

Cooperation and Conflict: Mothers and Daughters' Negotiation over Sexual Conduct in Morocco

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Abstract

Drawing on capabilities approach and the framework of the family as a system of cooperative conflicts (Sen, 1990), the present study explores how interaction between parents and their adolescent daughters shapes girls' agency in negotiating decision about their sexual conduct. Four areas of negotiation are examined: wearing *hijab*, importance of virginity until marriage, opposite-sex friendships, and dating. This study explores how communication and sexuality of Moroccan girls is mediated through their mothers and socialization. Separate group discussions and individual in-depth interviews were conducted with 76 Moroccan mothers and 93 daughters (age range 14-20) in Rabat city. Analysis revealed that negotiations for a particular group in each area were rarely characterized by conflict, and more often than not by mutual agreement. A firm grasp of religion, a clear understanding of duties and obligations in the family, as well as daughters' need to balance family demands and socialization with peers plays a significant role on daughters' agency in negotiating decisions about wearing *hijab*, virginity until marriage, opposite-sex friendships, dating and marriage. Findings showed that little communication regarding sexuality as a private experience happened between mothers and daughters. This was also confined primarily to the risks of premarital sexual relationships to the social order.

Keywords: Generation, gender, sexuality, mothers, daughters.

Introduction

This paper seeks to explore the issue of negotiation of sexual conduct between mothers and daughters based on a qualitative study of 76 Moroccan mothers and 93 of their daughters in Rabat. The key assumption of the study is that while both mothers and daughters profess Islam as their faith, different agendas may inform their negotiating experiences. For example, mothers may be primarily concerned with raising dutiful daughters and safeguarding them and their family's reputation. On the other hand, daughters may be more concerned with being able to create a space for themselves in the western

culture. The study, thus, proposes the following questions: (1) What is the position of mothers and daughters in the negotiation of girls' sexual conduct? (2) How do religious values and liberal views influence the process of negotiation between mothers and daughters? (3) How do mothers and daughters negotiate decisions about wearing *hijab*, virginity until marriage, opposite-sex friendships, dating and choice of marriage partner? (4) What is the content of communication regarding sexuality between mothers and daughters?

To explore these questions, the study uses the capabilities approach which focuses on an individual's actual opportunities in the current context, given the distribution of resources and institutional constraints (Sen, 1984, 1985, 1993, 1995). Based on this perspective, the study examines mothers and daughters' agency in the negotiation of sexual conduct as constituted both in religion and through the process of resisting western acculturation. This process of negotiation is conceptualized by approaching the family as a system of cooperative conflicts (Sen 1990). According to this framework, based on their perceived and actual interests, contributions, and breakdown response, individuals within the family enter into negotiating activities over distribution of resources. While the negotiating process may sometimes produce conflict, individuals fall short of breaking off the relationship because they want to maintain that relationship. Conceptualized this way, the study offers a fresh perspective to the discussion of intergenerational relationships in families. First, contrary to the common trend in interrogational comparison literature that focuses primarily on youths and how they may be 'victimized' in the negotiation process, the present study explores the dual perspectives of mothers and daughters and considers the interests and contributions at play from each party. This portrays both girls and their mothers as resourceful agents in the process of negotiation. Second, by paying attention to both the influences that religious heritage and acculturation brings to the process of negotiation, the study advances the idea that family rules, values and norms, inspired by religious heritage may not be rejected by youths in the name of assimilation to the western culture. Youths, as active decision-makers, creatively use these influences as a sound foundation upon which they shape their own identity. As such, it is recognizable that they are capable of designing their own patterned quilt.

The objectives of this study are presented in twofold. First, it provides a new approach to intergenerational relationships within Moroccan families. Most of the research on such relationships has evidenced the intergenerational tensions that are derived from the growing cultural schism between the generations and decline in parental power and authority (Kibria, 1993; Portes & Rumbault, 2001). A few studies have concluded that intergenerational conflict within families may be overrated (Rosental, 1984) and that balancing

family values/obligations and demands of liberal stream can slightly result in psychological distress (Fulgini, Yip, & Tseng, 2002). However, little research has focused on how youths negotiate the balance between parents' traditional views and western acculturation. This study will be among the first to focus on the Moroccan family as a negotiation site where members of the same family try to essentially prevail in their own individual pursuits while simultaneously maintaining family bonds.

The second overall objective is to provide qualitative data on how Moroccan youths obtain information about sexuality. Young girls bear the brunt of maintaining family honour, ethics, and religious integrity and learning about sexuality is too often perceived as a threat to social and family order. Parental perceptions that knowledge about sexuality may lead to promiscuous sexual activity put young girls at risk of not obtaining information about reproductive health. Compounding the challenge faced by young girls is the fact that we know little about how they obtain information about sexuality. The study focuses on two resources, namely communication with mothers and socialization. It is worth noting that because mothers are considered responsible for girls' sexual conduct, discussion of issues related to sexuality takes the form of moral interdiction and rejection of outside influences. Therefore, this puts girls at risk for not obtaining comprehensive information. By evidencing the shortcomings of morality-based interdictions against premarital sexual conduct, this study aims to provide suggestions and search for alternatives such as associative initiatives to improve how youths learn about sexuality.

Literature

Much of the literature and research on the field of cooperation and conflict and parents-children communication about sexual behaviour was conducted by American and Asian scholars. It has focused on Chinese, Japanese, Filipinos, Vietnamese, and Koreans, while scarce research has been done on Arabs-especially North African populations. There appear to be several reasons for this blatant shortage. First, the lack of empirical research on Moroccan population discourages further research. Second, scholars interested in these fields do not tend, for some reasons, to focus on the Moroccan population. Third, though the literature on other Arab, Muslim or African populations unhurriedly increases, there seems to be a propensity to clump all of them together and ignore the individual and unique attributes of each group. Within this larger context, research has identified that girls' sexual conduct continues to stand for core society and family values while, at the same time, serving as a symbol of integrating new tendencies (Espin, 1999). The phenomenon of striking a balance between family values and integration to liberal attitudes through sexual conduct has produced a burgeoning

literature that examines intergenerational relationships with the family and those in larger context (Espiritu, 2001; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001; Villarruel, 1998). Although this body of literature offers interesting insights on intergenerational conflict, it says little about how this conflict is negotiated between girls and their parents.

Before considering the data on the management of young women's sexuality within families, a few observations are necessary in regard to the background and wider context of the study. Previous research on children, young people, and sexuality indicates that interaction around sexual issues within families is often problematic. One of the contradictions of western sexual culture is that while sex is valorised as a source of pleasure and a route to self-fulfilment, it still provokes a great deal of anxiety in relation to children (Jackson & Scott, 2004, 2010).

Intergenerational Dissonance

For the past two decades, scholars have shown that socio-cultural value discrepancy between parents and their teenage children is a key feature of intergenerational relationships within families. As a result of these discrepancies, researchers have concluded that parents have to cope with intergenerational conflict (Fuligni, Tseng, & Lam, 1999; Lee & Liu, 2001; Phinney, Ong, & Madden, 2000; Rosenthal, 1984). The most likely areas of disagreement are education, gender roles and responsibilities, and sexual conduct including dating and premarital sex (DeSantis, Thomas, & Sinnett, 1999; Espin, 1999; Espiritu, 2001; Hennink, Diamand & Cooper, 1999; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2001; Zhou & Bankston III, 2001). Furthermore, this study also identifies that intergenerational conflict is gender-based, and young girls experience more restrictions in mobility and peer socialisation.

Although this study has concluded that intergenerational conflict in families may be overblown and conflict between family obligations and socialisation with peers does not significantly cause psychological distress (Fuligni, Yip, & Tseng, 2002; Rosenthal, 1984), scholarship has not yet fully gone beyond its inclination to centre on intergenerational conflict at the expense of other dynamics such as cooperation in families. Thus, this paper focuses on cultural dissonance as a key feature of intergenerational relationships. Intergenerational family conflict generally begins to occur during adolescence over issues of autonomy and independence (Lauren & Collins, 1994). Besides, non-conformity to parental guidance oftentimes is expressed as forming and holding new ideals regarding intergenerational relationships.

Girls' Sexuality

Women's sexuality is at the epicentre of the definition of family honour and traditional values, and young girls may face restrictions on their autonomy, mobility, and decision-making. Girls' virginity until marriage and appropriate sexual conduct are not solely personal concerns, but instead they are concerns of the whole family. For males, especially, who may have lost their sense of importance and their authority (Espino, 1999), controlling women's sexuality becomes a site of showing traditions are not lost. Restricting women's visibility and mobility and pressurizing them for marriage may be instances of this. In a few cases, challenging male authority through "inappropriate" sexual conduct on the part of women may result in "honour killing" (Haddad & Smith, 1996). The idea that girls require more control than boys prevails among Moroccan parents. Application of stricter rules is due to the fact that parents are afraid of "losing their daughters". Sexual activity during teenage years is often associated with unsafe behaviours with young people having more sexual partners than other age groups (Donaldson, 2008). Safe surroundings cannot be taken for granted, and daughters cannot be allowed to "go astray". Many parents respond to these fears by becoming more rigid and trying to adhere more strongly to traditional values (Gim Chung, 2001). In fact, because of these restrictions, girls report that they find it difficult to integrate parents' expectations and modernity (Basit, 1997; Hennink, Diamond & Cooper, 1999; Timmerman, 2000).

These findings suggest that young girls are involved in a lot of strategizing while living under a set of parental restrictions and constraints. To name a few strategies, they subvert, co-opt, acquiesce, and collaborate to make living in the family a plausible option. How young girls negotiate expectations of womanhood and sexuality is best exemplified in the mother-daughter relationship.

Mothers and Daughters

The symbolic relationship of mothers and daughters is a good illustration of how girls' sexual conduct is negotiated intergenerationally within families. While men exert some pressure and control over girls' sexuality, women play a crucial role intergenerationally in how they define family honour and values through their sexual conduct. As girls bear the brunt of bringing to life a new generation that is expected to perpetuate traditional heritage, a struggle to maintain and transmit family values becomes particularly salient in this relationship. Although little research exists on how daughters negotiate their sexual conduct with family which is mediated by mothers, both mothers and daughters have been cast as embracing opponent ideals and practices, with mothers being more traditional and daughters being more open to embracing modernity and challenging mothers' traditionalism.

A significant number of studies have explored the relationship between parenting behaviours and adolescent risk involvement (Griffin et al., 2000; Cottrell et al., 2003). These studies conclude that, in families where parents actively and closely supervise and monitor their children, there are significant associations with lower levels of alcohol and illegal drug consumption, higher rates of condom use, and lower levels of teenage pregnancy (Jacobson & Crockett, 2000; Miller et al., 2001; Borawski et al., 2003). While the parent–child relationship is generally perceived as the most important determinant for effective parental monitoring, a range of socio-economic factors are linked to poor parental monitoring and supervision. These include socio-economic status (Pettit et al., 2001), low educational attainment (Crouter et al., 1999), poor marital relationships (Cottrell et al., 2003), and child maltreatment (Gilbert et al., 2009).

The degree to which there was open discussion about sexual matters between mothers and daughters varied and not all mothers had provided explicit sex education. This was attested to by both mothers and daughters. Curiously, even mothers with very liberal views on sexuality and a relaxed attitude to their daughters' sexual relationships did not necessarily give them much information about sex. In contrast, women from poorer backgrounds or deprived communities are more likely to become teenage mothers and have often experienced low educational attainment, poverty or emotional difficulties, or are the children of teenage mothers (Cater & Coleman, 2006; Harden et al., 2006).

Conceptual Framework

The capabilities approach (Sen, 1984, 1985, 1993, 1995) focuses on an individual's actual opportunities in their current context, given the dissipation of resources and institutional constraints. According to this approach, a person's quality of life is assessed in terms of their capability to achieve valuable functionings. Functionings refer to the various things that an individual manages to do or be in leading a life. They represent actual life conditions of the person. They can include aspects of a person's life such as the level of education, quality of health, and family relations that reflect the present condition of an individual's life. A person's capabilities can be thought of as the set of possible functionings available to that person. A capability set represents alternative combinations of beings and doings that a person can choose and thus this is defined in the space of functionings (Sen, 1993).

Cooperative Conflict Framework

This study assumes that the process of negotiation between mothers and daughters is based on both common interests and areas of conflicting goals. As such, it uses Sen's framework of the family as a system of

cooperative-conflict (CCF) (as opposed to a completely cooperative family) to analyse the factors that influence mother-daughter negotiations regarding sexual conduct (Sen, 1990). While most research based on this framework has focused on the interaction between men and women (Holtzman, 2001; Kusakabe, 1999; Summerfield, 1997), this paper stresses the mother-daughter dyad. Although Sen's model was originally conceptualised to describe the dynamics of bargaining over economic resource production and distribution within the household, the model can be generalised to explain the dynamics of bargaining over social and cultural entitlements.

The central idea of CCF is that "the members of the household face two different types of problems simultaneously. One involves cooperation (adding to total availabilities) while the other involves conflict (dividing the total availabilities among members of the household). Social arrangements regarding who does what, who gets to consume what, and who takes what decisions can be seen as responses to this combined problem of "cooperation and conflict" (Sen, 1990). Bargaining may be carried out to different extent but usually stops as a result of conflict that causes breakdown of the system (Cloud, 1994). The result that increases the benefit to an individual in the family may at times reduce total family availabilities. Family members may also choose to sacrifice their own gains to improve the outcome for the family as a whole.

Methodology

Purposive sampling was used for this study. The total sample comprised of 169 individuals, 76 were mothers and 93 were daughters (age range 14-20). Choice of participants was driven by a concern to gain insight into different variables and capture the mother-daughter cooperation and/or conflict. All the subjects who were involved in this study were Moroccans. They took part in group discussions and were deeply interviewed. However, locating participants for this study was challenging. Four educational institutions were chosen from Rabat, namely Group Atlass high school and scientific high school which are private schools and Moulay Youssef high school and Hassan high school.

Findings

As previously mentioned, women are constituted as the hallmark of family reputation through their sexual and gender-appropriate conduct. This includes guarded sexual conduct as well as restful behaviour towards the elderly and society in general. While it is both in mothers' and daughters' perceived interest to negotiate a guarded sexual conduct and meet society expectations about their duty, there were slight variations regarding what drove mothers and daughters into negotiating. Perceived interests refer to whether daughters perceived their interests in negotiating decisions over

sexual conduct to be the same or different from their mothers. Furthermore, since mothers perceived their duty to include bringing up typical good Moroccan girls, it was very important to them that their daughters were good examples. While all mothers reported that they wanted their daughters to be perceived as “good girls”, some were overprotective and controlling of their girls’ activities. These mothers had rarely allowed their daughters to go anywhere alone because they felt they could not trust the environment. In extreme cases, mothers did not allow girls to even speak on the phone. Few as they might be, other mothers reported that they had enough trust in their daughters to allow them to do a few things on their own including trips for summer internships.

To mothers, it mattered a great deal how their daughters met society expectations of guarded sexual conduct. This is because “people have long memories and unfortunately not usually accurate ones, you give an inch, they take a mile.” Also, most mothers were hoping that their daughters would marry a member of the Moroccan society. Therefore, it was important that she behaved in a certain manner, otherwise “people will label her in a certain way, whether it is true or not.” Thus, it was in the interest of all mothers “to save” their daughters the trouble by being strict with them.

Above all, it was in the perceived interest of mothers to be good by religious standards. This is because in Islam, every individual, regardless of gender, relates to God as a person and is independently responsible for his/her own deeds. Mothers perceived that bringing up and educating a daughter with Islamic principles dwelled in the realm of fulfilling responsibility towards God. As such, they made sure that their daughters adhered to Islamic precepts of behaviour. A mother said:

I have been very clear to tell her that I am not stopping her from going to unchaperoned parties because I do not have any problems with her. I am stopping her because I have a problem with me. I have to answer to God on the day of judgement and I am worried about me, and I am not worried about her.

It was also in perceived interest of daughters to meet society expectations of being good Moroccan girls. They frequently reported that they were scared of gossips and did not want to give any chance to people to speak ill of them. However, for older girls that had removed themselves from the parents’ community, it was more important that their mothers rather than others understood that they were good girls.

Additionally, since they felt they had gained a certain amount of trust with their mothers, girls argued that the double standard of curfew time was

unfair. A few girls complained that their brothers were allowed to stay out late at night and drive alone, but the same freedom was not afforded to the girls. While they put up some resistance, most often, daughters withdrew because it was not in their perceived interest to lose their mothers' trust. Daughters embraced this idea of cooperation as the best alternative. They frequently mentioned that their mothers were powerful decision-makers in the home and if girls wanted to socialise outside the home, they had to cooperate with their mothers. In fact, they had to defer to their mothers and this served as a discouragement for some of the girls.

Usually I walk out, she yells or whatever, there isn't really a winning situation, (pause), yeah she wins, because if I ask to go out she says no, I cannot go out anyway. She wins, it's her house, it's her rules, as much as I try to argue, and talk but, in the end she wins.

Along with perceived interests, there are perceived contributions. They referred to the contributions mothers and daughters made to the family and how those contributions positioned them in the process of negotiation. Both mothers and daughters spoke in terms of their duties and responsibilities and what the realisation of those duties and responsibilities commanded for each party. These perceptions matched both mothers' and daughters' efforts to maintain family reputation through meeting society expectations.

Four Areas of Negotiation

Wearing Hijab

Wearing *hijab* was not one of the areas that mothers and daughters in the interviewed group were in definite conflict. Regardless of whether the girls and the mothers wore *hijab*, most of the daughters and mothers indicated that they did not disagree much over wearing *hijab*. This may be attributed to the fact that both mothers and daughters overwhelmingly agreed that it was important for girls to wear *hijab*. While they valued *hijab*, a good majority of the girls did not think that it was important to their mothers that they wear *hijab*. Wearing *hijab* was largely a personal decision, even though the family and especially the mother would be affected by such decision. This is because Moroccan society associates wearing *hijab* with adherence to and acceptance of religious and traditional values. Mothers and daughters gave several reasons for choosing to wear *hijab*, such as respect toward religion, Muslim identity, modesty, and prevention of temptations. Wearing *hijab* was linked to a thorough understanding of women's obligations toward their religion. Mothers and daughters who wore *hijab* said they did it primarily as a sign of their respect to God. This by no means implied that women who were not

wearing *hijab* were less religious or respectful. Such decisions were also influenced by cultural understandings of *hijab*. Mothers and daughters also overwhelmingly suggested that wearing *hijab* was a sign of modesty. *Hijab* to them was a constant awareness that they had to be modest in their behaviour, lower their gaze, wear clothes that were not very flashy, and speak softly. As part of modesty, according to a few mothers and daughters, *hijab* was ordained as a preventive measure that guarded not only women's sexual conduct, but also subdued men's sexual advances.

Virginity until Marriage

Girls' virginity until marriage was a prerequisite mothers and daughters did not feel the need to negotiate about. Both parties considered virginity until marriage as very important. Deciding to be a virgin until marriage was a question of faith, as one mother said:

Being a virgin before marriage means no physical contact with males except for the social manners. Look, in my perspective, it is like breathing air; there must be no sex before marriage. I have never tried to give excuses about it...

Mothers reported that girls' virginity until marriage was important because it was a prerequisite to marriage. Although they were also aware that Islam mandates men to also retain their virginity until marriage, a few were more lax about it because non-virgin men did not have a community to reckon with. If a girl was not a virgin on the day of her marriage, she would be "kicked out" of the new home, and "turned back" to her family. In a mother's words, "I wish she would die before this happens." In several group discussions and individual interviews, girls discussed the differential treatment they received from the cultural interpretation of purity. Similar to mothers, daughters agreed that Islam required that both males and females should not have premarital sexual relationships. However, the ideal was not equally enforced. According to girls, more males than females were engaged in premarital sexual relationships. In one of the group discussions, girls stated that this differential treatment was particularly upsetting.

If a girl is a virgin, the guy must be a virgin. This is not religion; it is culture. The guy can go clubbing till 03.00 or 4.00, and as a girl I must be home very early.

Contrasting this general tendency, there were a few "success" stories and the daughters proudly received the credit for placing limitations on their own brothers. Using Islamic instructions, mothers' requirements of curfew

time, and limited relationships with the opposite sex, they had successfully pushed for the same limitations to be put on their male siblings.

Opposite Sex Friendships

The prerequisite of virginity until marriage for girls had implications for the kind of friendships girls could establish. Overall, mothers and daughters never or rarely disagreed that daughters should not have male friends. A good majority of mothers also agreed that their daughters' decision to have male friends was important to them. Daughters were more evenly distributed on the item that having male friends was important to them. However, over fifty percent of girls indicated that their decision to have male friends was not at all of little importance to their families. In addition, mothers pointed out that while they did not have a problem with girls interacting with male classmates, they did not endorse the idea that their daughters should have male friends. Basically, their argument was that the girls did not really need male friends, primarily because having male friends could lead to dating. While most of them explained that they trusted their daughters, their biggest fear was that the environment girls were in, especially schools, could compromise their daughters' decisions.

Dating

While virginity until marriage was an affirmative decision, with no negotiating boundaries, dating had more permeable boundaries. Dating as a prerequisite to marriage was highly discouraged by mothers. Only a few mothers agreed that they would allow their girls to be alone with their husbands-to-be after engagement had taken place. Mothers felt that dating was not an effective tool for constructing a healthy marriage. To them, the ideal of dating was that both the daughter and the husband-to-be would be allowed to talk to each other in the presence of other people, or they would go out chaperoned or in a group. Although some of the daughters agreed to the procedure of getting to know their future husband in the chaperoned way, several of them were less reluctant to condemn dating as un-Islamic. However, this depended on how one defined dating. Among older girls, dating was not at all about sex. It was about two people getting together and learning about each other.

I like a guy...I want to marry him. When one is serious about somebody, one does not have sex. We are not at the marriage level yet. We just meet to get closer to each other.

However, for some girls who were not dating, they said that the best way to avoid any confrontation with their mothers was not to talk about dating.

If they started a conversation on dating with their mothers, the latter would be alarmed thinking that their daughters were already seeing someone behind their back. On this account, some mothers avoided talking about dating and pretended it was not a problem.

Conclusion

In the process of integrating modernity, Moroccan girls' sexual conduct is particularly important to their families. While adhering to religious and traditional values of modesty and guarded sexual conduct, mothers and daughters try to resolve issues they face as they construct the identity of who a good Moroccan girl is. By helping their daughters grasp what it means to be a good example and guarding their sexual conduct, mothers fulfil an obligation to God, gain approval from society, and help ascertain good marriages of daughters. Daughters, on the other hand, are able to transcend cultural interpretations of religion and make choices regarding sexual conduct that incorporates not only their desire to follow the religion but also the need to integrate modernity.

The analysis of the interview materials explained the nature of such negotiating positions through cooperative conflicts. Perceived interests, perceived contributions, and breakdown responses conditioned by influences from the traditional values and modernity mediated mothers' and daughters' negotiation of decisions regarding wearing *hijab*, opposite sex friendship, virginity until marriage, and dating. These negotiating instances showed that both mothers and daughters mutually participate in daily managing of intergenerational cooperation and conflict deriving from the construction of women's sexual conduct. The Moroccan family also strives to maintain the religious and social heritage. Research on intergenerational relationships should move beyond stating the evidence that conflicts arise from generational clashes and pay closer attention to what makes living together for generations a plausible reality.

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