Lebanese women understanding of their sexuality: A qualitative inquiry

Implications

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2nd International Conference
The Nursing profession at the heart of the health system
17-19 November, 2016

Aims and research questions

• This presentation is part of a multiphase qualitative study; it aims at understanding the meaning middle-aged Lebanese women attribute to sexuality and sexual life.
Background

- Sexuality is difficult to define and limit to one single conceptualisation.

- It is a complex and dynamic phenomenon that is ever changing and transforming affected by the interplay of biopsychosocial and cultural factors [1].

- It is an individual experience that is expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships [2].

Background

- Worldwide, research on sexuality has largely neglected women’s views and emphasised gender-based norms that reinforce men’s privileges and silence women’s voice [3].

- This view renders women with little power to negotiate their sexual concerns and preferences and negatively affects their sexual self [4, 5].
Background

- In the Middle Eastern countries including Lebanon, new sexual discourses characterised by openness have emerged supported by feminist and social movements and socioeconomic changes [6].

- Nevertheless, the control over women’s bodies and sexuality reflects one of the strongest indicators of patriarchal societies [7].

Background

- The problem is particularly important for the middle-aged women whose sexuality is challenged by hormonal changes, psychosocial factors and cultural influences.

- With the ageing population, there is an increasing recognition of the importance of sexuality throughout the lifespan.

- Studies that explore women’s own voice at middle-aged and beyond give the opportunity to gain new insights into the reality of their sexual emotions and experiences and the different forces that regulate them.

- These studies are appealing to guide professional policies and interventions in sexuality-related care.
Research questions

- Thus, the study addresses the following research questions:
  - What is middle-aged women’s perception and experience of their sexuality?
  - How is the meaning of sexuality constructed and shaped by social, cultural and political context of women?

Methods

- Exploratory qualitative study
- Middle-aged Lebanese of 40-55 years
- 23 women [18 individual interviews & A confirmatory FG with five women]
  - mean age 48 yrs, 12 secondary education and above, 10 employed; 10 Christian, all married but one single and two widowed and 11 perimenopause and menopause
- Purposive sample by education and menopausal status
- Women recruited from mammography units and by snowballing
- Thematic analysis guided by the ‘Framework Analysis’ of Ritchie and Spencer (1994) [8] was conducted.
Results

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<th>Themes</th>
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<td>Sexuality as imposed by sociocultural and gender norms</td>
<td>Women reflected on sexuality as dictated by normative views and gender-based social scripts</td>
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<td>Sexuality as a symbol of youthful femininity</td>
<td>Women pointed to the menopausal changes that might affect sexual life.</td>
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<td>Sexual life as a fundamental human need</td>
<td>Sexual life [defined as sexual relation with the husband], is viewed by women as an essential element of their life.</td>
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<td>Sexual life as a marital unifier and family stabiliser</td>
<td>Sexual life is a means that women use to gain agency.</td>
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**Theme 1. Sexuality as imposed by sociocultural and gender norms**

- Women interiorise the sexual double standards although they criticise them.

- They perceive their husband’s desires as pressing and claim sacrificing to satisfy them.
  - *The man is always ready, but the woman; no. She should be physically and psychologically ready for it. For man it does not matter… (Dima, 48y/married/ university)*

- One Christian woman referred to the Ten Commandments to justify her obedience to the husband.
Theme 1. Sexuality as imposed by sociocultural and gender norms

- As for Muslim women, they asserted the gender sexual power differential in reference to the Islam’s Sharia law.
  - We as Muslim, the religion incites woman to put on makeup and propose to her husband (Hana, 50 y/married/secondary/housewife).
- Women who were highly educated and economically independent seemed to be less compliant to their husbands' advances.
- Single women were considered asexual (either non-married, divorced or widowed).
  - I am not sure now what sexual life means because my husband is dead. I do not want to cheat on him. I am widowed; I do not want to commit a sin. I want to keep my memories with my husband because he was loyal with me (Chaten, 50y/widowed/secondary/housewife)

Theme 2. Sexuality as a symbol of youthful femininity

- Women related sexuality with youthful femininity
  - I am so afraid. I think that I have already reached this age (50 years), what will happen?… If a woman loves her husband, it is so difficult. Minimum, you feel that you got older. I seriously think that I will get my menopause; my husband will tell me “you are menopausal; this is the age of hopelessness”. I will realise that I get older and my husband will look at another woman. You think about these issues… (Lana, 50yrs/married/secondary/housewife)
- Paradoxically, their belief is that men would be sexually active up to the age of 60 or 70.
**Theme 2. Sexuality as a symbol of youthful femininity**

- Contrary to this view, other participants reported a decrease in sexual desire with increasing age for both women and men.

- Others perceived menopause as a way to enjoy sex with no restriction or fear of pregnancy. They reflected on their maturity with ageing.

  - *I am now 40. I feel that my body is better than before...I know more what I want ... and how I enjoy myself. Before, no... Your main concern was to satisfy your husband... Now, no! You want to satisfy him and yourself (Lubna, 40 y/divorced/secondary/employee).*

**Theme 3. Sexual life as a fundamental human need**

- Some of women’s accounts were:
  - Sexual life is equivalent to the quality of life;
  - A balanced and healthy person should have a balanced and healthy sexual life;
  - Sexual life is like water and food;
  - Without sexual life there is no life;

- Women exhibited ambivalence between their thoughts and acts as they declared having sex for their husbands’ pleasure.

- Only two expressed their sexual desire and need to enjoy sex alongside with their husbands.
**Theme 4. Sexual life as a marital unifier and family stabiliser**

- Women asserted the interdependence between sexual life and household stability where one guarantees the other.
- “**If there is a balance between a man and a woman (in sexual life), the household functions well**, said Hana (50 y/married/secondary/housewife).

- Sexual life is a buffer for daily stressors and marital conflicts.
  - “**forgiveness between man and woman is in sexual life**” (Chaten, 50 y/widowed/secondary/housewife)

- As such, women acknowledged the use of sex life as a commodity to render men lenient, undermining their power but also commitment to protect the family.

**Discussion**

- This study shows the experiential meaning of women’s sexuality and its multifaceted sociocultural layers.

- It reveals how traditional and patriarchal structure dominates women’s sexuality, although some nuances were observed.

- Women who are economically dependent are more likely to be exploited and less likely to negotiate their sexual agency.

- In contrast, highly educated women particularly those working outside home voiced their embarrassment and criticised the privilege bestowed on men’s sexual needs.
Discussion

- For women in the study, sexuality appears to have different functions: it is fundamental for the physical and psychosocial wellbeing and for marital and family cohesiveness. It is also a power for negotiation and gain of benefits asserting the sexual exchange theory [1].

- The social conception of women’s sexuality makes them accountable to men and passive recipients to their needs.

- It is also conceivable that women might have reduced sexual desires or might be too shy to voice their sexual needs and pleasure; thus, they claim that they are having sex only to satisfy their husbands.

Discussion

- Self-sacrificing and “the body-for-other”, described as “having sex for others’ pleasure” overarches all themes across all women.

- This has an important social significance within the Lebanese context where marriage is a powerful institution and the family is the core of the society.

- Women’s behaviour was valued as a way to protect the family rather than an expression of sexual passivity [9]. Yet, it was equated to an unequal gender and sexual power relation [10].
Discussion

- The majority of women praised men’s masculinity throughout the lifespan and confine their femininity to the reproductive age.

- Although menopause is a critical event in women’s lives, female sexual function is not only affected by hormonal changes [11,12]; the quality of a relationship and the cultural backgrounds have even greater impact [13].

- Some participants corroborated this assumption by asserting their sexual self-awareness and confidence at middle-age.

Discussion

- In conclusion, contemporary Lebanese society is becoming more open-minded and some women in the study criticised the conservative construction of sexuality. They even challenged social norms to build new sexual meanings that meet their expectations.

- The majority, however, tend to maintain the desirable social image of women who attend to others’ needs rather than claiming their own.
Recommendations

- Prioritise sexuality within the health agenda in Lebanon
- Raise awareness
- Empower women
- Inform, guide, support

Promote nurses’ and midwives’ role in sexuality-related care by developing their knowledge and skills and integrate this role in daily practice

References