

The Marital Sexual Experiences of South African Muslim Wives of Indian Descent: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

This article² explores the sexuality of South African Muslim Indian wives in monogamous marriages, analyzing the effect of religious teachings and cultural norms on sexual experiences using hermeneutic phenomenology. The abrupt shift from religious norms that promote chastity to the expectation of sexual activity upon marriage, together with variations in desire and sexual preferences remain relatively underexplored within Muslim marriages. Under analysis is the dynamic between intimacy, desire, and shame. Drawing on empirical research, results highlight emotional and psychological challenges faced by Muslim women during marital sexual initiation due to their interpretations of religious teachings and limited sex education. Muslim wives experience that their sexual desire discrepancies negatively impact their mental health and self-esteem. There is the invocation of gendered sexual conceptions perpetuated by cultural conditioning which is also negotiated and subverted. Despite challenges, a transformative potential in marital relationships

¹ Maryam Khan is the author of this article, while Sumayya Ebrahim is the supervisor. The article and positionality are therefore written from Khan's perspective.

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is indicated through agentival capacity, understanding, communication, and mutual sexual satisfaction.

Keywords: Islam, Muslim wives, marital sexual experiences, Indian culture, Islamic teachings, sexuality, sexual education

Introduction

Sexual intimacy is a dynamic aspect of human relationships that experiences shifts, adjustments, and transformation over time. The dynamics of a sexual relationship are complex and shaped by cultural, religious, and health factors that intersect within sociocultural contexts and the norms and values of the societies and belief systems that individuals inhabit.

Riyani (2014:1) has found that Muslims in various Islamic countries share common beliefs concerning sexuality in Islam. These include the belief that Islam is a sex-positive religion and recognizes sex as a natural aspect of human nature which should only be fulfilled within the confines of marriage (Riyani 2014:1). Illicit sex is considered sinful. In contrast, sex within marriage is viewed as an act of worship. Thus, religious teachings influence the regulation of sexuality for practicing Muslims, and upon marriage, observant Muslim women's sexual expression evolves from celibacy to the prospect of sexual activity.

The experiences of Muslim women within the context of their marital relationship and the influence of Islamic teachings on their perceptions of sexuality and marital sexual experiences have garnered increasing scholarly attention in recent years (Hoel & Shaikh 2013; Hoel 2014; Riyani 2016; Khan & Seedat 2017; Aziz, Abdullah, & Prasojo 2020; Bakuri & Spronk 2022). Bakuri and Spronk (2022:40) have written on the interconnection between religious piety and sexuality, and Riyani (2016:5) on the marital sexual experiences of Muslim women in Indonesia, focusing on the underlying dynamics of patriarchy. In the South African context, Hoel (2014:95) has addressed the subject of Islamic sexual ethics, Hoel and Shaikh (2013:81) on how sex is perceived as an act of worship within Islamic teachings, and Khan and Seedat (2017:146) on women's sexual negotiations motivated by pietistic aspirations. However, these studies do not specifically address the transition to married life, which can bring forth complex issues related to sexual desire

and satisfaction. Questions about how observant Muslim wives navigate the transition from celibacy to sexual activity upon marriage, variations in desire, sexual preferences, and negotiating these factors between spouses remain relatively underexplored within the specific context of Muslim monogamous marriages. Amini and McCormack (2020:4 of 15) have adopted a biographical approach to exploring the pivotal moments of older Iranian women's sexual experiences. An advancement in this line of inquiry entails exploring the lived realities of Muslim wives as they navigate changes in their sexuality after marriage.

This article situates experiences of sex and sexuality within the South African Indian context, which has been observed to potentially reinforce a patriarchal and religious gender order within the Indian community (cf. Shaikh 2003:147; Vahed 2007:128). The study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of the lived experiences of Muslim wives navigating their sexuality within a monogamous marriage using a hermeneutic phenomenology framework. Through an in-depth examination of Muslim wives' sexual experiences within a monogamous marriage, this study aims to understand the multifaceted dynamics that affect marital sexual relationships, such as religious and cultural influences and sexual desire discrepancy (SDD). This will not only contribute to the existing body of knowledge on Islam, gender, and sexuality but also has practical implications for Muslim communities. The researcher hopes that findings will inform a constructive discussion on sexuality and sexual health within Muslim communities and the development of supportive interventions and resources to promote the sexual health and well-being of Muslim women in South Africa.

Positionality of the Researcher

This manuscript encompasses my identity as a South African Muslim Indian woman. Growing up in this community, I experienced a notable absence of formal Islamic sex education. This void prompted me to embark on a personal quest for Islamic knowledge to address this gap, which led to a familiarity with cultural and religious influences that can affect one's sexuality.

Positioning relative to the participants used for this article was complex and multi-dimensional (Toy-Cronin 2018:456). Due to the shared religion, race, and gender between myself and the participants, I positioned my-

self as an insider to the population under study. This lived familiarity empowered me to navigate sensitive topics and was invaluable in examining how cultural influences and religious teachings affect women's sexual experiences. I experienced a level of trust and rapport with the participants that facilitated open and honest discussions on their sexual experiences, enabling me to gather authentic and detailed insights into their lived experiences.

However, 'insiderness' also comes with certain ideas of shared values and assumptions that require critical examination. One significant shared assumption is the perceived intertwining of culture and religion, where the lines between cultural practices and religious teachings are often blurred. From a researcher's perspective, it is essential to disentangle these elements to understand the distinct impacts of culture and religion on a marital sexual relationship. Through reflective practice, I was able to separate these elements and highlight participants' narratives of their own experiences.

More complex issues arose when I was asked to offer advice to some participants. Some women, particularly those who experienced SDD, sought my opinion and advice pertaining to their specific situations, assuming that I had the expertise to help them. Although I could empathize with their challenges and felt inclined to comment, I tried to refrain from offering advice as it would breach the professional boundaries of the researcher role. Inevitably, my understanding of their narratives is also shaped by my empathy for their lived experiences.

My stance is that Islam is a sex-positive religion which encourages a healthy and mutually fulfilling sexual relationship within marriage. In my view, any disparities between Islam's teachings and women's actual experiences may arise from external influences, such as cultural or societal factors. My epistemological position centers on advocating for the importance of women asserting their agency in defining and narrating their experiences for themselves.

Literature Review

Global studies have revealed that sexual dysfunction, distress, and dissatisfaction are prevalent among women (Haghi, Allahverdipour, Nadrian, Sarbakhsh, Hashemiparast, & Mirghafourvand 2017; Maasoumi, Elsous, Hussein, Taghizadeh, & Baloushah 2019; Muhamad, Horey, Liamputtong, Low,

Mohd Zulkifli, & Sidi 2021; Stephenson & Meston 2015; Zheng, Skiba, Bell, Islam, & Davis 2020). Cultural understandings of gendered heterosexuality, with expectations that men are sexually active and the dominant initiators of sexual activity, while women are ‘sexually reactive, submissive, and passive’, influence the ways individuals understand themselves sexually (Endendijk, Van Baar, & Deković 2019:163). Furthermore, heterosexual double standards impact how married couples experience sex and frequently lead to marital sex conflicts (Elliott & Umberson 2008:398; Hayfield & Clarke 2012:73).

Willoughby and Vitas (2011:477) define SDD as the difference between an individual’s desire for sexual intercourse and the actual frequency of sexual intercourse within their relationship. A high individual SSD score indicates that an individual desires to engage in more sexual intercourse than they currently do. Several studies have explored the effects of SSD in dating and committed couples (Mark 2012; Sutherland, Rehman, Fallis, & Goodnight 2015; Kim, Muise, Barranti, Mark, Rosen, Harasymchuk, & Impett 2020; Jodouin, Rosen, Merwin, & Bergeron 2021) with Herbenick, Mullinax, and Mark (2014:2201) as well as Mark (2014:31) dispelling the notion that men are always the partners with higher desires.

However, minimal studies have been conducted amongst marital couples in particular. Willoughby, Farero, and Busby (2013:558) as well as McNulty, Maxwell, Meltzer, and Baumeister (2019:2484) found that a high individual SSD is associated with negative marital outcomes, which may threaten the wellbeing of a specific relationship. Moreover, results suggest that husbands are more likely than wives to have higher SSD, implying that gender disparities exist between individual SSD and relationship outcomes within marital relationships (Willoughby *et al.* 2013:560). On the other hand, Rosen, Bailey, and Muise (2017:8 of 12) have investigated SSD among new parents and found that they were less satisfied when a mother has a higher sexual desire than the father. Therefore, in some cases, even after motherhood, women may desire more sex than men.

Impact of Religious Teachings and Cultural Influences

Researchers exploring Muslim women’s sexual pleasure have discovered that they would engage in consensual but unwanted sexual activities and accept sexual stimulation instead of expressing their sexual desires (Khan & Seedat

2017:148; Samadi, Maasoumi, Salehi, Ramezani, & Kohan 2018:8). Moreover, women perceive sexual activity in marriage to be a religious obligation or a strategy to gain their husbands' approval which can be interpreted as a form of patriarchal bargaining (Amini & McCormack 2020:9-10 of 15; Kandiyoti 1988; Riyani 2016:171). Hoel and Shaikh (2013:88) as well as Riyani (2016:225) point out that the distinction between patriarchy and Islamic religious beliefs is occasionally blurred, with patriarchy being presented under the guise of religious doctrine. For example, the interpretation that a Muslim woman should always be sexually available to her spouse because it is an act of worship perpetuates patriarchal norms. Hoel and Shaikh (2013:76) has found that despite broader marital dynamics, religious teachings on sexuality encourage sexual receptivity and place psychological pressure on wives to be sexually available to their husbands. Despite these findings, evidence suggests that women exercise agency in their lives by adapting and challenging these norms (Amini & McCormack 2020:9 of 15).

Ibrahimpure, Jalambadani, Najjar, and Dehnavieh (2012:455) have explored the first experience of intercourse amongst married Muslim women and have identified a prevalent expression of fear attributed to various factors. Notably, women report that the consummation experience, while daunting in anticipation, was less painful than anticipated. Conversely, Amini and McCormack (2020:8 of 15) have found that most women reported painful consummation experiences, distress, and a hatred of sexual intercourse attributed to a lack of prior sexual education as well as the difficult transition from the observance of modesty and wearing of hijab (headscarves) to the expectation of revealing their bodies within a marital relationship. This is supported by Alomair, Alageel, Davies, and Bailey (2021:12), who have found that Saudi Arabian Muslim women are lacking sexual education and hold a deep-rooted negative view towards sex that is embedded in cultural and religious messages. Moreover, religious injunctions necessitating ritual bathing after intercourse contribute to feelings of guilt and shame associated with their perception of sexual intercourse being impure.

These findings collectively provide insight into the complexity of factors affecting women's sexual experiences and underline the need to explore these dynamics among Muslim women, while considering sociocultural influences that shape their marital sexual experiences. Hence, this study aims to gain an in-depth understandings of South African Muslim Indian wives' marital sexual experiences.

Situating Indian Muslims in South Africa

While the precise figures remain unofficial, estimates in 2020 approximate the Muslim population in South Africa at two million (Vahed 2020:3 of 15). Pillay (2019:89) argues that the notion of a singular South African community remains more a matter of rhetoric than a concrete reality. However, what is observable is the existence of a nation of multiple distinct communities. Historically, the composition of South Africa's Muslim population has been characterized by two primary groups: Malay (classified as Colored during the Apartheid era) and Indian, each with distinct geographical concentrations enforced by the Apartheid state through the Group Areas Act, migratory backgrounds, and cultural traditions (Vahed 2020:3 of 15). The Indian Muslim community primarily settled in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng. It included individuals who arrived as indentured laborers in the Natal colony between 1860 and 1910 and entrepreneurial passenger migrants (Mandivenga 2000: 349). In a social context, both groups diverge in their interpretations of Islamic teachings, with Indian Muslims often characterized as adhering to more conservative viewpoints. At the same time, Malay Muslims are often described as embracing a more liberal approach (Mandivenga 2000:351).

Methodology

Research Design

The study was conducted using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). This qualitative approach examines how individuals create meaning in their unique lived experiences (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin 2012:21). Founded on the philosophies of phenomenology, hermeneutics, and idiography, IPA recognizes the importance of cultural and contextual factors in shaping individuals' experiences and meaning-making. IPA is described as a double hermeneutic wherein the researcher interprets the participants' reflections on their own experiences (Smith *et al.* 2012:3). The flexibility of IPA allows participants to define their experiences for themselves rather than conforming to pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Smith *et al.* 2012:1).

Participants

12 individuals were purposefully selected for this study. To effectively reach a difficult-to-access population, a research poster was shared on media plat-

forms following the guidelines and recommendations of Gelinias, Pierce, Winkler, Cohen, Lynch, and Bierer (2017:4-7). An inclusion criterion was used to ensure a relatively homogenous group of women.

The criteria consisted of being South African, identifying as heterosexual, adult Muslim females aged between 25 and 40, being born Muslim, and being monogamously married for a minimum of three months. All participants by happenstance self-identified as Indian – descendants of individuals who arrived in South Africa from British India during the late 1800s and early 1900s. This shared cultural background added a unique dimension to the study, providing insight into the potential influence that cultural heritage may have on the experiences of a specific community within the larger South African Muslim population. All respondents were currently married; two were remarried, two were married to revert³ Muslim males, and one was married to a non-Muslim male. Additionally, the participants had varying levels of education, with some holding diplomas, bachelor's degrees, honors degrees, and PhDs. Their occupations were diverse (e.g., lecturer, marine biologist, teacher, social worker, and journalist), with only two being housewives. Geographically, participants were from Gauteng and KwaZulu-Natal. The duration of marriage varied, with some participants having been married for just over three months, while others had been married for up to 12 years. Of the 12 participants, six did not have children, while the remaining six had two or three children each.

Data Collection

A combination of online and in-person semi-structured interviews were conducted by the researcher with a duration of between 90 and 120 minutes each⁴. Participants chose their preferred interview format and no discernible difference was observed in the disclosure of personal experiences between online and in-person private interviews. By giving voice to Muslim wives and allowing them to share their personal narratives through verbatim quotes, this

³ An individual who has embraced Islam after previously practicing another religion.

⁴ Permission to conduct this study was obtained from the University of Johannesburg Humanities Ethics Committee with ethical clearance number REC-01-205-2022. The study complied with the University of Johannesburg's Code of Academic and Research Ethics.

study aimed to reveal the intricate dynamics which they encounter while exploring their sexual lives within the framework of their faith. Credibility, dependability, and confirmability were adhered to, ensuring trustworthiness throughout the study.

Results and Discussion

The study's findings are organized into five main themes, which explore how the nature and dynamics of sexual intimacy evolve within the context of monogamous marriages among Indian Muslim wives. The five themes are: 1) Challenges to sexual initiation amongst newlyweds; 2) dynamics of desire and sexual discrepancies; 3) patriarchy and cultural conditioning; 4) sexual expression and agency within religious frameworks; and 5) reshaping gender norms.

Challenges to Sexual Initiation Amongst Newlyweds

The first theme described the initial steps taken toward sexual intimacy and highlighting the emotions, expectations, and challenges accompanying the beginning of a marital sexual relationship. Participants' narratives showed that most women were unprepared for sexual intercourse upon marriage and highlighted a spectrum of emotions and challenges surrounding the transition from celibacy to the initiation of sexual activity. Consistent with Ibrahimipure *et al.* (2012:455) as well as Amini and McCormack (2020:8 of 15), Participant 1 expressed apprehension and fear about marriage and sexual intimacy, specifically the abrupt transition from chastity to suddenly having to embrace physical intimacy within marriage: *'I was terrified to get married. I was terrified to have sex. Because, as we mentioned earlier on this call, it started off being like, "Oh, you should never...don't let people touch you. [Be] covered...' – all of that stuff. Then all of a sudden, it wasn't'.*

Participant 2 shared her struggle with understanding her emotions in relation to, and readiness for, the initiation of marital intimacy. Her fear stemmed from a lack of preparedness and understanding, creating challenges in consummating her marriage: *'I also felt very emotional, and I couldn't even understand the emotions because no, I don't think in school we were taught about it...I was so petrified. All I knew was that when you're married and you are intimate for the first time, that's going to be painful...so I was really scared. And for five days after getting married, I could not consummate my marriage because of that fear'.*

Participant 3 articulated a challenge that many individuals face: The expectation of transitioning from a state of virginity to embracing an active sexual life upon marriage. She questioned how one can seamlessly adjust psychologically if they have not been exposed to discussions about sexuality or if they have been taught that such discussions are considered inappropriate. This is in line with Alomair *et al.* (2021:12) who found that an absence of sexual education gave rise to physical and psychological challenges that adversely affected women's sexual experiences. Participant 3 narrated: *'From being a virgin, you're supposed to suddenly have an active sexual life when you get married and you're supposed to be able to talk about it with your husband openly or make jokes about it or whatever. But if you've never been exposed to it your whole life or you've been told it's wrong, how do you just make the switch?'*

Despite being afraid to marry and become sexually active, Participant 4 expressed that she was *'one of the few very privileged people who really did enjoy my first time with my husband. Because we had known each other for so long, it flowed naturally...so I did enjoy myself'*. However, regardless of their longstanding relationship, which fostered a sense of familiarity, leading to a natural and comfortable progression, Participant 4 acknowledged that it took a considerable amount of time for her desire for intimate engagement to develop fully: *'It took a really long time before I started wanting to do it. I think six months'*.

The challenges of sexual initiation amongst Muslim wives highlight a broader systemic issue grounded in the lack of sexual education within Muslim communities. Respondents' narratives reveal the repercussions, notably, a lack of preparedness and emotional readiness that characterize initial sexual experiences with anxiety and fear. Moreover, negative consummation experiences may potentially elicit feelings of tension and sexual aversion, threatening the development of a healthy marital sexual relationship.

Dynamics of Desire and Sexual Discrepancies

This theme explored SDD and the evolving desires and sexual needs of Muslim wives as their marriages mature. Across participants, marital intimacy was regarded as a dynamic space where desires, preferences, and expectations can vary between spouses, influencing the sexual experiences of couples. Participant 5 described the role of sexual intercourse as an integral part of her wellbeing, challenging patriarchal standards held that men are inher-

ently more sexually driven than women (cf. Endendijk *et al.* 2019:163): *‘In our first year of marriage, what we had to navigate was the fact that now I was an extremely sexual person and he wasn’t...sex is something that I – to my core – that I need. If I do not have sex, I cannot function. And my husband on the other hand, it’s a nice to have for him...I cannot physically do without sex. So that first year, it was very hard’*. She defied the notion that female sexual desire is secondary or less significant to that of men and instead confirms that patriarchal standards lead to marital conflict (Elliott & Umberson 2008:398).

Similarly, the account of Participant 6 reflected how couples engage in a mutual process of growth and understanding, navigating their varying levels of sexual expressiveness and desire over time: *‘I was always maybe a bit more sexually expressive and open than my husband, but he has learnt over the last few years as well’*. While Participant 5 discussed the challenges arising from differing sexual desires in marriage, Participant 6 illustrated how couples could actively work to bridge these gaps and adapt together: *‘It’s just been both of us learning together and, like, opening up together and learning to communicate as well because that can be something that’s awkward as well, right?’*

Other participants described how external factors, such as life circumstances, stress, and workload, can impact sexual desire. They indicated that external stressors could affect both partners, challenging the prevailing notion that only men experience a decline in libido due to stress. A participant’s husband’s decreased interest in sex due to stress contrasts with gender stereotypes that portray men as perpetually eager for sexual intercourse, thus dismantling the rigid expectations placed on men’s sexual behavior. Participant 7 argued: *‘I thought it was going to be a lot more sex, but it isn’t as much as I thought it was going to be. Because of life, because you’re tired. Some days you’re feeling stressed, and I mean, this year has been hectic for both me and my husband in terms of work and things, so like that also – with stress your libido decreases’*.

Many participants reported a high level of SDD, in which wives express a desire for more frequent engagement in sexual activity than their experiences reflect. This challenges the assumption that only men exhibit higher levels of SSD, in line with observations made by Herbenick *et al.* (2014: 2201), Mark (2014:31), and Rosen *et al.* (2017:8 of 12). Participant 7 shared

the following: *‘Our first year I did struggle a bit...he was not always so keen because of his stress levels and all of that. And it did worry me a little bit’.*

To the researcher’s knowledge, previous studies did not provide a comprehensive understanding of the psychological effects of high SDD experienced by women within marital sexual relationships. Participant 8 expressed distress and self-doubt when their joint sexual activity decreased to once a month. She questioned whether her husband’s decreased interest indicated a lack of love and desire for her, highlighting the emotional impact that low sexual frequency had on her mental health and self-esteem: *‘When we were being intimate once in a month, I was like, “What is happening? Does he not love me anymore? Is there something wrong with me?” Obviously, I started questioning myself, questioning him. All of those thoughts came through. I was really miserable for months...it all boiled down to him being stressed out for his exams and life, apparently’.*

These findings reveal insight into the potential correlation between SDD, low sexual frequency, and mental health. Couples experiencing SDD may question their self-worth and relationship stability, as highlighted by the feelings of inadequacy and doubt by Participant 8. The prolonged emotional distress and negative self-concept resulting from unmet sexual needs may increase the risk of depression (Remes, Mendes, & Templeton 2021:7).

These narratives highlight that SDD is experienced by Muslim wives, describe factors like stress and life circumstances that can impact sexual desire, and how a partner’s responsiveness to these concerns can positively influence the emotional wellbeing of both individuals in the relationship. According to Participant 8, *‘it’s starting to feel like...I don’t know why at this stage in my life, it’s something I do desire. Before it [sexual intercourse] was something I fully hated. So I think that he should be more considerate to that. And now he is a lot more considerate to it’.*

This articulation by Participant 8 of the evolving nature of her sexual desire from initial aversion to current recognition of increased desire for sexual activity has significant implications for the study. It highlights the complexity and fluidity of sexual desire within marital relationships, emphasizing that individuals’ feelings and needs regarding intimacy can change over time.

Patriarchy and Cultural Conditioning

A fundamental aspect of the South African Indian Muslim community is its predominantly patriarchal structure. Within this cultural framework, the

theme explores how women are conditioned to perceive and enact their roles as wives, particularly concerning marital sexuality. Participant 7 explained: *'In the Indian community, it's quite a patriarchal society. I mean the focus is on men'*. Participant 9 explained that Indian Muslim women are raised to believe that their primary purpose within marriage is to fulfil their husband's desires. She stated that this perception is deeply ingrained due to cultural conditioning, even if not explicitly communicated: *'Muslim women are raised to know that he's going to want me to please him and that's what I need to do, that's my purpose...even if we're not told this, subconsciously it's there. And that comes from our culture'*.

This narrative resonates with existing research, as results of the study imply that the sexual experiences of South African Muslim Indian wives reflect a broader reinforcement of patriarchal and religious gender norms within their community (Shaikh 2003:147; Vahed 2007:128; Khan & Seedat 2017: 148). The acknowledgment by Participant 9 of the subconscious nature of these beliefs emphasizes patriarchal indoctrination, highlighting how deeply embedded these norms are within the collective consciousness of the community. Even in the absence of explicit teachings, the expectation for women to prioritize their husband's pleasure serves as a tacit mandate. These expectations are culturally constructed through socialization processes including observation of family dynamics, social interactions, vicarious conditioning, and religious interpretations amongst others (Bandura 1971).

The silent influence of cultural conditioning can be particularly insidious as individuals may not consciously recognize its presence or impact. Participant 9 explored the ramifications, suggesting that many women do not have the opportunity to challenge or unlearn this perception. Instead, they internalize the notion that their role is akin to a chore, devoid of personal enjoyment. Moreover, she highlighted how societal norms may lead women to perceive intimacy primarily as an obligation rather than as a source of personal satisfaction: *'I don't think many women get to unlearn that because they're raised to believe it's a chore, where they're not getting any enjoyment from it. It's a responsibility; it's not a pleasure. You've been conditioned; it's not a choice because your husband or society has dictated'*.

Sexual Expression and Agency within Religious Frameworks

Participants' narratives revealed how religious teachings influence women's perceptions and engagement with their sexuality within marital relationships.

The transition from being celibate to sexually active is not a mere physical shift but also a spiritual and emotional transformation reflecting the influence of religious teachings on their lives. Participant 10 suggested that while individuals are often taught to suppress thoughts about men or intimate desires, there should be an acknowledgement that experiencing these feelings is a normal part of human nature: *‘When people are teaching us that it’s wrong to think about men or to have desires or whatever, they also need to explain to some extent that it’s normal to do so...not “push it away” or “it’s wrong, it’s haram [forbidden], think of something else”’*.

Participant 10 implied that the persistent suppression of natural feelings and desires creates a habitual detachment, making it challenging to experience and embrace sexual desire even when married: *‘So you’re so used to pushing it away, it takes you a while to actually feel it again’*. These results are supported by several authors who describe how religious teachings become internalized and negatively impact marital sexual experiences (Ibrahimipure *et al.* 2012:455; Amini & McCormack 2020:8 of 15; Alomair *et al.* 2021:12; Lamba, Mohajir, & Rahman 2023:166).

Participant 8 described how her understanding of self-expression and intimacy within her marriage was impacted by deeply ingrained teachings of modesty: *‘How do I show my husband my body? Is that not immodest? I always felt guilt about things like that...initially, it affected my behavior in that I was very shy, not wanting my husband to see me...it was like a chore. I barely ever really wanted to be intimate...it didn’t seem like it was important’*. Her reluctance to be seen by her husband and engage in sexual activity highlights the psychological impact of these teachings, particularly evident in her internalized feelings of guilt and shame. This reluctance reflects an outlook where intimacy is perceived as a source of embarrassment or obligation, potentially impeding the development of intimacy within marriage.

A few participants indicated critical engagement with religious teachings and, subsequently, made decisions that reconciled with their personal wellbeing and the dynamics of their marriage. This counters the notion of patriarchy as women display agency which defy conventional norms and expectations. Participant 4 stated, *‘I realized in therapy that just because a book tells you not to say “no” doesn’t mean that you have to listen to the book. You and your husband need to find a middle ground where you’re comfortable with saying “no”, and he’s not going to feel butt hurt about it’*. Her active negotiation of consent reflects Sadiyya Shaikh’s ‘tafsir of praxis’ (Shaikh

2007:7), which posits that religious interpretations and practices are reimagined through lived experiences and critical engagement with sacred texts. Shaikh's theoretical construct is particularly useful when analyzing how participants embody religious texts in their marital sexual experiences.

Participant 4 alluded to the notion that adhering to religious instructions does not equate to disregarding one's own needs or boundaries: *'One of the things that therapy gave me was the tools to lay out, okay, I can...this is my capacity, and you can fit inside here. But more than this, I don't have, and I can't give, and you're going to need to understand that'*. Her reflections exemplify how individuals exercise forms of agency in their lives and prioritize their psychological wellbeing by evaluating and adapting religious teachings to their unique circumstances (Amini & McCormack 2020:9 of 15). This approach highlights individuals' autonomy in navigating their sexual experiences rather than an unmindful adherence to religious norms. It further resonates with the theory of agency by Saba Mahmood (2005) which challenges conventional understandings of agency as mere resistance to given structures of power and normative frameworks. Instead, Mahmood posits that agency also encompasses the capacity to inhabit and transform normative frameworks in ways that align with one's piety and ethical goals (Mahmood 2005: 22). South African Indian Muslim wives, who, despite living within a patriarchal context, exhibit agentival capacities.

Reshaping Gender Norms

The final theme explored transformations in marital relationships through challenging the patriarchal model and reshaping gender norms. Participant 10 contemplated an imbalanced and potentially harmful power dynamic within the marital relationship, where the wife is left vulnerable to potential abuse or harm by her husband due to his perceived control over her: *'Before you'd have so much of doubt, self-doubt, you'd be worried, and you'd be scared. You'd be scared of the man that you were with, knowing that he has so much of power over you, so much of control over you. He could use it [against you] if he wanted to'*. She further described a transformation in the perception of her marital relationship and sexual experiences: *'I think now Alhamdulillah [all praise to God] being with somebody who is very understanding when it comes to that [female sexual satisfaction]. It makes a world of a difference...I feel relieved. I feel at ease. I feel comfortable. I feel more like I'm allowed to be myself and not worry or walk on eggshells'*.

To the researcher's knowledge, these extracts offer new insights into the potential of a supportive and understanding partner in mitigating the adverse effects of imbalanced power dynamics within marriages. It implies that addressing gender norms and power imbalances can lead to more positive and fulfilling marital and sexual experiences for women.

Participant 11 described how her husband's proactive efforts in learning about sexual intimacy positively impacted their marital sexual relationship. His attitude shifted from a self-centered focus on his pleasure to a genuine willingness to also satisfy her sexual needs and make the experience pleasurable for her: *'I honestly feel that he values it, that he actually wants to know what can he change; he's willing to change something and not feel bad about it. And to me that shows that you know what, to him, it's more than just him pleasuring himself sort of thing to. Him saying, "What can I do to make it better for you next time, how can I make you enjoy it?"'*

This illustrates a positive example of how couples can work together to improve their sexual experiences. It implies that open communication and a willingness to learn about enhancing a partner's sexual experience are crucial elements in a healthy and satisfying marital sexual relationship. Participant 12 echoed the importance of such efforts, as she described feeling loved and appreciated due to her husband's willingness to prioritize her satisfaction: *'I felt very loved and appreciated for what he was doing for me because a lot of men, unfortunately, have a ton of ignorance. They don't have a willingness to learn and it becomes all about their satisfaction'*. Her mention of the unfortunate ignorance exhibited by some men highlights the contrast between partners who actively seek to understand and fulfill their spouse's needs and those who prioritize their own satisfaction.

Participant 3 asserted that her husband prioritizes her sexual pleasure and satisfaction, recognizing her entitlement to as much enjoyment as himself. She emphasized that her confidence in asserting her desires and boundaries is rooted in trust, not fear. She did not feel pressured to say 'Yes' to sexual activities that she was uncomfortable with out of fear of her husband's anger or negative reactions. This implies a relationship built on respect, understanding, and consent, where both partners feel safe expressing their preferences and boundaries without fear of reprisal: *'If I am seriously not enjoying something, it's not something he will pursue. And yes, he wants to try xyz. And I will try it, but if I don't like it or it's causing me pain, or if I just simply don't enjoy it and don't want to do it, he's okay with that because it's im-*

portant to him that I'm happy in that regard...and I think the confidence in me comes from the fact that I know he's not going to get angry by saying "No". I'm not saying "Yes" out of fear'. This participant's account underlines that consent thrives in an environment where individuals feel safe to candidly express their desires and boundaries, knowing that these will be respected and honored by their spouse.

Limitations and Recommendations

The study examined the marital sexual experiences of South African Indian Muslim wives in monogamous marriages. Many of the themes identified were embedded in the shared cultural context among the participants. While this does provide valuable insight into the effect of cultural messages on marital sexual experiences, it fails to explore what the sexual experiences may entail when this shared context does not exist, as in the case of Muslims from other cultural groups (e.g., Malay) in South Africa. Future research should consider broadening the scope to include diverse Muslim communities within South Africa, recognizing that cultural and religious influences can manifest differently across groups. This approach would provide a more comprehensive understanding of how various cultural backgrounds intersect with religious teachings to shape marital sexual experiences.

Moreover, the study did not particularly address additional factors unique to each participant's circumstances (e.g., how being married to a revert Muslim, being married for the second time, or being a non-virgin prior to marriage affected participants' marital sexual relationships). Future studies should explore each participant's specific contextual characteristics – this could involve presenting data using a case study approach to present detailed insights into how these factors influence marital sexual relationships.

A third potential weakness of this study relates to a potential sample bias. In research addressing sensitive topics such as sexual experiences, it is plausible to hypothesize that individuals who are more comfortable with the subject matter may be more inclined to participate in the study. Consequently, this study recognizes that participants who were motivated to contribute, particularly those with strong opinions, were more likely to respond to the research poster compared to those who are not comfortable discussing sexual-

ity. Thus, these individuals, despite meeting the inclusion criteria, are likely to be overrepresented.

Furthermore, this study focused on describing the lived realities of Muslim wives as they reflected on changes in their sexuality after marriage. Another potential limitation is the absence of repeat interviews with participants, which could have provided deeper insights into their experiences and clarified or validated previous information shared. A longitudinal approach would be beneficial to capture how marital sexual experiences evolve over time, considering the impact of life stages, relationship duration, and generational shifts in attitudes and practices. Future research should explore the role of husbands in shaping intimate experiences within marital relationships. Interviewing both spouses allows for a comprehensive exploration of sexual issues within the context of the marital sexual relationship. Investigating how couples collectively navigate and negotiate sexual experiences can provide valuable insights into the dynamics of marital intimacy and contribute to a more holistic understanding of their experiences. This would help to develop comprehensive interventions and resources to promote the sexual health and wellbeing of both spouses.

Other recommendations include sex education that address individuals at different ages, including a revision of present syllabi, educators, and teaching approaches. Moreover, there is a need for effective and relevant training for religious authorities as well as both male and female educators engaged in sex education to Muslims. Lastly, pre-marital lessons serve as a proactive approach to promoting healthy and informed marital relationships and should thus be conducted for all prospective couples.

The study showed some evidence of Muslim wives experiencing SDD. Further quantitative research should be conducted to investigate the prevalence and potential correlations between SDD, low sexual frequency, and mental health among Muslim wives.

Conclusion

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Muslim wives navigating their sexuality within a monogamous marriage. By using interpretative phenomenological analysis, this study found that Indian Muslim women face emotional and psychological challenges when initiating sexual activity within

marriage. The abrupt shift from religious norms that promote chastity to the expectation of embracing physical intimacy upon marriage results in fear, emotional turmoil, and a lack of preparedness, resulting in difficulty consummating a marriage. Moreover, the psychological impact of suppressing sexual desire prior to marriage, which is often a result of interpretations of religious teachings, concurrently triggers feelings of sexual guilt and shame within a marriage. This emphasizes the need for sex education within the Muslim community, allowing individuals to engage critically with religious teachings and exercise agency in navigating their sexual experiences.

Cultural conditioning within the Muslim Indian community impacts women's perception of intimacy, often framing it as a duty rather than a source of personal satisfaction, even when not explicitly communicated. Such conditioning perpetuates traditional gender norms and reinforces the idea that women exist primarily to meet the needs and desires of their husbands. This can lead to a diminished sense of self-worth and agency, as women may believe that their sexual satisfaction is secondary or even inconsequential, preventing them from exploring their desires, communicating openly with their partners, and experiencing a fulfilling and satisfying sexual life.

One of the most noteworthy findings is the experience of high SSD among Muslim wives. This phenomenon negatively impacts their mental health and self-esteem, exposing a pressing need for recognizing female sexual desire as equally vital as that of men. This research shows the transformative potential within marital relationships when both spouses prioritize understanding, open communication, and mutual sexual satisfaction.

If the gap in sexual education can be addressed and formalized within Muslim communities, the outcome may alleviate some of the emotional and psychological challenges associated with marital sexual intimacy. Additionally, it could dispel the harmful effects of cultural norms and religious misinterpretations of Islamic texts on sexual experiences.

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