told me that she accepts menstruation as 'a natural thing that happens for everyone'. At first, 24-year-old Zahra did not feel good about menstruation, but now knows 'that it is a very natural thing that happens'.

Another consequence of the scientific perspective is that women accept the 'normal' categories constructed by this discourse without questioning its gendered basis. For instance, Martin puts forward that the medical scientific discourse paints the 'female cycle' as a 'productive enterprise'; therefore, the end of this cycle is a failure of womanhood (Martin 1991). In addition, the medical and psychological characteristics attached to different stages in women's menstrual lifecycles—such as pre-menstrual, menstrual and post-menstrual (menopause)—remain unquestioned.

However, as Tara described, accepting menstruation as a natural, biological experience has empowered women to discuss menstruation publically. Some of my 1980s interviewees spoke about how seeing menstruation as natural helped them become more comfortable buying sanitary pads from male shopkeepers.

For example, 30-year-old Sepideh told me that her attitude towards menstruation is different from when she was 22 or 23 years old. Now, she thinks: 'It is not that I wanted it [to happen], it is what nature asked me to do. So others should respect and accept that women continue the creation. Men should support women; it's their duty.' Since taking this perspective, it became easier for Sepideh to buy sanitary pads from male shopkeepers.

Still, many of my younger generation interviewees spoke of their embarrassment at buying sanitary products from male shopkeepers specifically. Their shame shows how socio-cultural norms have remained untouched by the modern scientific discourse. I discuss these aspects in the following section.

Keeping the Secret

As thus far discussed, women are not socialised to accept menstruation with pride. Through performing the social codes of 'appropriate' behaviour, young women internalise that menstruation is a shameful and embarrassing thing. Through years of performance, such becomes 'natural', 'normal' behaviour; hiding this aspect of their sexuality becomes part of their gender role.

By the time of their first menstrual cycle, women also learn—from either their mothers or other female relatives—to keep their menstruation a 'secret', especially from male relatives. The embarrassment caused

by a menstrual body reinforces the 'need' to hide this shameful aspect of their sexuality from the opposite sex. I found that women from both generations and different religious and social backgrounds prefer to hide their menstruation from male relatives, especially their fathers and brothers.

For example, women from religious families of both generations told me about faking religious practices in front of male relatives in order to keep their menstruation secret. From the beginning of the period of 'pollution', a Muslim woman is prohibited from fasting, reciting prayers, or touching the Holy Quran. As Maryam described: 'you can find this habit of hiding amongst all Iranian women. I think that I felt embarrassed. I used to wake up during *Ramazán*[8] [for *sahari*[9]] because I thought, if I didn't, others would know'. While explaining that she always buys sanitary pads for her daughter, Zahra also mentioned, 'she [Zahra's daughter] asks me to wake her during *Ramazán* [to fake fasting]; she doesn't like her brothers to find out [about her menstruation]'. Zahra's daughter is the youngest child; her eldest son is 31 years old and has a child himself. Even though both of her brothers know about menstruation, Zahra's daughter still wants to keep it a secret. Zahra described her daughter's decision with pride, finding it appropriate and expected behaviour.

My mother, I remember, also used to wake me up for *sahari* when I had my period during Ramadan; it was easier for her to avoid my brothers' questions than to explain why I could not fast. Some years she tried to make excuses, but in my brothers' teenage years, especially, I had to fake fasting in their presence. As they got older, my mother became easier on me. I never criticised or questioned my mother's decision in the years I had to fake my religious duties, as I also found it inappropriate and embarrassing to tell my brothers.

I shared this experience with many of my 1980s participants from religious backgrounds. For example, 29-year-old Elham mentioned that still she fakes fasting in front of her older brother: 'My brother never knows when I am having my period.' She added that she wants 'to keep it this way' because her brother once made a joke about menstruation that 'embarrassed' her, especially because she 'did not know how to reply'.

As both my and Elham's stories show, even women from highly educated backgrounds are not provided with the language to communicate about menstruation with the opposite sex. This lack of communication is

highlighted in women's inability to confront men's verbal abuse regarding menstruation. Zoha, 23 years old, described how her older sister was abused when she bought pads from a grocery store, and so now only buys from stores with a female shopkeeper: 'He told her with a mocking tone, "you are riding a red Pride".[10] She was really embarrassed and couldn't do anything.' Zoha's sister felt abused by the man's jokes about an aspect of her sexuality that she has learnt to conceal, especially from men. Such jokes put women in an uncomfortable situation, as they intensify women's sense of embarrassment and shame about their sexuality. Furthermore, as Elham described, instead of learning how to retort such jokes and communicate with men about menstruation, women have learnt to avoid both the topic and situations in which they are in inferior and uncomfortable positions. The jokes and abuse women receive from either male relatives or strangers in society remind them of the taboo aspects of female sexuality and highlight the centrality of performing according to accepted social norms.

The shame of buying sanitary products sheds light on women's embarrassment at men finding out about menstruation. Difficulties in buying or asking male relatives to buy sanitary products weaved through my conversations about menstruation with women of both generations. For example, Fariba, from the 1950s generation, remembered:

> For a long time, we [referring to her and her older sisters] thought that if we go and ask a shopkeeper for sanitary pads we were doing a *kheyli zesht* [very ugly] thing. And, if we saw a girl who asked her father to buy pads, we would say 'oh no'. It was *ajib* [weird] for us that her father knew [she laughs].
> Nafiseh: After your marriage who bought pads for you?
> Fariba: At first, my husband. But after a while, I began to buy it myself.

Simin emphasised that it was not socially acceptable for young women to buy sanitary products themselves: 'never ever, it wasn't very customary back then.' The experience of buying sanitary products was a marked difference between women of upper and lower middle class families of the 1950s generation. For example, Simin's wealthy family considered it inappropriate for a young, unmarried girl to ask for sanitary pads or other female products in shops. Monir, on the other hand, who is from a low-income family, remembered that from a certain age she had to buy

the products herself: 'it was difficult, but my mum didn't want me to be *dast-o-pâ-cholofty* [dependent on her or anyone else].' Farzaneh—a 51-year-old woman from a similar economic background as Monir, who had to start to work after she finished high school—remembered that her mother bought her pads at first, but she had to buy them herself after a while.

In addition, men's willingness to buy sanitary products for their wives and daughters also varies based on educational and cultural background. For example, Arezoo—a 55-year-old beautician—spoke about how her father, who was in the military, found it degrading and so 'didn't buy us pads, even now men [which refers to her son and her husband] don't like to hold sanitary pads in the streets'.

Many of my 1950s women mentioned that they purchase and prepare sanitary products for their unmarried daughters. It seems that, especially when women are pre or post-menopausal, it becomes easier for them to buy these products. For example, Mehri—a 51-year-old teacher from a religious, upper middle class family—described:

> My mum used to buy it for me and now I am buying pads for my girls. They prefer that I buy. You know, they [vendors] put it in a black plastic bag, maybe it's difficult for them to hold the bag because then everyone can guess what is inside it. […] I also prefer that no one sees me with this bag.

In Iran, when one purchases sanitary pads from grocery stores or pharmacies, the vendors put such products in a separate black plastic bag to keep them hidden. Previously, customers could not access these products themselves and had to ask the shopkeeper for assistance; now, however, people can pick out products themselves in most grocery stores. Still, the shopkeeper has to bag the products at the till. On one occasion, after I had selected pads myself and taken them to the register, the male shopkeeper asked me whether I wanted them in a separate black plastic bag.

Thirty-two-year-old Mitra opined that they conceal pads in a black plastic bag because men are also embarrassed about menstruation. She described women who buy pads from male shopkeepers as 'ignorant'; she believes that hiding menstruation is part of women's charm and chastity, especially as it pertains to remaining distant from the opposite sex. Mitra is from a wealthy and religious family. When we first met, she wore a black *châdor*, black *rusari* and no makeup. She made very harsh statements

against watching satellite television, as she sees decreasing religiosity to be a consequence of the widespread consumption of Western media. For example, she angrily narrated a story about a boy she saw in a neighbourhood shop:

> The shop was crowded and a boy came and asked the shopkeeper very comfortably, 'give me *navâr behdâshti* [sanitary strips] please'. The man put it in a black plastic bag and gave it to him. Then, one of boy's friends came and asked him to play with them. The boy replied: 'my mum is in the bathroom. Let me give these pads to her and then I will join you.' Everyone might laugh at this story […] I wanted to follow that boy, drag his mother out of the bathroom and beat her [she doesn't even smile]. It is really *zesht* [shameful].

For Mitra, this woman's comfort at buying pads is not acceptable, as it goes against women's preferred social behaviour. Mitra's anger with the boy's mother and her imagined violent reaction are akin to the jokes and abuse women endure when men find out about their menstruation. Mitra's violent fantasy reflects the socio-cultural context's reaction to women not performing according to accepted social norms. Moreover, it is not only men who are involved in controlling and disciplining women's gender roles and duties; other women also take up this mantle.

Due to the embarrassment caused by others, especially men, women employ different strategies when buying pads. For example, they tend to buy pads from shops in neighbourhoods other than their own, so at least it is not known in their immediate locales. For example, Negin—a 30-year-old woman from a wealthy, non-religious family—explained that she has bought her own pads since her mother's menopause. However, she also mentioned: 'I don't buy it [pads] in our neighbourhood. I try places that don't know me. […] I would feel a little embarrassed if I had to buy from the grocery store on our street.' According to Negin, her mother did the same thing. Younger generation also made a distinction between uneducated and educated men when it comes to purchasing sanitary products; in Sahar's description, those who had the opportunity to pursue higher education, are more sensible. She described men who work at grocery stores as '*âmi*' [uneducated]—those for whom menstruation is still 'not okay'. Similar to Sahar, many of my other 1980s generation interviewees expressed a preference for buying sanitary pads from men in pharmacies, rather than men in grocery stores; my interviewees found that they receive less verbal abuse from men who work at pharmacies.

Some of my 1980s women spoke about the process of buying sanitary pads becoming easier after they experienced sexual relations. For instance, 25-year-old Minoo described how, over the past few years, her experiences with sexual intercourse—as well as just becoming more comfortable with sex in general—have made menstruation 'easier' to deal with.

> When you see yourself naked in front of someone else and learn that every-one else has done the same thing, it becomes easier for you. […] At home and in front of my brother I don't say that I got my period, because he is too young and it is a personal matter. But, we don't hide it at home. Everyone [her sister, mother and herself] disposes of their pads in the toilet bin where everyone else can see. I tell my male friends that I have my period. It becomes a habit.

It seems that sexual experience can affect women's attitudes towards their feminine body, as if women see their body through the gaze of a male observer. Therefore, the exposing of their bodies to men through sexual relations leads them to see their sexuality and bodily activities as more 'natural' and 'normal'. Barki-Yi also observes that 'younger and unmarried [Malaysian] women feel more embarrassed than married women' about menstruation (Bark-Yi 2007, p. 136).

However, amongst my married 1980s interviewees, there were still instances of women who find it difficult to buy sanitary pads themselves. The diversity in women's attitudes towards menstruation is a result of the various social and cultural contexts that socialise young women about their body and sexuality. For instance, Mina—a 31-year-old, married woman from a religious and traditional family—expressed while laughing:

> If, God forbid, I die, I won't buy pads myself; not for me or for anyone else, because the shopkeeper will think that I am buying for myself. […] I can't help it, I feel embarrassed. I know that it is a natural thing and all men know about it, but I feel embarrassed.

Mahboubeh—a 26-year-old, married woman from a religious family, who is also four months pregnant—had the same attitude: she preferred that her husband buy sanitary pads for her. Both Mina and Mahboubeh are from similar familial backgrounds; they have internalised the codes of behaviour, imparted during their childhoods, which distinguish between appropriate and accepted behaviour for women in the public sphere.

Therefore, although Mina tries to convince herself through 'natural' and 'biological' justifications, she still finds it difficult to act against the internalised concepts of normal and appropriate behaviour.

Based on women's narratives from these two generations, I observed similarities between the shame involved in the buying of both sanitary pads and condoms: both products highlight different aspects of female sexuality. For instance, Shadi—a 55-year-old architect—told me that her husband 'buys it [condoms] himself all the time'. She continued: 'In Iran, it doesn't look good if you want to buy it yourself. It never came to my mind that [I can buy it myself]. I don't even know what to buy.' Shadi avoided using the word condom. Mahdavi also observed that young women consider buying condoms to be 'a man's job', as they feel more uncomfortable and there is social stigma attached to active female sexuality, especially before marriage (Mahdavi 2008, p. 244).

Sepideh related the embarrassment at buying condoms to a social and cultural context in which women feel ashamed of their sexuality and sexual needs. I described Sepideh's experience of her first sexual intercourse in the previous chapter. Sepideh said that she does not have any problems buying condoms:

> *Haqq-e mosallam-e mâst*[11]*!* [She laughs]. At first, my boyfriend used to ask me, 'why don't you buy it yourself?' Then I became red and white [felt embarrassed and blushed], and then realised that we [women] put these boundaries. It's a pleasurable part of our lives. Women should know that they have the upper hand in sex; they should accept that they are ten times more capable and can enjoy it ten times more than men. That's the end of it. […] We have been educated to control it. […] From their childhood, boys are told: 'You are a *shoombool talâ* [golden dick], go out and bring your girlfriend home my sweetheart' [she uses a soft and flirty tone to mock these talks]. But as a woman, I don't have the right to talk to a boy. Of course these affect us, but if you work on yourself and consider it a mutual right for both sides, then it becomes obvious who has the upper hand [she laughs].

Women's feelings of shame when buying both condoms and sanitary products highlight how they understand and approach their bodies and sexuality in the Iranian context. Moreover, this shame reflects the general socio-cultural view of female sexuality and the extent to which women internalise social norms and expectations. In their stories, women of the younger generation used different justifications to explain why they feel

unashamed of buying pads or less shame of their menstrual body and sexuality. However, many of these women do not directly question the social constraints and taboos that make them feel ashamed of their body and sexuality. As I show in the next section, instead of directly challenging the taboo of menstruation, women—especially younger generations—appropriate the socio-cultural and religious restrictions to their own advantage.

APPROPRIATING RESTRICTIONS

There are cross-cultural descriptions of menstrual taboos that restrict the activities of menstruating women (Buckley and Gottlieb 1988; Delaney 1988; Douglas 1984; Knight 1995; Lander 1988; Martin 2001; Winslow 1980). These restrictions, such as 'abstention from sexual intercourse, altered personal hygiene and eating habits', are based on 'the belief that menstruating women and/or menstrual blood are polluting, and have the power to contaminate persons and objects with which they come into contact' (Lawrence 1982, p. 84).

However, as Martin points out, 'every taboo on something shameful has the potential for rebellion written in it'; if we want to describe a 'menstrual taboo' as restricting women's behaviour, 'we must be sure to distinguish activities she longs for from those she is gladly rid of, at least for a time' (Martin 2001, pp. 97–99). The shame and disgust attached to menstruation gives women the opportunity to escape their duties, especially in societies where women do most of the food preparation (Martin 2001).

Lawrence, in her study of a village in southern Portugal, describes how women use the restriction on menstruating women 'preparing pork into sausages, or entering a room where it is being done' during *matanca* to legitimise their selection of female assistants; this allows 'them fuller control over the numbers and kinds of people they permit into their house and to whom they are obligated to reciprocate' (Lawrence 1982, p. 94). According to Lawrence, by accepting menstruation as pollutant, women manage to 'use it to their own advantage' and protect the interests of their family (ibid., p. 95).

The Islamic restrictions on menstrual women—banning them from daily prayers, fasting during the month of Ramadan, touching or reciting the Holy Quran and entering mosques and shrines—are not always considered to be negative aspects of menstruation for women. In my high

school, it was mandatory to attend prayer ceremonies, which took place during our lunch break; lying about our menstruation was the only way my friends and I could skip these ceremonies. Although our school was small and the principal knew all the students, it was difficult for them to keep track of all the pupils' menstrual cycles. My experience also recalls how Vahideh faked her menstruation in order to escape her mother's control over performing religious practices. Vahideh is a 30-year-old, university educated woman from a religious and upper middle class family. She has been married for seven years and has a two-year-old daughter. Vahideh began menstruating late, when she was in high school.

> I knew exactly what a period was. So, once while I was playing, I fell down in the garden and injured my foot. Then [instead of disposing] I showed the bloody tissue [that I used to clean my foot] to my mum and told her that I got my period [she laughs]. I was so happy that I wouldn't have to pray for seven days. After a few days my mum kept asking me, 'isn't it over yet?' I told her, 'no, not yet'. I used red lipstick on pads as evidence that I was still menstruating. Then, when I hadn't gotten my period for a few months, my mum became worried [she laughs] so she took me to a doctor and gave me pills. Then, I started to menstruate.

Especially in the current situation, where the Islamic Republic has made fasting obligatory during Ramadan, menstruation has become a good excuse for women to sidestep the rules. Bark-Yi also points to this view of menstruation amongst her Muslim interviewees: they describe menstruation as a 'holiday' and the taboo as a 'good thing' (Bark-Yi and Development 2007, p. 81).

Moreover, women have different coping strategies and mechanism in dealing with social restrictions and taboos during their menstrual cycle. Such strategies are usually in contrast to 'the masculinist idea of resistance as oppositional action and behaviour' (Lee 1994, p. 357). In differentiating between strategy and tactic, De Certeau refers to production of 'apparently meaningless' things by 'weak' or powerless people through the use of 'vocabularies of the established language (those of television and newspaper)' (De Certeau 1998, p. 34). In contrast to strategy, which is performed by a subject with will and power, tactic is 'an art of the weak' (ibid., p. 35). De Certeau argues that, in tactical trajectories, it is important to look for 'what is used not the ways of using it' in order to see how 'the weak' select and compose new stories (De Certeau 1998, p. 37). The use of language amongst my 1980s interviewees provided examples akin

to De Certeau's description of tactics. It seems younger generations of women have appropriated the established language, creating phrases and codes with which they can communicate about their menstruation with each other.

One young woman from a non-religious, upper middle class family, who was born in 1984, stated that her group of friends use the phrase '*Khorramshahr khoonin ast*' [Khorramshahr is bloodied] as a code for menstruation. Khorramshahr is a port city in southern Iran, whose name literally means 'prosperous town' and was a westernised city before the Revolution. It was occupied by Iraqi forces at the beginning of the Iran–Iraq war. In May 1982, when Khorramshahr was liberated by Iranian forces, a news reporter announced: '*Khorramshahr, shahr-e khoon, âzâd shod*' [Khorramshahr, the city of blood, is free]. It is interesting to see how these post-revolutionary generations reproduce and appropriate the meanings and memories of war in their everyday language; in particular, in describing the feminine bodily activity they have been taught to conceal.

Moreover, in order to perform according to social norms, women have also created codes to hide their menstruation from men. Their use of language allows them to communicate secretly with each other. For example, the common code used amongst religious 1980s women is '*khâleh pari*' [aunt Pari]. Pari is a metaphor for period; and they use phrases such as 'I have a guest', 'aunt Pari has arrived' or 'aunt Pari is here'. These codes also create a collective identity amongst women, as the coded language allows them to mock men for their obliviousness about the topic of conversation.

Instead of directly challenging norms that force them to conceal menstruation in front of men, the younger generation appropriates the taboo for their own benefit. They comply with the norm while simultaneously showing agency in their behaviour and use of language.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I argued that the role of educating young girls has shifted from their mothers or older female family members to religious education and hygiene classes in schools. The younger generation's experiences of menarche highlight the influence of the disciplinary role of the state's religious and medical education. While the medical discourse normalises the menstrual cycle as part of female physiology, religious education teaches women how to conceal and control their menstrual body based on the rules of *tahârat*.

However, this normalisation conceals potential questions about the socio-cultural context in which female sexuality is linked to shame and embarrassment. I noticed that women of younger generations try to convince themselves and others not to be ashamed, because menstruation is a 'natural' biological event; however, they fail to take into account why menstruation would be considered shameful in the first place. Similar to Foucault's argument (1980), it is important to look at power in not only its negative forms, as disciplinary power might also positively produce new forms of knowledge. For example, the scientification and medicalisation of menstruation have had positive effects on women's feelings towards their body, but also subjugates them to new forms of control and discipline.

Consequently, there is a change in communication about menstruation in homosocial spaces, which I analysed as a discontinuation of the traditional customs performed by older women at the time of menarche. By labelling traditions—such as 'the slap' and other traditional advice—as superstitions, younger women use more scientific and medical language to define and approach their menstrual body.

Moreover, although it seems that most of my interviewees have internalised the taboo of menstruation and avoid discussing their feelings and experiences publically, especially in the presence of men, women also use the shame and embarrassment of menstruation to their own advantage. Instead of directly addressing menstruation, they have created codes to communicate with each other. Similar to Scott's 'everyday forms of resistance' (1985) and De Certeau's concept of 'tactics' (1998), these codes are strategies that women use to communicate with each other and even mock men who are unaware of the topic of conversation. Although women create and use these codes actively, they are not directly challenging or resisting the socio-cultural taboo of menstruation that makes them feel embarrassed about their body and sexuality. Instead of directly challenging the norms, they show their agency by performing according to the social norms that require menstruation to be kept secret.

In general, the variety of experiences of menarche reflects the variety of meanings of womanhood for women from different socio-cultural backgrounds (Martin 2001). As I observed, there is a direct link between a family's economic and educational background—especially the mother's level of education—and women's experiences of menstruation.

The next chapter is based on women's narratives and expectations of marriage, wedding ceremonies and relationships with their husbands.

I analyse their experiences based on their familial and economic situations, and in relation to the wider socio-political events that influenced their ideals of femininity and marriage before and after the Islamic Revolution.

NOTES

1. *Les règles* is a French term for menstruation, which seems to be commonly used amongst women of the 1950s generation. Many of the 1950s women I interviewed used the term.
2. My mother also remembers her aunts using '*khâk-too-sari'* as a code for sex: 'last night *khâk-too-sari kardeh* [instead of saying 'she had sex last night']'.
3. In Persian the verb '*kardan*' (to do) is used for men's actions in sexual intercourse, while the verb '*dâdan*' (to give) is used for women.
4. A *jalase* is a women's religious meeting held at home. Women 'formed *jalaseh* circles around female preachers of their choice' in order 'to deepen religious understandings' (Torab 2006, p. 32).
5. Ritual ablution, in which the body is completely immersed in water (Torab 2006, p. 253). This ritual is not only limited to women and menstruation, as both sexes should perform the ritual after sexual penetration and men after ejaculation.
6. In Islamic jurisprudence, '*heiz*' [حیض] is the blood the female body discharges during menstruation. The term is also used to describe menstruation in religious texts.
7. For example, avoiding *sard* [cold] foods such as vegetables, fish, yogurt etc.
8. Ramadan: Month of fasting for Muslims.
9. '*Suhoor*': an Islamic term referring to the meal consumed early in the morning before starting the day's fast during the month of Ramadan. The meal is eaten before '*fajr*' or dawn. Suhoor is the morning meal and '*Iftâr*' the evening meal.
10. Pride is a popular car manufactured by Kia. I have also heard that some people call it 'period'.
11. This phrase means: 'It's our inalienable right'. She was making a joke by referencing the state's slogan of having an 'inalienable right' to peaceful nuclear energy.

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Narratives of Marriage

Introduction

In the Iranian context, the institution of marriage marks the socially, legally and religiously sanctioned boundaries of sexual practices. Marriage is understood as a 'legal-emotional relationship established through *aqd* [contract]' between a man and a woman (Mir-Hosseini 2000, p. 34). *Aqd* is the only procedure through which a relationship between and cohabitation of a man and a woman is legally and religiously recognised. Like any other forms of contract, *aqd* bequeaths specific moral and legal 'rights and obligations for each part' (*ibid.*, p. 33). In recent years, through changes in Iranian socio-political contexts the legal aspects of marriage have also changed. Changes in the legal system are accompanied by constructions of new gender roles, which are imposed on both women and men. I summarise these changes in the following paragraphs, arguing that instead of merely looking at changes in the legal aspects of marriage, it is important to see how women have experienced such changes in the context of their lives and their marital relations.

As part of Shah's reforms in 1967 the new Family Protection Law was established. The new law increased the age of marriage for women to 18 and gave women the right to divorce if their husbands took a second wife or temporary wives. After the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, the new government deemed the Family Protection Law un-Islamic, annulled it and, thus, diminished family courts. In contrast to previous changes, this

Islamic discourse reduced the age of marriage for girls to nine and gave men greater authority in marriage (Mir-Hosseini 2002, p. 137). Women's rights to divorce and child custody were entirely dependent on their husbands' disposition, as the law itself did not grant these rights to women (Ebadi and Moaveni 2006, pp. 53–54). During Khatami's presidency (1997–2005), the Centre for Women's Participation[1] asked Parliament to reform the family laws. These reforms included: raising the legal age of marriage for girls from nine to thirteen, granting women some rights to initiate divorce and exempting women's *mehrieh*[2] from taxes (Afary 2009, p. 329). However, the direction changed again after Khatami's presidency; while *mehrieh* has been 'a strong negotiation card' for women—used as insurance to prevent their husbands from divorce or taking a second wife—in 2007 the Parliament 'conditioned the payment of *mehrieh* upon men's financial ability' (Mir-Hosseini 2002, p. 138; Afary 2009, p. 368). In addition, despite criticism from women's rights advocates and even some clerics, in 2007 women lost the right to divorce in cases of a husband's second marriage (Mir-Hosseini 2012, pp. 77–78).

Indeed, changes to the marriage laws before and after the Islamic Revolution had different consequences on women's lives. Higgins argues that feminist scholarship has not only overemphasised Pahlavi's reforms, but has also not contextualised the reforms in Iranian women's social lives (Higgins 1985, p. 484). According to Higgins (1985), the majority of Iranian society consisted of rural and lower middle class families with low levels of education and little knowledge about legal changes. She states, 'the lives of most Iranian women were largely untouched by the legal changes of the Pahlavi era' (Higgins 1985, p. 484). For instance, the statistics reveal that the average age of marriage remained around 15 both before and after the establishment of the Family Protection Law (*ibid*., p. 485). Moreover, in contrast to Western feminists' expectations, Iranian women did not resist the Islamist gender ideology, in general, because it was 'not incongruent with the beliefs or the lives of the majority of the population' (Higgins 1985, p. 493).

In line with Higgins argument, this chapter emphasises contextualising the concepts of marriage and divorce in relation to women's socio-economic situation. I look at how these two generations approach marriage, negotiate with their socio-familial rules in choosing spouse and manage their marital and sexual relations. This chapter is organised around the different forms of marriage practised by these two generations of women in different social and political contexts and time periods. 1950s

women's narratives form the basis of this chapter because all of my 1950s interviewees, except one, have been married; while that figure is 11 of 37 for my 1980s generation interviewees.

In the next section, I look at how the changes in gender roles in opposition groups during the Islamic Revolution affected 1950s women's ideals of marriage; and how changes in the concepts of womanhood and femininity during and after the Islamic Revolution shaped the sexual relations of married 1950s women.

Different Approaches, Different Expectations

During the 1960s and 1970s, the state tried to de-eroticise women's presence in public by focusing on their roles in education and the labour market. The ideal woman was characterised as the fashionable, educated mother, companionate wife and professional worker. Royal women, such as Queen Farah, became symbols of this new image for Iranian women, as they negotiated Western and Iranian models of femininity (Afary 2009, p. 207). However, this image of modern women became the very embodiment of imperialism and '*Westoxification*' for revolutionary groups, both secular and Islamist, who referred to them as the 'painted doll of the Pahlavi regime' (Najmabadi 2005, p. 154; Moallem 2005, p. 79). For most of the women activists, imperialism and consumerism had simply 'replaced patriarchal oppression of women as the force to oppose' (Yaghoobi 2012, p. 70).

For leftist groups, this new image of Iranian women 'was identified with an assertive woman who was demanding an increasing share of the public world', which threatened the interests of Iranian men and 'presented a puzzle for which the left did not have an adequate answer' (Shahidian 1994, p. 233). According to Shahidian (1994), the Iranian left took a 'puritanical' concept of sex and sexuality: they criticised the sexual objectification of women in the public sphere while, at the same time, equating female sexuality with male sexual pleasure, denying female sexuality (p. 232). Consequently, the image of the de-feminised, de-eroticised woman was encouraged, which was visible through the wearing of 'baggy and loose clothes and absence of cosmetics among female revolutionary activists' (Afary 2009, p. 245; Moallem 2005, p. 79; Shahidian 1994, p. 234). The left believed that by reducing manifestations of femininity in the public sphere, women would rely more on their humanity than their womanhood (Shahidian 1994, p. 234). Therefore, showing femininity and enhancing sexual appeal were considered a lack of revolutionary commitment.

In the emerging Islamist revolutionary discourse, women were presented with a similar conception of feminine identity. For Ali Shariati—an influential Muslim lay intellectual, who played an important role in mobilising young educated Muslims—'women were the most efficient tool of imperialist oppression […] because women's sexuality is so powerful over men that it serves as capitalism's best tool for exploitation' (Terman 2010, p. 298). Shariati made a clear discursive link between the '*Westoxication*' of Iranian women and 'the legitimacy and health of the entire nation', as one could 'reject the socio-economic domination of Iran only by rejecting the "modern woman"' (ibid.). However, he simultaneously criticised the traditional and religious obsession with controlling women's sexuality, as well as their ideal of womanhood being limited to women's duties in the domestic sphere. He introduced Fatima[3] as the perfect role model for Muslim women. According to Shariati, Fatima is a Muslim woman who, in addition to performing her traditional feminine duties as a daughter, wife and mother, is politically aware and active in her society.[4] By attacking the middle class woman who is 'only good for housework and childcare and obsessed with sex', he encouraged women to participate in the public sphere (Moallem 2005, p. 92). Shariati also publicised the idea of modesty for women, encouraging them to 'respect their bodies and minimise their sexual appeal by wearing a long and loose mânto, or jacket, and cover their hair with a *rusari,* or scarf' (Zahedi 2008, p. 257).

The construction of the modern Muslim woman is similar to leftist's de-sexualised image of female revolutionary activists. In general, one of the main aspects of the anti-Shah movement was its gender-neutrality, and the fact that 'gender divisions of role and space diminished substantially' (Paidar 1997, p. 211). In contrast to the regime's sexualisation of women, in oppositional groups women were addressed and treated as sisters; they participated in mixed demonstrations and moved freely in public places without being physically molested (ibid., pp. 217–218). According to Paidar (1997), for a lot of women 'the most liberating experience of the revolution was the sense of freedom to mix with men without being harassed' (p. 218). Indeed, oppositional groups provided their followers with alternative gender subjectivities, which attracted many young men and women from different social and economic classes.

Many of my 1950s women's marriages happened in such political and social situations. In the next section, I look at the stories of women who were politically involved in the Revolution, as well as how their revolutionary ideas shaped their marriage decisions and their perception of sex and female sexuality.

Marriage in Time of the Revolution

Azam is a 51-year-old, self-employed tailor. She grew up in a lower middle class, non-religious family in a low-income neighbourhood in southern Tehran. Azam was 18 years old at the Revolution. Her family, such as her father and uncles, all belonged to the *Tudeh* party[5] and she remembered having an interest in political debates since childhood: 'I grew up in a political family, my cousin was in the Shah's prison, and so [in comparison to girls at my age] other things [like political activism] became more important for me'.

She was introduced to her husband through a friend at the age of 24, and they were married in 1983. Azam explained that she had many suitors; one such suitor was a *sepâhi* [Revolutionary Guard] from a good family, but she rejected him because she wanted to marry someone with similar 'beliefs'. When I asked what she meant by 'beliefs', she replied: 'similarity in every aspect, from religion to [she pauses] politics'.

Like other women political activists, Azam emphasised her future spouse's political views. Women political activists usually chose their partners from within their political group. As a consequence, political views and activism undermined more traditional spouse-selection factors, such as similar family background and economic situation. For instance, in Azam's story, there are no indications of social and economic class preferences in choosing a spouse, which contrasts with the traditional cultural context of marriage in Iranian society. As I discuss later, women political activists of the 1950s generation, whether Islamist or leftist, shared a similar approach in choosing their future husbands.

My 1950s interviewees also recount marriages that only happened for political reasons amongst oppositional groups. According to Mehri, one of my interviewees, the purpose of these 'political marriages' was 'to make the organisation more powerful'. She knew of cases in her own family: 'I know a man who married a woman ten years his senior only for political reasons; they got divorced two years ago.' However, none of my interviewees had 'political marriages', they emphasised on similarity in political views but did not marry only for political reasons.

Azam's agency and independence with regard to decisions about her marriage is another interesting point in her story; a point that resonated in my interviews with other revolutionary women of the 1950s generation.

> My parents knew [that I was seeing him]. It was a very bad situation. I even had to meet my in-laws in a park because he was on the run and wasn't living

with his parents. Now, you are enjoying your lives, but it was horrible back then. Then, when my mother found out, she was really upset because she wanted the formal procedure [traditional *khâstegâri* or proposal ceremony] in which he would come to our home with his parents [to propose formally].

In contrast to semi-arranged and arranged marriages in which families play the main role in regulating and controlling decisions and ceremonies, the revolutionary social and political context provided women, even those from traditional and religious families, with legitimacy and autonomy in making decisions about their lives. As demonstrated in the literature, the creation of a new revolutionary subjectivity in the Islamist discourse, which attracted many young Muslim women, also provided them with a legitimate religious excuse to resist their traditional roles and participate freely in revolutionary events (Moallem 2005, p. 77; Terman 2010, p. 298).

For instance, Fariba was 19 years old at the Revolution. She is from a religious, traditional and wealthy family. Fariba's father, while being pro-Khomeini himself, forbade her from participating in demonstrations, as he was worried about SAVAK[6] harassment. However, Fariba would not obey: 'I did so without their consent. I remember I used to jump over the wall and open the door for my sister when we returned home late at night [she smiles and then sighs at recalling the past]. The things that we did.' Later, when talking about her memories from the occupation of American Embassy in Tehran in 1979, she recalled: 'I told my parents that I'd be back in three days, without telling them where I was going, and then I came back after 444 days [she laughs].'

Fariba met her husband while interviewing for a job at the Ministry of Education; when he proposed, they talked for a few sessions. In terms of making decisions about her marriage, there are similarities between Fariba and Azam's stories. More interestingly, Fariba told me that they performed their *aqd* [marriage contract] alone, without either of their parents: 'we went to *Behesht-e Zahrâ* [Tehran's main cemetery located in the southern part of the city] and beside the martyrs' graves we read the *khotbe-ye aqd* [the Arabic sentence that is read during marriage contract] ourselves. Then, we held hands and walked in the cemetery.' However, they later also accepted to have a traditional wedding ceremony in her husband's hometown in northern Iran, which her husband was unhappy about: 'I told him that I don't care, let them [your parents] do as they wish'. In contrast to Fariba's family, her husband is from a lower social and economic class and grew up in a small city.

Other religious 1950s women from traditional families also told me they were introduced to their husbands via political activism, mainly through their local mosques' social and political activities. The mosque, as a religious place, legitimised their presence in public sphere as well as their interactions with *nâ-mahram*[7] men. The social and political participation provided religious women with the opportunity to extend their network, meet new people and see themselves in a more equal relationship with men. It also reduced the role of their traditional families in controlling their lives.

For instance, Zahra was introduced to her husband by the clergy of their neighbourhood mosque at the age of 21. As she explained to me, it was not common at that time for boys and girls to talk to each other before becoming *mahram* [married by religious law].

> We only talked two times at [the clergy's] house and then he proposed to my family. Our families didn't know [that we met], but we weren't alone [when we met] and we were aware of the *shari'a* [rules], so the door was always open.[8]

Later, Zahra even planned her wedding ceremony against her father's wishes; he wanted a traditional wedding ceremony, where he could invite people to meet his son-in-law.

> But we were hot-headed radicals, we didn't accept. For our wedding, we went to Mashhad [a city in northeast Iran with the shrine of the eighth Imam of Shi'a Islam]. Two years after our marriage, my brother-in-law married in a mosque. Because of the martyrs [from the Iran-Iraq war], everyone was in mourning in a way. People couldn't let themselves [have weddings and joyful ceremonies]. At the time, it was like this and everyone was also *dâgh* [hot-headed] and *jav-gir* [popular idiom describes bandwagon effect and herd mentality] [she laughs].

Similar to Azam, but from different political background, Zahra also described that in conversations she had with her husband before marriage she was more concerned with his beliefs and ensuring that he did not have any 'deviant beliefs', such as Mujahedin. She described the shift in the attitudes of younger generations towards marriage; as opposed to her and her friends during and after the Revolution, younger women care more about a suitor's financial situation. Zahra criticised her own generation's 'radical' thinking, saying that she agrees with her daughter's attention to suitors' economic and social situation. I discuss this change later in this chapter.

My 1950s revolutionary women, from both leftist and Islamist backgrounds, also discussed the clash between their ideal of marriage and the gender roles and expectations they experienced in their marital relations. They spoke specifically of their difficulties accepting sexual relations as the main purpose of marriage. Their experiences, as I describe in the following paragraphs, highlight the extent to which these women internalised the de-sexualised image of femininity touted in their political activism; a femininity they preferred.

As I mentioned before, in oppositional discourses, both Islamist and leftist, the relationship between the sexes was regulated and controlled through the de-sexualisation of women political activists (Shahidian 1994; Terman 2010). Therefore, expressing 'romantic love' and displaying affection to a fellow activist, whether in private or public, was considered taboo and 'inappropriate'. Fariba's description of the relationship between men and women in their Islamist group shows how the concepts of 'romantic love' and 'relationships' were politicised and de-sexualised. As Fariba described, women activists themselves preferred not to receive affection from their male comrades.

> Fariba: We didn't grow up in a normal era. One of the boys wrote me a letter, but I didn't like him and thought 'what did he think he was doing?' It wasn't normal for us. But I think that one of the characteristics of our time was that it made love and male/female relations a taboo. [Especially] Intellectual people shouldn't think about [such topics and they should have other more important things to think about]. Our mentality was like that, so I really didn't like him and I never replied to his letters. I had these feminine charms that could attract men but I resisted them. Someone proposed to me and I argued with him saying, 'you don't have the right to talk about this topic'. I considered it really bad when a boy approached a girl and talked about this issue with her. […] It was mainly because of the bad social situation. We were scared of what would happen if someone found out that someone likes another person.
>
> Nafiseh: What could happen?
>
> Fariba: Nothing important. We were scared of what others would think. I remember that one of my married friends asked me, 'do you know that guy (and she named him) likes you?' I became very upset because I thought that he acted in a way that everyone else would find out [about his feelings].
>
> Nafiseh: So did you change your behaviour with men?

Fariba: We controlled our behaviour all the time. I used to think that we were humans first and then we were men and women. So I didn't think that he was a man and I shouldn't talk to him. I used to do my work and I didn't care about men's feelings. I didn't look at myself as a second sex, so I used to express my opinion in front of men. But other girls used to think [and act] differently.

In oppositional groups, both men and women showed their commitment to the Revolution by focusing on their activism and ignoring any possible forms of attraction to the opposite sex. Women, especially, could be blamed—by themselves and others—for attracting men's attention by flaunting their 'feminine charms' and beauties. Both men and women internalised the norms of appropriate behaviour; as Fariba put it, 'no one told us how to behave'.

Shirin—a 54-year-old woman from a middle class, non-religious family, who was active in leftist groups—had a similar experience. She described how it was acceptable for girls and boys to work together, but they did not call each other boyfriend/girlfriend.

In the second year of university, a boy came to me and proposed. It was very strange for me; I thought that if two people want to marry they should have known each other very well, not like someone just proposes. Although I really liked that boy, I didn't want to get married and I didn't like the way he chose [to propose]. It [the public sphere] was very open at the time, and we could work together in the library or student associations or become friends while hiking and climbing. […] Our relations [with boys] were in groups [in contrast to individual relations with the opposite sex]. There were definitely boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, which I heard about later, but at the time everyone tried to hide them. These sorts of relations were forbidden in political groups. It wasn't accepted because they thought they shouldn't pay attention to themselves; they should only think about higher goals.

Shirin then told me that, in their leftist political group, all the marriages happened two or three years after the Revolution, 'when political activism was reduced and all the groups were suppressed. Then, suddenly, everyone realised that they should get married. We were even lacking a girl in our group [she laughs].' She also married a comrade during the Cultural Revolution in 1980, when universities were shut down for nearly two

years in order to purge all non-Islamic and Western ideas. Shirin and her husband were friends for a year before their marriage, which they spent 'talking' without having any sexual contact. Shirin thinks the relationship taboo, especially the stigmatisation of sex and sexual needs within her political group, affected sexual relations with her husband. In addition, oppositional groups' de-eroticised perception of women reinforced their shame of their sexuality. She described feeling 'ashamed' and 'embarrassed' whenever her husband wanted to touch her for a long time after their marriage: 'it took a long time until this shame was over'. Shirin added that, in her group of female friends, they still do not discuss their sex lives or sexual experiences, as they still perceive it as degrading and shameful behaviour.

Zeinab's perception of marriage was also shaped by her political awareness. From a religious and traditional family, Zeinab got married two years before the Revolution; she was 17, still in high school and had a traditional semi-arranged marriage. Her parents were very political, and she used to attend Shariati's classes and lectures with her mother: 'I went to the morning [sessions] with my friends, and my parents knew.' Her husband was also a political activist; he was arrested several times under the Shah.

> I didn't know anything about marriage, but I thought that I needed a partner to continue my activities with. Before the *aqd* [marriage contract], I told him that I didn't want my life to be like my parents' lives, so normal. I wanted to travel, see the world, study and *mobâreze konam* [fight]. He had similar opinions and we never talked about these [sexual] issues. Later, when I encountered [sex] I was shocked. I told my husband, 'I haven't seen my parents doing these sort of things, are you sure it is correct? Are you sure it's *shar'i* [in *Shari'a*]?' [She laughs] That's how I was. […] Then I asked my sister, who laughed and said, 'men only marry to have this [sex]'.

Although from different religious and social backgrounds, the de-sexualised definition of relationships between men and women had negative effects on both Shirin and Zeinab's first sexual experiences. This reveals the clash between the social and political representations of women in oppositional discourses and their roles as wives. While in the public sphere, women were expected to reduce their sexual appeal and control their affections in front of male colleagues; at home, women were expected to know everything about sex and actively participate in sexual relations.

Zeinab also told me: '[It is] strange for me that [nowadays] girls are like this [so concerned about sex]. Maybe we denied and ignored it [sexual desire] during the Revolution.' She related her own generation's lack of attention to sex and sexual desire to the socio-political context in which they lived. Her surprise at the younger generation's awareness of sex and sexual desire reflects how, in different times and contexts, specific behaviours are normalised and naturalised.

In the next section, I continue with the stories of Sorour and Soheila—two 1950s women. Through their stories, I show how the state propaganda encouraging the Iranian public to marry war widows, both during and after the Iran–Iraq war, changed the sexual lives of war widows and a group of Islamist revolutionary women.

Politicised Widowhood and Marital Relations

Sorour is a 55-year-old lecturer at one of Tehran's universities; she grew up in a religious and traditional family in a city in central Iran. She married during the Revolution at the age of 20. Sorour recalled that Islamist activists preferred to marry early and continue their activism with their partners. Sorour's husband, who is two years her senior, was also a political activist. Similar to mentioned experiences, Sorour, who also identified with Shariati's description of the modern Muslim woman, described her intent to marry as 'cultural' rather than 'sexual'. She emphasised that she did not even think about the sexual aspect of marriage:

> So, at first we had a crisis. I thought of marriage as the harmony of two intellects to reach higher ideals [in life], but men think completely the opposite. So my husband had other expectations. Intellectual companionship was also important for my husband, but it [placed] second. For me it was first; the sexual issue was second or third. We passed the crisis because we liked each other very much. It was very difficult, emotionally it put pressure on me and I didn't like it. After a while, I looked at [sex] as a natural thing.

Sorour's family, especially her mother, was not happy with her choice of husband, as his family was from a lower social and economic class. At points in our conversation, when she tried to explain and justify her decisions in life—such as marriage—she criticised her own radical revolutionary ideas. Other 1950s women also made similar comments, especially those who are

critical of the current policies of the Islamic Republic. The controversial presidential election in 2009 was a turning point for some 1950s women who participated in Islamist groups during the Revolution; they do not identify with the Islamic Republic and make a distinction between their own religious beliefs and the state's interpretation of Islam. Many still believe in the Islamic Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini in particular; however, they think the goals and values of the Revolution—namely, creating a fair Islamic community—have been lost. More importantly, such women have seen the negative effects of their revolutionary thinking on their own lives.

For instance, while narrating her wedding ceremony, Sorour described her religiosity as a *tab* [literally meaning 'fever', which here refers to her radical Islamist revolutionary ideas]: 'I say it was a *tab* because it really was. I don't believe in that much religiosity and devoutness anymore.' Sorour and her fiancé wanted a 'revolutionary' wedding ceremony, which was against her parents' wishes, especially her mother.

> I wore a white dress made by my mother [...] at our ceremony; and instead of glee and dancing, we had *maddâhi* [mournful songs for sufferings of Shi'a Imams]. It was really difficult for my mother and my family because it was the first time that we had such a ceremony in the family. Though, after us, a few people continued our way.

While her husband was fighting in the Iran–Iraq war, Sorour had a miscarriage in the ninth month of her pregnancy due to receiving false news about her husband's martyrdom. After her miscarriage, Sorour could not get pregnant for five years; under pressure from her in-laws, she let her husband marry a war widow with a four-year-old daughter. She discussed the possibility of her husband taking a second wife with two or three friends, who all encouraged her to allow it by describing this act with *ajr-e elâhi* [divine reward] but without considering the potential emotional and mental impacts on her life.

> Unfortunately, everyone was saying that women should be forgiving and accept [their husbands marrying war widows]. Everyone felt responsible for *khânevâde-ye shohadâ* [martyr's families] [...] and tried to support them in any way. [...] My husband's friend, who also introduced this woman [the second wife] to him, married [a second wife] himself. Even when his mother-in-law passed away, forty days after her funeral he found a woman

for his father-in-law so that he could be part of this *ajr-e elâhi* [divinely rewarded act] [she takes a sarcastic tone].

Sorour added that this was a 'very common practice' at the time amongst Revolutionary Guards and *basij*; in some cases, they married without their first wife's consent.

Based on the official statistics, by the end of Iran–Iraq war, 'martyrs left behind 56,157 wives and 144,525 children'; the majority of martyrs and war widows were very young (Zahedi 2006, p. 272). Many of these widows came from 'low socio-economic backgrounds with no formal education or just a few years of schooling' (ibid.). As they did not have any prospects in the job market, war widows' future without a husband to support them seemed unpleasant (ibid.). Therefore, in order to reduce the economic burden on martyrs' families and control widespread sexual promiscuity, the state encouraged war widows to remarry (ibid., p. 276). Ayatollah Khomeini instructed men to 'marry the widows of martyrs of the war either permanently or temporarily' (Haeri 1989, p. 8). Many clergy and religious preachers followed suit, encouraging men to marry widows and women to marry soldiers. In their sermons, clergy drew parallels between the time of the prophet and the recent war with Iraq, thereby representing these marriages as religious acts for which people would be highly rewarded by God. Ayatollah Khomeini also advised war widows 'not to be too fussy' and to marry disabled soldiers who required care (Haeri 1989, p. 8).

As Zahedi (2006) reports, the Martyrs' Foundation of the Islamic Republic [*Bonyâd-e Shahid-e Enqelâb-e eslâmi*]—founded in March 1980—also arranged for marriages between war widows and disabled war veterans or real believers; the Foundation even ran background checks on the beliefs of suitors who were introduced by women and their families to the Foundation (p. 277). According to statistics released by the Martyrs' Foundation, 'between 1982 and 1990 approximately 30 percent of war widows remarried'; therefore, 'of 56,157 [total] war widows approximately 16,847 of them remarried' (ibid., p. 276). However, it is not clear how many of these women married soldiers or became second wives.

Sorour also recalled the role that the state and governmental institutions played in encouraging the public to marry war widows:

When the biggest part of society is religious and the religion is *mazhab-e dolati* [state religion], the ideologues and scholars [who broadcast such

ideas in public] become more influential. Many people, both men and women, were encouraged by *Bonyâd-Shahid* [the Martyrs' Foundation of the Islamic Republic] to marry [martyrs' widows] whether openly or secretly. When it became widespread, they passed a law that required the first wife to give her consent to the court, but this was only a formal routine. In my own case, the judge only asked me to write on a paper 'I agree'. They didn't talk to me to discover whether I did really agree or not.

For first wives, the emotional aspect of such decisions—the process of choosing the second wife and its effect on relations between husband and wife—usually remains unsaid. Before talking to Sorour, I had heard rumours about wives of famous war martyrs who had become the temporary or permanent second wives of Iranian politicians. However, both war widows and women like Sorour were never officially addressed in the Iranian public sphere. This topic is treated as a taboo; even women prefer to hide their situation from others. During our conversation, Sorour said several times, 'I only tell you this because I don't know you and I probably won't see you again'. In addition, many of her friends and family do not know about her husband's second wife.

She then told me how it all happened, and how her 'revolutionary' decision affected her marriage and her marital relations:

I saw her first. She was introduced to my husband by one of his friends. I agreed, but told my husband that I wanted to talk to her first. [In a conversation we had] I told her, 'the reason we are doing this is because, at the moment, we are having problems getting pregnant. We still don't know the reason, so we might be able to have a child in the future.' Because she already had a daughter, she was sure that she could have more children, so she didn't like the idea that I could also get pregnant. She told me that this possibility made it difficult for her to decide. […] She was living in another city at the time. At first, I never thought that my husband would think seriously about this [marriage]. I thought that we were doing *t'ârof* [to politely offer something without really meaning it expecting the other party to politely refuse] with each other. I thought that [by offering this solution] I was showing my love to him and he wouldn't take it seriously. But he was serious. Women usually believe love will prevent their husbands from making decisions like this [to marry another woman for a child]. But men think totally different; they only love themselves, which is even more powerful than their love for their children. […] So, I was wrong about my husband. [Two years after their marriage] that woman moved to Tehran and our problems were doubled.

After two years, Sorour could no longer bear the situation and decided to divorce; but, they 'loved each other' and so tried again to continue the relationship. Nevertheless, she has not had sexual relation with her husband since then: 'He still stays [with me] every other night […] it's like we are friends and we live under the same roof.' Sorour described her current marital relation as 'emotionally divorced'. She knows women in similar situations who got divorced; they could not continue in a polygamous marriage.

Sorour did not consult her parents about her decision to allow her husband to take a second wife. When her parents found out, one year after her husband's marriage,

> […] they cried a lot, they were hurt. […] First, they told me to get a divorce. Later, they concluded that divorce was not such a good idea, because in our culture a divorced woman does not have a good situation in society and could have other difficulties.

Sorour told me later that her husband does not have any children by his second wife: 'he believes that it is *tanbih-e elâhi* [a punishment from God] for hurting me'. In fact, it turned out that her husband had fertility problems not Sorour.

During the Revolution, the religious discourse empowered women from more religious backgrounds to choose their spouses based on revolutionary ideals rather than familial traditions; after the Revolution however, as stories of women like Sorour show, religious women were the main target of the state's propaganda and dominant religious discourse, which sanctified polygamous marriages and reduced women's right in marriage and divorce.

Sorour introduced me to Soheila one of her high school friends. Soheila also grew up in a religious family. We met at her office and I began with questions about her marriage; Sorour had told me that Soheila's first husband was a war martyr. In response to my question about the age difference between Soheila and her husband, she spoke in detail about her two marriages:

> I married my husband when I was eighteen. It was a traditional marriage; girls in our family used to marry young. I had a suitor before I went to high school, but I refused him because I wanted to study. […] My husband was introduced to me by one of my high school teachers. He didn't have a problem with my studies and he was revolutionary, so I accepted. […] He was martyred in 1982 [during the Iran-Iraq war]; I had two daughters at the time. Five years later, I married his brother who was four years younger than me. He was single and the family insisted. It wasn't easy for me to marry with two girls, it was an important factor [used the English word] for me. In sum [she smiles], now my husband is four years younger than me, but my first husband was three years older than me.

For her second marriage, Soheila's sister-in-law proposed to her. Soheila's mother-in-law was against the marriage, as Soheila's husband's body was still missing and his mother still hoped he was alive and would return. Therefore, for two years after their marriage, Soheila and her second husband visited her mother-in-law separately, although she knew they were married. Soheila said repeatedly that it was a 'very difficult' decision, as 'you don't know what will happen after the marriage'. Although both her daughters had a good relationship with their uncle, she knew that parenthood was 'happening out of its natural procedure' for her brother-in-law/husband.

> I am not saying that it was difficult, I'm just saying that it wasn't easy. So many similar marriages didn't succeed because the man [husband] was not mature enough. For example, on the wedding night when they wanted to make a link [to consummate their marriage], it was enough that the woman's five year-old daughter said, 'I am not staying with grandma, I want to be with my mum'. This put hatred in the man's heart and sadness in the girl's. An uncle who took care of them had become the man who stole their mother.

The story of Soheila's remarriage to her brother-in-law can, on the one hand, be seen in the context of the state's new conceptualisation of widowhood; respecting and supporting war widows became a social and religious responsibility for Iranian society. As previously mentioned, the policies of the state led the Iranian public to become concerned with war widows' economic and sexual needs.

On the other hand, levirate marriage is a popular tradition amongst some ethnic groups in Iran and was widely practised after the Iran–Iraq war across a broad spectrum of Iranian society. However, I could not find any cases of levirate marriage in the existing literature on war widows in Iran. Although the state encouraged men to marry war widows, there was no direct link made with this specific custom. Even in the Quran—in contrast to the Old Testament, where brothers ought to marry their brothers' widows—there are no rules about who should and should not marry widows in Islam (Davies 1981, pp. 139–140). Levirate marriage is a social custom practised by many families in Iran, both in urban and rural areas, which 'solves' the problem of supporting young widows and their children. This tradition can be understood in the context in which the paternal family are the children's legal guardians. In the absence of the husband, his family becomes responsible for the wellbeing of his wife and children. Therefore, marrying a brother's widow is considered a form of protecting the wife's honour and keeping the children in the family. However, unless a mother's inability to care for her children is proved in court, the law allows widows to retain custody of their children. A widow can retain custody even in the case of her remarriage, although the paternal family can also make a claim for custody under these circumstances (Tebyan 2013).

In Iranian cinema, there have been many references to the social and cultural aspects of this tradition after the Iran–Iraq war. In addition to representing economic and social challenges, these films also show the pressures exerted by both families and society on male members of the family to comply and marry their brothers' widows. As Soheila's story demonstrates, age difference is not an issue when it comes to this custom. In my own paternal extended family, there were cases of war widows marrying their younger brothers-in-law.

In addition, Soheila's story reflects the new social position of and responsibility attached to her role as a war widow. She described how, after her husband's martyrdom, it became difficult to live in her hometown because people began to control and judge her behaviour. Soheila had previously gone swimming to keep her spirits up, but people began to talk; they said, 'look at her, her husband is dead and she is doing exercises'.

Zahedi describes how, in the Islamic Republic's discourse, war widows acquired a 'highly politicised' position; they symbolised sacrifice and resistance and became role models for other Muslim women (Zahedi 2006, p. 283). As there were so many, war widows 'constitute(d) a distinct social

group' in Iranian society and were publically respected (ibid., pp. 272–273). Soheila told me that she continues to wear *châdor* because, as a war widow, it is expected.

Before her second marriage, for five years Soheila lived independently with her two small children. The state compensation for martyrs' families made it possible for her to move to Tehran and start a postgraduate course at the university. However, she could not resist the social pressure and agreed to marry her brother-in-law. Her marriage decision fell in line with her familial and social traditions. However, Soheila indirectly asserted her own wishes by choosing between her two brothers-in-law. Soheila mentioned that she also had an older brother-in-law, who she knew would eventually propose. It became clear that she did not like this brother-in-law, so instead she introduced him to her cousin, which led to their marriage.

In general, women's marriage stories from both before and after the Islamic Revolution highlight the significance of the socio-political context. This context provided politically active women with the power and authority to resist their parents in marriage decisions; an opportunity unavailable to their mothers and even older sisters.

However, 1950s women's stories also reflect the revolutionary discourse's disciplinary role, as it regulated and controlled sex and sexuality amongst political groups. The revolutionary discourse's gender neutrality empowered women by emphasising the importance of their participation in the socio-political events without feeling ashamed of their sexuality; a feeling they had been acquainted with since puberty. Compared to previous and even future generations, 1950s women had the opportunity to be treated as human beings rather than merely objects of desire.

However, from the affection women political activists received from their male partners or husbands, it became clear that women's main role was still to satisfy men's sexual needs. In their homes, women political activists still had to behave in accordance with the norms of female sexuality. This contradictory situation affected these women's sexual lives. This was particularly true for women from religious backgrounds, as they were more concerned with concealing their sexual appeal during their activism and performing according to their religious duty—that is, be obedient to their husband's sexual needs.

In the next section, I show that many of my 1950s interviewees had arranged or semi-arranged marriages and remained under the full control of their family. Although women form different socio-economic and religious backgrounds participated in the Revolution, other 1950s women's

stories show the variety of marriage experiences, including women from cities other than Tehran and from lower educational and economic backgrounds; women who did not have the luxury of choosing their spouse.

FAMILY AND MARRIAGE ARRANGEMENTS

Family plays an influential role in arranged[9] or semi-arranged marriages in Iran. In different social and cultural contexts, families follow different customs and traditions pertaining to marriage. Semi-arranged marriages, where the groom's family proposes to the bride's family through a *khâstegâri* ceremony, were the most common amongst both groups of women in this study. However, issues such as a woman's age, the couple's age difference and the spouse's required qualities vary according to time and place, as well as according to the religiosity and socio-economic background of the families involved. These are the issues discussed throughout this section.

Sima—a 55-year-old housewife from a religious, educated and upper middle class Tehrani family—described her family's marriage custom:

> We have this custom that, first, female members of the [suitor's] family pay a visit [to see a girl without *hejâb*]. We still have this custom. I did the same thing when I was looking for a bride for my son. For my daughter, the suitors did the same thing. Then, if they like the girl they will get in contact one or two days after their visit and ask to come with the boy himself.

Sima was 18 when she got married; her husband was 28. When I asked whether she wanted to get married then, she replied:

> Yes, of course I wanted. My children also married when they were young. We don't consider it soon at all, and we say that when a girl is seventeen or eighteen years old she is ready; it's the time [to get married]. […] We don't have the custom of letting them go out together while they are still *nâmahram*. But, when they [a girl and her suitor] have decided to get married, then they will have a temporary marriage until *aqd* [marriage contract]; after that, they can easily *raft-o-âmad konand* [visit each other].

By 'we', Sima was referring to her extended family, who all follow similar 'customs' specific to their own social community. In their custom of finding and choosing a spouse for male members of the family, women play a main role in approving and selecting a bride. Sima's family is different

from the stereotypical image of traditional religious families, as all her family members—including herself—are university educated. Despite their level of education, both girls and boys in such families are socialised to marry when they reach the appropriate age and through their families' arrangements. Religious beliefs also limit their relations with the opposite sex, and early marriage is done to prevent any sinful or inappropriate behaviour. Under their families' supervision, a young couple can talk, get acquainted with each other and make decisions about their future. Sima remembered that her mother encouraged her to speak with her husband more before announcing their decision. In addition, family arrangements are more likely to find a match from similar social and economic backgrounds. As I describe later in this chapter, *khâstegâri* ceremonies are still a popular form of spousal selection for younger generations of women, especially those from religious families.

Sima's emphasis on early marriage demonstrates the socio-cultural norms that determine the acceptable age of marriage for women. As Farahani (2007) notes, 'within a patriarchal setting […] in which women's primary obligation is toward marriage and motherhood the notion of "marrying on time" becomes increasingly oppressive' (p. 173). However, 'marrying on time' is not oppressive for Sima; it is 'natural' and 'normal' that her daughters should marry at the age of 18. By performing according to her familial customs and tradition, Sima proves her daughters position of respectability within the community.

Sima's perception of 'marrying on time' highlights the need to contextualise social norms and traditions in the context of women's lives in order to see how they perceive and perform according to norms. Marrying on time can be oppressive, especially when a woman is from a lower socio-economic background, does not have familial support or lacks other desirable factors. In such cases, women can decide to marry their first suitor just to be recognised as a married woman. For example, Sima belongs to a wealthy and prestigious class of Iranian society, it will not be difficult for her family's female members to find 'good' matches 'on time'. The acceptable age of marriage usually applies only to women; men can marry whenever they wish. However, this is not always the case, as some families also apply an acceptable age for men, influencing men's marriage decisions.

Mahnaz, my other 1950s interviewees, remembered that after receiving her high school diploma, her family started accepting marriage proposals; it took a year to find a suitable husband. She used the Persian term

khåstegår råh dådan, which literally means 'letting suitors into the house' and is commonly used in conversations on the topic of marriage. This phrase also marks the acceptable age, which varies amongst different social classes, for a girl's family to start receiving marriage proposals. Although early marriages are still performed in some families and communities (as Mandana described, in Yazd all her high school classmates were engaged), many Tehrani families encourage their daughters to enter university and finish their degree before accepting a marriage proposal. In the current economic situation, a university degree increases women's marriageability as it shows their ability to contribute financially.

Mahnaz and Sima's both had the opportunity to choose between suitors; hence, their marriages were only semi-arranged. Still, their description of *khåstegåri* highlights the role of the family and community in regulating the selection of spouse. The role of the family increases in arranged marriages. There are 1950s women, mainly from poor and lower middle class families, who married through arranged marriages to the match who was decided mostly by their parents.

Mahin is 50 years old and grew up in a small town in Iranian Kurdistan. She married at the age of 17 to fulfil her father's wishes: 'At first I said no. Then I realised that my father really wanted me to marry him, so I accepted only because I loved my father very much. […] His father was a close friend of my father's.' Mahin's husband is 13 years her senior. They were 'never' left alone together throughout the eight months between signing the marriage contract and the wedding ceremony; 'culturally', it was unacceptable for couples to spend time together before their wedding ceremony. Mahin recalled that she did not 'know' anything about her husband, even after *aqd*:

> [While we were engaged] he would come to our home, but I never went to the room. I used to leave the room just after I brought his tea. My father kept telling me, 'he came all the way to see you, come and sit down', but I refused. I didn't know him, and I had this feeling that I didn't know how to explain.

Mahin, also spoke about how she had to escape Kermanshah with her fiancé while the city was under siege during the war with Iraq; they went through the mountains to Tehran, therefore her family was not present at her 'simple' wedding ceremony in Tehran. She related her shock at her first sexual intercourse to her lack of information: 'none of my sisters were

there [at her wedding] to explain to me what happens on the wedding night'. Similar to Sorour, Mahin's narrative also reflects the effects of the Iran–Iraq war on women's lives—especially women living in warzone areas—as well as how the new social situation influenced marriage decisions and relations.

As the following interview extracts show, women who married against their own wishes faced difficulties in their marriages, especially in their intimate and sexual relations. Arezoo, 55 years old, also had an arranged marriage against her wishes and is unhappy in her marital relations.

> I was fifteen and I was two or three months younger [than the legal age of marriage], so my aunt [her father's sister] came to school and asked permission to take me to the court, so the man [in the court] could see that I am physically mature enough to get married. He looked at me, I remember clearly, and then signed [permission] so that we could have *aqd*. [...] My father did it out of kindness, but I think he made a mistake. He called me one day and told me that 'x has proposed'. I had seen my husband before, but we never talked or anything. My father was a military person and everyone used to obey him. Then he asked me, 'what should I tell them?' I was a child, I wasn't mature enough to say no, so I told him: 'do whatever you like *âqâ* [sir]'. However, my mum disagreed. I will never forget that my aunt came to my school and took me out of the class. When I arrived home, I saw fifteen other women waiting for me so that we could go shopping for the wedding. I went upstairs and knocked my books on the floor; I cried that 'I don't want to go with them'. I remember my mum was also crying. My aunt told me that I should go, as 'it's bad, they are waiting'.

Arezoo did not continue her studies after marriage. However, she told me: 'I am lucky that my husband turned out to be a good man, otherwise I couldn't have lived with him. But I still wish that I had been older when I got married, and that I had more experience.' She added, 'now, when something small happens they [young couples] ask for a divorce, but back then we had to continue our marriage, especially when we had children.' Arezoo's marriage has not been easy and the situation also affected their sexual relations: 'I can only do it [have sex] if I am at peace with him, it is very important. If he tells me something or does something that upsets me, then I won't be able to go even near him for ten days.' Arezoo's daughters, in contrast, married their boyfriends; however, the marriages still had to be approved by Arezoo and her husband.

Arezoo's story also highlights the role that female family members play in arranging marriages. Although women from her paternal family regulated the procedure, Arezoo's father was the main decision maker for her marriage. She does not blame her mother, as she was not in a powerful enough position to resist her father. Moreover, her emphasis that she was 'too young' to get married shows changes in women's attitudes towards the age of marriage, due to a shifting socio-cultural context.

Indeed, 1950s women from Tehran had different expectations of marriage than women from other cities. While Mahin emphasised that the age difference negatively affected their marital relations, Arezoo focused on the fact that she married early. Although she and Mahin come from similar economic and religious backgrounds, Arezoo grew up in Tehran; she saw that she could have a different future if she was able to delay her marriage and finish high school. In addition, social customs also normalise age of marriage for women; Mahin married around the age of 17, which she did not consider 'early' or 'soon', because it was the accepted age of marriage for women in their communities.

Part of the Shah's modernised gender policies aimed at encouraging women to continue their education (Paidar 1997; Afary 2009). Therefore, in contrast to their own mothers (most of my 1950s interviewees' mothers could not attend high school), they had the opportunity not only to finish school but also to enter university. However, as Arezoo and Homa's stories show, these policies were not successful amongst the traditional social classes, religious or not.

When Homa, 51 years old, was accepted to a university in another city, her parents did not approve and 'forced' her to marry her father's distant relative, ten years her senior. I met Homa at the office, where she works as a secretary. She is from a traditional, religious and lower middle class family:

> I was forced. In the old times, there were a lot of obligations. […] I cried to my mum and she said, 'how much more do you want to study?' The culture was different back then. […] I didn't like my husband and I didn't like being married. This is why my daughters are still single […] they have suitors but they don't marry. I tell them to marry, but I don't force them. I was forced and I don't want them to tell me one day, 'you forced us'.

After her marriage, Homa could not continue her studies. She is still unhappy about her marriage. Amongst my 1950s women, Homa is the only woman who mentioned that she did not want to marry her husband

because she did not 'like' him; if she had 'liked' him, she added, she could have been happier in their marriage. The remaining 1950s women whose families arranged their marriages did not speak about their feelings for their suitor, even when they were opposed to their families' decisions. This has changed amongst post-revolutionary generations; a point I return to in the next section.

When I asked about their sexual relations, Homa said that her husband still 'likes her very much' but 'I still don't like him, and he knows that'. She continued by saying that she 'naturally' enjoyed sexual intercourse during the first few years of marriage, 'but not like someone who is in love with her husband'. After a while, however, she 'didn't like it that much' because her husband is very 'grumpy'.

When describing their experiences of menarche and marriage, many of my 1950s interviewees repeated the phrase 'The culture was different back then'. The women used this sentence to describe their powerless position in choosing a spouse and justify their compliance with their parents' decision. On the one hand, the women used this phrase to help picture the past and convince me—a young audience—of the differences between then and now, also referring to the shift in parents' role in marriage decisions and younger women's greater power to resist their parents.

On the other hand, by differentiating between 'back then' and now they also highlighted the accepted socio-cultural norms that limited their decisions and behaviour, as they chose to perform according to these norms in order to guard their position within the community. However, the women's powerless position in marriage did not equate to a complete lack of agency, as they were aware of the socio-familial expectations and importance of marriage to their lives. Indeed, agency should not be defined as a synonym for resistance against relations of power; as stories of arranged marriages show, agency is action 'enabled by specific relations of subordination' (Mahmood 2005, p. 18). The women evaluated their situation and decided how to perform in order to preserve their respectable position within the family.

Even though they had no power in choosing the time of their marriage or husband, some 1950s women managed to negotiate their wishes within the marriage. Esmat, who married at the age of 16, has a similar story. She is married to a cousin 12 years her senior.

> When he proposed I really wanted to study, but I was scared of my parents. My father asked me, 'do you want to marry or not?' We were disciplined in

a way that we didn't dare to say no. My mum was essentially the authority at home. I cried a lot, but only in front of my mother. […] I was the first daughter; now all of my sisters are educated.

Her brothers, who were university students at the time, were also against her marriage, 'but they didn't have the authority [at home], my mother had the power. I liked weddings and ceremonies, but I wasn't crazy about getting married.' She added, 'back then, it was thought that girls should marry young and not study'. Esmat is now happy in her marriage, as her husband is very 'supportive' and 'understanding'. She had her first child at the age of 17. After the Revolution, with two children in tow, she began completing her high school degree. She had four children when she began her undergraduate studies and had a fifth during the course of her degree, but still managed to finish. Several years later, Esmat completed her master's degree. She now works for a charity that supports single women householders in Tehran.

Sakineh, 52 years old, was one of the most extreme cases amongst my interviewees: she married at the age of '12 or 13 years old', she does not remember her exact age. I interviewed Sakineh at a house where she works as a cleaner. In addition to cleaning, she also prepares and sells vegetables with the help of her daughters. She is from a very poor, working class family. Before marriage and moving to Tehran, Sakineh lived in a city in central Iran. She now lives in a low-income neighbourhood in southern Tehran.

I didn't know anything. They [her parents] were illiterate and in a bad financial situation. They thought if they gave me to this man, who was from Tehran and claimed to be rich, so [they did something good for me]. Even though I cried a lot that I didn't like him, they said 'no, if you marry him then you have a comfortable life'. […] I hated him, I still do. […] But my father threatened, 'if she doesn't marry him, I'll kill her.' […] So they sent me to Tehran after *aqd* [marriage contract]. You can't believe it, but God knows how much torture and misery I've borne. At first, because I didn't have a child, they [her in-laws] didn't let me talk to anyone. I was his fourth wife and he had other children from his previous marriages. He divorced all his wives […] he was thirty-five years older than me. […] After my first child was born, my father realised that he'd made a mistake because my husband was really poor. My father asked me to come home, but I said no because I didn't know what would happen to my son.

Sakineh's family forced her to marry due to their bad economic situation. The family had other small children and marrying off Sakineh meant they had one mouth less to feed. A family's economic situation has great influence in marriage decisions. Although cultural norms and traditions determine the accepted age of marriage, a good financial situation helps women delay their marriage. As mentioned at the beginning of this section, all the women who had arranged marriages hailed from lower economic backgrounds.

Aside from those who found husbands through political activism, many 1950s women's families played a central role in choosing and arranging marriages. However, even amongst those who married in the same time period and social and political context, women's experiences of marriage differed depending on their economic situation and families' level of education. In the next section, I look at changes in the processes of marriage and choosing a spouse amongst the 1980s generation.

MARRIAGE FOR POST-REVOLUTIONARY GENERATIONS

Amongst my 1980s interviewees, 11 out of 37 women are married. Seven of these women, whose socio-cultural and religious backgrounds differ, had semi-arranged marriages and four married their boyfriends. Semi-arranged marriages are still popular, and traditional proposal ceremonies are practised amongst many social classes in Tehran. There are many similarities in the 1950s and 1980s generations' narratives of the process of *khâstegâri* [semi-arranged marriages] and choosing a spouse. For instance, both Vahideh and Fatemeh, from upper middle class and religious families, first met their husbands in *khâstegâri* ceremonies. The first session of *khâstegâri* is for the young couple and their families to meet and see whether they approve of each other. In this session, in addition to the couple, female members of both families are also present.

However, the ceremony can vary based on each family's customs and traditions. After Fatemeh's first *khâstegâri* session, her mother-in-law called to ask her parents if they could meet again. Then, '*sigheh khoondeh shod*', they had a short, temporary marriage so that they could spend time together and discuss their future. As Fatemeh explained, it was specifically mentioned that their temporary marriage was only for the purpose of having a *shar'i* conversation, as it is not religiously acceptable for a *nâ-mahram* man and woman to socialise together. Haeri (1989) describes this form of temporary marriage as a 'non-sexual *sigheh*', a common

practice amongst many religious and traditional families, through which 'prospective married couples use the opportunity of lawful association to get to know each other without endangering the honour of the woman' (Haeri 1989, p. 95; Paidar 1997, p. 278).

Fatemeh also said that she 'did not even take off [her] *rusari* and *châdor*' in front of him because they 'weren't *mahram*' [husband and wife]. They met mostly at Fatemeh's house with her parents present. At the end of the period of their temporary marriage, they announced their decision and then performed *aqd* [marriage contract]. Usually, during the period of temporary marriage, young couples also spend time getting to know each other's families; the girl's family, especially, will also do background checks on the groom and his family by asking around and contacting his relatives and friends to ensure that he is a suitable match. For Vahideh, the procedure was the same, except they did not have a temporary marriage.

The families' religiosity and customs determine the time and activities couples are allowed during their dating period, prior to the announcement of their decision for marriage. In contrast to the 1950s generation, even amongst traditional and religious social classes, families now encourage their daughters to spend more time with suitors before making any decisions about marriage, in efforts to decrease the chance of divorce. Although during her own time it was not customary for girls to spend time with suitors outside the house, Mehri, for instance, now lets her daughters go to dinner and the cinema with their suitors. Parents, especially girls' parents, do still supervise and regulate the dating period before *aqd*, however.

Some of my 1980s women criticised the process of *khâstegâri*. These women are mostly from religious families of various socio-economic backgrounds, contexts in which *khâstegâri* or semi-arranged marriages are considered the only appropriate method of finding and choosing a spouse. For instance, Zahra—a 24-year-old university student from an upper middle class and religious family—explained her problems with *khâstegâri* ceremonies:

> I believe neither in *khâstegâri* ceremonies nor in being friends [boyfriend/girlfriend] for finding a husband. […] I think people should reach an understanding of each other, which they can't achieve through the traditional procedure of *khâstegâri*. And in friendship, they only try to impress each other. […] My attitude is different from my family, […] my family is very ideal in many cases; they are educated and have a good economic situation. I don't like suitors to come to our home to see whether I am beautiful or

not, it's disgusting. [...] In *khâstegâri* one family judges and approves the other family based on their appearance. It doesn't have any logical explanation for me to say that I don't like your son's look [...] I haven't let any suitor come to our home yet. [...] The best way is to know someone at your workplace; you know each other better this way.

The younger generations are now questioning a traditional process that was the 'normal' procedure of finding a husband for their mothers' generation. The changes in women's expectations and ideals of marriage, as well as ways of finding a spouse, have been caused by women's increasing presence in the Iranian public sphere—in both higher education and the job market—since the Islamic Revolution (Sadeghi 2008; Afary 2009; Hegland 2009).

Through comparing her field research from 1978 to 1979 and 2003 in Aliabad,[10] Hegland observed that before the Revolution women were more limited to the domestic sphere and in contact only with their relatives and family; the younger generation of unmarried women in Aliabad, however, are now attending training courses at universities or other institutions, even commuting to Shiraz or other cities for their education. In this context, 'women may develop phone, email, or text-messaging communication with young men outside of their family circles'; this may never lead to marriage, as families do not approve such contacts before marriage, but 'these experiences may help women to feel less shy and intimidated by males and may assist them in dealing with a husband later' (Hegland 2009, p. 75).

Girls like Zahra, who belong to religious and traditional families but have experienced mix-sexed environments like universities, think that traditional *khâstegâri* ceremonies do not give them enough space to know their future husband. As Zahra clearly expressed, instead of sitting and waiting for a suitor at home, who will judge them based on appearance, young women prefer to meet and know a potential suitor from environments other than a *khâstegâri* ceremony. However, as I described in the previous chapter, the younger generation is still aware of society's (and their families') double standard regarding gender rules and norms; having a relationship with the opposite sex can still affect their situation in the marriage market.

Moreover, whereas most of my 1950s interviewees had arranged or semi-arranged marriages, all of my 1980s Tehrani interviewees—from different socio-economic situations—feel they have the right to choose their husband and reject marriage proposals for various reasons, even in

khâstegâri ceremonies arranged by their families. Nevertheless, women's freedom to refuse a marriage proposal is still dependent on their socio-cultural and economic situation.

As previously discussed, customs and traditions practised in extended families and communities—such as the accepted age of marriage for women, which can reduce or increase their marriageability—affect women's decisions about marriage. Moreover, women who belong to families with higher social status and level of income are in a more privileged position. Even in cases of premarital sexual relations, which usually reduce chances of marriage, women's economic situation—especially economic independence, as the cases of Sepideh and Mahtab show—gives them a powerful negotiating position with regard to marriage proposals.

In terms of women's marriage ideals, there are significant changes in 1980s women's expectations of marriage as compared with the 1950s. The post-revolutionary generations are more concerned with their future husband's social and economic situation. In conversations with unmarried women born in the late 1980s, the 'ideal' relationship was described as with a man from good family and fortune who they meet one day, fall in love with and marry. For 1950s women who had the opportunity to meet and choose their husbands at university or through political activism, religious and political similarities were important; 1980s women, on the other hand, emphasise the necessity of 'romantic love' in marriage.

The importance of 'romantic love' in marital relations is relatively modern in Iranian society, as well as in the rest of the Middle East. Najmabadi (2005) argues that the modernisation of Iranian society in the nineteenth century 'changed marriage as a sexual procreative contract to a romantic contract' based on 'companionship' (p. 59). As previously noted, marriage as 'companionship' only materialised in the de-sexualised and gender-neutral discourses of the 1979 opposition movements.

In post-revolutionary Iran 'earthly' love was still a taboo, and 'any sign of love' was banned in the public media; since the 1990s, however, romantic love has 'returned to the Iranian public sphere' (Khosravi 2008, p. 159). Khosravi (2008) sees these changes in relation to shifts in state policy during Khatami's presidency (ibid.). In recent years, Valentine's Day has even been celebrated widely by the youth in many Iranian cities (Khosravi 2008; Mahdavi 2008; Afary 2009).

Increased access to Western media and global consumer culture are also important factors in the changing attitudes of Iranians, especially the younger generations, towards public displays of affection and the importance

of romantic love in heterosexual relationships. Younger generations even, as I described in the third chapter, cited 'trust' and 'love' as two influential factors in their decision to have premarital sexual relations.

In an article published online, Mir-Hosseini (2009) also describes recent changes amongst women's political activists in publically displaying love and affection, especially after the controversial presidential election in 2009. Mir-Hosseini refers to the public letters written by women, mainly from religious backgrounds, to their prisoner husbands in which they speak about 'their physical longing for their men, and question the very justice of the system that has imprisoned them' (Mir-Hosseini 2009). Mir-Hosseini argues that the state has created a 'paradox', as it has 'politicised the sexuality and honour of all Iranian women' by controlling and policing sexual relations in public, which used to be a private matter for families; now, 'the regime finds its own adherents taking the policies' spirit to an uncomfortable extreme' (ibid.). Some of the authors of these letters belong to the 1950s generation. As noted at the beginning of this chapter, these same women censored their feelings during the political activism of the Revolution, but are now publically discussing their emotional relationships with their husbands. Public displays of affection between married couples were stigmatised during the revolutionary time, and declared politically irresponsible by both leftists and Islamists; in the current context, conversely, love letters have gained political significance through their highlighting of the state's suppression of oppositional groups.

However, Najmabadi (2004) shows that—through examples from popular post-Revolution novels critical of marriages based only on romantic love—still in popular culture romantic marriages are represented as emotional decisions; such marriages disregard differences between a couple's socio-cultural situation and familial background and usually end up in misery and divorce (Najmabadi 2004). There is a Persian phrase, *eshgh cheshmesh ro koor kardeh*, which means 'one who is blinded by love' and is commonly used to describe someone whose emotions prevent her from making rational decisions. While the youth see images of relationships based mostly on love and affection on satellite channels and Hollywood movies, national television and publications represent a successful marriage as one based on affection and, more importantly, familial approval and support. In public media, based on religious education, young people are usually encouraged to choose a spouse who is their equal; someone from similar religious, familial and economic backgrounds.

This advice differs from the revolutionary time, when young people were encouraged to ignore class differences.

Emphasising the family's role in successful marriage decisions controls and disciplines relations between the sexes in the public sphere. I also observed a suspicion of marriage decisions based only on affection amongst my 1980s generation interviewees. Although many from this younger generation prefer to find their own husband and establish an emotional relationship with him before marriage, they still seek their parents' approval. Marzieh, 22 years old and engaged to be married, explained that she involved her parents from the start in order to make a 'rational' decision.

> I don't believe in the way in which you find someone yourself. I think this way you become emotionally attached and unable to make a rational decision. Also his [suitor's] family is a main factor [in marriage]. If you see them and you don't like them, but because you are already in love with him you don't consider any of these factors [which is bad].

Her fiancé was formerly her tutor at university. When he proposed through one of his friends, she asked him to contact her family and propose through a *khâstegâri* ceremony. After their families officially met, the couple started to talk and socialise with each other. Based on recent research conducted in urban Iranian society, statistics show that by 2005 'nearly 70 percent of respondents favoured personal choice in spouse selection and of these 50 percent declared love to be more important than parental approval'; however, most still sought their parents' approval for 'love marriages' (Afary 2009, p. 326).

In general, many aspects of marriage have changed between these two generations of women. However, marriage is still an important issue for many of my younger interviewees; marriage determines their situation as adult women in society and their own families. Although many of my 1980s generation identified their main goals in life as finishing higher education or getting a job and becoming financially independent, it is still important for them to marry and have a family. Likewise, for many families, the only accepted form of relationship between a man and a woman remains marriage. In the next two sections, I discuss the social stigma attached to temporary marriage and divorce in Iranian society, highlighting the boundaries of relationships that are sanctioned by marriage.

Temporary Marriage

Despite its prohibition in the mainstream Sunni view, temporary marriage (*sigheh* or *mut'a*) is allowed in Shi'a jurisprudence and has been practised freely in Iran. Shi'a jurisprudence suggests that temporary marriage[11] is a morally acceptable solution to control and regulate Muslims' sexual behaviours. The goal of temporary marriage in Shi'a discourse, as the Arabic word *mut'a* signifies, is enjoyment and pleasure (Haeri 2000, p. 349).

In the 1967 Family Protection Law, temporary marriage was prohibited and classified as a backward tradition. According to this law, 'men wishing to marry for the second time were obliged to obtain court permission' or face two years in prison (Haeri 1989, pp. 118, 227). However, after the Islamic Revolution this law was weakened along with the rest of the Family Protection Law. The state encouraged temporary marriage as a morally and religiously acceptable act for both men and women (Afary 2009; Haeri 2000, p. 350).

As discussed earlier in the chapter, both during and after the Iran–Iraq war—in order to reduce the economic burden of war widows and prevent sexual disorder in society—the state encouraged men to marry war widows either permanently or temporarily. In order to encourage war widows to remarry, President Hashemi Rafsanjani—in a speech at Friday prayers in November 1990—acknowledged female sexuality and 'suggested that women should feel secure enough to initiate a relationship when they felt they need it' (Haeri 2000, p. 343). The state's promotion of temporary marriage is defined not only for male enjoyment but also for female sexual pleasure. According to Haeri, in contrast to the Pahlavi regime's silence about female sexuality, the Islamic Republic has started to openly discuss and acknowledge female sexuality, although women do not enjoy the same rights as they did under Pahlavi (Haeri 2000, p. 349).

Based on her ethnography of men and women who practise temporary marriage in Iran's religious cities, Haeri argues that divorced or widowed women look at temporary marriage as a morally and religiously acceptable means of sexual satisfaction, especially as they cannot or do not want to be tied up with the duties of permanent marriage (Haeri 1989, p. 124).

From her law practice, Sepideh knows many women involved in temporary marriages; she said, 'it is mainly because of financial reasons'. In addition, Sepideh also knows of women who have temporary marriages 'because of the social situation in which *gir midan* [they constantly control

you] you should have [a temporary marriage contract], because the law doesn't approve [civil] partnership, which is very common [nowadays] in our society.' According to Sepideh, as Islamic law forbids unmarried heterosexual couples' cohabitation, temporary marriage is used as a strategy to avoid any possible punishments.

During the 1990s, young people started using *sigheh* as a strategy to more easily socialise with the opposite sex and avoid the moral police. Since then, the state has discussed *sigheh* as a religiously sanctioned dating system. As Mahdavi reports, in recent years, websites have emerged where people can ask questions about *sigheh* from a cleric and 'have temporary marriage performed online' (Mahdavi 2008). I found a website[12]—*sâyt-e sigheh-ye Irâniân* [Iranians' *sigheh* website]—that performs online temporary marriages for a specific group of men and women. The website's owner is a graduate of the University of Judicial Sciences and has a degree in legal rights. The website works under the constitutional law, but is not sponsored by any legal or state institutions.

On this website, temporary marriages are divided into hourly and monthly marriages. In addition to duration of marriage, women are also categorised by those who want to have *sigheh-ye dokhool,* temporary marriage with penetrative sex, or *sigheh-ye gheyr-e dokhool*, temporary marriage without penetrative sex. A woman's dowry is decided by the website's experts and is dependent on her age, situation and other characteristics such as weight, height and so on. Women give the website permission to perform temporary marriages online. The website also regulates and controls the meetings between men and women. For instance, it is mentioned that, for women's safety, the hourly temporary marriages take place under the supervision of a woman from the website. In addition, this gives women the right to refuse and cancel the marriage if men behave badly or their appearance is unattractive.

Through the website, men can find a list of women available for either hourly or monthly temporary marriages. The list includes women's ages and a simple description of their physical appearances, using adjectives such as attractive, beautiful, physically fit and so on. Some women also give details about their situation, such as divorced or student in need of financial support. According to the website, most of the women listed have financial difficulties.

Women who use this site come from different religious backgrounds and have different reasons for becoming temporary wives, for example, either to solve financial problems or fulfil sexual needs. Similarly, from her

interviews, Haeri (1989) discovers that although economic issues play an important role, as men still have to pay the bride-price in temporary marriage, women have agency and use temporary marriage as a strategy to fulfil their desires (p. 124). Hence, the religious discourse not only regulates heterosexual relations, it also allows women to have temporary sexual relations especially when they can/do not want to be in a permanent relationship.

However, men and women who have temporary marriages usually deny and conceal it as socially and culturally it is not accepted. In my conversations with women from both generations, there was much condemnation of temporary marriages. Marzieh—a 22-year-old university student from a religious background—criticised the use of temporary marriage for having licit and lawful sexual relations:

> I disagree [with temporary marriage], I think it's only for specific situations but people don't pay attention. It should lead to [permanent] marriage. […] Otherwise, whenever young people feel the [sexual] urge, instead of [permanently] marrying [someone], they practice *sigheh* only to avoid the responsibilities of marital relations. [In such situation] mostly women are hurt.

Sixty-year-old Zohreh also thinks:

> *Sigheh* is not in Quran. […] I know women who do this, but they are really hurt and have problems [like] they get diseases; they constantly have feminine diseases. Unfortunately, nowadays *ulamá* [religious leaders] encourage it. It's one of the reasons AIDS is widespread [in our society]. It's only slightly better than *fahshâ* [prostitution].

Zohreh expressed that women are looking for 'stable relations' but 'men prefer temporary marriages'; so, if temporary marriages become popular, then 'there will be no marriages'. Although from different generations, social classes and religious backgrounds, Zohreh and Marzieh share the same attitude towards *sigheh*. Zohreh grew up in an upper middle class, non-religious family. She began wearing *hejâb* to show her solidarity with the Revolution and, later, became critical of the new Islamic order. Marzieh, on the other hand, grew up in a religious, middle class family and is an active member of the *Basij*[13] at her university.

According to Haeri, 'outside of religious circles, the custom of *mut'a* marriage has had a somewhat stigmatised, ambiguous and marginal status'; for the more urban, educated Iranian middle classes, *mut'a* is 'legalised prostitution' (Haeri 1989, p. 6). As I observed, Marzieh's comments—along with other women from religious backgrounds——show that the stigmatisation of *sigheh* is not limited to the middle class/non-religious sectors of Iranian society. I received comments from young religious women concerned about 'women's insecurity in *sigheh* marriages'. Although the state has stressed that both men and women can enjoy *sigheh*, women see this practice as favouring men. This shows that the official religious discourse has been unsuccessful in establishing *sigheh* as 'religiously sanctioned social intercourse', even amongst the more religious sectors of Iranian society (Paidar 1997, p. 185).

Some women expressed contradictions between their religious beliefs and the socially accepted norms. For instance, 51-year-old Zahra told me that she 'cannot be against *sigheh*' because it is a religious law; however, she does not 'like' men and women who practise it 'mainly because it's not accepted by [customary] norms in our society. [I know] it is *shari'a* law, but our social norms don't approve it'.

Even women who accept temporary marriage as a religious rule consider it an acceptable solution only in specific contexts, such as for men and women who do not have the opportunity to marry permanently and do not want to have sinful relationships. For example, Mansoureh—a 61-year-old woman with an education in theology from a seminary in Tehran—said that *sigheh* is 'good' for young men and women who are unable to get married due to their economic situation. In our conversation, she defended *sigheh*:

> All these boys and girls who are having elicit [sexual] relations, why don't you stop them? What's the difference? They commit sin. […] A woman should respect herself and not offer herself to a man without receiving anything. If she does, then it's her fault and she should take responsibility. Temporary marriage is for these people, not for someone who is married. […] In such cases, it's not morally acceptable.

Mansoureh believes that women are also responsible when a married man engages *sigheh*, as the religious-cultural context dictates that women are responsible for satisfying their husband's sexual needs. It is considered

that men have no control over their urges and religiously have the right to acquire temporary wives if their sexual needs are not satisfied at home. Mansoureh also thinks,

> Women are responsible when a man satisfies himself outside his home. […] When he doesn't like his family environment, doesn't feel relaxed, and doesn't have the pretty, clean, chic woman that he wants, then he feels thirsty and searches for water somewhere else. […] There were times when men were stealing girls, now girls are the ones who steal men.

She then advised me to be more careful about my marriage and take care of my husband: 'if a woman enters your life, then your marriage won't be the same and you won't have the peace you had before. It's all your art [doing].' 'It's all your art' describes a woman's ability to manage her marital relation; the phrase implies that women have more authority and power, as men are easy to manage. Mansoureh described men's expectations of marriage as limited to feeling relaxed at home and having a beautiful and caring wife. These needs, according to Mansoureh, are easily satisfied if a woman knows how to manage her household and pay attention to her appearance. I will return to this point with reference to women's attitudes towards divorce and approaches to keeping their marriages.

Most of my religious 1950s interviewees rejected the possibility of their husbands having *sigheh* wives. Only Forough—a 51-year-old woman from a religious, middle class background—described once becoming suspicious that her husband had a temporary marriage. I met Forough at her apartment in a complex in northern Tehran, where she lives with her husband and two daughters; one of her daughters is already married. Forough had a semi-arranged marriage.

> When my third daughter was born, he [my husband] was really irritated because he wanted a son. […] He didn't talk to me for months. […] After that, I became suspicious that he had a temporary wife. He had a secretary who was very *bâz* [open in her relations with men]. I didn't say anything to my husband, but I couldn't bear it anymore. For the sake of my children, I decided not to say anything to him because, if I did, then we had to get divorced. Because I couldn't nurture them without a father and I couldn't bear to let them live with their father, I decided to keep it to myself. But then later, I realised that it was my own imagination and nothing had happened between them. […] He used to threatened me that if 'I don't have a

boy I will remarry', and so it made me think like that. [She pauses] I think I reached a level of insanity [during that period], I even thought about suicide.

She got very emotional at this point, and I apologised for reminding her of bad memories and making her feel sad. Then she started to cry. She added, 'my daughters don't know about any of this'. Just to calm her, I said: 'I hope they appreciate what you did for them, because our generation doesn't make such sacrifices, we are more selfish.' She stopped me and said, 'no you are more realistic. […] For us [our generation], the husband was like a God.' According to Forough women of her generation were socialised to prioritise their roles as wives and mothers. For example, Forough could not continue her studies because she had to take care of her children. It is similar to the advice Mansoureh gave me about how to treat my husband, and that my husband should be more important than my studies. However, Forough described a change that has occurred between her own generation and that of her daughters, who have other priorities in life such as finishing their education or finding a full time job.

Forough's narrative also highlights women's powerlessness in marital relations; their lack of legal and social support. Forough is economically dependent on her husband and knows that she would be unable to provide for her children if she were to divorce, as she does not have the financial and familial resources. In addition, the law will also not support her in the case of divorce, as it will give custody of her children to her husband. The fact that she thought about 'suicide' shows her level of desperation, especially as she is a religious Muslim. Furthermore, her decision not to ask about her husband's potential relationship also demonstrates how women like Forough, who are only prepared to perform the role of wife and mother, have learnt to compromise their discomforts and ignore difficulties in their marriage to preserve their position as married women in their families and society. In the next section, I discuss the social stigma attached to divorce, which also forces women to continue in unhappy marriages.

Divorce

There is a wealth of literature discussing the legal changes in women's right to divorce both before and after the Islamic Revolution (Afary 2009; Bahramitash and Hooglund 2011; Fathi 1985; Higgins 1985; Mir-Hosseini 2000, 2012; Paidar 1997). Against the expectations of Islamists,

Islamic family law has not been successful in 'creating marital harmony and the stability of marriage' in Iran, as there has been a huge increase in the number of *talágh* [divorces] in recent years (Mir-Hosseini 2012, p. 80). According to the statistics, women petitioned for more divorces than men in 2001, a figure that had doubled by 2008; at that time, the average rate of divorce in Tehran was 'one in every five marriages' (Afary 2009, pp. 361, 363). Increased levels of education, smaller families and 'the growing desire for intimacy and companionship in marriage' are considered influential factors in women's increasing demands for divorce (ibid. p. 362). However, as it is still more difficult for women to find well-paid jobs and Iranian society 'as a whole remained intolerant of young divorcees', many women still feel they have no choice but to stay in unhappy marriages (ibid., p. 363). In this section, instead of discussing women's legal right to divorce, I focus on the personal and social aspects of divorce, women's narratives and their attitudes towards and reasons and justifications for divorce or continuing their marriage.

Similar to Afary's (2009) description, I observed amongst my interviewees that a gap exists between accepting divorce as a legal action and its social acceptability for women. There is a Persian proverb that says, 'a girl goes to marital home in white dress and leaves it in white burial shroud',[14] meaning after wearing white wedding dress only death should do a woman apart from her husband. Women from different social backgrounds commonly use this proverb, both in jest and in earnest, highlighting the general social attitude towards divorce.

For instance, Zari—a 49-year-old high school teacher from a middle class, non-religious family—explained in detail about 'our Iranian way of life' and how young women today have not learnt how to behave in their marriages.

> Zari: Instead of teaching them how to live, their mothers only taught them how to study; in Iran this is the main reason for divorce. Families pay a lot of attention to a girl's education instead of her manners and behaviour. You see that a girl has a PhD but she doesn't know how to handle her life; she doesn't even know how to sit [and to behave], and her father is proud that she has a PhD [with sarcastic tone]. A PhD doesn't give her womanhood. I'm saying that being a woman is an art; it's an art that you [know how] to keep yourself, your children and your husband. […] A divorced woman is an outcast in our society. However you try to conceal it, she is still an outcast. When you watch movies from before the Revolution [you see that] a woman's role is for

men's pleasure. A divorced woman is like this, only for [men's] pleasure, they won't marry her because they say that if she was any good her previous husband wouldn't let her go. […] Young women are making a mistake when they say they want divorce because they won't be able to marry again, that's my opinion.

Nafiseh: Even when they are not happy in their marriage?

Zari: So they should have opened their eyes before marriage. When he has addiction, yes, divorce is for such situations; but wanting divorce only because he is cranky or because he tells you what to wear or where to go, you can fix him. A woman is cleverer than a man, much more clever. For example, when my husband is angry with me, I start to cleverly and implicitly remind him of our good memories and after a while he forgets. Disagreements always exist.

Zari criticised the high rate of divorce and blamed women for unsuccessful marriages. Arezoo—a 55-year-old woman from a non-religious, lower middle class family—also criticised young women, saying: 'Nowadays *taghi be tooghi mikhore* [when slightest things happen] young women want *talâgh* [divorce], but when you have a child you should cope [with your situation]. I think that a woman should open her eyes before marriage, but when you have a child then [its over].'

There are similarities in Zari and Arezoo's attitudes: they both emphasised women's role as a wife and mother; they both used the phrase 'women should open their eyes before marriage'; and they both blame women for divorce, as they are too fussy or impatient with their husbands. Zari also spoke more specifically about 'women's art', that is, women's ability to manipulate their husbands to achieve their own goals.

I observed that women use sex and sexual relations to control and regulate their marital relations. I noticed that women from both generations do not look at sex merely as bodily pleasure or, at least for themselves, sex is about more than achieving sexual satisfaction. They justify men as not having control over their sexual urges, hence men are unable to regulate sexual relations according to their own wishes. Women have been raised with the idea that 'sex is more important for men' and 'men are only after sex in their relations with women'; they have learnt to discipline their behaviour and appearance in order to reduce or increase their sexual appeal to their husbands. Through internalising the socio-cultural and religious norms which dictate a subordinate position for women in heterosexual

relations, women often learn to regulate and discipline their bodies and desires in response to their husband's sexual needs.

For example, Shahin, 49 years old, sees sex as men's weakness, making them dependent on women:

> I've learnt that this desire in men is more than ours. So, this is one situation where God has led men to kneel in front of women and ask, beg […] I've seen it amongst my friends, they use it [to manipulate their husbands]. But I haven't, maybe because my husband has always loved and respected me.

Twenty-two-year-old Marzieh explained men's weakness for sex very clearly, as well as how this weakness can be a 'useful tool' for women:

> [Sex] can be a useful tool in a woman's hand to manage her life as she likes and make him more dependent. […] I believe that men's desire is more than women's, especially at the beginning of the relation, as he had to control himself for a while. This need can also increase his affection; it depends on the woman.
>
> Nafiseh: like how?
>
> Marzieh: If she postpones a lot and says 'no I don't want it', it's not good; the man will have a distaste for her after a while, because at first he has affection and love. It's his body that urges. If he encounters resistance and he doesn't want to hurt her, then he becomes cold. I think it's a spark than can warm man in married life […] women need more emotional support rather than this [sex].

Marzieh's comment justifies sex as a powerful tool for women. As previously mentioned, under the influence of both sexology textbooks and the state's emphasis on biological differences between male and female sexualities in the modern Islamic discourse, many younger generation from various religious backgrounds repeat stereotypical understandings of the female role in marriage, especially in sexual relations. For example, Minoo—a 25-year-old graduate student from a non-religious, middle class family—explained that, in her current relationship, she and her partner are simply 'sex partners'; they are not committed to each other and, hence, she is 'not worried' about making sex more 'attractive' for him. She added: 'Each relationship has its own politics. […] If I was in a committed

relationship with him, I would have bought sexy underwear just to make sex *jazzâb va motenave'e* [attractive and spontaneous] for him.' Although Minoo is undermining the socially accepted rule of female virginity by having premarital sexual relations, she still thinks that it is a woman's duty to increase her partner's sexual satisfaction in order for the relationship to continue.

Women from both generations spoke about using indirect techniques—such as wearing make-up or sexy lingerie, or even sending amorous text messages to show their husbands they want to have sex. For example, Mahboubeh—a 26-year-old woman from a religious, middle class family—said, 'I send him sexy or amorous text messages as a signal, so he realises that I am okay to have it [sex]'. She continued, 'I send these messages only when I feel that we are distant from each other, not because I want to have [sex]'. It is still difficult for Mahboubeh to directly initiate sex, instead she waits for her husband to come to her. Although sending 'sexy' text messages signals her readiness, it is still her husband's decision as to whether they will have sex that night.

Women specifically use these techniques when they know sex can change their husband's mood. For example, Zohreh—a 60-year-old woman from an upper middle class, non-religious family—said that her husband has 'never apologised' to her in their more than 20 years of marriage. Instead, he sulks all the time, especially after fights; she used sex to cheer him up and change the family atmosphere for their children.

Based on the relationship with their husband, their socio-economic situation and their religious beliefs, women decide how to behave in their sexual relations. As women's behaviours differ, it is difficult to categorise them as passive, subordinate or active women. Indeed, women employ different strategies to alleviate problems and change their situation. In addition, as Zohreh's appropriation of sex shows, the social stigma attached to divorce forces women to instrumentalise sex to make their relationship bearable.

In the patriarchal setting divorced women are considered desirable sexual partners, especially as they are already stigmatised in the community and in a less powerful position. A divorced woman can also be marginalised by women who see her as a threat to their own marriages. Consequently, divorced women can be subject to accusations and judgments by the wider society, especially other women. Ava's description of a divorced woman living in a low-income, conservative neighbourhood in Tehran represented such difficulties:

In my grandmother's neighbourhood [in southern Tehran], there is so much corruption. You can't find a divorced woman to whom nothing has happened; it's to the extent that they have to become *sigheh* [temporary wife]. We know a woman, she was very honourable, and then she became a *sigheh* to her landlord. We thought, 'how she could do it while his wife and children live in the same building and she sees his children'. Once, she told my grandmother, 'if I didn't accept [to become this man's wife] then I had to do something worse'. She had so many [sexual] offers [from men in the neighbourhood]. She could have been raped. So, at least this way she belongs to someone [and she is safe].

As Ava's narrative clearly shows, the meaning of *talâgh* and *motallagheh* [a divorced woman] is different based on a woman's socio-cultural context and economic situation. The familial support divorced women receive is highly dependent on the family's perception of divorce and the extent to which it is stigmatised in the community. Although they might resist it to start, as a woman divorcee is seen as inappropriate, wealthy families usually have less difficulty supporting their daughters after divorce. The next example from my 1980s interviewees highlights the fact that families usually support their daughter's decision if it was impossible for her to stay in a marriage. The reasons for this impossibility vary amongst different socio-economic groups, but, as thus far mentioned, it is generally considered unacceptable if a husband is addicted to drugs or violent towards his wife or children. In such cases, the law also easily grants women with divorce and gives them custody of the children.

Amongst my younger generation interviewees, only 30-year-old Sara has been divorced and remarried. Sara belongs to a non-religious but 'traditional' middle class family. For Sara's mother, '*âberoo*' [reputation] is very important, especially in front of her in-laws. During high school, Sara's mother would control all her relationships with friends. She was not allowed to attend any mixed parties without her parents present; even her phone conversations with friends were checked. When she entered university, Sara's mother loosened her grip, although Sara could still not stay out late at night. In her first term at university, Sara met her husband and they became friends. Sara knew she had to marry the first suitor that came to her home, as her mother wanted her to marry soon, so she introduced her boyfriend to the family and they were married a few months later. Sara was 19 when she got married, even though she had only known her husband a few months. After they married, he started to show sadistic behaviour,

especially during sex. She tolerated his violent behaviour for two years and then petitioned for divorce. In response to my question as to the reason she waited two years, Sara replied:

> I was too young, I didn't know what to do […] and I was scared of divorce. Until, after one incident I couldn't bear it anymore, so I went back to my parents' house. My mother thought that it was probably just this once. Then I showed her my back [from previous incidents] and I showed her a doctor's report. My mother was shocked that I hadn't told them anything during these two years; she even had a heart attack.

Sara was aware of the damage that divorce could have on her family's reputation. The concept of '*âberoo*' [reputation] is used as a micro-mechanism of control to regulate younger women's marital relations. Also women play the main role in teaching and familiarising younger women with the importance of reputation in their lives, as divorce can ruin both theirs and their family's reputation. Her mother's attempt to convince Sara to go back to her husband demonstrates the fact that some families consider divorce to be shameful and degrading, not just for their daughter but for themselves as parents. After divorce, many families even try to conceal the event from their extended family for as long as possible. I have also seen amongst families, both religious and not, that a daughter's divorce can decrease marriage chances for her sisters, especially if the divorce happened in the first two years of marriage.

Sara described her divorce procedure as 'easy' and 'fast'. After a few years, she then had a semi-arranged marriage to her current husband. However, in contrast to her first marriage, Sara decided to have sexual relations with her current husband before they married; she wanted to make sure of his behaviour during sex. Since she was a divorcee, retaining virginity was no longer her concern. Based on Ava's story, I asked Sara about people's behaviour towards her during the time she was divorced. She said,

> After [the divorce] they [her family] were easy on me, but then after a while all [the controls] started again, but less than before [her marriage]. […] One of my lecturers at university heard about my divorce from my friends, my mother told me to ask him to give private lessons. He accepted and came to our home. He was young and married, then he started to call me. I didn't take any classes with him anymore. […] But, in conversations men were harassing me by changing their tone and saying things like 'I can't live without you'. It scares you, like what's going to happen if he decides to act upon that.

In addition to the difficulties associated with divorce, many of my 1950s women pointed to their children as the main reason for staying in unhappy marriages. Indeed, the social stigma of divorce is increased when a woman also has children. For instance, 56-year-old Sadaf said, 'five days after marriage I wanted to get divorced, but I did it after twenty-six years'. She met her husband on her way to school, and, although her father wanted her to attend university, she insisted on marrying him: 'My father was really a democrat, and so he let me decide myself. […] I remember years later I told him, "you should have been stricter with me"'. She described her husband as a 'fanatic' and 'suspicious' man, who would not let her study or work. He started abusing her on their honeymoon; he accused her of 'not being a virgin'. When I asked about her reasons for remaining in her marriage so long, she replied:

> Because ten months after our wedding my daughter was born […] He preferred to have a son, and I was scared that [the court] won't give me custody of my child and I didn't want her to grow up with a step-mother. […] I thought, you know the silly thoughts that women have, that having a son might change our relationship. […] We were constantly fighting […] until I got pregnant with my son […].

However, Sadaf's marital relations did not change even after her son was born; thus, Sadaf decided to divorce only after her children had reached a certain age. Sadaf's reasons are similar to Forough's justification—mentioned at the end of the previous section. Petitioning for divorce is more difficult for women who are unable to find well-paying jobs to support them. In such cases, the court will not give them custody of their children for economic reasons. The economic situation can become even harsher if a woman's right to *nafagheh*[15] is revoked by the court, which can be done on the grounds of 'immorality' or refusal to *tamkin* [have sex with her husband] (Paidar 1997, p. 300). While families and communities regard divorced women as disgraced, they can also become financial burdens on their family.

Women's uncertainty regarding child custody, and fears that their children could grow up with another woman, reflect the lack of legal support women receive in matters of marriage and divorce, as well as how this affects their lives. While a man can remarry after divorce and keep custody of his children, women lose custody if they remarry. According to the current family law, the mother legally has custody of her children for a fixed

period of time—to the age of seven for a female child and up to the age of two for a male child—after which custody is given to the father (Paidar 1997, p. 294).

For example, 60-year-old Zohreh waited for her three children to grow up and leave the house before petitioning for divorce.

> I had many difficulties with my husband, I bore them only for the sake of my children, because – more than a father – a mother should sacrifice for her children. Also because in Iran the law won't give the custody to the mother, so I decided to tolerate my husband and not let my children find out about our problems. […] I say that woman should *modârâ koneh* [tolerate it] but not *tahammol* [endure it], because then it makes her sick. My idea has always been that when a child is born then you are no longer for yourself [you should sacrifice]. So, after my third son left home, I talked to my husband and we both agreed on divorce.

Similarly, Firozeh had decided to get divorced after she discovered her husband's infidelity, 'but my mother calmed me down. She told me, "you are one person but you have four kids, it doesn't seem rational to sacrifice the lives of four people to save just one life." Then I decided to continue [my marriage] with my husband'. Firozeh believes that she did the right thing.

Both Zohreh and Firozeh emphasised their role as mothers and their responsibility to their children, which is an accepted decision in the wider social context; a mother who sacrifices her own life and happiness for the sake of her children. This shows how women see marriage and motherhood as part of their identity. However, both Zohreh and Firozeh believe they made the right decision.

As the stories of women and their approaches to marital relations in this section show, getting divorced does not simply entail ending an unhappy or abusive relationship. Women must think about their post-divorce situation and how they can deal with divorce's socio-economic aspects. In general, as Mir-Hosseini argues, women's choices and negotiations in divorce are influenced by many factors, such as 'their personalities, their conjugal circumstances, and the socioeconomic context in which marriage is embedded' (Mir-Hosseini 2002, p. 148). Therefore, in order to understand women's decisions in marital relations, we need to contextualise these decisions within the social and legal boundaries limiting women's actions.

Conclusion

To summarise, due to changes in socio-cultural and political situation during the last three decades after the Islamic Revolution experiences of marriage have also changed between these two generations. In contrast to their mothers, a suitor's economic situation is very important to 1980s women; they prefer to marry someone from a similar or even higher socio-cultural and economic background. 1980s women also emphasised 'companionship' in marriage, similar to 1950s women, however the meaning of 'companionship' has changed in the post-revolutionary context. The issue of 'love' and 'emotional feelings and affection' is another influential factor in marriage for younger generations; their mothers, on the other hand, either did not have the power or authority to resist their parents' decision or romantic 'love' was not important to their choice of spouse.

Furthermore, the social stigma attached to divorce and temporary marriage, similar to Higgins (1985) argument, demonstrates that to see the real consequences of changes in law and state policy on the situation of women in Iranian society, we need to contextualise them in women's lives. Still amongst middle class, educated Tehrani families, irrespective of level of religiosity or lack thereof, divorce is seen as a selfish and shameful act, especially when women lack 'important' grounds for divorce—such as husband's abusive behaviour or drug addiction. This social attitude is reinforced by and reproduced in the Iranian media, which shows how the state 'normalises' this patriarchal understanding of women's role in order to deny their rights in marriage and divorce. In contrast, however, the dominant cultural attitude has not favoured the state's policies on temporary marriage; therefore, the state has tried to justify and legitimise temporary marriage through criticising its associated social stigma.

However, as shown throughout this chapter, women use different coping strategies to deal with social constraints and limitations. For example, their use of sex in regulating marital relations shows how they appropriate the binary understanding of male/female sexualities and men's weakness in sex to their own advantage. In the socio-cultural situation where women are socially recognised through marriage, are often economically dependent and face substantial difficulties in getting divorced, as well as its associated stigma, sex and sexual relations gain different meanings for women. Even when women decide to satisfy their own sexual desires, such decisions might not be in accordance with our liberal perception of agency and

bodily autonomy; likewise, sexual submission to their husbands does not automatically make women passive sexual beings. Instead of directly confronting their husbands or their marital problems they prefer to use other ways in order to reduce their marital conflicts and change their situation.

Notes

1. Markaz-e Moshârekat Zanân.
2. Dowry.
3. The Prophet's favourite daughter and the wife of Ali, the first Imam of Shi'a Islam.
4. After the Revolution Fatima was reduced to her role as mother and wife, and her birthday is now celebrated as National Mother's Day in Iran.
5. The Tudeh party of Iran was founded in the 1940s by a group of Marxists who had been released from Reza Shah's prisons (Paidar 1997, p. 120). After the Islamic Revolution, many Tudeh members were arrested and later executed.
6. Mohammad Reza Shah established the SAVAK, a domestic intelligence service, in 1957.
7. According to Haeri, 'in the Islamic context gender relationships are defined based on the paradigm of mahram/nâ-mahram, a mahram relationship is formed either through birth or marriage' (Haeri 1989, p. 76). Therefore, men and women can associate with each other only if they are blood related or married.
8. Here, she referred to a hadith that states: 'when a nâ-mahram man and a woman are alone together, the third person is Satan'. It is forbidden for a woman to be alone with a nâ-mahram, a none relative man.
9. By 'arranged marriage' I mean marriages that are arranged and decided only by a woman's family, especially her father. In some cases, such arrangements are made against a woman's wishes, as women are usually not given the right to reject the selected husband in these types of marriages. While the parents' decision is still very important in semi-arranged marriages, dependent on the families' customs and traditions, the couple still gets a chance to make their own choice. Both arranged and semi-arranged marriages have[*khâstegâri* or proposal ceremonies; however, it can be only a formality in arranged marriages, as the decision has already been reached between the parents. Therefore, as previously mentioned, I use *khâstegâri* [mainly to describe semi-arranged marriages.
10. Aliabad is a village near Shiraz, the capital of the Fars province in southwest Iran.

11. Mot'e/mut'a: 'a contract with a definite duration (from a few minutes to ninety-nine years) [which] legitimises a sexual union as well as the children born into it' (Mir-Hosseini 1999, p. 69).
12. http://www.sighe25.cf/
13. The *Basij* is a voluntary militia organisation established after the Revolution by Ayatollah Khomeini.
14. *Dokhtar bá lebás-e sefid mire khoone-ye bakht, bá kafan miád biroon.*
15. *Nafagheh* is maintenance that a woman receives after consummation of the marriage and if she has been given 'lawful custody of the children' after divorce.

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Conclusion

As I have shown throughout this book, women's experiences of menarche, relations with men before marriage, sex and marriage have changed between the 1950s and 1980s generations. In addition to increased access to global media and changes in the Islamic Republic's sexual politics, these shifts occurred as a result of women's increased presence in the Iranian public sphere, access to higher education and participation in the job market.

However, changes in these two generations' bodily and sexual experiences do not necessarily mean that the gender relations double standard, in both the public and private spheres, has been undermined. Indeed, I argue that taking an intergenerational approach to studying Iranian women can highlight the ways in which gender norms are, in fact, reproduced. In addition to demonstrating changes in the sexual and bodily experiences of women from different age groups, comparing women's narratives can also show how socio-cultural perceptions of female and male sexualities are transformed instead of challenged. In the following sections, I summarise the main findings of my research and answer the questions raised in the first chapter of this book.

Contextualising Women's Narratives of Sexuality in Iran and Its Theoretical Implications

Women's narratives, from both generations, show how religious and cultural norms of female sexuality reproduce and reinforce each other. In this book, in contrast to the existing literature on women and gender in the Islamic Republic, I argued that focusing on the state's sexual and gender policies without addressing the socio-cultural context in which such policies are shaped and enforced ignores the multiplicity and complexity of regulatory forces that shape women's bodily and sexual experiences.

For instance, while premarital sexual relations are religiously and legally forbidden, and relations between the sexes in the Iranian public sphere are controlled by the state, women of both generations emphasised the negative social consequences of having premarital sexual relations for women. Instead of referring to the religious or legal implications, most of my interviewees—even those with religious backgrounds—pointed to the social stigma of premarital sex. Therefore, in discussing the state's control—based on Islamic moral codes of conduct—over women's public behaviour and appearance, it is also necessary to look at the wider socio-cultural context in which women learn to discipline their bodily desires and behaviours in order to retain social status. Hence, changes to the state's sexual policies do not simply lead to changes in the socio-cultural and other regulatory forces that construct and control female sexuality.

In addition, emphasising the religious aspect of the dominant discourse of sexuality in Iran ignores the use of other disciplinary discourses in both the public and private spheres. As I observed, one such regulatory mechanism is the use of medical and scientific knowledge by both the religious discourse and official state education.

As I discussed in Chap. 3, the institutionalisation and professionalisation of sexuality in the post-revolutionary Iran has legitimised scientific discussions of sex and sexuality in the Iranian public sphere. Consequently, many unmarried 1980s women—from different religious and social backgrounds—displayed extensive knowledge about sex and sexual intercourse. In contrast to their mothers' generation, younger Tehrani women use medical and scientific language to speak about their bodily experiences.

However, although modern science has helped women by providing them with a language to discuss their bodily experiences, it has neither changed nor challenged the control over female sexuality. Instead, as I discussed throughout this book, modern science has helped the

patriarchal order to regulate and discipline women's sexual behaviour—especially the post-revolutionary generation—by scientifically justifying binaries of active male and passive female sexualities. I also argued that the scientific discourse has been appropriated by the state and the dominant religious discourse in order to appeal to a wider spectrum of Iranians and reproduce the specific norms of heterosexualities that are in accordance with Islamic regulations.

In addition, the scientification of sexuality acts as a powerful regulating force, as it conceals the socio-cultural restrictions and rules that construct and discipline women's bodily and sexual experiences in Iranian society. As I discussed in chapters of narratives of virginity and menstruation, women do not question the social and cultural restrictions and religious taboos that force them to conceal their menstrual body or avoid sexual intercourse before marriage. This aspect is more significant in 1980s women's perceptions of their bodies; these women place themselves in a passive position by defining menstruation or the hymen as part of their female body, which is 'naturally' determined and, hence, out of their control. Although younger women use science to convince themselves and others not to feel shame, because menstruation is a 'natural' biological event, they fail to recognise why menstruation would be considered shameful to start.

However, public discussions of sex and sexuality have had contradictory effects on the sexual lives of women from the more religious and conservative classes of Iranian society. While recent discussion of sex and sexual relations—such as in workshops, television programmes or publications—reproduces the hierarchy of gender relations, fails to question men's right to polygamy and ignores women's lack of legal support in marriage and divorce, such explicit discussion introduces new concepts, such as mutual satisfaction, to Iranian women's sexual lives. In contrast to cultural and social understandings of sex, this recent discourse defines sex not as 'animalistic' and shameful behaviour, but instead as a joyful, pleasurable and divinely-sanctified relationship for married couples.

This discourse also encourages both religious men and women to learn more about and discuss sex with legitimate sources, such as clergy, medical or psychology professionals. Consequently, many religious women attend government-sponsored workshops, read popular books published by seminary institutions and/or visit private consultants before marriage to increase their sexual knowledge.

The contradictory effects of medicalising sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran highlight both the negative and positive aspects of disciplinary power:

while it creates new forms of knowledge that undermine the taboo of public discussions of sex and increases women's knowledge about their body and sexuality, it also normalises and reproduces women's passive sexuality and the hierarchy of gender relations. In the next section, I continue my argument by criticising the existing literature's dominant approach, as it categorises women based on simple binaries and ignores the multiplicity and complexity of factors that shape women's sexual behaviour.

Moving Beyond the Binary of Resistance/ Subordination

In discussions of the Islamic Republic's policies against women, disregarding the socio-cultural context ignores the variety of ways in which women perform norms of female sexuality; such disregard leads to a simple categorisation of women's behaviour along the subordination/resistance binary. This bifurcation also divides women into the homogenised groups of traditional, religious, conservative and modern, secular, liberal, indicating that women either comply with the Islamic order or resist in an effort to create a more liberal and egalitarian society.

As discussed throughout this book, women invoke different subjectivities in different contexts, which do not always resist or comply with norms of female sexuality. In line with Mahmood (2005), I showed how women differently inhabit the norms of female sexuality. My interviewees show their agency while simultaneously performing according to the socio-cultural norms that limit their bodily behaviour and sexuality. As I have shown, while younger women have learnt to conceal their menstrual body and internalised the embarrassment and shame of menstruation, they also show their agency by creating secret codes in order to communicate with each other about menstruation in public spaces.

Moreover, it is important to contextualise the concept of resistance as, similar to Mahmood (2005), I find that women's perception of agency is not always in accordance with our liberal desire for change. For instance, having premarital sexual relations is not simply a challenge to religious prohibitions and the patriarchal order, it is also a personal choice influenced by women's religious, economic and social situations. In the chapters on virginity and marriage, I argued how, for both generations, women's economic dependence on their fathers or husbands influences decisions about premarital sex or expressions of desire in heterosexual relations.

In general, as I observed amongst both religious and non-religious women, a modern lifestyle does not necessarily equate to premarital sexual relations, or vice versa. Moreover, in contrast to the arguments made by Varzi (2006), Khosravi (2008) and Mahdavi (2008), premarital sex does not necessarily lead to a change in social norms; although women might engage in such actions, they do so in a context that still privileges male sexual desire and satisfaction. I argued in Chap. 4 that, instead of undermining the rule of virginity, a transformation of the meaning of the virginal body has occurred amongst younger generations. For 1950s women, the term 'virgin' implied no sexual contact with men; for younger generations, the meaning of this term has been reduced to simply a woman with an intact hymen. I analysed how this transformation was the result of increases in both the age of marriage and women's presence in the Iranian public sphere.

In addition, searching out acts of resistance to the state's sexual and gender policies—as we see in current literature on Iranian women (Moaveni 2005; Mahdavi 2008; Khosravi 2008; Afary 2009; Hélie and Hoodfar 2012)—ignores the complex and contradictory situation that such policies create in Iranian women's sexual lives. In the previous section, I summarised the changes occurring as a result of medicalising sexuality in the post-revolutionary era.

The above-elucidated points highlight the necessity of contextualising women's embodiment in their familial situations, religious and economic backgrounds, the state's control and the global consumer culture. It is important to understand the meanings women attach to their sexual and bodily behaviour in order to understand how they acquire and negotiate different, and even contradictory, subjectivities. It is difficult to place women in any existing categories, such as modern/traditional or sexually liberated/sexually oppressed.

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Appendix: Selected Glossary

In this book I have used Persian rather than Arabic pronunciation as the basis of my transliteration.

Âberoo	reputation
Âmizesh	is a Farsi equivalent for sex and sexual intercourse
Aqd	marriage contract, the only procedure through which a relationship of a man and a woman is legally and religiously recognised
Aqd-kardegi	a period from signing the marriage contract until wedding ceremony
Bâzâri	refers to a merchant in Tehran's grand bazaar. *Bâzâri* signifies a family that is traditionally religious and rich.
Bekârat	virginity, *Bâkereh* means a virgin woman
Châdor	a top-to-toe shapeless and loose-fitting cloth specific to Iran
Dâdan	to give, is used to describe women's action in sexual intercourse
Dastmâl	cloth or napkin. In this text, *dastmâl* refers to either a white napkin or piece of cloth that is prepared for the wedding night or the material used as a sanitary pad during menstruation
Diyeh	compensation, blood money

Dokhtar	literally means a girl, but also signifies a virgin woman
Dokhtar-zâ	an adjective used to describe a woman who only gives birth to daughters
Dookhtan-e pardeh	a slang for *tarmim-e pardeh ye bekârat* or hymen-repair surgery
Erzâ	sexual satisfaction
Eyb	shameful or inappropriate behaviour done mostly by women. *Zesht* which means ugly is also used in similar context.
Ezdevâj kardan	marrying
Ghosl	Persian pronunciation of Arabic *Ghusl*, ritual ablution which is to clean the body from sources of impurity such as blood. The ritual, through which the body is completely immersed in water, should be performed at the end of women's menstrual cycle, after sex and by men after ejaculation
Hadith	Stories attributed to the Prophet Mohammad and twelve Imam of *Shi'a*
Hayâ	charm, dignity
Heyz	Persian pronunciation of Arabic *heize*. In Islamic jurisprudence, *heize* is the blood the female body discharges during menstruation. The term is also used to describe a menstrual cycle in religious texts.
Jalaseh	Literally means session, is a women's religious meeting held at home
Jonob	condition of body after sex until the ritual ablution is performed, while *jonob* a man and a woman cannot pray, recite Quran or enter into a mosque until they perform *Ghosl*
Kardan	to do, is used for men's action in sexual intercourse
Khâk-too-sari	literally translates to 'dirt on my head', can mention as a result of a very shameful and embarrassing behaviour or event, here it is mostly used as a code for sex

Khâstegâri	An old custom where *khâstegâr* (suitor) accompanied by his parents, guardians or elder family members, calls upon the bride's family to ask for her hand in marriage
Khorâfât	superstitions
Mahram/Nâ-mahram	a *mahram* relationship is formed either through birth or marriage. Mahram people (mostly close family) can socialise, while *nâ-mahram* refers to unrelated men and women whose interaction is forbidden without observing rules of gender avoidance, such as veiling.
Mânto	manteau, a gown-like dress that covers from neck to knees (or in more conservative ones, from neck to ankles). It can be worn without chador or underneath chador. The dress code of the government female workers and preference of the moral police is very loose one with dark colours (dark blue, grey, dark brown and black) but particularly after the first post-revolution decade women started to wear tighter and more colourful *mântos*, and now their size, colour and model changes according to fashion of the season.
Mehrieh	dowry
Motallaqeh	divorced woman
Mut'a (siqeh)	Temporary marriage; a contract which legitimises the sexual relation of the couple and has a definite duration.
Najes	polluting, impure person or object from a religious point of view. *Nejâsat* then refers to the source of pollution such as urine, semen or blood.
Orf	Customs and traditions
Otâq-e hejleh	or in short *hejleh*, is wedding chamber, the room in which the couple consummate their marriage.
Pardeh ye bekârat	Hymen
Pâtakhti	A female-only ceremony held a day after the wedding to celebrate the consummation of marriage.

Râbeteh ye jensi	Sexual relation
Rusary	or scarf, is the term used for head cover which can be in different shapes and sizes. As it is obligatory in Iran for women to cover their hair and body outside their homes, based on their religious beliefs and sense of fashion they use different styles to wear scarves to cover their hair.
Seqt-e Janin	is a formal term used for abortion in legal and medical contexts.
Sharm	Shyness
Siqeh ye dokhool	temporary marriage which allows penetrative sex. In contrast to *Siqeh ye qeyr-e dokhool:* that forbids couple to have vaginal intercourse, while they can have other forms of sexual contact.
Tamkin	Based on *Shari'a* women should submit to sexual needs of their husbands at any time. Marriage contract also makes it a legal obligation for women to do so.

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[1] Note: Page numbers followed by 'n' refer to notes