Sexuality and young women born into Muslim families. A phenomenological study

Sexualidad y mujeres jóvenes nacidas en familias musulmanas. Un estudio fenomenológico

Sexualidade e mulheres jovens nascidas em famílias muçulmanas. Um estudo fenomenológico

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Abstract

Sexuality represents a fundamental aspect of our lives as human beings; it significantly affects identity. Other influential factors include sociocultural context, ethnicity or race, religion, and so on. Women have fought for decades against patriarchal oppression. The following presents the situation of intersectional discrimination faced by migrant women, which is intimately related to their experiences of sexuality. The objective of this research is to understand, in their entirety, the experiences of young Muslim women that influence their sexuality. The design presents a qualitative study based on Husserl's phenomenology, employing interviews with women who grew up in Muslim families as the data collection technique. The data were recorded, transcribed, and analyzed, following the procedure developed by Colaizzi. From the analysis of these studies, three main themes emerged: (1) Family honor as a moral imperative, (2) Fragile childhood lacking sex education, and (3) Neither here, nor there; living in a cultural limbo. Education, as a path to social change, and the feminist struggle, are inclusive if they do not exclude Muslim women.

Keywords: Sexual behavior, intercultural education, sex education, social education, immigrant, Islam, woman, Muslim, sex, sexology, sociology of culture, sociology of education.

Resumen

La sexualidad representa un aspecto fundamental en nuestra vida como seres humanos, la identidad está en gran parte desarrollada en base a ella. Otros factores influyentes son el contexto sociocultural, la etnia o la raza, religiones, etc.; las mujeres han luchado durante décadas contra la opresión patriarcal. A continuación, se presenta la situación de discriminación interseccional a la que se enfrenta el

colectivo de mujeres migrante, que está íntimamente relacionado con las vivencias sobre su sexualidad. El objetivo de la investigación es comprender las experiencias, en su globalidad, de mujeres jóvenes musulmanas, que influyen en su sexualidad. El diseño presenta un estudio cualitativo basado en la fenomenología de Husserl, empleándose, como técnica de obtención de datos, entrevistas a mujeres que han crecido en familias musulmanas. Los datos fueron grabados, transcritos y analizados siguiendo el procedimiento desarrollado por Colaizzi. Del análisis de los mismos, emergieron tres temas principales: (1) El honor de la familia como imperativo moral, (2) Infancia frágil y carente de educación sexual, y (3) Ni de aquí, ni de allí; vivir en un limbo cultural. La educación, como vía de cambio social, y la lucha feminista, es inclusiva si no excluye a las mujeres musulmanas.

Palabras clave: Comportamiento sexual, educación intercultural, educación sexual, educación social, inmigrante, islam, mujer, musulmán, sexo, sexología, sociología cultura, sociología de la educación.

Resumo

A sexualidade representa um aspeto fundamental das nossas vidas enquanto seres humanos; a identidade desenvolve-se em grande parte com base nela. Outros fatores influentes incluem o contexto sociocultural, a etnia ou raça, a religião, entre outros. As mulheres lutam há décadas contra a opressão patriarcal. O texto que se segue apresenta a situação da discriminação interseccional enfrentada pelas mulheres migrantes, intimamente relacionada com as suas experiências de sexualidade. O objetivo desta pesquisa é compreender, na sua totalidade, as experiências das jovens mulheres muçulmanas que influenciam a sua sexualidade. O estudo qualitativo baseia-se na fenomenologia de Husserl, utilizando como técnica de recolha de dados entrevistas com mulheres que cresceram em famílias muçulmanas. Os dados foram gravados, transcritos e analisados seguindo o procedimento desenvolvido por Colaizzi. Da análise destes estudos emergiram três temas principais: (1) A honra familiar como imperativo moral, (2) Infância frágil com falta de educação sexual e (3) Nem aqui nem ali; vivendo num limbo cultural. A educação, como caminho para a mudança social, e a luta feminista são inclusivas se não excluírem as mulheres muçulmanas.

Palavras-chave: Comportamento sexual, educação intercultural, educação sexual, educação social, imigrante, Islão, mulher, muçulmano, sexo, sexologia, sociologia da cultura, sociologia da educação.

Introduction

Sexuality, according to the World Health Organization (2023), occupies a central place in human life and is shaped by multiple factors—cultural, moral or ethical, biological, psychological, religious, or spiritual. When we talk about sexuality, we are referring to a unique and private dimension tied to personal identity and to all of one's physical and psychological life experiences (Ruppert, 2021). Sexuality accompanies us throughout our entire lives; every person has one, and it is always unique

and unrepeatable (Calero, 2019).

Sexualities and their expression are socially constructed, which means they depend on context and encompass different spheres (Soto, 2021): the mind (fantasies, desires, beliefs), the body (pleasure), and relationships (expression and interpersonal bonds). Sexuality therefore occupies a fundamental dimension in people's lives, closely tied to how we live and how we experience ourselves as social beings. It also influences our internal and external relationships, modes of expression, communication, and more.

Alberto González (2024), Research Professor at the Universidad del Mar in Oaxaca (Mexico), notes that sexuality encompasses and is directly related to emotions and behaviors, and is shaped by sociocultural foundations, personal identity, experiences, and so on. Giraldo et al. (2021) further explain that sexuality is often reduced to sexual intercourse, overlooking the many factors that make up and shape our sexual development: relational styles, attachment, relationships, affection, or the absence of it.

Environment, life experiences, family, and countless variables influence the construction of our sexuality. As a result, sexuality becomes subject to indirect control and to a form of social "training," creating a space where norms are established about what is acceptable or not, what is right or wrong, what should be felt, and how one should act (Choza, 2017; Foucault, 2007, 2019; Sedano, 2025).

The absence of sexual education inevitably leads to increased rates of sexually transmitted infections among adolescents—an urgent and evident challenge (Navarro & Ojeda, 2025) that is not being properly addressed.

Félix López (2023), Professor of the Psychology of Sexuality at the University of Salamanca, identifies five main models of sexual education: the moral model (shaped by values, beliefs, and religious impositions); the risk model (based on fear and the dangers of sexuality); the prescriptive-revolutionary model (which frames sexuality as a right, but may also be experienced as an obligation); the biographical-professional model (grounded in science, adopting a bilateral perspective that includes positive and negative aspects, and involving socializing agents such as schools, families, and professionals working collaboratively across contexts); and finally, the holistic and comprehensive model, which emphasizes the positive dimensions of sexuality: natural, satisfying, dynamic sexuality; equality between sexes; ethics; diversity; and the recognition of sexual minorities.

Throughout this study, we will examine the experiences of young women who have grown up and developed within Muslim families, and the influence this has had on their sexuality. Gender studies specialist María Frías (2022) describes the concept of "intersectional discrimination," or "intersectionality of discrimination," which refers to the double exclusion experienced by migrant women, combining

racism and sexism. For this reason, it is essential to shed light on emotions, sociocultural patterns, and the factors of exclusion and inclusion within Spanish culture resulting from cultural differences, and, of course, to examine Islam and its relationship to women's sexuality.

The concept of sexuality, according to Figari (2023), a Doctor of Sociology at the Instituto Universitário de Pesquisas do Rio de Janeiro, encompasses a transcultural and transhistorical idea that adapts to the particularities of each context and historical moment. In this study, we will explore women's experiences—authentic human experiences that persist, that do not change, and that often converge with one another. These ideas will later be consolidated through reflective analysis in order to understand reality as it is, thereby shaping a descriptive account of that reality (Husserl, 1992).

Method

With the fundamental objective of understanding the experiences of young Muslim women regarding their sexuality, a study was designed using qualitative methodology, guided by the philosophical principles of Husserl's phenomenology (1992). The phenomenological approach focused on examining phenomena as they are, with the aim of achieving a substantive interpretation of human thought (Husserl, 1992). This entails setting aside, as much as possible, our own personal experience to avoid potential biases that might interfere with interpreting the data collected. Arbaizar (2022), who holds a PhD in Philosophy from the Universidade de Santiago de Compostela, adds that although a specific lived experience and the object of that experience are linked, the ideal unity of meaning emerges from a plurality of experiences and cannot be reduced solely to the subjective realm.

The sample in this study consisted of ten young women of different nationalities. The inclusion criteria were as follows:

– Participants were between 20 and 35 years of age.

– Participants had to be born into Muslim families that were believers and practitioners of the Islamic faith.

– Sexual orientation and gender identity were not exclusion criteria; however, all women in the study identified as heterosexual and cisgender.

Participants of foreign nationality affiliated with religious doctrines unrelated to Islam, or belonging to other religious sects, as well as men who wished to participate, were excluded.

To recruit participants, the principal investigator initially contacted potential participants due to a previous professional connection. Snowball sampling was then used (Mohammadi et al., 2025), meaning that additional participants were reached through referrals from the initial group.

Data collection began in December 2023 and concluded in May 2024. The data were obtained through an interview composed of open-ended questions aimed at eliciting participants' experiences, feelings, emotions, and personal narratives, allowing for spontaneity and descriptive expression. Interviews lasted between 35 and 55 minutes and were audio-recorded with informed consent from participants. At all times, participants were informed that they could decline to answer any question or end the interview at any point.

The interviewer was familiar with the interview script and had rehearsed it beforehand, which facilitated a conversational flow centered on open questions. After ten interviews -and given the difficulty of recruiting additional participants- data collection was concluded.

During the analysis phase, ATLAS.ti software was used. Once data collection ended, all recordings were transcribed verbatim. General transcription guidelines were followed (e.g., removal of repeated words or filler phrases). Microsoft software tools were used to ensure clarity and organization of the data.

The data analysis followed a procedure grounded in Husserlian philosophy (Colaizzi, 1978; Wirihana et al., 2018). The following steps were followed:

- Familiarization with the data: Reading and re-reading the interviews to deepen understanding and unify the main themes expressed by participants, with the ultimate goal of organizing relevant information and beginning the identification of significant excerpts.

- Identification of significant excerpts: Highlighting key ideas related to the phenomenon under investigation.

- Formulation of meanings: Assigning relevant meanings to each excerpt. As much as possible, prior personal assumptions were set aside to avoid interfering with interpretation.

- Organization of meanings into themes: Each meaning was grouped into common themes. Subthemes were then extracted from each theme. Efforts were made throughout to avoid the influence of pre-existing ideas in naming or developing themes.

- Comprehensive description: A detailed description of the phenomenon was developed, incorporating all themes and subthemes.

- Writing process: Information was condensed into a concise statement that captured the essential aspects needed to understand the studied phenomenon.

- Verification of the fundamental structure: Key findings were returned to participants, who

confirmed and approved the generated themes.

The study adhered to the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki for research involving human subjects (World Medical Association, 2024). Prior to conducting interviews, approval was obtained from the Ethics and Research Committee of the Department of Nursing, Physiotherapy, and Medicine at the University of Almería, Spain (EFM 217/2022).

Following approval, potential participants were contacted and provided with detailed information about the study, including its purpose, voluntary participation, the right to withdraw at any time, and the option not to answer any questions without facing any negative consequences.

The ten participants took part in the interview voluntarily and signed informed consent forms. Anonymity and confidentiality were guaranteed, and participants were coded so that their identities would not be revealed. Throughout the study, the protection and handling of personal data were ensured. Only the principal (and sole) researcher had access to this information. The data were stored, analyzed, and processed in accordance with European regulations and with Organic Law 3/2018, of December 5, on the Protection of Personal Data and the guarantee of digital rights.

The study follows the criteria built around four concepts defined by the American scholars Lincoln and Guba (1985): credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Colombian university professors Arias and Giraldo (2011) describe these as the four aspects that confer a status of credibility and support a rigorous study. The research undertaken was designed to ensure respect for each of these criteria:

- Credibility: The truthfulness of the data, and the trustworthiness and value of the findings produced during the research process.

- Transferability: The extent to which the data and findings from this study may be applied to other, similar research.

- Confirmability: The effort, throughout the entire study, to remain neutral and objective, distancing ourselves as much as possible from initial assumptions.

- Dependability: The consistency and replicability of the data obtained. An exhaustive description of the methodology is provided, enabling other researchers to replicate the study.

Results

The main demographic characteristics of the 10 participants are outlined in the following table:

Table 1.

Sociodemographic data of the participants.

Participants	Age	Sex/Gender	Nationality	Previous Studies	Personal Status	Children	Born in Spain
P1	34	Woman	Syria	University	Married	Yes	No
P2	27	Woman	Morocco	University	Single	No	No
P3	25	Woman	Morocco	University	Engaged	No	No
P4	30	Woman	Morocco	Higher Education	Married	No	No
P5	24	Woman	Morocco	University	Single	No	No
P6	28	Woman	Morocco	University	Single	No	No
P7	23	Woman	Morocco	University	Single	Yes	No
P8	25	Woman	Morocco	University	Single	No	No
P9	30	Woman	Senegal	University	Married	Yes	Yes
P10	26	Woman	Morocco	Higher Education	Married	No	No

The mean age of the participants was 27.4 years. In the data analysis, three main themes were developed (Table 2), offering an understanding of the experiences of women who were raised in Muslim families, particularly in relation to their sexuality and the multiple factors that influence it. The exhaustive description of the phenomenon is presented through a detailed explanation of the content of each theme and subtheme.

Table 2.

Units of Meaning, Themes, and Subthemes

Units of meaning	Subtheme	Theme
Woman, forbidden, body, marriage, vaginismus, guilt, sin, dishonor.	Virginity as something sacred.	Family honor as a moral imperative.
Care, overprotection, father, family, rules, brother, machismo, fear.	Protection as a feminine privilege.	
Play, girl, body, hijab, obligation, responsibility, sexual relations, puberty.	Sexualization in childhood.	Fragile childhood lacking sexual education.

Information, menstruation, culture, hiding, religion, inequality, taboo, concealing.	Childhood lacking sexual education.	
Stereotypes, submissive woman, illiterate, child-rearing, dominated, discrimination, judged.	Unfair or real prejudices.	Neither from here nor from there: living in a cultural limbo.
Limits, racism, pressure, cultural clash, values, western, conflict, struggle.	Society as a moral judge.	

Family honor as a moral imperative

This theme reflects the importance of the feelings and emotions experienced by the participants in relation to the moral commitment they maintain with their families. This moral commitment fluctuates according to the degree of adherence to Islamic norms, which are linked to gender roles and the development of their sexuality. Virginity is conceived as something sacred, and protection as a privilege, one that may be shaped by benevolent sexism.

Subtheme 1: Virginity as something sacred

It is evident that the participants grew up and were socialized within an intra-familiar and cultural context deeply rooted in the Muslim religion.

Family honor is essential in the consolidation of a Muslim family, which entails a direct relationship with preserving virginity as something divine, complying with norms, and monitoring behaviors considered illicit or unacceptable according to their doctrine.

Virginity has been a controversial topic throughout different eras, transcending religions and societies as a form of social construct. It is often tied to the transformation of the female body into a tool of moral regulation; it carries connotations of "purity," functioning as yet another form of control over women's individual freedom, in this case, sexual freedom.

> I wanted to keep my virginity until marriage. Because virginity is the honor of the whole family, not just mine, but of the entire family. I didn't feel comfortable having sexual relations beforehand, this feeling of guilt… this trust you have with your parents, I don't want them to feel ashamed of me, because I bring sin… (participant 1).

The participants describe the importance of protecting their virginity until marriage, alongside protecting family honor, as both concepts are highly interconnected. The responsibility of not dishonoring the family

is transmitted from generation to generation; guilt and fear are strongly present in many of the participants' accounts.

The participants explain that, within Islam, both men and women are expected to marry as virgins; however, this moral expectation is disproportionately enforced upon women, who become the primary subjects of scrutiny. Culturally, it is only women who are monitored, questioned, and intimidated, because the family's honor is perceived to be at stake.

> If a woman is not a virgin, she is finished for society. If her virginity is doubted, it is a dishonor for the family… (participant 4).

Some participants describe difficulties when attempting to engage in penetrative sexual relations for the first time, difficulties that were later diagnosed as vaginismus. These challenges were resolved after months of effort, and in some cases, professional help was required. There is also evident fear about accidentally losing one's virginity.

Finally, throughout the interviews, virginity is conceived as practices limited strictly to vaginal penetration. Masturbation or oral sex would not be included, though they are still regarded as sinful or forbidden practices within Islam. Additionally, virginity implies having an intact hymen, as it may be inspected during early marital sexual encounters.

> My first time was after marriage. And it was very intense because I would resist it, this thing I had been preserving for so many years—my body would reject losing it… trying and trying; I had some type of vaginismus… because you have this idea that you cannot do this, this is forbidden… (participant 10).

Subtheme 2: Protection as a feminine privilege

Family represents a special status in Islam, assigning each member an important role based on protection. The family is a primary socializing agent with a strong influence on our care, values, and culturally accepted roles. It also provides a foundation for identity, offering security and emotional support.

Throughout their testimonies, the participants describe having felt attended to and cared for by their families since childhood. Some mention the male figure as a central symbol of protection. However, in their narratives they explain that this system of protection—or sense of privilege stemming from the attention they received, particularly from fathers and brothers—could also become a tool of control and a source of fear. In other words, during their process of acculturation, they began questioning this form of "overprotection," leaving room for the recognition of a camouflaged form of sexism.

> When I was younger, I didn't even realize it, honestly. I didn't think it was bad; I even saw it as something positive… my brother tells me I can't get home late, that I should be careful, that it's for my own good, or they tell me I have to do things around the house, also for my own good. As I've grown up, I've started setting limits. Mentally I've changed so much… (participant 5).

In relation to these narratives and this form of "positive" gender-based discrimination, we can refer to benevolent sexism. Muslim culture clearly defines the roles of each family member, and it is important that everyone feels comfortable in the position they occupy. The participants describe that, in many cases, Muslim women do not intend to escape that place, as the dominant sexist discourse makes them feel like a "valuable object" that must be cared for and protected.

> …you are a diamond, we have to protect you because you are a diamond, you have the best and most important role in the family, which is raising the whole community, raising the future of tomorrow. You are loving, you are kind, gentle, empathetic, the sensitivity of women… (participant 7).

Generally, emphasis is placed on differentiated education for men and women, especially regarding family fears during certain stages of development, such as adolescence. However, there are exceptions in which parents provided very similar education to both sons and daughters. Some participants also report that they themselves reproduced sexist roles toward younger brothers, when they had them.

The sexist behaviors the participants describe are primarily based on: attention to household chores, complying with male family members' demands, differences in clothing expectations, difficulty setting boundaries, overindulging younger brothers, transferring protective responsibility from father-brother-husband, etc.

A fragile childhood lacking sexual education

This theme highlights educational gaps regarding sexuality: difficulties accessing information about the body, menstruation, sexual orientations, contraceptive methods, and more. It also emphasizes the emergence of secondary sexual characteristics as a form of childhood sexualization and a rupture with the stage of girlhood.

Subtheme 1: Sexualization of childhood

Several participants explicitly or implicitly emphasize the importance of puberty in the Muslim religion. Puberty signifies leaving childhood behind and beginning a new period in which behavior, clothing, and even one's gaze become elements subject to judgment. Puberty is the stage in which societal perception ceases to be open and egalitarian and becomes sexist and sexualized.

> When puberty arrives, we are required to wear the hijab; the hijab is not only the headscarf, but also values, behavior, gaze, lowering your gaze, for example. (participant 2).

One can speak of social judgment, as the participants agree that this process of scrutiny is more heavily imposed on women. Although the religion requires both sexes to carry their own "hijab," the "hijab" is not the same for everyone. Some participants questioned this religious expectation as sexist and misogynistic. Others defended the idea that culture is sexist, but religion is not, and presented the hijab as a religious element that creates equality among women—no woman being superior to another. For this reason, they make special effort in their discourse to differentiate cultural practices from religious ones.

During the interviews, feelings of longing, sadness, and injustice frequently emerged when discussing childhood. Several participants question when and why they stopped being girls. They describe the appearance of secondary sexual characteristics and bodily changes as a forced detachment from the freedom of being a child and behaving as such. The body becomes an instrument of measurement in the sexualization of childhood.

> Everyone at that age thinks you should be at home doing other things. You can only go out with your friends, but playing… I was like a girl with breasts who couldn't play. (participant 9).

They explain that even before becoming women, they were already afraid of becoming one. In some more open families, they felt privileged… They knew that some of their friends and classmates married at fourteen or fifteen, which meant radically changing their lifestyle and taking on adult responsibilities—immediately stripping them of the joys of childhood.

> I wanted to keep being a girl because I thought that becoming a woman would take many things away from me, like playing in the neighborhood. I was the only girl who still rode her bike and scooters and went down to play, always with girls younger than me. (participant 8).

They also describe that more open or less restrictive families faced a significant social cost as well. Families could be influenced by neighbors and friends, leading them to hide certain behaviors or avoid drawing attention. As a result, even when the participants' families agreed that they should enjoy puberty or childhood spontaneously—through play, without scrutinizing their clothing or behavior—social judgment often intervened. Remaining unnoticed posed a major risk to the family's honor, or families simply chose not to oppose the rest of the Muslim community.

> As I got older and reached puberty, it wasn't so well regarded that I played jump rope or that I ran around my grandmother's neighborhood… I was still a kid. (participant 6).

The participants explain that they did not understand these new prohibitions, all of which were driven by fear—fear of "being desired" due to the sexualization imposed by society itself, and fear that they might engage in sexual relationships because they appeared too noticeable or suggestive.

They describe that they lived as they always had; only one thing had changed: their bodies. They state that puberty, not age, emotional maturity, or psychological development, dictates when one must begin to behave as a woman in Islam. Throughout the women's narratives, feelings of sadness, fear, and guilt emerge as consequences of early adolescence and their relationship with their own bodies.

Subtheme 2: A childhood lacking sexual education

In all interviews, a lack of sexual education was evident. Three sources were identified: sexual education from the family, from educational institutions, and that received casually through media or peer groups. All participants agree that they did not receive any sexual education from their families—at least not intentionally.

> Well, regarding the family, nothing, because since in Islam you're not supposed to have sexual relations until you get married, they don't talk to you about the topic, you know? (participant 3).

Additionally, they commonly express that they were more familiar with menstruation and pregnancy, which they consider natural and vital aspects of women's lives. However, they avoided taboo topics such as masturbation, sexual practices—including oral sex and intercourse—other sexual orientations, gender identities, and similar issues.

> …pregnancy, yes, that's very normalized; people there have much more respect for pregnancy. There, you talk about 'I'm going to start trying… (participant 9).

Those participants who knew about menstruation usually learned about it from older sisters or from their mothers, who served as their female role models. Despite menstruation being the most familiar topic, they generally remember their first period as a moment filled with doubt, uncertainty, shame, and fear. They also describe how menstruation remains hidden in their socio-cultural environment; women do not openly say they are menstruating.

Participants report receiving some sexual education at school or high school. The depth of the information varies considerably depending on whether their education took place in Spain or in their country of origin. In both cases, however, they mention missing topics such as consent and pleasure.

Neither from here nor from there: living in a cultural limbo

This theme describes the participants' feelings regarding the widespread prejudices present in Spanish

society about Muslim women. It also explores the sense of bicultural identity that develops throughout their lives, shaping their experiences related to sexuality and gender.

Furthermore, it examines the duality of ethnic identity, the struggle between identities, and the costs associated with belonging to one culture or another.

Subtheme 1: Unfair or real prejudices

The results show that all participants have felt subject to criticism at some point in their lives from the host society—in this case, the society surrounding them in Spain. When asked how they believe Muslim women are perceived by the rest of the world, the following terms emerged: submissive, oppressed, ignorant, illiterate, controlled by men, etc.

> We're seen as kind of ignorant, submissive. If they see you a bit modern, you're a rebel, and you tell yourself, I'm just being normal… (participant 3).

Some participants state that there is a mistaken idea about what it means to be a Muslim woman. They explain that many women follow religious norms because they want to, not because they are forced.

In contrast, other participants argue that the stereotype of the Muslim woman as oppressed and subordinate to men is, to a large extent, accurate. They explain that although some stereotypes are incorrect, others emerge from real conditions. These views are grounded in the belief that women are subjected to benevolent sexism by men, occupying a family role in which they feel comfortable and useful within a patriarchal society governed by religious norms.

Subtheme 1: Unfair or Real Prejudices

The findings suggest that all participants have felt subject to criticism at some point in their lives, by the host society, in this case, the society that surrounded them, and/or surrounds them, in Spain. When asked how they believe Muslim women are perceived by the rest of the world, the following terms appeared in their accounts: submissive, oppressed, ignorant, illiterate, under male control, etc.

> They see us as kind of ignorant, submissive. If they see you a bit modern, you're a rebel, and you tell yourself, I'm just being normal… (participant 3).

Some participants explain that there is a mistaken idea about what it means to be a Muslim woman, emphasizing that many of them follow religious norms because they want to, not because they are forced to.

In contrast, other participants argue that the stereotype of the Muslim woman as oppressed and

subordinated to men is, in many ways, accurate. They explain that some stereotypes are incorrect, but others arise from real circumstances. These views are grounded in the idea that women are subjected to benevolent sexism by men and occupy a family role in which they feel comfortable and useful within a patriarchal society shaped by religious dogma.

Subtheme 2: Society as a Moral Judge

On the other hand, the findings reveal a sense of dissatisfaction and complaint directed toward the host society. The participants feel frequently questioned about how they live their religion, and some wonder whether this may stem from racism. They state that Arab countries are boxed into Islam, like chess pieces on a board. Furthermore, the host society both believes and assumes—while also criticizing— that all Muslim people strictly follow religious dogmas or prescribed values, even though such norms are neither questioned nor scrutinized to the same extent in other religions.

Virginity is a clear example. The host society assumes that all Muslim women maintain their virginity until marriage and therefore should not have partners, since it is considered sacred. However, in Catholicism, virginity is also sacred, yet it is widely accepted that an adult woman may have already had her first sexual experiences.

Some participants explain that these comments about what they should or should not do generate feelings of guilt, constantly reminding them that there is something they are supposedly not doing "correctly."

> …they judge your values, and that burns because it reminds you that you're not a good Muslim or you're not a good Arab or you're not a good Moroccan or you're not a good daughter or I don't know… but they remind you of it… (participant 4).

Moreover, the host society always expects something more from them. The participants describe a duality of identity, a sense of not belonging, and a feeling of rejection. They express that they will never be "Western enough" or "European enough" for the host society, nor "Muslim enough" for the Arab community. They perceive negative judgments that carry a heavy psychological and familial cost.

To be seen as empowered and accepted, the host society demands that they set boundaries, pressures them, and expects them to prove themselves more than others—feel it more, show it more. However, what may be understood as an achievement or success in Spanish society may be seen as an act of rebellion or recklessness in their own community.

> …but carrying out that struggle… sometimes comes at a very high cost, a huge family conflict, and as a woman you might decide not to go through with it, because the cost may be greater than what you gain. It is exhausting, it is exhausting to be constantly fighting… (participant 7).

Conclusions

This qualitative study, conducted with ten women, aimed to understand the experiences related to sexuality of women who grew up in a sociocultural context influenced by the Muslim religion.

Focusing on each of the most representative findings, we observe that the women interviewed in our study defined the concept of virginity as a sign of virtue and innocence. The results indicate that within the religious context, both men and women are expected to remain chaste until marriage. However, in the cultural context, women are more heavily questioned and scrutinized, which gives rise to a false "valuation" of female virginity, monitored much more strictly than male virginity. In addition, there is a generalized fear of losing one's "virginity", a moral and religious norm tied to preserving family honor and honoring the husband on the first night of marriage.

We can see the influence that the sociocultural context has on sexuality as part of our social identity. The Spanish Institute for Women (2022) points to the existence of significant social pressure regarding the loss of virginity, and notes that this idea becomes tied to perfectionism and adequacy, reinforced by the fear of "disappointing others." It also highlights peer pressure related to age and the life stage at which sexual activity begins.

The participants in our study grew up in a family and cultural environment completely different from the one referenced above, even though many of them had lived in Spain for several years or throughout significant periods of their lives. Furthermore, the religious expectations and obligations tied to observing religious dogma differ greatly between Spanish society, generally Catholic, and Arab society, generally Muslim, particularly regarding adherence to religious practices and responsibility for fulfilling them.

In The concept of virginity from the perspective of Iranian adolescents: a qualitative study, Mehrolhassani et al. (2020) highlight how virginity is defined in Iranian society: the criterion for the loss of virginity is vaginal penetration. As in our study, the results indicate that other sexual practices that leave the hymen intact do not represent a risk or threat to the loss of virginity. This similarity may be due to the fact that, in both studies, the sample consisted of participants belonging to the Islamic religion.

On the other hand, the cited authors suggest that the concept of virginity as a religious value or tradition could prevent sexually transmitted infections (STIs). However, in our study, the participants emphasized the need for sexual education as a means to prevent STIs, sexual violence, promote consent, positive sexuality, etc. These ideological differences in approaches to sexual risk and harmful behaviors may be due to the fact that our sample consisted of women in an older age range, and most had attended school in Spain at some point, whereas the participants in the cited study lived in Iran and were younger, in adolescence.

In our study, the women interviewed described a childhood lacking in sexual education, which they view as something negative and which also reflects a problem within the current educational system. In this regard, several educators from Castile (Fernández et al., 2023) conducted a qualitative study on teaching strategies for addressing sexual education in the classroom. The findings reveal limitations in teacher training to deliver comprehensive sexual education across different subjects.

Among the results of our research, we also find difficulty in distinguishing between the concepts of protection and gender-based violence, as the participants explained how they were affected in the family context by different forms of benevolent sexism. They described how they valued male protection and felt cared for, yet also expressed a dramatic shift in this feeling of respect and admiration toward their protectors, experiencing instead a sense of injustice and anger upon recognizing the presence of hidden machismo. This relates to the idea of male dominance and child-rearing (Misari, 2022), as participants also explained that the responsibility for "female protection" was often transferred from fathers to brothers and later to husbands, generation after generation.

Moreover, the results indicate a shift in perspective among participants depending on the social context in which they live. Manuela Barreto and David Matthew Doyle (2023) concur with our findings, describing the distance between the notion of protection and various forms of gender-based violence. Both concepts may be confused depending on educational, cultural, and social contexts. They explain that ambivalent, hostile, and benevolent forms of sexism can take on different violent patterns disguised as protection, concealing openly negative attitudes or seemingly caring behaviors that are in fact harmful to women.

Likewise, among the main findings of our study, we identify the sexualization of childhood. Several participants recount early-life experiences in which they felt sexualized by relatives, society, and their broader environment due to physical changes associated with puberty. The sexualization of childhood is a sensitive topic in society, and there is a lack of validated theories; it remains an uncomfortable subject in research. As a result, it is difficult to find studies comparable to our findings. However, adult sexuality is influenced by the cultural frameworks experienced during childhood -frameworks that are often inseparable from religion- and shape children's sexual development within cisheteronormativity, gendered power relations, sexual harassment of girls, girls' resistance to patriarchal power, homophobia, transphobia, and sexualized behaviors, especially toward girls (Bhana et al., 2023).

Continuing with the comparison of our findings, we observe that the women describe how they sometimes find themselves in a constant state of conflict between the host society and their society of origin. They recount experiences of enrichment and diversity, as well as new opportunities for learning and development. In contrast to these positive aspects, they are also exposed to the loss of cultural identity, cultural conflicts, and clashes between their own values or between the two societies. The

binary of "culture versus religion" is a fact (Ortiz et al., 2021), as in our study, and it is significant that the women interviewed generally believe that cultural conflict arises because of tension between both factors. However, some women question this belief and refer directly to the family as the primary source of how one relates to the host society and the conflicts that emerge from that relationship (Ortiz et al., 2021). In our study sample, the participants' parents were Muslim families composed of migrant mothers and fathers, whereas in the previously cited study the participants were born into mixed interreligious families.

Finally, regarding prejudices about Muslim women, we find a duality. On one hand, the women express that stereotypes of submission and male domination represent an act of racism and social arbitrariness; on the other hand, some women state that these prejudices arise from a contextual reality.

If we compare this with perspectives from previous studies, the results align with various essays published earlier, and it is important to highlight concerns about the identity of Muslim women, the difficulty of breaking away from religion… but it is also evident that religion functions as a system for controlling women, as well as the power imposed by the patriarchal system and the silencing to which they are subjected (El Hachmi, 2019). Although this author does not deny that religion is often used to conceal the xenophobia to which the Islamic community is exposed.

Likewise, María Jiménez (2012), Director of the Department of Sociology and researcher at the University of Alicante's Institute for Gender Studies, addressed the importance of education as the only path to social change, capable of transforming the cultural and religious identity that masks deeply unequal relationships between men and women.

Several limitations in our study must be noted. First, access to participants was difficult because the research focused on experiences related to sexuality, which could evoke modesty or embarrassment. Additionally, many participants perceived themselves as an invalid sample because they believed they did not have enough sexual experience to participate. Moreover, with some participants, a prior relationship existed, which could create certain obstacles in their narratives, while also fostering trust or spontaneity.

Furthermore, interview dates had to be modified due to the arrival of the holy month of Ramadan in the Islamic calendar, a month observed by Muslims for fasting, prayer, reflection, and community. Some participants preferred to reschedule to avoid discussing certain topics, as doing so may be considered inappropriate in Islam. Future research should evaluate which factors may influence differences in findings, using -when possible- large and representative samples from different nationalities and sociocultural contexts. Generational differences or even descriptive perspectives from diverse genders could also be included.

Muslim women face challenges stemming from the prejudices and stereotypes about Islam that persist in many societies. They also deal daily with racism affecting the Muslim community, manifested through various forms of exclusion and marginalization. Throughout this research process, the struggle of Muslim women in Western countries becomes evident, as they find themselves at the intersection of multiple forms of oppression.

Factors such as clothing, skin color, level of education, or proficiency in Spanish represent only the tip of the iceberg of social segregation; they are "thermometer" elements that indicate the degree of racism they face. At the same time, these factors are interrelated and contribute to inclusion if they are genuinely addressed; however, in contrast to gradual adaptation, they may also lead families to preserve traditions, resulting in generational conflicts.

We found differing -and even opposing- points of view. Nevertheless, in listening to their voices, we identify a common theme: the effort to break away from social perceptions based on a limited understanding of culture and religion. It is crucial to recognize that the experiences of Muslim women are not homogeneous and vary widely depending on geography, culture, and social class. Intersectional discrimination appears in various domains: labor, education, public and private spaces; it cannot leave us indifferent.

In summary, the struggle of Muslim women for gender equality and social justice is an integral part of the global feminist movement; it would not be feminist if they were not included.

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