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Faking Orgasms

Exploring Iranian Women's Religious and Sexual Moralities

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Abstract

The phenomenon of faking orgasms has been the subject of extensive feminist inquiry, but in contemporary Iran, where sex and sexuality remain sensitive and controversial topics, the topic has not received much scholarly attention. This exploratory pilot study uses qualitative methods to explore the prevalence and the reasons for faking orgasms among a group of women living in urban Iran. The study addresses the possible consequences and implications of faking orgasms for women's sexual life. Eleven female participants took part in the study. The data revealed that the topic was considered taboo even among highly educated working women. It also showed that faking orgasms were related to perceived female moral responsibilities and marital self-sacrifice and the lack of sexual education and knowledge, machismo, male infidelity, porn culture, and sexual performance ideals.

Keywords

Iran – faking orgasm – morality – qualitative – religion – sexuality

1 Introduction

Orgasms are considered an important and sometimes an essential part of sexual activity. They have become the sign of sexual competence and well-being in medical discourses and represent a 'peak' in the sexual experience, a form of self-transcendence or self-actualization (Potts 2000). A major problem in defining orgasm is the discrepancy between subjective descriptions and objective physiological signs, forcing most researchers to describe only the observed

physical changes (Younis, El-Esawy, and Abdel-Mohsen 2015, 37). Studies in European and North American contexts show the importance of orgasms as people often define their sexual satisfaction in terms of orgasm (Fahs 2014). Sexual pleasure is, however, not homogeneously experienced and is highly dependent on several factors such as the general physical and mental well-being and the quality of the relationship, and the life situation (Younis, El-Esawy, and Abdel-Mohsen 2015, 39).

The phenomenon of faking orgasms has been subject to large numbers of feminist research, in which feminists have exposed and subverted the valorization of male-centered versions of sex, including the imperative of orgasm-via-penetration (Potts 2000). They have exposed that the orgasmic imperative exerts a normative influence on those judged against the expectations it evokes (Frith 2013). Research on faking orgasms has been motivated by the centralized attention to orgasm as the sign of real sex and an implication of the existing sexual hierarchy in heterosex.

The growing qualitative and critical body of work on faking orgasms (e.g. Nicolson and Burr 2003, Salisbury and Fisher 2014) is explicitly concerned with gendered power relations and how they operate in the context of heterosexual sex (Frith 2013). While faking orgasms is practiced by men and women, it is predominantly conducted by women because of their relatively lower status in the power hierarchy. Studies, mostly in Western contexts, have shown that over half of women have faked orgasm for reasons including to please the male sexual partner, to end the sex fast, to sleep, to avoid conflict, and not to hurt the feelings of the partner (Fahs 2014, Goodman, Gillath, and Haj-Mohamadi 2017, Frith 2015). Although the prevalence of faking orgasms has been studied, few studies have examined women's experiences with faking an orgasm, mainly using qualitative and in-depth data (Fahs 2014). This exploratory pilot study aims to contribute to this growing literature by exploring the prevalence and the reasons for faking orgasms among women in urban Iran, using qualitative methods and feminist conceptual frameworks. It also aims to extend the studies on women's sex life and sexual morality in Iran to the realm of sexual gratification and orgasm.

There are very few empirical studies on women's sexuality, preferences, and experiences of sex in Iran (e.g. Janghorban et al. 2015, Maasoumi, Taket, and Zarei 2018, Shojaa, Jouybari, and Sanagoo 2009, Rahbari 2016b). Even fewer studies have focused on women's sexual moralities and behavior in the context of Iran. This study uses interviews and qualitative surveys with eleven Iranian women to answer the central exploratory question, 'how prevalent are faking orgasms?' and 'what are the reasons for, and possible consequences and implications of them for women's sexual and moral life?' The paper is orga-

nized as follows: a brief research background on fake orgasms is presented, followed by an introduction to the moral sexual discourses in contemporary Iran. Then, after discussing the study's methods and limitations, the analysis is carried out. The contribution of this study is thus in rectifying the gap in research on faking orgasms in Iran, and its relation to women's religious moralities.

2 Research Background and Contextualization

Faking an orgasm is broadly defined as acting as if an orgasm was occurring and/or saying or giving the impression that orgasm had taken place when it had not (Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010). While men fake orgasms too, women are more likely to report faking an orgasm during intercourse than are men (Kaighobadi, Shackelford, and Weekes-Shackelford 2012). In terms of the effects of faking orgasms on sexual partners, Ellsworth and Bailey (2013) have discussed that while men can sometimes scrutinize the authenticity of female orgasm, women can often convince their partners. Therefore, men report that their partner pretends orgasm significantly less often than their partner actually does (Mialon 2012). Women's orgasm has consequences for the person who pretends and their sexual partner as men reportedly feel sexually inadequate if the female partner does not orgasm (Muehlenhard and Shippee 2010). This discourse on sexual adequacy and responsibility in heterosex creates anxiety for men who need to prove their performance and women who are held responsible for ensuring that men have a positive perception of their own sexual performance (Earle and Sharp 2008).

Research on faking orgasms is abundant, and most studies on the topic refer to a myriad of individual, medical, and psychological reasons behind faking orgasms. Some studies explain faking orgasms using moral frameworks, using the term 'moral' to refer to the interrelated institutional, publicly produced, and individually embodied dispositions on right and wrong categories (Zigon 2009). Evaluating women's faking orgasms based on moral standpoints, researchers have sometimes associated the phenomenon with manipulative personality or lower moral standards. In this line, faking orgasm has been called 'lying to one's partner,' deception and manipulation (Goodman, Gillath, and Haj-Mohamadi 2017, McCoy, Welling, and Shackelford 2015, Cooper, Fenigstein, and Fauber 2014) or associated with personality traits that are characterized by distrust, manipulativeness, and a willingness to exploit others (Brewer, Abell, and Lyons 2016). Similarly, Ellsworth and Bailey (2013) point out a positive relationship between the frequency of faked female orgasm and the likelihood of

female infidelity, implying that low standards of morality—here, faking and infidelity—appear together.

This study, however, aims to explore the phenomenon of faking orgasms, the reasons behind it, and social and positional conditions that might predict faking orgasms. In this line, Séguin and Milhausen (2016) discuss the significance of sexual scripts and the heteronormative cultural sexual norms as causes of faking orgasms. Sexual scripts are discourses that provide meaning and information on how, when, and why sexual encounters occur (Séguin and Milhausen 2016). These scripts define the ways sex and orgasm are expected and experienced. Séguin and Milhausen (2016) use notions of coital and orgasm imperative within heteronormative sexual scripts to highlight how sexual discourses are vaginal orgasm-centered. The heteronormative coital imperative is one script that assumes vaginal-penile intercourse as an essential component of sex (Jackson 1984). This coital imperative makes it unthinkable to have heterosex without having intercourse and considers orgasm an essential criterion for successful sex (McPhillips, Braun, and Gavey 2001). This normalized image of heterosex is a source of social anxiety for sexual partners. Additionally, men are generally regarded as having a more exceptional sex drive, and power and violence have been assumed to be an integral part of a male-centric sex model (Jackson 1984, Roberts et al. 1995). In this model, women's position is on the passive side of the binary and requires efforts from men to be fulfilled (Roberts et al. 1995). Within this discourse, women's orgasm is assumed to need the correct state of mind and skillful masculine work (Roberts et al. 1995). The female orgasm is, therefore, not 'natural' in the sense that female orgasm is something men should work hard for.

This study thus adopts the notion of orgasm entangled with cultural inscriptions and unconscious culturally defined desires (Roberts et al. 1995). As qualitative studies such as Nicolson and Burr (2003) show, there is a disconnect between the medicalized and atomized model of healthy and 'normal' sex and the everyday practices and perspectives of women's sexuality. Therefore, to understand faking orgasm, cultural narratives, mainstream sexual technique, normalized sexual binarism, and culturally acceptable notions of what constitutes appropriate feminine and masculine behavior and attitudes should all be considered (Roberts et al. 1995). To this end, before analyzing the findings from qualitative interviews, in the next section, the female sexuality, desire, and (fake) orgasm will be situated within the moral and socio-cultural context of urban Iran.

3 Religion, Morality, and Desire in Contemporary Iran

Sex and sexuality remain sensitive and taboo topics in contemporary Iran. Gender and sexual politics of Iran, although not formally built around a singular and homogenous discourse of bodily morality, are based on some strictly held core ideas, including gender binarism, heteronormativity, and female modesty (Kheshti 2012, Sadeghi 2009, Hashemi 2018). Legally speaking, the state's marriage and family policies delineate sex as a 'right' that men have over women. This is compensated by men's financial responsibility as the breadwinners. Apart from legal frameworks, being a Shi'i Muslim-majority country, desire and sexuality are intertwined with local interpretations and cultural narratives of Shi'i morality that emphasize female modesty, maternity, and marital self-sacrifice (Rahbari 2013, Afshar 2005, Halper 2005). The subject of sex is discussed in detail in the Shi'i religious scripts such as the *Tozih-al-Masael*, which are compilations of fiqh rulings on contemporary and everyday life issues written by religious scholars. In the mainstream moral and cultural frameworks, providing sex is considered the duty of the female partner (Mehrkhane 2015), and legitimate types and conditions of heterosex draw on a mixture of dynamic socio-cultural norms and religious beliefs. However, the prescriptive content of these scripts shows little interest in women's sexuality.

The formal transmission of moral codes of modesty and sexual inhibitions starts as of childhood (Rahbari 2016b) and socialize young girls not to express their sexual needs, not to be perceived as immodest and indecent. However, more in-depth sexual socialization occurs in the late teen years or early adulthood, as many families are reluctant to discuss sexuality until their children have a prospective marriage. Many parents adopt a passive or conservative approach to sexual education (Maasoumi et al. 2013), and formal sex education is limited to biological aspects of reproduction before tertiary education (Rahbari 2016b). Before tertiary education, the reproductive system is introduced in biology classes, but no reference is made to sex and sexuality (Hamshahrionline News 2018). Furthermore, all marriage candidates must attend one compulsory session on family planning. This session includes training on the sexual, legal, and moral obligations of the partners and some contraceptive methods. This program is widely criticized for lacking comprehensive or useful information on sexual issues (Young Journalists' Club 2013, Jamejamonline 2014).

A family planning course is obligatory for all new entrants during tertiary education. This course aims to prepare the students for marital responsibilities and familiarize them with family planning and contraceptive methods. However, the focus of the course is mostly on socio-legal and religious-moral discourses (Farmahini Farahani 2012). This education also comes quite late,

considering Iran's largest marrying age groups are 15–19 for women and 20–25 for men (Parsnews 2016). This means that many young women have experience of sexual intercourse before they access tertiary education and qualify for this course. An additional issue is that despite the high rates of university attendance of Iranian women, not all women go to the university (Rahbari 2016c). The official silence around women's sex and sexuality and the lack of formal education contribute to a vague framework of sexual socialization of both men and women that affect their heterosexual lives.

Nevertheless, despite the inadequacy of formal education, sexuality is an essential matter in the public discourse. Even the most conservative readings and interpretations of Shi'a Islamic rulings on sexuality assume that both men and women have sexual desires and are entitled to sexual pleasure within marriage. According to Shi'i scholars, men are not only advised but required to satisfy their wives. The line between religious-cultural teachings on women's sexuality in general and orgasms, in particular, is, however, not always clear. Religious discourses consider marriage the legitimate way to reach sexual satisfaction and orgasm [in Farsi, *rezayate jensi* and *erzaye jensi* respectively] but often do not go beyond emphasizing that married partners must satisfy each other.

Institutional discourses such as scientific knowledge of sexual (dys)function, sex education, and the media shape how people understand their own experiences of heterosex (Frith 2013). In the context of Iran, the state-enforced educational system, media institutions, and religious teachings address women's sexuality as an extension of male desire or an instrument for reproduction (Kashani-Sabet 2011). As such, while women are considered sexual beings, men receive numerous sanctified ways of indulging their desires (Milani 1992). These official discourses affect women's perceptions of their bodies and sexuality. Recent studies on women and sexuality in contemporary Iran show that Shi'i interpretations of female religiosity define the moral aspects of sexuality and continue to impact Iranian women's sexual understandings (Ghorashi, Merghati-Khoei, and Yousefy 2014).

There is a difference between the formal settings and the private and semi-private spaces, such as intimate single-sex family groups and women's friendship groups where sexuality is a welcomed topic. Iran's younger generations are increasingly embracing less patriarchal interpretations of religion (Shirazi 2012a) that entails a more tolerant attitude towards non-mainstream gendered and sexual practices. Younger women are also active users of national and international media in Iran, and they share and exchange advice on sensitive matters, including sex, on Internet forums (See for e.g., Rahbari 2021). While ordinarily, Iranian youth are kept away from discussing sexual topics, increas-

ing access to diverse forms of mass media and increased modes of interaction with sources of knowledge contribute to changes in the youths' awareness and lifestyle (Rahbari 2016a). The Internet has brought about a higher level of democratization of access to sexual politics among other spheres (Shirazi 2012b). From diasporic activists to Influencers, younger tech-savvy Internet users, bloggers, and vloggers residing inside Iran, Iranian women increasingly address sex and sexuality online. Iran has recently had its #metoo moment; another sign that the silence around sex is (albeit slowly, but surely) being broken (see e.g. Fathi 2020).

In spite of its positive impact, the Internet does not guarantee access to accurate information. Like Western contexts where there is the public interest in women's sexuality and women's magazines regularly give explicit instructions on achieving better, quicker, or more intense orgasms (Frith 2013), Iranian online lifestyle magazines are engaged with the topic. However, the content of the Iranian lifestyle magazines is not always based on scientific and/or evidence-based data on female sexuality. My preliminary research in public discussions online showed that while there are resources about female orgasms, the descriptions of female orgasms are vague and misleading. For instance, women 'trembling,' 'crying,' 'falling asleep,' and their 'inability to walk' after sex were introduced as signs of female orgasm in different Farsi-language online health and lifestyle magazines (e.g. Tasvirezendegi n.d., Akairan n.d., Hi Doctor 2013). These accounts create a problematic discourse on female sexuality that could translate signs of psychological dissatisfaction or physical pain as sexual gratification.

Opposed to the lack of social studies on women's orgasm, there are studies in Farsi on this topic from a medical perspective. This literature discusses what it considers 'sexual dysfunction' such as lack of sexual desire and interest, painful intercourse, and vaginal dryness (e.g. Mazinani et al. 2013, Ghavam and Tasbih Sazan 2006), but rarely explains what orgasm is or addresses faking an orgasm. The small number of existing research on faking orgasms in Iran show that the phenomenon is reported by women in relation to sexual dissatisfaction (Amjadi et al. 2017, Ghazanfarpour, Khadivzadeh, and Roudsari 2018, Janghorban et al. 2015) and that in the lack of orgasms women turn to an alternative definition of pleasure and physical intimacy (Rahbari 2014). Based on these premises, this pilot study explores how women's perceptions of faking orgasms are affected by mainstream sexual scripts.

4 Methods

Sexual relationships remain a taboo and private topic in Iran. Many individuals did not feel comfortable sharing their own stories. Still, they sometimes showed a willingness to discuss the topic generally and outside the research context. This pilot study used qualitative methods, including structured interviews and qualitative surveys among Iranian women in urban areas in Iran. The qualitative surveys entailed interview questions that were replied to by the participants in written form rather than orally. The research questions were designed to explore possible reasons behind faking orgasms and their possible consequences and implications for women. Snowball and random sampling were used to recruit interviewees. The first two participants were recruited randomly within the personal networks of the researcher. Sampling then continued with the snowballing technique.

Due to its methodological limitations, the author acknowledges that this exploratory research cannot draw any general conclusions regarding Iranian women or middle-aged, urban middle-class women. The aim of this research has thus been to provide some preliminary insights that might be useful for further in-depth studies on the topic of female orgasm and faking orgasms practiced by women in heterosexual marital relationships with men in the Iranian urban context.

As a result of sampling, eleven female participants agreed to participate in this research. The participants were informed about the research goals and were assured of the confidentiality of the data. All women who participated in the study were familiar with faking orgasms before the study. Most women had also thought about or discussed it with female friends or family members such as mothers and sisters. The age range of the participants was between thirty and forty-five years old. The sampling did not discriminate in terms of age, and the age range was not a result of the sampling technique but the unwillingness of older women to discuss the topic. Participants' education levels ranged between high school degrees and university/higher education. Seven participants had salaried jobs, and four worked at home without a salary.

All data were collected in Farsi, the official language of Iran, and the mother tongue of all participants and the researcher. The analysis was first conducted on the original data in Farsi and then selected quotations were translated to English. The quotations reported in this paper are followed by the participant's pseudonyms and age. Pseudonyms were selected in agreement with the participants to guarantee anonymity. While the scope of a qualitative study is not generalizations, it is additionally noteworthy that since the study population comprises mostly independent, educated women who lived in urban Iran and

are socially and sometimes financially empowered, the analysis is only valid limited to this specific population. Another essential methodological observation was that the participants of this study did not use the names of sexualized female body parts. When referring to these parts, women used words such as 'it,' 'there,' and 'the part.' Sex and orgasm were referred to as the 'issue,' 'matter,' and 'topic.'

5 Why Fake?

5.1 *Power Dynamics and Heterosexual Coupledness*

Several motives for faking orgasms were discussed by the participants. One of the recurring themes was self-sacrifice. Self-sacrifice and caring for the partners' needs more than oneself has been discussed in the literature as a strategy to balance sexual life and religious, moral beliefs (Bahri, Latifnejad Roudsari, and Azimi Hashemi 2017). For some participants, the sacrifice was interpreted as an individual choice either to enable the partner's pleasure or to avoid frustrating them,

Women sacrifice their own pleasure. They want the husband to enjoy or not get annoyed. For his [pleasure], they sacrifice their own.

POORAN, 45 years old

Other participants referred to the prevalent religious and cultural socialization in Iran to explain women's sacrificial behavior,

In [Iranian] cultural and religious customs, women are taught to care for satisfying their husbands' needs, rather than their own.

SHIMA, 32 years old

As seen in the Pooran and Shima's comments above, while terms with similar connotations were used [e.g. *Az-Khod-Gozashtegi*], the 'sacrifices' they discussed bore different origins and meanings. The sacrifice could mean (i) a conscious choice to care and possibly empower the sexual partner and a strategy to avoid the male partner's annoyance, (ii) and a perceived marital and moral obligation. While the two are not mutually exclusive, their implications can be agentic decision-making by women or compliance with existing norms of female sexuality. In relation to the latter, the women's sense of fear, insecurity, and vulnerability was another recurring theme. They explained that women's perceptions of their position in the relationship and society created a sense of

powerlessness. Additionally, it was a common belief that political and legal discourses played a role in unbalancing the power dynamics in relationships. In Iran, sexual dysfunction of any of the partners is sufficient grounds for divorce, and sexual incompatibility between spouses is one of the most frequently cited grounds for divorce (Nasserzadeh 2018); there is the anxiety of perceived sexual incompetence, especially for women. This power relations and the hierarchy between the couple were explained as a reason why faking orgasms took place,

There is fear of betrayal, of being left alone, getting labeled ... [The women] pretend to convince [the partner] that they are good partners, not to be left alone, not to suffer the consequences.

NOOSHIN, 33 years old

The fact that men's sexual satisfaction is socially deemed central in marital relationships contributes to insecurity among women. Fear of failing to perform sex in optimal ways and to be considered good sexual partners was a factor that affected women's faking behaviors, 'maybe [women who fake orgasm] are afraid to say they did not enjoy it because that makes them seem like bad sex partners' (Nasrin, 40 years old). Another participant explained,

Women do not want to show their partners that they have not reached orgasms since ... this might be considered a sign of their [the women's] sexual impotence.

FOROUGH, 36 years old

The women also feared that performing poorly in sex would lead to their partners' seeking sex elsewhere. They were concerned that in case this happened, the general social attitudes would be skewed and more inclined to defend the mean,

Also, there is, unfortunately, this idea in our society that if a man betrays a woman, it is because the woman does not sexually satisfy the man ... However, men never get such labels. Because women are not perceived to have the right to such things [sexual satisfaction].

NOOSHIN, 33 years old

Women's vulnerability could also be made sense of when positioned in the context of Iran, where polygamy is legal. Since men have to obtain the first wife's consent to remarry a permanent wife (Tabnak 2017), they resort to temporary marriage, which is also legal and practiced for reasons such as sex (Fararu

2017). Temporary marriage is not always registered and does not require the first wife's consent (Rahbari 2019). Although not culturally accepted and generally frowned upon by society, the legal possibilities are sources of stress for married women.

One of the participants believed that there is an innate difference between men's and women's sexual needs and considered its implication in the relationship a critical factor in women's sexual behavior. Women's faking an orgasm, in her view, was because men generally were more interested in sex than women, and consequently, women had to pretend on some occasions. This participant explained, 'men's physical capacities are different, and they can have sex every five minutes' (Pooran, 45 years old). The participants also mentioned a wide gap in sexual education for women and men. This theme will be further discussed in the following section.

6 Sexual Knowledge

Sexual knowledge was another theme that was brought up by most participants who emphasized that both men and women lacked knowledge on sexuality since most of their information came from informal oral sources or personal experience, rather than from formal education and/or expert sources,

Men and women do not have enough knowledge about sexual matters, sensitive areas, interests ... what they know, they have learned orally and by experience.

FOROUGH, 36 years old

While the lack of a definitive symbol of female sexual climax has been considered a reason for uncertainty of a woman's orgasm (Frith 2015), the women of this study suggested that it was mostly due to the lack of knowledge about orgasm that those uncertainties existed, 'There is the fact that many women—including myself—do not much about this matter [female orgasm], let alone men,' Tarlan (30 years old) explained. Another participant suggested that since women did not learn about their sexuality, it was possible that faking was not only to convince the partner but due to a wrong assumption that sexual satisfaction had indeed peaked,

Maybe [the women who fake] do not even know how to get to orgasm ... maybe it is a psychological reaction [to convince themselves] that they have enjoyed it.

NASRIN, 40 years old

The lack of sexual knowledge was perceived to be harmful to women. Besides being denied some forms of sexual satisfaction, they were also at risk of suffering and physical harm. Pooran (45 years old) explained, 'Women pretend in order to finish the sex faster. Because men do not have the skills [to pleasure women], they even physically hurt them.' While education was often mentioned as an important factor, some participants believed that faking orgasm happened not because of the lack of formal education, but because men were not motivated enough to learn about women's anatomy and satisfying women, not due to the lack in education, but due to the existing social attitudes:

[Men] should learn; they should practice. They do not want to do this because it is not essential to them. In our country, it is not common to bring women to orgasm ... women [fake orgasms] to deter their partner from seeking other women.

LEILA, 41 years old

Leila's comment pointed to the lack of knowledge among men and the general lack of interest in learning, which she believed to be a widespread phenomenon. Additionally, two participants blamed pornography for the current skewed understanding of women's sexuality, both among men and women. Pornography was considered useful in conveying inaccurate messages on women's sexuality and by promoting expectations of an extraordinary sexual performance that led to faking,

In recent years, men's sexual fantasies have changed dramatically by watching porn ... there is a high chance that women fake orgasms thinking that their husbands expect that [porn-like performance] from them and because they cannot reach orgasms.

SHIMA, 32 years old

Mokhtari and Malekhamadi's qualitative study on pornography and sexual behavior in heterosexual relationships in Iran shows that pornography affects sexual expectations of enhanced or exaggerated performance (Mokhtari and Malekhamadi 2017). While the amount of empirical research in the Iranian context is rather small, the harmful effects of violent or inaccurate representations of sex in pornographic visualizations have been shown in studies around the globe (Kingston et al. 2008, Wright, Tokunaga, and Kraus 2015).

Additionally, the participants criticized the existing social attitudes that hindered discussions about female sexuality in general and female orgasms in particular in the name of religious morality. There was consensus that there is a

silence on sexuality in Iran, and even where and when sexuality was discussed, ‘there was much less attention given to women’s orgasm’ (Kiana, 32 years old). Another participant explained,

Sex is generally suppressed in Iran, particularly women’s sexuality. It is taboo. First of all, women do not know a lot about [their own sexuality], and generally, Iranian women self-censor their sexuality since childhood, and this pattern continues for the rest of their lives.

NOOSHIN, 33 years old

Besides the problematic ways women’s sexuality was addressed, the participants believed that discourses around men’s sexuality affected the sexual dynamics and could motivate women’s faking. As Tarlan discussed, the way masculinity has been defined leads to complications:

Men try to give orgasms to their partners to prove their masculine [sexual] prowess, and if they cannot do it, then they might consider it a sign of their own sexual weakness and impotence. I think most women [fake orgasm] as a sacrifice.

TARLAN, 30 years old

The portrayal of men’s sexuality as a requirement of their masculinity and female orgasm as something complicated and hard to achieve are sources of performance anxiety for women and contribute to the formation of masculinity as fragile and precarious (Rogers 2005). If female sexuality gets portrayed as overly complicated and hard, the capacity to give orgasms to women also becomes a ‘trial’ for men’s level of ‘masculinity’ (Rogers 2005). Therefore, women’s faking is a sacrifice to ease their male partners’ anxiety and prove them masculine enough and an attempt to avoid the consequences of being perceived as incompetent. I will return to the consequences of faking an orgasm in the following section.

Additionally, the fragility of masculinity within the socio-cultural context of Iran, where men are expected to be ‘heads’ of households, is also related to the organization of marriage. There is a strong expectation for men to be breadwinners, but with high levels of unemployment and rising insecurities in the country, many men are failing to perform the roles traditionally assigned to them. Moreover, many men—and thus also women—remain unmarried because of the inability to afford to maintain expenses and provide housing for a prospective wife.

7 The Consequences of Faking an Orgasm

Most participants considered faking orgasms a psychologically, emotionally, and physically harmful phenomenon for women and their sexual partners. Nasrin explained,

The woman becomes frustrated. If you have sex a few times and do not have an orgasm, it gives you a sense of being a mere passive object, as if you are only an object for someone else's desire ... It all loses meaning for you.

NASRIN, 40 years old

When asked about why women did not discuss their lack of sexual peaking with their partners, the participants explained that the combination of cultural mores, as well as religious and moral interpretations of sexual behavior for women, hinder their communication and thus undermine their sexual agency,

[Women do not talk about their orgasm] because of the clichés that women should have prudence. That pleasure is only for men; or for considering sex generally bad, shameful, and sinful even though it is legitimate and halal [taking place within the framework of an Islamic marriage].

BEHNAZ, 36 years old

Faking orgasm out of a reluctance to communicate about sexual preferences may be negatively related to sexual and relationship satisfaction, suggesting a lack of trust and intimacy and leading to continued engagement in unsatisfying sex (Séguin and Milhausen 2016). Due to these moral and cultural frameworks, women's communication about their sexuality is difficult at best,

If women express their sexual needs, they are considered profligate, dissolute, and immoral ... women do not even consider it their right [to talk about sexual matters].

NOOSHIN, 33 years old

Besides the hindrances by discourses of female modesty and prudence, other participants discussed that even when communication about female sexuality took place, they did not always benefit women. Nasrin (40 years old) explained that discussing faked orgasms could lead to women being accused of dishon-

esty, 'if you tell them that you had faked it, then they will be annoyed as if their subjectivity is dismissed.'

While most participants recognized power differences and contextualized women's behavior within the broader socio-cultural, moral, and religious frameworks of proper female behavior, some participants adopted a more individualistic approach and considered faking orgasm a personal act of dishonesty. 'Women have to be honest,' stated a participant (Nooshin, 35 years old). Women's faking was considered immoral behavior and equivalent to lying,

If the [sexual] behavior is not real, then its fakeness will be easy to recognize. I do not see a [good] reason for telling a lie.

KIANA, 32 years old

Additionally, some considered it the women's responsibility to teach men about their own sexual needs. 'It is important that women themselves [learn and] transmit the information to men so that they can adjust their expectations and behaviors,' Tarlan (30 years old) stated.

Another aspect of this approach was a perspective that considered faking orgasms as empowering for male and female partners. The participants who discussed this saw temporary benefits and advantages in faking orgasms. One participant believed that fake orgasms could be considered an advantage and a possibility for women, considering that men's orgasm is much harder to fake. 'This is a possibility that women have, contrary to men, and they might use and even abuse it in their relationships,' Shima (32 years old) discussed.

Another participant discussed that faking orgasms by a female partner would boost the confidence of the men and would thus be an empowering practice for women who solidarize with their male partners. 'The one benefit that [faking orgasms] has is empowering men and encouraging men who do not have enough sexual potency,' said Kiana (32 years old).

These findings revealed that female sexuality in general and female orgasms, in particular, were considered a social taboo even among educated working Iranian women. In the next section, I will position these findings on women's sexuality and faking orgasms in the broader socio-cultural, political, and religious context of contemporary Iran.

8 Discussing and Conclusion

This pilot study used qualitative methods to explore the prevalence, reasons for, possible consequences and implications of faking orgasms for a group of Ira-

nian urban women's sexual and moral life. The findings revealed that, similar to Janghorban et al. (2015), women who pretended orgasms prioritized their partner's sexuality to their own. The practice of self-sacrifice in the context of marital sex could be associated with interpretations of Shi'i teachings on women's sexual availability for the husband (called *tamkin*), which is also translated into legal language. Tamkin means that women's unwillingness does not provide grounds for women to refuse marital sex and is considered the marital legal duty of the wife unless the wife has 'legitimate' constraints such as illness or menstruation that hinder sex. Studies have shown that tamkin is perceived by Iranian women as performing religious duties and being a sign of devoted Muslim woman (Janghorban et al. 2015), and as female submission and subordination by others (Tizro 2014). The study participants also referred to socio-legal and moral discourses as the causes of the existing bias towards female sexuality. While the distinction between religious and non-religious moral discourses is hard to make, the moral frameworks that the women drew on indicate their perceived social and legal vulnerability rather than moral or religious apprehension.

The participants also sharply criticized the mainstream narratives of modesty and silence around women's sexuality in Iran. The women drew on moral, social, and religious discourses to discuss the reasons behind faking orgasms. They found moral discourses on women's desire to be male-centric and patriarchal. The mainstream beliefs on female moral responsibilities and perceptions of (self)sacrifice in heterosex were acknowledged and criticized. The women also found a general lack of sexual education and adequate knowledge among men and women on female sexuality to be part of the reasons for the confusion about women's sexuality that led to faking orgasms. Other factors such as machismo and male infidelity, porn culture, and sexual performance ideals among men were also discussed to affect men and women's perceptions of sexuality and performance during sex.

This study confirmed some of the assumptions existing in the literature on faking orgasms. Similar to studies discussed in the previous sections (e.g., Fahs 2014, Goodman, Gillath, and Haj-Mohamadi 2017, Frith 2015), the findings highlighted the significance of unequal power relations in motivating women to fake orgasms, to please their male sexual partner, to avoid conflict, and not to hurt the feelings of the partner. Contrary to this study's finding that interpreted faking orgasm as deceptive/manipulative behavior, faking orgasm has been discussed in other literature to be a strategy to support a partner's self-esteem and could be positively associated with care and concern for the partner's feeling (Séguin and Milhausen 2016). There was also a minority view that believed faking orgasms could be an advantage for female sexuality since women's cli-

maxing is not as visible as it is in male bodies. Participants drew on popular discourses of successful marital relationships to both justify the practices of fake orgasms and self-silencing and condemn them as ‘morally incorrect’ and ‘dishonest’ practices.

This study shows the co-existence of discourses that condemn the manipulation of religious morality to maintain the prevalent silence on women’s sexual issues and those that encourage women to learn about their sexuality and take control over it. Women’s critical standpoints, on the one hand, and their abstinence to subscribe to an ideology that renders women’s sexuality secondary to that of men’s was an indication that the mainstream moral and legal frameworks that value female sexual submission were not in line with the emerging emancipatory attitudes among Iranian women. Women in Iran are increasingly seeking self-fulfillment, independence, and freedom from conventional boundaries of appropriate female behavior. This changing approach does not always mean rejecting religious morality but sometimes includes redefining and reinterpreting religious morality (Rahbari and Longman 2018) to be compatible with their requirements in modern contemporary societies.

The findings also reveal how women’s institutionally and structurally created notions of appropriate sexual behavior were connected to their sense of security and vulnerability and their socially constructed moral position in society. It also highlights the growing critique of patriarchal social attitudes that limit, control, or undermine women’s sexual gratification. The study’s contribution is thus mostly in uncovering the impact of culturally mandated or enforced sexual scripts and situating sex and sexual performance—including faking orgasm—within the cultural, religious, and moral discourses in the context of Iran. To understand sex and sexuality in Iran, it is crucial to conduct further studies on culturally specific and sensitive topics such as faking orgasms. While further research is required to substantiate the relationship between moral discourses of female modesty, self-sacrifice, and fake orgasm, this study allows for a deeper understanding of the possible reasons behind the phenomenon of faking orgasm and highlights the importance of avoiding individualized interpretations regarding the reasons for and the implication of sexual practices.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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