

**SEXUAL AGENCY AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE AMONG FEMALE GRADUATE
STUDENTS IN IRAN AND CANADA: TOWARD A MODEL OF SEXUAL AGENCY**

Farinaz Basmechi

Thesis submitted to the University of Ottawa
in partial Fulfillment of the requirements for a
Doctorate of Philosophy degree in Women's Studies

Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies
Faculty of Social Sciences
University of Ottawa

© Farinaz Basmechi, Ottawa, Canada, 2026

Abstract

In an era of intensified globalization and digital connectivity, discourses surrounding sexual agency and sexual violence against women have gained unprecedented visibility. Yet, persistent structural inequalities continue to constrain practice of women's sexual agency across diverse socio-political contexts. Despite stark differences in legal, cultural, and institutional regimes, women in liberal democratic settings such as Canada and highly restrictive regulatory contexts such as Iran continue to experience high rates of sexual violence and comparable barriers to exercising sexual agency. This paradox raises a central question: how and why do women's sexual lives and vulnerabilities converge across such divergent geopolitical contexts?

This study examines the lived experiences of female graduate students in Iran and Canada, focusing on sexual agency, sexual pleasure, sexual violence, and the role of state and institutional policies, with particular attention to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic constituted a global moment of intensified state intervention, social isolation, and digital reliance, exacerbating pre-existing gendered inequalities. In Canada, reported sexual violence increased by approximately 20–30 percent during the pandemic. Comparable dynamics were observed globally, including in Iran, where the absence of protective policies, combined with restrictive legal and religious regulations, further constrained women's sexual autonomy and safety. Graduate students, situated at the intersection of gender, age, academic precarity, and economic vulnerability, remain significantly underexamined in the literature, particularly within comparative and non-Western frameworks.

Guided by a hybrid theoretical framework that integrates feminist materialism, intersectionality, and biopolitical analysis, this study addresses four research questions: (1) how female graduate students in Iran and Canada experience and enact sexual agency and sexual pleasure; (2) how state and institutional protective and preventive policies shape their sexual practices; (3) the forms of sexual violence they encounter and the ways in which university and state policies influence these experiences; and (4) how the COVID-19 pandemic transformed their sexual lives and exposure to sexual violence across the two contexts. Employing a qualitative comparative design, the study draws on in-depth interviews with 31 graduate women aged 25–45 in the humanities and social sciences at the University of Ottawa (n = 16) and the University of Tehran (n = 15). This comparative analysis demonstrates how variations in legal, cultural, and institutional environments shape sexual agency, lived experiences, and exposure to sexual violence, as well as the strategies women use to navigate, resist, and respond to these conditions.

The findings reveal that female graduate students in Iran and Canada experience sexual agency, intimacy, and sexual violence in strikingly similar ways, despite profound differences in political and legal governance. In both contexts, women's sexual lives are structured by patriarchal neoliberal capitalism, which appropriates women's emotional labor, time, and bodily availability through dating cultures and intimate relationships. Sexual relationships are shaped by emotional capitalism and social acceleration, generating precarious, competitive, and gendered expectations that disproportionately burden women. In Canada, formal policies and discourses of sexual liberation have not dismantled patriarchal power relations; rather, participants described their reconfiguration through media, informal sexual education, and neoliberal market logics. In Iran, sexuality is overtly regulated through legal, religious, and biopolitical mechanisms.

Nevertheless, women actively navigated and resisted these constraints, particularly through digital platforms used for dating and intimacy, while simultaneously expressing deep mistrust toward state and institutional authorities perceived as punitive rather than protective.

Across both settings, intersecting forms of marginalization, including economic precarity, migrant status, and sexual orientation, significantly heightened vulnerability to coercion and sexual violence. Sexual agency emerged as a dynamic, evolving process rather than a fixed capacity, resulting in four empirically identified forms: habituated traditional, anomic, updated conflicted, and liberated. Patterns of sexual violence were largely comparable across contexts, with street harassment more prevalent in Iran and institutional and workplace violence more prominent in Canada. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these risks in both countries, while institutional responses remained limited, underscoring the structural and systemic nature of sexual violence beyond policy reform alone.

Keywords: Sexual agency; Sexual violence; Dating and Intimacy, Female graduate students; Patriarchal capitalism; Neoliberalism; Intersectionality; COVID-19; Iran; Canada.

Acknowledgement

I would like to begin by expressing my deepest gratitude to all courageous women who have fought, and continue to fight, for equality and liberty across the world, in the past, the present, and the future. I acknowledge that I completed this thesis on the traditional, unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe Nation. I recognize their enduring relationship with this land, which remains unceded. I honour the traditional knowledge keepers, both young and old, and pay respect to their courageous leaders, past, present, and future.

I am deeply grateful to my supervisor, Dr. Dominique Bourque, whose guidance sustained me throughout this long journey. Her understanding, flexibility, and steady support meant a great deal to me. Her strong theoretical insight, careful attention to detail, and ability to balance the broader vision with finer nuances gave me confidence and clarity as I completed this thesis. Working with and learning from Dr. Bourque was both an invaluable academic opportunity and a formative intellectual experience.

I would also like to sincerely thank each of my committee members for their time, insight, and thoughtful feedback. I am especially grateful to Dr. José Lopes, whose sociological expertise, particularly on methodological approaches, provided invaluable guidance and helped me navigate the thesis process with rigor. I thank Dr. Constance Crompton for sharpening my arguments and helping me refine my thinking throughout this journey, through her generous emotional and intellectual support. I am deeply appreciative of Dr. Stephanie Gaudet, who generously dedicated her time up to the final stages of my thesis and offered valuable feedback on my proposal, helping me refine its scope and coherence. In addition, I thank Dr. Kathryn Trevenen for accepting to be part of my committee and for her generous support over the past several years at the Institute in her role as Chair.

I am grateful to my colleagues at the Institute of Feminist and Gender Studies, particularly Dr. Shoshana Magnet and Dr. Phyllis Rippey, for their intellectual generosity and support. A huge thank you goes to Nandy Cassamajor and Marco Becerril for their constant help, encouragement, and care over the years. I also thank Terry Kruek and Dr. Sylvie Frigon at Graduate Studies in the Faculty of Social Sciences for their unwavering support of graduate students. Their dedication supported not only my research and graduate journey but also the academic lives of many other graduate students at FSS. I am also thankful to La Chaire de recherche sur les violences sexistes et sexuelles en milieu d'enseignement supérieur (UQAM) for supporting my thesis through a scholarship at the beginning of my program in 2021.

Last, but by no means least, I wish to thank my precious family. I am endlessly grateful to my mother, Fariba, my first feminist role model of resistance and perseverance. She has always strived to create a better life not only for her family, but for everyone she touches with her generosity and love. I learn from her every day. I thank my sister, Farzaneh, who is also my closest friend, a strong and thoughtful person whose grounded reasoning has consistently illuminated my path. I thank my brother, Farzam, whose brilliant ideas, role as my Gen Z technology advisor, and joyful presence bring light to my life. I also thank my father, Asadollah, and my younger sister, Faranak, who supported me from afar throughout this journey from my homeland, Iran.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to my homeland, my beloved Iran, and to the Iranian people. Your courage, resilience, and creativity inspire me every day. From our rich and enduring history to the vibrant spirit of the present, you remind me that together we can imagine, build, and claim a future full of possibility, hope, and justice. I am proud to carry your strength, vision, and determination forward in all that I do.

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
<i>I. Chapter Outlines</i>	5
Chapter 1 Literature Review	8
<i>I. Introduction</i>	8
<i>II. Sexual Revolution and Liberation</i>	9
<i>III. Dating and Intimacy</i>	12
<i>IV. Pleasure</i>	18
<i>V. Women’s Sexual Agency</i>	22
<i>VI. Sexual Violence</i>	27
<i>VII. Studies on the Role of the State on Sexual Practices and Sexual Violence</i>	32
a) <i>Literature on State Policies, Sexual Practices, and Sexual Violence in Iran</i>	34
b) <i>Studies on State Policies, Sexual Practices and Sexual Violence in Canada</i>	43
<i>VIII. COVID-19 Pandemic, sexuality, and sexual violence</i>	47
<i>IX. Female Graduate Students</i>	52
<i>X. Gap in Literature and Research Questions</i>	54
Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework.....	56
<i>I. Feminist Materialist</i>	56
a) <i>Women, Sex-Gender System, and Sexage</i>	56
b) <i>Women and Neoliberal Capitalist Market of Sex and Intimacy</i>	62
c) <i>Women, Globalization, Sex, and the Digital Revolution</i>	65
<i>II. Intersectionality</i>	68
<i>III. Biopolitics of Sexual Practices</i>	70
Chapter 3 Methodology	74
<i>I. Introduction</i>	74
<i>I. Methodology: Comparative Study</i>	74
<i>II. Research Parameters</i>	76
a) <i>Contexts</i>	76
b) <i>Research Objectives</i>	84
c) <i>Research Questions</i>	86
d) <i>Population and Sample</i>	86

III. Step-By-Step Method.....	91
a) <i>Qualitative Comparative Analysis</i>	91
b) <i>Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured In-depth- Interview.....</i>	93
c) <i>Qualitative Content Analysis: Tools, Coding, and Themes</i>	94
d) <i>Gender Responsive Intersectional Approach in Methodology.....</i>	95
IV. Limitations.....	96
Chapter 4 Results.....	98
I. Introduction.....	98
II. Dating.....	100
a) <i>Dating Modality: Online vs Traditional and the Third Space</i>	103
b) <i>Dating Scripts</i>	115
c) <i>Factors Influencing Young Women’s Dating Experiences</i>	118
d) <i>Ideal Dates.....</i>	124
e) <i>Appearance and Self-Presentation on First Dates.....</i>	126
f) <i>Dating in the COVID-19 pandemic era</i>	128
III. Intimacy.....	133
a) <i>Factors in the Formation of an Ideal Intimate Relationship</i>	133
b) <i>Bad Intimate Relationships</i>	137
c) <i>Sex and Intimacy.....</i>	140
d) <i>Intimacy in the Covid-19 Pandemic Time.....</i>	142
IV. Sex, Pleasure, and Sexual Agency	146
a) <i>The Meaning and Purpose of Sex</i>	148
b) <i>What Impacts or Restricts Sex?</i>	151
c) <i>Ideal Sex.....</i>	182
d) <i>Sexual pleasure: priority or not?</i>	186
e) <i>Watching Pornography: Yes or No?.....</i>	188
f) <i>Masturbation: Yay or Nay?.....</i>	192
g) <i>Sexual and Pleasure Education</i>	196
h) <i>Sexual agency.....</i>	203
i) <i>Sexual Experiences During the COVID-19 pandemic.....</i>	209
V. Sexual Violence.....	213
a) <i>Ambiguity and the Normalization of Sexual Violence.....</i>	214
b) <i>Experience With Sexual Violence</i>	216

c) <i>Did You Get Enough Support If You Asked?</i>	233
d) <i>Sexual Violence Impact on Young Women</i>	239
e) <i>What Creates and Prevents Sexual Violence?</i>	244
f) <i>What Prevents Sexual Violence?</i>	250
g) <i>State-Level Policies Against SV</i>	253
h) <i>School Policy Against SV</i>	255
i) <i>School SV Prevention Policy During the COVID-19 Pandemic</i>	257
j) <i>Sexual Violence During the Covid-19 Pandemic</i>	258
k) <i>Sexual Violence Support Group</i>	259
l) <i>SV Rate</i>	260
VI. Conclusion	263
Chapter 5 Discussion	273
I. Similarities	276
a) <i>Similarities at the Individual Level</i>	277
b) <i>Similarities at the Family and Community Level</i>	296
c) <i>Similarities at the State/Institutional Level</i>	298
II. Differences	299
a) <i>Differences at the Individual Level</i>	299
b) <i>Differences at the Family and Community Level</i>	306
c) <i>Differences at the State/Institutional level</i>	309
III. Sexual Agency Model	314
a) <i>Categories of Sexual Agency</i>	320
Conclusion	326
References	338
Appendices	372
<i>Appendix A: Interview Guide</i>	372
<i>Appendix B: Similarities & Differences in Results in Two Contexts Tables</i>	375

List of Tables and Figures

Table 1. University of Tehran and University of Ottawa Information	87
Table 2. Participants Demographic Characteristics.....	89
Table 3. Overview of Dating-Related Findings.....	132
Table 4. Overview of Intimacy-Related Findings	146
Table 5. Overview of Sex, Pleasure, Sexual Agency-Related Findings	212
Table 6. Experiences with sexual violence: forms, settings and perpetrator and frequency of reporting	217
Table 7. Summary of responses by participants encountering SV	232
Table 8. Sexual Violence Support and Impact Findings	262
Table 9. Types of Sexual Agency: from formation to practice characteristics	323
Table 10. Summarizing Similarities in Results in Two Contexts	375
Table 11. 381Summarizing Differences in Results in Two Contexts	381
Figure 1. Theoretical Framework381.....	73
Figure 2. 381Theoretical Framework with Impacts Levels of Analysis	275
Figure 3. 381Sexual Agency from Formation to Practice.....	381

Introduction

In today's globalized and digitally connected world, information flows instantly across borders, shrinking distances and linking people in unprecedented ways. Amid this accelerated connectivity, conversations about sexual agency and sexual violence against women have intensified over the past decade, highlighting both the possibilities and persistent challenges in realizing sexual autonomy. Yet, women continue to face restrictions on exercising sexual agency, even in contexts like North America, where sexual liberation movements took place. Despite numerous policies aimed at preventing sexual violence, rates remain high. In Iran, women also experience high rates of sexual violence, exacerbated by the absence of protective state policies and, in some cases, the existence of regulations that restrict agency and control their bodies. This raises a critical question: why do women in these two very different geopolitical contexts, with differing regulatory frameworks, still face similar barriers and violence? How similar are their experiences, and what accounts for these parallels?

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced a new global factor that intensified governmental control, confining people to their homes and regulating daily activities. It also exacerbated restrictions on women's agency and increased rates of sexual violence. According to the Canadian Red Cross (2021), sexual violence increased by 20–30% during the pandemic, disproportionately affecting women. University campuses remain high-risk sites, with Statistics Canada (2020) reporting that approximately 1 in 10 female-identifying students at Canadian postsecondary institutions experienced sexual assault in 2019, contributing to elevated stress, anxiety, and, in some cases, withdrawal from school. Similar increases in sexual violence were reported globally during the pandemic.

Research on sexual practices, intimacy, and sexual violence emphasizes the role of social norms, power structures, and state governance. The Sexual Revolution and subsequent sexual liberation movements contested dominant moral regimes and aimed to broaden individual freedoms. However, scholars continue to question the extent to which these movements reshaped sexual agency, especially within neoliberal capitalist contexts, which commodify intimacy and reproduce existing social hierarchies. Studies in globalized neoliberal settings show how structural conditions, including class, race, gender expression, and economic insecurity, shape sexual decision-making and limit sexual autonomy.

A robust literature documents the prevalence and impacts of sexual violence across social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Comparative analyses of state involvement reveal how policies influence public discourse, institutional accountability, and survivors' access to protection. In Iran, sexual practices and reporting are constrained by legal, religious, and social norms, while in Canada, responses are embedded in human rights and gender equality frameworks, though gaps and inconsistencies remain. Despite growing attention, graduate students' experiences, particularly regarding harassment and assault, have been underexamined. As a population navigating intersecting vulnerabilities of gender, age, and academic precarity, their experiences are often marginalized.

The pandemic further worsened female students' experiences of sexual violence, but most studies have focused on undergraduates (Huff, 2022; O'Connor et al., 2024), leaving graduate students largely overlooked. Investigating graduate students' experiences during the pandemic is crucial for developing policies and training to mitigate harms both in crisis and non-crisis contexts.

Significant gaps remain in research on sexual agency. Existing studies rarely examine how agency is shaped across different geographic, socio-cultural, political, and legal contexts, leaving non-Western experiences underexplored. The relationship between sexual agency and experiences of sexual violence has not been systematically studied. Comparative analyses of state and institutional policies' effects on sexual practices and violence, especially between Iran and Canada, are limited, and the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on sexual practices and exposure to violence among graduate students remains largely unexplored.

To address these gaps, this study poses four key questions: (1) How do female graduate students in Iran and Canada experience sexual agency and pleasure, and how are these shaped by socio-political, economic, legal, and cultural factors such as class, ethnicity, religiosity, and sexual orientation? (2) How do women enact sexual agency in the presence or absence of protective policies, and how do such policies shape their sexual practices? (3) What forms of sexual violence do graduate students encounter in Iran and Canada, and how do university and state policies influence these experiences? (4) How did the COVID-19 pandemic transform graduate students' sexual practices and exposure to sexual violence in these two distinct contexts?

This study contributes significantly to feminist scholarship on sexual agency and violence by addressing empirical, theoretical, and geographical gaps. Through qualitative comparative analysis of female graduate students in Iran and Canada, it challenges Western-centric assumptions that sexual liberalization and protective policies ensure safety or agency. The findings show that despite stark differences in legal and political regimes, women's sexual lives in both contexts are shaped by convergent forces of patriarchal neoliberal capitalism and sexage, producing similar vulnerabilities through distinct mechanisms. Centering graduate students, an

institutionally precarious and underexamined population, and considering the COVID-19 pandemic extends research into largely overlooked domains.

The theoretical contribution lies in conceptualizing sexual agency as a dynamic, lifelong process shaped by values, expectations, and experiences, operationalized through a model of sexual agency spanning from formation to practice. By identifying four empirically grounded forms of sexual agency and linking agency explicitly to sexual violence, the research moves beyond individualistic and policy-centric explanations, foregrounding structural conditions that constrain women's choices and normalize harm. The study further exposes the limits of institutional and state responses, showing how policies often function performatively without transforming patriarchal norms. Ultimately, it advances feminist political economy and biopolitical analyses by demonstrating that sexual violence is a structural outcome of patriarchal capitalism and argues for comprehensive sexual and pleasure education as a transformative intervention essential for disrupting rape culture and affirming women's sexual agency.

The research employed a qualitative comparative design based on in-depth interviews with 31 graduate women in the humanities and social sciences, 16 at the University of Ottawa and 15 at the University of Tehran, aged 25–45. This comparative approach illustrates how differing legal, cultural, and institutional contexts shape women's sexual agency, lived experiences, and exposure to sexual violence, revealing the varied harms and strategies of navigation, resistance, and response across socio-political conditions. Guided by a hybrid theoretical framework integrating feminist materialism, intersectionality, and biopolitics, the study addresses the four research questions examining sexual agency, sexual pleasure, the influence of state and institutional policies, experiences of sexual violence, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic across the two contexts.

I. Chapter Outlines

Chapter 1 provides a brief review of existing scholarship on sexual liberation, sexual agency, and sexual violence, with particular attention to the role of state policies in shaping sexual practices. It situates the discussion in the comparative contexts of Iran and Canada, identifies gaps in knowledge regarding graduate students' experiences of sexual harassment and assault, and highlights the need for targeted research and policy responses in higher education.

Chapter 2 outlines the theoretical framework guiding the analysis, grounded in three epistemological perspectives: feminist materialism, intersectionality, and biopolitics of sexual practices. The feminist materialist lens examines how gender and sexuality are structured within capitalist patriarchal systems, privileging certain identities while subordinating others (Beauvoir, 1949; Millett, 1970; Rubin, 1975; Wittig, 1980), and how men, as a dominant class, appropriate women's labor, bodies, and sexuality (Guillaumin, 1996). It also considers how neoliberal capitalism commodifies emotions and sexuality, positioning women as self-governing subjects responsible for managing their intimate lives, yet constrained by patriarchal norms, stereotypes, and accelerated social expectations (Osterlund, 2017; Illouz, 2007, 2017, 2021; Scharff, 2016; Cheng, 2016; Minina et al., 2022; Bay-Cheng, 2015). Globalization and the digital revolution further embed women's sexuality in a marketized and surveilled context, with social acceleration shaping dating practices and intimate relationships (Wolf, 2000; Connell, 2010; Rosa, 2013; Rosa et al., 2017; Zuboff, 2019). The framework incorporates intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989) to explore how overlapping identities such as race, gender, disability, and sexual orientation influence women's experiences of sexual violence and agency (Collins, 2017; Smooth, 2013; Bay-Cheng, 2015), while Foucault's biopolitics (2003, 2007) highlights the role of state power in regulating sexuality through laws and institutions. Together, these perspectives allow for a

comparative analysis of women's sexual experiences and vulnerabilities in contexts like Canada and Iran, emphasizing how structural, intersectional, and state forces interact to shape sexual agency and exposure to violence.

Chapter 3 connects the theoretical framework to the methodology, explaining the choice of qualitative comparative analysis and its benefits for this study. It introduces the research contexts of Iran and Canada, describing their locations, populations, political systems, rates of women in higher education and the workforce, regulations concerning sexual activity and sexual violence, and significant women's rights movements within the five years preceding the study, including COVID-19 pandemic measures. The chapter also outlines the research objectives, questions, population, sampling methods, sample characteristics, step-by-step data collection procedures, and the use of a gender-responsive, intersectional framework to guide the methodological approach.

Chapter 4 presents the study's results in four major areas. Dating examines online, offline, and "third space" modalities, including cultural and friendship-based scripts, factors shaping young women's dating lives, first-date strategies, and the impact of COVID-19. Intimacy explores how young women navigate diverse intimate relationships, define "bad" relationships, link emotional and sexual intimacy, and adapt relational dynamics during the pandemic. "Sex, Pleasure, and Sexual Agency" investigates participants' conceptualizations of sexual activity and ideal encounters, perspectives on pornography, masturbation, and sexual education, categorizes sexual agency into four main types, and considers the pandemic's influence on sexual lives. Sexual Violence presents major themes regarding forms of violence, influencing factors, available resources, and the impact of COVID-19 in both contexts.

Chapter 5 discusses the findings in conversation with the literature embedded in the theoretical framework. It addresses similarities across contexts at the individual level, including the pervasive influence of social and cultural norms, the critical role of knowledge, education, and experience, and the struggle for agency and autonomy, as well as at the family, community, state, and institutional levels. Differences across contexts are also examined, though they are less pronounced due to the presence of impactful systems of domination in both settings. The chapter concludes by introducing a model of “Sexual Agency from Formation to Practice,” outlining five main categories of sexual agency derived from the data.

Chapter 1 Literature Review

I. Introduction

The study of sexual practices, intimacy, and sexual violence has long been situated at the intersection of social norms, power relations, and state regulation. Central to this discourse is the Sexual Revolution and the broader sexual liberation movements, which challenged traditional moral codes and sought to expand individual freedoms regarding sexual expression. Scholars have debated the extent to which these movements genuinely transformed sexual agency, particularly within the constraints of neoliberal capitalist systems that often commodify intimacy and reproduce social inequalities. Research on dating, intimacy, and sexual agency within neoliberal globalized contexts highlights how structural forces, including class, race, gender expression, and economic precarity, shape individual sexual choices and constrain the exercise of sexual autonomy.

A substantial body of literature addresses sexual violence, documenting its prevalence, forms, and consequences across different social and institutional settings. Case study scholarship on sexual practices and sexual violence further elucidates how experiences of harassment, coercion, and assault are deeply embedded in local cultural, legal, and institutional frameworks. Comparative studies of the role of the state reveal divergent approaches to regulating sexual practices and addressing sexual violence, with policies shaping both the social visibility of sexual issues and the protection, or neglect, of victims. Research focusing on Iran and Canada illustrates these contrasts: in Iran, legal, religious, and social norms deeply influence sexual behaviors and the reporting of violence, whereas in Canada, state interventions and institutional policies have evolved within frameworks of human rights and gender equality, albeit with notable gaps and challenges.

Despite growing attention to sexual violence in academic and policy research, the experiences of graduate students, particularly regarding sexual harassment and assault, remain underexplored. This population occupies a unique position within institutional hierarchies, navigating power relations that intersect with age, gender, and academic status, yet their experiences are often overlooked in broader discourses on sexual violence. Understanding sexual practices, agency, and violence within graduate education contexts is therefore essential for developing more inclusive and effective policies and interventions.

In this section, I examine existing scholarship on sexual liberation, sexual agency, and sexual violence, with a particular emphasis on the role of state policies in shaping sexual practices. It also situates the discussion within the comparative contexts of Iran and Canada and identifies gaps in knowledge regarding graduate students' experiences of sexual harassment and assault, highlighting the need for targeted research and policy responses in higher education.

II. Sexual Revolution and Liberation

The study of sexuality started with sexology¹, which mainly examined sexuality as a biological phenomenon shaped by human nature and hormones (McGann, 2007). Social scientists questioned this notion by proposing the theory of sexuality, including sexual practices, sexual desires, and intimacy, as a social construction (Rubin, 1975). This theory is developed through specific discourses and can be defined by political regimes (Wittig, 1980) or institutions (Rich, 1980) in any specific historical and social context (S. Jackson, 2001). According to Rubin

¹ Kaan's *Psychopathia Sexualis* (1844) can be named as the first attempt to classify sexual behaviors, identifying masturbation as the root of all sexual "deviations" and a basis for sexology. Kaan's work became a foundational precursor to later sexology and psychiatry.

(1975), “a sex-gender system is [the] set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity, and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied” (p.34). The sex-gender system could not have been established without patriarchy as a long-standing social system, which has shaped sexuality throughout various eras of history using oppressive tactics (Lerner, 1986). Sexuality and courtship in premodern social contexts were practiced through shared cultural norms and rules, in agreement with religious patriarchal ideology (Valdes, 1996). The aim of these practices was to reproduce a normative heterosexual framework within the institution of family and marriage to preserve “economic status and moral reputation” (Illouz, 2021, p.45).

Liberal capitalist economic and cultural forces eventually mutated the realm of sexuality by introducing the notion of sexual liberation and freedom, especially freedom from religious norms. Sexuality, which used to be “the object of public scrutiny” transformed into a private matter, allowing individuals to be alone in their sexual life and experiences (Illouz, 2021). As a result of sexual liberation, the sin associated with sex was squashed and sexuality underwent a series of scientific, legal, cultural, and social changes (M. Jackson, 1983; McBain, 2021; Phayer, 2017). Eventually, sexuality entered the capitalist market, and its unconscious consumption became normative. Meaning, individuals started presenting their sexual selves through visual performances of sexual bodies in leisure venues and became consumers of the sexual market through the pornography, sex-toy, marketing, and therapeutic-pharmacological sex services industries (Illouz, 2021).

Globalization has transformed every facet of human life, extending even to intimate and sexual experiences. Millett (1970) writes that although sex is a biological and physical activity, it is taking place, not in a vacuum, but “within the larger context of human affairs” (p.23).

Globalization is distinguished by the acceleration and magnification of access to a free market (Wolf, 2000), where almost everything can be seen as a tradable commodity (Connell, 2010). While globalization created a context in which social connections have been stretched on an intensified worldwide scale (Giddens, 2013), social acceleration, which is significantly empowered by “digital revolution,” introduced an almost “real-time” (Rosa, 2013, p.214) exchange of information, money, and commodities, without large costs.

In this socially accelerated world, the pace of life is increasing from “temporalized history” to a “frenetic standstill” (Rosa, 2013, p.290), in which the rate of cultural and structural transformation is faster than generational turnover. Living in a “timeless time” is being accompanied by the deinstitutionalization of the life course, where individuals' lives are being seen as “life project[s]” with a low level of stability (Rosa, 2013, p.313). “Uncertainty” caused by the instability of the life course has been promoted by new social media (Camerini & Diviani, 2012), is a new constant of the neoliberal globalized world that impels people to “become creatures of the update” where “to be is to be updated” (Chun, 2016, p.2).

Love, intimacy, and sexuality have transformed in the face of an uncertain world where the notion of ‘update’ serves neoliberal capitalism. While, capitalism has been associated with rationalization and individualization of various socio-cultural processes (Illouz, 2007), neoliberal capitalism is the means by which young women, among others, are promoted to take up the discourse of agency and participate in an open market of sexual and romantic transactions as individuals with free will (Bay-Cheng, 2015). In the neoliberal capitalized world, sexuality is considered a tradable commodity that can be controlled and surveilled by big corporations in service of capitalism. In the following sections, I will review the literature and the debates around dating, intimacy, and sexual agency in the neoliberal capitalist system.

III. Dating and Intimacy

Dating plays a very crucial role in young adults' and adolescents' lives (Tang & Zuo, 2000). Dating can be defined as a practice involving romantically interested parties to get to know one another better (Eaton & Rose, 2011). In the classic literature, dating has been studied as a recreational activity (McDaniel, 1969), as a way of socialization that can lead to social growth, and as an opportunity to connect with members of the opposite sex (Erikson, 1968), and as a mean for mate selection (McDaniel, 1969). In an attempt to develop a theory of adolescent dating," McCabe (1984) highlighted three major forces that influence the orientation of young adults in their dating lives: 1) maturation pointing out both psychological maturation and biological maturation; 2) social influence focusing on social pressure one can experience coming from peers and wider society; and 3) the personal meaning that can be attributed to these forces in the process one's striving toward maturity. Along with social pressure, cultural and personal characteristics are highlighted as important factors forming individuals' attitudes and actions in their dating lives. Having a liberal attitude toward dating (Tang & Zuo, 2000), a higher level of education, and more social and financial assets (Brown & Shinohara, 2013) are important factors in one's life dating experiences leading to having a higher number of dates in their lives when they are single.

However, the urge to find a romantic and/or sexual relationship has been the main reason for dating. Since finding a suitable partner can be challenging, in a more traditional socio-cultural context, getting help from a third party (matchmakers) to deliberately intervene in the process of partner selection for two individuals is not uncommon (Coontz, 2006; Finkel et al., 2012). Also, historically, dating in a heterosexual romantic context supports gender stereotypes and men's power (Belsey, 1994; Impett & Peplau, 2003; Mahoney & Knudson-Martin, 2009;

Rose & Frieze, 1989). To maintain such support and proper pattern for dating, “cultural scripts” (Masters et al., 2013) work as collective guides for situational values, norms, and practices to picture an ideal dating etiquette (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004; Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). On the other hand, “interpersonal scripts” are the enactment of a specific cultural script by individuals and can be more subjective and detailed than cultural scripts to incorporate knowledge and personal preferences (Klinkenberg & Rose, 1994; Simon & Gagnon, 1986). Such scripts usually dictate that men are expected to “initiate, plan, and pay for dates and to initiate sexual contact, whereas women were supposed to be alluring, facilitate the conversation, and limit sexual activity” (Eaton & Rose, 2011, p.846). Studies show that these gendered stereotypes in dating scripts, beliefs, and behaviors of introducing women as passive and recipients versus men as powerholders are resisting in dating scenes and beliefs of young adults (Cameron & Curry, 2020; Comunello et al., 2021; Eaton & Rose, 2011; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010; Rose & Frieze, 1989). However, some studies show evidence of moving toward more “egalitarian dating” where “friendship script” is a transition from a gender-typed initial romantic encounter to a friendship-based initial romantic encounter. This leads to more equal long-lasting romantic relationships where there is an overlap between characteristics of a romantic partner and friendship at the interpersonal level (Eaton & Rose, 2011; Fehr et al., 2009; Rose & Zand, 2020).

Modalities and forms of dating have been the center of attention in scholarly works as well. Ways and routes to meet possible mates have been revolutionized under the impact of the sexual liberatory revolution. Therefore, the ways of mate selection moved away from involving a third party to only involving the two individuals meeting and selecting one another in settings such as school, work, social gatherings and so forth (Cacioppo et al., 2013). Additionally, one of

the big changes that transformed people's experiences with dating is the advent of electronic social communications. Internet dating or online dating refers to the practice of using dating applications or websites to find long-term or short-term romantic or sexual partners (Toma, 2015). Match.com, which was one of the pioneers of online dating services was launched in 1995 and turned the dating scene to a big profitable industry for big companies. With the advent of smartphones, many new dating applications have been made available for people to access online dating anywhere and anytime (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2021). Studies show that online dating became increasingly popular among younger adults, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. According to a report published by the PEW Research Center (McClain, 2023), 53% of youths under 30 years old in the U.S. have used dating applications or websites to find dates. While the population of adults between 30 to 49 who used online platforms to find dates was 37%, between 50 to 64 years old 20%, and 65 and above only 13%. According to this report, men compared to women, never married individuals compared to the ones who married at least once, and lesbian, gay, or bisexual individuals compared to straight individuals are more likely to use dating apps.

Despite the popularity of the usage of online dating, studies show that there are some negative stereotypes attached to people who use online dating platforms, such as being unattractive, desperate, creepy, opportunists, willing to lie to find dates, just looking for short-term hookups, or being sleazy (Doan, 2010; Finkel et al., 2012; Johanis et al., 2024; Schmitz et al., 2011; Vandeweerd et al., 2016; Whitty & Carr, 2017; Wildermuth, 2001). However, such negative perceptions of online daters are mostly common among individuals who do not use online methods to date while young adults who use online dating platforms to meet people have a more positive perspective toward online dating methods (Johanis et al., 2024). Online dating platforms also seem to be positively functioning toward allowing some levels of negotiation on

gendered traditional scripts (Comunello et al., 2021), allowing users to have access to larger pools of available more suitable matches for dates picked and introduced by algorithms on the dating websites and applications to find meaningful romantic relationships (Hobbs et al., 2017; Toma, 2015), and possibly more positive marital outcome with a higher level of satisfaction (Cacioppo et al., 2013). Sharabi (2024) found that technology and dating applications can play a central role not only to relationship initiation but also to ongoing, multimodal development of the relationship after meeting offline.

Despite the transformative impact dating apps initially had on young people's romantic lives, recent evidence indicates a decline in their use (Macdonald, 2025). Pew Research Center (McClain & Gelles-Watnick, 2023) data further highlight that 46% of dating-app users described their experiences as very or somewhat negative. Analysts suggest that the novelty of these platforms is wearing off for younger users. While dating apps were initially praised for offering the illusion of choice and efficient ways to meet partners, dissatisfaction stems from distrust toward apps, the gamified swipe-based interface, and a shift toward alternative platforms and hobby-based communities. The gamified mechanics of apps, once seen as engaging, are now often perceived as shallow or uncomfortable, undermining genuine intimacy. The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily repositioned apps as social tools rather than purely dating platforms, but this effect largely diminished after lockdowns, leaving many users disillusioned with the limitations of dating-app culture (Macdonald, 2025).

Online or offline, people in dating scenes are presenting themselves to potential mates in specific ways to be found attractive. Studies show that being deceptive or strategic to represent oneself has been used as common practice for daters regarding their socioeconomic statuses, physical appearance, interests, or personal characteristics to make themselves more desirable and

attractive matches to date (Hall et al., 2010; Rosenfeld & Thomas, 2012; Rowatt et al., 1999; Sharabi & Caughlin, 2019). Thus, one of the main reasons for distrust and negative attitudes toward online dating is the higher possibility of “selective self-presentation” (Walther, 2007) or being deceptive even about one's physical appearance and the representation of individuals on their dating profiles (Guadagno et al., 2012; Lo et al., 2013; Peng, 2020; Toma et al., 2008; Toma & Hancock, 2012). This is a significant aspect to consider, as Abramova and colleagues (2016) found that evolutionary theory is largely applicable to online dating. Men often prioritize physical attractiveness when choosing a partner, whereas women, being more selective, tend to emphasize socio-economic attributes or intelligence (Abramova et al., 2016; Blair & Madigan, 2016).

By introducing “emotional capitalism,” as a concept concerning dating and intimacy, Illouz (2007) explores the ways that capitalism has impacted intimate relationships, creating a conflict between economic behavior and personal connections. Emotional capitalism refers to a social situation where emotions and relationships are commodified, and emotional interactions become more economic, leading to insecurity and anxiety in romantic relationships. To Illouz, internet dating exemplifies this trend by turning romantic encounters into economic transactions, stripping them of emotion and deviating from traditional love. The rationalized selection process in online dating contrasts with spontaneous, traditional love, leading to mass consumption and standardization in romantic interactions. Bauman (2013) supports this view, suggesting that love has become a rare achievement, often replaced by commodified imitations. This sociologist criticizes online dating for promoting temporary connections over lifelong relationships, making dating a recreational activity where people are easily disposable. The widespread use of technology has rendered connections superficial and easily suspended (Turkle 2011). Heino et al.

(2010) highlighted how the marketplace metaphor shapes young people's interactions on communication sites, which promote a market-driven approach to partner selection: "they [online daters] described accounting for others' exaggerated résumé-like profiles, assessing their own value based on explicit feedback, adopting a shopping mentality and choosing features as if out of a catalog, and referred to the process of finding a partner as a "numbers game." (p.441). Viewing online dating as a numbers game encourages "relationshopping" rather than relationship-building (Duck, 1991), leading individuals to prioritize finding the perfect partner over developing emotional connections and effective communication.

Horvat (2016) questions whether internet dating truly reinvents love or merely promotes free sex, arguing that real love involves risk, which is avoided in modern society. Online dating often leads to superficial conversations focused on sex. However, some research emphasizes the continued importance of traditional, monogamous relationships and commitment (Carter, 2012; Carter & Duncan, 2017; Jamieson, 1999; Smart, 2007; Van Hooff, 2016). Duncan (2011) argues that individuals still draw on tradition to navigate changing situations, and Carter (2017) found that traditional family structures and marriage remain significant, with traditions being reaffirmed and reinvented.

Online dating applications facilitate pleasure-centered sexual activity without long-term relationship expectations by providing the proliferated competitive market of sex and dating. However, the motivations for dating even in the age of cold intimacies are highly gendered. Research has shown that women prefer not to engage in sexual activities in dating relationships until they go on a couple of dates and develop a level of emotional intimacy in their relationships, while, on the other hand, male counterparts would rather have a minimum number of dates with a high level of sexual intimacy (Christopher & Frandsen, 1990). Even in "hook

ups,” young women have a prospect of forming a romantic relationship whereas men are more often motivated by sexual experiences without further attachment or obligations (Weitbrecht & Whitton, 2020). Female users active on online dating applications such as Tinder also have negative attitudes toward the free sex market facilitated on dating apps without ultimate long-term relationship expectations, while male counterparts consider dating applications as a suitable sexual market that allows them to be active on sexual dating scenes for longer time (Palmer, 2020). However, in a study on long-term versus short-term relationships among youth, Mengzhan et al. (2024) found that, regardless of participants’ gender, both single and partnered individuals emphasized passion in short-term relationships (STRs), with partnered participants highlighting “fun” and single participants emphasizing “exciting.” In long-term relationships (LTRs), love, trust, and commitment were central, and partnered individuals additionally valued loyalty. But, after all these changes in attitudes and practices toward dating and intimacy, it is important to explore how pleasure fits into people’s sexual lives today.

IV. Pleasure

Sexual pleasure is defined as the personal satisfaction derived from one's sexual experiences. While it often precedes orgasm, orgasm does not necessarily occur in every sexual encounter (Bastian, 2021). Research shows that young adults report the highest levels of sexual pleasure and satisfaction within committed relationships, followed by emotionally involved relationships, and lastly, casual hookups (Armstrong et al., 2012; Barnett et al., 2018; Milstein et al., 2020).

Ford et al. (2019) assert that "sexual pleasure and satisfaction are essential aspects of overall wellbeing and deserve universal acknowledgment and promotion," advocating for sexual

pleasure as an integral part of enhancing sexual health and upholding sexual rights. According to Armstrong et al. (2012), relational contexts offer young women more conducive environments to experience sexual pleasure. They examine factors influencing orgasm and sexual satisfaction among heterosexual college women using surveys and interviews. They identify four key contributors, technical stimulation, partner-specific learning, commitment, and gender equality, and find women experience more orgasms in relationships than hookups. They also note a sexual double standard: women's pleasure is often questioned in hookups but affirmed in relationships.

In addition to being in a relationship with their partner, engaging in a variety of sexual behaviors, including manual and oral genital stimulation, is positively associated with women's orgasms (Herbenick et al., 2010). Furthermore, feelings of trust, closeness with a partner, and providing pleasure to that partner are critical components of women's sexual satisfaction in partnered interactions (Goldey et al., 2016).

"Embodiment," or the subjective experience of oneself as a sexual being aware of her own needs and pleasures, has been linked to greater comfort with sexual desire. This can lead to an increased sense of entitlement to sexual pleasure for women (Chmielewski et al., 2020). Montemurro (2014) suggests that as women age, they become more confident in expressing sexual desires, leading to enhanced pleasure. Bastian (2021) similarly found that older women reported greater sexual pleasure and satisfaction, often due to new partners, accumulated sexual experience, and improved communication of sexual needs. However, this increase in sexual satisfaction did not apply to women with strong religious beliefs tied to sexual conservatism or those with negative past sexual experiences, which may have hindered their pursuit of personal pleasure. Women also reported more satisfaction when they communicated their sexual needs to

their partners, with behaviors such as foreplay and clitoral stimulation being key contributors to their pleasure and likelihood of orgasm.

In addition, research indicates that women in sexual encounters with female partners are more likely to experience orgasms compared to those in heterosexual relationships (Laan et al., 2021; van Rees et al., 2016). A U.S. survey highlighted that heterosexual women were the least likely group to report having an orgasm during their most recent partnered sexual activity (Frederick et al., 2018). Herbenick et al. (2010) found that 91.3% of heterosexual men in the U.S. achieved orgasm in their last sexual encounter, compared to only 64.4% of women. Additionally, 46.9% of men described their last sexual experience as extremely pleasurable, while only 35.3% of women felt similarly. This disparity suggests that heterosexual and bisexual women may experience a “loss” in sexual interactions when orgasm or intense pleasure is the standard for a successful sexual experience. Factors such as coital norms, lack of knowledge about female anatomy, and the prioritization of men's pleasure contribute to this imbalance (Braun et al., 2003; Laan et al., 2021). Gendered scripts teach women to lower their expectations for heterosexual encounters and to prioritize their male partner's pleasure over their own (Bastian, 2021; Laan et al., 2021). Rodríguez-García-de-Cortáza et al., (2025) found that patriarchal norms that prioritize men's pleasure over women's, also enforce rigid standards for female bodies, and tolerate coercion and sexual violence continue to shape the sexual beliefs and experiences of young people.

Not all women prioritize orgasm as essential for sexual satisfaction, with some viewing it as "not necessary" in every partnered encounter due to cultural factors such as sexism, stigma, and rape myths that inhibit women's sexual pleasure (Blackledge, 2004; Hite, 1989; Nicolson, 1994; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Petersen & Hyde, 2010; Rudman et al., 2013). Despite this,

studies indicate that orgasm remains a primary goal for both young men and women in sexual encounters (Opperman et al., 2014). According to Kontula (2009), orgasm is the most significant predictor of sexual satisfaction for women.

Masturbation, historically a taboo subject for women, is an area where there is less gender disparity today (Petersen & Hyde, 2010). In the past 50 years, the proportion of women engaging in masturbation has quadrupled, driven by evolving cultural norms (Bozon, 2008), changing representations of female masturbation in media, and access to more stimulating sexual toys (Azéma et al., 2010; Giami & de Colomby, 1997). Notably, women in relationships also engage in masturbation, often due to dissatisfaction with the quality or quantity of sexual encounters with their partner (Kraus, 2017). Rowland et al. (2020) found that more frequent masturbation in women correlates with a greater emphasis on the importance of sex in their lives, lower satisfaction with a partner, and higher levels of anxiety or depression.

Regarding pornography consumption, although it has been criticized as exploitative and oppressive toward women (Campbell, 1988; Ciclitira, 2004; Dworkin, 1981), some women acknowledge its potential to challenge societal norms. Daskalopoulou and Zanette (2020) found that women use pornography for pleasure and self-exploration, despite its potential reinforcement of patriarchal narratives. Feminist porn has emerged as an alternative to mainstream male-centered pornography, prioritizing women's pleasure and sexual agency while depicting diversity in gender, race, body type, and more (Attwood et al., 2018; Chadwick et al., 2018; Hardy, 2015; Kodaka, 2020; Taormino et al., 2013). It aims to reshape discourses around sexuality, empowering women to reclaim their sexual agency (Lieberman, 2015). The literature highlights the complex ways in which sexual pleasure is influenced by gender, relational dynamics, cultural expectations, and evolving understandings of sexual agency. The disparities

between men and women's sexual experiences reflect broader societal norms, yet shifts in discourse, such as those prompted by feminist porn, offer pathways for greater equality and satisfaction.

V. Women's Sexual Agency

Sexual agency broadly refers to an individual's capacity to define and control their sexuality free from coercion or exploitation (S. Jackson, 1996). It encompasses both the development of sexual identity and the embodied role of sexual practice in shaping self-understanding, relationships, and social context (Bryant & Schofield, 2007; Tolman, 2012). Agency is closely linked to power relations: it can emerge not only as resistance to domination but also from conditions of subordination, where social structures create opportunities for action (Mahmood, 2010). Relational sociological perspectives suggest that agency is embedded across micro-, meso-, macro-, and chronosystems, continuously exercised by all individuals regardless of social context, and manifesting as deviation from norms (imaginative agency), adherence to routines (habituated agency), or deliberate consideration of choices (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Sexual agency is socially and relationally embedded. Concepts such as "bonded agency" and the "embedded self" highlight how relationships with family, peers, and communities shape agency, rather than merely constrain it (Phạm, 2013; Prins, 2006). It involves strategic negotiation to manage relationships, navigate social expectations, and situate sexual and reproductive choices within cultural and structural contexts (Bell, 2012; Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014; Schalet, 2010).

In more recent literature, the concept of "women's sexual agency," promoted by neoliberal perspectives, is framed as sexual rights and women's ability to define and control their

sexuality (Scott & Jackson, 2022; Abboud et al., 2019; Bay-Cheng, 2019; Evans et al., 2020; Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Mann, 2016; Pande et al., 2011; Ranganathan et al., 2017; Seabrook et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2018). As Cense (2019) explains, “young women’s sexual agency” can be “connected to different concepts of the self, being autonomous or bonded², being in control of one’s body or becoming a subject through the body” (p.250). Fahs and McClelland (2016) highlight that sexual agency is often viewed as a defense against negative experiences or a precursor to positive, intentional sexual encounters. Researchers studying young women’s sexual well-being frequently equate agency with assertiveness, autonomy, self-expression, and self-efficacy, challenging traditional gender norms of female compliance and passivity (Curtin et al., 2011; Horne & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2005; Martin, 1996; Merkin, 2018; O’Sullivan & Brooks-Gunn, 2005). In study on Vulvar pain, Oesterling et al., (2025) found that most of their participants experienced vulvar pain, with many engaging in intercourse despite it, often without communicating pain to partners. They highlighted that low sexual self-esteem, restricted definitions of sex, and limited sexual agency were linked to higher sexual distress and poorer sexual function, highlighting how sexual agency influences sexual well-being.

However, an overemphasis on overt self-advocacy can oversimplify sexual agency into clear, straightforward behaviors such as seeking personal pleasure. Yet, sexual desires and behaviors are often complex and context-dependent, leading to ambivalence and uncertainty. In advanced models of sexual empowerment and healthy sexual development, sexual agency is considered crucial. These models emphasize individual resources and opportunities, viewing sexual agency as the effective use of these resources to achieve positive outcomes. Rather than seeing it as a fixed personality trait, sexual agency is understood as a set of skills that, when

² In other words, having the autonomy to decide when, if, and with whom to engage in a relationship.

well-developed, support autonomy, decision-making, freedom of movement, behavioral control, and collective action (Kågesten & van Reeuwijk, 2021; van Rees et al., 2016; Vanwesenbeeck et al., 2021).

In many contexts, women's sexual agency is shaped by the sexual politics and power relations of the societies they live in. For example, young girls often face the "dilemma of desire," where media and cultural norms encourage them to look "sexy," but openly expressing their sexuality risks criticism for defying societal expectations (Laan et al., 2021). In addition, in more traditional and conservative contexts, though youth are shifting away from traditional gender norms, persistent relationship power imbalances and dominant forms of masculinity continue to reinforce male authority. These dynamics limit adolescent girls' and young women's sexual agency and discourage them from asserting control over their sexual choices and sexual health (Duby et al., 2023).

Bay-Cheng (2019) critiques traditional approaches that frame sexual agency as a skill that girls must develop, instead conceptualizing it as a universal, ever-present capacity shaped by social contexts. She emphasizes that efforts to support sexual agency should address structural inequalities, such as those related to race, class, gender expression, and physical appearance, that constrain young women's autonomy. Understanding sexual agency, therefore, requires attention to the biopolitical and structural conditions shaping women's sexual experiences, highlighting the importance of targeting external factors to promote sexual well-being and empowerment.

Bay-Cheng (2015) further examines how young women in the U.S. navigate neoliberal capitalist sexual norms, where they are expected to be sexually accessible yet face condemnation if labeled as "sluts." These "controlling images" destabilize young women, reinforcing neoliberal and patriarchal values regarding their bodies and sexuality. She argues that young women are

evaluated not only based on sexual activity but also according to neoliberal expectations of agency, choice, and personal responsibility. To capture these dynamics, she introduces a four-part framework of sexual agency: ‘Agents’, sexually active and agentic (high agency, high activity); ‘Virgins’, sexually abstinent yet agentic (high agency, low activity); ‘Sluts’, sexually active but non-agentic (low agency, high activity); and ‘Losers’, low agency and low activity. Bay-Cheng (2019) further points out that young women’s sexual lives are shaped by gender-based norms, material conditions, and sociopolitical inequalities, alongside age-related restrictions. The intersection of gender, age, and sexuality leads to a critical point where adults often seek to limit young people’s sexual autonomy. As a result, young women bear the most severe impacts of gendered sexual inequalities, including restricted access to sexual and reproductive rights and increased exposure to negative sexual experiences like violence. These inequalities complicate their sexual health decisions and highlight the complex nature of sexual agency.

Klocker (2007) introduces the concept of “thick” versus “thin” agency, distinguishing between substantial freedom and influence versus making minor adjustments within constraints. This framework demonstrates that agency, while always present, varies in its expression depending on social conditions. Thus, agency should not be confined to specific actions or individuals, as often portrayed in sexuality research and practice.

While neoliberal notions of sexual agency can place significant burdens on women regarding their sexual activities and choices, they also introduce emancipatory ideas into women’s lives. Cense (2019) advocates for understanding sexual agency not only in terms of striving for sexual rights but also as a process of gaining strength or developing navigating skills, even in unequal relationships. Cense (2019) proposes a multidimensional model of sexual

agency that integrates four interrelated components: bonded, embodied, moral, and narrative agency. Bonded agency highlights the influence of relationships with family, friends, and communities on the development of sexual agency. Embodied agency emphasizes the role of the body and sexual practices in shaping sexual subjectivity. Moral agency involves navigating ethical and social norms in relation to sexual behavior, while narrative agency refers to the capacity to construct coherent life stories that make sense of one's experiences and choices. These components interact dynamically, reflecting how young people negotiate their sexual selves within diverse social, cultural, and moral landscapes.

Several studies have examined factors influencing sexual agency. Hobbs et al. (2017) found that younger generations perceive greater romantic and relationship opportunities than previous cohorts, with technology enhancing their ability to seek and meet partners. Parental support, communication, and knowledge also play a key role: Klein et al. (2018) showed that emotional support, autonomy, and frequent discussions about sexuality positively contribute to the development of sexual agency in young women. Despite these gains, societal stigma toward sexually active women persists, with labels such as "Agents" or "Sluts" still applied, though sometimes less rigidly (Kim et al., 2022).

While discussions of sexual agency have primarily focused on the ability to engage in desired sexual activity, the prevention of unwanted sexual acts is also recognized as an important expression of agency. The concept of the "ideal victim" (Christie, 1986) frames victims as passive, weak, and blameless, reinforcing harmful assumptions about vulnerability, victim-blaming, and women's passivity. However, research demonstrates that many women actively resist sexual violence through a variety of strategies, including avoiding certain places or people, leaving threatening situations, engaging in verbal or physical self-defense, and seeking support

from trusted individuals or agencies (Kelly, 1988; Kavanaugh, 2013; Rintaugu et al., 2014). Institutional support, such as from the police or victim services, can facilitate these forms of resistance, though formal reporting rates remain low due to self-blame, normalization of incidents, or lack of awareness that behaviors constitute sexual violence (Stenning et al., 2013). Roberts et al. (2019) further categorize resistance strategies into short- and long-term approaches. Short-term strategies include moving away from or confronting the perpetrator, engaging in collective resistance, or reporting the incident, reflecting immediate, situational responses. Long-term strategies often involve behavioral restrictions, such as avoiding certain places, groups, or men, adopted in response to expectations of routine male violence. These findings underscore that women exercise agency within social constraints, navigating structural and cultural limitations while actively resisting sexual violence and prioritizing their safety.

VI. Sexual Violence

While discourses around female pleasure, empowerment, and orgasm equality are emerging, heterosexual relationships often remain structured by unequal power dynamics, control, and abuse, deeply influenced by socio-cultural, legal, and economic factors. Patriarchal norms continue to enforce self-blame, fear, and gendered expectations, with women fearing sexual violence (Rodríguez-García-de-Cortázar et al., 2025). Sexual violence (SV) is defined as “any sexual act, attempt to obtain a sexual act, or other act directed against a person’s sexuality using coercion, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting” (World Health Organization, 2021). The Ontario government categorizes SV to include, but is not limited to: rape by a partner or stranger, sexual harassment, unwanted sexual advances in any setting, sexual slavery or systematic rape (e.g., in armed conflicts), forced marriage, child or

disabled person sexual abuse, sexual torture, voyeurism, and cyber sexual harassment (Government of Ontario, n.d).

In Canada, sexual assault was the only violent crime that did not show a decline in 2014 (Statistics Canada, 2015). In 2019, Statistics Canada reported that 32% of Canadian women aged 15 and above had experienced sexual assault at least once in their lives (Cotter & Savage, 2019). Despite the prevalence of SV, only 6% of sexual assaults, and just 1-2% of "date rape" cases, are reported to the police (Statistics Canada, 2021). Similar trends are observed in Iran, where recent reports and meta-analyses estimate the lifetime prevalence of intimate partner violence, including physical and sexual abuse, at approximately 27% to 66% (World Bank, 2025; Hajnasiri et al., 2016). Reporting rates in Iran remain critically low due to legal barriers and social stigma; human rights monitors indicate that a significant majority of sexual violence cases go undocumented, with victims facing a judicial system that lacks specific laws to criminalize marital rape or domestic abuse (Amnesty International, n.d.; Human Rights Watch, 2025). Thus, while the true rate of SV is unknown, estimates suggest that globally, around 35% of women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime (World Population Review, 2022). Thus, while the true rate of SV is unknown, estimates suggest that globally, around 35% of women have experienced sexual violence in their lifetime (World Population Review, 2022).

Borumandnia and colleagues (2020) analyzed data from the Global Burden of Disease (GBD) database to examine gender differences and the impact of the Human Development Index (HDI) on SV prevalence. Their findings show that SV rates are consistently higher among women than men. While both genders saw a decrease in SV prevalence globally over time, the decline was more significant among men. In countries with a high HDI, the prevalence of SV against men decreased, whereas in low-HDI countries, the rate of SV against women increased.

These trends highlight the influence of socio-economic factors on SV (Borumandnia et al., 2020).

The risk factors contributing to sexual violence can be best understood through the socio-ecological model (Dahlberg & Krug, 2006; Lazard et al., 2015). At the individual level, risk factors include aggressive attitudes and hostility toward women (Carr & VanDeusen, 2004; Tharp et al., 2013), as well as attitudes supporting rape (Maxwell et al., 2003; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015). Alcohol consumption (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018; Carr & VanDeusen, 2004; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015) and non-sexual delinquency (Abbey & McAuslan, 2004) are also prevalent among adolescents who commit sexual offenses, while empathy is identified as a protective factor (Broidy et al., 2003; Wheeler et al., 2002).

At the family level, factors such as inadequate parental supervision (East et al., 2010), exposure to parental conflict (Vagi et al., 2013), and weak emotional bonds between caregiver and child are linked to sexually aggressive behavior (Ybarra et al., 2011). The relationship between parental income and adolescent SV perpetration remains unclear but may act as a contextual factor (Tharp et al., 2013). At the peer level, peer pressure to engage in sexual activity is associated with SV among young men (Abbey et al., 2012), while peer group norms often reinforce sexual harassment (Robinson, 2005). However, social support and friendships seem to protect male adolescents from perpetrating SV (Linder & Collins, 2005).

Community influences, such as media consumption, play a role in SV. Research indicates that frequent use of pornography, particularly violent pornography, is linked to sexually aggressive behavior, particularly in men (Malamuth et al., 2000). The Growing Up with Media study suggests that violent pornography may be a significant factor influencing adolescent

perpetrators of SV (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2013), with similar, though non-significant, patterns noted for violent non-sexual media (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2013).

Street harassment is a pervasive form of gendered violence experienced by women worldwide. Research from North America shows that it exacts a significant toll, increasing anxiety, depression, and self-objectification. Fairchild (2023) shows that when women share their experiences, they are often dismissed or trivialized, with harassment framed as mere “compliments” or greetings. Such minimization places an undue burden on women to navigate these violations of personal space, while speaking out can provoke misogynistic backlash. Street harassment also contributes to victim blaming and can lead women to restrict their movements or avoid certain public spaces altogether.

Dating violence (DV) is another form of violence prevalent in adolescent and young adult romantic relationships, encompassing psychological, physical, and sexual violence (Anderson & Danis, 2007). Psychological violence includes behaviors such as humiliation, control, withholding information, and isolation from friends and family (Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2017; Ureña et al., 2015). Physical DV involves actions like hitting, slapping, or choking (Straus, 1979; Wolfe et al., 2001), while sexual DV includes forcing unwanted sexual acts or touching (Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2017). DV is prevalent worldwide. Studies show physical DV rates ranging from 17% to 45% in 16 countries (Straus, 2004), and verbal or emotional DV was reported by 77% of adolescents in a large sample (Niolon et al., 2015). A meta-analysis found that the prevalence of physical DV perpetration was 20%, while sexual DV was reported at 9% (Wincentak et al., 2017). In Turkey, 79.5% of university students reported experiencing dating violence, including psychological, physical, and/or sexual violence (Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2013). Toplu-Demirtaş et al. (2022) highlight that vertical collectivism, which emphasizes

inequality within groups, along with hostile sexism, plays a role in perceptions of DV, with patriarchal structures reinforcing the acceptance of domestic violence myths (Glick et al., 2002; Rollero & Tartaglia, 2019; Marshall & Furr, 2010).

Technology-facilitated sexual violence is a growing concern, with Henry and Colleagues (2020) identifying three main forms: technology-facilitated sexual assault, image-based sexual abuse (IBSA), and online sexual harassment (OSH). Technology-facilitated sexual assault involves using digital tools like social media and online dating apps to perpetrate assaults or coercion, including "rape by proxy" and "sextortion" (Powell & Henry, 2017). A UK study found a sixfold increase in first-date rape cases linked to dating apps between 2003 and 2015 (National Crime Agency United Kingdom, 2016; Powell & Henry, 2017). IBSA includes the non-consensual sharing or threatening to share sexual images, often for revenge or financial gain. Victimization is widespread, with prevalence rates ranging from 1% to 12% (Eaton et al., 2017; Lenhart et al., 2016). Vulnerable groups such as women, LGB individuals, and those with disabilities are disproportionately affected (Powell et al., 2018). Online sexual harassment (OSH) refers to unwanted sexual attention and cyberstalking, with 34% of young Australian adults reporting experiences of OSH on social media. Women, transgender individuals, and LGBTQ+ populations are at higher risk, with marginalized groups experiencing more significant impacts (Douglass et al., 2018; Powell & Henry, 2019; Australian Human Rights Commission, n.d.).

Young women navigate sexual inequality by negotiating, resisting, or internalizing various forms of violence in their intimate relationships. Understanding sexual practices and sexual violence in their full complexity requires acknowledging the importance of context, as both are shaped by various settings and forms. In the following sections, I will review the literature on the role of the state in shaping sexual practices and sexual violence, focusing on

studies related to Iran and Canada, university campuses, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on sexual activity and sexual violence.

VII. Studies on the Role of the State on Sexual Practices and Sexual Violence

Sexual activity regulation varies across states, with each implementing different policies on family planning, reproductive health, and sexuality education. One of the areas related to sexuality that states might have regulatory measures is sex education. Rose (2005) compared the religious right's abstinence-only approach to comprehensive sex education, exploring their impacts on American social policy. Abstinence-only education, often influenced by the Religious Right, emphasizes limiting sex to heterosexual marriages, highlighting concerns over teenage sexuality and the decline of the traditional nuclear family (Gallagher, 1999). However, countries like Denmark, with comprehensive sex education, focus on adolescents' rights to sexual information and contraception, which leads to lower rates of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Alford et al., 2005). Studies revealed that the debate over sex education is rooted in broader concerns about maintaining patriarchal control, where gender equality is seen as a threat by proponents of abstinence-only education (Bendroth, 1996; Hawley, 1994; Marty & Appleby, 1993).

Research has shown the importance of comprehensive sex education in improving public health outcomes. Zori et al. (2023) found that state policies supporting family planning and contraceptive access correlate with lower rates of teen pregnancy, but data on the impact of abortion and sex education policies on STI rates and minority health disparities remains inconclusive. Similarly, Atkins and Bradford (2021) discovered that states with comprehensive

sexuality education report lower rates of sexually active youth and higher contraceptive use, while abstinence-focused education correlates with higher sexual activity and lower birth control use. These findings indicate the significant influence state policies have on adolescent health and underscore the need for further research to inform effective policies. In addition, van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem (2025) in their scoping review found that pleasure-inclusive sex education is generally associated with greater sexual agency and improved sexual well-being, though most studies are cross-sectional and cannot establish causality. Evidence is stronger for its impact on sexual health outcomes, such as STI/HIV prevention, than on broader sexual well-being. Sexual agency, consistently linked to positive sexual experiences and reduced negative experiences, may mediate the benefits of these programs. High-quality longitudinal research is needed to clarify how pleasure-focused approaches contribute to sexual agency and well-being, considering contextual factors and other sources of sexual knowledge.

On the other hand, the role of policy in shaping adolescent sexual behavior extends beyond individual decisions, as shown by Averett et al. (2002), who found that access to family planning services significantly impacts contraceptive use, though policies have limited influence over sexual activity itself. Additionally, federal involvement in sexual violence prevention through comprehensive sex education and legal frameworks is crucial, as highlighted by multiple scholars (Anderson, 2014; DeGue et al., 2013; DeMatteo et al., 2015). The 1949 UN framework also supports non-discriminatory national policies on sex and sexuality, emphasizing global standards that promote equality and individual rights (Assembly, 1949 in Gruskin & Ferguson, 2009). These studies collectively stress the need for policies that ensure informed, responsible sexual behavior and address structural inequalities. However, a lot has changed since then and additionally, not all the countries are obliged to follow the proposed criteria by the UN. Since

this study is a comparative analysis between two geopolitical contexts with different sets of regulations, in this section, I elaborate on literature related to state policies in Iran and in Canada concerning sexual activities and sexual violence.

a) Literature on State Policies, Sexual Practices, and Sexual Violence in Iran

The political landscape of Iran has profoundly influenced the roles and perceptions of women, leading to a troubling privatization of women as both property and sexual objects (Sedghi, 2007). Throughout different regimes, the state has played a crucial role in shaping women's positions via policies that often prioritize its own interests over those of women. An examination of gender policies under both secular and religious administrations reveals a consistent failure to advocate for women's rights. For instance, while the Pahlavi state attempted modernization, it largely excluded many women, particularly in rural areas, resulting in an incomplete transfer of patriarchal power to the state (Sedghi, 1997). As such, secondary institutions, notably religion, continued to exert significant influence over women's lives.

The 1979 revolution transformed policies regarding women's bodies and sexuality through a unique interpretation of Islam, mandating that women wear hijabs in public and engage in sexual activities only within the confines of temporary³ or permanent marriage. “Mandatory Islamic dress in Iran is used to control and discipline women’s bodies and sexualities, symbolizing their expected submissiveness” (Abdmolaei, 2014). Following the revolution, the rapid rollback of women's rights shocked many, as new laws lowered the marriage age to puberty, granted unilateral divorce rights to husbands, enforced gender

³ In Iran, temporary marriage (sigheh) is a legally sanctioned practice that allows for unions of a fixed duration, yet it remains highly controversial as critics argue it is often used to exploit women and circumvent laws against extramarital relations (Hawramy, 2012).

segregation, restricted women's access to workplaces, and promoted practices like polygamy and temporary marriage (Afary, 2009). These regulations were policed by moral vigilantes, illustrating how the state prioritized control over women's bodies over genuine gender equality. Following the revolution, state interventions increasingly shifted intimate and family matters away from traditional private or familial oversight and placed them under governmental regulation. The Islamist project sought to standardize and discipline sexuality according to Sharia-based definitions of what is permissible, leading to significant social consequences. One key outcome was the 'domestication' of heterosocial relations: courtship that once occurred in public settings, such as cinemas, restaurants, parks, and university campuses, was pushed into private spaces like homes or apartments where they could not be supervised or policed by the law enforcement agencies in Iran. This shift reflects the broader politicization of sexuality in post-revolutionary Iran (Sadeghi, 2008).

While conservative policies have indeed enforced traditional gender roles, some studies indicate that certain religious frameworks have benefited women from rural and lower socio-economic backgrounds by creating a sense of security for parents concerned about morality and family honor (Velayati, 2012). This compatibility with traditional values has allowed women's participation in public life to be less stigmatized. However, the same policies have also intensified controls over women's sexuality, as evidenced by an increase in convictions for sexual crimes following the establishment of the Islamic Republic (Yaghoobi, 2012). Young people often use their bodies to make social and political statements against what they view as a repressive regime (Mahdavi, 2007). Shahrokhi (2022) argues that the dynamics of sexual politics need to be understood as influenced by modernization and urbanization, rooted in the pre-

revolutionary era. As Iran has opened to global markets, the state has found itself negotiating sexual politics rather than exerting total control.

Despite the state's condemnation of non-marital relationships, practices like “white marriage,” or cohabitation without formal marriage, have emerged as subversive acts that challenge traditional norms (Golestaneh, 2022). The ongoing debate around such arrangements illustrates the flexibility of the legislators’ interpretation of the religious texts and the potential for dynamic jurisprudence to adapt to contemporary needs (Rodziewicz, 2020). As women increasingly view marriage not merely as a means for procreation but as an opportunity for emotional and sexual closeness, they challenge traditional expectations (Yaghoobi, 2012). Moreover, while homosexuality remains criminalized, discussions around such life choices are gaining traction among Iranian youth, indicating a subtle shift in cultural attitudes.

Concealment has become a crucial strategy for women engaging in sexual activities to navigate the socio-legal landscape, where their bodies symbolize family honor. Women bear the responsibility of the family honor by preserving their chastity until their wedding (Arjmand & Ziari, 2020). However, women employ various concealment tactics, such as body concealment encouraged by families and authorities, homosocial practices to challenge heteronormativity, and the concealment of desires to resist repressive policies. This reflects their efforts to transform their bodies from sources of shame into sites of pride. In a study of attitudes towards premarital dating, Motamedi et al. (2016) found that a majority of participants, particularly younger men, supported dating and non-sexual affectionate interactions, signaling a potential socio-cultural transition in sexual attitudes.

Virginity remains a crucial marker of chastity in Iranian society, with many young women resorting to hymen restoration surgeries (Kaivanara, 2016). The state controls public

interactions between the sexes, reinforcing social stigma around premarital sex, which women often navigate with strategies aimed at maintaining their social status (Sharifi, 2018). Although the use of medical and scientific language has opened discussions about sexuality, it has largely reinforced patriarchal norms. The medicalization of sexuality, influenced by increased access to information via the internet, has introduced new concepts that simultaneously challenge and conform to traditional views of female sexuality. In addition, the current socio-political context necessitates that policymakers address the taboo surrounding sexual health issues. Mosavi et al. (2014) identify six critical reasons for providing sexual and reproductive health services for adolescent girls, highlighting the pressing need for educational and healthcare interventions aligned with cultural values. Despite sufficient support for improving sexual health, indicators suggest a decline in its status over the past decade (Damari et al., 2016). Addressing these issues requires comprehensive policies that not only respect cultural norms but also promote sexual autonomy and health. Establishing women-only healthcare clinics could help alleviate prevalent sexual dysfunctions and promote sexual freedom while protecting women's health (Zarrinnegar, 2022).

As mentioned earlier, in Iran, since the 1979 revolution, a theocratic system has been governing the country basing the legal system on the Islamic criminal code (sharia). In this new legal system, the religious authority intervened into both private and public spheres (Aghtaie, 2011). It also criminalized sexuality by considering sexual relationships outside a legal marriage a crime. Zena⁴ is the main category of this form of crime that is defined as any act of illicit

⁴ Qur'an claims related to Zena are as follows: "Nor come nigh to fornication/ adultery: for it is a shameful (deed) and an evil, opening the road (to other evils)" (Qur'an, Sura 17 [Al-Isrā'], 32); "The woman and the man guilty of zinā' (for fornication or adultery), flog each of them with a hundred stripes: Let not compassion move you in their case, in a matter prescribed by Allah, if ye believe in Allah and the Last Day: and let a party of the Believers witness their punishment" (Qur'an, Sura 24 [An-Nūr], 2); "And those who accuse chaste women then do not bring four witnesses, flog them, (giving) eighty stripes, and do not admit any evidence from them ever; and these it is that are

sexual contact between a man and a woman. According to AsrIran, in 2007⁵, 53 000 men and women were arrested due to having an “illegitimate” relationship (AsrIran, 2020). The punishment of Zena is gender-based⁶ especially for married individuals which is death by stoning (Mir-Hosseini, 2011; Qur’an Sura An- Nur). The punishment is gender based since it was less severe for men, as men were “only” buried to the waist comparing to women who were buried up to their necks. However, in 2012, stoning was replaced by unspecified death penalty.

The punishment of Zena for unmarried people is 100 lashes and also, in this case, since males, in general, have more muscle mass to endure the lashes, women would suffer more from such a harsh punishment. The Islamic criminal code has severe punishment regarding rape. If a man has sexual intercourse with a woman without her consent⁷ or when she is unconscious, he is convicted of adultery and sentenced to the death penalty (Nayyeri, 2012). Despite the laws against rape, there are other forms of legal rape, for example, child marriage and marital rape. This line of thinking not only gives sexual agency completely to men, but also defines sex as a quid pro quo exchange, when men are in charge of providing for their families (Nafaqah⁸) or

the transgressors. Except those who repent after this and act aright, for surely Allah is Forgiving, Merciful” (Qur’an, Sura 24 [An-Nūr], 4–5).

⁵ Up to now, this was the most recent data that I could find online.

⁶ Although this law is not implemented in Iran due to a campaign against stoning. Feminist activists started a campaign against stoning in 2006 named “Stop Stoning Forever Campaign” in order to show the world that stoning was still happening in Iran, although the government denied this (Kar, 2007; Terman, 2007). The activists started with raising public awareness on both local and international levels about the reality of stoning in Iran. They also exerted pressure on decision-makers in Iran and encouraged the international community to do the same. Finally, they tried to advocate for the reform of Islamic laws and started the argument that stoning is not Islamic. Religious reform was a helpful strategy to show that stoning is un-Islamic using different Islamic sources and clerical fatwa. In May 2009, a new draft was passed to Iran’s parliament which eliminated stoning. Finally, in 2012, stoning was removed from Iran’s Islamic Punishment Law and was legally abolished as a punishment for adultery and was replaced by the unspecified death penalty.

⁷ The notion of consent should be understood as a situation in which a person has a genuine choice, requiring appropriate knowledge, necessary resources, and the absence of any coercion or violence (Mathieu, 1990).

⁸ Nafaqah “constitutes the financial obligation of a husband toward his wife during marriage and for a time after he divorces her” (Oxford, n.d.).

need to pay a dowry⁹ in exchange for having the legal right to be satisfied sexually whenever they wish to by their legal wives. Such a strain arises because, under Sharia law as enforced by the religious state, wives must obtain their husband's approval to work outside the household as independent earners.

Unfortunately, within the Islamic Penal Laws of Iran, there is no explicit recognition of the term "sexual assault." As a result, many forms of sexual assault often go unreported due to the reduced likelihood of the perpetrator facing consequences, since there is no specific legal framework to address such cases. Physical assault and adultery are the two closest terms to sexual assault. Article 223, paragraph 61, of the Constitution states: "(Women) have the right to be protected against verbal abuse by others and duty toward members of the society to refrain from verbal abuse." Although the Iranian Islamic criminal code implicitly points to verbal sexual harassment, it does not identify non-consensual groping or touching as some possible forms of sexual assault (Torabi, 2018). Therefore, the lack of accurate legal definitions and terminologies in the current Iranian legal system of such crimes amplify the chance of biased decisions made in courts in the cases of addressing sexual assault (Basmehchi, 2023).

In addition, since studying sexuality related issues is a taboo in Iran, there are not enough comprehensive research related to this issue. Thus, very few reports or scholarly works focused on the subject. For example, back in 2007, the Iranian police acknowledged that sexual assaults were a matter of high importance (ISNA, 2007). In line with this, the largest city in Iran, Tehran, recorded the highest number of reported rape cases in 2020, with 1,650 instances, as reported by the Shargh daily newspaper (Hemmati, 2020). However, due to lack of legal support for victims,

⁹ Dowries were paid to the bride or the bride's family to compensate their loss of her labour and her reproductive potential (Lagoudi, 2022).

only 20% of women report the rape cases to the police. There is even less information regarding the other forms of SV. One of the few studies addressing the issue of sexual harassment is a study that was conducted among 350 women living in Sari, Iran. This study shows that 95% of women have experienced some form of sexual harassment in their lifetime (Kurdi and Hosseiniozari, 2015).

However, even though more than 90 percent of Iranian women have experienced gender-based violence in their lifetime (Kurdi and Hosseiniozari, 2015), talking and conducting research on sexuality-related issues remains a taboo in Iran. This issue becomes even more taboo when it comes to discussing SV in the educational system and, more specifically, on university campuses because addressing this issue can be considered as an insult to the virtue of the educational system. To the best of my knowledge, there is only one study available examining the issue of sexual harassment on Iranian university campuses, which mainly focuses on student-professor relationships (Rostami, 2021). In addition to the lack of studies, there is a lack of policies to prevent SV on campuses in Iran's universities. Preventive policies are not clearly stated in educational institutions' policies and handbooks in that country. There is also a lack of awareness regarding this issue in its universities. In an effort to raise awareness about the danger of sexual harassment and violence, students of Amirkabir University started sharing their experiences with SV on their university campus in their newsletter in 2018. However, even this activity was suspended since it was considered as an insult to the education system and professors (HarrasWatch, 2019).

Studies highlight the widespread prevalence of intimate partner violence (IPV) against women in Iran, with alarming rates of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse. For instance, research from Tehran shows that 55% of female university students and 60% of married women

have experienced physical aggression (Ghahari et al., 2006). Similar findings across different cities in Iran reflect the pervasive nature of IPV (Faramarzi et al., 2005). Despite the patriarchal norms, both men and women are perpetrators and victims of violence, although men are often the primary abusers in domestic violence incidents (Smith-Marek et al., 2015; Vameghi et al., 2010). The absence of specific laws to protect individuals from IPV exacerbates the situation, leaving women particularly vulnerable.

The risk markers for IPV victimization and perpetration among men and women in Tehran show distinct gendered patterns. Nikparvar and colleagues (2021) identified that physical aggression victimization and perpetration are interconnected for both genders, with psychological aggression also playing a significant role. For men, physical aggression perpetration was a key predictor of victimization, while for women, psychological aggression victimization was a major predictor of physical violence. These findings underscore the importance of tailored interventions that address the specific needs of both men and women to effectively reduce IPV (Nikparvar et al., 2021). Such interventions are crucial in Iran, where socio-cultural and legal frameworks complicate efforts to combat IPV.

Younger women, particularly in premarital relationships, face additional layers of vulnerability in Iran. Rahbari (2020) discusses how cultural norms around virginity and chastity exacerbate the risks of violence in these relationships, as young women fear stigmatization and lack support from families and legal systems. This creates an environment where women feel compelled to stay in abusive relationships, fearing social and familial repercussions more than the violence itself. The absence of legal protections and societal support for these women makes it difficult to break the cycle of violence, leaving them trapped in harmful relationships.

The impact of sexual violence extends beyond individual experiences, contributing to a range of psychological and physical health issues. Jabbarinejad et al. (2023) found that IPV is linked to psychiatric symptoms, substance use, and even suicide, with abuse often exacerbating underlying health conditions. Educated women, despite their higher social status, are not immune to such violence, highlighting the need for systemic changes in healthcare and legal systems to address the issue comprehensively. Emotional and psychological abuse, often overlooked, plays a crucial role in the overall experience of IPV and requires targeted interventions.

While the overall prevalence of IPV in Iran is high, with emotional and sexual violence often going hand-in-hand with physical abuse, there is a lack of official data on sexual violence within intimate partnerships (Ansari et al., 2017; Fallah et al., 2019). Meta-analyses provide some insights, indicating that emotional violence is the most common form of abuse, followed by physical and sexual violence (Dehkordi & Heydari, 2024). However, the socio-economic and cultural factors that correlate with IPV, including the husband's employment status, family interference, and patriarchal views, further complicate the issue (Hosseini, 2021). These factors contribute to women's reluctance to seek help, as cultural norms often justify abuse and prioritize family reputation over individual well-being.

Sexual violence in particular has long-lasting consequences on women's mental and physical health. Naghavi et al. (2019) found that women who experience forced sexual activities within marriage often suffer from depression, pain, and emotional disempowerment. The lack of support from social networks further isolates these women, making it difficult for them to seek help or even discuss their experiences. In many cases, divorce is seen as a last resort, but cultural expectations often prevent women from pursuing this option, leaving them trapped in abusive marriages. Sexual dysfunction and dissatisfaction are also linked to sexual violence, as

highlighted by Tadayon et al. (2018), who found significant disparities in sexual satisfaction between women who experienced violence and those who did not.

b) Studies on State Policies, Sexual Practices and Sexual Violence in Canada

Sexual practices and sexual violence in Canada are influenced by a complex interplay of gender policies, social norms, and evolving legal frameworks. Policies related to gender shape access to education and employment for women, influencing their ability to maintain good health and escape poverty. Societies with greater sex equality tend to be more prosperous and have stable democratic institutions (Htun & Weldon, 2010). However, the implementation of these policies in Canada has been uneven, with sex gradually losing its centrality in public policy from the 1980s onward (Brodie, 2007). This shift has significantly impacted women's lives, as sex-based policies that previously supported their economic and social rights have been dismantled.

One of the critical issues in Canada's gender policies is the balance between women's work and domestic responsibilities. Despite progress in women's workforce participation, many still struggle with work-life balance, particularly in dual-income families. The gender wage gap persists, and women are overrepresented in part-time work and "pink-collar" jobs, which often lack security and benefits (Sawer, 2006). Furthermore, the decline of gender-based policy units in the government has exacerbated these challenges, as the absence of such frameworks makes it harder for women to navigate the complexities of modern work and family life (Brodie, 2007).

In the context of sexual practices, Canada has witnessed the rise of movements challenging traditional relationship structures. Polyamory, for instance, offers an alternative to the monogamous relationship model. However, the politics of polyamory in Canada reflect tensions between seeking inclusion within societal norms and advocating for broader structural

change. While some polyamorous individuals focus on gaining acceptance and differentiating themselves from polygamy, others call for more transformative change, aiming for universal rights and a de-institutionalization of marriage¹⁰ (Poole, 2022).

Legal frameworks have also evolved in relation to same-sex relationships, contributing to a "normalizing love discourse" that emphasizes monogamy and responsibility. This shift is evident in court cases like *Halpern v Canada*, which established a form of socially acceptable, legally recognized love. However, this legal recognition also carries implicit expectations about care and responsibility within relationships, reflecting broader neoliberal ideals of self-sufficiency (Osterlund, 2017). Such norms influence both individual relationships and state policies, often reinforcing traditional family structures while marginalizing alternative forms of intimacy.

Sexual health practices among Canadian youth are shaped by socioeconomic status (SES) and family structure, with significant differences in behaviors between genders. For example, young women from lower SES backgrounds are more likely to engage in sexual activity, while young men's sexual risk behaviors are more closely linked to family structure (Langille et al., 2005). Additionally, policy changes, such as the increase in the age of sexual consent in 2008, aimed to protect adolescents from exploitation, although the impact on behavior has been mixed, with younger teens showing slightly higher risks for forced sex and multiple partners (Miller et al., 2010).

Sexual violence remains a pervasive issue in Canada, particularly affecting women. The 2019 General Social Survey found that 3.5% of Canadians had experienced spousal violence, with women more likely to suffer severe forms of violence, such as sexual assault and choking

¹⁰ The deinstitutionalization of marriage refers to the weakening of formal and informal rules, norms, and assumptions that govern marriage, household production, and intimate relationships (Lauer & Yodanis, 2010).

(Conroy, 2021). Indigenous women, disabled women, and other marginalized groups are at even higher risk, reflecting deep-rooted social inequalities that perpetuate gender-based violence (Cotter & Savage, 2019). Despite efforts to improve reporting and support services, many survivors still face significant barriers, including fear of retaliation, stigma, and mistrust of authorities (Sit & Stermac, 2021).

Access to support services for sexual violence survivors in Canada varies, though trauma-informed approaches have gained traction. These models emphasize collaboration among professionals and community organizations to provide comprehensive care, particularly for diverse groups such as Indigenous women and women in the sex industry (Benoit et al., 2015). Nevertheless, significant gaps remain in reaching marginalized populations, including immigrant women who face barriers related to language, discrimination, and navigating the healthcare system (Machado et al., 2022). Such limitations can undermine broader feminist efforts toward meaningful social change, underscoring the need for more holistic and inclusive approaches to addressing violence against women (Abraham & Tastoglou, 2016).

In Ontario, on March 6, 2015, the Government of Ontario announced *It's Never Okay: An Action Plan to Stop Sexual Violence and Harassment*, affirming that sexual violence, harassment, and domestic violence would not be tolerated. Protecting all Ontarians from these harms was framed as a top government priority and essential for achieving a fair and equitable society. This initiative was followed by the passage of Bill 132 (MacCharles, n.d.). This legislation amended various statutes with respect to sexual violence, domestic violence, and related matters.

Ostrich (2025) demonstrates that despite these legislative and policy measures, stand-alone sexual violence policies at neoliberal universities often operate as performative, neoliberal tools. Drawing on a genealogy of a policy at an unnamed university, Ostrich argues that ruling relations shape provincially mandated policies to silence expert knowledge, narrow prevention efforts, and reinforce neoliberal logics in higher education. Influenced by Bill 132 and a pervasive performance culture, the policy functions more as a managerial mechanism than a survivor-centered framework. In practice, mandatory reporting pressures, mistrust of reporting processes, and administrative control over disclosures limit survivors' options and suppress official statistics. Using a critical feminist lens, Ostrich shows how the bureaucratic design individualizes sexual violence, protects the institution's corporate image, obscures systemic problems, and ultimately reinforces institutional power while marginalizing frontline workers and survivors. Colpitts (2022) also flagged how neoliberal universities often invoke intersectionality rhetorically, but these commitments rarely translate into practice, resulting in anti-violence measures that overlook how institutional power and intersecting systems of oppression shape sexual violence, vulnerability, and access to support, while allowing universities to present themselves as progressive without addressing structural causes.

The COVID-19 pandemic further intensified barriers to services and increased risks to women's safety. Social isolation, economic insecurity, and movement restrictions contributed to a surge in domestic violence, described as a "shadow pandemic" of abuse (Simonovic 2020; House of Commons 2021). Domestic violence cases rose an estimated 30%, calls to Ontario's Assaulted Women's Helpline increased by 84%, and female homicides grew by 26% between 2019 and 2021, with many committed by intimate partners (Ibrahim 2022). Public health measures also forced shelters to reduce capacity, often by 50% or more, severely limiting access

to critical supports and heightening risks to women's health, safety, and overall well-being (Koshan et al., 2021). As these risks intensified, the pandemic also reconfigured women's sexual relationships and vulnerabilities, setting the stage for broader discussions of COVID-19, sexuality, and sexual violence.

VIII. COVID-19 Pandemic, sexuality, and sexual violence

The COVID-19 pandemic, declared a global crisis by the World Health Organization on March 11, 2020, prompted widespread measures aimed at reducing virus transmission, including mobility restrictions and the closure of non-essential services (Eleuteri et al., 2022). These interventions profoundly altered people's daily lives, introducing stressors such as social isolation, financial uncertainty, and heightened fear of infection and death. As a result, many individuals experienced a decline in psychological well-being, manifesting as increased anxiety, depression, and decreased life satisfaction (Li et al., 2020; Pera, 2020; Salari et al., 2020). Notably, changes in sleep patterns and quality, along with increased harmful behaviors like alcohol consumption, were reported during this period (Ahmed et al., 2020; Cao et al., 2020). These widespread psychological impacts inevitably extended to sexual health and activity, a critical aspect of human life defined by the World Health Organization as a state of physical, emotional, mental, and social well-being related to sexuality (World Health Organization, n.d.).

Research on dating app use during COVID-19 shows how online dating became both a technological workaround to social restrictions and an emotional coping strategy. Duguay et al. (2024) demonstrate that dating-app companies rapidly reconfigured their platforms to promote “virtual dating”, prioritizing video interaction, expanding location boundaries, and framing

online encounters as the safest and most responsible romantic practice. These corporate shifts reinforced heteronormative dating scripts and emphasized authenticity and affective connection while sidelining alternative uses of apps. Complementing this socio-technical perspective, Dean Marshall et al. (2023) show that users turned to online dating platforms to alleviate boredom, loneliness, and social deprivation produced by lockdowns. For many, online dating platforms became essential spaces for meeting new people when offline interaction was impossible, even if restrictions ultimately limited the ability to develop relationships beyond the app. Increased use was also driven by the gamified, entertainment-oriented nature of swiping features, which offered distraction and a sense of social contact. Together, these studies illustrate how dating apps became critical infrastructures of intimacy during the pandemic, simultaneously reshaped by corporate narratives of safe, virtual romance and repurposed by users to meet urgent social and psychological needs.

The pandemic's social distancing measures led to significant shifts in sexual behavior, influenced by individuals' relational status, gender, and sexual orientation. Research indicated that while partnered individuals reported higher sexual satisfaction, singles faced notable declines in sexual activity due to difficulties in meeting potential partners (Candel & Jitaru, 2021). The early pandemic period saw an increase in online dating as a means of connecting with others, yet users reported challenges like heightened anxiety regarding safety and the quality of virtual interactions (Candel & Jitaru, 2021). Interestingly, while many reported a decline in partnered sexual activities, there was a notable increase in solo sexual activities, such as masturbation, as individuals sought to adapt to the new realities of their sexual lives (Bowling et al., 2021). The increased reliance on technology and virtual platforms for maintaining

relationships provided some benefits, but also highlighted the struggle for intimacy and physical contact that many individuals faced.

Bowling et al. (2021) explored these perceptions in their qualitative study of US adults during the pandemic, uncovering a complex landscape of sexual attitudes and behaviors. Thematic analysis of participants' responses revealed themes such as shifts in the purpose of sex, fluctuations in sex drive and desire, and increased sexual experimentation (Bowling et al., 2021). Factors like stress, changes in living situations, and the dynamics of time spent with partners significantly influenced individuals' sexual experiences, resulting in both positive and negative changes. While some participants reported increased intimacy and connection, others experienced decreased sex drive or desire. The research underscores the need for further exploration of the long-term impacts of these changes on sexual health and well-being, as the pandemic has not only reshaped individual sexual practices but also posed new challenges and opportunities for intimacy in romantic relationships.

The COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly altered sexual activity and experiences of sexual violence globally, as evidenced by many studies. Surveys indicate that in-person intimacy and sexual activity with partners decreased during the pandemic, particularly among adolescents and younger adults who experienced significant declines in sexual activities and satisfaction compared to pre-lockdown levels (Lindberg et al., 2020; Wignall et al., 2021; Mercer et al., 2022). This reduction in sexual intercourse and bonding has been linked to feelings of loneliness and depressive symptoms, especially for individuals living with parents due to increased parental monitoring and diminished independence (Stavridou et al., 2021). Young adult couples living apart faced heightened loneliness due to limited opportunities for physical and social intimacy, leading to relationship conflicts exacerbated by social distancing measures (Yarger et al., 2021).

In response to these challenges, some people find online sexual activities as a safer alternative to in-person interactions during the pandemic. Evidence suggests that online sexual behaviors, including sexual image sharing, pornography consumption, and online dating, increased during lockdown (Ballester-Arnal et al., 2021; Vendemia & Coduto, 2022). Notably, sexting during lockdown correlated with greater satisfaction in one's sex life among young adults, particularly those experiencing pandemic-related stress and those living apart from their partners (Lehmiller et al., 2022). However, not all studies found increases in sexting rates during the pandemic; some reported little to no change or even decreases in sexting behavior (Romero-Rodríguez et al., 2022; Yarger et al., 2021; Gassó et al., 2021).

Moreover, adolescents and young adults articulated their perspectives on sexting through focus groups and interviews, revealing how social and cultural norms shape their experiences. Adolescent girls often perceived a gender-inequitable landscape within peer sexting cultures, where boys gain value while girls face risks (Ringrose et al., 2021; Setty et al., 2025). Many girls regarded boys' interest in sexting as a potential "red flag" indicating objectification, advocating for caution in these interactions. This aligns with previous findings that suggest boys view sexting as disadvantageous for girls (Setty, 2020). Consequently, girls often navigate the risks associated with non-consensual and abusive sexting, finding limited space to articulate any benefits from these practices (Setty et al., 2025).

The discussions in focus groups often highlighted themes of shame, risk, and stigma, which inhibited the expression of diverse perspectives. This environment reinforced a gender-inequitable dynamic in which girls bear the risks of sexting while boys are rewarded, leaving the experiences of LGBT+ youth and boys who experience harm largely unacknowledged (Setty & Dobson, 2024). Adolescents expressed reluctance to report abusive sexting experiences due to

peer norms that discourage intervention and a fear of being labeled a “snitch” (Harder, 2021). Many girls described navigating requests for non-consensual sexting with careful resistance, influenced by fears of negative consequences and the desire to avoid antagonizing boys (Thorburn et al., 2021).

Amidst these challenges, the pandemic has also been linked to an increase in gender-based violence (GBV), particularly sexual violence against women. The World Health Organization (2021) notes that GBV is a prevalent human rights and public health issue, with one in three women experiencing sexual or physical violence in their lifetime. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many countries reported alarming increases in domestic violence incidents. For example, France saw a 30% rise in domestic violence reports during the lockdown, and similar trends were observed in Argentina, Singapore, and Cyprus (Dlamini, 2021). In India, the National Commission for Women documented a doubling of complaints regarding gender-based violence against women during this period (Chandra, 2020). Such statistics underscore the vulnerability of women during global crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic.

The pandemic has also exacerbated rates of sexual violence against women, particularly intimate partner violence. The United Nations reported that nearly one in two women experienced direct or indirect violence during the first two years of the lockdown (UN Women, 2021). Studies in the U.S. highlighted increases in sexual and physical intimate partner violence during the early stages of the pandemic (Jetelina et al., 2021). Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis created a backdrop for various forms of violence, particularly non-dating sexual violence among adolescents. A study examining the prevalence of sexual and physical dating violence among U.S. high school students found that experiences of parental abuse and economic insecurity were associated with increased risks of violence among adolescents (Krause et al., 2023). These

findings illuminate the urgent need for effective support systems to address and mitigate the risk of sexual violence during and after the pandemic.

IX. Female Graduate Students

The experiences of graduate students regarding sexual violence and harassment have been largely overlooked in the existing literature, which often combines their experiences with those of undergraduate students or faculty and staff (Chico, 2018; Holt et al., n.d.; Humphreys, 2000; Jovanovic & Williams, 2018; Rittenhour, 2022). As McMahon et al. (2021) point out, there is a limited amount of empirical research focusing specifically on graduate students, with no peer-reviewed studies reflecting their health status concerning sexual violence. While recent campus climate reports offer some insights into the prevalence of sexual violence among graduate students, methodological differences, such as varying definitions of sexual violence and incident timeframes, make it difficult to compare findings across studies. This gap highlights the necessity for targeted research addressing the unique experiences of graduate students.

Increased attention to campus sexual violence has emerged from various factors, including media coverage of activism and federal initiatives aimed at enhancing institutional accountability (U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, 2017). Research indicates that sexual violence disproportionately affects women, with approximately one in five undergraduate women reporting such experiences during college (Fedina et al., 2018). While men can also be victims, their rates are significantly lower, and most prevention efforts primarily target undergraduates, who are at higher risk due to social factors (Krebs et al., 2007). Furthermore, campus assaults often occur in party settings involving alcohol (Armstrong et al., 2006), leaving graduate students, who comprise nearly 15% of the student population (National

Center for Education Statistics, 2014), largely unaddressed in these initiatives. A study revealed that about 4% of female graduate students experienced forced or incapacitated penetration in the previous year (Cantor et al., 2015), emphasizing the need for more comprehensive resources and support.

Despite extensive research on sexual harassment among college students, there is a notable lack of focus on predictors of sexual harassment specifically among graduate students. A study analyzing data from 490 female graduate students identified individual vulnerabilities, such as LGBTQ+ identity, international student status, psychological distress, and alcohol use, and organizational contexts, like departmental female ratios and support, as significant risk factors for sexual harassment (Sutton et al., 2021). The findings revealed that both individual and contextual factors heighten the likelihood of harassment, varying by the type of offender. This research highlights the importance of creating safe spaces on campus and establishing clear consequences for offenders to better protect vulnerable groups.

Furthermore, a survey of 525 graduate students (61.7% female, 38.3% male) explored their experiences with sexual and gender-based harassment. Results indicated that 38% of females and 23.4% of males reported harassment from faculty or staff, while 57.7% of females and 38.8% of males experienced harassment from peers (Rosenthal et al., 2016). The study also examined the link between sexual harassment and negative outcomes, such as trauma symptoms and feelings of institutional betrayal, and noted that female graduate students faced significantly more harassment than their male counterparts. Finally, research investigating graduate students' experiences with sexual violence and harassment (SVSH) training revealed limited knowledge of available resources (Bloom et al., 2023). Many graduate students felt that mandatory training focused more on “responsible employee” duties than on prevention or seeking help. The findings

underscore the necessity of prioritizing graduate students in SVSH prevention and education efforts to address their unique vulnerabilities effectively within campus communities. There remains a critical gap in understanding how female graduate students in Canada and Iran experienced sexual violence and harassment during the COVID-19 pandemic, a period shaped by distinct cultural contexts, regulatory frameworks, and heightened vulnerabilities.

X. Gap in Literature and Research Questions

Despite extensive scholarship on sexual agency, particularly in Canada, significant gaps remain. Existing research rarely considers how women's sexual agency is shaped across different geographical, socio-cultural, political, and legal contexts, leaving experiences outside Western settings underexamined. The relationship between women's sexual agency and the forms or prevalence of sexual violence (SV) they encounter has not been systematically explored. Comparative analyses of how state and institutional policies influence sexual practices and SV, especially between contexts such as Iran and Canada, are limited. Additionally, the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on dating practices, sexual behavior, and exposure to SV among graduate students remain largely overlooked, despite global increases in SVAW during lockdowns.

To address these gaps, this study asks four key questions. First, how do female graduate students in Iran and Canada experience sexual agency and sexual pleasure, and how are these shaped by socio-political, economic, legal, and cultural factors, including class, ethnicity, religiosity, and sexual orientation? Second, how do women understand and enact their sexual agency within the presence or absence of protective or preventive policies, and how do such policies shape their sexual practices? Third, what forms of sexual violence do female graduate

students experience in Iran and Canada, and in what ways do state and university policies at the University of Tehran and the University of Ottawa influence their experiences of sexual agency and SV? Finally, how did the COVID-19 pandemic affect graduate students' sexual practices and their exposure to SV in these two distinct socio-cultural and legal contexts?

Chapter 2 Theoretical Framework

For my theoretical framework, I use a hybrid model to encompass cultural and political realities in two different socio-geographical contexts. My theoretical framework is grounded in three key epistemological assumptions: feminist materialist and intersectionalist perspectives, and biopolitics of sexual practices.

I. Feminist Materialist

First, my framework is rooted in a feminist materialist approach by reflecting on the fact that in the capitalist patriarchal system, gender and sexuality are framed in an asymmetrical oppositional binary manner, male and female, homosexual and heterosexual, for example, in which, one is not only prioritized over another but is positioned as representative of a population while the other is introduced as particular.

a) *Women, Sex-Gender System, and Sexage*

The feminist materialist theory is rooted in the work of Simone de Beauvoir, the French existentialist who contributed to the field of gender and sexuality by introducing the idea of a socio-historical construction of the human females within human society. According to Beauvoir, since "one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman" (1949, p.273), to fully comprehend the condition that perpetuates women's oppression, we need to examine the economic and material conditions they live in. Additionally, Kate Millett's theory of "Sexual Politics" (1970) influenced the feminist materialists' approach to sexuality by exploring the intersection of sex, sexuality, and power. Millett highlighted the material and economic conditions that contribute to the patriarchal power structures in order to reinforce oppressive

norms and perpetuate male domination over women. Furthermore, Rubin (1975) served the feminist materialist theory by challenging the essentialist and moralist points of view regarding sexuality. She contends that sexuality is a socio-political phenomenon and a social construct that is shaped in a given "sex/gender system" (1975) within an interplay of social norms/regulations and capitalism.

Women's exploitation throughout history has been the basis of the relation between "sex classes." Therefore to address the ways that women's exploitation has been shaped within each "sex/gender system," it is important to comprehend the ways that women are being appropriated.

Like Beauvoir, writer Monique Wittig (1980) claimed that women are being socially created as others. This materialist lesbian considered that they were also forcefully produced as "woman": "What actually produces a woman is a special, particular social relation to a man, relation that we before called serfdom, a relation that implicates personal and physical obligations, as well as economic obligations ('forced residency,' domestic work, conjugal duty [devoir conjugal], illimited children production, etc.), relation to which lesbians escape while refusing to turn or to keep on being heterosexual."

In explanation of the process of creation of a class of women as others, Guillaumin (1996) coined the term "sexage" to name the structural power social relations of sexes (Falquet, 2024) by which men as a separate class not only dominate and exploit but also appropriate women. The "appropriation of women" has been taking place by transforming and reducing them to "the state of material objects" (Guillaumin, 1996, p.179) toward maximizing the assets and benefits of men as the dominant group. Various expressions of the relation of appropriation in "sexage" include: (a) the appropriation of time: although appropriation of time is explicitly taking place through marriage as a social contract, it does not just involve wives, but other

female/women members of the society's time can be appropriated by the male/men in their community and specifically the head of their families to maintain their property. This form of appropriation is a more general appropriation of the class of women. "It is as if the wife is actually owned by the husband, and each man has use of the class of women, and particularly each man who has acquired the private use of one of them" (Guillaumin, 1996, p.77) (b) the appropriation of the products of the body: this form of appropriation includes the appropriation of the individual material body of women, children and anything coming from women's body being used by the male counterparts and in a more general way by men as a dominant group; (c) the sexual obligation: physical usage and more specifically sexual usage is one of the essential aspects in the relationship between men and women. This relationship is mainly concerned with usage, control, and exploitation and not desire.; and (d) the physical charge of members of the group: women, as the appropriated group, are responsible for assuring the emotional, material, and bodily maintenance of all social actors include men as the dominant group as well as other disabled groups of society (Guillaumin, 1996). Though physical charge of members of groups can be done by paid workers, in general, it is the primary responsibility of women, who we know as "caregivers" in society.

Guillaumin (1996) argues that due to appropriation, women's lives are being absorbed by constant interaction to satisfy the needs of others, leading to the deprivation of their individuality. Constant burdens in women's lives work as "a powerful hindrance to independence and autonomy" (Guillaumin, 1996, p.80). All women, in the collective and more invisible form of appropriation (Guillaumin, 2016), are appropriated and belong to the dominant group of men (sexage). Marriage as an institutional contract for the private appropriation of women stems from sexage. However, it has a contradictory component, as it restricts a woman's collective use and

grants her usage to one individual. According to Guillaumin (1996), the appropriation of the class of women is being carried out by the usage of means of appropriation including 1) labor market, which refers to the labor market that does not allow women to sell their labor power; 2) spatial confinement that is referring to the place of residence usually determined by male counterparts; 3) show of force which refers to physical violence against women; 4) sexual constraints as an essential means of coercion against women in the form of rape, harassment, provocation exercised by all male members in the society empowered by the collective nature of appropriation of women; and 5) the arsenal of the law and customary rights: where women are not fundamentally legal subjects before the law.

Guillaumin discusses that "women ARE sex. Wholly sex, and used as such. Of course, no personal appreciation nor any impulses of their own toward sex [...]. Sex is a woman, but she does not possess a sexual organ; a sexual organ does not possess itself. Men are not sex, but they possess sexual organs. Indeed, they possess it so well that they regard it as a weapon and effectively give it the social attribution of a weapon in situations of male bravado, as well as in rape" (Guillaumin, 1996, p.91).

Danielle Juteau and Nicole Laurin (1989) utilized and tested the notion of appropriation into practice and argued that private and public appropriation do not necessarily contradict one another. According to them, collective appropriation can occur within host institutions such as businesses, states, and churches. "The private form of appropriation assures a man the exclusive, personal, and full usage of a woman. ... As far as we are concerned, we lean toward conceiving it less as a restriction, a limit on collective appropriation, than as a condition for the actualization of the general relationship between sex classes, for some particular purposes. Marrying a woman probably means keeping other men from appropriating the sexual services of that woman, her

domestic work, and the children she might bear, but first and foremost, it effectuates the production of those goods, services, and children for the benefit of society – that is, for the benefit of the class of men in its entirety" (1989, p.26). Through this logic, the class of men makes sense of the private appropriation of women to benefit the patriarchal accumulation of capital in favor of the dominant class.

Falquet (2016) proposed the concept of "Straight bind" to explain the whole set of rules and institutions that control and organize the matrimonial arrangements in the disposal of women's bodies as a workforce machine of procreation. Such rules define who owns the bodies that women create within each geo-historical context while considering the sex, race, and class of the individuals involved in the process.

"Straight bind designates the whole organization of who has the right to marry with whom, what kind of matrimonial unions are highly desired, which are only tolerated and which are impossible or forbidden. Depending on that, straight bind also predicts to which lineage (if any) the different children produced by each woman will belong. Some will be considered as very valuable, some will not be recognized by anybody and will be exposed to death, given into adoption, left alone in the streets, captured by State for the army, or by religious institutions to work for them" (Falquet, 2024, p.238).

S. Jackson (2001), while discussing the formation and relation of patriarchal or gendered structures, emphasizes the importance of material/capital as well as racism, colonialism, and imperialism, highlighting the point that "the social order is not some seamless monolithic entity" (p.284). According to S. Jackson, adopting a materialist perspective should not preclude awareness of differences between women, and to acquire a complete picture of women's situation, we need to pay attention to material, social inequalities, and social practices in their

daily lives. By acknowledging those differences, a feminist materialist perspective aims to analyze women's subjectivities within their social-historical contexts. At the level of social structure level, S. Jackson argues that gender hierarchal relations exist, constituting social men and social women, and it is being explicitly practiced within heterosexual marriage contracts and state laws along with social conventions bolstering such gender relations. According to S. Jackson (2001), gender and sexuality are both constructed also at the level of meaning by creating them as objects within each specific socio-historical discourse; "these discourses serve to define what is sexual, to differentiate the "perverse" from the "normal" and to delimit appropriately masculine and feminine forms of sexuality" (p.289). In our daily lives, gender and sexuality are being constantly constructed and reconstructed through each of us negotiating and making sense of our own gendered and sexual lives.

According to Hennesy (2012), in post-industrial culture, there was a need to create and promote the "New Woman," who could juggle the responsibility of professional work and domestic responsibilities of "home and family." The pre-structure patriarchal order of gender and sexuality is being updated to match the New Woman ideal type, implemented and promoted by cultural spaces within popular media, magazines, novels, and other available media. This picture of New Woman complements the neoliberal perspective on women and the deeply rooted relation of sexual norms and practices to capitalist political economy and imperial ambitions regarding sexual liberation where women's bodies and sexual practices still are in service of capitalist patriarchy and all the failures are being blamed on the incompetence of the women not being able to handle their lives rather than acknowledging the predetermined structural patriarchal forces imposed on women. Feminist materialists can "amplify our understanding of sexuality's relation to the reproduction of social life, to the ways that bodies and well-being are

impacted by political economy and culture and to the animation or erosion of collective social movement toward life-enhancing alternatives...but without it feminist theory risks becoming irrelevant, unable to explain the conditions that shape the desires and needs that organize peoples' lives... it exposes the deeply rooted relation of sexual norms and practices to capital's political economy and imperial ambitions" (Hennessy, 2012, p.321). Utilizing the feminist materialist perspective in this study sheds light on the sex/gender system imposed on the (sex) class of women (Falquet, 2014) caught between appropriation and capitalist exploitation.

b) Women and Neoliberal Capitalist Market of Sex and Intimacy

In today's world, sexuality and emotions, like other aspects of social life, are being impacted by "rational management" and market logic (Osterlund, 2017). To analyze women's sexualities, dating habits, intimate relationships, and encounterment with sexual violence, it is necessary to understand the logic of the neoliberal capitalist context impacting their material conditions and lived experiences, forming sets of expectations and ideal types for them to follow.

Capitalism is a frame that defines and shapes norms, practices, and values within the structure of social life, turning everything into a tradable commodity (Illouz, 2007). Neoliberalism refers to "a set of free market principles; amid other dynamics, neoliberalism extends to the organization of subjectivity [where] individual citizens are construed as entrepreneurs of themselves in their lives" (Scharff, 2016, p.218). In the explanation of the role of government in a neoliberal state, Richardson (2005) states that "the role of government is to provide advice and assistance to enable self-governing subjects to become normal, responsible citizens, who voluntarily comply with the interests and needs of the state" (p.516). Therefore, normal citizens should be accountable for their well-being and responsible for their actions in all

aspects of their lives, including education, health, welfare, and sexuality (Poole, 2022). Scharff (2016) introduced young women as ideal neoliberal subjects who can calculate and work on themselves, transform their bodies, and manage their sexualities through consumption within the capitalist market to 'better' themselves. The neoliberal subjectivity of young women pushes them to focus on incitement to self-care, taking responsibility, and individualization of failure. Cheng (2016), building on what Rubin explained as the "renegotiation of the domain of erotic life," contends that within neoliberal capitalist systems, which work both as a form of governmentality and a mode of subject-making while naturalizing market logic in all aspects of human nature and society, individuals become neoliberal subjects even within their sexual realms, making them not only creature of exchange but the creature of competition, by making 'capital' as one's capacity to compete.

Access to a free market of sex and intimacy can both have empowering effects on one's life by creating the venue for self-expression, having fun, and experiencing desirable fantasies and, at the same time, can have a constraining impact by trapping individuals in the endless market of wants and choice (Minina et al., 2022). Illouz (2007, 2019) highlighted the importance of market ideology in human relationships in the last century when one's romantic feelings were impacted by an individual's experiences as a consumer within the capitalist neoliberal world.

Continuing the French Materialist feminist school of thought and building on the "Emotional Capitalism" concept introduced by Eva Illouz, I examine how material conditions of all sorts frame the various forms of social production of sexuality and practices of dating and intimacy. Illouz discusses that sexual consumption and intimacy in the mass communication and internet era are framed by the ways that the capitalist market commodifies emotions by creating "cultural templates for selfhood" through patterns of self-liberation (Illouz, 2017). She argues

that the logic of economic exchange within contemporary societies has turned sexual and romantic relationships into economic transactions, making human relationships and intimacy comparable to market exchange. Emotions, such as love, which used to be considered spontaneous and irrational feelings within the capitalist mindset, are formed based on a logic of self-interested transactions.

Focusing on mental health and the rise of “self-monitoring” as a commodity for managing emotions, Illouz (2007) argues that the capitalist, modern model of intimacy constructs an “emotional ontology” in which the emancipation of intimate relationships from asymmetrical power relations is achieved through the (re)definition of “emotional health” and what constitutes a “healthy relationship.” This emotional ontology rationalizes emotional bonds and recasts them as tradable objects within the private sphere. In this sense, intimacy becomes an “equitable commodity, susceptible to cost–benefit analysis,” one that can be “traded and exchanged” within intimate relationships according to the logic of a neoliberal free market. Objectification of sexuality and emotions generates "ontological uncertainty" (Illouz, 2021, p.142) since one's self, body, and value are always targets of "visual evaluation," especially in online dating scenes. People constantly need to update their self-representation according to the dating market's ever-changing customer tastes and modes (Ellison et al., 2006). The uncertainty created within the neoliberal market of sex, dating, and intimacy can result in non-commitment, non-choice, and quick, easy endings-behaviors (Illouz, 2019).

While within the neoliberal market of sex and intimacy, the notion of agency is supposed to be protected, due to hegemonic imperatives imposed by patriarchal and heterosexual culture regarding sexual activities, one's free will and an indication of the practice of agency are being invalidated (Bay-Cheng, 2015). It is important to note, especially considering the reality of the

female experience within the free' market of sex and intimacy, where they need to navigate. As Bay-Cheng mentioned, 'tip toe' on the agency line to not fall within each of the stereotypes of 'slut' or 'virgin' that measure their sexual activities. This not only contradicts the notion of agency in the neoliberal world but also confines the ability of women to be free sexual agents in the market of dating, sex, and intimacy. This becomes even more contradictory when we add the reality of acceleration in all aspects of life, including sex and dating, into account.

c) Women, Globalization, Sex, and the Digital Revolution

Globalization in the information era, distinguished by the acceleration and magnification of access to a free [neoliberal] market (Wolf, 2000) where almost everything can be seen as a tradable commodity (Connell, 2010), has reframed every aspect of human life. Since globalization has created a context in which social connections have been stretched on an intensified worldwide scale (Giddens, 2013), it is crucial to consider the impact of "social acceleration" that introduced an almost "real-time" (Rosa, 2013, p.214) speed in the exchange of information, money, and commodities without significant costs, significantly empowered by "digital revolution," in the sexual lives of women located in a different part of the globe.

In the past few decades, young women experienced significant social and cultural changes while transitioning to adulthood. Impacted by globalization along with the internationalization and intensified importance of markets, accelerated spread of knowledge and networks through new technologies, and intensified competition in every aspect of one's life has transformed the experience of young women transitioning to adulthood (Mills & Blossfeld, 2006), impacting their experience with dating, sexuality, and their perceptions and practices related to forming intimate relationships. In the socially accelerated world, the pace of life is

being increased from "temporalized history" to a "frenetic standstill" (Rosa, 2013, p.290), in which the rate of cultural and structural transformation is faster than generational turnover. In this stage of late modernity, according to Rosa (2013), social relations become subject to fundamental change within a timespan compressed into a single generation. As a consequence of social acceleration, the problem of social desynchronization may emerge: the experiences, practices, and stocks of knowledge of the parental generation increasingly appear anachronistic and meaningless to younger generations. Importantly, social desynchronization is not confined to the family sphere; it can also arise at the macro level, within organizations and institutions. For instance, within society, some processes or subsystems are more "speedable" than others. Economic transactions, scientific progress, and technological innovations can be readily accelerated, whereas the functioning of political democracy and cultural reproduction cannot. As a result, democracy in particular faces an increasing risk of becoming "de-synchronized" (Rosa et al., 2017).

Living in a "timeless time" is being accompanied by the deinstitutionalization of life courses, where individuals' lives are seen as "life project[s]" with some level of stability. According to Mill and Bossfeld (2006), due to temporal uncertainty, young people tend to be less inclined to make long-term relationships, opting for cohabitation or short-term relationships rather than marriage as a long-term commitment. Mengzahan and colleagues (2024), in their study comparing youths' attitudes toward long-term versus short-term relationships, found that short-term relationships have become increasingly popular in recent years. Today, the notion of "life partners" has been replaced by a series of "life period partners" (Rosa, 2013). "Uncertainty" promoted by new media (Camerini & Diviani, 2012) became the new constant of the neoliberal

globalized world that impels people to "become creatures of the update" where "to be is to be updated" (Chun, 2016, p.2).

Love, intimacy, and sexuality also underwent a transformation in the fashion of an uncertain world where the notion of update serves neoliberal capitalism by compelling people, especially young women. This transformation pushes women to take up the agency discourse and participate in an open market of sexual and romantic transactions as individuals with free will (Bay-Cheng, 2015). Therefore, they need to constantly update themselves to remain part of the free market as both suppliers and consumers of the sexual and romantic market (Illouz, 2021). At the same time, the proliferation of social and digital media intensifies these dynamics. Young women are increasingly engaging in practices of self-surveillance to conform to postfeminist norms across multiple platforms. These frameworks emphasize individual "choice," often obscuring structural inequalities while encouraging women to position themselves as self-empowered subjects, "entrepreneurs of the self", responsible for managing both their appearance and behavior (Gill, 2019).

Since in the neoliberal capitalized world, sexuality is also considered a tradable commodity that can be controlled and surveilled in service of capitalism, I am using surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) in my thesis to discuss the ways that young women experience their sexuality and intimate relationships in the neoliberal digital era under the scrutiny of state and/or capitalist tools of surveillance in Canada and Iran. I examine how young women plan their presence online or offline dating scenes. It is essential to comprehend women's involvement in online dating websites and applications and how they perceive the impact of online dating platforms in an accelerated world where they constantly update, frame, surveil, and appropriate

time, body, and sexual taste of young females while rerouting their behaviors toward benefiting the big capitalist patriarchal corporations.

II. Intersectionality

The various practices of sexuality and different experiences of women with SV can be closely related to their marginalized positions. Since my approach is an activist approach to recommend policy change, I also build my conceptual model on the intersectional theory to examine marginalized/non-marginalized women's experiences with their sexuality and SV during the pandemic. Intersectionality is a concept coined by Crenshaw (1989) to address the erasure of black women in anti-sexist and anti-racist discourses. Since then, the intersectional approach has been used to comprehend the experience of different communities and/or groups of people with multiple intersecting oppressions such as disability, race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Intersectionality as a framework sheds light on various systems of oppression that maintain power hierarchies influencing different marginalized groups and seeks to recognize the interaction of various social identities, how people located in various intersections in the social world define “societal power hierarchies” and how these intersectional positions impact their living experience (Smooth, 2013).

Women’s sexual practices and their experience with sexual pleasure and dating are affected by different interlocking systems of oppression and their intersectional positions, such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, and disability. Intersectionality is a theoretical and methodological tool (refer to the methodology section) to highlight the importance of power relations and marginalized categories in cultural arrangement, collective practices, and individual contexts related to sexuality (Alarcão et al., 2022). In addition, women with marginalized

statuses experience a higher rate of sexual violence. Simultaneously, sexual violence can be used as a mechanism and the result of inequality with the impact on racial, gender, sexuality, nationality, and marginalized citizenship status people and work to silence these populations and push them away from resisting inequality (Armstrong et al., 2018). Patricia Hill Collins (2017) argues that violence can be the conceptual glue that binds systems of domination together. Intersectionality within my framework allows me to reflect on the impact of power asymmetry due to the marginalized statuses of the participants. In other words, an intersectional approach to sexual agency and sexual violence sheds light on systems of domination, specifically within institutional settings such as university campuses, as its primary roots (Colpitts, 2022).

However, it seems that the materialist approach conflicts with the intersectionalist approach by criticizing this concept and arguing that these categories, such as gender or class, only divide individuals (Adkins & Leonard, 1996) toward oppressing people more easily and obliterates material concerns. However, I argue that since we are living in a world where these categories are already in place, we need to consider them in our analysis to be able to fight them. The theoretical framework I introduce will provide a conceptual tool for activist researchers to tackle the issues that marginalized people face while considering the impact of larger systems of domination that precede our experience today. As Smooth (2013) points one of the general premises of intersectionality as a framework is to change the conditions of society, thus “that categories of identity are not permanently linked to sustained inequalities in efforts to build a more just world” (p.21).

It is essential to consider that not all the social categories within the intersectional framework carry the same meaning in different socio-political contexts. Also, systems of oppression can work differently depending on the context we are analyzing. Therefore, in

comparative studies, it is necessary to consider the biopolitics regarding sexuality within each geopolitical context of the research, especially when aiming to provide recommendations to update the existing policies.

III. Biopolitics of Sexual Practices

Michel Foucault introduced the term "biopolitics," which is how governments measure, organize, and control populations by implementing biopower in every aspect of people's lives (Foucault, 2007). Foucault used this concept to refer to the process where human life on the scale of significant populations is placed in the center of attention of political systems. Foucault analyzed power as a pervasive force that rationalizes, controls, and disciplines human behavior and bodies. He viewed power as inherent in all social and political relations, influencing production, social organization, administration, family dynamics, sexual relationships, and the broader social context. Foucault's historical approach to power goes beyond traditional politics, seeing it as a socialized, institutionalized, and embodied phenomenon that shapes various aspects of society (Takács, 2017). In 'Western societies,' the state exercises its power through specific technologies of knowledge and security practices based on liberalism, recognizing freedom as an essential terrain of rule. Biopolitics within liberal forms of government limits the overt restrictive regulations to secure the autonomy of the economy and society from the state (Means, 2022). However, even liberal states minimize their regulatory involvement in people's lives and implement some regulations to maintain citizens' security and 'safety.' This became evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when even the most liberal states, such as the USA, enforced some regulatory measures and enforced its biopower over their population.

In most countries, states have some policies to regulate or police the sexual behavior of their citizens. With the proliferation of accessible pornography in our daily lives, aggressive sexual behaviors are being normalized and sometimes promoted in dating scenes. Women can be encouraged to accept being recipients of violence voluntarily to stand out within the competitive market of dating and sex or resemblance of porn stars. In addition, it is possible that the definition of SV became distorted or even remains unknown where rough sexual behavior is being advertised. While in most liberal countries, such as Canada, there are policies regarding SV prevention, this is not the case for many authoritarian countries, such as Iran. After the 1979 revolution in Iran, the Islamic Republic State pursued a strict regime of gender normativity and heterosexuality through official discourse on gender, sexuality, and homophobia (Naeimi & Kjaran, 2022). The biopolitics implemented within such a context aims to control people's sexual activities through regulatory policies legitimizing only heterosexual normative forms of sexual activities within its geopolitical borders. Due to the very narrow definition of accepted sexual activities, addressing many forms of sexual violence issues concerning the state, as a legitimate policy maker and regulatory powerholder, is being disregarded.

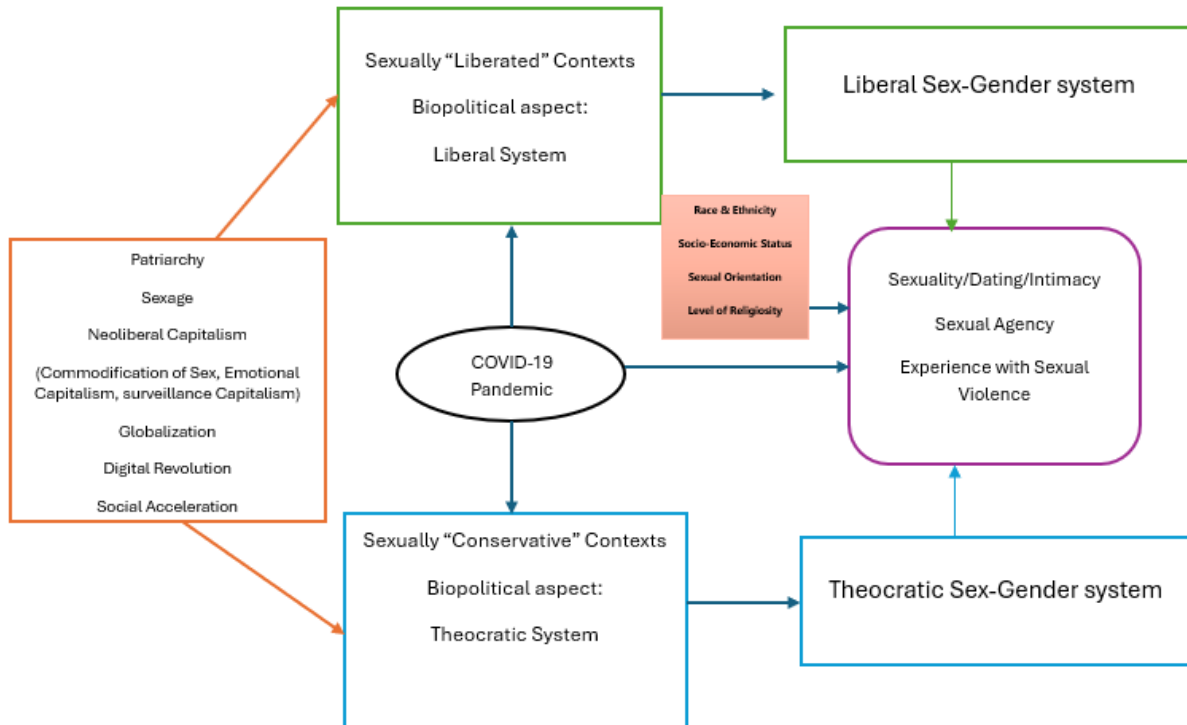
In addition, Foucault distinguished between disciplinary power and biopower by their specific targets and methods of control. Disciplinary power, which he detailed in *Discipline and Punish* (1995), functions as an "anatomy-politics of the human body" that treats the individual as a machine to be optimized, trained, and corrected through surveillance and spatial organization in institutions like schools or prisons. In contrast, biopower (1978), operates as a "biopolitics of the population," focusing on the human race as a biological species rather than on the individual body. While disciplinary power seeks to create "docile bodies" through microscopic observation,

biopower utilizes statistics, demographics, and public health interventions to regulate the life, death, and overall health of the entire social body.

Building on the theory of "biopolitics" and "biopower," I examine the impact of state regulatory policies regarding sexuality and SV on the experience of young women with their sexuality and their sense of sexual agency. According to Foucault (2003), the primary role of a biopolitical state is to produce normativity through disciplinary institutions such as education, medicine, and punitive systems, while also regulating and optimizing the biological and reproductive capacities of populations. In this framework, the state exercises disciplinary power over individuals within society to shape conduct, enforce norms, and manage life processes at both the individual and population levels. Since policies enforced by biopolitical states can legitimate or forbid one's action, it is essential to assess the impact of regulatory politics on women's sexuality-related practices, SV, and their experiences of sexual agency or sexual violence being shaped by the regulations in their lifetime. The following figure (Figure 1) maps the structural forces shaping the experiences of female graduate students and presents the conceptual framework used to analyze their intersections. It identifies the key structures influencing female graduate students and illustrates how the concepts described above are articulated and interrelated.

Figure 1

Theoretical Framework



Chapter 3 Methodology

I. Introduction

My doctoral research methodology utilizes a qualitative comparative study to offer a portrait of the situation in countries where rules and infrastructure differ regarding the prevention of SV. I take a gender-responsive, intersectional, community-engaged approach. This thesis is concerned with the experience of graduate students with their sexual agency and SV in general and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This comparative study enables me to examine the impact of any contextual and material elements, structures, or conditions (i.e., socio-political, economic, legal, and cultural) on the formation of sexual agency and women's experiences with their sexuality. In addition, the comparative study helps me to capture the interplay of different forms of sexual agency (in Canada Vs. Iran) and cultural and legal contexts, which may lead to different forms of SV or sexual harassment and different ways of attempting to avoid or confront incidents of SV.

I. Methodology: Comparative Study

Comparative study is valuable for conducting cross-cultural studies and identifying similarities and differences across different social contexts. In the 21st century, as digitalization reframes nearly every aspect of human existence, the ways in which individuals engage in sexual activities and navigate their sexual agency have been fundamentally transformed. Furthermore, the detraditionalization of marital and family relationships alternates people's experiences in their sexual/intimate lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2009). In addition, our understanding of intimacy and dating is also being reshaped by relying on online platforms and, more specifically,

dating applications such as Tinder and Bumble. While technological advancements were once confined to specific geographic regions, the forces of globalization and ubiquitous internet access now ensure that digital innovations are dispersed globally and almost instantaneously. Although in different geographical locations, dissimilar historical, legal, and/or cultural backgrounds shape people's lives differently, individuals' experiences in different geopolitical and cultural contexts are becoming more similar due to the ever-growing technological development in the globalized world. Therefore, it is essential to broaden the scope of analysis when we want to study social phenomena to provide a thorough analysis of the reality that people live in.

By conducting a comparative study on the experience of Iranian and Canadian women regarding their understanding of their sexual agency and their experience with SV, this study introduces a comprehensive analysis of the impact of digitalization of the globalized capitalist neoliberal world on women's sexual and intimate lives. This study also contributes to the increase of data. It fills the knowledge gaps by comparing the challenges women face in a global world where they circulate and migrate increasingly to different parts of the globe. In addition, this study unpacks the new forms and practices around dating and intimate lives of young women while shedding light on the paradoxical situation of women in different geographical contexts with different ways of controlling and policing women's bodies and sexuality through the usage of laws or more insidious way through shame culture.

Furthermore, by focusing on the issue of SV on university campuses, this thesis contributes to the body of literature about the existing rape culture in the education system in two geopolitical contexts. Since new forms of online SV have been introduced in the digitalized world, this thesis assesses the potential of existing preventive regulations on university campuses

to address online and offline forms of SVAW on campus. In addition, since the issue of care and, more specifically, self-care is an overlooked but important topic in academia (Gaudet et al., 2022), addressing the subject of sexual agency and SV among female graduate students can contribute toward creating a more supportive academic work culture.

II. Research Parameters

a) Contexts

Utilizing comparative study enables us to comprehend the possible reason for the steady high level of SVAW in a country like Canada, where many preventive policies are in effect to reduce this form of violence against women. The other geographical context is Iran, which has an Islamic Conservative government and legal system. Since the Islamic laws in Iran do not accept the liberation of women's sexuality and also do not specify preventive regulations to prevent sexual assault or SV, this comparative study can show how young women's experience in the educational system in Iran might be different from the ones who attend universities in Canada where laws do not restrict their sexual activities while preventive laws seem to be available to defend them against SV.

The leader of the Islamic Republic government in Iran and some of its official policymakers claim that policing women's bodies and sexuality serves women's security in society. They refer to a high level of reported sexual harassment cases during #MeToo and connect this to the sexualization of women's bodies in 'Western' capitalist countries. The following is a quote from the leader of the Islamic Republic government on an Iranian website published after the #MeToo movement in 2018:

"The disaster of countless sexual assaults on Western women, including incidents leading to #MeToo campaign, and Islam's proposal to resolve it: By introducing the hijab, Islam has shut the door on a path that would pull women towards such deviation... Islam does not allow this through the hijab" (Khamenei, 2018).

This mindset is widespread among the pro-government and current policymakers in Iran, which has constrained women's ways of dressing and appearance in public to avoid their harassment instead of punishing the perpetrators.

The issue of SV becomes even more problematic in the academic setting and for graduate students. In the case of the University of Tehran, there was no formal record of the number of reported SV on online platforms. However, the Human Rights Office at the University of Ottawa reported 224 requests for services regarding SV from 2021 to 2022, and this number was only reported cases, which usually is only 5% of the actual number of incidents of SV (Government of Canada, 2014) since being a victim of SV is still associated with shame. Also, many female graduate students may tend not to share their experiences and report them because they want to be taken seriously in the academic setting and avoid receiving the stigma of being a sexual harassment survivor.

Last but not least, the increase in the rate of SVAW during the COVID-19 pandemic once again proved that women should be considered a vulnerable population in a situation of crisis. However, due to the closure of many university campuses in some phases of lockdown to control the COVID-19 measures, little attention has been paid to the experience of graduate students with their sexuality and SV. However, this population was still sexually active and exposed to various forms of SV, including online SV or intimate partner violence. This study aims to contribute to the body of literature about SVAW in academia in a crisis. Although the COVID-

19 pandemic could be counted as a unique example of a health crisis, as different scientists have predicted, it will not be the last. Thus, we need to prepare our communities with the necessary information and educational and preventive policies to reduce or eradicate human-made harm/disasters such as SVAW during a crisis.

In the following section, I introduce the characteristics of the two geopolitical contexts of this comparative study.

Iran.

Location and Population. Iran is a country in West Asia, and its population was 91,567,738 in 2024.

Political System. Iran's political system is a unitary presidential theocratic system, with the Islamic Consultative Assembly as the legislative body. Neoliberalism in Iran is best understood as a hybrid and uneven process of restructuring rather than a full ideological shift toward free-market capitalism. Since the late 1980s, particularly under post-war reconstruction policies, Iran has pursued forms of privatization, market liberalization, and integration into global capital flows, while maintaining strong state control over key sectors such as energy, banking, and strategic industries. Scholars describe this as “hybrid neoliberalism,” where market-oriented reforms coexist with authoritarian governance and ideological state management, producing a distinct configuration of capitalist development shaped by both global pressures and domestic class reorganization (Valadbaygi, 2020). Neoliberalization in Iran has also involved the expansion of semi-private and parastatal institutions, growing inequality, and the reconfiguration of state-society relations around entrepreneurial and rent-seeking logics, rather than the withdrawal of the state itself (Valadbaygi, 2021). In this sense, neoliberalism in Iran does not

eliminate state power but retools it to facilitate accumulation, manage sanctions pressures, and reorganize class relations within a constrained and politically controlled economy.

Women in Higher Education. The rate of women in higher education in Iran has increased from 3% in 1978 to 59% in 2018 (University of Tehran News Agency, n.d.).

Women in the Workforce. Despite the significant presence of women in higher education, women's participation in the labor force remained very low. As of 2021, the female labor force was 14% compared to a 70.6% rate for men (World Bank, n.d.).

Regulations Concerning Sexual Activities. As mentioned earlier, since the 1979 revolution, Iran has been governed by a theocratic system that bases its legal framework on the Islamic criminal code (Sharia). This system allows religious authorities to intervene in private and public matters (Aghtaie, 2011). Sexuality is criminalized, with any sexual relationship outside of legal marriage considered a crime. The main category for such crimes is Zena, defined as any illicit sexual contact between a man and a woman. The punishment for Zena is particularly severe for married individuals, historically resulting in death by stoning, with men buried up to their waists and women up to their necks. In 2012, stoning was replaced by an unspecified death penalty. Unmarried individuals convicted of Zena face 100 lashes, a punishment that is harsher on women due to their generally lower muscle mass. However, 'white marriage' is a new practice that occurs among young heterosexual, middle-class Iranian women and men who choose to live together without religious or legal documentation (Golestaneh, 2022). Non-heterosexual relationships are also being criminalized within the Islamic penal code. Islamic penal code also restricts women's autonomy on reproductive rights. In the most recent Population Rejuvenation and Family Support Act passed in 2021, women's access to contraception and abortion is being restricted, which can reinforce traditional gender roles (Julie, 2024).

Regulations Concerning Sexual Violence. The Islamic Penal Laws of Iran do not explicitly recognize “sexual assault,” leading to many cases going unreported due to the lack of a specific legal framework. The closest terms are physical assault and adultery. Article 223, paragraph 61 of the Constitution, states that women have the right to protection against verbal abuse and a duty to refrain from verbal abuse. While the code implicitly addresses verbal sexual harassment (Tavasolian, 2016), it does not explicitly cover non-consensual groping or touching (Torabi, 2018). However, the Islamic criminal code imposes severe penalties for rape. A man who has non-consensual sex with a woman or does so while she is unconscious is convicted of adultery and sentenced to death (Nayyeri, 2012). However, these legal penalties apply only if a victim can successfully prove that the rape occurred, a significant challenge in the absence of witnesses. Under the Iranian Penal Code, proving rape typically requires four male witnesses or a confession, and without such evidence, cases are often dismissed or the victim themselves may face charges of adultery. Despite these barriers, at least 22 men were executed on rape charges in 2024, though this figure represents only a small fraction of total reported incidents (Iran Human Rights, 2024). Despite these laws, other forms of legal rape, such as child marriage and marital rape, persist. Within a marriage relationship the Islamic penal code does not recognize rape within marriage, and legal wives are obliged to satisfy their male partner's sexual needs (Aghtaie, 2017). This framework grants men significant sexual agency and defines sex as a quid pro quo exchange, where men provide for their families (Nafaqah) or pay a dowry in exchange for sexual rights over their wives¹¹.

¹¹ This situation resonates with Tabet's materialist analysis. Paola Tabet argues that a "sexual-economic exchange" exists on a continuum between marriage and prostitution, where female sexuality is commodified as a service exchanged for material resources and social legitimacy. Within this framework, institutions like the dowry act as the material mechanism that formalizes a man's exclusive right to a woman's body, effectively taming and domesticating her sexuality (Tabet, 2012).

Additionally, wives need their husband's approval to work outside the home. The rate of sexual violence in 2018 experienced by women between 17-49 years old reported by UN Women was 17.6% (UN Women, n.d.). However, this number, as mentioned in the literature review and studied by some scholars, can get as high as 90% (Kurdi & Hosseiniozari, 2015).

Significant Women's Rights Movements within the Last Five Years Prior to the Study. This

study was conducted when three essential women's rights movements had occurred in Iran: 1- My Stealthy Freedom movement, which was an online movement against mandatory hijab laws in Iran (To read more see Basmechi et al., 2022). 2- #MeToo movement: started in 2020 on Twitter as its central platform. It opened up conversations around sexual violence and various forms of it, awareness raising, blaming the government because of gender segregation, and lack of proper sex education and support for victims/survivors (To read more see Basmechi, 2023). 3- Women, Life, Freedom movement: started in 2022 after a young woman's death under the custody of the morality police. It significantly challenged the mandatory hijab law enforcement in Iran, a law that was proposed after the 1979 revolution and implemented and enforced in 1983. The movement fostered global solidarity with Iranian women's rights, particularly highlighting the symbolic and political act of appearing unveiled in public spaces as a reclamation of agency. During the movement, at least 551 protestors, including 49 women and 68 children, were killed (Iran International, 2024).

COVID-19 Pandemic Measures. Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic measures, temporary lockdowns, travel bans, and business closures were implemented during this time. Physical distancing, public awareness campaigns, and mask mandates were some of the public health measures taken by Iran's government during the global pandemic (Middle East Institute, n.d.).

Canada.

Location and Population. Canada is located in North America, above the United States, and its population was 40.1 million in 2024 (World Bank Open Data, n.d.).

Political & Economic System. Canada is a parliamentary democracy and constitutional monarchy that recognizes the Queen or King as the head of state, but the prime minister is the head of government, according to the House of Commons (House of Commons of Canada, n.d.). Canada was founded on the rule of law and respect for rights and freedoms, and its legal system is based on a combination of civil law and common law. Since the 1980s, Canada has undergone a neoliberal shift characterized by deregulation, privatization, free trade. Although elements of the social safety net remain, neoliberal reforms at federal and provincial levels have intensified inequality and sparked ongoing debates about their impacts on marginalized groups (Carroll & Shaw, 2001). Neoliberalism in Canada functions as both a governing logic and policy framework that reorganizes social, economic, and political life through privatization, deregulation, austerity, and individual responsibility. It produces entrepreneurial subjects expected to manage their own education, work, health, and well-being, while weakening collective entitlements and public support. At the same time, it gradually unravels the postwar welfare state by reducing public investment, expanding precarious labour, and shifting social risk from the state to individuals and families. As Porter (2012) argues, neoliberal rationality extends market logic into social life, weakening democratic and redistributive commitments and deepening inequality. In Canada, this appears as the partial retention of welfare institutions alongside their increasing marketization, conditionality, and fragmentation

Women in Higher Education. The rate of women in higher education in Canada has increased, from 35% in the 1970s to 55% in 2021-2022 (Women and Education, n.d.)

Women in Workforce. The labor force participation of Canadian women above 15 increased from 58.5% in 1990 to 61.5% in 2022 (Statistics Canada, 2023).

Regulations Concerning Sexual Activities. Regarding sexual activities, the core regulations in Canada are based on consent, which is a “voluntary agreement to do a particular sexual activity at a particular time, and it only applies to that activity at that time” (Women and Gender Equality Canada, 2024). However, the person must be 16 years old or older to be able to consent to sexual activity legally. Same-sex sexual behavior, activity, and relationships have been decriminalized between two consenting adults over 21 years old since 1969. In addition, two people who are unmarried but have lived together in a conjugal relationship for more than one year can be considered in a common-law relationship (To read more see Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada, 2019).

Regulations Concerning Sexual Violence. According to the Government of Canada (2024), sexual violence is any sexual act (including but not limited to catcalling, sharing an intimate photo of a person without consent, unwanted touching or kissing, threatening someone to get sex, sexual assault, rape, etc.) that occurs without consent and can come from any person regardless of their relationship with a survivor or the setting they are in. Sexual violence charges, depending on factors such as the age of the offender, survivor/victim, level of force, etc., can be one year in jail for a lifetime (Criminal Code, RSC 1985, c C-46, s 271).

Significant Women's Rights Movements within the Last Ten Years Prior to the Study. One of Canada's most impactful women’s movements prior to this research was the #MeToo movement in 2017. Joining the call out by American actress, Alyssa Milano, to share their experiences with sexual violence using hashtag #MeToo. In addition, in December 2017, hundreds of people protested sexual violence and advocated for more services for survivors,

joining the #MeToo March (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2022). In addition, incorporating an intersectional lens and prioritizing intersectionality and diversity has been the center of attention in the women's movement in Canada in the last 10 years. Furthermore, there has been a strong focus on the issue of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, and a national inquiry into this issue is being prioritized (Hill, 2018).

COVID-19 Pandemic Measures: Regarding the COVID-19 pandemic measures, during this time, there were severe lockdowns, travel restrictions, and business closures. Physical distancing, public awareness and vaccination campaigns, and mask mandates were some of the public health measures taken by Canada's government during the global pandemic (Government of Canada, 2025).

b) Research Objectives

Although the notion of sexual agency has been studied extensively in Canada, the reality of sexual agency experienced by women in different geographical locations has not been addressed comprehensively. Notably, the relationship between the sexual agency of women and the rate and forms of Sexual Violence (SV) or harassment experienced by them have not been examined. This project aims to examine the experience of female graduate students with their sexuality and SV and to analyze the interplay of sexual agency and SV during the COVID-19 pandemic in Canadian and Iranian main universities.

I have four specific objectives for this project. Firstly, I wish to unpack the importance of sexual agency and pleasure for female graduate students in Iran and Canada with attention to socio-political, economic, legal, and cultural factors, class, ethnicity, level of religiosity, and sexual orientation. This allows me to challenge postcolonial and Eurocentric perspectives by

exploring the diverse experience of women within different socio-cultural, religious, and legal contexts.

Secondly, I aim to examine the ways that women comprehend their sexual agency and act on it through protective or preventive policies. Having this goal allows me to assess the power dynamics and impact of the existence or absence of restrictive policies surrounding sexual activities on women's sexuality and their agencies.

Third, I want to reflect on the specificities of SV in Iran and Canada. Also, I aim to examine the impact of the existence or absence of preventive SV policies and resources available in the State (Iran and Canada) and university campuses at the University of Tehran and the University of Ottawa on the experience of female graduate students with their sexual agency and/or sexual violence. This analysis enables me to acquire a thorough picture of the politics around sexual activities and the SVAW status quo in these two geographical contexts and help me assess their policies' influence on women's experience with sexual agency and SV.

Last but not least, I aim to capture the experience of female graduate students regarding their sexual activities and SV during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the pandemic impacted the dating life and sexual behavior of people almost all around the world, it is essential to comprehend the impact of this shift on graduate students' sexual lives. In addition, since the rate of SVAW increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, it is crucial to precisely assess the impact of lockdowns and confinement of individuals on the level and forms of SV experienced by graduate students in two different geographical locations with different socio-cultural and legal contexts to understand how to prevent them. Having this goal allows me to introduce a more supportive, inclusive, and equitable campus environment to policymakers and school principals, which benefits the female students directly involved and the broader university community.

c) Research Questions

My research centers on answering the following questions: What is the experience of female graduate students with their sexual agency and intimacy in Iran and Canada? What are the main factors in the formation of their sexual activities and sexual agencies? How do their experiences of SV differ/converge in each geo-political context? How does their sexual agency interplay with their experience while encountering various forms of SV? What do we know about SV regarding young/graduate women in Canada and Iran? What preventive/protective tools or policies exist, and to what extent do they use them? What was their experience regarding sexual agency and SV during the COVID-19 pandemic?

d) Population and Sample

Population of the study. The study's population is female graduate students in the humanities and social sciences during the COVID-19 pandemic in Iran and Canada.

Cases. The sample of this study is selected from female graduate students in the humanities and social sciences field at the University of Ottawa, located in Ottawa, the capital of Canada, and the University of Tehran, which is located in Tehran, the capital of Iran. These two educational institutions are being selected because of the popularity of these prominent research universities in these two countries; there is a higher chance that people from other places in each country and even internationally will continue their graduate school there. In addition, although this study only focuses on female students in humanities and social sciences, it can shed light on the experiences of other female students in different fields. However, due to the higher possibility of knowledge of these populations about feminist-related concepts, the result might be more reflective of women's experience in these fields. Thus, as a qualitative research, this study is not

aiming for generalization of the results, but rather, its goal is to examine the complexities that women in higher education might face regarding their sexual activities, dating, and sexual violence. It is an exploratory comparative analysis to investigate the nuances of female graduate students' experiences in two geopolitical contexts with vast legal differences regarding sexuality but under the shared systems of oppression, including patriarchy and neoliberal capitalism. However, future studies should specifically examine the experiences of women in STEM, disciplines that remain predominantly male-dominated, whereas the humanities and social sciences more closely approach gender parity or are comprised of a female majority.

Table 1
University of Tehran and University of Ottawa Information

2020-2021	University of Tehran	University of Ottawa
Female Students Rate	42.2%	54.4
Sexual Violence Complaints	Not Available	92
Sexual Violence Prevention Policy	Not Available	Policy 67B ¹²
Sexual Violence Prevention Policy during COVID-19 pandemic	Not Available	A statement was announced but not accessible now

Sampling Strategy. For my sample, I recruited individuals who identified as women and were graduate students (Master's or PhD) at some point during the COVID-19 pandemic at either the University of Tehran or the University of Ottawa in humanities or social sciences programs. Recruiting from this population allowed me to interview participants who were likely familiar

¹² You can access this policy by visiting Policy 67b: Prevention of Sexual Violence (University of Ottawa, n.d.).

with basic feminist concepts due to their academic training, and to explore how their educational background may have shaped their experiences with sexual agency and sexual violence. In addition, my prior familiarity with some women in these academic settings in both contexts facilitated the recruitment process and helped me establish initial connections for the study.

I used snowball sampling to recruit graduate students from each of the two universities. This method is appropriate when researching highly sensitive topics, as is the case in this study. In addition, since I could not initially reach the desired number of participants, I used LinkedIn to support recruitment. I uploaded the recruitment poster and sent private messages to potential participants using a prewritten script. I was able to recruit several participants through LinkedIn, and I also asked those participants to introduce me to others who might be interested, thereby continuing the snowball sampling process.

Sample's Characteristics. In this research, I interviewed 31 women who were graduate students during the COVID-19 pandemic in the fields of humanities and social sciences. Sixteen participants were students at the University of Ottawa and fifteen were students at the University of Tehran. One participant at the University of Ottawa, an Iranian religious PhD student, chose not to answer the entire section on sex, pornography, and pleasure. As a result, I decided to recruit and interview one additional participant from the University of Ottawa. The sample characteristics for both the University of Ottawa and the University of Tehran are presented in the table below.

Table 2
Participants Demographic Characteristics

Sample Characteristics	University of Tehran		University of Ottawa	
Age	25-29	6	25-29	3
	30-35	5	30-35	7
	35-40	3	35-40	2
	40-45	1	40-45	4
Level of Education	BA	2	BA	-
	MA	11	MA	15
	PhD	2	PhD	1
Employment Status	Unemployed	4	Unemployed	3
	Part-time	7	Part-time	9
	Full-time	4	Full-time	4
Racial-Ethnic Minority Status	Yes	5	Yes	13
	No	10	No	3
Economic Status	Challenging	6	Challenging	12
	Comfortable	9	Comfortable	4
Relationship status	Single	3	Single	5
	In a relationship	12	In a relationship	11
Children	Yes	3	Yes	4

	No	12	No	12
Religious-Traditional Background	Yes	12	Yes	15
	No	3	No	1
Religious affiliation	Non-Believer	11	Non-Believer	12
	Believer-Muslim	4	Believer-Muslim	1
	Believer-Christian	0	Believer-Christian	3
Sexual Orientation	Heterosexual	12	Heterosexual	7
	Non-heterosexual (Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Pansexual)	3	Non-heterosexual (Lesbian, Bisexual, Queer, Pansexual)	9

As shown above in Table 2, participants in both contexts ranged in age from 25 to 45 years, with a mean age of 31.1. It is important to note that six of the sixteen participants from the University of Ottawa were Iranian; however, none of the participants from the University of Tehran were Canadian.

In terms of racial self-identification, among the University of Ottawa participants, six identified as Iranian, one as Arab, one as Black (first generation), three as Black Canadian (second generation), two as Latinx/South American, two as White Canadian, and one as White European. Nine participants were international students holding study visas, while eight held Canadian citizenship or permanent residency.

None of the participants from the University of Tehran were international students; all were Iranian citizens. In terms of ethnicity among the Tehran participants, one identified as Lur, two as Kurdish, two as Turkish, and the remainder as Fars.

Regarding sexual orientation, participants from the University of Ottawa identified as queer (n=3), pansexual (n=1), lesbian (n=1), bisexual (n=4), and heterosexual (n=7). Among participants from the University of Tehran, three identified as bisexual and twelve as heterosexual. Overall, there was greater diversity in sexual orientation among participants from the University of Ottawa.

III. Step-By-Step Method

Because topics related to sexuality and sexual violence are highly sensitive and can have profound impacts on young women's lives, this study employs a qualitative methodology. I used semi-structured interviews as the data collection method, which allowed me to capture the nuances of participants' experiences, insights that would not be easily accessible through quantitative or survey-based approaches. This method enabled me to identify themes organically and provided space for participants to share their experiences beyond predefined categories. In the following sections, I explain the importance of using a comparative approach in this research, the process of designing my data collection method, the steps taken in data analysis, and the use of a gender-responsive, intersectional framework to guide my methodological approach.

a) Qualitative Comparative Analysis

Using a comparative analysis was essential for this research, as it allowed me to capture both the differences and the influence of geopolitical contexts on young women's experiences with dating, sexual agency, and sexual violence, while also highlighting the global impact of systems of domination such as patriarchy. This approach enabled a deeper examination of how these dynamics shape young women's lives in both Iran and Canada.

A comparative framework was particularly important because it provides a richer understanding of how social phenomena unfold across different cultural and political environments. In the 21st century, extensive digitalization has transformed nearly every aspect of human life, including intimate and sexual relationships. The rise of online communication, shifting family and marital structures, and the widespread use of dating applications have generated new forms of sexual agency and interaction that transcend national borders. Although historical, legal, and cultural differences continue to shape people's lives in significant ways, globalization and rapid technological diffusion have made many aspects of young women's experiences increasingly comparable across diverse contexts.

For these reasons, a comparative study offers a more comprehensive analytical lens, one that reveals both shared patterns and critical contextual differences. This approach became even more relevant in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, a global crisis that connected societies through shared disruptions while simultaneously exposing enduring social inequalities. Given the pandemic's universal reach but uneven local effects, it was necessary to investigate whether it shaped women's dating experiences, sexual agency, and encounters with sexual violence in similar ways in Iran and Canada, or whether these experiences diverged based on local sociopolitical conditions.

Thus, employing a comparative framework provided the methodological and conceptual space needed to analyze the complex interplay between global forces, such as patriarchy, digitalization, and pandemic-related disruptions, and the specific cultural and structural contexts that shape young women's intimate lives.

b) Data Collection Method: Semi-Structured In-depth- Interview

I used semi-structured interviews as my data collection method because this approach allows for open-ended questions, giving participants the opportunity to fully share their experiences. Additionally, it enabled me to ask follow-up questions if important or interesting themes emerged during the interviews. I organized the interview guide into three main sections: (1) dating and intimacy, (2) sex, pornography, and pleasure, and (3) sexual violence.

Before beginning each interview, I ensured that participants were comfortable, in a safe environment, and able to respond to questions with ease. I also reassured them that they were not required to answer any questions that made them feel uncomfortable. As mentioned earlier, one participant at the University of Ottawa chose not to respond to questions related to sex, pornography, and pleasure. To maintain the minimum sample size of 15 participants per context, I interviewed an additional participant from the University of Ottawa.

Given the sensitive and potentially retraumatizing nature of questions related to sexual violence, I asked participants to inform me if they felt uncomfortable at any point before starting that section of the interview. The full interview guide is available in Appendix A.

Interview durations ranged from one to three hours, depending on the depth of experiences and the amount participants wished to share. For two interviews that lasted three hours, the participants requested to split the session, and we conducted them in separate segments. All interviews with participants from the University of Ottawa, as well as those from the University of Tehran who were in Canada at the time, were conducted via Zoom. Due to connectivity and filtering issues in Iran, interviews with participants located at the University of Tehran were conducted using Google Meet. During the interviews, I informed participants when we were

about to begin a new section and checked whether they needed a break. If participants were unwilling to answer any question, we skipped it and moved on to the next one. All interviews were recorded on my personal laptop, transcribed by me, and prepared for analysis. To ensure the confidentiality and safety of the participants, all individuals were assigned pseudonyms, which have been used throughout this study to replace any identifying information.

c) Qualitative Content Analysis: Tools, Coding, and Themes

For the analysis of my data, I used NVivo as the primary software which enabled me to systematically organize, code, and analyze the data. NVivo 14, the version available to me, was not fully compatible with Farsi text. Therefore, I translated all Farsi interviews into English before importing them into NVivo for systematic coding and analysis. This step ensured that all data could be uniformly analyzed while preserving the meaning and nuances of participants' narratives as accurately as possible.

I employed a hybrid coding approach that combined both inductive and deductive methods. Initially, I conducted inductive coding, creating codes and labels directly from the data themselves. This allowed me to identify themes and patterns that emerged organically from participants' accounts, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in their lived experiences rather than being constrained by pre-existing theoretical assumptions. Once all interviews were coded inductively, I conducted a round of deductive coding to refine these themes and align them with the theoretical framework of the study. This two-step process enabled me to situate participants' experiences within broader conceptual categories while preserving the richness and specificity of the data.

The hybrid approach offered several key advantages. It allowed for flexibility in identifying unanticipated insights while maintaining theoretical rigor, strengthened the credibility and validity of the findings, and facilitated a nuanced understanding of both context-specific experiences and overarching patterns. Ultimately, this approach ensured that the final themes captured both the data-driven realities of young women's experiences with dating, sexual agency, and sexual violence, and their connection to broader frameworks of social and cultural structures, such as patriarchy, digitalization, and global influences.

d) Gender Responsive Intersectional Approach in Methodology

Since I am taking a gender-responsive and intersectional (GRI) approach in this research, I made sure to account for participants' markers of marginalization. I designed questions in the demographic section and throughout the interview guide to capture relevant aspects of participants' identities, including race, sexuality, and socioeconomic status. During analysis, I considered the intersectional dimensions of these young women's experiences and how these identity markers influenced their experiences, particularly when occupying marginalized positions.

Throughout the inductive coding process, I coded any references to participants' marginalized positions, noting how these aspects shaped their experiences with sexual agency and sexual violence. In the subsequent deductive coding round, these points were examined in conversation with the existing theoretical framework, allowing me to situate participants' intersectional experiences within broader understandings of structural and social inequalities. This approach ensured that both the nuanced, data-driven experiences and their theoretical

significance were captured in the analysis, with a particular focus on the gender-responsive and intersectional (GRI) framework.

IV. Positionality Statement

Building on Haraway's assertion that knowledge is situated (Haraway, 2013), my research is necessarily shaped by my social, cultural, and epistemic location. As an Iranian diasporic woman conducting research across Canada and Iran, and working in both Farsi and English, my positionality informed every stage of the research process, from access and recruitment to interview dynamics, participant disclosure, and the interpretation of data.

My shared linguistic and cultural background with Iranian participants often facilitated rapport, trust, and nuanced communication, enabling participants to articulate experiences that may have remained inaccessible to an outsider. At the same time, my diasporic position and academic training in both American and Canadian contexts situate me as both an insider and an outsider, requiring ongoing reflexivity in navigating power dynamics, assumptions, and expectations in the field. In the Canadian context, my positionality also shaped how participants perceived me, particularly in relation to authority, expertise, and shared or divergent experiences of gender, migration, and institutional structures.

Working across Farsi and English further involved interpretive decisions that extend beyond direct translation, as meanings related to sexuality, intimacy, and violence are deeply embedded in cultural and linguistic contexts. This required careful attention to preserving participants' intended meanings while acknowledging the limits of translation. Throughout the research process, I engaged in reflexive practices to critically examine how my positionality influenced the production of knowledge, recognizing that the data and its analysis are co-constructed through these situated interactions.

V. Limitations

One of the main limitations of this study was related to participant recruitment. Since the pandemic occurred between 2020 and 2022 and I began recruiting participants in 2023, it was more difficult than expected to find individuals who were graduate students during that period. Being physically away from Iran added another layer of challenge in reaching potential participants. I addressed this issue by recruiting through LinkedIn and leveraging mutual connections on the platform, targeting individuals who were in graduate school at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another limitation of this study was the relatively high proportion of Iranian participants in the sample (6 out of 16 participants from the University of Ottawa were Iranian). While the presence of Iranian graduate students at the University of Ottawa allowed for meaningful comparative insights between students in Ottawa and Tehran, it also resulted in an overrepresentation of Iranian voices. This distribution shaped the comparative analysis and may have nuanced the overall conclusions. Future research should aim to validate these findings across more diverse populations and with a more balanced ratio of international and domestic students, in order to further assess the generalizability of the results and reduce potential sampling bias related to the higher number of Iranian participants.

A further limitation was related to the available software for data analysis. NVivo 14 was not fully compatible with Farsi, which required me to translate all Farsi interviews into English before analysis. This additional step may have introduced subtle changes in meaning, despite careful translation.

Chapter 4 Results

I. Introduction

The sexual and intimate lives of young women are shaped by a complex interplay of cultural norms, structural inequalities, and personal agency, producing experiences that are at once deeply individual and profoundly influenced by broader social forces. Across different contexts, young women navigate expectations around sexuality, negotiate boundaries in intimate relationships, and confront varying degrees of risk, surveillance, and gendered power. Understanding these experiences requires examining how factors such as family dynamics, education, economic precarity, social and cultural stigma, and institutional support systems intersect to shape both vulnerability and resilience in their everyday lives.

This chapter presents the key findings from my comparative study of women graduate students at the University of Ottawa (uOttawa) and the University of Tehran (uTehran), focusing on their experiences with dating, intimate and sexual relationships, and sexual violence. It explores how young women shape their dating relationships, negotiate agency in intimate and sexual encounters, and navigate incidents of sexual violence, including help-seeking, safety, and support. Drawing on in-depth qualitative accounts from 31 participants, 15 from the University of Tehran (uTehran) and 16 from the University of Ottawa (uOttawa), aged 25–45, the findings reveal both shared experiences shaped by globalized yet patriarchal norms and context-specific dynamics linked to cultural expectations, institutional policies, and broader sociopolitical structures. Additionally, this chapter examines the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young women's dating lives, intimate relationships, sexual encounters, and experiences of sexual

violence. All participant names used in this study are pseudonyms, assigned to protect the identity and safety of those who contributed to this research.

This chapter is organized into four major subsections:

Dating: This section discusses the modalities of dating (online, offline, and “third spaces” such as social media platforms used for dating in contexts like Iran), the various dating scripts (traditional-cultural and friendship-based), factors that restrict or shape young women’s dating lives, presentation strategies on first dates, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on dating practices.

Intimacy: This section examines how young women navigate diverse forms of intimate relationships and the factors influencing their formation. It explores participants’ definitions of a “bad” intimate relationship, the varied connections they draw between emotional intimacy and sexual relationships and concludes by discussing how the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped their intimate lives and relational dynamics.

Sex, Pleasure, and Sexual Agency: This section explores how young women conceptualize sexual activity, what they consider an “ideal” sexual encounter, and the factors shaping their attitudes and experiences. It examines how participants understand sexual pleasure, including perspectives on pornography and masturbation as sources of empowerment, education, or bodily need. Because sexual and pleasure education emerged organically throughout the interviews, this section analyzes the formal and informal ways participants learned about sex. Finally, it categorizes young women’s experiences and practices of sexual agency into four main groups, elaborates on each, and examines how the COVID-19 pandemic influenced the sexual lives of young women in both Canada and Iran.

Sexual Violence: This section presents the major themes that emerged from the data, offering a detailed examination of the forms of violence encountered, the factors influencing responses, and the resources, or lack thereof, available to participants in each setting.

While one might expect young women's experiences with dating, sexuality, and sexual violence to vary drastically across different geopolitical and cultural contexts due to differences in norms, policies, and cultural expectations, several global factors have created notable similarities. The widespread availability of information via the internet, the prevalence of neoliberal capitalism, and the persistence of patriarchy, even in more liberalized contexts through religion and culture, have shaped young women's experiences in comparable ways across contexts. At the same time, differences in the presence or absence of restrictive or supportive policies continue to influence fundamental values and shape experiences to some degree, reflecting the impact of structural and institutional frameworks on sexual, intimate and dating lives of young women.

II. Dating

Meeting people with the possibility of engaging in romantic and/or physical intimacy was widely regarded by participants as the central purpose of dating and of young women's presence in "dating scenes." Among the 31 young women who participated in this study, eight were single (not currently in a relationship), and 23 were in some form of relationship, either married or in a dating relationship that they characterized as having a boyfriend or a girlfriend. However, being active in the dating scene or seeking dates was not always determined by one's relationship status.

For most women, both in Canada and Iran, being in a relationship was understood as being “off the dating scene” due to their commitment to a monogamous partnership. Yet for some, being in a couple relationship did not necessarily preclude the possibility of returning to dating or considering alternative intimate relationships. Although such participants did not necessarily actively seek new partners, they remained open to emotional or physical intimacy outside their primary relationship.

For example, Arezoo, a woman who had been married for seven years in Iran and cohabiting with her current partner for three, explained:

I’m not looking for it-[a date]. It’s not a topic I’ve thought about a lot, but because of human nature, I don’t see it as super far from what’s possible, that all of a sudden, you fall in love, in a very special situation, and you experience a very intimate and unique relationship. I’m not completely closed to it, but it’s not something I’ve actively thought about or looked for. I don’t feel the need for it, but I don’t see it as impossible. It might happen; everything is possible.

Conversely, not all single women were actively seeking dates. Many expressed disappointment or disillusionment with dating, particularly due to challenges in finding a suitable match.

“Finding the right match” often reflected a desire for long-term compatibility, shared social values, and mutual life goals. This pattern appeared across both sociopolitical contexts, among participants from uTehran and uOttawa.

Mina, an Iranian master's graduate from uTehran, described this dynamic:

It’s important for me to be with someone who has similar goals to mine. I spend a lot of time and energy on my own goals, and because I’m a woman, sometimes the other person expects me to stay and do things for them. I can’t really accept

that. So even though I might need a partner emotionally and sexually, I haven't found someone who matches my criteria. I am not really looking anymore.

Mari, a PhD graduate from uOttawa, expressed her disappointment with dating apps and reflected on the possibility of returning to them:

The pool of candidates on the apps is very mediocre. In my social network, most people around my age are already with someone. And if they're not, they usually want kids. So, the pool of potential partners is very small. I also don't know many people from the LGBTQ community, which makes it really hard to find any meaningful connection. At this point, I feel very closed off to relationships. I just don't want one, I'm quite comfortable where I am now.

This sense of disappointment led some women to stop actively searching for dates, though they remained open to the possibility of an organic connection emerging. As Bahareh, a PhD student in Canada, put it: “[I am not looking for dates] actively and deliberately... but if it happens for me, um, I would think about it.”

While participants' relationship status and motivations shaped their engagement with dating scenes, the modalities through which they navigated these spaces, whether online or in person, further influenced their experiences and perceptions of dating. The following sections explore the modalities of dating among young women in Iran and Canada, highlighting both the similarities and differences across these contexts, as well as the preferred dating scripts they follow. In addition, I discuss various factors that influence or constrain dating for young women, the elements that contribute to their perceptions of an “ideal date,” and the different ways they prepare for potential dating experiences. The section concludes with an examination of how the COVID-19 pandemic affected young women's dating practices and experiences.

a) Dating Modality: Online vs Traditional and the Third Space

Dating practices among young women in both Iran and Canada reveal diverse modalities shaped by access, social norms, and cultural expectations. While some participants preferred traditional, in-person dating, others turned to digital platforms as spaces for connection, experimentation, and negotiation. The interplay among these modalities, online, offline, and what I refer to as the “third space”, highlights how young women navigate structural constraints, safety concerns, and shifting social boundaries in their pursuit of intimacy and companionship.

Traditional In-Person Dating. Regardless of participants’ relationship status or willingness to date at the time of the interview, they were all asked how they would imagine finding a date. A majority of respondents (23 out of 31), both in Canada and Iran, had never used online dating applications. Most young women preferred finding dates in familiar, traditional, in-person settings where they could get to know potential partners within broader social contexts, such as university or work environments, through groups of friends, or within social activities they were already involved in. Since the study population consisted of female graduate students, the university was one of the main spaces where participants met potential partners. As Ana, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, explained:

For me, the norm is that the person must be found at the university. Ah, well, an educated person. Of course, I know not every university person is intelligent or trustworthy, but for me it was always like this: the right person should be at the university.

Familiarity with potential partners in traditional in-person settings was an important factor for young women, as they believed that knowing someone personally, or through mutual

acquaintances, enhanced trust and reduced the risks associated with dating a “total stranger.”

Isabella, a PhD student at uOttawa, noted:

I think that at least we know a little bit about the person. Like, if it's a friend of a friend, my friend can tell me, 'Oh, I know this person because they took a course with me.' It's from somewhere I recognize. And I know if he's cool or not. You see, I already know whether this person is nice or maybe someone who just wants to be with everybody. So at least I'll know a little bit about the person, the good things and the bad things, and then I can decide for myself.

Some participants who had experience with dating apps still preferred traditional, in-person dating because it allowed for greater familiarity and shared values. For instance, Bahareh, a PhD student in Canada, reflected:

I've been on dating apps, but generally it's about ideals and standards. If I were to go back to the dating scene, I'd prefer in-person, at some activities. For example, if there's a workshop that's related to my interests, like, I don't know, flower arranging or animal rights, I'd prefer that setting where values and principles that match mine are present. I'd meet people who share those values.

Another recurring theme in participants' narratives was the desire for relationships to develop organically and naturally within in-person settings. Susie, a PhD student at uOttawa, remarked: “I rarely had to ask people to go out with me, but when I do, I try to make it happen very naturally.”

Similarly, Nina, an MA graduate at uOttawa who had also used dating apps, emphasized how traditional dating settings allow relationships to evolve with genuine emotional buildup:

I think I always feel so excited when I have a crush on somebody because I've had several interactions with them already. So it's like we meet in the wild and

we're almost like friends before we start dating. It feels more special and organic. I've dated a lot of people that I've worked with, and that happens because I've had months of daily interactions with them. That excitement builds, you get to know the person better, so you like them on a different level.

Engaging in meaningful conversations before formally dating was also valued by participants who preferred traditional dating. They viewed such interactions as essential for establishing emotional depth and trust. As Maral, an MA graduate from uTehran, explained: "After I get to know that person, I let myself have deeper conversations with them, and after that, a date can happen. It's highly possible that what we call a 'love meeting' happens after we've spent time getting to know each other."

For many, traditional in-person dating was also associated with a higher level of commitment compared to online dating. Siri, who had tried dating apps but did not favor them, stated: "I think that when you're on a dating app, the level of commitment that people give you is lesser."

Similarly, Sarah, a PhD student at uOttawa who had never used dating apps, described the importance of building trust gradually through in-person interactions:

I'm not the type that would see someone and just say, 'Oh, I like this person and I'd like to date them.' No. I have to get to know you. For me, those meetings would definitely have to be casual, just chatting like any other meeting. For me to commit to something like a date, you have to prove your worth. It's serious for me because I see that as giving a vital part of myself. It's a commitment and shouldn't just be done casually.

Participants also viewed in-person dating as more fluid and unstructured compared to the procedural nature of dating apps. Nina noted: "I think when you meet people in the wild and you build those connections; it's just so much more fluid, it's different."

Alaina, a PhD student at uOttawa, added:

It feels like something more artificial when it's on an app than if you're at a social event and someone is introduced to you and you can interact. On apps, it's a procedure, but during social events, you don't have a procedure to follow.

Traditional in-person interactions also blurred the boundaries between casual encounters and formal dating, helping reduce the pressure and expectations often associated with a "date." Some participants even preferred to describe early encounters as "going out" rather than "dating," as Hira, a PhD student at uOttawa, explained, in order to "get to know each other more." Similarly, Rozita, a PhD student in Canada who completed her MA at uTehran, emphasized that:

"Everything should start very indirectly and friendly, like two humans, with a gentle, natural process."

Online Dating: "No!" As mentioned earlier, most participants had never used online dating applications. One of the main reasons was safety concerns. Young women, especially those who had never used dating apps, reported lower levels of trust and safety when seeking potential partners online. They associated some degree of "risk" with dating on such platforms.

For example, Fatima, a master's graduate from uTehran, explained:

Well, honestly, I have always felt some level of fear about these kinds of things. I have a high level of insecurity about them, we are meeting people I don't know, and I cannot really know what to expect. That usually results in me having a lot of fear or anxiety, and that's why I never thought about it.

Similarly, Sarah, a PhD student at uOttawa who had also never used dating apps, reflected on the potential dangers:

These are some of the risks , like being presented with one thing on an app and then meeting someone completely different. Totally different. I think that's a possible risk for me. And even life-threatening risks as well, I would say. I also feel apps may not be able to guarantee your safety.

In addition to safety concerns, participants raised other stigmas associated with online dating, such as a perceived lack of commitment, depth, and emotional connection. Bahareh, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa who had some limited experience with online dating but preferred in-person interactions, described her dissatisfaction: "It doesn't provide the kind of depth of knowing that I'm looking for, and it creates a feeling of insecurity in me." She continues:

I feel like my personality , my prominent, bold personality traits, like the way I choose words, my body language, my sense of humor , these are things that attract someone in face-to-face interactions. Those bold, iconic signature traits of mine can't be transferred into a dating app profile. I feel like I have to limit this volume of my being to a few lines, a few words, a few photos. I didn't like that. I would have liked someone who wants to see me in context over time , for example, over a few months, where the person sees me as a colleague, sees my messy/clean routines day to day , a larger volume of me would come out, and then they would approach me. Not that speed-dating swipe-swipe mode. I feel dating apps don't do justice to me."

Siri, an MA graduate from uOttawa who had briefly used dating apps but decided not to return to them, echoed this sentiment, emphasizing the low level of commitment she observed among users:

I think that when you're on a dating app, the level of commitment that people give you is lesser because there's a lot of options. The necessity to try to align yourself with somebody is not so high because there's always another option. People don't get to know you intimately.

Interestingly, none of the participants from uTehran had ever used online dating applications. The majority expressed distrust toward the platforms and their users, with several noting that such apps are perceived primarily as spaces for casual sexual encounters rather than meaningful relationships. As Hoorah, a PhD graduate from uTehran, stated: “Most online applications in Iran are only for sex and finding sex partners.”

This perception makes dating apps an unfavorable way for young women to meet potential partners, as they are more likely to seek committed relationships rather than casual hookups or one-night stands.

Other participants noted that the timing of app popularity and personal relationship history also played a role in their non-use. Some had entered long-term relationships before dating apps became widespread. For instance, Isabella, a Brazilian PhD student at uOttawa, recalled: “I never dated using these apps like Tinder. Because when Tinder started to become famous and popular in Brazil, I was already dating. So, yeah, I think that’s why , it was not my time.”

Moreover, several participants stated they never felt the need to turn to online dating, as they already had sufficient opportunities to meet potential partners in their everyday environments. In contexts such as Iran, where dating apps are neither widely used nor socially accepted, young women viewed them as unlikely spaces to find a compatible partner.

Experiences with Online Dating Applications. Despite prevailing negative attitudes toward online dating apps, some young women in this study used them to find potential partners. Among the participants, eight young women from uOttawa reported having used online dating apps at some point in their lives. For some, the experience was disappointing and not something they intended to repeat, while for others, it became one of their main ways of meeting people.

Nina, a Canadian MA graduate from uOttawa, used online dating applications during periods when she did not have opportunities to meet people through traditional, in-person means:

“I find sometimes I’ll go through periods of not meeting anybody, like quote-unquote ‘in the wild,’ for months and months at a time. So it’s just a nice way to sort of actively engage in dating and to meet people who might be on a similar page. I started using dating apps when I was, I don’t know, 20, and I’m 33 now. So it’s always been part of my dating culture since coming of age. But I’d definitely say that I don’t want it to be a part of my dating future as I continue dating. I think I’m sort of falling out of love with them.

While using dating apps, young women learn the “logics” that govern these digital spaces, through trial and error, and through conversations with friends. They come to understand that different apps serve different purposes: for example, Tinder is often associated with casual sex, while Hinge is perceived as better suited for more serious relationships since it includes more descriptions in the application allowing daters to have more information rather than just “seeing a face and swiping left or right” (Mari, PhD graduate from uOttawa). Bumble is seen as more female-friendly since it requires women to initiate conversations, and apps such as Her cater to queer women. Others, such as Feeld, are used by individuals interested in exploring non-normative or “kinky” relationships.

Alaina, a PhD student at uOttawa, shared her experiences:

I think the one [dating app] that I feel is more connected with my personality is Feeld. It’s for kinky stuff, BDSM, queer people. It’s more open than Tinder or others because people can really say what they want. If they just want sex, they can say it. If they want something romantic, they can specify that. So I think it’s easier.

Other apps cater to specific identity-based communities, such as Muslim Match for Muslims, Millionaire Match for wealthy individuals, or Christian Mingle for Christians. Layla, a Black PhD student at uOttawa who wanted to find a Black partner, used an app designed for Black users and successfully met her current partner there.

Participants who had never used online dating often viewed these apps as spaces that compel users to “sell themselves” as objects. As Susie, a PhD student from France studying at uOttawa, explained: “I don’t like to stage myself or try to sell myself for that kind of purpose.” However, even among those who did use dating apps, there was recognition of this underlying “market logic.” Many users described a tension between their discomfort with objectification and their curiosity, or lack of offline options, which motivated them to engage in online dating despite their reservations.

Farah, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, described this ambivalence:

These applications were generally seen as superficial, for casual sex. The first time I used Tinder, around 2014, even Bumble didn’t exist yet. Tinder was perceived as only for finding sex partners. So, as a feminist and a critic of those conditions, I felt like I was contradicting myself, like I was just another woman standing in the meat market, offering myself. That judgment, whether fair or not, was in my head. But still, curiosity made me use it, because it was the only way to meet people. I didn’t want to date Iranian men, so my options were limited. The only space available was these apps, despite all their problems.

Because of this stigma, Farah initially tried to conceal her identity when creating her profile:

I tried to choose photos where nothing familiar showed, so acquaintances wouldn’t recognize me. Maybe that was naïve, because people just scroll fast anyway. But it still happened, some acquaintances recognized me. At first, I

posted photos with sunglasses, standing far away. Later, I posted clearer ones of my face. But then guys would ask for more photos, to see my body, my height, my figure. That gave me a really bad feeling, like I was in a meat market, being seen as a commodity. Each time I got such requests, I felt awful and sometimes deleted my account right away.

Over time, Farah became more comfortable presenting herself more openly on these platforms. She developed strategies to create a profile that reflected her preferences: “In the end, I chose photos where my face was clear. Later, when a few acquaintances teased me, I realized it didn’t matter. At first, I cared, but then not anymore.”

Participants also developed strategies for transitioning from online interaction to in-person meetings. While some appreciated the convenience of dating apps, especially those with limited opportunities to meet potential partners in person, most preferred to move from online chatting to in-person meetings relatively quickly. They generally reported that chatting for one to two weeks was sufficient before deciding whether to meet.

Mari, a Canadian PhD student from uOttawa, explained her approach:

If I saw that they were responding, not super quickly but within a normal range of time, and if they responded with interesting answers, I would quickly say, ‘Let’s meet.’ I didn’t want to stay on an app for weeks and weeks getting to know them there, because I found it was a waste of time. In most cases, you go for just a quick coffee or one drink.

Continuing long conversations online was considered a waste of time because meeting in person provided a more accurate sense of whether there was genuine interest or compatibility.

Participants also reported that in-person meetings helped verify the accuracy of online profiles, particularly physical appearance, since some had encountered misleading information.

For safety reasons, all participants with experience in online dating emphasized meeting in public places for the first time and keeping initial meetings brief. After encountering “weird” or uncomfortable dates, they learned to prioritize control over the duration and conditions of first meetings.

Nina reflected on this strategy:

I like the idea of a first date being very fast. I don't want to do something that's going to take a long commitment because I don't even know that I like this person yet. Back in the day, I'd been on first dates where we went to a movie and then dinner, and I was like, the whole time, 'I hate this person, I don't want to be here.' So now it's a lot more relaxed to just get a coffee and go for a walk for an hour or something, rather than making a commitment to spend a few hours with someone you don't really know.

Although participants from uTehran did not report using online dating applications to find potential dates, they turned to other platforms, leveraging the possibilities of the digital sphere to meet people while avoiding the stigmas attached to dating apps in Iran.

The Third Space. While access to online dating applications in Iran remains limited and their use is associated with considerable stigma and negative attitudes, many young people have found alternative ways to connect. Although none of the participants from uTehran reported using formal online dating applications to find dates, more than half reported using other social media platforms to connect with potential partners. I refer to these platforms as “the third space”, a hybrid space situated between traditional in-person interactions and dedicated online dating applications.

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and even LinkedIn were cited as examples of this third space, virtual environments where young people create informal opportunities for social and romantic connection outside of institutionalized dating platforms. Within these spaces, users have developed particular strategies to signal and navigate romantic interest.

As Tina, a master's graduate from uTehran, described:

Generally, someone follows you, maybe they know what they want or just randomly, then you post a photo or video of yourself. They reply, complimenting you at first, then try to continue the conversation by asking questions. You reply if you like them. After some days of communication, they invite you to a café to meet in person. For me, this process is normal, not strange.

Using social media as a third space for dating appears to stem from both social restrictions in the physical world and the increasing centrality of online spaces in young people's daily lives. As Rezvan, an MA student from uTehran, explained:

I don't know, it usually happens by chance. But Instagram or social media were always the places where I spent the most time and paid the most attention to, where I communicated with people. Maybe the reason is that before coming to Tehran, when I was living with my parents, most of my friendships and relationships happened through this medium, and a lot of my relationships were formed through Instagram. The person I'm in a relationship with now, no, but the person I used to be in a relationship with, I found them on Instagram.

Participants also reported feeling greater trust when connecting with potential partners through the third space than on dating apps. Unlike dating applications, where users primarily appear for dating and limited personal information is available, social media profiles reveal broader aspects

of a person's identity and life, offering more context for evaluating authenticity and compatibility. Additionally, the possibility of mutual connections within these networks further contributed to feelings of safety and familiarity. As Mina, an MA graduate from uTehran, explained the reasoning behind trusting a person to date on Instagram. She said: "I couldn't really trust people in virtual spaces... Though I had some sort of mutual contacts and connections with this person [on Instagram], so that was there, and I felt that it's OK."

While in Iran, the third space often served as a primary site for initiating romantic connections, participants in the Canadian context described using it differently. Rather than as a place to meet new people, the third space was used to extend or deepen conversations with someone they had already met, either through mutual acquaintances or in person. Social media thus became a way to maintain virtual contact, follow one another's lives, and assess compatibility before exchanging phone numbers or meeting again.

Isabella, a PhD student at uOttawa, described this process:

For example, someone would introduce me to this person, a friend would introduce me. Then we would start chatting through social media, like Instagram. I would start to follow this person, and then we would talk and see if we had things in common, things that would attract me to want to meet this person in person. And then, I think, we would exchange phone numbers.

Regardless of the modality through which dating takes place, whether online, in person, or within the "third space" of social media, participants' experiences reveal that dating practices remain deeply shaped by existing social and cultural scripts. While technology offers new avenues for connection and may blur traditional boundaries between public and private interactions, the underlying norms governing intimacy, gender roles, and

expectations often persist. In this sense, shifting the modality of dating does not necessarily disrupt established power relations; rather, it relocates them into new contexts, where young women continue to negotiate agency, safety, and desire within familiar cultural frameworks. The following section explores how these gendered scripts manifest across different dating experiences and how participants reinterpret or resist them in practice.

b) Dating Scripts

The literature on dating scripts highlights how heterosexual romantic contexts often reinforce men's power and sustain gender stereotypes regarding the initiation of dates. Similarly, half of the participants in this study, both from uOttawa and uTehran, acknowledged the importance of men taking the initiative to invite women on dates. Notably, most respondents who adhered to this cultural script came from more religious or conservative social contexts. For instance, Hira, an Arab PhD student at uOttawa, explained: "The one who will invite to the date is definitely the man, [it is] in my culture."

For some participants, men's initiation was also understood as a way to assess their ability to plan and demonstrate effort. Siri, a Christian Canadian master's graduate from uOttawa, commented:

Maybe a little old school, but the person has to ask me out. And after they ask me out, then we go on a date... it's just a preference of mine. I just want to see that they're able to plan something and take that initiative.

However, even when young women expected men to initiate dates, they still sought some control over the location, timing, and activities of the encounter, emphasizing comfort, safety, and financial considerations. As Bahareh, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, noted:

Usually, culturally, when planning for a date, a bit more priority is given to women, out of respect and for safety reasons. Men know women might feel unsafe, so they usually do not refuse the woman's choice of location. Also, because of the general income gap, men usually have more flexibility, like having cars. I have had guys say, 'I will take the bus if needed, no problem,' just to make sure I feel comfortable. So usually it is somewhere convenient for both, with a bit more weight given to the woman's comfort, maybe 60–40.

Even though some young women expected men to initiate, they actively employed strategies to encourage men to take that step. Arezoo, a PhD student at uTehran who began dating in her late twenties, shared:

When I started wanting to be in a relationship with someone, contrary to my background, I was very actively acting, I had the control. I started sending hints and hitting on that person myself in different ways because he was very nerdy. I started connecting with him through text messages, using academic excuses, and it continued up to the first date, which was in a café. He offered the first date and picked the place.

These gendered expectations and stereotypes around men's initiation stem largely from social and cultural norms within traditional families that dictate that "men are always pursuing women," as Ramina, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, explained. This dynamic contributes to women's reluctance to initiate, as cultural expectations emphasize that women should be "desired". Ava, a PhD student at uTehran, reflected: "These are somehow historical contexts of

Iran, that girls should be wanted. Some parts have a social aspect, and some parts are more intensified in traditional families.”

Fear of rejection also reinforces this dynamic. Bahareh described the emotional burden associated with taking the initiative and how she managed it during her only experience of asking someone out via her friend: “There is always that little fear of rejection. I thought if he rejected me, Sara [her friend] would not feel the same emotional weight I would. So I asked her to do it.”

Among non-heterosexual participants, a different dating script emerged, one based on equality and friendship rather than traditional gender roles. Ana, who is in a lesbian relationship, emphasized: “For me, because we were and are both women, in reality it didn’t matter who proposed. It wasn’t like someone higher or lower.”

Similarly, Rezvan, a bisexual MA student at uTehran in a relationship with a woman, reflected on her positive “friendship script” within her current non-heterosexual relationship that contrasted sharply with her previous experiences in heterosexual dating.

In online dating contexts, women tended to take more initiative themselves, often as a strategy to save time, assess compatibility, and ensure the sincerity of potential partners. In addition, some participants took the initiative within the third space, using social media to spark connections and initiate dates. As Tina, an MA graduate from uTehran, explained: “I usually take the initiative. I post a photo on my story; someone replies and compliments me, and I react based on whether I like the person or not.”

In restrictive contexts like Iran, where dating is socially and legally constrained outside of marriage, women also exercised greater control to resist such limitations. Haleh, a master's graduate from uTehran, explained:

In Iran, because of the social and political situation, your private and public spheres cannot really be distinguished from one another. You cannot go to a café with peace of mind the way you want, or if you want to go to a bar, which is not really available in Iran, or a restaurant. So, because of all those restrictions, I usually meet my person in my house after I kind of get to know him. The person I'm with lives far away, and it's hard for him to come and go, so it's usually me who decides when and where to meet, usually at my place.

Overall, while many participants continued to navigate dating through gendered scripts that privilege male initiation, their narratives also reveal subtle forms of resistance and negotiation. Women's agency emerged not in rejecting these norms outright, but in reinterpreting them, by setting boundaries, influencing decisions, and asserting comfort and safety within the dating process.

c) Factors Influencing Young Women's Dating Experiences

Through the process of deciding whether to go on a date, and reflecting on the quality of those dates, multiple factors were recognized and discussed by young women in this study. These factors influenced women's decisions about whether to date, with whom, when, and where, as well as their assessments of what made a date successful or what restricted a good dating experience.

Age. One of the most significant factors shaping participants' dating lives was their age. Given that the participants in both contexts ranged from 25 to 45 years old, this 20-year span showed

the importance of age in shaping dating experiences and highlighted the differences between younger and older women. It often determined the dating modality, as some women had entered committed relationships long before online dating became widely available. While accessibility and popularity of dating applications remain limited in Iran, some participants who had been in long-term relationships (more than ten years) mentioned that these platforms simply did not exist when they were dating. Similarly, several participants from uOttawa, particularly international students from the Middle East, South America, or Africa, reported that they had never heard of or used dating apps because such technologies were unavailable in their countries during their dating years.

Experience level. Experience in dating also influenced participants' confidence and comfort in dating. Those who had been away from the dating scene for long periods often reported anxiety or distress until they "got the grasp of it." Hoorah, a PhD graduate from uTehran who had been in a long-term relationship for ten years, reflected: "Because I was in two very long relationships, I didn't have that time to experiment and gain experience about dating. So it was really hard for me to start dating again and learn how it works."

Similarly, Mari, a PhD graduate from uOttawa, described returning to dating after twenty years in a relationship as a learning process: "Through time, I've learned certain things."

Personal mood, stage of life, and goals. Personal mood and stage of life were also key factors influencing dating decisions. For instance, participants mentioned that periods of emotional exhaustion, heavy workloads, or limited mental capacity made dating difficult. Bahareh, a PhD student at uOttawa, shared: "I feel because of some wounds I've had in previous relationships,

and because of where I am in my personal life path, I don't have the space to expose myself to a relationship.”

Having shared life goals, such as a desire for a long-term relationship or shared plans around immigration, also shaped dating choices, particularly for older participants. With the proliferation of diverse forms of relationships, young women often feel the need to clarify the purpose and goals of their meetings in a world filled with numerous possibilities. For example, Bahareh, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, explained: “For me, I always ask from the beginning, ‘Are you asking me out? Is this a date or just a friendly meet-up?’ Because I want to know what the intention is... clarity matters to me.”

In addition, being a graduate student was another common limitation, as academic, work, and research commitments left little time or energy for dating.

Familial responsibilities. Familial responsibilities, particularly for single mothers, also played a decisive role. Participants emphasized that arranging childcare was essential before going on dates. For participants who were a parent with full custody was a central aspect they disclosed early in the dating process. Layla, a PhD student at uOttawa, described her approach:

I will establish from the get-go that I'm a mother... I will explain that I have custody a hundred percent. I'll give you the tough ones, to really see if you're interested in getting to know me more. I'm always with them, so I don't have that much time for me. If a man is interested, he needs to be okay with us talking on the phone while I'm also mothering.

Communication Ability. Across both contexts, meaningful conversation emerged as a critical component of a good date. Participants emphasized that engaging in deep dialogue allowed them to assess compatibility and shared values. The phenomenon of ghosting, when one's date

gradually disappears without explanation, was experienced in both contexts and was perceived as emotionally damaging.

Shared Interests and Values. While shared interests were often described as a bonus rather than a necessity, participants valued the ability to communicate and alternate between each partner's preferences. For those who viewed dating as a form of recreation, having *fun* was also essential.

Conversely, lack of shared values was seen as a major restriction. Participants from both Tehran and Ottawa emphasized that consistency and follow-up after a date were crucial for developing relationships.

Topics such as family orientation, freedom, political beliefs, attitudes toward religion, education, and tolerance were particularly salient. Sharing fundamental values was seen as crucial, especially in Canada, where participants of color emphasized the importance of dating partners who were not racist and who shared core political and moral values. As Nina, an MA graduate from uOttawa, stated:

For me, obviously as a feminist thinker and someone who's very left-leaning, I could never date someone who would vote conservative. I could never date someone who is pro-life. I could never date somebody with certain views in life. I'm open to hearing why people think the way they do, but there are some fundamental differences where I'm like, I could not date you. This would not work.

Dating Environment. The environment of the date was another significant factor. Most participants preferred calm, quiet public spaces that facilitated conversation and provided a sense of safety, especially for first dates. As Susie, a PhD student at uOttawa, described: "I don't like noisy places for a first date because then I can't have a proper conversation. If it's too noisy, it

distracts me and prevents me from getting their vibe.” Layla similarly emphasized the importance of safety: “If I do not know the person, we should go somewhere where other people can see us.”

However, in Iran, restrictive regulations surrounding dating outside of marriage limited the ability to meet freely in public. As a result, some women preferred private spaces once trust was established. Haleh, a master’s graduate from Tehran, explained:

In Iran, because of the socio-political situation, your private and public spheres cannot really be distinguished. You cannot actually go to a café with peace of mind. So because of all those restrictions, I usually meet my person in my house after I get to know him.

These restrictions were even more severe for women in non-heterosexual relationships, as homosexuality is criminalized under Iranian law. Ana, an Iranian PhD student married to a woman, shared:

I preferred not to be in public. Because in a country like Iran, two women in public cannot easily talk about their feelings. Imagine in a restaurant, they cannot easily talk or show affection. When you live in an environment that doesn’t accept two women together, that date never becomes ideal. That sense of freedom you should feel, you never feel.

Traditional Family Structure. Beyond state-imposed restrictions, traditional family structures also influenced dating behaviors of participants from both contexts. In more conservative families, dating outside of engagement or marriage was discouraged, particularly for women. For example, Yara, a PhD student at uTehran who grew up in a religious family, reported that she did not go on many dates, especially alone, with her current husband while they were engaged, because her family exerted control. This control created a structured way of thinking that she

internalized, such that even in later stages of her life, when her family was no longer directly monitoring her, she continued to follow the rules they had set. She explained:

We were not even going on that many dates before getting married. I don't like these kinds of dates myself, and my family, being religious, defined a structure for us that we didn't go out of. Our dates before marriage were mainly when his brother was coming, so we were never alone at all. My family always told us to study, and we didn't have cell phones at the time, it was not allowed for us girls to have them. ... Later, when I came to Tehran to do my master's, my family was not with me, so I wasn't really scared, but because I grew up that way, I was controlling myself and didn't allow myself to be alone or even talk with another guy.

Respect and Trust. Participants also highlighted the importance of respect, particularly around physical boundaries. Respecting personal and bodily autonomy was essential for defining a “good date.” Haleh, from Tehran, noted that a lack of respect for physical boundaries was an immediate red flag. This sentiment was shared by 20 out of 31 participants, 11 from Ottawa and 9 from Tehran. As Layla from Ottawa explained: “If you establish sex at first, then we probably won't talk anymore.”

Trust was another recurring theme, especially in online dating, where concerns about honesty and authenticity were heightened. As mentioned by Bahareh, a PhD student at uOttawa that “often, the disappointment of meeting someone very different from their photos pushed me to stop investing much in chats.”

Intersectional Factors. Finally, intersectional factors such as sexual orientation, language, and financial stability impacted with dating experiences. For international students, financial insecurity or navigating dating in a second language were major challenges. Alaina, a PhD

student from Brazil, reflected on her experience using dating apps: “I don’t like the chat part, you know, writing things. I think it’s confusing, mostly in English. It’s tricky for us who don’t have English as our first language.”

Despite all these intersecting restrictions, participants across both Iran and Canada expressed clear ideas of what they considered *ideal dates*, ones that balance comfort, respect, meaningful conversation, and shared values.

d) Ideal Dates

Ideal dates for participants were characterized by several key features: strong communication and a sense of connection, attentiveness and emotional support, physical attraction, a good sense of humor, shared values, and mutual trust.

Good Communication and Connection. In response to the question about what constitutes an ideal date, 27 out of 31 participants (13 from uTehran and 14 from uOttawa) emphasized the importance of a good conversation and a genuine connection with their partner. A meaningful, mutual interaction, where thoughts are shared, participants feel heard, and deep intellectual conversations unfold, was widely described as the foundation of a satisfying date. Feeling comfortable to express oneself freely, without fear of judgment or the need for self-censorship and being able to show vulnerability were also common themes across both contexts. As Sima, a master’s graduate from uOttawa, explained:

It’s important to me that meaningful, deep conversations happen, not superficial small talk. I want to really get to know the person at least somewhat through the talk. Also, it’s important they feel comfortable, not censor themselves, and show their true self, not act or pretend.

Similarly, Siri, another master's graduate from uOttawa, described her ideal date as one where she could "be comfortable and talk about anything." The emphasis on intellectual and emotional connection was particularly strong among highly educated women, for whom such interactions were both rare and crucial. As Ava, a PhD student at uTehran, reflected:

I say that us as people in social sciences, when we are in this field for a long time, we can't connect with others easily... For example, in my past experiences, it happened that someone started speaking to me on the way and he had kind of an attractive appearance, but after a few sentences I was like, what are you talking about? That's enough, go away! I cannot really bear this kind of talk anymore.

Attention and Support. For many participants, an ideal date also reflected the level of attention, effort, and curiosity shown by their partner. This could include choosing an appropriate venue or activity, offering small thoughtful gestures, or trying to create a romantic atmosphere. Such behaviors were particularly valued by women who followed more traditional dating scripts and expected men to take the initiative in planning the date.

Feeling supported and cared for was another recurring theme in participants' descriptions of an ideal date. As Susie, a PhD student from uOttawa, shared when describing a date with her current partner:

The perfect date for me would be based on my current relationship, that the person is very kind and just makes sure that I'm comfortable at every step of the process and offers to take on the workload of putting together the date and making sure that my wishes and my needs come first.

Physical attraction was mentioned as a significant component of an ideal date, particularly among Iranian participants (three from Ottawa and five from Tehran). As Yara, a PhD student at uTehran, explained:

The thing that can attract me more, and I pay more attention to, is the other person's appearance at first glance, having a good outfit, a good smell, and then we start the conversation. The way they speak, their point of view, their personality.

A sense of humor and the ability to have fun together were also identified as qualities that make a date ideal, as they helped participants build a more natural and enjoyable connection. As Maral, an MA graduate from uTehran, said: "Having a sense of humor a little bit, in the ideal level, can help us build a connection."

Shared Values and Trust. Finally, having shared values, such as respect for diversity and inclusion, family orientation, respect for boundaries, and loyalty, was cited by roughly one-third of participants in both contexts as a crucial factor in feeling safe and trusting in an ideal date. As Haleh, an MA graduate from uTehran, emphasized: "I don't care that much if they bring flowers, it doesn't make an ideal date for me. But being honest, being respectful, showing that they are supportive, and creating a secure environment, those are the indicators of an ideal date."

Overall, while participants emphasized emotional connection, intellectual depth, and shared values as the foundation of an ideal date, many also acknowledged that the first impression, often shaped by physical appearance and presentation, plays a key role in initiating that connection.

e) Appearance and Self-Presentation on First Dates

Participants in this study expressed two general attitudes toward their appearance on first dates. One group emphasized authenticity and comfort, preferring not to invest significant effort in their appearance. They aimed to present their "real" selves rather than a curated image. These

participants often chose clothing that made them feel comfortable. As Farah, a PhD student at uOttawa, explained: "Since the situation is already awkward, I don't want to feel more uncomfortable." Similarly, Rezvan described her approach as relaxed and unconcerned with impressing others: "I try not to be too sensitive. I try to be my usual self. I'm totally OK, and I'm not stressed. I don't try to make myself in a way that others like me, I'm not very sensitive."

Those with more experience using dating apps expressed a similar sense of ease and casualness about their appearance. Nina, an MA graduate from uOttawa, shared: "I've been on so many app dates that I don't really get nervous anymore. It's just kind of like, I'm gonna go be myself as much as possible, and I don't put that much effort into getting ready anymore."

Two participants who identified as active believers, one from uTehran and one from uOttawa, emphasized their intention to present themselves in a non-sexualized way. Zohreh, a PhD graduate from uTehran, explained: "I don't want to have any specific sexual attraction myself. I wanted him to see me beyond sexual aspects, beyond being a sexual being, and only see me as a friend he can talk to."

On the other hand, about half of the participants in both contexts reported that they aimed to look their best and appear attractive on first dates, though none described going "above and beyond" in their efforts. They sought to balance attractiveness with comfort. Layal, a PhD student at uOttawa, described her routine: "I do my hair, makeup, everything, that's part of my routine anyway, even without going on dates."

Experience with dating and age also shaped how participants prepared for first dates. Younger women often described feeling more excitement and paying greater attention to their appearance,

whereas participants in their late thirties and early forties reported becoming less concerned over time. Rozita, an MA graduate from uTehran, reflected:

My mindset now is a little different than five or six years ago. Back then, I'd definitely do full makeup, try to stand out, and enjoy attention. Now, I do simple makeup and simple clothes, not to attract attention. I've become more humble. Back then, I liked the attention.

Overall, participants' approaches to appearance on first dates reflect a balance between authenticity, comfort, and attractiveness, influenced by personal values, cultural background, and past dating experience. These considerations took on new dimensions during the COVID-19 pandemic, when dating was limited and impacted by the reality of the global pandemic.

f) Dating in the COVID-19 pandemic era

The experiences of dating during the COVID-19 pandemic were very similar for young women in Iran and Canada, as confinement and lockdowns were imposed in both contexts. Dating was completely halted for some and became significantly more difficult for others due to the lack of open public places to meet. In addition, for those who were studying in Tehran or Ottawa away from their hometowns, relocation and navigating dating life in a new setting became even more challenging. In general, dating was recognized as harder by participants in this study, and many described it as a period in which life itself felt suspended. As Rezvan mentioned: "Covid-19 pandemic stopped life, it halted life while time was passing. Time was passing but life was not going on."

Among the participants, twelve were single at some point during the pandemic, but not all were actively looking to date. One of the main reasons cited by those who refrained from dating despite being single was concern for their own health and that of their loved ones. For example, Alaina, who had pre-existing health concerns, explained that she stopped dating entirely during the pandemic: “I was very afraid of the disease. My lungs are not healthy, and I didn't want to die.” Another participant, who had just left a bad relationship and was not in a good mental state, described COVID-19 as a form of protection that allowed her to take a break from dating and focus on herself.

For those who were open to dating and tried to meet new people, all reported significant challenges, especially due to the closure of public spaces during lockdowns. Using online dating applications, or, for participants from uTehran, meeting people through the “third space” (other social media platforms), became normalized during the pandemic, as virtual environments were often the only spaces available to connect from the confinement of their homes. As Tina, an MA graduate from uTehran, stated:

I think after COVID and the quarantine, the role of social media increased in everything. Dating online existed before, but after COVID, it became one of the main ways to find a partner. I experienced that myself and also saw it much more among people around me. Online dating became much more common, it existed before but not this prominently.

However, some participants used dating apps during the pandemic primarily to connect with people or pass time but did not return to them afterward, describing the experience as repetitive and emotionally draining. As Siri, a MA graduate from uOttawa reflected:

It was hard to date because I was unable to like meet anyone in person. So I actually ended up going online. I chatted with some people, but after a while it felt redundant. It just felt like you were saying the same thing to the same people all the time. It was like an empty feeling... After the pandemic I did not go back on the apps.

The pandemic also normalized video calls as a form of dating. Some participants found them convenient and useful as a shortcut to determine compatibility, while others described them as uncomfortable and awkward. Farah shared her experience:

People wanted to video call. For the first time, that became common. It was very difficult doing a video call with a stranger you'd just been chatting with, knowing it might lead to sex, then maybe a relationship. It was awkward, both sides were uncomfortable. I remember video calling two or three people during that time, and it always felt strange. Once, the guy kept glancing away; I asked if someone was there, he said, 'No, my dog is throwing up.' He hung up, called again, I felt uneasy, thought maybe someone else was there. After that, when someone suggested video call, I said no. If you want, we can meet in person, if you're comfortable, if not, fine.

Some participants did go on dates with people they met online, but most described these encounters as unsuccessful or even unsafe. Young women reported heightened feelings of insecurity and risk due to the lack of public meeting spaces, which often led to private, uncomfortable, or even violent experiences. For example, Nina, an MA graduate at uOttawa, discussed the risks of having dates at home while living alone:

I felt less safe dating during the pandemic because there were less public options, right? Like, if you know, if there was a lockdown period, really all you could do was go sit in the park. But during the winter, you're not gonna go sit in the park. So it's like, okay, we'll come over to my place, but then you don't feel safe

because you don't know this person... When I moved to Ottawa and I was living by myself, I was pretty careful with dating, and I really only started to go on more dates with the apps again when stuff was more open, to like go to a bar or do something like that, because I had two instances where I invited people back to my place, and they were both very unpleasant, and one of them felt very unsafe. So I was like, no, like, learn your lesson. Don't do it again.

Similarly, Rezvan, an MA student at uTehran who began dating someone during the pandemic and eventually moved in with him, described being trapped in a violent relationship. She explained how the pandemic restricted her choices and made her more vulnerable:

Covid-19 pandemic had impact on my dating life because it prevented it and nothing happened. I think I only went on a date with one person during corona and I started, I went on a relationship but that person, I think if it was not corona, I wouldn't go to a relationship with such a sick person. Because it was possible that there were other chances, I could go to university, I could be living in dormitory and I could have a life for myself before meeting that person, and all of these could decrease his chance.

These examples show how young women who were still willing to meet new people found themselves in highly vulnerable positions due to confinement and lockdowns especially in a context like Iran that dating activities and cohabitation outside formal marriage setting is being prohibited by the state law. Aside from the immediate disruptions caused by the pandemic, some long-term effects persisted. For several participants, returning to dating after COVID-19 was difficult, as they reported lower levels of self-confidence and a feeling of having lost touch with dating life. Table 3 below presents an overview of the dating-related findings

Table 3
Overview of Dating-Related Findings

Relationship status	uTehran: 3 single & 12 in a relationship uOttawa: 5 single & 11 in a relationship
Date Modality	Traditional in-person only: 7 from uTehran; 8 from uOttawa Used online dating apps: 8 from uOttawa Used the “third space”: 8 from uTehran
Dating Scripts	Traditional-Cultural Script: Followed by about half of participants from both contexts, mainly among those from religious or conservative backgrounds. Friendship script: Followed by half of the participants from both contexts
Factors Impacting Dating Experiences	Age; experience level; personal mood and goals; family responsibilities; communication skills; shared interests and values; dating environment (esp. restrictions and regulations in Iran for uTehran participants); traditional family structures; respect and trust; intersectional factors
Ideal Dates	Good communication and connection; attentiveness and emotional support; physical attraction (8 Iranian participants, 3 uOttawa, 5 uTehran); sense of humor; shared values; mutual trust
Appearance & Self-Presentation on First Dates	Authentic: About half of the participants from both contexts- Preference for comfortable and authentic clothing; casual style among online app users; two religious participants (one per context) preferred non-sexualized clothing. Attractive: About half of the participants from both contexts- Aiming for an appealing, put-together look without being overly formal; younger participants were more attentive to their appearance.
COVID-19 and dating	Overall impacts: Similar across contexts; dating felt less safe; restrictions and lockdowns halted or complicated in-person dating. Normalizations: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased normalization of online dating apps (uOttawa) • Normalization of video/virtual dates • Normalization of using the third space (uTehran)

III. Intimacy

While some young women in the age of “emotional capitalism” have grown tired of dating, most continue to engage in a wide range of intimate relationships, including partnerships, marriages, online long-distance relationships, and open relationships. All participants in this study, from both uTehran and uOttawa, had experienced at least one form of intimate relationship in their lives, and each also described what they considered to be an ideal partnership. In this section, I discuss the various factors influencing the formation of intimate relationships among young women in this study, as well as their understandings of what constitutes an “a bad intimate relationship.” I also examine the relationship between intimacy and sexual relationships, noting that while some participants did not perceive a direct connection between the two, others could not imagine engaging in sexual activity without a sense of emotional closeness with their partner. I close this section by analyzing the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on young women’s intimate relationships.

a) Factors in the Formation of an Ideal Intimate Relationship

Regardless of their current relationship status, its form, or their intention to start one, participants reflected on the characteristics of an ideal intimate relationship.

Communication Ability. Out of 31 participants, more than 26 emphasized the importance of successful communication as a key indicator of an ideal intimate relationship, as it leads to feelings of safety and trust. Mutual interaction, open dialogue, and the ability to express oneself freely were frequently cited. As Isabella, a PhD student at uOttawa, explained: “For me it is one. That like I feel that like I am being heard and listened.”

Participants highlighted empathy, emotional openness, and the ability to be vulnerable as essential. Trust and safety were seen as outcomes of consistent honesty and openness. As Ana, a PhD student at uOttawa, mentioned: “To a great extent, being able to be honest with your partner, be yourself. That creates intimacy, that creates trust, that later creates commitment, and it grows more.”

Consent, and non-judgmental relationship as a result of good communication were repeatedly described as core to sustaining intimacy. Many also pointed to patience, boundary setting, and problem-solving ability as indicators of emotional maturity. These traits appeared more often in discussions of ideal intimate relationships than in ideal dates, as long-term relationships require consistency and endurance. Participants valued having a safe space to give and receive feedback, even during sexual moments, without judgment. As Rezvan, an MA student at uTehran, put it: “People in an ideal intimate relationship can resolve any issues going on between them through constructive communication and nothing can go between them.”

Self-development and emotional growth were also emphasized. Participants described how sharing one’s experiences, including personal traumas, and being vulnerable without fear of judgment strengthens intimacy. Curiosity about one another, communicating needs and desires, and maintaining mutual understanding were also viewed as essential for emotional balance. Consistent communication and feeling valued helped build safety and trust over time. As Arezoo, a PhD student at uTehran, explained:

For me at the moment I am not scared if there is tension in my relationship or conflict because a thing that gives me a high level of security that anything happens in our relationship, we know how to talk about it and get over it together.

Emotions and Love. Unlike ideal dates, where emotions were rarely mentioned, love and emotional connection were the second most frequent characteristics of an ideal intimate relationship. Almost half of the participants across both contexts mentioned love, kindness, and genuine emotion as central. They emphasized that ideal relationships are built on emotional authenticity rather than formal titles such as marriage, relationships where partners choose to stay “by heart” rather than obligation. Passion, mutual attraction, and emotional support were described as key components. As Mari, a PhD graduate from uOttawa, noted: “In an ideal intimate relationship people are brave enough to freely love each other and emotionally make themselves available and vulnerable.”

Being Supportive. Participants described support, reliability, and generosity as indicators of a strong partnership. Being a priority in each other’s lives, offering emotional and practical support, and growing together were common themes. As Haleh, an MA graduate from uTehran, expressed: “You feel that you are free and your partner respects and support your path with all differences.”

Participants valued being able to rely on one another, address problems collaboratively, and balance their own needs with their partner’s. Equal treatment and shared responsibilities were mentioned as signs of fairness and respect. For some, financial support and encouragement toward personal or career goals were also forms of care. Generosity and shared effort helped participants feel less alone and more empowered within their relationships.

Shared Values and Common Ground. Many participants emphasized the importance of shared values, including a similar worldview, ethical alignment, intellectual connection, and cultural compatibility. They highlighted the significance of education, mutual respect, and the ability to

communicate through a shared moral or cultural lens. Respect for freedom and autonomy was particularly important for liberal participants. As Alaina, a PhD student at uOttawa, explained:

With freedom I think is the 1st thing. We will be together because it's good, but we don't need to be together. Because you don't need me, I don't need you.
Freedom is the If you if we talk about values, I think this is the 1st one.

For more religious participants, shared values often centered on family orientation, the importance of faith, and respect for traditional or religious structures. For more liberal participants, being “on the same page” in terms of values meant mutual respect for independence and equality.

Sexual Relationship and Attraction. Interestingly, only four participants, two from uOttawa and two from uTehran, mentioned the quality of sex and physical attraction as components of an ideal intimate relationship. For these women, sexual chemistry and physical connection complemented emotional intimacy. Passion and mutual enjoyment were seen as meaningful parts of closeness. As Farah, a PhD student at uOttawa, stated:

The quality of the sexual relationship matters; it has to be good. That is, as they say, the chemistry between both sides has to work. That both my body and theirs enjoy each other, and that the sex itself is of good quality.

Overall, participants’ reflections reveal how social, cultural, and familial expectations continue to shape their dating experiences and perceptions of appropriate behavior. These narratives highlight that dating is not only about personal preference but also about navigating broader structures of control, morality, and self-presentation. Such influences do not end at the stage of dating but extend into how young women understand, pursue, and sustain intimacy. The next

section explores how these intersecting factors, ranging from cultural norms to personal boundaries, may create bad intimate relationships.

b) Bad Intimate Relationships

Some young women, all Iranian, including two from uOttawa and one from uTehran, did not report experiencing a “bad” intimate relationship. They explained that they had only been in one relationship in their lives, which was still functioning at the time of the interview.

Not feel prioritized or cared. However, the majority of participants who answered this question described a “bad” intimate relationship as one in which they did not feel prioritized or cared for by their partners. As the characteristics of an ideal intimate relationship identified by participants indicated, feeling supported was considered a key component of a healthy partnership.

Consequently, a lack of emotional support and care often led to the termination of past relationships among young women in both contexts. Bita, an MA graduate from uTehran, reflected on her experience with a failed relationship: “In that relationship, it was clear I wasn’t a priority, and eventually, our paths completely diverged.”

Lack of consistency in communication and follow-up. Not being a priority in a partner’s life also manifested through a lack of consistency in communication and follow-up, which resulted in a loss of intimacy and passion. Farah, a PhD student at uOttawa, shared: “He wasn’t consistent, didn’t reply to messages... Eventually, I lost my desire and I decided to stop seeing him.”

Several participants also mentioned that differing life priorities, such as education or work, contributed to a sense of not being supported. Having a partner who failed to respect or encourage these ambitions was viewed as another form of emotional neglect.

Ask for mothering. Moreover, some women described experiences in which they were expected to take on a “mothering” role in their relationships, which led to frustration and emotional exhaustion. Two women from uTehran and two from uOttawa referred to this dynamic as a form of role reversal that undermined intimacy. As Hoorah, a PhD graduate from uTehran, explained: “At first our relationship was very hot, and then it turned into a mother–son relationship. At some point I didn’t want to play the role of his mother, and he became angry and cold.”

Absence of similar values. Not sharing similar values within a relationship was another commonly cited reason for dissatisfaction in both contexts. Although participants’ personal values varied widely, from religious to atheist, and from strictly monogamous to polyamorous and pro–sexual liberation, most young women emphasized that mismatched values led to dishonesty and a lack of respect, ultimately causing the relationship to end.

Similarly, differences in attitudes toward sexual intimacy also created tensions. Fatima, an Iranian MA graduate from uTehran, described ending a relationship she deeply valued because her religious beliefs conflicted with her partner’s expectations:

When my partner asked for a sexual relationship, it was a shock for me. I thought, why? When you were not really on board with getting into something more serious, why are you asking me such a thing? Though I really loved that person, I preferred to end the relationship because I felt that he couldn’t have the kind of relationship I believed in.

Violent. Some young women also identified violence and manipulative behaviors as defining features of bad intimate relationships. Participants from both contexts reported experiencing psychological manipulation, emotional abuse, and “gaslighting,” often without initially recognizing these behaviors as forms of violence. Nina, an MA graduate from uOttawa,

reflected: “He was very abusive in certain ways that I didn’t really realize were abuse because I was so young, like 19 or 20. I didn’t know what abuse was at that point. I thought it was just physical violence.”

For many participants, the recollection of bad intimate relationships was intertwined with their younger age and lack of experience. They often attributed their tolerance of harmful dynamics to their inexperience and limited understanding of healthy relationship standards. Layla, a PhD student at uOttawa, explained: “When I got married, I was a virgin. So, I wasn’t that experienced. He wasn’t, either. Looking back, I don’t know that the chemistry was there. I don’t think so.”

Rozita, an MA graduate from Tehran, echoed a similar sentiment, describing how her lack of awareness kept her in a violent relationship during her teenage years:

I had stayed in my first relationship when I was 18, which was toxic and violent, just because I was too young to realize it. We were always fighting, and he wanted to dominate me, belittling me in all aspects of life. I had no mental capacity to consider ending it.

For bisexual women like Isabella, a PhD student from uOttawa, the experience of violence and manipulation also carried an intersectional dimension, as their sexuality often became a site of control and stereotyping. Also, some queer participants expressed a deep skepticism toward men’s sincerity in relationships. As Rezvan, an MA student from uTehran, bluntly stated: “All men are manipulative and just try to have sex in intimate relationships.”

Overall, participants’ narratives of failed intimate relationships reveal that lack of communication, emotional neglect, mismatched values, and gendered power dynamics not only

disrupted their relationships but also shaped their perceptions of intimacy itself. For many, intimacy was closely tied to emotional support, mutual respect, and shared values rather than purely physical or sexual connection.

c) Sex and Intimacy

As the literature suggests, women are generally more inclined to engage in sexual relationships when they perceive the potential for deeper emotional attachment. Consistent with this, in the present study, most participants (25 out of 31) stated that at this stage in their lives, sex and intimacy are interconnected. They emphasized that to engage in sexual activity, they must feel emotionally close and intimate with their partner.

For most young women in both contexts, sex and intimacy were perceived as tightly linked. As Tina, an MA graduate from uTehran, expressed: “I need to feel emotional intimacy and trust before putting my body in a sexual situation.”

For some young women, emotional closeness and open communication were essential for expressing needs and desires during sexual activity, contributing to a more fulfilling experience. Isabella, a PhD student at uOttawa, who previously engaged in sexual encounters without intimacy but later came to view the two as connected, explained:

If we have more intimacy with a person, the sex can be different. It can be more comfortable and better for each person. I can feel more comfortable about saying, in a sexual relationship, what I want to do, what I desire, what I expect from that.

For some, intimacy and sex were seen as inseparable, a holistic “package.” As Sarah, a PhD student at uOttawa, put it: “For me, it has to be a package. It’s something that’s not food. And it’s a lot of giving, in my opinion. I don’t just do it casually.”

A few participants also emphasized that a satisfying sexual relationship could strengthen intimacy itself. Homa, an MA student at uTehran, shared: “I think sexual relationships often make intimacy stronger for me, and conversely, intimacy really affects the quality of sexual relationships, it can make it better or worse.”

However, the majority also acknowledged that this connection between sex and intimacy does not apply to all young women. As Mina, an MA graduate from Tehran, stated: “I know that my friends had one-night stands and they were satisfied, but it’s not like that for me.”

Several participants explained that their own perspectives on the connection between sex and intimacy had changed over time. Earlier in life, some engaged in casual sexual encounters without emotional attachment, but as they matured or prioritized meaningful relationships, they came to associate sex with emotional intimacy. Alaina described her experience following her divorce:

I had this phase that everything was very fast and casual, and it was not good. I was feeling empty. The casual sex was not good for me. I was not feeling happy. I enjoyed it for a while, and after that, I decided I needed connection, intimacy, as you said.

In contrast, for six participants (four from uOttawa, two Canadian and two Iranian, and two from uTehran), sex and intimacy were not necessarily connected. For these young women, sex could still be pleasurable even without emotional closeness, particularly in casual or one-night encounters. Ava, a PhD student from uTehran, explained: “In a one-night stand there’s no intimacy, but the sex is very good.”

These participants described that feeling safe and somewhat comfortable with a partner was sufficient to enjoy sex. As Ramina, a PhD student at uOttawa, expressed: “For me... just because I have sex with someone doesn’t mean I’m intimate with them, or that I’ll become intimate. Comfort, yes, but intimacy, not necessarily.”

Mari, who had experienced limited sexual satisfaction in her intimate relationships, described “logistical casual sex” that she found surprisingly positive: “I didn’t have any level of intimacy with that person, but it was very successful and pleasant.”

However, even among those who saw sex and intimacy as separable, a few participants, one from each context, believed that a *good* intimate relationship should include a healthy sexual connection. As Willow, an MA graduate from uOttawa, explained: “The sexual part of a relationship can bring a specific type of intimacy.”

Two participants also previously identified physical attraction and the quality of sex as indicators of an ideal intimate relationship, further reinforcing that, for some, sexual and emotional closeness remain deeply intertwined aspects of intimacy.

d) Intimacy in the Covid-19 Pandemic Time

The COVID-19 pandemic also significantly affected the intimate relationships of young women. Among the 31 participants in my study, 19 were in some form of intimate relationship, either married or in a committed partnership during the COVID-19 pandemic. Of these 19, only seven reported that they were dating their partners during the pandemic. The majority described positive experiences, noting that the lockdowns and social restrictions increased their sense of

closeness and intimacy, as they had more time to spend together without the usual distractions of work or family obligations.

As Sima, an MA graduate from uOttawa, reflected: “It was very good, even better than before. I think because outside influences weren’t there. Before, sometimes issues came from interactions with other people. But during quarantine, it was just the two of us, and our relationship became more intimate and stronger.”

Some participants also noted that distance or restrictions created opportunities to develop creative forms of bonding. For instance, Hira, a PhD student at uOttawa who was living apart from her husband, shared that they maintained intimacy through virtual activities, overcoming the challenge of time zone differences.

Zohreh, a PhD graduate from uTehran, mentioned that the pandemic even brought financial and emotional benefits, as they learned to simplify their dating routines:

The pandemic did not restrict our dates. It was like when we had a date, oh we both had cars uh and we usually got into one of our cars, we couldn’t go to coffee shops. I was taking some tea and biscuits with me and we’d have it in the car, then go to a park or countryside like Lavasan for a good walk, to get fresh air or change our mood, and then go back home.

However, for some couples, especially those in same-sex relationships, the pandemic created new barriers to connection. Ana, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, described the specific difficulties faced by lesbian couples:

Covid was a disaster. At the beginning of Covid , in March 2020, we had planned a trip together for both of our migration. But because of Covid, that trip

was canceled. And we didn't see each other again until July, six or seven months later... So yes, it had a big effect , fewer and fewer meetings.

For the 12 participants who were in relationships but not dating their partners during the pandemic, several factors played a role. Some were already married and did not consider dating within marriage as relevant. Others avoided in-person meetings due to health concerns or family vulnerabilities. In certain cases, pre-existing relational conflicts were intensified by the pressures of quarantine, leading to separation after the pandemic. For instance, Haleh, an MA graduate from uTehran, explained:

I was in a relationship, but the relationship was over at the time. It's a bit complicated. I didn't want to be in that relationship anymore, but because I couldn't move to another place, I was staying in the same place with my ex.

For some women who were living with their partners, the forced constant cohabitation during lockdown sometimes led to increased tension, emotional fatigue, and even the risk of violence and isolation. The experience was especially difficult for immigrant students at uOttawa who had to adapt to a new country amid lockdown conditions. Raheleh, a PhD student, described: "The environment was different. When we arrived, fourteen days of quarantine. Yes, those fourteen days were very hard. At home, we didn't fight, but we were cramped, depressed, upset."

Similarly, Fatima, a PhD student at uTehran, spoke about the strain of confinement:

My husband was forced to stay home and there were a lot of changes. We weren't used to having him home all the time. We couldn't do much, and our studies kind of stopped for a semester. It wasn't an easy time, we faced a lot of emotional problems.

Some participants turned to social media or dating apps to cope with loneliness and dissatisfaction in their relationships, though few interactions progressed to in-person meetings due to pandemic restrictions or their own religious or moral boundaries. Bahareh, a PhD student at uOttawa, described her experience with open relationships during lockdown: “I didn’t go on any in-person dates. I only met a few people online. But those few in-person dates I went on, I don’t even remember what we talked about, it was very limited and difficult.”

Similarly, Fatima, a MA graduate from uTehran, mentioned receiving multiple online offers through what she called the “third space” on Twitter, but she deliberately avoided pursuing them:

Honestly, I can’t say there weren’t offers, I had to control myself not to start another relationship, specifically because of my religious beliefs. I tried to prevent myself from falling into those situations. For example, I deactivated my account for a while.

Overall, while the COVID-19 pandemic strengthened intimacy and emotional bonding for some couples, it simultaneously exposed fractures in others, especially among those already experiencing conflict, distance, or social marginalization. Once lockdowns lifted, many of these weakened relationships dissolved, allowing participants to seek new spaces and forms of intimacy. The pandemic thus revealed how intimacy operates within broader structures of vulnerability, power, and adaptation. For some young women, isolation fostered deeper emotional connection and domestic solidarity, while for others it intensified existing inequalities and anxieties, leading to relational breakdown or digital escapism. Table 4 below presents an overview of intimacy-related findings.

Table 4
Overview of Intimacy-Related Findings

Ideal Intimate Relationship	Similar across both contexts: strong communication (26 out of 31), emotional connection and love, supportiveness, shared values, and a satisfying sexual relationship and attraction (only 4: 2 from uOttawa and 2 from uTehran).
Bad Intimate Relationship	Similar across contexts, often occurring when participants were younger: feeling uncared for or not prioritized; inconsistent communication and follow-up; partner expecting “mothering”; lack of shared values; presence of violence.
Sex and intimacy	Connected: 25 participants (12 uOttawa; 13 uTehran) felt a close link between sex and emotional intimacy. Not connected: 6 participants (4 from uOttawa, 2 Canadian, 2 Iranian, and 2 from uTehran) did not experience a strong connection between the two.
Intimacy & covid 19	In a relationship during COVID-19: 7 participants across both contexts were dating their partners and became more intimate; using technology for long-distance contact, reported more time together and deeper bonding. Not dating partners during COVID-19 (12 participants): Included those married but not “dating” within marriage; those with pre-existing relationship problems worsened by confinement; health-related separation; intersectional challenges (e.g., sexual minority participants in Iran needing feasible private spaces); some sought connection through online apps or third spaces to cope with loneliness.

IV. Sex, Pleasure, and Sexual Agency

Sexual activity can be defined in various ways, from full intercourse involving penetration to making out, oral sex, video sex, sexting, or even masturbation. In this study, all participants in the Canadian context had experienced vaginal intercourse. Although participation in sexual activity outside of marriage is not legally accepted in Iran, many young women are nevertheless engaging in sex. Among the fifteen participants from uTehran, seven were never married, and only two of them had not experienced sexual intercourse. However, even these two participants reported some form of sexual experience in the past, either with a partner or individually. As

Mina explained: “I didn't have a sexual relationship yet. Well, there were some exchanges of nude pictures or touching, and I masturbate too.”

While sexual pleasure was not a central priority in every young woman's life, most participants acknowledged the importance of sexual satisfaction, particularly within relationships. However, satisfaction was not always associated with orgasm; for many, it was linked to emotional intimacy, mutual respect, or feeling desired.

One factor contributing to higher levels of pleasure among young women was self-awareness, understanding their own bodies and having greater self-esteem. This awareness often led to a stronger sense of control over their sexual activities and a more agentic approach to sex. However, not all young women demonstrated this level of agency or prioritized their own pleasure. The way women perceived sexual activity, whether as an act for themselves or for their partner, varied significantly depending on their upbringing, social norms, and personal beliefs.

In the following sections, I discuss how young women conceptualize sexual activity and its purposes, the factors that influence their sexual experiences and attitudes toward sex, and their definitions of “ideal” sexual encounters. I also examine how they situate sexual pleasure within their lives and whether they consume pornography as a source of pleasure or education.

Although not all participants practiced masturbation, some viewed it as a healthy and empowering way to connect with their bodies and support their emancipation, while others regarded it solely as a means of addressing physical or sexual needs.

Even though I did not directly ask questions about sexual or pleasure education, these themes emerged as central to understanding participants' sexual experiences. In the next section, I

examine the presence, or absence, of sexual education in the lives of young women and the various sources from which they learned about sex. I then categorized the participants into four groups based on their expressions of sexual agency, with each group exhibiting distinct traits and practices, and each characterized by its own defining features. Finally, I explore how the COVID-19 pandemic shaped young women's sexual activities and relationships, and how these experiences varied across different contexts.

a) The Meaning and Purpose of Sex

From a biological standpoint, sex is often understood as a natural need essential for reproduction and the survival of humankind. However, for the participants in this study, sex was not seen solely as a means of procreation or physical release. Young women in both contexts conceptualized sex in three primary ways: 1. Sex as a holistic experience, 2. Sex as a recreational act, and 3. Sex as a means of satisfying male partners in heterosexual relationships.

Sex as a holistic experience. For some participants, sex was a holistic experience through which people “exchange their energies.” These women described sexual intimacy as something that extends beyond the physical realm, involving emotional, psychological, and even spiritual dimensions. Consequently, women who viewed sex holistically were often selective about their sexual partners, seeking deeper emotional connections and avoiding what they called “meaningless sex,” which left them feeling “empty” afterward. For example, Maral, an MA graduate from uTehran, differentiated human sexuality from animal behavior by describing sex as “a holistic experience accompanied by commitment and love.” Similarly, Alaina, a PhD student at uOttawa, reflected on how her earlier approach to sex as merely a physical and recreational act eventually felt unfulfilling: “I enjoyed sex as a physical recreational action, but

after a while, I found that this way of seeing and practicing sex wasn't satisfying, it lacked meaning and prevented me from engaging in a complete relationship."

Sex as a recreational act. For others, sex was more closely associated with pleasure and recreational activity. Isabella, a PhD student at uOttawa, noted that while sexual activity should include some level of intimacy, "it is also important to have fun as well." Bahareh, another PhD student at the same institution, emphasized prioritizing her own pleasure and agency in her sexual life:

Sexual pleasure should center me. It's part of the self-realization and individuation that I've gained. Overall, I've become a more independent person, it's like my own self has become the first priority in life. The same thing has happened in sex. It's like: what does Bahareh want? What does Bahareh like? What is Bahareh's decision right now?

Similarly, Hira, a PhD student at uOttawa, highlighted that in her relationships, it was essential that "both have fun." Zohreh, a PhD graduate from Tehran, also described sexual activity as a mutually enjoyable and playful experience shared between partners.

Sex as a means of satisfying male partners. More than half of the participants discussed how sex had initially been introduced or practiced in their lives as something performed primarily for men's satisfaction. Many described learning, through family, culture, or religious teachings, that sex was a performative act in which women should be passive and responsible for pleasing their male partners in heterosexual relationships as Ramina, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa put it: "I feel sex is very passive for me...I don't feel that sex is something that belongs to me or that I own it." Patriarchal norms that define women's bodies as existing for male pleasure and reproduction remain prevalent not only in more conservative societies, such as Iran, but also

within some communities in North and South America. Several participants shared how they had internalized these expectations. Isabella, a Brazilian PhD Student at uOttawa, reflected: “ I didn’t have a healthy relationship with sex because I was doing things just to please boys and not myself.” This mindset often led some young women to engage in risky or unwanted sexual situations or to remain in emotionally or physically violent relationships for fear of rejection. As Hira, a PhD student at Ottawa, explained, according to such patriarchal values, “sex is mainly considered a shameful act for women that should be controlled by men.” Iranian participants mentioned that they learnt these traditional values from female family members who modeled submissive roles toward men, further reinforcing the idea that women’s sexualities exist in service of men.

Religious attitudes within families and communities also played an important role in shaping these gendered understandings of sex. Siri, an MA graduate from uOttawa and an active Christian believer, described this internalized view:

For a long time, I was taught that you always have to focus on the men, and you always have to please them. But where do women fall? You know? For a long time, I felt like women were left behind. But through education and listening to people talk about women’s sexuality, I’ve learned to take a hold of myself and take myself into account in relationships.

Among married participants, these patriarchal and religious expectations were often reinforced through social and cultural norms that positioned sex as a duty rather than a mutual act. While unmarried women described performing sex to please men in hopes of receiving love or validation, married women often felt obligated to fulfill their husbands’ sexual needs as part of

their marital role. This dynamic was particularly visible among women raised in religious families in both contexts or patriarchal families in the Middle East.

Yara, a PhD student at uTehran, reflected on her early years of marriage:

For the first three or four years, I wasn't having orgasms. My sexual knowledge was very limited, there was no knowledge. I saw myself as a person giving a service, not as someone with rights in that sexual relationship. Being a 'good wife' meant being sexy and attractive so that my husband enjoyed himself. I experienced some pleasure myself, but not enough to reach orgasm.

Similarly, Mari, a Canadian PhD graduate from uOttawa who grew up in a highly religious household, described how her marriage as abusive relationship, shaped by expectations of female submission:

I got used to doing or being what I was supposed to. I was not supposed to be assertive or say what I wanted. For a very long time, it was in my head that the guy needs to have pleasure, and if he does, then I've done my duty.

Over time, however, many of these young women began to challenge and unlearn such gendered understandings of sexuality through education, feminist discourse, and self-awareness. In the following section, I discuss the broader factors that shape and restrict young women's sexual experiences.

b) What Impacts or Restricts Sex?

There are various factors impacting the sexual experiences of young women. These factors can shape or restrict how young women experience sexual activity. I grouped them into three main categories: Environmental factors; Interpersonal (couple) factors; and Personal factors.

Environmental Factors.

These refer to influences coming from outside the individual or the couple's interpersonal relationship. They can be cultural, social, familial, or educational.

Societal expectations, community values, and regulations. These values and regulations emerged as the most influential environmental factors, flagged by more than two-thirds of participants from both contexts. Societal expectations sometimes pressured young women into having sex even when they did not necessarily feel the desire to do so.

This pressure often can come from liberal views framing sex as a healthy habit that should be practiced regularly. For example, Ramina, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, described feeling peer pressure when she arrived in Canada as a virgin: "When one of my Canadian peers realized I hadn't had any relationships before, she thought now that I'm here, I must 'experience' things. Maybe she encouraged me, maybe even pushed me a little."

Similarly, Layla, a PhD student at uOttawa, said she felt pressured by friends to "go back into the dating scene and have sex" after her divorce. While such pressure was more common among uOttawa participants, two younger women from uTehran also mentioned community pressure, particularly from social media and peers, to have sex after a certain number of dates to appear "avant-garde."

Restrictive gender stereotypes and social regulations were a more common form of pressure, especially in contexts where sex is viewed as shameful for women. Participants from both universities reported such pressures. Those who experienced patriarchal restrictions most

strongly tended to come from cultural or religious backgrounds, including Iranian, Arab, and Brazilian participants, as well as Canadians raised in religious communities. For example, Hira, an Arab PhD student at uOttawa highlighted the double standard in her hometown culture saying that: “Men can go away. They can have a sexual act before marriage, and that's okay. They are considered to be heroes. They are considered to be naturals. But women are considered to be corrupted, filthy.”

Two participants from Brazil also discussed societal stigma toward sexually active women. For instance, Isabella said: “The social stigma is much worse for women. Because for us, I think we still need to think about respecting ourselves and not being sexually hyperactive to be valued.”

Aliana echoed this:

Here the religious premise is that pleasure is a sin. The person you have pleasure with is a sinner, someone less important. We still have this distinction between the wife and the whore. The hypocrisy of society is huge. It's 2024, but in the back of your mind, you still have 19th-century conceptions.

In such patriarchal contexts, especially in parts of the Middle East, laws and policies along with cultural norms explicitly regulate women's sexual activities and sex is treated as taboo. Hira, an Arab PhD student at uOttawa, explained: “Women are raised to be virgins, to be obedient.” She added that she only felt comfortable with sex after marriage “Because then I'm not defying the norms.” Hira also discussed legal and religious restrictions on interfaith marriage in her home country, where Muslim women face unequal rights if they marry non-Muslims: “Muslim men can marry Christian women, but if the women don't convert, they lose rights, like inheritance or child custody.” Thus, culture and law often work hand in hand to restrict women's sexual choices.

In Iran, sex outside marriage is legally and religiously prohibited, which significantly affects young women's experiences. Homa, a MA student at uTehran, said: "Maybe socially and culturally it's somewhat accepted, but in terms of law and religion, it's not, and that creates certain restrictions and anxiety."

Some women described feelings of guilt and fear, leading them to engage in painful sexual acts to preserve their virginity before marriage. Bahareh recalled:

Because of fear and cultural norms, for eleven years I avoided intercourse. I was in sexual relationships, like oral or anal sex, but not vaginal intercourse. After I got married, suddenly everyone said, 'You must have sex with him from tonight on.' My body didn't respond. That's how I developed vaginismus.

For non-religious Iranian women, the restrictions came not from faith but from state laws rooted in Islamic doctrine. Others, such as non-heterosexual participants, felt doubly excluded by religious and social norms. Ana, an Iranian lesbian PhD student at uOttawa, described religion as something that "blocked everything" and generated guilt.

However, some religious participants described internal struggles rather than outright rejection of faith. Zohreh, a believer from Tehran, said: "There are some acts in sex that Islam forbids, but we want to try them. When my partner gets emotional, I stop it because I think, 'This contradicts Islam's order,' even though I'd like to experience it."

Religious norms also influenced Canadian participants. Siri, a devout Christian at uOttawa, explained: "Religion is a big constraint. Even now, I still navigate guilt about my sexuality and intimacy."

Some participants eventually left their faith due to negative experiences with religion and religious community, while others found religion liberating. Sarah, a married Christian at uOttawa, viewed sex as sacred: “Sex is ordained by God. It’s meant to be enjoyed within marriage. It’s not a duty or obligation, it’s something I have to enjoy.” In Canada, participants did not identify state policies as influencing their sexual behavior, unlike in Iran.

These examples show how society may simultaneously pressure women to engage in sex under liberal norms or restrict them through patriarchal values that police their sexuality.

Family Influences. Families can reinforce gender stereotypes and shape how young women view sexuality. Mothers, in particular, often pass on conservative views. Ramina reflected: “Maybe we’re programmed not to show ourselves sexually, to be conservative. I might link that to comments from my mom.”

These familial expectations create the “good girl” archetype, virginal before marriage, faithful afterward, submissive, and monogamous, even if dissatisfied. Arezoo, a PhD student from Tehran, said: “For a long time, I was preoccupied with the cliché of virginity... being a proper girl had a very fragile meaning that could be disturbed by one wrong step.”

These values also stigmatized non-heterosexual relationships. Rezvan, a bisexual MA student, shared: “Being a ‘good girl’ meant being calm, not horny, controlling men. Being in a homosexual relationship was locked for me, it took a lot of energy to even make that decision.” All of these young women reported that they developed and learnt these attitudes toward sex from their mothers as their main role model especially in childhood.

Even in Canada, non-religious families sometimes perpetuated patriarchal control in subtler, neoliberal forms, through body image and beauty standards. Nina, a Canadian MA graduate, said: “My family was hard on me for being overweight. My body never felt like I owned it. So during sex, I felt my partner owned my body instead.”

However, not all family influences were negative. Some women described supportive parents who encouraged confidence and autonomy. Sarah, a PhD student from uOttawa, said: “Seeing the relationship between my father and mother, without restraints like ‘you’re a woman, you have to do this’, shaped me.” Similarly, Haleh, an MA graduate from Tehran, shared: “My dad never made us feel inferior as girls. He was sensitive about some topics, but he didn’t stop us.”

Media. Media also play a significant role in shaping young women’s sexual lives. Gender stereotypes and cultural clichés are frequently reproduced across various mediums such as books, films, and online platforms, influencing women’s understandings of sexual behavior and agency. For instance, the persistent portrayal of women as passive participants who should not initiate sexual activity reinforces normative gender hierarchies in heterosexual relationships. Maral, a master’s graduate from uTehran, reflected on how these narratives informed her own perceptions and decision-making processes regarding sex. She explained:

Sexual clichés and some gender clichés are predominant in our heads. Like when I was watching films or reading books, I was thinking, why are people acting this way? But when it was actually happening to me, I realized that certain things can be difficult. Like if you are the one who wants to start something, initiate something, I always had that idea that I need to wait until the other person approached me. This is the thing that women are always inactive and passive, and men are active.

Such representations are also reproduced through newer digital mediums, including social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), where certain predefined models of sexual encounters and standards of desirability receive disproportionate attention.

Nonetheless, most participants reported that new social media spaces have also provided them with positive opportunities for self-directed sexual education and critical reflection. I will elaborate further on these experiences in the section focusing on sexual education.

Pornography, as a distinct media genre, emerged as another key influence on young people's sexual lives. Some participants reported using pornography as an informal educational resource in the absence of comprehensive sexual education. Others, however, emphasized the detrimental cultural impact of pornography, particularly its role in producing exaggerated expectations and idealized, unrealistic portrayals of sexual relationships. These depictions, participants noted, can negatively affect young women's sexual well-being, especially when their partners develop dependency or addiction to pornographic content. This concern was raised predominantly by participants in the Canadian context, where access to pornography is more widespread and convenient. I will return to young women's attitudes toward pornography in greater depth in the following sections.

Sexual education. As briefly noted above, the lack of comprehensive sexual and pleasure education was identified as a major factor shaping the sexual experiences of young women in both contexts. Nina articulated this gap by stating: "The way that we look at sex in Canada, education being so limited for me in school, and pleasure education being non-existent, completely non-existent for you."

This absence of structured sexual education frequently led young people to seek information from alternative sources such as pornography. Similarly, Zahra, a PhD student at uTehran, described feeling “lost” in her sexual relationships after marriage due to the lack of any formal sexual education. She recalled: “When I got married when I was 22, in our educational system or in my family there was no education regarding sexual relationships.”

Many participants (14 from uOttawa and 13 from uTehran) reported that, over time, they sought to bridge this gap through self-education and professional support, including consultations with sexologists and therapists, which they described as positively enhancing their sexual knowledge and confidence. I will discuss these experiences in more detail in subsequent sections.

Sexual Violence Trauma. The experiences of physical and psychological sexual violence also had a profound impact on women’s sexual lives in both contexts. Such experiences often resulted in enduring mental and physical barriers to sexual activity. Beyond the long-term consequences of sexual violence, which will be examined in detail in the relevant section, some participants also highlighted the effects of the threat of sexual violence on their sexual autonomy and behavior. For example, Rozita, who had previously been in an abusive relationship in Tehran, stated: “If someone threatened me with nude photos or videos of my sexual relationship, I’d probably continue the sexual relationship and do whatever they say to prevent it from being shared.”

Such trauma introduced deep psychological and physical barriers to healthy sexual intimacy.

Situational Constraints. Practical constraints such as distance, parenting, or work also influenced sexual activity. Layla, a PhD student at uOttawa, shared about her experience with her current partner: “We don’t live together, so sex happens less often, but when it does, it’s

cool.” Fatima, an Iranian MA graduate from uTehran and mother, added: “Having a kid means we can’t always have sex with peace of mind, there’s always an intruder around.” Similarly, Hira, who lives in a different country from her husband, said: “Being busy and apart makes it frustrating not to be together, and being tired or preoccupied affects my mood for sex.” Hoorah, a single mother from Tehran, echoed this: “Limitations of time and place affect my sexual activity. Even during sex, anxiety about work stays with me.” In addition, being in a safe and secure environment was essential for some young women to have a positive sexual encounter in both contexts.

The intersectional aspect of being in lower class can be detected here. Financial security within a couple’s relationship was mentioned as a factor that can influence sexual encounters between partners. In cases of financial insecurity, it may negatively affect both the quality and even the occurrence of sexual encounters. This factor was mainly reported by Iranian participants. In addition, since migration might come with some levels of financial instability it can be even more difficult for immigrants. As Rozita, a MA graduate from uTehran who migrated to Canada reported: “Economic problems can enter the bedroom. For example, when we first immigrated, the pressure on me was very high. Everything was chaotic, and for a while, we didn’t even think about sexual relationships. And when we tried, it was very mechanical, very much without quality.”

While some of these restrictions stem from environmental factors, others emerge from the interpersonal and emotional dynamics between partners.

Interpersonal (couple) factors

Interpersonal (couple) factors refer to elements related to attributes within couple relationships and those concerning one's relationship with their sexual partner.

The type and duration of a relationship can influence the sexual activities of young women in both contexts. Being in a more formal relationship such as marriage comes with certain responsibilities and expectations from the families involved. On the other hand, being in an informal relationship, such as a partnership or a boyfriend–girlfriend relationship, in more traditional settings like Iran can create constraints on young women's sexuality, as having sexual relationships before marriage can be deemed immoral or condemned by law or culture. For example, Isabella, who grew up in a more conservative family in Brazil, mentioned:

For example, when my husband was my boyfriend; he could never sleep in my house. My father never allowed him to sleep in my house because we were not married. I think it was more like, oh, we would have sex. My father was like, not under my roof.

In addition, being in a non-monogamous relationship can also impact and restrict young women's sexual activities. Mari, a PhD graduate from uOttawa who has experienced both non-monogamous and monogamous relationships, reported that in non-monogamous relationships, the possibility of honesty is higher, something she appreciated more than experiencing lies and betrayal in monogamous ones. She said:

I think so many people have cheated on me that I don't think it's a viable situation to expect someone to never have a thing for somebody else. We live in a world of hundreds [of possibilities]. I don't see how it's feasible to stay.

Being in a non-heterosexual relationship can also impact the sexual experiences of young women, especially in contexts like Iran, where such relationships are criminalized.

Though some participants reported a level of boredom and dullness in sex while being in long-term relationships, as noted by Zahra, a PhD student at uTehran who has been married for 15 years, she said, “I don't know, I think it might become repetitive”, the majority of participants reported the opposite. Most indicated that being in a long-term relationship had a positive impact on their sexual lives because, over time, they learned about each other's bodies and became more comfortable sexually with their partners, resulting in higher-quality sexual experiences. Some participants also reported higher levels of sexual satisfaction while being in a relationship rather than casual sexual encounters because they are more familiar and feel more comfortable and more connected with their partner. For example, Farah mentioned:

In casual or one-night stands, I couldn't use a vibrator comfortably, I couldn't modify positions. Because I was also still getting to know them. Foreplay was often less. Sometimes more, depending. But overall, casual sex was closer to “normal” or even below normal, not ideal. Maybe one or two times I had ideal sex outside a relationship, but mostly it was rushed, with alcohol, with less connection. Very ordinary.

Bitra, an MA graduate from uTehran who has been with her current partner/husband for nine years (five years married), emphasized the importance of trust and safety in long-term relationships while acknowledging the potential excitement in short-term ones. She mentioned:

Maybe a non-marital relationship, meaning outside of marriage or a short-term relationship, had more excitement, but it came with many stresses... being long-term with that person, and being sure, for example, about diseases or that the person doesn't have multiple partners, you can trust that. Ah, and the commitment that person has toward you. Sexual desire mostly comes from that commitment.

Communication Ability. One of the most prominent factors impacting sexual activities among young women in both contexts, reported by 26 participants (13 from uTehran and 13 from uOttawa), was the importance of communication with their sexual partners. As Nina, an MA graduate from uOttawa, explained regarding sexual encounters: “How comfortable you are talking to your partner about the decisions you want to make and why you want to make them are important.”

Having some degree of intellectual connection made the partner more appealing and allowed participants to feel secure and loved. Nina also noted the importance of this intellectual connection: “An intellectual connection with somebody [is necessary] to really enjoy the sex with them.”

Some mentioned that not being able to assertively communicate their sexual needs negatively impacted their experiences. An inability to communicate sexual needs can negatively affect sexual encounters, especially when individuals involved hold different expectations or values. For example, Mina, an MA student from uTehran, could not communicate her needs and perspective with her ex-partner. As a result, she experienced only a limited level of intimacy and felt unsatisfied, since she expected a more intimate connection while her partner held different attitudes toward sex, perceiving certain acts as disrespectful toward women.

Conversely, participants who could effectively convey and discuss their needs during sexual or non-sexual contexts reported more positive and satisfying experiences. Haleh, an MA graduate from uTehran, emphasized that a good sexual relationship is one in which “you can share what you want, what you don't want, what you like, what you dislike, position-wise.”

The importance of communicating consent was also mentioned by participants in both contexts, particularly among those in their 20s. Consent appears to have become more essential and integrated into the sexual language and culture of younger generations, shaping their sexual interactions.

Connection and Intimacy. Another important factor for approximately two-thirds of participants influencing their sexual encounters was the level of connection and intimacy they felt with their sexual partners in both contexts. For these young women, emotional connection and care were central to having a fulfilling sexual experience. As Susie, a PhD student at uOttawa, expressed: “For me, feeling intimate [sexually] with someone goes through having feelings for them.”

This reflects the broader theme that the majority of young women in this study perceived sex and intimacy as interconnected issues, as discussed in earlier sections.

Safety, Respect, and Trust. Feeling safe was identified as an especially important factor by several participants. Many reported that when they felt respected and trusted their partner, they could feel safe engaging in sexual relationships. As Layla, a PhD student at uOttawa, noted: “Being respected as a whole is essential for me; it will allow me to open up, rely, and feel safe around the other person.”

Conversely, a lack of safety and trust could constrain not only the current relationship but also future ones. For example, Rezvan, a bisexual MA student at Tehran, identified safety as one of the most important factors shaping her sexual experiences. After being in several violent and disrespectful relationships with men, she lost her sense of trust and safety with male partners in general. Comparing this to her current relationship with a woman, she stated:

It is different comparing to the relationships that I had with men, 180°; from ground to the sky, it's different. This relationship that I have, from the very first second, is based on being considerate about boundaries and respecting my boundaries, and some level of gaining trust. It's being built on trust. But this never happened with any man in my life.

For some, feeling safe was closely associated with the level of commitment their partner demonstrated. Siri, an MA graduate from uOttawa, mentioned: "Commitment is very important for me. It means that we're only dating each other. That is my indication to know that, okay, I can be safe with this person."

Physical Attraction. Interestingly, physical attraction was mentioned by only a few participants, all Iranian but from both contexts, as a factor influencing their sexual lives. For instance, Bahareh from uOttawa noted:

It is important that you feel physical attraction to the other's body. For example, you like their style, or you like their sexual organ itself, that it looks beautiful. That the person's face isn't too unattractive, isn't dirty, so you feel that physical attraction.

Similarly, Rozita from uTehran mentioned that not being attracted to another person's physical attributes, even minor ones, could prevent her from becoming sexually involved with them. She

said: “For instance, if I don’t like something about his wrist, I literally can’t even think about having sex with him. Or if I try to ignore it, it still keeps coming to my mind.”

Orgasm and Sexual Satisfaction. Some participants emphasized the importance of orgasm as a routine part of their sexual relationships. However, most reported greater difficulties in achieving orgasm compared to men. As Farah, a PhD student at uOttawa, explained: “For women, reaching orgasm is more complicated. Many don’t have orgasms at all, or men don’t care enough, or they’re inexperienced. So women might fake it, or not reach it, and just go along.”

Many young women stated that, early in their sexual experiences, they did not reach orgasm, often due to inexperience, both their own and their partner’s. Ramina recalled her first sexual encounter: “I didn’t get fully orgasm, like many other times.”

Even after some time, achieving orgasm was not consistent across encounters, as women noted that it required more time, communication, and effort than what typically occurred. For some, this inconsistency was dissatisfying. Zahra, a PhD student at uTehran, stated: “Usually my partners care about me getting orgasm, but maybe out of 10, I get it 7 or 8 times. I think it is not completely satisfactory in those cases, it is kind of medium.”

For others, however, reaching orgasm was not essential. They viewed sex as a process rather than a goal-oriented act and did not assess the absence of orgasm as a failure. Isabella, a PhD student at uOttawa, explained:

When I was younger, I think I always had this idea that we need to achieve orgasm for it to be a successful, good sex. But nowadays, I feel it is much more about the process. This helps me reduce my anxiety. When I was too worried about this [orgasm], I thought if I don’t have one or my partner doesn’t, it’s a

failed sex. Now I understand that the whole process can be pleasant, everything can be good, not just the orgasm.

Partner Characteristics and Sexual Performance. Centering women's satisfaction during sexual encounters by their partners was reported as a major positive factor shaping women's sexual lives in both contexts. Siri from uOttawa mentioned: "In my relationships and with the people I end up choosing, it's typically been like, what does Siri like? And how does Siri move? What does she like?"

Maral, an MA graduate from uTehran, described a good sexual encounter as one in which her partner paid close attention to her needs:

A good sexual pattern is about attention when you are in a relationship as a woman in a sexual context. It shouldn't be only about the other person being satisfied and meeting their sexual needs. Having someone pay attention to you, starting with some preparations and checking if you're comfortable, if you want this relationship, is important. It's not only because this person wants this and has this need.

Rozita from uTehran also emphasized the centrality of partner attentiveness, explaining that her husband's care and sensitivity were among the reasons she chose to marry him. She said:

Before my current partner, what I experienced was not really as good. One of the reasons I became sure about marrying my husband was the quality of our sexual relationship. Both his physical appearance and characteristics, and his attention to my bodily responses, he was paying attention to see if I was enjoying what he was doing for me. It was one of the reasons I wanted to get married to this person. That's how I felt confident and started this marriage with peace of mind regarding the sexual aspect.

Or Farah, a PhD student at uOttawa mentioned: “It would be more pleasant for me if he pays attention to me first [during sex], making sure I’m ready.” Having good sexual encounters and a partner who addresses the sexual needs was introduced as a reason to make a casual relationship more serious for Farah too. She said: "Having positive experience with my current partner sexually was one of the reasons I wanted this relationship to be serious, because good sex isn’t easy to find, even if it looks simple from the outside. For women especially, quality sex with consistency is harder to achieve.”

On the other hand, several young women reported negative experiences due to their partners’ sexual inattentiveness, often attributed to work overload, lack of interest, addiction to pornography, low libido, or physical and mental conditions such as micro-penis, erectile dysfunction, premature ejaculation, or OCD that interfered with performance. Some participants expressed that their partners often failed to prioritize their pleasure, while women consistently ensured that men reached orgasm. As Mari described:

In couples, the woman always makes sure that the guy comes no matter what happens. You try and you try, you make sure that they come, or else you’ve failed your duties. That kind of encourages women to do things men don’t necessarily want to do. But women want to make sure he comes, and men never ensure that you do.

Similarly, Nina stated: “It’s mostly just the other person not giving a shit about my pleasure.”

Experience level also affected sexual satisfaction. For instance, Ava, a PhD student at uTehran, reflected:

At the beginning of my marriage, I didn’t want to talk about my sexual pleasure. I felt shy to talk about it. Before that, I didn’t even consider it my right to have an

orgasm during sex. A few years later, after four or five years of marriage, I started talking to my husband, it was really hard, but I tried because it was bothering me. He didn't know about it; we were both very young when we got married, and he didn't even know that it should happen for me as well. Now it happens maybe once a month. If we have sex 10–15 times a month, 8–9 of them are routine, and neither of us focuses on my orgasm. We try in about 4–5 of them, and it's possible that I reach orgasm once or twice. When I don't, he doesn't even think about it, and sometimes I feel frustrated, but in most cases, I cannot talk about it.

The influence of sexual partners on self-confidence and sexual experiences is significant.

Partners who are controlling, self-absorbed, or unsupportive can cause young women to repeatedly engage in unwanted or uncomfortable sexual encounters. Over time, frequent negative or painful experiences, particularly within heterosexual relationships, may lead women to view sex as generally disappointing or unpleasant, ultimately undermining their self-esteem and sexual confidence.

For instance, Mari explained that her ex-husband displayed “extreme manipulation, extreme gaslighting, extreme control,” which left her feeling unable to be assertive during sexual interactions, even after their separation and in subsequent relationships. Similarly, Hoorah described her experience with her husband, stating: “When I left home, I had that feeling that I am ugly, not sexy, with no talent, stupid, a bad wife, a bad mother. An uneducated person. All the things about a bad girl, a bad mother, a bad wife, I was bad in all of my roles.”

Conversely, a supportive partner can help compensate for the absence of familial encouragement, positively shaping young women's sense of sexual agency. For example, Rozita, who lacked emotional support from her family during a violent relationship in her youth and is now in a

stable marriage with strong communication, shared: “Having a partner who reassures me makes me feel I don’t need to try hard to be beautiful. Having a safe partner gives confidence.”

Siri also reflected on her positive sexual experiences, noting that she managed to become more in control of her sexual life: “By just doing [it], I guess, and just finding partners who feel safe, who are communicative, who are respectful, and who align with my version.”

Having a harmful sexual partner can even destabilize one’s attitude toward sex and influence their personal practices in daily life. For example, Ava described the process of revising her core values as follows:

I’m describing myself as a non-believer, but I was born and grew up in a traditional and religious context. I got married early when I was 20, and it’s been 10 years that I’ve been married. During this time, up to 2–3 years ago, I was religious, not the kind who was actively involved, but I was a passive believer. At that time, I never thought about having a relationship outside of my marriage. Everything had a very strict structure, this is commitment, this is marriage, this is betrayal, and you cannot really exit that. But it’s been 2–3 years that this mindset has changed. I speak freely and easily about these topics. It was 2–3 years ago that I realized my husband had a relationship on the phone. I’m not sure if it was in person; I’m kind of sure the first relationship wasn’t in person. When I found out about it, it was a very big shock, and all of the pillars of our marriage kind of fell for me. I had a mental breakdown.

This example demonstrates how a combination of low experience, patriarchal attitudes toward sexual activity centered on men, lack of communication, and partner performance collectively contribute to unsatisfactory sexual experiences for young women. Such negative experiences were reported across dating, marital, and casual relationships in both contexts, sometimes leading participants to end those relationships. However, sexual encounters are not solely

dependent on partner characteristics; they are also shaped by personal-level factors that influence young women's sexual experiences.

Personal factors

Personal factors refer to the elements and characteristics that emerge directly from one's experiences, feelings, and understanding of the world around them, shaping their sexual experiences.

Age, level of experience and self-esteem play an important role in shaping the sexual encounters of young women. About half of the participants from both contexts reported that when they were younger, they were more vulnerable due to a lack of experience. As Susie, a PhD student at uOttawa, shared about her first experience:

I was 18, and I was with someone I had a crush on. That person was older than me, and I was very young at that time. It was my first time living away from my parents and family. It was my first year in undergrad, my first time managing a budget, cooking for myself, so many new things. It was like a baby taking its first steps into the world alone and realizing that people are not as nice as you thought they were. So, yeah, my first intimate relationship was with someone who took advantage of me... I didn't really know what I was doing. I tried to act based on my values, but the truth is, I was intimidated, intimidated into doing things. I felt like if I didn't do them, I would disappoint him and lose him as a friend.

Similarly, Bahareh, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, explained:

I had started that relationship very young, at the age of fifteen. I felt less power. For example, if I was in a position where my leg would fall asleep or I wasn't

experiencing sexual pleasure, like when the guy was sucking my nipple so hard that it hurt, I would never decide to tell him to stop. I just wanted the flow of sex to continue, to maintain that ‘ideal’ flow, no matter the cost, even if the cost was my own pain.

The importance of self-esteem is crucial for young women’s sexual lives. Low levels of self-esteem and self-confidence can significantly affect their sexual behaviors and encounters. As Layla, a PhD student at uOttawa, shared, after her divorce, due to a lack of validation from her previous partner and low self-esteem, she felt that she “was not being herself” in her sexual encounters. She explained: “I was looking for validation in other men.”

Similarly, Willow, an MA graduate from uOttawa, reflected on her experience of being in an abusive relationship, saying:

At the time, I didn’t have the confidence, nor did I trust my gut, you know, to say this is what I wanted, or this is what I don’t want. And oftentimes because of that, because I wasn’t able to set those boundaries or say no or remove myself from the situation, I kind of let the, and I shouldn’t say let, but I was taken advantage of.

Farah, another PhD student at uOttawa, also highlighted the importance of self-esteem in women’s sexual lives, emphasizing: “I can say nothing is more important than self-confidence, self-esteem, and the peace a woman has with her own body, with anybody. That guarantees pleasure more than anything else.”

About half of the participants from both contexts reported that as they grew older and gained more experience, they became more assertive, more aware of their bodies and sexual needs, and more confident in expressing them. They developed a sense of ownership over their bodies

through trial and error, self-education, and therapy (which will be discussed further in the *Sexual Education* section). As Sima, an Iranian MA graduate from uOttawa, mentioned:

I can compare now with the early years of my relationship. Now, with my knowledge and what I've read, I know what I want. I don't censor myself. I know my body better. But early on, society and education influenced me a lot, I wasn't comfortable talking about my desires. Shame and lack of sex education kept me from discovering my body. Over time, through experience and learning, I got better at this.

In addition to changes in regularity and rhythm of their sexual lives, some women described the need to relearn how to connect with their bodies after physical changes such as pregnancy. For instance, Layla, a PhD student at uOttawa, reflected on her experience after her pregnancies and her divorce: "I'm discovering this new part of me. I'm still discovering her. What's a bit tricky this time around is that there's this new body I'm still getting used to, after children."

Some participants from uOttawa who used to date casually when they were younger reported that, as they aged, emotional intimacy became more important than casual sexual encounters.

For one participant in her early thirties from uTehran who had never had full intercourse, aging became a source of anxiety due to mental barriers that made sexual intimacy difficult. Being born in the 1980s in Iran, a generation with limited sources for learning about sexuality, was another factor that affected the sexual lives of millennial women.

The idea of aging was also mentioned by Zahra as a factor contributing to less satisfactory sexual encounters. However, she sought to challenge this notion, which was mainly emphasized by her husband. She said:

Right now, when I ask for something or tell him something, he's like, 'We're old now, you're about 40 years old.' But I'm like, how is that related? I don't think that way. He says, 'I have gray hair,' but I think it's not really related. Some things are constant, you always want to have a good relationship regardless of your age. You still need and want affection from your husband and partner. Of course, aging has some influence on your relationship, but it shouldn't define it.

Finally, as young women gain financial stability and independence, it also impacts their sexual experiences. Financial insecurity can create unease and mental preoccupations that negatively affect sexual satisfaction. Conversely, financial stability allows young women to have more control over their sexual encounters, such as deciding where to meet and maintaining independence from both their sexual partners and their families.

Internalized Restrictive Values. Although some young women in both contexts became more assertive and experienced mostly positive developments in their sexual lives as they aged, internalized social stigma and restrictive values continued to shape their experiences. Growing up in cultures that associate guilt, shame, and restriction with women's sexuality often leaves lasting imprints. These internalized beliefs can make it difficult for women to express their needs, feel comfortable discussing sexual topics, or engage in sexual activities without experiencing guilt or discomfort.

For example, Isabella, a Brazilian PhD student at uOttawa, shared:

I still feel shy to talk about sexual topics. Sometimes I think it's still a bit of a taboo for me to talk about it, even though I've been in a 10-year relationship with my husband, someone I love and trust. Sex is still a difficult topic for me. I don't know if it's because I had a very traditional upbringing. My parents didn't talk with me about these things, at all.

Similarly, Bahareh, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, reflected:

All these so-called restrictions you mentioned almost don't exist for me. But still, there's this little voice in the back of my head that wants to discipline me and frame how I think about sex. For example, in the back of my mind, someone who has sex with many people, there's an element of, umm, not necessarily prostitution, but a sense of looseness, of lack of discipline. And yet, I know it's completely a cultural construct in my mind.

Rezvan, an MA student at uTehran, described how these feelings of guilt emerged despite not being religious:

I used to think that masturbation was a bad thing, and I felt guilty, it preoccupied me during the day. Then when I was 18 and had the opportunity to have a sexual relationship, I thought it was a sin. I was never religious; I rarely prayed and I'm not a religious person at all, but I still felt like I was sinning.

Among some Iranian participants who grew up with traditional restrictive values but later tried to challenge and outgrow them, this process sometimes led to a sense of conflict in their sexual lives. The conflicting messages they continued to receive, from society on one side and from more liberated ideas circulating through social media and self-education on the other, could create psychological tension, guilt, and unease. As Fatima, a married MA graduate from uTehran, explained:

There were some people who wanted to connect with me outside of my marriage, and it started happening a lot. I was receiving many of those messages, and I was struggling, it made me unable to enjoy anything, not even eating food. I felt guilt... partly because I kept thinking, how much of this is my responsibility or my fault?

Physical and Mental Characteristics and Concerns. Physical and mental characteristics and concerns also impacted women's sexual activities. Overall, physical and mental factors impact one another and can sometimes create issues in both domains. For example, mental discomfort may result in bodily reactions, while physical insecurity or problems can lead to mental stress or anxiety.

Physical Factors and Concerns. Being ready both bodily and mentally was an important factor mentioned by participants. They especially emphasized the first few times they had sexual intercourse and the pain associated with it. For some participants who were young when they had that experience, it was more painful, and they felt less control over the situation due to a lack of knowledge and self-confidence. The majority of participants who had intercourse at a young age reported unpleasant encounters with their sexual partners at the time.

Also, having a "successful" intercourse was connected to breaking the hymen, and for some women, it did not occur in the first few sexual encounters, which created a painful experience.

As Zahra tried to explain her experience with her husband:

When I got married in those first years, I don't know if we didn't know that much, but our relationship was okay, but I didn't like it. For a while, they say that the hymen breaks, but it didn't happen for a while. But we made it right after a while. I don't know, I think maybe for us as more religious people and being young, we didn't have any experience beforehand.

The same problem and high level of pain during the first few sexual encounters were reported by other young women, such as Rozita, an MA graduate from uTehran, who even had a good sexual relationship with her partner but said the process of breaking the hymen was long and painful.

Even among those who experienced their first sexual intercourse later in life, physical pain

during the first few times was still present. For example, Ramina reflected on her first few attempts to have intercourse with her partner, saying that the first time did not work due to pain, and even the second time they could not “finish” because of physical pain and anxiety. She said:

The second time, since he wasn't in the mood, I decided I should take control myself, because I know how much pain I feel, what sensations I have, and he can't really know. So I chose the position myself so I could control it. That time, we managed to do it, but still, it didn't finish because it was too painful. You know, you're constantly cautious, both of you, and it ruins the flow. I was in pain, and he wasn't in the mood, so it just didn't work out.

Some participants even felt forced into the encounter, which added to the level of pain and anxiety and became a traumatic experience for them. As a result of these traumatic experiences, their bodies showed physical reactions and pain during intercourse, preventing them from having a pleasant sexual experience. In some cases, the sexual partners of young women did not pay attention to bodily reactions and physical pain, leading to deeply traumatic experiences.

Being in unsafe or emotionally insecure relationships made young women's bodies react with physical pain during sexual encounters. As seen in the experience of Susie, a PhD student from uOttawa, in her first two relationships when she was very young, she experienced bodily reactions and pain during sex, especially when it was forced. Her body responded again with pain when she entered another manipulative relationship with a new partner:

The relationship with that person was, God, the most toxic relationship I ever had, for a lot of reasons. But intimacy-wise, where I realized that something was wrong was when the pain came back. The pain came back when we were having sex, and he bullied me for it. He made me believe that I had a problem and that I should see a doctor because it really had a big impact on our relationship.

Sometimes I would just feel like saying, 'No, sorry, it hurts, please stop,' and then he would be super frustrated and mad. Other times, he would not even start, and I was like, 'No, please, I don't want this to hurt tonight, so please just don't do anything.' And he would just be frustrated and mad... Later on, I saw a doctor, and I was officially diagnosed as hypersensitive.

Having physical reactions to stress and anxiety impacting the sexual lives of young women was reported by four participants in both contexts. These kinds of bodily reactions can last for long periods and restrict women's sexual behavior. As Bahareh reported:

I got a condition called vaginismus, which I call 'impossible penetration,' and I couldn't have penetration. This issue lasted about a year and a half. For me, it was very hard because of a lot of stress and anxiety. I couldn't have any kind of sexual intercourse, and it was a very difficult and dark period for me.

In addition to bodily reactions to insecure sexual situations and pain resulting from intercourse, the adaptation of young women's bodies to different contraception methods can impact their physical encounters. Some women have allergies to latex, while others experience allergic or physical reactions to IUDs. Adjusting to or finding the best solution that works for them can take time and affect their sexual activities. In addition, the menstrual cycle can impact the physical activity of some young women, as flagged by several participants.

Pregnancy was also reported as a factor that interfered with the sexual lives of young women. For some, changes in hormone levels during pregnancy increased their sexual activity, while for others, it had a negative impact on their sexual experiences. As Fatima, an MA graduate from Tehran, mentioned: "I felt the need to have sex a lot during my pregnancy. I had the need, but I didn't have the bodily capacity."

In addition to that, fear of pregnancy, STDs, and HPV was reported by young women as a concern related to their physical bodies that could impact their sexual activities. Isabella, a PhD student, mentioned in response to the question about what would restrict her sexual activity:

To be pregnant, for example. This is something that I wouldn't risk. So, for example, as I was saying, when I stopped taking the [contraceptive] pills, and we were trying to use condoms, we were not adapting. We stopped having sex because I was like, I can't have a baby now, at my age, at the phase that I am in my life. So this was something that restricted my decisions.

One of the participants from uTehran mentioned the high level of stress she faced due to the hardship of accessing abortion pills on the black market in Iran for her sister, who wanted to abort, since abortion is illegal, negatively impacting their sexual experiences. Having less access to contraceptives, information, and vaccines in Iran was also flagged by Farah, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa. She said even access to information and medical care was limited, according to her experience: "In Iran, doctors don't give this information to unmarried women. I even had a doctor refuse to examine me because I said I was unmarried, that broke me at the time."

Also, one of the participants from uOttawa who has HPV reported some level of shame up to a certain point in her life about having HPV and sharing it with her sexual partner, which impacted her sexual life. Concern with sexual health and STDs was mainly a concern for people who had been on and off the dating scene recently, rather than for those in long-term committed relationships, due to the trust and safety they felt toward their sexual partners.

Hygiene and physical cleanliness of both the person and their sexual partner were also flagged as important factors shaping the sexual experiences of young women. This was mentioned by about one-third of participants in both contexts.

Being in good physical condition in general was mentioned by some participants, while being in poor physical condition was identified as a restricting factor. Things such as sickness, tiredness, female-specific issues such as vaginismus, cysts infection, or genital and urinary tract infections were all referenced.

In addition, some participants categorized themselves as “hot” (keener to have sexual relationships) or “cold,” which they considered a factor impacting their sexual activity in general.

Feeling insecure about their bodies and being self-conscious was another factor related to their physicality that impacted young women’s sexual encounters. For example, being slightly overweight, or developing eating disorders and losing a lot of weight, were flagged by a few participants in both contexts (uTehran and uOttawa). Arezoo, a PhD student at uTehran, mentioned:

My feelings about my body, when I feel that I’ve gained weight or my body has changed, I don’t desire sexual relationships. When I exercise and work out, I’m more active, I’m more hyper. Exercise has a positive impact on my sexual relationship.”

In addition to one’s feelings toward their whole body, one’s feelings toward their genitalia also may impact their sexual relationship. For example, Ava, a PhD student at uTehran, mentioned:

I don’t like my genitalia, so when my husband wants to perform oral sex on me, it’s possible for 3–4 minutes, but then I start feeling, ‘Oh my God, it’s so bad, his mouth is getting wet, it’s so bad, oh my God,’ and it’s over. I stop him and tell him that I cannot do it.

Mental Factors and Concerns. Mental state, stress, and anxiety can prevent sexual activity. Being “in the mood” for sex or, on the other hand, feeling anxious, depressed, or mentally preoccupied were mentioned by many participants as significant psychological barriers to sexual engagement. Psychological barriers toward sex were reported as factors impacting the sexual activities of young women to the extent that, although Tina, an MA graduate from uTehran, was willing and looking forward to having full intercourse, these barriers prevented her from engaging in it. She shared:

Psychological reasons. Even when I tried, my body physically resisted due to internalized pressures. Even a willing partner couldn't overcome my tension. These factors make explanation to men difficult because they didn't grow up under similar social pressures as girls in Iran.

General feelings, mood, or being anxious, depressed, or preoccupied can also affect sexual activity. Arezoo said, “If I have stress, if I'm depressed, if I'm good or bad, I think that general feeling of myself impacts my sexual relationship.”

Similarly, Fatima explained, “I think the most important thing is the thoughts that I have in my head. If I have positive thoughts, I usually have a good sexual relationship. If there are negative thoughts, I cannot enjoy it that much.”

Being “in the mood” for sex also falls within this realm. Willow, who has ADHD and some physical issues resulting from mental stress at uOttawa, mentioned:

My health is a big barrier. I also like, what has been helpful is I'll sometimes have an edible, and that has helped my sexual experience. It's like our shared social experience helps me relax, and therefore my pelvis relaxes and all that kind of

stuff. Yeah, I think, yeah, if you want me to be more specific, I might need an example.

While for the majority of participants, being under the influence of anxiety or stress decreased their potency or willingness to have sexual experiences, Bahareh reported an opposite pattern: “When my anxiousness is high, my desire both for masturbation and for watching porn increases.”

The long-term impact of sexual violence trauma also affected the mental condition of some young women, which in turn negatively influenced their sexual activity. For example, Ana, a PhD student at uOttawa, when asked what restricts her sexual activity, answered:

My mind. The events in my mind control me and stop me. That’s why I am in therapy... These are mental barriers, from the past, from childhood experiences. I’ll say one sentence and prefer we don’t continue. Please don’t talk about it. Ah, I experienced rape in my childhood, and that hurts me.

This statement shows the level of trauma one can carry throughout their lifetime, impacting their sexual encounters and overall sexual life. The long-term impact of traumatic experiences with sexuality was mentioned by about one-third of participants from both contexts.

In cases involving dating and sexual relationships, Farah also reported that in the early stages of relationships, too much information and developing a sense of sympathy could negatively affect sexual encounters. She shared her experience:

Like one guy told me about his kids, he had two, one with autism, and about his painful divorce. I respected him a lot; he was attractive, funny, and kind. But when he tried to initiate intimacy later, I couldn’t. I saw him as vulnerable, even sad, and that intimacy destroyed the possibility of sex. Despite us both wanting it,

we couldn't move forward. It became awkward. That's an example of how too much information or sympathy can block instinct and physical attraction.

Feeling controlled or unsafe in one's social environment, such as the presence of morality police, social stress, or family control, was also mentioned as a reason that anxiety could be created by the environment, affecting sexual behavior. Homa, an MA student at uTehran, pointed this out.

Despite all these restrictive or influential factors impacting the sexual lives of participants, even those who have not experienced full intercourse have some ideas about what ideal sex could be for them. In the next section, I will elaborate on these perspectives.

c) Ideal Sex

For some participants, their ideal and typical sexual patterns aligned closely. As Siri described, "An ideal relationship is kind. It equates to a typical relationship." However, for most participants, the main distinction between the ideal and typical sexual relationship centered on prioritizing their own sexual needs and desires. In their view, ideal sex involved mutual attention and pleasure, while typical sexual relationships often revolved around the partner's needs and neglected women's sexual satisfaction.

Feeling loved, safe, and secure was a dominant theme. As Layla, a PhD student at uOttawa, shared:

To me, the most important thing is that the person loves me and is in a relationship with me. That's the most important. And then I can feel it, it makes me feel more secure, and it also allows me to break all these barriers. I stop being in my head and I'm more in my body.

Similarly, Arezoo, a graduate of uTehran, reflected on the tension between freedom and emotional attachment:

A pattern for me to enjoy sex is that it needs to be directed and centered around me. I think I had my best sex with people who were not important to me. When I was at the center of the relationship and wasn't really considerate about the other person, I was very free, and I enjoyed that relationship more. When I have to think about the other person's attitude toward me, that awareness and self-control make me enjoy it less.

Yet, even Arezoo prioritized safety and security over pure pleasure in committed relationships, acknowledging, "The feeling of being secure in his arms, so pleasure and sex are not very central for me, or maybe they are, I don't know, I don't think about them."

Intimacy and care were emphasized as essential aspects of an ideal sexual relationship. Bahareh described it beautifully: "In an ideal sexual relationship the couple have intimacy; their bodies are sacred to each other like a temple, not just an object or a tool for pleasure."

Expressions of romantic affection before and after sex were also significant for many participants. Bita, an MA graduate from uTehran, shared: "I like to hear romantic talk, to communicate with each other even before and after; that gives me much more pleasure."

Ana, a PhD student at uOttawa, added "With a prelude, romantic words, kindness. And after sex, still closeness: not letting go, kissing, expressing love."

Foreplay and Afterplay. About half of the participants in both contexts believed foreplay and afterplay should be integral to ideal sex, creating a gradual, organic flow. As Hoorah described, "It [an ideal sexual relationship] starts with caressing and making out, a bit of playing with

private parts or oral sex, and then intercourse. After orgasm, staying in each other's arms, hugging, relaxing, and calming down."

Comfort, open communication, and fun about sexual needs were crucial for most participants. Isabella, a PhD student at uOttawa, stated: "I should feel comfortable, comfortable sharing what I want to do, what I desire at that moment."

For her, sex should also be fun and playful, not necessarily involving penetration or orgasm. Several participants associated ideal sex with being adventurous, spontaneous, and passionate, as these qualities added excitement and variety.

Nina emphasized the role of communication and vulnerability in ideal sex: "[In an ideal sexual relationship] we're not afraid to tell each other our desires, even if they seem a little weird. There's no judgment, there is open communication, honesty, vulnerability, sharing during the act, expressing what you like." She linked being open and adventurous directly to communication: "[Being] adventurous, exploratory, someone who's open to trying new things, I don't need them to like everything I like, but I need them to be open to trying. Being open to hearing each other out, cooperating, and meeting halfway, that's what matters."

For some participants, ideal sex was defined by a combination of communication, mutual pleasure, and satisfaction. Fatima, an MA graduate from uTehran, characterized about 80% of her sexual encounters with her partner as ideal:

We talk about this topic with each other. It's not only about the act, we talk about the things that excite us. Neither of us has premature ejaculation, and the duration is good, not too long to make me uncomfortable and not too short to feel disappointed.

Duration. The duration of the sexual encounter and the ability to reach orgasm were mentioned by several participants as important. Farah linked this to prioritizing women's pleasure:

Ideally, he pays attention to me first, making sure I'm ready and enjoying myself before going further. Because men reach climax faster, women need more time. For me, ideal sex is when the partner, without me having to say anything, recognizes the small signs in my body and pays attention to my pleasure as much as his own.

This emphasis on centering women's pleasure stood in contrast to typical sexual relationships, as Ava, a PhD student at uTehran, observed: "A typical sexual relationship is when you have sex, the man gets orgasm, and it's usually over very fast. But an ideal relationship starts with high passion and continues longer, it lasts more time, and in the ideal form, I also orgasm."

For many participants, ideal sex either centered on women's pleasure or was a mutual act of pleasure. About half of the participants in both contexts emphasized the importance of orgasm for both partners, with some, like Farah, stating that sex "is only a good experience if she also orgasms."

Frequency. Several participants also mentioned the frequency for sex as contributing to an ideal sexual life. Having a compatible sexual appetite and engaging in sex regularly were seen as indicators of sexual satisfaction.

Mutual understanding and care were key. Susie at uOttawa, explained:

An ideal sexual relationship for me is the one I have now. It's a relationship where you feel so connected that you don't need to talk for the other person to understand what you want or don't want. If something hurts, you can say 'ouch,'

and the other person listens and changes things without judgment. There's no forcing.

Ramina, a PhD student at uOttawa, described an ideal sexual relationship as a mutual process grounded in familiarity and attentiveness: "Knowing each other's sensitive spots, and adjusting so that both partners reach orgasm."

Consensual relationship. Having a consensual relationship was repeatedly flagged by participants as a defining feature of an ideal relationship, one grounded in care, mutual respect, and the absence of coercion, as Susie's account illustrates.

Though the idea of an ideal sexual relationship may hold different meanings and implications for participants, often centered around their own will and autonomy, it is important to understand where sexual pleasure stands in their lives.

d) Sexual pleasure: priority or not?

Sexual pleasure, as a form of personal satisfaction during sexual experiences, holds different levels of priority in individuals' lives. Among the 31 participants in this study, 15 (7 from uOttawa and 8 from uTehran) considered sexual pleasure a priority in their lives. Some viewed it as a healthy experience associated with the release of dopamine in the body (as mentioned by Willow, an M.A. graduate from uOttawa). Others described it as a form of self-care and a way to honor themselves and their bodies. A few participants reported experiencing physical and mental discomfort when deprived of sexual pleasure or relationships. Ava, a Ph.D. student from uTehran, stated: "When I do not have sexual relationships for a long period, it irritates me, and I masturbate."

For some, sexual pleasure also influenced their self-confidence and overall sense of well-being, helping them feel better about themselves and perform more effectively in other areas of life.

Hoorah, a Ph.D. graduate from Tehran who identified herself as a “hot person,” described sex as “a source of energy.” Some participants also overcame their shyness and self-censorship when discussing this topic. Sima, an M.A. graduate from uOttawa, shared: “Without sexual pleasure, the relationship doesn’t really work for me. So yes, it’s a priority.”

However, 15 participants (9 from uOttawa and 6 from uTehran) did not consider sexual pleasure a priority in their lives. Six participants from both contexts emphasized that they valued emotional connection and intimacy more than sexual pleasure. Susie from uOttawa explained: “Sexual pleasure is a cherry on top of a good relationship with deep connection.” Mari (43 years old, PhD Graduate from uOttawa) linked this shift in priorities to aging, noting: “Intimacy can be important in a relationship, but especially as I’m getting older, it’s becoming less and less important.”

Several participants indicated that other life issues took precedence over sexual pleasure. For Ana, from uOttawa, sexual pleasure was not a current priority due to trauma resulting from sexual violence. However, she expressed hope that therapy might help her reconnect with her sense of pleasure. Others mentioned that the demands of work, stress, and other personal responsibilities left little room for prioritizing sexual relationships. Some participants emphasized that respect, care, and acceptance within a relationship were more significant than sexual pleasure.

Yara, a Ph.D. student from uTehran, framed this as a gendered issue: “I think for us women, sexual pleasure is not a priority, because I think we have more control over our instincts.”

Similarly, Arezoo, a Ph.D. student who reported being in an unsatisfying sexual relationship with her husband, reflected: “My understanding is that it’s not my priority because I don’t do anything about it. But whenever I have conflicts with my husband, this dissatisfaction becomes more visible in my mind.”

Only one participant, Rozita, an M.A. graduate from uTehran, reported that the importance of sexual pleasure in her life fluctuated with her menstrual cycle. She explained:

One or two days before and after ovulation, it really becomes a top priority and occupies my mind a lot, it even irritates me. But the rest of the month, it’s not a priority. So, I really can’t lose control or let it dominate my thoughts. Maybe two or three days a month, yes, but otherwise, not like that.

While sexual pleasure held varying levels of importance for participants, their perceptions of how pleasure could or should be experienced were shaped by broader cultural and technological influences. One of the most notable factors in this regard was the role of pornography in shaping sexual expectations, fantasies, and behaviors. In the next section, I will elaborate on participants’ attitudes toward pornography and the extent to which it plays a role in their sexual activities, if at all.

e) Watching Pornography: Yes or No?

Participants expressed diverse and often ambivalent attitudes toward watching pornography, ranging from viewing it as a tool for pleasure, sexual arousal, and self-exploration, to rejecting it as unrealistic, exploitative, or incompatible with emotional intimacy.

Out of 30 participants who answered the question related to pornography use, 11 (five from uOttawa and six from uTehran) reported that they watch pornography. Nine of these 11

participants stated that they usually watch pornography while masturbating, while two reported watching it with their partners. The majority watched it alone. Ten of these participants identified as non-religious or non-believers, while one participant, an active practicing Muslim, reported watching pornography with her partner. When asked whether watching pornography contradicts her religious beliefs, she explained:

No, um, maybe because this is a film and it's not live and it's not alive, the third person, the third character, and I think there's no problem. From Islam's point of view, I'm saying, well, it's possible. If I tell you, it surprises you, I follow Sistani. And about this topic, he didn't say anything. I checked it out. Anything that is available is about the third person alive in the scene, I think he was talking about a threesome, and he referred to it that way. From what I understood, there is no problem with watching porn; it doesn't really create a problem or disturbance.

Among the five participants from uOttawa who reported watching pornography, three mentioned that they intentionally seek out *ethical pornography* or *porn for women*, which they described as having higher-quality content, being non-violent, and produced from a non-male-gaze perspective. For instance, Mari noted that ethical pornography is often “more difficult to find,” but she prefers it because it avoids abusive or exploitative portrayals of women. Similarly, Nina explained:

The big porn services are really shady. So, like, Erika Lust is one website that I really like, highly recommend. It's kind of like D-list movies that she makes that are more like porn, but they're more... I don't know, elegant. And then all the actors are paid properly. I also really like 'Make Love Not Porn,' which is another paid site, and it's more like people send in their home movies, which is kind of cool, like watching people actually have sex.

Mari and Willow also reported preferring ethical pornography because they found mainstream porn to be low quality, male-centered, and lacking in inclusivity for women and queer audiences.

In contrast, the two Iranian participants from uOttawa who watched pornography, as well as all six participants from uTehran who did, primarily used accessible sources such as Pornhub. Some mentioned that they watched pornography for both educational and arousal purposes. However, Homa, one of the participants from uTehran, expressed discomfort and guilt about her consumption due to the perceived unethical nature of the pornography industry:

Mostly from the aspect that this industry itself isn't ethical, I don't see it as moral. I feel like by watching it, you're kind of promoting it and increasing it, causing it to spread more, I think that's not a good or right thing to do. Watching it from those groups causes more harm to other people, umm, and the harm it causes to society is also from that angle. I don't see it as right because of that. So, I think, that's maybe the kind of shame and guilt it carries. It's clear that my shame and guilt come from that dimension, for me.

Although Homa criticized mainstream pornography for being unethical, the rest of the Iranian participants who watched pornography did not express similar concerns about the sources they used.

Nineteen participants (ten from uOttawa and nine from uTehran) reported that they did not watch pornography at the time of this study. Some mentioned watching it in the past, either out of curiosity or with a partner, but later lost interest, finding it “boring” or “not creative.” For example, Ramina from uOttawa stated: “I didn't feel the need for porn. Personally, I like to use my imagination.”

Others expressed reluctance to watch pornography due to its perceived violence, unrealistic depictions, abusive industry, and reinforcement of gendered power dynamics. Susie explained:

I just feel that it's taking advantage of women's bodies to make money all over again. The same talk. I don't like that kind of representation. I don't like the values it carries. And a lot of people watch porn as an educational tool, which isn't good because it's violent and shows unrealistic bodies.

Similarly, Bitia, an MA graduate from uTehran, commented: "I see porn as an industry that creates unrealistic needs and exploits women. I don't see it as a healthy industry to be a consumer of."

Sarah from uOttawa noted her discomfort with the power dynamics typically portrayed in mainstream pornography: "The other person may not have as much control over what is going on. There is an element of being forced into such acts, it's problematic for me."

Hoorah, from uTehran, said that she avoids watching pornography because it conflicts with her own narcissistic tendencies, she prefers to be "the center of attention" in sexual experiences.

Yara, a PhD student from uTehran, associated her negative attitude toward pornography with being raised in a restrictive family environment where watching such material was considered shameful.

A few participants reported watching pornography with their partners in the past but eventually stopped, as it distracted them from connecting with one another. For example, Fatima from uTehran explained that "it distracted [us] from paying attention to one another." Layla from uOttawa shared that her ex-husband's pornography addiction had negative consequences for

their marriage: “It’s very negative because it affected family time, it affected many things, you know, in a negative way.”

Some religious participants, particularly from uTehran, connected their avoidance of pornography to their faith. Zahra noted: “I think it’s not really a good thing, it doesn’t have a good impact. And maybe from a religious perspective, I was thinking that it’s not accepted. I didn’t really like it.”

Finally, several young women across both contexts expressed a preference for watching or reading erotic stories or films rather than pornography, as they found these to be more realistic, creative, and emotionally engaging.

f) Masturbation: Yay or Nay?

Participants expressed diverse attitudes toward masturbation, with some embracing it as a routine and empowering practice, while others associated it with discomfort, shame, or ambivalence. For many, masturbation was not only a source of physical pleasure but also a way to explore personal desires, relieve stress, and enhance self-knowledge.

Out of 29 participants who responded to this question, 19 (10 from uOttawa and 9 from uTehran) reported that they masturbate. For some, masturbation was a way to reconnect with their bodies and reclaim their sexuality, especially when they were experiencing dissatisfaction or lack of fulfillment in their sexual relationships. Layla, a PhD student from uOttawa, described masturbation as an act of self-reclamation:

[Masturbation is] a way to reclaim myself. I went with a few toys, and I would have the kids watched by the neighbors so I could go and masturbate because I

just needed to feel something, claim something. And I started actually wetting the bed, but then I was like, oh, I can do that. Okay. It took me three kids and a divorce to get there. I'm still stuck in some of the reprogramming, or deprogramming, so it's not easy. But I think I'm trying anyway. I'm aware that I'm trying.

For others, masturbation was an important way of connecting with their bodies and a healthy form of self-pleasure. Willow, an MA graduate from uOttawa who grew up in a religious family, reflected on her changing relationship to the practice: "I used to masturbate when I was younger, but shamefully. Now I do it intentionally. I do it because I think my sexuality is my own." Some of the participants including Willow mentioned that they use some toys in their masturbations, none of them were Iranian.

Feelings of shame and guilt were also mentioned by Bahareh, who was raised in a religious family. She explained:

For me, masturbation has been different in different periods. First, because of those mental and religious restrictions, I started masturbation at a very late age, at twenty-three, because I was very religious and I knew it was a religious sin. I didn't do it. In my mind, someone who has a partner shouldn't masturbate, since all their sexual needs should be met with the partner. But now I've reached the point where I see Masturbation as a different sexual activity from sex with a partner, as a form of sexual intimacy with myself. It doesn't matter if I have a partner or not.

For Isabella, also from uOttawa, masturbation was a form of freedom that she preferred even when in a relationship: "It's like only me with myself. I can do whatever I want."

Some participants, such as Susie, viewed masturbation as an emancipatory practice: "I sometimes still masturbate because masturbation is an emancipation tool." Others, like Yara, a

PhD student at uTehran, used masturbation as a way to reach orgasm after unsatisfying sexual encounters with their partners:

In general, I get my orgasm through masturbation, it's the thing that I do with myself. It can happen right after we have sex and it's over, next to my husband, but I don't tell him; or sometimes when he's not around, I do it myself and watch a porn film or read a story.

Arezoo, a PhD student at uTehran also shared that she masturbates even in her husband's presence: "Even with my husband's presence, I do masturbate. It's a different genre, it's something for myself, a space where I can center myself."

Mina, an MA graduate from uTehran who had never had sexual intercourse, shared that she only began masturbating in the last two years. She described her journey toward body awareness and acceptance:

I went to a female doctor, and she told me my clitoris is sensitive and large, and this bothered me mentally. At first, it wasn't easy for me, I wasn't even sure if I was doing it right, but mentally I have a better feeling now. When I visited the doctor, I realized that having that level of need is normal. I felt more at peace knowing I have the right to feel that way and that it's okay.

Four participants mentioned that masturbation served as self-care and a stress reliever. Nina, from uOttawa, described it as both a pleasurable and educational experience:

Because it's great. It teaches us about our bodies. It's super important, I think everybody should masturbate if they want to. Especially if you have a vulva, it's really the only way to understand where your pleasure comes from because we don't get that education anywhere.

Nina also discussed her practice of “mindful masturbation,” which she defined as masturbation without pornography: “It’s often recommended if you want to have a mindful masturbatory session to shut the porn off, be with yourself, breathe, and fantasize.” Bahareh, from uOttawa, also mentioned that she does not always watch porn while masturbating. She explained, “Out of maybe ten times I masturbate, maybe four times I watch porn. The rest of the time, I try to use my imagination because I know it’s healthier. From a sexual health perspective, it’s better to masturbate without porn.”

Four participants from uTehran mentioned that they masturbate occasionally but not consistently, as it depends on their emotional state or stress levels. For example, Hoorah shared that difficulty concentrating made it less likely for her to reach orgasm during masturbation. Maral described it as “not really enough for me,” explaining that it gives her only a brief, transient sense of pleasure but not fulfilling experience. Similarly, Bita preferred partnered sex to masturbation, while Rozita said she masturbates only when her partner is away.

Six participants reported that they do not masturbate. Two were from uOttawa, both religious and in relationships, who said they do not feel the need to. Hira from uOttawa explained that after giving birth, she became too busy and exhausted to engage in self-pleasure. Three Muslim participants from uTehran stated they had never tried masturbation. Yara, mentioned both religious and social media influences shaping her decision:

There are posts talking about reasons you shouldn't do such a thing, and that's why I don't have any desire for it. I remember something in the Qur'an, or maybe a *hadith*¹³, saying that if you masturbate, it's a cardinal sin.

Some participants' reflections on pleasure and sexual practices underscore the role of education from various sources in shaping their understanding of sexuality. In the following section, I will elaborate on young women's experiences with sexual and pleasure education, including its different forms and availability.

g) Sexual and Pleasure Education

While in the interview guide there was no direct question about sexual and pleasure education, the topic was mentioned by so many participants that it became a prominent theme in this study. About half of the participants stated that they never received comprehensive sexual education in their lifetime, either from family or institutions. For those who received some form of sexual education, it was mainly biology-focused and male-centered. Pleasure education was almost entirely absent from formal education systems and family discussions. Only one participant reported receiving a book from her mother that explained women's pleasure. Consequently, most young women grew up unaware of their sexuality and sexual pleasure.

Susie, a PhD student at uOttawa, reflected on her lack of knowledge and ignorance about her own pleasure and sexual boundaries due to insufficient education. She said: "I was ignorant for a long time... I was just not educated in where my pleasure was, or in how 'no' should be respected, and how to say no, and how to set boundaries."

¹³ A narrative record of the sayings, deeds, or silent approvals of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, and the twelve Imams

As mentioned by Susie and others such as Ava, Rozita, Farah, Zohreh, and Isabella, they never received pleasure education, nor were they educated about boundaries, bodily autonomy, or sexual violence. Farah emphasized that:

None of my parents told me how they could protect me. The only information I ever got from my mother was very vague, basically, ‘men want to take advantage of you.’ That was it, nothing more detailed. It was as if men were some kind of enemy, strange creatures who had come just to harm us. She never gave me concrete, practical information.

These young women felt vulnerable and insecure in contexts where both systems and families were male-dominated, religious, and patriarchal. Their families were often more concerned with honor and reputation than with their daughters’ well-being. For instance, Rozita mentioned being in an abusive relationship without realizing it and without feeling safe to confide in her family: “Nobody had talked to me about what a proper sexual relationship should be like. I was too young, and I didn’t know any better. My family was mainly concerned about their familial honor.”

Although a few participants mentioned receiving some form of sexual education from their families, it was mostly focused on how girls should respond to situations of violence. For example, Rahleh from uOttawa, a Muslim woman from a religious family, said: “My mom had taught me and my sister safety tricks.”

Families, mainly mothers, who had some level of sexual education, tended to teach girls that they needed to protect themselves when dealing with men. They presented sex as “functional [rather] than enjoyable,” as Willow, an MA graduate from uOttawa, put it. Willow and Layla both described their mothers as survivors of multiple violent relationships and having little formal

education. Willow explained: “My mom was a victim of a lot of sexual violence. She talked to me about it, maybe too extensively at times, but it made me very hyper-aware that men can be dangerous.”

Similarly, Farah said: “The only information I ever got from my mother was very vague, basically, ‘men want to take advantage of you.’”

Only Nina’s mother showed a more open attitude and guided her sexual education. When Nina was around 14 or 15, her mother gave her a book called *Girl Stuff*, which included information about orgasms, sex, pleasure, and masturbation. Nina described feeling comfortable talking to her mother, a biology teacher, without shame:

My mom always used to come to me first and say, if you ever need to talk about anything. Her mother later provided additional information about birth control. However, despite this openness, Nina’s mother also conveyed ambivalent messages about sexual pleasure, telling her that: “Sometimes sex isn’t that great. I gotta say, I like food better than I like sex sometimes.

Nina reflected that, although she received more education than most, Catholic values had still shaped her views and those of Canadian society more broadly: “Catholic values have completely shaped Western society in the way that we look at sex in Canada, education being so limited for me in school, and pleasure education being completely non-existent.”

For Isabella, access to sexual education was not openly available at home:

I still feel shy talking about sex. Sometimes I think it’s still a bit of a taboo... My parents didn’t talk with me about it at all, it was my initiative to say, ‘Hey, Mom, you need to talk with me about this.’ And then she said, okay, you’ll go to a gynecologist. So I didn’t have these conversations with my parents.

None of the participants from uTehran reported receiving sexual education from their families. Ava, a PhD student in Tehran, said she learned indirectly by observing conversations among married women in her extended family: “At home, my mom and my uncles’ wives would sit in those feminine gatherings and talk about how they make themselves pretty for their husbands, and I learned from the environment I grew up in.”

Some participants reported receiving limited sex education at school, but it was focused on biology rather than pleasure or relational aspects. Hira shared: “I didn't know how sex is done till I was maybe 18 or 19. We took biology at school, but they just tell you: there’s a penis and it enters, but you don’t really understand how it happens.”

Similarly, two participants from uTehran said their university classes focused on “sexual disease transmission, prevention methods, and related issues.” In Iran, pre-marriage classes are also required; Zahra described hers as “only two hours long and not really comprehensive or useful.” She emphasized the importance of sexual education but saw it as primarily the responsibility of mothers. Nevertheless, she herself had received no sexual education at home. Her family culture prioritized men’s needs, teaching that “a man needs to start the sexual relationship, and as a woman, you shouldn’t say anything directly.”

Reflecting on generational change, Zahra noted: “When I was a kid, there was no education, but now I know that there are some lessons in kindergarten and schools about private parts and teaching kids that no one should touch or see them.”

However, among Iranian participants, there was a strong sense that the lack of proper sexual education reflected state control over women’s sexuality. Mina stated: “When our educational

system and our science books don't include the bodily anatomy of men and women, we don't even have access to the minimum level of education."

Zahra also recalled a university professor reinforcing male-centered views of sexuality: "One professor said that one of the reasons men are unfaithful is that their wives don't give them what they want, so they go to prostitutes. That stuck with me, it encouraged centering sex around addressing my husband's needs."

Alaina, a Brazilian PhD student from uOttawa, similarly noted that even institutions in the U.S. failed to adequately discuss sexuality.

Despite the lack of formal or informal sexual and pleasure education, many young women taught themselves through various means. As Farah put it, having no older siblings or supportive parents meant: "I learned on my own."

Nina said she later invested in learning about sexuality and pleasure, which "really positively impacted the way [she] interacted with people sexually."

Access to educational resources about pleasure was limited and often came from pornography. Arezoo from uTehran mentioned that, although she was not having satisfying sexual relations, she began masturbating after accidentally watching a porn video and enjoying it. For others, pornography was their only source of information, yet, as Nina observed: "[In Western societies] the only way you learn about pleasure is through porn, and porn is usually made for the male gaze. It's not about women actually enjoying themselves; it's about women faking enjoyment." As a result, young girls often "learned" how to perform sexuality through male-gaze, often violent pornography.

However, with the rise of social media, young women increasingly used online platforms to educate themselves about sexuality and pleasure. Ava shared: “Instagram pages were very helpful in raising my awareness.”

Social media provided a space for women to share experiences and learn about topics that had long been taboo in their societies. Sima, an Iranian MA graduate from uOttawa shared that she was not comfortable talking about her desires because of shame and lack of sex education, but social media helped her to be more open about her sexual desires. She said: “Social media, seeing others talk openly about their sexual experiences, made me more open too.”

About one-third of participants (five from uOttawa and five from uTehran) followed social media pages of sexual health educators, therapists, and sexologists.

Beyond online learning, ten participants (six from uTehran and four from uOttawa) reported visiting therapists or sexologists at some point in their lives. Therapy helped them recognize harmful patterns, reconnect with their bodies, and challenge patriarchal beliefs about sex. As Maral said: “I’m trying so hard to remove and get rid of the patriarchal roots that are hidden in me, with therapy.”

Mina shared that visiting a sexologist helped her overcome guilt about masturbation when she learned that her anatomy and needs were normal: “When I visited the doctor, I realized that having that level of need is normal. I felt more at peace and knowing that I have the right to feel that way.”

For Fatima (uTehran) and Alaina (uOttawa), therapy helped them avoid unhealthy relationships. Alaina explained: “Therapy was very nice for me. In my first round of therapy, I realized that

casual encounters and casual sex were not good for me.” Others, like Homa and Zahra, attended couples’ therapy to address sexual communication issues early in their relationships.

In addition to therapy and social media, about two-thirds of participants (ten from each context) said they gained self-directed sexual and pleasure education through their academic studies in the humanities and social sciences, as well as through TV shows, films, and podcasts.

Supportive circles of (often feminist) friends were another key source of learning. Twelve participants (four from uOttawa and eight from uTehran) highlighted the importance of having friends they could freely discuss sexuality with. Ava noted: “My friends from social sciences, some of them were feminists who worked on this topic, and talking to them was very useful.”

Some women developed these networks through feminist activism and educational programs.

Hira, for example, expanded her circle through involvement in a “sexual orientation and sexual practices” program.

Engagement with social feminist movements like #MeToo was also educational and inspiring for some participants. Willow, who participated in a campus campaign against sexual violence, said: “The shift for me, enjoying my own sexuality, involved a lot of advocacies. Similarly, Farah reflected: “After #MeToo, especially the Iranian #MeToo during COVID, hearing those narratives was very helpful. They showed us that our experiences with sexuality are not normal.”

All participants who mentioned social movements as educational tools, except Willow, were Iranian, either from uOttawa or uTehran.

Most young women in this study reported engaging in some form of self-directed sexual and pleasure education, which increased their awareness and sense of control over their sexual

activities and beliefs. However, achieving agency and autonomy in sexuality involves many intersecting factors beyond education. In the next section, I elaborate on the factors influencing sexual agency among young women.

h) Sexual agency

Based on the analysis of the results regarding indications of sexual agency, I was able to categorize the participants into four main groups, as outlined below. This classification highlights the diverse ways in which individuals experience, express, and negotiate their sexual agency within different relational and social contexts.

Group 1. In this group, young women grounded their views in traditional and religious values, considering sexual activity appropriate only within marriage. Their expectations reflected these beliefs, and they noted that their sexual experiences were consistent with these standards.

For instance, Sarah from uOttawa and Yara from uTehran both expressed this type of agency. Both are believers, Sarah is Christian, and Yara is Muslim, and neither expressed a desire to experiment sexually. Sarah reported engaging in sexual activities at times even when she did not want to, saying she would “make the decision to help a brother out” and please her husband. She had not engaged in sexual intercourse before marriage. Sarah viewed religion as a liberatory factor and sex as something to be enjoyed within the boundaries of faith. She explained:

It makes me realize that sex is ordained by God, is part of what God gives. It's children, human beings, it's part of what we are supposed to enjoy. And based on the Christian faith, it is, of course, within a context, the marriage context. That is a given. Well, it is meant to be enjoyed. So, yeah. It's not a duty; it's not an obligation. It's something that I have to enjoy.

Neither Sarah nor Yara reported feeling restricted by anything, and neither engaged in masturbation. Yara's sexual attitudes were shaped by strict traditional religious values instilled by her family.

Group 2. Individuals in Group 2 navigate a blend of both traditional and more liberal values simultaneously. Their emerging challenges to traditional and religious norms exist in tension with deeply internalized beliefs. This pattern appeared more frequently among participants who identified as religious, as they attempted to legitimize their doubts and reconcile new perspectives with their faith. While these women were generally content within conventional heterosexual relationships, they still questioned certain restrictive religious norms and expectations. For example, Layla from uOttawa explained: "I'm very active in the sense that I go [to church] most Sundays. We pray, you know. But I don't necessarily always respect the status quo because I question things. So I go, but I also question."

When asked what constrained her sexual activities, she responded:

Religious background. Being raised in a conservative religion. I'm a free spirit, bound by a lot of religious morals, and I need to, not break free completely from all of them, but some of them. Yeah, I mean, my head... overthinking can kill you. He's shown that he loves me and my body, but I'm still in my head, so self-conscious.

Among uOttawa participants categorized in this group, both Layla and Siri identified religion as the main restrictive factor. However, both engaged in some sexual activities, Siri had sex before marriage, and both reported masturbating.

Among uTehran participants, four, Zohreh, Zahra, and Fatima, categorized in group two, all identifying as Muslim believers. None reported masturbation. Zohreh viewed Islam as a

constraining factor but tried to stay within its boundaries while occasionally finding ways around some Islamic restrictions for pleasure (for example, watching pornography). All of them reported engaging in sexual acts primarily to please their partners. Zahra and Fatima described a lack of sexual intimacy with their partners.

In Zahra's case, her husband requested certain sexual activities that she found contradictory to her understanding of Islam. She explained:

There are some things that he likes, but I have it in the back of my mind that if he wants that to happen again, I don't really accept it. I tried different ways, but it didn't result well. I saw that if I don't do it, the relationship doesn't go well, and I have to do it. It's not that he forces me physically, but if you don't do it, the relationship doesn't continue. So is that forcing? Maybe not violent forcing, but still pressure. I've tried to change it but wasn't really successful so far.

While Zahra challenged traditional notions around male initiation of sex and even visited a sexologist to educate herself and maintain a more active sexual life, her partner did not reciprocate. In disagreements about sexual activities he wanted, he often responded with sexual inattention. Fatima also described a disrupted sense of agency when she was approached by men on social media during a period of emotional distance from her husband, but she ended the interactions because, as she put it, "because of Sharia law, it is betrayal."

Group 3. This group which encompassed the majority of participants (12 from uOttawa and 10 from uTehran), was primarily composed of graduate students in the humanities and social sciences who were already exposed to feminist and liberatory ideas. In addition to formal education, many pursued self-directed sexual learning and expressed a strong desire for autonomy in their sexual experiences.

For these young women, engaging in sexual relationships in participatory, communicative, and mutually respectful ways was essential, contrasting with being dominated in sexual relationships. Most of them had already had some sexual experiences, and the youngest participant in this group was 25 years old. However, many had previously were describing other categories mainly group one or group two at earlier stages of life.

Among the 22 participants who fall under this category, 12 identified as sexual minorities. However, only three of them, all white participants from uOttawa, felt comfortable revealing their sexual orientation openly with others. The others, particularly those from religious and traditional families, and all participants from Iran, disclosed their sexual minority identity only to a close circle of friends or like-minded individuals. They deliberately avoided discussing this topic with their families, fearing negative consequences. This reflects how restrictive heteronormative values can deeply affect and constrain young sexual minority women, especially in contexts such as Iran, where non-heterosexuality is considered illegal.

As Ana, a lesbian PhD student from Iran studying at uOttawa, explained: “In Iran, to almost no one, as long as I was in Iran. Because of security issues and other things, like whether people around would accept it or not.”

Similarly, Ava, a bisexual woman, highlighted the strong cultural stigma surrounding non-heteronormative identities: “We cannot talk about it at all. There’s a lot of judgment in it, and they don’t really accept it as a sexual orientation. They see it as a disorder or deviation.”

Willow also shared that she preferred not to disclose her sexual identity to her family, particularly to her religious mother:

I'm safely in a hetero-presenting relationship. I don't have to tell her. And so I think, I don't wanna have that conversation, because it wouldn't go well. And if I don't have to put myself through it, then I just won't. The rest of my family thinks similarly, even though they're not all of the same religious denomination, they're all conservatively Christian.

Young women, through experience and education, their fundamental values became increasingly liberal regarding sexuality. Nevertheless, partner characteristics and environmental factors could still restrict their sexual experiences. Sixteen participants in this category mentioned specific sexual activities they wished to experiment with, using sex toys (2), penetration (1), intercourse in public spaces (2), threesomes (7), lesbian encounters (1), BDSM (2), or swinging (1), but none had done so due to fear of judgment, environmental constraints, lack of confidence, fear of the experience, being in a committed relationship, lack of time, lack of trust in sexual partners, mental barriers, or physical allergies (e.g., to silicone).

Despite holding updated values, young women's sexual encounters were often dependent on their partners. Having a supportive partner who communicated openly about sexual needs was essential; otherwise, disappointment was common. Some experiences were also restricted by the environment or even shaped by neoliberal attitudes toward sex, which could reinforce negative experiences and limit sexual agency. Environmental restrictions, such as regulations (especially noted by Iranian participants) and the availability of suitable partners, also influenced sexual agency in this category. In some cases, profound trauma caused long-term mental and physical effects, which continued to restrict sexual activity despite liberalized values and expectations.

The role of parental support was crucial in shaping, or undermining, young women's sexual agency. Importantly, it is not always the absence of parental sexual education or guidance that

affects this process; even when some support is present, contradictory or harmful messages can still weaken a young woman's sense of autonomy. For example, although Nina's mother was the only parent who offered any sexual or pleasure education by giving her books and encouraging open conversations, she simultaneously contributed to Nina's body insecurity. This dynamic resulted in years of diminished self-love and limited body ownership. Nina explained:

My family was very hard on me for being overweight when I was a kid, for having acne when I was a kid. My body never felt like I owned it. It felt like everybody else in my family and my friends and in my life were the ones that dictated how I should feel about my body. So I already was growing up in a state of not trusting my body, not liking my body, not valuing my body. So I think that lack of autonomy over your body is already sort of ingrained into you in nonsexual ways so that when it comes to sex, you haven't been taught properly about what sex is, what sex should be, and how sex should feel.

On the other hand, some participants who never received sexual education from their parents, and whose families restricted conversations about sexual activities, particularly those from Iran, reported higher levels of self-confidence and self-esteem when their parents were supportive of their decisions. Parental respect, trust, and the absence of discriminatory treatment compared to brothers fostered a stronger sense of autonomy, even within religious households. This was evident in the experiences of participants such as Sima from uOttawa, as well as Haleh and Hoorah from uTehran. However, despite this support and higher self-confidence, these participants still encountered contextual, personal, and relational constraints that limited their sexual agency and created challenges in fully exercising it.

Group 4. Group 4 is characterized by fully liberated sexual values, emphasizing the expectation of fulfilling, unrestricted sexual experiences with a supportive and communicative partner. Only one participant from uTehran, who was living and studying in Canada at the time of the interview, fell into this category.

Bitra, a non-believer in a married relationship, reported that she never engaged in sexual activity merely to please her husband. She did not feel restricted in any way and described decision-making as mutual and balanced, with good communication leading to a satisfying sexual relationship. However, she noted that before marriage, when she lived in Iran, both the environment and the nature of her relationships had been restrictive factors influencing her decisions about sexual activities.

Across all categories of sexual agency, young women were affected by the COVID-19 pandemic in various ways. It is important to consider how broader social and structural changes, such as those brought about by the pandemic, shaped their sexual lives, relationships, and expressions of intimacy.

i) Sexual Experiences During the COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic changed many aspects of people's lives, including their sexual activities and experiences. The majority of participants in this study reported some degree of change in their sexual lives during this period. Only three participants, all of whom were already in a committed relationship or married, reported improved sexual relationships due to increased availability and time spent together.

About one-third of participants reported having less or no sexual activity. Four out of five of those who reported no sexual activity were not in a relationship and either were not looking for or were unable to find a partner due to the restrictions imposed by the pandemic and the perceived risks of meeting new people. One participant mentioned being in long distance relationship with her husband, which made sexual activity impossible. Participants who were not in a relationship and experienced reduced sexual activity often attributed it to health concerns and the risks of meeting new people, especially those living with family members, such as parents. In addition, several participants reported that a lack of private space further limited their ability to engage in masturbation.

Some young women who were in relationships also reported less sexual activity for various reasons, including the challenges of maintaining long-distance relationships during lockdowns. Ana, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa who was in Iran at the time, described the difficulties of meeting her partner due to COVID-related restrictions, which were further intensified for homosexual couples in Iran. On the other hand, some participants from uOttawa, who were newcomers or recent immigrants to Canada at the time reported higher levels of anxiety and tension, which negatively affected the quality of their sexual activities. Other participants from both contexts, cited mental health issues, such as anxiety, depression, or obsessive-compulsive disorder (OCD), affecting themselves or their partners as contributing factors to reduced sexual activity. Those who were already experiencing relationship problems also noted that spending more time together and having less private space negatively affected their intimacy.

Bahareh, who was living with her husband during the pandemic, explained how anxiety and the lack of privacy hindered her sexual and self-pleasure practices: “To masturbate, you need a safe

and private space. I'm like that, I need privacy. And well, with a partner present at home during Corona, you had less privacy.”

About half of the participants reported that their sexual activity remained roughly the same, though with some adjustments. For example, Farah, who was dating at the time, shared: “The sexual activity and encounters didn't change much, except less kissing during that time. Otherwise, things went back to normal afterward.”

Nina, who was not in a steady relationship but was casually dating, reported reconnecting with an ex-partner during the pandemic, explaining: “Maybe that was because of COVID, like we could meet because I felt safe.”

Bitu also reported no change in her sexual activity but mentioned that she took contraception very seriously during that period, using two different methods to prevent pregnancy.

Others similarly reported that their sexual activity stayed the same, some were in relationships and living with their partners, while others were single and did not perceive the pandemic as a factor that altered their already limited or nonexistent sexual experiences.

Higher levels of sexual violence against women were reported almost worldwide during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the next section, I will elaborate on participants' experiences and attitudes toward sexual violence and its prevention, concluding with an inquiry into whether they personally experienced sexual violence during the pandemic. Table 5 below presents an overview of sex-, pleasure-, and sexual agency-related findings.

Table 5
Overview of Sex, Pleasure, Sexual Agency-Related Findings

Meaning & Purpose of Sex	<p>Both contexts</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sex as a holistic experience 2. Sex as recreational 3. Sex as satisfying male partners (more than half, especially in conservative or religious contexts)
Factors Impacting or Restricting Sex	<p>Environmental: societal expectations, community values, regulations, family, media, pornography, sexual education, sexual violence/trauma, situational constraints</p> <p>Interpersonal (couple): relationship type/duration, communication, connection/intimacy, safety, respect, trust, physical attraction (Iranian participants), orgasm/satisfaction, partner characteristics/performance</p> <p>Personal: age, experience, self-esteem, internalized restrictive values, physical/mental health, concerns about pregnancy/contraceptive access (among participants in Iran)</p>
Ideal Sex	<p>Feeling loved, safe, secure; foreplay and afterplay; comfort, open communication, fun; duration and frequency; mutual understanding and care; consensual relationship</p>
Sexual Pleasure Priority	<p>Yes: 15 participants (7 uOttawa; 8 uTehran)</p> <p>No: 15 participants (9 uOttawa; 6 uTehran)</p> <p>Variable: 1 uTehran participant, depending on menstrual cycle</p>
Pornography Use	<p>Yes: 11 participants (5 uOttawa, 3 non-Iranian ethical, 2 Iranian any source; 6 uTehran, 5 any available resources, 1 concerned about ethical aspect)</p> <p>No: 19 participants (10 uOttawa; 9 uTehran)</p>
Masturbation	<p>Yes: 19 participants (10 uOttawa; 9 uTehran)</p> <p>Occasionally: 4 uTehran</p> <p>No: 6 participants (3 uOttawa, 2 religious; 3 uTehran, religious)</p>
Sexual and Pleasure Education	<p>About half in both contexts never received comprehensive sexual education (family or institutions).</p>

	<p>Pleasure education was largely absent.</p> <p>Some received some sex ed: uOttawa, family + institutions; uTehran, mainly institutions (biology/sexual health)</p> <p>Self-education: 27 out of 31 (14 from uOttawa and 13 from uTehran) expressed at least one kind of sexual/pleasure self-education including: use of pornography, social media (~1/3), therapy/sexologists, academic/feminist studies or films/podcasts (~2/3), friend circles, social/feminist movements</p>
Sexual Agency	<p>Group 1: Traditional religious values (1 uOttawa)</p> <p>Group 2: Traditional with some liberal updates</p> <p>Group 3: Majority (12 uOttawa; 10 uTehran), exposed to feminist/liberatory ideas, strong autonomy, some environmental and value conflict</p> <p>Group 4: Fully liberated sexual values (1 uTehran), unrestricted, fulfilling sex with supportive/communicative partner</p>
Sexual Experiences During COVID-19	<p>Improved: 3 participants in committed relationships/married (more time together)</p> <p>Less or no activity: ~1/3 participants</p> <p>Roughly same activity: ~1/2 participants, some adjustments; includes partnered and single participants with unchanged sexual activity</p>

V. Sexual Violence

It has been reported that one in three women experience sexual violence at least once in their lifetime. In this study, among 31 participants, 30 had experienced at least one form of sexual violence at some point in their lives. Only one participant reported never having experienced any kind of sexual violence. In all the reported cases, the perpetrators were men. Mari, in response to the question ‘Have you ever experienced sexual violence?’ said: “Yes, from my boyfriends, my ex-partner, men in general.”

In this section, I discuss how the definition of sexual violence is often ambiguous among young women, largely due to limited awareness and the normalization of certain forms of violence across different contexts. I then examine the experiences of participants in both settings, including the various forms and circumstances of sexual violence they encountered. Although all but one participant experienced at least one form of sexual violence in their lifetime, not all sought help, and among those who did, many did not receive adequate support. I explore the types and adequacy of support available to them, followed by a discussion of the impacts of sexual violence on young women regardless of whether they received sufficient assistance. The section then analyzes the factors that contribute to or prevent sexual violence, including the essential role of state-regulated policies. I discuss how young women in each context perceived the effectiveness, or ineffectiveness, of these policies and consider their awareness of institutional policies at uOttawa and uTehran. I conclude the chapter by examining participants' experiences of sexual violence during the COVID-19 pandemic in each setting.

a) Ambiguity and the Normalization of Sexual Violence

I identified a high level of ambiguity in how participants defined sexual violence across both contexts. While some Iranian participants linked this unawareness and ambiguity to the context in which they grew up, for instance, Farah stated, “For many years when I was living in Iran, maybe until about ten years ago, for me Sexual Violence only meant rape”, several participants from uOttawa also demonstrated a similar lack of awareness. About two-thirds of participants expressed some uncertainty about what constitutes sexual violence and whether their experiences of sexual harassment, indecent exposure (flashing), stalking, intimate partner violence, or other forms of misconduct could be categorized as sexual violence, as long as it did not involve rape or extreme physical harm.

Some participants even asked for clarification during the interview, indicating unfamiliarity with the concept. For example, Yara, a PhD student at uTehran, when asked if she had ever experienced sexual violence, responded: “No, can you define it for me? Because I don't have any idea what that means.”

Others were somewhat familiar with the concept but still uncertain about its scope. Sima, an Iranian MA graduate from uOttawa, shared: “I have experienced sexual harassment... I don't know if it can be called violence, because usually we think of sexual violence as a bit more serious.”

Beyond the ambiguity in definitions, about half of the participants mentioned that, especially at younger ages, they were not even aware of what sexual violence meant or that it could encompass a wide range of behaviors. They often learned about its broader definition only through later education or exposure to feminist or social science discourses. As Isabella, a PhD student from uOttawa, explained:

After I started my undergraduate in social science, I learned about this [sexual violence]. I was like, okay! This is sexual violence, not only rape. It can have many other forms. So it was only when I learned it that I could name it.

As Isabella described, many young women lack awareness of what constitutes sexual violence; without this knowledge, they cannot even name or recognize their own experiences. Nina, a MA graduate from uOttawa echoed this idea when reflecting on her past experiences:

When I was younger, there were some sexual assault issues that I didn't realize were assault at the time. That's what's tricky about sexual assault, right? It's not as cut and dry as getting punched in the face by someone.

Even Susie a PhD student at uOttawa, reflected on her coercive experience with her first boyfriend when she was 18 and said: “I don’t know if I can talk about rape because it was a long time ago and I was not aware of boundaries and what sexual violence is. I think I was coerced and compelled at that time, and I was young.”

In addition, some participants demonstrated internalized normalization and trivialization of less severe forms of sexual violence, including verbal harassment and street-based physical harassment. This pattern varied by context: in Canada, trivialization was primarily limited to verbal harassment, whereas in more traditional patriarchal contexts, such as Brazil and Iran, both verbal and physical harassment were normalized. Frequent exposure to these incidents in daily life contributed to their acceptance among young women, rendering such experiences routine rather than exceptional. This issue will be further explored in the next section under the subtopic of street verbal and physical harassment.

b) Experience With Sexual Violence

As mentioned earlier, 30 participants had experienced at least one form of sexual violence (SV) at least once in their lives. However, most participants had encountered sexual violence more than once in their lifetime and had faced various forms of it. Table 6 below presents experiences with sexual violence, including forms, settings, perpetrators, and their frequency of reporting.

Table 6*Experiences with sexual violence: forms, settings and perpetrator and frequency of reporting*

Forms of SV	Verbal Harassment (19), Physical Harassment (17), Online Harassment (9), Indecent Exposure (8), Stalking (5), Rape (2)
Settings of SV	Street, Church, Club, Date, Private spaces, School, Work, Public Transport
From whom?	Strangers (70 ¹⁴ -both), Intimate Partner Violence (16-Both), Classmates or Professors (12-Both), Coworkers or Superiors (11-Both), Family (6-Iranian), Date (5-uOttawa), Friends and Peers (5-Both)

Physical and Verbal Street Harassment. As shown in the table above, street-based verbal and physical harassment are the most common forms of violence experienced by women in this study. Despite the high frequency of these encounters, some participants demonstrated a degree of internalized normalization and trivialization of less extreme forms of sexual violence, such as verbal harassment or street-based physical harassment. In the Canadian context, this was mostly limited to the trivialization of verbal harassment, whereas participants from more patriarchal and traditional societies, such as Brazil and Iran, described the normalization of both verbal and physical harassment. This normalization and acceptance reflect the lived realities of young women in these societies, where such incidents are frequent and often go unchallenged.

Siri a MA graduate from uOttawa mentioned that she never faced anything serious. She said:

No, I haven't had anything that's super extreme. I've had somebody on a plane try to talk to me, continue talking to me, and after I said, "No," thank you. I just went

¹⁴ This high number is due to some participants reporting multiple instances of experiencing physical or verbal harassment in the streets.

up to the flight attendant, and I just need change seats. That was fine. But it's nothing like that I've had to really like call for help or ask somebody to help me, or anything like that.

In a context like Brazil culture around street harassment is more physical and even that form is normalized. Alaina, a Brazilian PhD student at uOttawa, explained:

Here in Brazil, someone might slap your butt in the street. Yes, because we have this kind of violence all the time. When you start to grow up and have the appearance of a woman, this kind of thing starts, and it's very common here.

According to Iranian participants, verbal and physical street harassment is also very common In Iran. Rozita, an MA graduate from uTehran, described similar experiences with sexual violence in public sphere. She said: "In public, I experienced only minor things. For example, once someone pressed against my chest on a quiet street." She explained that she typically responded to such incidents by shouting. Regarding the incident above, she said: "I screamed, and the person ran away. There was no one else to help."

Ava, a PhD student at uTehran reflecting on her experiences in Iran, stated: "Encountering verbal or physical sexual harassment on the street is part of the routine life of Iranian women. It's part of daily life, and there is no space where you can take your case."

Similarly, Mina, an MA graduate from Tehran, added: "Being touched in public spaces has become kind of a normal thing for girls here, and it's possible that they don't even consider that sexual violence."

However, perceiving it as a usual incident does not prevent women from resisting it in various ways. For example, Haleh, who experienced sexual violence on a street near her home late at

night when no one else was around, avoids taking that route, especially at night. She explained: “I was just scared because it was a quiet place, not very busy, and I didn’t want to respond. But it resulted in me not passing through certain paths at night.”

While encountering sexual violence in public spaces, some participants tried to fight back, some attempted to escape, some chose to ignore the situation, and others sought help from people around them. However, some did not ask for help from bystanders because they were unsure whether others would care enough to get involved.

However, while participants from Iran and Brazil reported these experiences with street harassments as routine and normal in their daily lives, Canadian participants described them as less common. Young women who had lived in both Canada and their home countries with less liberal attitudes toward sexuality reported a reduced number, or complete absence, of verbal and physical sexual violence incidents in Canada. Majority of young women reported that in response to verbal harassments they usually try to either ignore or sometimes oath back. But as Hira mentioned when it is very common: “it's easier to ignore it.” She said: “I used to put my headsets and listen to music to avoid this.” Some participants try to escape the situation as soon as possible but some sought help from people or a family member around them.

Online Sexual Violence. About one-third of participants from both contexts reported experiencing online harassment through email, dating apps, and social media, often in the form of unsolicited pictures or messages. Participants generally responded by ignoring, blocking, or sometimes reporting the perpetrator. They perceived these actions as sufficient for protecting themselves and noted that they did not know what else could be done in cases of online harassment. Bahareh, for example, said:

Online harassment had less meaning for me, because I felt less danger. The person was just an account, and with blocking, they couldn't reach me. I didn't seek help. But once, a guy I didn't know sent me a nude pic, his genitals. Just a stranger. I posted his photo in my story for close friends and told everyone to report him.

In some cases, young women like Bahareh mobilized their communities to take further action to ensure that perpetrators were banned or blocked from social media.

Dating Violence. Participants who reported dating violence were exclusively from uOttawa.

They described situations where harassment occurred in private spaces with their dates, who ignored their requests to stop or attempted to force them into unwanted sexual activities.

However, none of these cases were labeled as rape by the participants themselves.

Farah said: "I wanted to stop but, for various reasons, I didn't stop it. But it wasn't in the sense that I now say, 'I was raped.' The feeling was that, for some reason, I didn't cut it off. I felt pity for them."

In some instances, participants showed disagreement verbally but did not try to stop the action because they feared the person might become violent. This was the case for Mari during the pandemic. She described how her date's behavior changed once they arrived at his home "Once we got home, things changed drastically. He really wanted to make out. I was sitting, like, I don't really want to... and then he was on top of me and I got bruised. It was really hard to get out."

In these cases, participants usually did not seek help during or after the incident, though they sometimes disclosed their experiences to friends and received emotional support.

Clubs. Three participants from uOttawa described encountering sexual violence in clubs. They attempted to distance themselves from the perpetrator, and in some cases, friends intervened. Susie shared “My friend had the instant reaction of putting his body between me and the other guy and dealing with that situation for me.”

Friends and Peers. A few participants from both contexts reported experiencing sexual violence from friends or peers. In most cases, they responded directly and attempted to stop the behavior, as many incidents occurred in public or group settings. However, Willow described an incident involving a peer from her church group who repeatedly groped her. She did not disclose it to anyone: “I don't think I told anyone. I don't remember, actually, because it was so long ago... I feel like the others knew, but it was seen as funny for some reason. Even though I hated it. It was seen as... whatever.” In another incident of SV that happened in a private space with friends, Willow again did not seek out help. She said: “I didn't think anyone would care. You know. Like, who cares also like again, like. There's a culture of like victim blaming like.” These cases illustrate how group culture as well as society's culture, in the absence of clear education on sexual violence, can shape young women's responses and their understanding of incidents encountering SV.

At School. Some participants reported experiencing physical or verbal sexual violence from classmates in school, including sexist comments or unwanted touching. Most responded by distancing themselves from the perpetrator.

However, in Tina's case at uTehran, the situation escalated to threats, prompting her to seek help from family members and campus security. She explained:

One day he followed me home, maybe to scare me. For four semesters, it was a

nightmare... He came to my house, cornered me, and said, 'If you don't go out with me, I'll spread rumors that you slept with me'... Eventually, I decided to report him to security. My mom came with me, and we filed a complaint. They did take some action.

Similarly, Ramina, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, reported experiencing sexual violence from a friend in a group shortly after arriving in Canada. She asked another mutual male friend for help, but she did not receive adequate support: "He froze... he said he couldn't do anything. Afterwards, my interaction with Amin decreased, but we still communicated. I understood that for him, it wasn't important; he mostly thought about how the incident might affect his own interests."

Some participants from both contexts also reported experiences with sexual violence from university professors. In Iran, perpetrators included clerics professors and teachers who hold positions of power. Farah described harassment from a cleric-professor: "He would ask very personal questions... I didn't report him because everyone already knew about him. Even the female students warned each other: if you had to go to his office, don't go alone."

Despite the lack of formal reporting due to fear and vulnerability, students engaged in informal resistance, such as warning one another or leaving anonymous notes. Zohreh from uTehran also described harassment from several professors but did not act due to safety concerns: "I promised myself I would write a #MeToo narration about them, but I didn't because they have connections with security services, and I thought it might create backlash for me." Ana also reported freezing during a physical sexual violence incident with a professor in Iran and not seeking help.

Alaina experienced harassment at uOttawa but did not report it due to her vulnerability as an international student: “My friend said we should go to the institution and say what happened. But you are in a very vulnerable position in Canada, just a student with a student visa. You are afraid of the consequences.” Her case highlights the precarious position of international students who may hesitate to report sexual violence for fear of jeopardizing their immigration status.

The only case in which a student took formal action against a university professor occurred at uOttawa. Raheleh, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, who was alone in a classroom with a professor she was proctoring for, faced inappropriate questions and attempts by the professor to get closer to her. She applied strategies her mother had taught her for situations of vulnerability and danger, appearing engaged and interested to gain the potential perpetrator’s trust until she found a safe moment to leave. Raheleh used these strategies to exit the building and then shared the incident with her partner. Together, they filed an anonymous complaint after experiencing the inappropriate behavior. Raheleh reflected: “I expected much more from the university in confronting this... I thought these things would happen less easily here... but his intention was obvious. I expected much more support.”

In addition, Willow shared her experience at her previous school, where sexual violence was prevalent. Her university campus, a religious institution affiliated with the church, had no formal policies or training to prevent sexual violence. Along with a group of students, she initiated a campaign to address and prevent sexual violence on campus. This campaign was long-lasting and reflected sustained, rather than immediate, resistance to the violence she and other students experienced.

At Work. About one-third of participants in both contexts experienced sexual violence at work. For the majority, the perpetrator was their boss or a person in a higher position. Most participants did not take any formal action and instead tried to avoid being alone with the perpetrator. The power dynamics in these situations, combined with participants' need to keep their jobs, discouraged them from reporting or confronting the behavior. This was especially true among Iranian participants in Iran, where supportive systems and policies were largely absent.

Hoorah elaborated on her experience with a man in a higher-ranking position at work who attempted to initiate a sexual relationship with her despite her reluctance. She described some examples of his actions: "I was going to his room, his office, and I was putting my hands [down], and he was putting his hand on mine, and I tried to drag my hands off of him." She explained that after she refused his advances, she faced repercussions:

It was giving me some weird advantages in front of other coworkers, and then after refusal of his offer he was humiliating me. I was trying to move to another section of the corporation, but it didn't happen because he was not allowing me, and I ended up leaving that job.

When asked whether she sought help, she stated:

I didn't share about these sexual violences, but I tried to get help and move to somewhere else, but it didn't happen and I didn't receive enough help. It was obvious that I was experiencing those things, but I didn't receive help. I sought help from the main manager of the institution and the vice president of the higher management, but they didn't care. They couldn't do anything because that person had power. They were telling me that this person is in this position because of the lobbies and the connections that he has. For a while the boss tried to have my back, but it didn't really work in the long run.

Ana, who experienced sexual violence at work in Canada from a white male supervisor, initially did not want to report the incident. However, a coworker disclosed the incident to management, and it became a formal case of sexual harassment under investigation. In the end, the perpetrator remained employed. Ana explained:

Nothing happened. Managers, because he was close friends with the top manager, closed the story. They even said, ‘No one is lying, it’s just misunderstanding.’ And the union did nothing. For them, the only important thing was not to fire him.” She expressed her shock: “So I saw this in a Canadian workplace, and it shocked me. Why even in Canada it is like this?”

Stalking and Indecent Exposure. Only Iranian participants reported experiences with stalking and indecent exposure. In cases of stalking, young women mainly sought help from family members or partners, who supported them by picking them up or accompanying them. Tina, for example, reported a stalker from her school; she informed university security, who intervened and made him stop.

Among those who encountered indecent exposure in public spaces or on public transportation, most did not seek help. They reported freezing, looking away, or, when possible, running away. Many described simply waiting until they reached their destination rather than alerting anyone.

Rape. Two participants reported they had experienced rape. One was Ana, who did not wish to provide details. She only mentioned that the incidents were perpetrated by close family members when she was a child. And the other one was Nina, who got raped while intoxicated as a grownup on a vacation and she did not seek any immediate help and support.

Experiencing Sexual Violence as a Child. About 13 participants across both contexts reported experiencing sexual violence during childhood. The majority did not know how to respond at the

time. Some sought help from family members, but many froze, remained silent, and did not share the experience due to shame, fear, or anticipation of blame.

Ana, the only participant who reported rape by close relatives, shared that she never sought help and had told only two people in her life, her spouse and the interviewer. She explained:

No, [I did not seek help], because I thought I was guilty. I always blamed myself. In issues, the first finger I point is at myself. I didn't say, 'Certainly I didn't do wrong.' I said, 'Surely, I did wrong. Surely, I acted in ways that made him think this.' I completely put the blame on myself. That's why you are maybe the second person to know this, only my spouse and you. That's why I don't talk about it. I silence it quickly, so it doesn't rise up, so no one discusses it.

Some participants who experienced sexual violence from relatives or family members also did not disclose their experiences or seek help. Farah explained:

I did not seek help from anyone. I completely froze. I knew, it was obvious to me, that what happened was wrong. I had no doubt it was wrong, even without having received any education about it. Neither my parents nor society nor school told me that such situations could happen. The only information I ever got from my mother was very vague, basically, "men want to take advantage of you." That was it, nothing more detailed. It was as if men were some kind of enemy, strange creatures who had come just to harm us. She never gave me concrete, practical information. So I realized, for example, that if I liked a boy, or fell in love, or wanted a relationship, I couldn't tell my mother, because she would think he just wanted to exploit me. That prevented me from sharing anything with my family. I couldn't open up to my mother, and I didn't have a close relationship with my father either.

She attributed her silence to the absence of proper sexual education and lack of emotional or practical support from her family.

However, some young women did receive support when they experienced sexual violence as children at the hands of strangers. Hira, for example, recalled an incident with another child in their neighborhood; she told her parents, who intervened and supported her.

Others again did not disclose their experiences but instead attempted to avoid the location or situation in the future. Mina, an MA graduate from Tehran, described an incident in a market when she was a child:

The first time I had that experience, it was [when] I was 12. My breast was about to evolve. It was kind of a bazaar during the day, and a guy easily touched my breasts. He touched it for a second and then he left. And it was very heavy for me, and I didn't even share it with my mom, and I was just telling her that I don't like that bazaar because it smells like chicken.

She added: "It also happened a lot in subway, in buses, but unfortunately my response is just being freeze."

In most cases, participants like Mina described freezing during the incident, especially when they were younger. Some attempted to escape or run away when possible.

In some cases, participants mentioned that they were unaware how to respond to the situation and they only tried to escape it. For example, Homa said: "I didn't know what the right reaction was. Usually, my reaction was to feel unsafe and try to run away , I was lucky that I could escape." However, not everyone is lucky enough to be able to escape the situation.

Family Members. All participants who reported experiencing sexual violence from family members, five in total, were Iranian. These incidents occurred primarily during childhood, and none of the participants sought help at the time. Sima explained: "I wanted to forget it. Like I

didn't want to think about it." However, she, as well as some other participants who experienced sexual violence from family members during childhood, later shared these experiences with their therapists.

Ava, on the other hand, never shared her experience with sexual violence as a kid from a person from close family (Mahram person¹⁵) with anyone or asked for help, besides with me in the interview. She said:

No, I never shared it with anyone anywhere. I don't know I thought that if I share it with someone it's going to be some fight and some upsetness. I don't have any idea what was going to happen. And my mom was a person who could actually tell and talk to me about such a thing she never talked about this with me that it's possible that such a thing can happen for you and you can talk to me. I even had some fear from my trusted person and it was not like that I could tell that person I thought that they might become angry or upset. I was very unaware about that.

Intimate Partner Violence: Among 31 participants, more than half (16 participants, 8 from uOttawa and 8 from uTehran) reported experiencing sexual intimate partner violence (IPV) at some point in their lives. These experiences included physical violence, mental manipulation, sexual coercion, sexual assault, and psychological abuse.

For Nina, a Canadian participant from Ottawa, the majority of sexual violence she experienced was perpetrated by her partners. She said: "Most of it did happen with either a partner or somebody who I was regularly seeing. Or happened like in a bedroom or in a private residence kind of thing." Although Nina had experienced sexual violence in the form of unwanted

¹⁵ A close family member with whom marriage is permanently forbidden in Islam, due to blood, marriage, or breastfeeding ties

advances, coercion, and rape, she tried to “not take up space” and hesitated to acknowledge these disturbing experiences as sexual violence, so as not to overshadow those who had faced more severe experiences, such as rape. Eventually, however, she began attending therapy, like some other participants, and found it helpful. She reflected: "Talking to my therapist about it was very, very helpful. Because I think it was more like, okay, I can take this space up."

Both Nina and Alaina noted that substance use, mainly alcohol, played a role in forcing them into sexual activities with their partners. Alaina reflected on this period of her life, stating that she decided never to have sex when not in control of her own body.

Some young women did not resist sexual encounters because they feared losing their partner. Isabella described: “I think I couldn't react. I think I was afraid that if I stopped the person, this person would never want to have something with me again.” In other IPV situations, Isabella mentioned that she did not get help because she was unaware that the situation was SV and also felt embarrassed. She said: “ I think I did not see them as violence I think I was embarrassed. I think I was like also like, oh my god, how I let this happen. How I let this happen.” Other participants complied with sexual acts to avoid conflict or maintain peace in the relationship. Susie explained:

I was not listened to when I didn't want to have a sexual relationship, and I was bullied for that. So because I was bullied, and because I felt bad, I just gave up on the control I had over my body, and sometimes I would just say yes, for the sake of getting some peace in previous relationships.

Several participants reported that their partners manipulated them by exploiting personal vulnerabilities and forcing them into sexual acts against their will. Ramina, who was in a long-distance relationship, explained:

With a guy I had a long-distance relationship with, it could be called violence because he used methods like raising his voice, or I think he knew some of my weaknesses and used them. He made me do things he wanted. I really felt the violence, and it affected my anxiety.

Some young women were coerced into sexual activities after initially resisting, while others felt obligated to perform sexually for their male partners out of a sense of duty.

Nina reflected on her experiences:

My partner at the time was really abusive. There were multiple times that I would consider assault with him because he wasn't listening to me and what I wanted in that moment, but we were dating, so at the time I didn't realize it was assault.

Some participants from uOttawa shared their experiences with their friends and in some cases, they received support. But for some Iranian participants, seeking help was hindered by the belief that couple-related problems should remain private. Fatima explained: "I felt that it's kind of a very private issue; it's between us." Bahareh, an Iranian PhD student at Ottawa, noted that she complied with certain sexual acts in her relationship with her ex-husband because she "didn't want to lose the relationship, or because of social norms, or because I thought until a certain age I had to comply, like the concept of *tamkin*¹⁶ in Islam, being at the service of my sexual partner no matter what." This highlights how certain interpretations of religious notions can disregard female autonomy and position serving male sexual pleasure as an obligatory duty.

¹⁶ The wife's duty to be available for her husband's sexual rights within the marriage

Bahareh continued:

In that relationship with my ex-husband, which started at a young age, I experienced those kinds of subtle violences. Sometimes, for example, when the place wasn't suitable for sex, or I thought it wasn't safe, but my ex-partner insisted it was fine, I went along but didn't feel secure.

Many participants reported that their experiences of sexual violence occurred when they were younger and less aware of sexual violence or their rights within a relationship. As they matured, they became more vocal and able to recognize these incidents as sexual violence. Bahareh reflected on this process:

The manipulation by your partner and the power hierarchy makes you lose your decision-making power. You surrender to that man who's older, in a patriarchal society. It's like you become part of the story, part of the game. This is what you signed up for. I didn't think I had the right to decide. I didn't take it seriously enough. I didn't talk to anyone about it, not to him, not to a therapist. But over time, as my sexual agency has grown, now I can name it. I can say, yes, that was violence. Not just violence, it was a violation of my boundaries and disrespect toward me as a participant in that sexual act, since it was outside my consent.

Some participants noted that sexual violence did not always occur during sexual acts per se, but rather in situations where their partners objectified them, pressured them to be more feminine or sexual, or were sexually inattentive when the women refused certain acts. Zahra, for example, described her relationship with her husband: "It's not that he forces me to do those things, but you see that if you don't do that, the relationship doesn't go well or doesn't continue at all."

For many young women who faced IPV, sexual relationships felt manipulative and controlling rather than mutually participatory. Some changed the structure of their relationships or ended

them after experiencing violence, although for some married participants, it took longer to leave abusive situations, if at all. But in case of staying in the relationship they were still negotiating for their equal rights and trying to employ ways and systems to avoid SV, as Zahra mentioned in her relationship. Table 7 below presents a summary of responses from participants who experienced SV.

Table 7
Summary of responses by participants encountering SV

Freeze or nothing	Physical sexual harassment, lack of unawareness of what SV is
Escape	If possible, depending on the context, using strategies developed to fool perpetrators
Ignore	In case of verbal sexual harassment or flashing (indecent exposure)
Resist and surround	Work as a process for some, but in case of possibility of danger due to power imbalances and IPV young women might surround.
Resist	If possible, by attacking and shouting back, long lasting resistance: starting a campaign against SV on campus
Block and report	Online SV
Getting help	From partner, therapists, family members, friends, institutions (work, school)
Not getting help	Feeling of shame and guilt self-blame, culture of victim blame, feeling vulnerable, intersectional aspect (immigrant), seeing the issue as a couple private matter, unawareness of SV, want to forget, systematic inattention and feeling helpless, fast encounter in street

c) *Did You Get Enough Support If You Asked?*

While many young women decide not to ask for help due to the reasons mentioned in the previous section, some did seek assistance from various sources, either immediately during the incident or afterward. However, their experiences with receiving sufficient help vary widely depending on several factors.

Family and Partners. In cases of encountering SV, mainly from strangers in public spaces, especially in the Middle East, young women sometimes sought help from their families, particularly from their parents when they were younger. Seven young women who reported asking for help from their parents explained that they received some support, either by having their parents intervene and make the perpetrator leave, or, when shared afterward, by being offered support such as being picked up or supervised when in public.

For example, Raheleh said that when she was a child and a man approached her in their vacant alley while she was playing alone, she escaped and told her family:

They comforted me a lot; it was healing. They consoled me, and after that I didn't go out to play in the alley anymore. Or if I went, it was always with my mom or my brother, someone supervising me.

Similarly, when Tina faced street harassment from a stranger, she asked her mother for help:

I told my mom. She said, 'Let's handle it ourselves. Don't tell your father.' She said if we told him, he'd go after the guy and it'd cause trouble. Later, we told him, and he said, 'Why didn't you tell me right away?'

This example shows how some traditional assumptions, such as stereotypes around men's violence, can keep men out of conversations about SV, leaving women responsible for handling

the issue without full protection from all family members. Gendered norms and taboos around sexuality and SV can prevent young women from relying on male figures in their families, potentially increasing their vulnerability.

Some young women also sought help from their partners. Nina, for instance, explained that after learning to be more open about her feelings, she shared some of her SV-related experiences with a partner who “was giving her space.” She said:

The fact that he had all that background knowledge made him more emotionally aware of how I might be during a sexual encounter, and that’s why he was able to call me out when I was dissociating that one time. I found that very helpful.

Other participants reported receiving support from partners when encountering street SV or stalking. For example, when Raheleh experienced an incident at the University of Ottawa, she sought help from her partner, who supported her and helped her file a complaint against the perpetrator:

I received enough support, honestly, support was the best medicine. It helped me get out of that space. I described the environment to him, he understood, and he suggested things like therapy together.

However, some participants said they never sought help from partners in cases of stalking, street harassment, or indecent exposure because they found it difficult to share such experiences.

Participants in both contexts also mentioned sharing SV experiences with sisters, dates, or partners, and sometimes receiving emotional support. This included participants like Mari, Bahareh, and Layla from uOttawa, and Raheleh and Haleh from uTehran.

Friends. In cases of harassment while partying or encountering violence from a date or partner, some uOttawa participants sought help from friends. Some received adequate support, but others said they did not receive proper support due to differences in fundamental values.

For example, Nina said:

I told my girlfriends about it at the time, but they were just like ‘boys will be boys.’ This was before #MeToo. It felt like two different worlds... That’s why I always feel like, when people say ‘there’s no hope,’ I’m like, do you not see how much has changed?

Similar experiences were shared by Mari, who said that some of her friends considered her “too feminist,” which worked against her when she experienced violence:

They think I’m too sensitive, that I’m exaggerating. I was at a bar and a guy wouldn’t stop touching me. I went to security, and they said, ‘Well, you’re at a bar dancing, obviously there’s going to be some touching.’ And my friends agreed. They said, ‘Well, you’re dancing, some guy’s going to grab your ass.’ No. So their ‘boys will be boys’ attitude made me feel like I was the problem.

These examples show how rape culture and the normalization of SV persist in some settings, often reinforced by the notion that “boys will be boys,” which can invalidate young women’s experiences and make them feel overly sensitive.

Some participants said that when they turned to friends, the responses were not supportive because the friends pushed them toward specific actions rather than centering the survivor’s needs. Both Ramina and Bahareh, Iranian students at uOttawa, experienced this.

Bahareh explained:

One problem is that the people around me are very logical. They don't know empathy, and their anger is often bigger than mine. When I talk about these issues, they react angrily and don't let my emotions, as the person who experienced it, be the dominant ones. My emotions have been shut down by their logic.

Ana also shared an incident where a man from the Iranian community verbally assaulted her and used coercion techniques when she had just moved to Ottawa. After she managed to make him leave, she told some female friends:

They said, 'You should report it, you can complain.' But I didn't want to enter that. I was new, didn't know the law, didn't know who was right. I had no evidence. They said, 'You don't need evidence, your word is enough.' But their pushing felt too much, not supportive.

These examples show how support that is not survivor-centered, pressuring rather than empowering, can make young women feel unsupported.

In the uTehran context, some participants shared experiences of violence from university professors with trusted friends. Mina explained: "I needed emotional support, sharing with someone, because the whole incident felt too big to carry alone. My friend provided enough emotional support."

However, others were more selective. When Zohreh faced SV from a professor at uTehran, she said she only told a friend outside the school community because she did not want the incident to become a topic of gossip within the institution.

Therapists or Sexologists. Some participants reported seeking help from therapists, and a few, such as Nina (uOttawa) and Zahra (uTehran), said they received adequate support. However, others found therapy unhelpful due to judgmental or prescriptive responses.

Bahareh explained:

I need to self-censor sometimes and it disarms me, even with my therapist. You want to talk about the pain and the harm, and everyone says, ‘The solution is clear: break up.’ No one asks, ‘How do you feel right now? What are you getting from this relationship that makes you stay?’

Hoorah also said therapy was not helpful when dealing with issues with her ex-husband: I did not receive enough help. I went to therapy for two years. Going alone when you have couple problems is not really helpful.

Support from Institutions. Some participants in both contexts sought help from institutional authorities at work or school, but often found the support inadequate. As discussed earlier with the cases of Ramina and Raheleh in uOttawa and Tina at uTehran, the systems were not survivor centered.

Tina explained that while school security intervened to stop the stalker, they also attempted to extract information from her:

The security officer said, ‘You’re such a good girl, even though you show some of your hair and wear short coats.’ She asked me to report if classmates misbehaved. I thought: you helped me a little, but now you want something in return. I refused.

Many young Iranian women reported that if they faced SV from officials or people in power, they would not seek help because they believed the system would act against them and potentially harm them further. Even when Hoorah tried to transfer away from an abusive boss, she could not receive institutional support:

I tried to get help and move somewhere else, but it didn't happen. I didn't receive enough help. Everyone knew what I was experiencing, but they said they couldn't do anything because that person had power and connections.

Two participants did report positive institutional help. Siri, in Canada, sought help from flight attendants during an incident of SV on a flight and said she received enough support as they changed her seat.

Mari, a PhD graduate from uOttawa, reported a date who was sexually violent to the dating app where they met: I notified the app. They immediately acted and removed him.

People in Public. A few young women reported receiving some form of help from bystanders, for example, one participant asked an older person to accompany her when she was being stalked in a vacant alley. However, most said they did not ask for help from strangers in public, and people rarely intervened in concrete ways.

Sima, an Iranian MA graduate from uOttawa, reflected on her experience with street harassment:

I received looks and attention...I didn't feel alone. People stood there for me, didn't walk past carelessly. But no one asked, 'Are you okay? Do you need anything?' It wasn't that kind of support.

d) Sexual Violence Impact on Young Women

Sexual violence has both immediate and long-term impacts on young women. It affects them mentally and physically at the personal level, and it also has interpersonal and social consequences.

Self-blame and shame. One of the most commonly reported impacts across both contexts, with both short- and long-term effects, is the feeling of self-blame and shame. This feeling often arises when women are unable to respond during an incident of SV, particularly when they freeze.

Arezoo, a PhD student at uTehran, described her experience with indecent exposure and her inability to respond:

I just waited until we got to the station and I went away, but it was a very, very shocking experience for me. Remembering it gave me a horrible feeling, especially asking that question, why didn't I do anything? Why didn't I shout or scream? And some sort of self-blame about why I was so passive.

Mina, an MA graduate from uTehran, expressed similar feelings:

Every time incidents of touching happened, and I couldn't respond and I froze, I wanted to speak up. I had a very bad feeling afterward. I felt that I was an incapable person, an incapable girl who couldn't defend herself. I promised myself that I would respond the next time, but unfortunately, it's as if it's not really under my control, and it gives me a horrible feeling. Many times, I try to reimagine the situation in my head and try to reply and respond to that person, although I know that in real life this cannot happen.

Some young women, like Mina or Mari, reported thinking they should be more assertive in any future vulnerable situation, but practicing these imagined responses is not easy.

Self-blame is not always tied only to an inability to respond in the moment. It can also stem from a general belief that women “put themselves in a dangerous situation” and “let this happen.”

Rezvan reflected on this feeling: “I think it’s always in all women’s minds that when you get raped or assaulted, it’s your fault, or it’s your fault that you went there, and this means you wanted to have sex.”

Participants at uOttawa reported similar feelings. For example, Nina, an MA graduate, described her reaction after an incident of SV with a date: “At that moment I was like, well, it’s my fault. I was drinking. I shouldn’t have gone back with somebody, blah blah blah. I victim-blamed myself.”

Layla from uOttawa also mentioned feeling shame after being sexually assaulted, believing that she was old enough to have prevented it: “There’s a lot of guilt on my part. How am I 36, with this life, and got so naïve? I had guilt that I inflicted on myself.”

Lower self-confidence. These experiences of SV and self-blame often have long-term effects on young women’s self-confidence. Fatima described how her inability to respond affected her: “It decreases my self-confidence. I feel that I am incapable. I feel that I am a passive person who couldn’t control the situation or stop the incident, and it usually results in feeling low in my self-confidence.”

Less assertive. Some young women in both contexts, like Isabella and Ava, mentioned that encountering SV made it difficult for them to be vocal about sexual topics or to share experiences of SV. Ava noted:

Maybe my silence, not really sharing about my experiences, if something happened again to me, I couldn't talk about it or respond or break the silence. I think it's related to the sexual violence and the sexual training that I had.

For some, experiencing SV and needing support from others made them feel weak. As a result, they avoided accepting help, even when offered. Maral explained: "My ex was offering to pick me up from work, and I was accepting his offer maybe two times out of ten. I didn't want to have that face of being scared or feeling weak."

Fear of judgement. Some young women feared being judged by their community. As Bahareh said: "We can't really understand that someone who's a victim and survivor gets trapped in a loop and can't get out. And I was always very afraid of being judged by people, not so much by strangers, but by closer people."

Less safe. Young women from both contexts also reported feeling less safe and more insecure in general. Fatima, who witnessed indecent exposure and public masturbation in a street, said:

"Whenever I pass by that street, I still have that fear with me from that incident."

Losing trust and fear of men. Some participants who experienced SV in intimate relationships reported losing trust in men. Aliana said that SV affected her by creating: "The feeling that men are predators. It came later in life. I think I had more violent experiences after my divorce, and this feeling that the man's world is dangerous, something I learned after the divorce."

Tina described a similar experience: “It’s made me very distrustful. Of course, not everyone is the same, but these experiences plant a darkness in your mind, you start wondering if this person might also be abusive. It makes it hard to build intimacy.”

For some participants who had more intense experiences with SV, the result was fear of men. Ana reported: “Very much, both psychologically and physically. I have intense fear of men. I absolutely prefer not to be alone in an environment with a man. I prefer my distance with men not to be less than a certain amount.”

Farah also mentioned that SV made her distrustful and constantly cautious:

It made it hard for me to trust again. Always a fear and caution that really influenced me. It made me feel less comfortable and affected the quality of my sexual relationships, like in dating. Because I was always afraid he might push further or be violent.

More careful. Willow said she now pays more attention to warning signs in encounters with men: “I started to pay more attention to the signs that may show that they might have this sudden switch, wanting to dominate.”

Trauma. For some, like Bitu, distrust was temporary. For others, the impact was long-lasting trauma that was difficult to forget. Isabella described how trauma resurfaced even in a safe relationship: “I think it is something that stayed with me inside, a kind of trauma. Sometimes I remember these things in the middle of sex and I ask my husband to stop.”

Sexual activity interruption. For others, such as Ana, encountering SV had physiological consequences that interrupted sexual activity: “The [SV] incidents in my mind control me and stop me.”

Nina described dissociation during sex as a bodily response connected to past SV: “I actually dissociate during sex, and that’s why it hasn’t been a very pleasurable experience for me throughout most of my life, I just go away. My brain just goes away.”

She added: “Dissociation probably comes from a lot of that sexual violence and performing, and fear responses, like not making decisions I wanted to make because of past experiences.”

For the first time, it was her recent sexual partner who noticed her dissociation, which made her burst into tears because she had not realized it herself: “I think he’s the first person who noticed that and cared. When someone else noticed it, it put into perspective how much I do that.”

Relationship avoidance. For some participants, the trauma and distrust were so intense that they avoided relationships altogether. Mari explained:

I’ve felt used, so used, and when a relationship doesn’t go well, it exacerbates everything. I know that a lot of men are nice to you just because they want to get into your pants. So now any guy that’s nice to me, just fuck off. Because it’s going to hurt. I’m going to end up doing things I don’t want to do. It’s going to be painful physically and emotionally. I’m really in a phase of just fuck off everyone. I don’t want anybody touching me whatsoever.

Mina also mentioned that her encounters with SV resulted in an “unconscious feeling of challenge with intimacy.”

Helplessness. The feeling of helplessness after encountering SV can be extremely heavy. For Mina, after the WLF movement and an incident involving a professor at her university, these feelings led to suicidal thoughts. She explained that when she encountered SV in a professor’s

office, where he was sexually aroused and demanded that she reveal names of people involved in the protests, she felt:

I was really shocked. The pressure was very high, and I had the feeling that I didn't want to exist anymore. I had thoughts of suicide. I felt helpless and couldn't tell anyone. It was a very awful experience.

Proud for resistance. Willow, who eventually began resisting and speaking openly about SV in her life and on her university campus, said she felt proud when she stood up to SV and became vocal. Being part of a religious institution made this even more complicated:

There was so much shame, so many people felt so much shame, and that leads to anger, confusion, insecurity, and violence for some people. I couldn't let it be anymore. It made me an outcast, especially because at the time I was a religious studies student training to be a pastor. What I was saying went completely against the church, and it made me lose a lot of respect from professors. Which is fine, they refuse to hold men accountable, even though many of the perpetrators were in the religious studies department. They let these people have authority in churches anyway. So I lost respect for the institution. But all of that gave me the courage to continue finding my own way and forming my own beliefs about sexuality and other things.

Sexual violence resulted in all of these profound feelings and brought significant changes to young women's lives. However, to address its impact, it is equally important to understand the factors that create sexual violence and the measures that can prevent it in society.

e) What Creates and Prevents Sexual Violence?

While the impacts of sexual violence primarily shape young women's personal and social lives, it is equally important to understand, at a broader level, what creates sexual violence and what

prevents it. In this section, I examine factors identified by participants as contributing to the prevalence of sexual violence in society.

What Creates Sexual Violence?

Culture. For more than half of the participants across both contexts, patriarchal systems, along with the gender and sexual stereotypes embedded within them, were identified as major reasons for the prevalence of sexual violence. Sarah, a PhD student at uOttawa, noted that cultural norms can make SV more common: “Holding on to traditional roles... culture plays a big role here. Because culture has a way of dictating people's lifestyles, how they behave. Or how they don't.”

These gender stereotypes are deeply ingrained in families and in society, often resulting in victim-blaming. Ana, an Iranian student at uOttawa, reflected on growing up in such a context:

The social and familial culture that I grew up in always gave me this belief that men are right, women are wrong. Woman was not even a second-class citizen in the city I lived... when we heard a story that someone hit a woman, even the women who listened to the story... they said: what did you do? What did you say that he did this? Or: what were you wearing, that he harassed you? Always you are guilty... This sentence was always: I am guilty, not the sick people around me.

Zohreh provided an example from her family, showing how secrecy around women's bodies contributes to silence and prevents girls from seeking help:

My mom... always when we wash clothing, we put the one female underwear hidden under some other clothing, but male underwear is not really a big deal... all of these ‘shush don't talk about it’ have influence on not really sharing and seeking help.

In cultures where sex is taboo for girls, being sexually active or expressive can make young women targets of SV. Isabella reflected on a dating experience:

He was thinking that I was like a very open person, that I could have sex with everybody only because I kiss boys and girls. He tried to do things with me despite my disagreement, saying that he heard I liked girls too. I was like, these things are not related. And then after that, we broke up because I said, I can't stay with you anymore.

Similarly, divorced women are often sexualized or viewed as “available,” putting them at risk.

Aliana shared her experience:

Here if you wear a ring you are kind of protected from harassment. Men respect other men. They don't respect you. They respect your husband. And if you don't have a husband? You are available... After I took off my ring, the way that people used to see me changed.

Hoorah described similar experiences, noting that these stereotypes intensify in religious contexts: “When you get divorced... I don't really tell usually that I'm divorced, especially in religious settings because usually most religious men are perverted... they think about you in bad ways.”

Participants also emphasized how global media, pornography, and pop culture reinforce the objectification of women. Mari, a PhD graduate from uOttawa, explained: “Many people rely on terrible pornography... romantic comedies, video games... the women on there are objectified. They're killed. They're raped.”

Maral, an MA graduate from uTehran, highlighted how gender segregation and lack of sex education further push youth toward violent and unreliable sources of sexual knowledge, such as pornography.

Religion. Participants who grew up in religious countries or communities identified religion, especially its misinterpretation, as a contributing factor. Sarah, a religious participant from uOttawa, described how misinterpreted religious laws can create impunity:

Religious communities can also play a big role... misinterpretation... causes people to do things... and the religious community... helps create that cultural impunity within that group.

Willow, who grew up in a religious community, described how impunity and protection of perpetrators led her to reject her religious institution:

The men who were doing the sexual violence were from the religious studies department... the professors... let these people have authority in churches anyways... Instead, she [the victim] was sent away.

She added that instead of teaching consent, the community: “Doubled down. Blamed women, blamed Eve, blamed lust.”

Willow also emphasized that queer students experienced even greater harm due to lack of acceptance and safe spaces.

Bitra, an MA graduate from Iran, noted that Islamic legal frameworks shape SV: “As long as it fits within the Islamic framework... if it’s outside the marriage framework, I don’t think there’s much legal protection, unless it’s a fully reported rape.”

Lack of Supportive Policy and Community. Many participants linked patriarchal culture and weak legal or policy structures to high levels of SV. Raheleh, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, explained: “In our patriarchal system, women remain silent... in such a country where the law doesn’t stand up for them, perpetrators feel freer and freer to commit assault.”

Rozita similarly noted that while laws appear improved, in practice women are still blamed.

Participants across contexts also pointed to perpetrators’ sense of safety. Sima, an MA graduate from uOttawa, said: “The person who commits sexual violence... feels safe that they can do it... Even here, I don’t think police follows up that much... addressing SV is not a big priority.”

In Iran, the criminalization of sexual activity outside marriage was described as violent and retraumatizing. Arezoo shared a painful experience seeking medical help along with her partner:

we decided to go to a doctor together it was a situation that I thought that I don't know what to do and I need to see a doctor and we did go to different places but we couldn't see anyone we ended up going to probably hospital and I gave out fake name and I told them that I am bleeding. The person then the doctor was wearing gloves, and I told them that I had sex with my fiancé but I was virgin. But all of a sudden that woman started screaming and shouting that you did wrong why didn't you tell us that you were virgin. That was one of the things that I think I would never forget. She was asking for my ID I remember that I just ran away I wore my clothing and ran away. This painful situation that you need to bear up these pressures even socially to be able to live your personal life the way that you want; it was an experience that a lot of my friends had.

Rezvan described how an unsupportive system and community make her feel unsafe: “It makes me more cautious... I trust people rarely... Even good men if they needed, they become accomplice with regulations.”

Participants also highlighted how power imbalances create impunity, whether through university professors in Iran or religious leaders in Willow's community.

Hira emphasized financial inequality as a form of power imbalance: "When you're poor... you have more pressure... When you're rich... you have more power... Honor crimes are mainly happening with middle class or poor families, but not with rich families." Bahareh added that becoming financially independent helped her resist unwanted sexual activity.

Lack of Sex Education. About one-third of participants from both contexts identified lack of sexual education and awareness as key causes of SV. Many young people do not know what constitutes boundaries, consent, or their sexual rights.

Maral explained how gender segregation in Iran and lack of sex education push youth toward unreliable sources: "We didn't learn things from anywhere... we shared our own experiences with shame... started seeing invalid and non-reliable sources."

Bahareh described that instead of education, girls received fear-based warnings: "They didn't take concrete action... They taught us, 'This exists, now you must learn how to protect yourself.'"

Susie noted similar gaps even in more liberal contexts: "I was not able to recognize abuse... I guess this is related to the environments that I tried to build myself into as an adult."

Participants also noted that lack of communication and sexual dissatisfaction can escalate interpersonal tensions that sometimes contribute to sexually violent behaviors.

f) *What Prevents Sexual Violence?*

Participants in this study identified several key practices and conditions that can help prevent sexual violence in societies.

Cultural Change. Several participants from both contexts emphasized that cultural transformation is central to preventing sexual violence. Many highlighted the influence of feminist movements, such as #MeToo in Canada and *Woman, Life, Freedom* in Iran, in creating social and cultural shifts that reduce the prevalence of SV.

Nina, a student at uOttawa, described the positive impact of #MeToo on public discourse:

The conversations around rape and assault and how open we are with each other about it... the conversation [has] completely shifted around rape and sexual assault in Canada specifically since #MeToo... people aren't afraid to say the word rape anymore... It's so much more out in the open.

She added that the movement also changed her personal understanding of SV: "The post #MeToo era... I have a different way of framing those things."

Ava, a PhD student from uTehran, described how post-#MeToo activism made conversations about SV more visible:

These topics of sexual violence became bold, both in homes and also on social media... psychologists, therapists, and even lawyers... announced that they are ready to help... I haven't seen in Iran such a time where this topic became bold and widely discussed.

Tina reflected on the impact of the *Woman, Life, Freedom* movement on her sense of agency and resistance: "After the *Woman, Life, Freedom* protests, I feel braver... I've stopped staying

silent... I try to use my courage... And I feel like since that movement, this attitude has grown a lot around #MeToo.”

Arezoo and Homa both observed decreases in street harassment in Iran following the WLF movement. Arezoo explained: “Street harassment decreased... women have changed a lot drastically... they increased the cost of street harassment... society has changed, people have changed, and the relationship between the two sexes has changed too.”

The shift brought by WLF, according to participants, transformed not only women’s behaviors but broader social relations.

Sexual Education and Awareness. Young women across both contexts emphasized the importance of education and awareness for preventing SV. They highlighted the role of social media as a learning space.

Rozita shared: “Following feminist pages on social media helped me understand healthy relationships, and my fear decreased.”

Mina echoed this, noting the value of online educational spaces and peer conversations: “Social media can give out good information... and I really enjoy talking to people about different topics... nothing can be more [valuable than] the lived experiences of people.”

Age and Experience. Several participants described how gaining life experience helped them prevent or effectively respond to SV. Increased confidence, stronger boundaries, and reduced fear of judgment were common themes. Farah, a PhD student from uOttawa, observed:

Through experiences... we develop confidence and awareness... we face less sexual harassment... avoid uncomfortable situations... and can focus more on

sexual pleasure and talk about it... This being less afraid of judgment gives a kind of freedom that comes with time for women.

Ava, a PhD student from uTehran, similarly noted: “In the last 1–2 years if someone wants to do something, I’ll definitely respond very strictly, harshly, and maybe loudly.”

Susie, a PhD student from uOttawa, reflected on how confidence increased her ability to assert boundaries: “When you start feeling powerful enough to say no... you yourself are also a good support, because you’re able to finally own the fact that you are able to say no.”

Nina emphasized how learning to love her body supported boundary-setting: “Not loving my body led to me not being able to vouch for it... When you love your body, you’re more likely to stand up for it and make boundaries.”

Maral, an MA graduate from uTehran, discussed applying feminist knowledge to resist patriarchal norms in sexual relationships: “I actually tried... to object to the patriarchal norm in my head... all of the education that I had... the concept of equality... if there’s going to be a sexual relationship both parties need to enjoy it equally.”

Feminist Circles and Support Networks. Some participants described feminist circles as crucial protective spaces. Arezoo, a PhD student from uTehran, emphasized: “I am connected with a group of feminist activist academics... we think about these topics and try to solve [them]... if something happens at school or work... we share and try to find a solution.”

These networks provided emotional support, practical strategies, and collective resistance to power abuses.

g) State-Level Policies Against SV

The existence of state-level policies against sexual violence was unclear to the majority of participants in both contexts. However, most Iranian participants expressed a strong sense of distrust toward the state and its ability, or willingness, to implement policies to prevent SV. Only two participants said they did not know about existing policies without assuming that they were absent or ineffective.

For example, Bahareh mentioned: “I don’t know, but I doubt it. And even if there are laws, they’re not enforced. There are no regulatory bodies in Iran to ensure good enforcement or consequences.”

Some Iranian participants viewed the state itself as a source of violence. In response to the question about whether policies to prevent SV exist in Iran, Hoorah stated: “I don’t know... I don’t think so. I think they are symbols of sexual violence themselves.”

Rezvan echoed this sentiment: “There are some regulations, but they're just formality because police are intruders and harassers themselves.”

Tina also highlighted the state’s incompetence in supporting survivors: “Maybe there are, but they’re not discussed... you’re told to protect yourself with your clothing... and even if you want to speak up, the laws aren’t strong enough.”

Several women also pointed out that Iranian law does not offer meaningful protection to unmarried women unless they can prove a rape case.

Iran's Policies as Non-Survivor-Centered. Participants, mostly from Iran, emphasized that state policies are not survivor-centered in either context, but especially in Iran. Maral explained the legal impossibility of reporting rape:

If you go and say that I've been raped, they ask you to bring 4 witnesses... It's totally obvious that there are no policies...up to the point that if I get raped and I hurt the rapist, I become the guilty person...It's obvious that rapists have high security in Iran.

Arezoo described how difficult it is to prove an SV case: "The proof of it is very hard... almost impossible. No, I don't think there are any supportive policies."

Ana also noted: "If it was from first-degree family members, almost surely no... And if it was from a stranger, usually proving it is very difficult... Therefore, my belief is that it doesn't exist."

Haleh added that policies fail to create even a basic sense of safety: "I don't think I'm in a country where the body of regulations and laws are there to defend me against those kinds of violence."

Overall, while many young Iranian women were unsure about the existence of policies, there was a strong collective distrust toward a system that does not provide survivor-centered protection.

As Homa said: "Policies in Iran... are usually very conservative... based on a religious and traditional perspective... I haven't seen any proactive or progressive policy. If it exists, I'm not aware of it."

Support Lines and Services. A few participants, mostly Iranian, mentioned the existence of support hotlines but expressed hesitation about the actual quality of these services. As Zahra

stated: “There are some phone numbers... but I don't know if they're really helpful... I heard that they're not really helpful.”

Canadian Context. Though a few participants including Nina and Ana expressed concerns about the limitations of Canadian policies, noting that they are not always survivor-centered, most participants from uOttawa assumed that Canada must have serious and effective policies, even though they were not entirely aware of the details. For instance, Siri said: “I'm just assuming that there are... I just don't know what they are.”

Layla similarly noted: “My first instinct is to say yes, but I wouldn't be able to give you any details.”

Nina was more critical, reflecting on the inadequacy of policies and policing practices:

We don't protect survivors... you can go and report something but unless you have semen inside of you... or a valid solid enough story... The police don't even take these reporting seriously a lot of the time... I don't know that policies and police are helpful when it comes to sexual assault.

h) School Policy Against SV

uOttawa. Regarding the existence of policies to prevent SV on university campuses, only five participants from uOttawa were aware of such policies. Their awareness mainly came through a mandatory course: Hira and Farah completed it as part of their teaching assistant training. Bahareh learned about the policy through course syllabi, and Sima became aware of it through her research on sexual violence and information available on the university website.

The remaining participants from uOttawa were generally not fully aware of the policy. Some knew it existed but could not recall where they had encountered it or what it contained. For example, Ramina explained: “I know there is. But well... how I got familiar with it... I don’t know. I don’t remember, like, what the policy exactly is, I didn’t read it.”

Similarly, Susie noted: “I am aware that Ottawa has one, because it's something that we talk a lot in Canada.”

Some participants mentioned that although they believed a policy existed, they did not know where to find it. As Nina explained: “Do I think that they're advertised or accessible? No.”

Several students linked this lack of awareness to being graduate students, more disconnected from campus life, and to the university’s limited communication about policies and available resources. A few participants were aware of specific services provided by uOttawa, such as the Foot Patrol, which they found helpful. Still, four uOttawa participants stated that they had no idea whether any policy existed to prevent SV at the university.

uTehran. Among participants from uTehran, all reported being unaware of any SV-prevention policy and expressed distrust in the system’s willingness to implement such policies. Haleh stated:

I think they didn't. No there was none. Maybe they were just showing off in some ways, but you could see sexual violence specifically from some professors and the discrimination that they have against women comparing to men and the way that they were treating women definitely it was violent but there was none policies existed.

Maral echoed this sentiment:

No I don't think so I never heard of it. During the #MeToo movement I heard a lot of things about uTehran and I didn't see any preventive actions from uTehran. That's why I think that it's not really being taken seriously.

Overall, in the educational setting, young women at uTehran reported feeling vulnerable and unsupported in the face of sexual violence, with no visible policies or mechanisms in place to protect them or address their concerns.

i) School SV Prevention Policy During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Regarding policies against SV during the COVID-19 pandemic, only one student from uOttawa could vaguely recall anything related to such measures. The remaining 15 participants from uOttawa were unsure or unaware of the existence of any school-level policies aimed at preventing SV during that period. As Hira explained: “I don't know. They were sending a lot of things by emails. And there was. But I don't remember.”

Similarly, none of the participants from uTehran were aware of any SV-prevention policies implemented during the pandemic. For example, Homa noted: “My impression is that, even during Corona, there wasn't anything specific about training or policy from the university.”

This demonstrates how young women were left without institutional support during the pandemic and how universities failed to provide the necessary protection in such an unstable and stressful period. However, the pandemic did not halt the occurrence of sexual violence. In the next section, I elaborate on young women's experiences with SV during the pandemic.

j) Sexual Violence During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Sixteen participants, eight from uOttawa and eight from uTehran, reported that they did not experience sexual violence during the pandemic. However, fifteen participants (seven from Tehran and eight from uOttawa) stated that they did encounter some form of SV during COVID-19.

Raheleh from uOttawa and Homa from uTehran reported verbal sexual street harassment during the pandemic. A few participants from Tehran (four) described experiencing online sexual harassment, including feeling pressured into unwanted conversations or receiving unsolicited sexual content and messages.

Some participants experienced sexual violence from intimate partners, particularly those who already had pre-existing relationship issues. For instance, Hoorah and Bahareh described violence that was similar in nature to what they had encountered before COVID-19. Ava from Tehran also reported unpleasant sexual interactions with her partner during the pandemic but noted no significant difference from her pre-pandemic experiences.

Several uOttawa participants, Nina, Marie, Susie, and Ramina, reported experiencing violence during dates in the pandemic period. Nina reflected on the fear she felt being alone in her home with a date: “I really wanted him to leave, but I didn't say anything because I was scared.”

Participants noted that the violence they experienced on dates felt different because dating itself had become more precarious. As Marie explained: “It was different. It came on much more suddenly... I felt very insecure. There was [a] difference in the sense that in this case, I knew that it was violent.”

Susie also described the intensity of dating dynamics at that time:

He was intense. He really wanted to make out... and I think that that was one of the COVID effects, right? Like when you just spend months on lockdown, not seeing anyone. The first person that you see is just... coming off too intense.

Ana from uOttawa reported that most of the violence she experienced in Canada occurred during the pandemic. She described this period as uniquely risky, explaining: “Our choices were fewer. We could meet fewer people. Maybe that caused it [SV] more.”

While half of the participants did not face SV during the pandemic, and some who experienced SV during the pandemic they said it did not differ from their previous experiences, others reflected on how dating felt more frightening and dangerous due to heightened vulnerability and the psychological strain caused by isolation. These factors increased the need for reliable support networks during such periods. In the next section, I elaborate on whether participants had support systems and how connected they felt during the pandemic.

k) Sexual Violence Support Group

Among the 31 participants, only three reported that they did not have any support group to share issues related to sexual violence, one from uOttawa and two from uTehran. Twelve participants (five from uOttawa and seven from Tehran) mentioned that their family serves as their support group. Twenty-two participants (11 from each context) indicated that their friends were their support group. Zohreh noted that she shares issues related to sexual violence with her friends, as long as they do not involve her husband. Only four participants, three from uOttawa and one from Tehran, reported that their partner (one participant identified as lesbian) served as their support group. Some participants identified more than one source of support. Two of the

participants from uOttawa also named their therapist as part of their support group in sexual violence related issues.

Twenty-seven participants reported that they were in contact with their support group during the pandemic, and the majority noted using online platforms such as video calls, messaging apps, and other digital tools to stay in touch, unless they were living with them. Some participants mentioned that their relationships became somewhat superficial due to the online format of connection. Additionally, participants who had moved to a new city, such as Nina or Alaina in Ottawa, reported that rebuilding a support group took time and contributed to feelings of isolation, particularly during the pandemic when meeting people and forming connections was more difficult.

Participants' experiences with sexual violence and their access to support networks provide context for understanding perceptions of SV rates in society. These personal and collective experiences highlight how social, cultural, and systemic factors shape both the occurrence and visibility of sexual violence.

1) SV Rate

I asked participants whether they believe the rate of sexual violence has increased or decreased over the past few years¹⁷. Some participants said they had no idea due to the lack of accessible

¹⁷ According to Department Justice of Canada (2025), SV in Canada has risen notably in recent years. Police-reported sexual assault increased by 32% between 2017 and 2024, mirroring a broader rise in violent crime. Sexual assault remains highly gendered, with women and girls representing 89% of victims and men and boys comprising 90% of those accused, most of whom were known to the victims. Reliable data on sexual violence in Iran is limited, but available reports suggest rising severity. Between March and November 2025, 63 femicides were recorded, and in 2025 over 1,800 cases of child sexual assault were officially reported, a 25% increase from the previous year (Fararu, 2025). Actual numbers are likely far higher, and comprehensive data remain largely inaccessible.

statistics, and some believed the rate has stayed the same because they saw no significant social change that would alter its prevalence.

Fewer than one-third of participants stated that they thought the level of SV had decreased. They attributed this decline to higher awareness and increased access to sexual education, particularly through social media, as well as broader social changes resulting from movements such as *Woman, Life, Freedom*, including the noticeable decrease in street harassment in Iran. Higher awareness among younger generations was also mentioned as a contributing factor. Notably, all participants who reported a perceived decrease in SV were Iranian.

About half of participants, however, believed that SV has increased. These participants came from both contexts. The reasons they provided included the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, the rise of cyberharassment as a new form of SV, the growth of incel culture and its potential escalation into sexualized violence, an overall increase in social violence, and heightened targeting of marginalized populations such as queer and racialized people. Some participants also connected the perceived rise in SV to women's increased awareness and willingness to speak up, suggesting that while incidents may not necessarily have increased, more cases are being reported or publicly discussed due to social media and higher levels of vocality among women.

As Farah noted: "Sexual violence has always been there and will be there, as long as patriarchy exists." Table 8 provides an overview of findings related to sexual violence, support, and its impact.

Table 8*Sexual Violence Support and Impact Findings*

Support Received	Family and partners; friends (not always sufficient); therapists/sexologists; institutions (limited support; many Iranian women did not seek institutional help); people in public.
Impact on Women	Self-blame and shame; lower self-confidence; fear of judgment; feeling unsafe; loss of trust/fear of men; increased caution; trauma; interrupted sexual activity; relationship avoidance; helplessness; pride in resistance.
Causes of Sexual Violence	Patriarchal culture (majority across both contexts); religion (for those raised in religious contexts); lack of supportive policies/community (Iran: criminalization of sexual activity outside marriage intensifies the problem); lack of sexual education (~1/3 of participants).
Prevention of Sexual Violence	Cultural change; sexual education and awareness; age and experience; feminist circles and support networks.
State-Level Policies Against SV	Iran: Most participants distrust state ability to protect; policies seen as non-survivor-centered; some mention hotlines but question their quality. Canada: Most assume policies exist and are effective; a few note limitations and non-survivor-centered aspects.
School Policy Against SV	uOttawa: Only 5 participants aware of campus policies. uTehran: None aware; distrust in system's willingness to implement policies.
School SV Prevention Policy During COVID-19	uOttawa: Only one participant vaguely recalled measures; rest unaware. uTehran: None aware of any pandemic-related SV-prevention policies.
Sexual Violence During the Covid-19 Pandemic	16 participants (8 uOttawa; 8 uTehran) did not experience SV. 15 participants (8 uOttawa; 7 uTehran) experienced some form of SV, including intimate partner violence and violence during dates (from uOttawa). All noted experiences were similar to pre-pandemic.
Sexual Violence Support Group	3 participants had no support group (1 uOttawa; 2 uTehran). Family support: 12 participants (5 uOttawa; 7 uTehran). Friends as support: 22 participants (11 each context).
SV Rate	~Half believe SV has increased (both contexts).

	<p>Fewer than one-third believe SV decreased (all Iranian).</p> <p>Some unsure or think rates remained the same due to lack of statistics/social change.</p>
--	--

VI. Conclusion

The findings of this study underscore that the sexual and intimate lives of young women are shaped by a complex interplay of personal agency, cultural norms, and structural forces. Across both uOttawa and uTehran, participants navigated dating, intimacy, sexual activity, and sexual violence within contexts that simultaneously enabled and constrained their choices. While local norms, policies, and institutional frameworks produced context-specific differences, global forces, such as the internet, neoliberal capitalism, and persistent patriarchal structures, created notable similarities in experiences across these diverse settings. As a result, the two groups of students shared many common experiences. These dynamics reveal how young women continually negotiate risk, desire, and relational expectations, balancing individual preferences with broader social, cultural, and institutional pressures.

Dating. Young women’s dating experiences were influenced by multiple intersecting factors, including age, prior dating experience, stage of life, personal goals, familial responsibilities, and academic or work commitments. Dating modalities varied across generations and contexts: older participants were more critical of dating apps and tended to rely on traditional forms of dating, in part because they had limited exposure to online platforms during their earlier relationships. In contrast, younger participants were more likely to use online dating apps. In Iran, the use of dating apps remains taboo, leading many young women to rely on social media as a “third space”

as safer, less conspicuous alternatives that allow for information gathering and low-pressure interactions. Across both contexts, participants followed different dating scripts: roughly half adhered to cultural and traditional scripts, often shaped by conservative or religious backgrounds, while the other half adopted friendship-based scripts.

Key factors for a positive dating experience included communication ability, shared values, respect, trust, and a safe and comfortable dating environment. Restrictive cultural, legal, or familial norms, particularly in Iran, limited freedom and safety, while intersectional factors such as sexual orientation, language, and financial stability further shaped experiences, especially for international students. Participants emphasized that ideal dates balance meaningful conversation, emotional and intellectual connection, mutual respect, and care, with physical attraction, humor, and thoughtful gestures enhancing the experience.

Participants also described two main approaches to first-date appearance. Some prioritized authenticity and comfort, aiming to present their “real” selves, while others, including those identifying as active believers, deliberately presented themselves in a non-sexualized manner. Age and dating experience influenced preparation, with younger women paying more attention to their appearance, and older participants becoming less concerned over time.

Intimacy. Young women in both Iran and Canada engaged in diverse forms of intimate relationships, including partnerships, marriages, long-distance, and open relationships, shaped by cultural norms, personal values, and life circumstances. Across contexts, participants emphasized that ideal intimate relationships are characterized by open communication, trust, emotional vulnerability, support, and shared values, with love and emotional connection often prioritized over sexual or physical aspects. Conversely, “bad” relationships were described as those marked

by neglect, mismatched values, emotional manipulation, or unequal power dynamics, often exacerbated by inexperience or intersectional vulnerabilities such as sexual orientation. Most participants also connected sexual activity with emotional intimacy, highlighting that trust and closeness enhance sexual satisfaction, although some saw sex and intimacy as separable.

Sex, Pleasure, and Sexual Agency. For participants in this study, sex was not merely a means of procreation or physical release. Young women in both contexts conceptualized sex in three primary ways: as a holistic experience, as a recreational act, or as a means of satisfying male partners in heterosexual relationships. Their sexual experiences were shaped by a complex interplay of environmental, interpersonal, and personal factors. Environmental influences, including societal expectations, restrictive gender norms, religious and legal regulations, family pressures, media representations, inadequate sexual education, and experiences of sexual violence, could enable or constrain sexual activity, often producing guilt, anxiety, or internalized shame. Interpersonal factors, such as relationship type, communication, intimacy, trust, partner attentiveness, and sexual performance, significantly affected satisfaction, with emotional connection and mutual care central to fulfilling experiences. Personal factors, including age, experience, self-esteem, physical and mental health, body image, sexual knowledge, and internalized restrictive values, further shaped confidence, agency, and pleasure. Cultural, legal, and familial pressures layered over these dynamics, affecting sexual frequency, quality, and satisfaction.

Participants' ideals emphasized mutual pleasure, safety, emotional intimacy, and open communication, often contrasting with typical experiences that prioritized partners' needs. Foreplay, afterplay, affection, vulnerability, and playful exploration were integral, with many emphasizing women's pleasure and orgasm. Sexual pleasure held varying importance: half of

participants prioritized it as a source of energy, self-care, and well-being, while the other half emphasized emotional connection and intimacy over sexual satisfaction, shaped by age, responsibilities, trauma, or cultural norms. Situational factors, such as menstrual cycles, also influenced sexual priority. Exposure to pornography and media shaped expectations, fantasies, and behaviors, with nuanced attitudes toward ethical or mainstream content while some participants refrain watching pornography due to ethical or religious reasons. Masturbation was practiced by most participants, framed as self-exploration, empowerment, and stress relief, while non-practicing participants cited religious beliefs, social norms, or lack of time.

Sexual and pleasure education emerged as a significant theme, revealing widespread gaps in formal and familial instruction. About half reported never receiving comprehensive education, and when present, it was often biology-focused, male-centered, and devoid of pleasure-related content. Family guidance tended to prioritize protection over understanding consent, boundaries, or enjoyment. Many compensated through self-directed learning via social media, feminist networks, pornography, therapy, and academic study. Supportive friends, activism, and movements like #MeToo provided critical learning spaces, particularly for Iranian participants.

Sexual agency was consistently evident among participants, though its expression varied depending on social, cultural, and relational contexts. This study identified four main groups to capture the diverse experiences and practices of young women in relation to their sexual agency. These categories provide a framework for understanding how different factors shape autonomy, decision-making, and satisfaction in sexual experiences, and they will be discussed in greater detail in the discussion section.

Sexual Violence. Participants across both Iranian and Canadian contexts demonstrated notable ambiguity in defining sexual violence, with many normalizing certain behaviors. Iranian participants often equated sexual violence solely with rape, while several Canadian participants also lacked awareness of its broader scope. About two-thirds expressed uncertainty regarding whether harassment, stalking, indecent exposure, or intimate partner misconduct qualified as sexual violence. Some requested definitions during interviews, and others downplayed coercive or unwanted behaviors, reflecting the social acceptance or trivialization of certain forms of misconduct. Many participants only developed a fuller understanding of sexual violence later through education or exposure to feminist and social science discourses. This lack of awareness, combined with normalization of less extreme forms of sexual violence, often prevented young women from recognizing or naming their own experiences, highlighting how cultural, educational, and contextual factors shape perceptions and acceptance of sexual violence.

Nearly all participants (30 of 31) reported experiencing at least one form of sexual violence in their lives, often multiple times, across streets, schools, clubs, workplaces, and private spaces. Common forms included verbal harassment, physical harassment, online harassment, intimate partner violence (IPV), stalking, and indecent exposure. Perpetrators ranged from strangers and family members to peers, partners, coworkers, and authority figures. While Canadian participants sometimes described less severe SV as trivial, participants from more patriarchal contexts, including Iran, reported normalization and trivialization of both verbal and physical harassment. Coping strategies varied, including freezing, escaping, ignoring, resisting, seeking help, or mobilizing campaigns against harassment, depending on perceived risk, power dynamics, and available support systems.

Contextual differences were evident in both experiences and responses. Canadian participants generally described SV, especially street harassment, as less common and often responded by avoiding or ignoring perpetrators, whereas participants from Iran described incidents as routine and normalized. IPV experiences were significant across contexts, with coercion, manipulation, and control shaping sexual encounters, particularly for younger or less aware participants. Online harassment affected about one-third of participants, who usually blocked or reported perpetrators. Childhood experiences of SV were often silenced due to shame, fear, or cultural constraints, particularly among Iranian participants. Support-seeking also differed: in Iran, family, especially mothers or female relatives, was the primary support, while friends, partners, or institutional channels were less accessible or reliable. In Canada, friends were commonly sought, though therapy and institutional interventions varied in effectiveness. Across contexts, support was often partial or conditional, shaped by cultural expectations, gender norms, and social structures.

Sexual violence had profound impacts on young women, producing immediate and long-term mental, physical, interpersonal, and social consequences. Across contexts, participants reported self-blame, shame, decreased confidence, difficulty asserting boundaries, distrust toward men, trauma, and disrupted intimacy, with some avoiding relationships entirely. Extreme cases included intense psychological distress and suicidal thoughts, particularly when perpetrators held power or institutions failed to provide support. Nevertheless, some participants found empowerment and resilience by speaking out and resisting societal and institutional pressures, emphasizing the importance of addressing both individual trauma and broader systemic factors perpetuating sexual violence.

Findings indicate that sexual violence is shaped by intersecting factors, with both shared and context-specific influences across Canada and Iran. Key drivers include patriarchal culture, gender and sexual stereotypes, victim-blaming, lack of sex education, and impunity for perpetrators. In conservative or religious settings, religion, sexual taboos, and weak institutional protections intensified risks. Media, pornography, and cultural norms further reinforced harmful sexual scripts. Preventing sexual violence requires cultural change, comprehensive sexual education, awareness, and personal empowerment through life experience, confidence, and boundary-setting. Feminist movements (#MeToo in Canada, Woman, Life, Freedom in Iran) and supportive networks were critical in creating safer spaces, promoting social change, and providing emotional and practical support.

Reflecting on participants' perspectives on sexual violence prevention policies, state-level measures were largely unknown or perceived as ineffective, with Iranian participants expressing particularly strong distrust. Many Iranian women described laws as symbolic, non-survivor-centered, or even harmful, citing barriers to reporting rape, lack of enforcement, and impunity for perpetrators. Support services existed but were often unreliable. Canadian participants assumed policies existed but were generally unaware of details, with some noting limitations in survivor-centeredness and policing practices. At the university level, awareness of policies was limited. Only a few uOttawa participants knew about them, often through mandatory courses or research, while most were uninformed. Participants at uTehran reported no visible policies or protective mechanisms, expressing distrust in the institution's willingness to prevent or address sexual violence, leaving them vulnerable and unsupported.

Participants' perceptions of SV rates were mixed. Fewer than one-third, primarily Iranian, believed rates had decreased due to awareness and social movements, while about half perceived

an increase, citing pandemic-related factors, cyberharassment, and heightened social violence. Overall, participants emphasized that patriarchal structures continue to shape both the prevalence and visibility of sexual violence across contexts.

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly affected participants' experiences with dating, intimacy, sexual activity, and sexual violence in both Iran and Canada. Lockdowns and restrictions severely limited public dating opportunities, particularly for those living away from their hometowns. Online platforms, including dating apps and social media "third spaces" in Iran, became primary means of connecting. Experiences varied: some participants found virtual interactions useful and convenient, while others found them awkward or unsatisfactory. The lack of safe public spaces heightened feelings of insecurity and sometimes led to private or potentially risky encounters, particularly in restrictive contexts such as Iran. Beyond these immediate disruptions, the pandemic produced lasting changes in young women's dating practices and perceptions of safety.

The pandemic's impact on intimate relationships was mixed. For some couples, lockdowns strengthened emotional bonding and intimacy through increased time together, while for others, confinement intensified pre-existing conflicts, isolation, or relational strain. These experiences highlighted how intimate relationships are negotiated within broader structural, cultural, and situational constraints. Sexual experiences were similarly affected: a few participants reported improved intimacy due to more time with partners, but many experienced reduced sexual activities, particularly those not in relationships, in long-distance relationships, or lacking privacy. Iranian participants faced additional challenges, especially sexual minorities, due to restrictive social norms and legal constraints, while some newcomers to Canada reported heightened anxiety that affected sexual quality. Health concerns, mental health issues, and

preexisting relationship difficulties also limited sexual activity in both contexts. About half of participants reported no significant change, though some adjusted behaviors or exercised greater caution with contraception.

Support systems were critical for navigating sexual violence during the pandemic. Among 31 participants, most relied on friends or family as their primary support, with a few identifying partners or therapists. Twenty-seven participants maintained contact with support networks through online platforms, though some noted these interactions felt more superficial, and newcomers to cities experienced additional isolation. Experiences of sexual violence during the pandemic varied across contexts. Sixteen participants, eight from uOttawa and eight from uTehran, reported no SV during this period, while fifteen experienced some form of sexual violence, including verbal street harassment, online harassment, and intimate partner violence. Several Canadian participants highlighted increased risks associated with dating during lockdowns, describing encounters as more sudden, intense, or frightening due to isolation and limited social options. Iranian participants reported online harassment and challenges in intimate relationships, noting that the nature of the violence often mirrored pre-pandemic experiences. Overall, the pandemic heightened feelings of vulnerability, underscoring the importance of accessible and reliable support networks.

Reviewing the results regarding dating, sexual intimacy, and sexual violence reveals that the material conditions of young women's lives and the broader social context, including cultural, religious, and policy environments, shape their expectations, particularly regarding social support, institutional protections, and prevailing values, making them feel either more vulnerable or more secure. However, some pervasive social structures, rooted in patriarchal values, reinforced by religious norms, and intensified by neoliberal capitalist systems, continue to

influence young women's experiences with sexuality and encounters with sexual violence globally, especially in the accelerated flow of information in today's world. In the absence of comprehensive sexual and pleasure education that promotes equitable and updated values, emphasizing sexuality as a site of mutual enjoyment rather than an activity serving male pleasure, the mere existence of policies in more liberal contexts cannot fundamentally transform young women's experiences. Nevertheless, negotiation, activism, and self-education led by young women, often facilitated through new tools such as social media, continue to challenge these structures and create spaces for empowerment, awareness, and collective action.

Chapter 5 Discussion

In this study, I conducted a comparative analysis of young women's experiences of dating, intimacy, sexuality, and sexual violence across two distinct geopolitical and social contexts: Canada, characterized by relatively liberal attitudes toward sexuality, and Iran, where conservative values and theocratic state regulations seek to control sexual practices. Although the sex/gender systems in these contexts are shaped by fundamentally different ideological orientations, liberal in Canada and conservative in Iran, this analysis demonstrates that several underlying structural forces operate across both settings and significantly shape women's sexual lives.

As Rubin (1975) theorizes, sexuality is a socio-political phenomenon and a social construct produced within a specific "sex/gender system," formed through the interaction of social norms, regulatory frameworks, and capitalist relations. Despite their contrasting regulatory regimes, both Canada and Iran are embedded within neoliberal patriarchal capitalist logics that profoundly shape the organization and experience of sexuality. In both contexts, the marketization of intimacy and sexual relations structures expectations, behaviors, and vulnerabilities, albeit through different institutional arrangements.

In Iran, restrictive state regulations governing young women's sexuality intensify their vulnerability by placing them at the intersection of state surveillance, patriarchal social norms, and neoliberal economic pressures. Young women must navigate and negotiate these overlapping systems of control in order to practice their sexuality, often without institutional protection, including in cases of sexual violence (Rahbari, 2020). In Canada, by contrast, the neoliberal organization of sexual life operates primarily through discourses of self-care, responsibility, and

the individualization of risk and failure (Cheng, 2016). While formal legal protections exist, the burden of managing safety, consent, and emotional well-being is frequently placed on young women themselves, rendering them vulnerable in less visible but structurally embedded ways.

Across both contexts, women's appropriation (Guillaumin, 1996) remains a central organizing force, though it manifests differently. In Canada, appropriation occurs largely through social and cultural mechanisms within a framework that ostensibly promotes gender equality and sexual rights. In Iran, the state operates in tandem with patriarchal social structures to appropriate women's time, bodies, reproductive capacities, and sexual obligations, exerting direct control over women's physical and moral conduct. Yet, in neither context are women's experiences monolithic (S. Jackson, 2001). Diverse social values, norms, and intersectional positions, shaped by class, age, family relations, and access to resources, produce differentiated experiences of sexuality, intimacy, and violence.

For some participants in both contexts, pre-structured patriarchal norms of gender and sexuality are reconfigured to align with the "New Woman" ideal type (Hennessy, 2012), promoted through popular media, cultural industries, and consumer culture. For others, particularly at different life stages or intersectional locations, these representations are actively resisted. Many participants articulated efforts to define their own sexual subjectivities and intimate practices, rejecting the framing of sex and intimacy as "equitable commodities" within neoliberal markets (Illouz, 2021).

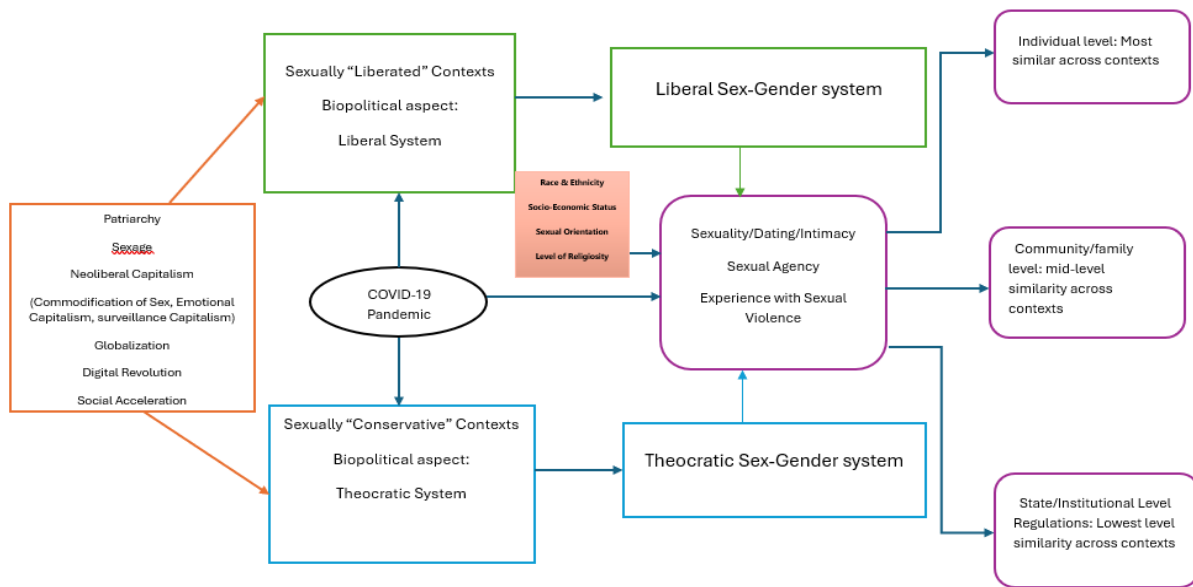
Finally, the accelerated circulation of knowledge, digital networks, and globalized cultural norms has reshaped young women's sexual experiences in both contexts. While new technologies have expanded access to information and connection, they have also intensified

competition, surveillance, and emotional labor. These transformations contribute to processes of social desynchronization (Rosa, 2013), widening the gap between young women and older generations, families, and institutions. Even in liberal democratic contexts such as Canada, policy frameworks struggle to keep pace with the rapid transformations shaping young people’s intimate lives. In authoritarian conservative contexts like Iran, state reluctance to adapt or provide protection further deepens institutional mistrust and renders existing policies ineffective from young women’s perspectives.

However, despite profound differences in the biopolitical regulation of sexuality in Canada and Iran, the similarities in young women’s lived experiences of dating, intimacy, sexuality, and sexual violence were striking¹⁸. These convergences challenge assumptions that liberal regulatory frameworks necessarily produce safer or more equitable sexual lives.

Figure 2

Theoretical Framework with Impacts Levels of Analysis



¹⁸ Tables summarizing all similarities and differences are included in Appendix B (Tables 10 and 11).

In the following section, I discuss these shared experiences in greater depth, situating them within the existing literature.

I. Similarities

Participants' demographic characteristics in both contexts were largely comparable across most categories, including age, relationship status, religiosity, and religious background (see Table 2 in the Methods Section). The results further indicate a high degree of similarity in young women's dating and sexuality-related experiences across the two contexts. Young women's experiences of sexuality and sexual violence are shaped by multiple sources of values and norms, ranging from more conservative to more liberal, as well as by the regulatory frameworks intended to prevent or protect against sexual harm. In the information era (Wolf, 2000), access to diverse and often competing perspectives on sexuality is widely available to young women in both contexts examined in this study. As a result, despite substantial differences in the legal and regulatory regimes (Richardson, 2005) governing sexuality in Canada and Iran, the findings indicate that young women's sexuality-related experiences are, in many respects, more similar than different across the two contexts.

These similarities are particularly pronounced at the individual and micro levels, where young women reflect on their personal experiences, values, norms, and perceived restrictions. At the family and community levels, similarities remain evident, especially in relation to gendered expectations, moral regulation, and intergenerational tensions and expectations, although the

degree of difference is greater than at the individual level. This pattern can be understood through processes of socially desynchronized change (Rosa et al., 2017), whereby individuals are able to adapt to shifting norms and trends more rapidly than their parents or communities, particularly those organized around predefined value systems such as religion.

At the state and institutional levels, some similarities also emerge despite divergent legal frameworks. These include limitations in institutional protection, gaps between policy and practice, and challenges in effectively addressing sexual violence. Nevertheless, differences are more pronounced at this level, shaped by varying regulations, foundational value systems, and, in the case of Iran, the persistence of an authoritarian theocratic state that actively resists change in relation to sexuality.

In the following sections, I elaborate on the similarities in young women's experiences of sexuality and sexual violence across three analytical levels: the individual level, the family and community level, and the state and institutional level.

a) Similarities at the Individual Level

The experiences of young women in a globalized, neoliberal, patriarchal capitalist world are shaped by pre-existing values that have become increasingly widespread through participation in the digital sphere, where information, practices, and discourses circulate at accelerated speeds and are often freely accessible. At the individual level, particularly in young women's interactions with intimate partners, there is a high degree of similarity across the two contexts examined in this study. Young women's experiences of dating, intimacy, sexual agency, and sexual violence manifest through three main subthemes that are shared across both contexts: (1) the pervasive influence of social and cultural norms; (2) the critical role of knowledge,

education, awareness, and experience (or lack thereof); and (3) the struggle for agency and autonomy.

The pervasive influence of social and cultural norms. Across both Iran and Canada, social and cultural norms shaping women's sexuality are structured by a capitalist neoliberal patriarchal order reproduced through religion, social institutions, and media, with the state playing a more explicit regulatory role in Iran (Aghtaie, 2011) and a formally liberatory, prevention-oriented role in Canada (Criminal Code, RSC 1985, c C-46, s 271). Despite these contextual differences, the dominance of neoliberal patriarchal capitalism produces similar sex–gender systems (Rubin, 1975) and lived experiences, as patriarchal values persist and adapt through processes of socialization within families and schools. In addition, capitalist neoliberal systems are present in both contexts, reinforcing patriarchal constraints, creating further hindrances to women's sexual liberation, and appropriating their sexuality in service of sexism (Guillaumin, 1996). These norms are inherent and ingrained in social culture globally and historically, including patriarchy. While some young women in both contexts engage in more individualized and liberalized sexual practices at the micro level, many were raised in religious and traditional environments, even when they now identify as non-believers, highlighting the enduring influence of religion and cultural norms. In Canada, although sexuality is framed through secular and rights-based discourses, patriarchal norms continue to shape women's lives via religious institutions, media, family structures, and migration histories, particularly for first- and second-generation immigrants.

The majority of young women who encountered religion and lived in a religious household, community, or country reported restrictions on their sexual practices based on religious attitudes. Conservative values toward sexuality exist in some contexts and promote a

sex-gender system (Rubin, 1975) that deems women as inferior and passive (Cameron & Curry, 2020; Comunello et al., 2021; Eaton & Rose, 2011; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010; Rose & Frieze, 1989), expected to be approached by men in dating and sexual contexts. These norms, backed by conservative and religious attitudes, maintain gender inequality by placing men in a superior position and positioning them as active initiators of dating and sexual activities.

Traditional-Cultural Scripts (Masters et al., 2013) were followed by about half of participants from both contexts, mainly among those from religious families or conservative backgrounds. These gendered expectations and stereotypes around men's initiation stem largely from social and cultural norms within traditional families, which dictate that "men are always pursuing women," as Ramina, an Iranian PhD student at uOttawa, noted. This traditional script prescribes a gender stereotype of a "good girl," defining a good woman as passive (Eaton & Rose, 2011, p.846). This is in accordance with literature showing that gendered stereotypes in dating scripts, beliefs, and behaviors, introducing women as passive recipients versus men as powerholders, persist in the dating scenes and beliefs of young adults (Cameron & Curry, 2020; Comunello et al., 2021; Eaton & Rose, 2011; Emmers-Sommer et al., 2010; Rose & Frieze, 1989).

While the majority of participants in both contexts grew up in traditional and/or religious families and traditional geopolitical settings, roughly half in each context followed friendship scripts in their dating practices (Eaton & Rose, 2011). Their experiences reflect a form of subjectivity in which emotions are increasingly ontologized and rationalized. Participants' descriptions of enacting a friendship script align with Illouz (2021), where emotions are treated as identifiable and manageable aspects of the self that can be analyzed, evaluated, and regulated rather than simply experienced. Within this framework, communicative rationality becomes the

primary mode of relating, where intimacy is organized through explicit communication, justification, and the ongoing negotiation of needs, boundaries, and expectations. Consequently, friendship and romantic relationships converge in their relational logic, as individuals deliberately articulate emotional and sexual needs, assess reciprocity, and make decisions about continuation or withdrawal based on perceived mutual recognition, respect, and alignment. This finding suggests that living under religious regulation and patriarchal norms does not automatically produce a subordinated generation of women. Instead, some young women actively negotiate their sexual agency by adopting more egalitarian approaches to dating, particularly those who connect through online platforms and other “third spaces,” consistent with research showing that digital environments can facilitate more equal dating practices (Comunello et al., 2021). In online dating contexts, women often initiate contact to save time, assess compatibility, and evaluate sincerity. While access to liberatory ideas about dating and sexuality was more readily available to Canadian participants from religious or traditional families, the digital age has also expanded exposure to such ideas for participants in Tehran. For roughly half of the Tehran participants, engagement with online platforms enabled greater negotiation of equality and control in their dating lives through the adoption of friendship scripts. However, consistent with Cacioppo et al. (2013) and my findings, about half of the participants did not use online platforms and instead met potential partners through school, work, or social gatherings.

Standards for first-date appearance varied among participants. About half emphasized physical attractiveness in heterosexual dating, reflecting the market logic of dating in which women’s desirability, particularly in relation to men, is highly valued (Abramova et al., 2016), while the other half prioritized authenticity over sexualized self-presentation. Some religious participants (Christian and Muslim) intentionally avoided sexualized appearances, emphasizing

personality and character and resisting what they perceived as an overly sexualized dating culture, often drawing on values that situate sexuality-related attractiveness as appropriate primarily within marriage. Young women actively negotiate between conformity to dating market norms (Illouz, 2021) and autonomy within unequal gendered structures. Participants engaged critically with these dynamics, illustrating what Illouz (2021) identifies as the paradox of freedom, where expanded choice produces not liberation but ambivalence, uncertainty, and negative sociality.

Literature shows that young women are oriented toward forming romantic relationships, whereas men are more often motivated by sexual experiences without further attachment (Weitbrecht & Whitton, 2020). Findings in this study align with this literature: the majority of women reported a close relationship between sexual experiences and intimacy, with only six participants (four from uOttawa, two Canadian, two Iranian, and two from uTehran) not experiencing a strong connection. For many participants in both contexts, intimacy was a central factor in their intimate relationships and sexual encounters. According to literature, men often prioritize physical attractiveness when choosing a partner, whereas women, being more selective, emphasize socio-economic attributes or intelligence (Abramova et al., 2016; Blair & Madigan, 2016). In ideal intimate relationships, love and feeling were central, emerging after mutual interaction, respect, and non-judgment.

Many participants reported early intimate experiences in which sex was primarily oriented toward male satisfaction, reflecting the persistence of traditional gender norms that appropriate women's bodies and time (Guillaumin, 1996). Patriarchal values producing various forms of *sexage*, embedded in capitalist systems and reproduced through media, family,

education, and religion in both Canada and Iran, shaped participants' beliefs at some point in their lives.

When describing negative intimate relationships, participants highlighted partners' expectations that they assume traditional caregiving roles, prioritize male needs, or tolerate coercion (Rodríguez-García-de-Cortáza et al., 2025). Most of these experiences occurred earlier in life, when participants had less awareness of gendered power dynamics. Over time, exposure to new ideas, education, and relational experience enabled many to question these norms and develop strategies to negotiate their needs and resist gender stereotypes.

As patriarchal capitalism hijacked women's liberation movements in the West, it reshaped cultural production and transformed women's sexuality, from an abstinence-based model in which women's bodies were reserved for private appropriation to a regime of public sexual availability. This shift is evident in the oversexualization of women and the production of new forms of appropriation that impose sexual obligation through pornography (Corsianos, 2007) and normalize misogynistic cultural products (Adams, 2015), particularly in the era of widespread digital media access. Participants similarly described the negative influence of media in reproducing patriarchal values and circulating sexual clichés and scripted patterns through pornography, films, podcasts, and images. These media forms define desirability in ways that appropriate women's physicality and commodify their pleasure within the capitalist sexual market.

Although access to social media has created new and innovative channels for women to educate themselves about sexuality, pleasure, and agency, some young women remain cautious of the prescriptive postfeminist practices these platforms often promote. They recognize how

such norms can reinforce performative expectations surrounding relationships, dating, and sexual encounters. Moreover, they are increasingly aware of the limitations of self-empowerment rhetoric on social media (Gill, 2019), as well as the tendency of some platforms to overlook the structural nature of issues related to women's sexuality. This aligns with Illouz (2017), who notes that sexual consumption and intimacy in the mass communication and internet era are framed by the ways capitalist markets commodify emotions, creating "cultural templates for selfhood" through patterns of self-liberation. Participants highlighted social pressures in both contexts: in the more "liberated" context of Canada, women were pressured toward sexual activity following the pattern of self-liberation (Illouz, 2017); in Iran, women were pressured toward abstinence due to cultural and religious expectations. Similarly, in Brazil, where sexuality is less regulated by the state but cultural double standards prevail, sexually active young women reported high levels of hostility, often being labeled "whore" or "saint." This dynamic is not limited to conservative contexts: in North America, Bay-Cheng (2015) showed that young women are forced to "tiptoe" along the agency line to avoid stereotypes of "slut" or "virgin." These stigmas conflict with neoliberal notions of agency and constrain women's sexual freedom, even in sexually liberated contexts.

While one religious participant described religion as liberatory and protective, most religious participants, both Muslim and Christian, experienced religious prescriptions as constraining and navigated their sexual practices accordingly, consistent with existing literature (Irby, 2014; Wilcox, 2006). Participants employed varied strategies in response: some negotiated their practices within religious rules (e.g., Siri, uOttawa; Zohreh, uTehran), others questioned religious norms (Layla, uOttawa), and some ultimately distanced themselves from or left their

faith due to conflicts with religious teachings or negative experiences with religious communities or partners (Willow, uOttawa; Ava, uTehran).

Patriarchal culture, often intensified by religious norms, stigmatizes sexual activity and renders discussions of sexual violence taboo (Stepp, 2016). Cultural, familial, and religious influences also contribute to victim-blaming (Bhuptani & Messman-Moore, 2019; Catlin et al., 2021), which in both contexts constrained young women's ability to respond to sexual violence or seek support. Many participants reported feelings of shame, guilt, and self-blame, viewing sexual violence as a private matter. Some, having internalized beliefs that sex primarily serves male partners, did not initially recognize coerced sexual encounters as violence.

In Iran, marital rape is not legally recognized, and women are expected to submit fully within marriage; similar expectations were reported by Canadian participants from religious or conservative backgrounds. The collective appropriation of women (Juteau & Laurin, 1989) and the normalization of violence against women are reinforced through legal and institutional controls over women's bodies.

Mainstream media representations, embodied practices, gendered norms of sexual agency, sexual harassment, and rape reflect shared cultural scripts rooted in both patriarchal and neoliberal discourses. As Downey et al. (2023) argue, these images, practices, and norms constitute forms of sexualized violence that reinforce existing gender and class hierarchies. Together, neoliberal and religious discourses (Hamid, 2021; Ross, 2022) shift responsibility for sexual safety onto women, reaffirming patriarchal assumptions that sex is for men and that women who assert sexual agency must tolerate violence and self-manage risk, an expectation echoed in participants' accounts (e.g., Rezvan, uTehran; Nina, uOttawa).

However, despite these constraints, in both contexts, feminist activism and informal education provided avenues through which women, individually and collectively, navigated and promoted their agency in relation to their sexual practices. Young women were influenced by broader social movements such as #MeToo and women's life-freedom movements. These movements provided new frameworks for understanding sex and women's bodies, challenged gendered stereotypes, shifted the responsibility for sexual violence away from women, and contested patriarchal appropriation of women's sexuality in both conservative and liberal contexts. Broader feminist discussions, educational tools, and literature further challenged traditional views and norms around sexuality, discussed in the following section on *The Critical Role of Knowledge, Education, Awareness, and Experience*.

The Critical Role of Knowledge, Education, Awareness, and Experience. The literature consistently demonstrates that comprehensive sexuality education improves adolescent health outcomes (Atkins and Bradford, 2021; van Ditzhuijzen and Overeem, 2025; Zori et al., 2023). However, approximately half of the respondents in this study across both contexts reported that they did not receive comprehensive sexual education from either their families or educational institutions. Moreover, access to pleasure-inclusive education, shown to be associated with greater sexual agency and improved sexual health (van Ditzhuijzen & Overeem, 2025; Mosavi et al., 2014), was largely absent for almost all participants in both contexts. This absence further undermines women's sexual agency and places their sexual practices at greater risk.

While sexual liberation movements in Western contexts reshaped public discourse around sexuality, participants in this study reported that sex education centered on women's sexual needs and recognition of women as autonomous sexual agents remains largely absent, including in Canada. In more conservative contexts such as Iran, sex education is either nonexistent or

narrowly confined to sexual health. The broader absence of comprehensive sex education, combined with non-comprehensive approaches that medicalize sexuality and promote abstinence, meant that young women were primarily targeted by forms of sex education that politicized their bodies in service of patriarchal capitalist logics, emphasizing bodily control for “healthy” reproduction (Rose, 2005; Boryczka, 2009) or the avoidance of sexual practices framed as protection from men’s desire.

In Canada, broader ideological struggles were evident in the type of sex education participants received, which often occurred within families and was shaped by religious attitudes and abstinence-only frameworks influenced by the Religious Right, promoting heterosexual marriage and traditional family structures (Rose, 2005; Gallagher, 1999). In Iran, where the state explicitly legitimizes abstinence before marriage, sexual education is not provided at the school level, and limited university-based instruction focuses primarily on sexual health. Opposition to comprehensive sexuality education in both contexts reflects broader efforts to maintain patriarchal control and resist gender equality (Bendroth, 1993; Hawley, 1994; Marty & Appleby, 1993).

Some Iranian participants, particularly those studying at the University of Tehran, reflected on gendered and patriarchal forms of sexual education encountered during university courses. They described curricula that centered male pleasure and normalized coercion, with teachings framing women as responsible for male infidelity or dissatisfaction, thereby undermining women’s sexual agency and legitimizing coercive dynamics (e.g., Zahra’s experience). This amalgam of neoliberal and patriarchal discourses positions young women as individually responsible for guarding their bodies and regulating their sexuality in the absence of adequate education (Clark & Stitzlein, 2018). Despite differing regulatory regimes and state

policies governing sexuality, participants in both contexts reported limited or no access to institutional sex education, with education about sexual pleasure almost entirely absent.

Consistent with the literature (Stenning et al., 2013), the lack of sexual education and awareness also emerged as a key contributor to sexual violence. Participants explicitly identified “not knowing what constitutes sexual violence” as a barrier to resistance and help-seeking. Many women in both contexts reported that they did not respond to experiences of sexual violence because they were unable to recognize or name them as such, particularly when violence was non-physical. This lack of awareness limited their ability to navigate sexual encounters safely and effectively. Sex education was repeatedly identified as a central prevention strategy, alongside broader awareness-raising efforts. In Canada, despite the existence of multiple sexual violence prevention policies, participants’ lack of awareness of these policies further hindered effective responses.

Many participants, particularly in the Canadian context, normalized verbal street harassment, framing it as trivial, expected, or even complimentary (Fairchild, 2023). In the absence of education emphasizing consent and women’s sexual rights, this normalization reinforced rape culture across both contexts, supported by pervasive narratives such as “men will be men” and “girls need to be careful.” These discourses contributed to victim-blaming, increased vulnerability, and reduced help-seeking following sexual violence. This narrative aligns with neoliberal capitalism grounded in patriarchal values (Downey et al., 2023), which are often hidden or overt in existing sexual education and broader cultural norms, rationalizing sexual violence against women according to neoliberal logics.

In the absence of comprehensive sexuality education, participants experienced a prolonged “learning curve,” gradually acquiring knowledge about dating, intimacy, and sexual practices through experience. Age emerged as an important factor: consistent with prior research (Bastian, 2021; Montemurro, 2014), participants reported greater confidence, sexual awareness, and improved communication of desires as they grew older. Some participants engaged in self-education about sexual pleasure, gaining informative knowledge and breaking normative patterns, an approach that may reflect both the influence of neoliberal framings of sex and sex education and the impact of social movements such as #MeToo, which highlight the prevalence of overt and covert sexism across contexts. While Montemurro (2014) found that strong religious beliefs could hinder sexual pleasure, religious participants in this study did not report uniform difficulties; some described religion as emancipatory, while others emphasized that increased age and experience enhanced their awareness of rights and needs regardless of religious affiliation. Education also played a critical role: all participants held higher education degrees in the humanities or social sciences, likely contributing to greater critical awareness and reflexivity regarding sexuality and sexual violence.

In the absence of comprehensive pleasure-inclusive sexual education, 27 of the 31 participants reported engaging in self-education to negotiate sexual agency and equip themselves in the absence of supportive culture and formal instruction. Sources included pornography, social media (used by approximately one-third of participants), therapy or consultations with sexologists, academic or feminist texts and media (used by approximately two-thirds), peer and feminist friendship circles, and the influence of feminist social movements.

For some participants, pornography became a primary source of pleasure education. However, mainstream pornography often prioritizes male pleasure, objectifies women’s bodies,

and reinforces patriarchal and neoliberal capitalist values that normalize violence against women (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018). In contrast, feminist social media, readings, podcasts, and activist spaces challenged patriarchal sexual norms and enhanced awareness of women's sexual rights, health, and agency, facilitated by the nearly "real-time" speed of information exchange (Rosa, 2013, p.214). Therapy and sexology services helped participants identify harmful patterns, reconnect with their bodies, and contest internalized patriarchal beliefs. Feminist friendship circles provided spaces of solidarity, nonjudgmental support, and shared learning, while feminist movements, particularly #MeToo, played a crucial role in consciousness-raising, experience-sharing, and challenging entrenched rape culture in both Iran and Canada.

Collectively, these self-education strategies functioned as compensatory mechanisms through which participants gradually built sexual knowledge, awareness, and agency in the absence of institutional support.

The Struggle for Agency and Autonomy. Despite restrictive norms, values, and regulatory frameworks rooted in patriarchal neoliberal capitalism, which historically sexualized women's bodies to benefit the sex and dating industries and the interests of men (Guillaumin, 1996), young women in this study actively pursued agency and autonomy in their dating, intimate, and sexual lives. Across both contexts, participants described ideal dates and relationships as spaces where they could "be themselves" without self-censorship and where personal boundaries were respected, reflecting a strong desire for autonomy. The majority emphasized open and effective communication as a central indicator of ideal dating, sexual, and intimate relationships.

Consistent with Bastian (2021), participants reported that increased age and experience enhanced their ability to articulate sexual needs, pursue pleasure, and communicate effectively. Some even described sex itself as a communicative practice, aligning with literature that identifies

communication as essential for negotiating agency in contexts lacking formal sexual education (Widman et al., 2022). Regardless of religiosity or context, shared values and goals made communication crucial for exercising agency, even among participants following traditional scripts. Ideal relationships were characterized by mutual respect, boundary-setting, and value negotiation, and were often ended when partners failed to support women's goals. For many participants, later sexual relationships increasingly reflected these ideals.

Although patriarchal structures embedded within the sex-gender system (Rubin, 1975) and forms of sexage (Guillaumin, 1996) continue to constrain women's agency, participants actively negotiated and resisted these limitations. They identified shared values, emotional support, mutual trust, open communication, and emotional care as defining features of ideal intimate relationships. These findings align with Klein et al. (2018), who show that emotional support, autonomy, and frequent discussions about sexuality enhance young women's sexual agency. In contrast, participants described unhealthy relationships as those in which they felt deprioritized, anxious, or emotionally commodified, echoing Illouz's (2007) analysis of emotional capitalism and instrumentalized intimacy.

Sexual pleasure was prioritized by approximately half of the participants in both contexts, though its importance varied across life stages, personal priorities, and, in some cases, menstrual cycles. While literature often emphasizes orgasm as a hallmark of a good sexual relationship (Opperman et al., 2014), participants in this study expressed diverse perspectives: some viewed orgasm as central, others saw it as a "cherry on top," and some framed pleasure as a form of agency. Whereas prior research (Blackledge, 2004; Hite, 1989; Nicolson, 1994; Nicolson & Burr, 2003; Petersen & Hyde, 2010; Rudman et al., 2013) links these attitudes to sexist cultural norms, participants in this study actively resisted prescribed notions of sexual pleasure,

negotiating agency by recognizing and exercising their bodily needs independent of male-centered scripts or pornographic representations.

Participants conceptualized sex in multiple ways: male-centered, holistic, relational, or recreational, the latter aligning with earlier work (McDaniel, 1969). Indicators of ideal sexual experiences included feeling loved and safe, foreplay and aftercare, comfort, consent, open communication, mutual care, enjoyment, and reciprocity, consistent with literature (Goldey et al., 2016). Participants' attention to diverse practices, including duration, frequency, and initiating sex, even among religious women in married relationships, demonstrated nuanced forms of sexual agency, often facilitated by guidance from medical professionals or sexologists to legitimize their choices (Laan et al., 2021). These definitions challenge male-centered models of sexuality, reframing sex as cooperative rather than dominated by one partner. Some participants emphasized that ideal and regular sexual experiences should be inseparable, holding sexual relationships to consistently high standards. The role of a supportive partner emerged as central to enabling agency, confidence, and self-esteem, as illustrated by Susie (uOttawa) and Rozita (University of Tehran), who described transitions from earlier manipulative relationships to more affirming partnerships following increased self-awareness, experiences of surviving sexual violence, and reassessment of personal values.

Approximately two-thirds of participants across both contexts reported engaging in masturbation, with some incorporating pornography into this practice. For some, masturbation served as a substitute for partnered sex, while for others it provided a means of bodily connection and self-knowledge. Six participants reported not masturbating, primarily for religious reasons, as it was considered sinful within their belief systems. Some participants, particularly those from religious backgrounds, initially experienced shame or guilt (Hungry, 2016); however, over

time, through self-education or consultation with sexologists, many reframed masturbation as a healthy practice. Although Rowland et al. (2020) link frequent masturbation to lower partner satisfaction and higher anxiety or depression, participants in this study did not consistently exhibit these patterns.

Given the pervasive taboo surrounding discussions of sex, especially in conservative and religious contexts, participants developed individualized strategies through trial and error. As noted earlier, limited access to formal sexual education often left young women uncertain about their values and expectations, constraining early agency. However, with increased age, experience, self-reflection, therapy, and feminist engagement, many participants described a shift toward greater sexual autonomy and assertiveness. Feminist movements, in particular, provided awareness, language, and collective empowerment that facilitated higher levels of agency for some participants.

Participants in both contexts emphasized the important role of medical professionals and therapists in fostering self-acceptance and sexual autonomy. This reflects the rise of the “therapeutic self,” as Illouz (2007) describes it, a mode of subjectivity that ontologizes and rationalizes emotions, potentially distancing individuals from immediate experience and rendering them objects of reflexive management. This shift is tied to the emergence of communicative rationality as a dominant framework for navigating relationships, often within contexts that do not fully legitimize or grant women autonomy to engage in sexual activity, or to abstain from it. For some participants, however, professional consultation provided crucial education, validation, and affirmation, particularly in relation to masturbation, therapy, and physical or medical conditions affecting sexual experiences. In these cases, therapeutic discourse

helped legitimize both sexual desire and the choice or inability to engage in sexual activity due to physical or mental health considerations.

Within sex–gender systems where sexage and the appropriation of women’s bodies are normalized through patriarchy and intensified by capitalist sexual markets, the role of medical and mental health professionals becomes especially significant. As Guillaumin (1996) notes, “Sex is a woman, but she does not possess a sexual organ; a sexual organ does not possess itself” (p.91). In this context, professional guidance from medical practitioners and sexologists, by validating women’s desires, limits, and embodied experiences, enabled participants to reclaim sexual autonomy and resist sexual obligation. Amid broader cultural shifts influenced by feminist movements, such validation helped participants legitimize sexual desire, lack of desire, pain, initiation, and masturbation, countering internalized stigma and patriarchal norms. For example, Susie and Bahareh (uOttawa) sought medical support for sexual pain, while Zahra and Mina (uTehran) consulted professionals regarding high sexual desire and masturbation; in all cases, professional validation affirmed their experiences as legitimate and deserving of care rather than dismissal or stigma.

Reflecting broader gendered norms shaping women’s sexual experiences (Bay-Cheng, 2019), participants acknowledged the persistence of stigma toward sexually active women, including labels such as “sluts” or “too sexual” (Kim et al., 2022). While many participants personally emphasized emotional intimacy over sex, and sexual activity was not a priority for approximately half, they recognized that this perspective does not apply universally. Participants generally rejected societal judgments against sexually active women, indicating greater generational resistance to sexual stigma.

Marginalization significantly shaped the exercise of agency. In conservative or highly religious contexts (e.g., Iran, parts of the Middle East, Brazil), sexual minority participants faced heightened barriers to disclosure due to stigma and heteronormativity, in line with existing literature (Abdi & Van Gilder, 2016; Silva & Vieira, 2014). Immigration status, language barriers, and cultural unfamiliarity further constrained dating and sexual negotiation, particularly when navigating relationships in a second language, as documented in prior research (Cao, 2023). Some participants adjusted their dating preferences based on past experiences, including avoiding partners from their own ethnic or regional backgrounds. Financial insecurity also emerged as a key structural constraint, consistent with the literature (Breiding et al., 2017), which limits dating options and reduces negotiating power in economically unequal relationships. From a materialist feminist perspective, this mirrors Paola Tabet's concept of the 'sexual-economic exchange,' where women's sexuality, excluded from primary access to resources, becomes a form of capital to be exchanged for survival or social stability (Tabet, 2012). By viewing these relationships along a continuum rather than a binary of 'pure' versus 'transactional' love, it becomes clear how economic dependency heightens vulnerability to coercion and sexual violence, as the exchange of sexual access for financial security inherently compromises a woman's ability to navigate agency and consent.

In encounters with sexual violence, participants' responses evolved over time. While early experiences were marked by lack of awareness and inability to resist, many women later developed self-protective strategies. Consistent with Roberts et al. (2019), participants employed a range of resistance tactics, including avoidance, verbal or physical resistance, compliance to prevent escalation, blocking and reporting online harassment, and long-term behavioral adaptations such as increased vigilance. Although alcohol consumption is widely identified as a

risk factor for sexual violence (Ybarra & Thompson, 2018; Carr & VanDeusen, 2004; Zinzow & Thompson, 2015), relatively few participants linked their experiences directly to intoxication. Notably, 30 of the 31 participants reported experiencing sexual violence at some point, underscoring the pervasiveness of hostile sexism within patriarchal structures (Toplu-Demirtaş et al., 2022). Sexual minority participants described distinct forms of violence tied to heteronormative enforcement and objectification (Powell et al., 2018).

Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic reshaped how participants negotiated agency in dating and sexual practices. For some, online platforms normalized virtual intimacy and mitigated loneliness (Dean Marshall et al., 2023; Duguay et al., 2022). This shift unfolded within a broader neoliberal and digital context characterized by uncertainty and social acceleration, in which, as Chun (2016) argues, individuals are compelled to “become creatures of the update,” where “to be is to be updated” (p.2), a condition intensified by social media–driven instability (Camerini & Diviani, 2012). For others, dating and sexual activity declined due to restricted mobility and disrupted social routines (Candel & Jitaru, 2021).

Some participants reported living with their parents during the pandemic, a situation associated with increased parental monitoring and reduced independence, as documented in the literature (Stavridou et al., 2021). While research shows widespread declines in sexual activity and satisfaction during lockdowns (Lehmiller et al., 2021; Lindberg et al., 2020; Wignall et al., 2021; Mercer et al., 2022), participants in stable relationships sometimes reported increased intimacy, facilitated by slower life rhythms and reduced social acceleration (Rosa, 2013). In contrast, participants in long-distance, unstable, or marginalized relationships experienced heightened isolation and vulnerability. Approximately half of participants reported experiencing sexual violence during the pandemic, with many describing how confinement, reduced access to

support networks, heightened psychological violence (Rodríguez-Díaz et al., 2017; Ureña et al., 2015), and barriers to leaving abusive relationships intensified harm.

b) Similarities at the Family and Community Level

Participants in this study demonstrated varied responses to familial norms. Some, particularly religious participants in conservative family environments, adjusted their practices to align with familial expectations, effectively limiting their agency in accordance with patriarchal and religious ideologies (Valdes, 1996). These practices aimed to reproduce a normative heterosexual framework within the institution of family and marriage in order to preserve “economic status and moral reputation” (Illouz, 2021, p.45). However, religious families were not uniformly experienced as suppressive. Regardless of religiosity, families that supported women’s life choices, affirmed bodily autonomy, and promoted gender equality fostered higher levels of self-confidence and sexual agency among participants in both contexts (e.g., Sarah from uOttawa and Haleh from the University of Tehran).

Importantly, openness about sexual matters alone did not guarantee higher sexual agency. In one Canadian case, Nina reported that although her mother provided sexual education, she simultaneously policed Nina’s body weight and appearance in accordance with patriarchal beauty standards. This contradiction resulted in diminished self-confidence and a sense that her body was not fully her own, ultimately undermining her sexual agency. These findings complicate existing literature, which suggests that parental emotional support, autonomy, and frequent discussions about sexuality enhance sexual agency (Klein et al., 2018). While such factors are important, this study highlights the broader role of parental support in affirming bodily autonomy, gender equality, and respect for agency beyond sexual communication alone.

In cases where families were unsupportive, whether religious, traditional, or otherwise, female sexual agency was significantly constrained. The absence of a supportive family and/or a long-term partner who respected agency further compounded these limitations across both contexts. Within patriarchal and increasingly neoliberal social environments (Ross, 2022), the lack of relational spaces that affirm autonomy makes the exercise and development of sexual agency more challenging. Conversely, families that valued women's presence, bodies, and choices equipped participants with greater confidence to resist and respond to sexual violence. In contrast, controlling family environments that regulated daughters' bodies and behavior often left women more vulnerable to coercion and normalization of violence.

When experiencing sexual violence, some participants sought support from family members; however, the majority excluded their fathers from these disclosures. Instead, they primarily confided in mothers, sisters, and close female friends, reflecting gendered patterns of trust and safety in seeking support.

At the community level, religious communities in both contexts were widely described as unsupportive of women's sexual rights and, in some cases, as sites of sexism and impunity. Several participants characterized religious environments as hostile, with one stating that "religious men are perverted," prompting some women in both contexts to distance themselves from religion or adopt atheist or agnostic identities. These findings align with earlier research in Iran (Sedghi, 1997). While some Canadian studies suggest that religious colleges may function as "moral communities" that reduce the risk of sexual violence (Vanderwoerd & Cheng, 2017), the findings of this study challenge that assumption. Participants reported heightened protection of male perpetrators in positions of authority within religious communities and campuses, even in contexts where formal sexual violence prevention policies exist.

c) Similarities at the State/Institutional Level

Similarities across the two contexts were evident, particularly in their systemic limitations. In both Iran and Canada, sex education existed but was largely restricted to biological, health-based, or abstinence-focused content, rather than comprehensive, pleasure-inclusive approaches. As a result, the majority of participants in both contexts did not prioritize seeking help from official institutions following experiences of sexual violence. In Iran, sexual violence prevention policies remain limited and, in some cases, actively exacerbate gender-based violence (Nikparvar et al., 2021). In Canada, despite the existence of formal policies, participants similarly hesitated to seek institutional support due to limited awareness of available services and perceptions of these mechanisms as unwelcoming or performative neoliberal tools in neoliberal universities rather than survivor-centered resources (Ostrich, 2025). Across both contexts, participants who did seek institutional support, whether on university campuses or in workplace settings, generally encountered inadequate and non-survivor-centered responses.

Despite the formal existence of sexual violence prevention policies at uOttawa, awareness was strikingly low. With the exception of five participants from the University of Ottawa, the majority of participants across both sites were unaware of sexual violence policies at either uOttawa or the University of Tehran. This gap highlights a critical disconnect between policy existence and meaningful accessibility.

The COVID-19 pandemic constituted a distinct regulatory moment in which preventive health measures and emergency policies were rapidly implemented across both contexts (Simonović, 2020). Lockdowns and mobility restrictions significantly disrupted in-person dating and intimate relationships. Yet, as public health concerns dominated institutional priorities,

issues of sexuality and sexual violence were largely sidelined. None of the participants recalled the implementation of COVID-19–specific policies addressing sexual violence prevention; only one participant from uOttawa vaguely remembered institutional messaging on the issue. This absence underscores how sexual violence and sexual well-being remain peripheral within crisis governance frameworks, even as vulnerabilities intensified under lockdown conditions that confined women to domestic spaces and reshaped dating and sexual lives within patriarchal, neoliberal capitalist structures.

II. Differences

Given that the two study sites, uOttawa and the University of Tehran, are situated in distinct geopolitical contexts with different historical and cultural trajectories, as well as divergent biopolitical regimes and regulatory systems, these contextual differences produced varying experiences for young women in relation to dating, intimacy, sexuality, and sexual violence. While the majority of differences emerged at the state and institutional levels, notable variations were also evident at the family/community, and individual levels.

a) Differences at the Individual Level

Although similarities at the individual level outweighed differences, several notable differences nevertheless emerged. These differences were largely shaped by contextual constraints, particularly regulatory regimes governing sexuality and intimate relationships. One of the most salient differences concerned the use, or non-use, of dating applications to find potential partners. With the advent of smartphones, numerous dating applications have become available, allowing people to access online dating anywhere and anytime (Bonilla-Zorita et al.,

2021). Dating has also increasingly become a profitable industry, particularly following the introduction and expansion of dating websites and applications (Bonilla-Zorita et al., 2021). Despite the global normalization of online dating, none of the participants from uTehran reported using dating applications to find potential dates. Participants from uOttawa offered several explanations for this divergence. First, access to dating applications in Iran is restricted by the government, and users must rely on VPNs to access these platforms. While women in both contexts expressed relatively low levels of trust in dating applications, the stigma and negative attitudes toward the “free sex market” facilitated by dating apps (Palmer, 2020) were particularly pronounced among participants from uTehran. Dating applications were frequently described as venues primarily used to find sex, generating high levels of distrust toward the market logic embedded in these platforms. Combined with the lower popularity of dating applications, this stigma and distrust were cited as key reasons why no participants from uTehran had ever used dating apps to find dates.

Importantly, young women in Iran were not inactive on digital platforms. Approximately half of the participants from uTehran used social media such as Instagram, Facebook, and X, which I conceptualize as “third spaces.” These digital contexts enabled participants to develop a more nuanced and contextualized understanding of potential partners through shared posts, interactions, and mutual networks. Features such as direct messaging, reactions, and emojis allowed participants to navigate their dating lives within the affordances and constraints of these platforms. In doing so, they avoided the stigmatized online dating market while creatively repurposing social media to meet their relational needs, demonstrating adaptive strategies to circumvent state surveillance (Zuboff, 2019) and social stigma, while keeping pace with new features in an accelerated digital world (Rosa, 2013) to date and meet their potential partners.

Young women in Iran described the third space as a way to bypass surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019) and shape their experiences of online dating and partner selection outside the dominant neoliberal market logic. Under the scrutiny of state and/or capitalist surveillance tools, the third space offered greater levels of trust and familiarity. Through this strategy, participants sought to negotiate and resist participation in the “number games” characteristic of dating applications (Heino et al., 2010). As Illouz (2021) argues, the objectification of sexuality and emotions generates “ontological uncertainty” (p.142), wherein one’s self, body, and value become constant targets of visual evaluation, particularly within online dating contexts. The uncertainty produced by the neoliberal market of sex, dating, and intimacy can lead to non-commitment, non-choice, and short-term, easily terminated relationships (Illouz, 2019). While participants might still update their self-representation to align with the dating market’s ever-changing tastes (Ellison et al., 2006), doing so within the third space provided greater confidence and negotiating power, as dating was not the primary purpose of their online presence. Although young women also used social media affordances to explore dating opportunities through the blurring of casual conversation and dating, these strategies were less visible when participants negotiated their willingness to engage online in the context of state restrictions and cultural stigma.

Although the “third space” was more prominent among participants from uTehran, some participants from uOttawa also reported using social media during the early stages of relationships. In the Canadian context, social media was often used to maintain contact before exchanging phone numbers and was framed as a safety measure, particularly in the initial phases of dating. Beyond general social media use, about half of participants from uOttawa had used dating applications. Participants’ narratives point to the expansion of emotional capitalism from

online dating into everyday relational life, where awareness of a large pool of potential partners, both online and offline, intensifies uncertainty and shapes dating behavior. Relationships were often evaluated through the lens of attention and recognition, with “not being prioritized” or “not being followed up on” interpreted as markers of negative intimate experiences, reflecting perceptions of partners treating dating as a game rather than a meaningful relational process. About half of participants at the University of Ottawa reported using dating applications, demonstrating awareness of the underlying market logics that structure matching systems and relational selection processes (Österlund, 2017; Illouz, 2017). Participants who had never used dating apps expressed negative attitudes toward them, in accordance with the literature (Johanis et al., 2024). Those who did use dating apps were more aware of the platforms’ affordances and limitations, navigating the “pool of candidates” or “meat market” while negotiating gender scripts and authentic self-presentation (Eaton & Rose, 2011). They recognized the apps’ drawbacks, such as superficial conversations or the gamified nature of partner selection (Heino et al., 2010), and developed strategies to mitigate them, initiating dates quickly, carefully choosing locations and timing for safety, and over time establishing their fundamental values, red flags, and criteria for selecting suitable partners.

Non-heterosexual participants in Canada reported using apps tailored to their communities, as noted by McClain (2023). However, some participants’ accounts illustrate what Illouz (2021) describes as “negative sociality,” whereby individuals withdraw from dating apps when the perceived quality of the partner pool is seen as inadequate, when the market logic of matching conflicts with personal values, or when platforms generate emotional uncertainty that is incompatible with their relational expectations. In this sense, some participants stopped using dating applications altogether, preferring being single over engaging in a dating market

experienced as misaligned with their ethical or emotional standards. This reflects how digital platforms reconfigure romantic encounters away from idealization and affective openness toward processes structured by cognitive comparison, self-presentation, and personal “brand” management. Emotional capitalism extends beyond online dating: in an accelerated social context, awareness of numerous potential partners, both online and offline, intensifies uncertainty and shapes dating behavior. Participants characterized negative intimate relationships as those in which they were “not prioritized” or “not followed up on,” reflecting inattentive partners who treated dating as a game. For some, this uncertainty and misalignment with personal standards led them to prefer being single rather than engaging in a dating market incompatible with their values.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns and limited access to in-person meetings in both contexts further intensified young women’s reliance on digital platforms. While dating app use became increasingly normalized in Canada during this period (Duguay et al., 2024), some literature reported a complete halt of dating and relationships in Iran (Yaghoobi, 2024). The results of this study, however, indicate that although dating apps in Iran remained stigmatized and less accessible, other social media platforms became essential tools for connection and dating. In short, the pandemic accelerated young people’s migration to online spaces, though the specific platforms adopted varied according to technological availability, cultural norms, and contextual affordances. Dating-app companies also rapidly reconfigured their platforms to promote “virtual dating” by prioritizing video interaction, expanding location boundaries, and framing online encounters as the safest and most responsible romantic practice (Duguay et al., 2022). Consequently, some participants in both contexts utilized audio and video chat features, and online dating became normalized for certain individuals.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, some participants in both contexts experienced sexual violence, but only those from uOttawa reported dating violence. This difference reflects how pandemic restrictions heightened risk while shifting responsibility onto young women through neoliberal arrangements that emphasized individual harm management amid limited support (Colpitts, 2022; Krause et al., 2023). Within this biopolitical framework, protection of health and safety was individualized, leaving young women to navigate isolation, mental health strain, and increased vulnerability to sexual violence with minimal institutional support. In Canada, harsh winter conditions, lockdowns, and the closure of public spaces led some women, particularly those living alone, to meet dates in private settings, further increasing their risk.

Interestingly, while existing literature suggests that men often prioritize physical attractiveness when choosing partners, whereas women tend to emphasize socio-economic attributes or intelligence (Abramova et al., 2016; Blair & Madigan, 2016), physical appearance and attractiveness emerged as key indicators of an ideal date and sexual relationship among some Iranian participants in both contexts. This pattern did not appear among non-Iranian participants. Physical attraction was emphasized by eight Iranian participants (three from uOttawa and five from uTehran). These findings challenge stereotypical representations of Middle Eastern women as sexually passive or lacking agency, instead suggesting that beauty standards and market-driven aesthetics have become embedded within the sexual culture of Iranian women.

Regarding pornography consumption, the results showed that usage among young women followed the logic of market availability and convenience. Participants in both contexts reported using pornography for pleasure and self-exploration, despite its potential reinforcement of patriarchal narratives (Daskalopoulou & Zquette, 2020). Only one Iranian participant from uTehran expressed concern about the ethical dimensions of pornography while still consuming

mainstream content. Among uOttawa participants, only three (all Canadian) flagged ethical concerns and reported attempting to consume ethical pornography or pornography produced for women. This suggests that discussions surrounding the ethical dimensions of pornography and the exploitation of women are less prominent among Iranian participants. This may be due to restricted access to pornography, reliance on VPNs, limited public discourse, and the dominance of the state as the primary perceived oppressor, which may obscure the role of patriarchal capitalism in exploiting women within sexually liberalized industries. Notably, access to pornography is already limited in Iran, and access to ethical pornography¹⁹ is even more constrained for participants from uOttawa.

Divorce further had a profound impact on women's dating and sexual lives in conservative contexts such as Iran and Brazil. As Juteau and Laurin (1989) argue, marriage functions to appropriate women's sexual and domestic labor for the benefit of patriarchal systems. Within this framework, a divorced woman, having lost virginity and no longer being the "property" of a father or husband, is perceived as publicly available and becomes more vulnerable to harassment and sexual violence. In Iran, divorced women are not subject to paternal permission for remarriage and lack the supervision associated with being unmarried daughters. As a result, they are often deemed more sexually available and face heightened vulnerability to sexual violence, particularly in more religious contexts and among religious men.

¹⁹ While some pornography is produced under the category of ethical pornography (also referred to as "feminist" or "fair-trade" porn), it is defined as erotic material created within a normative framework that prioritizes labor rights, affirmative consent, and the subversion of harmful stereotypes (Scott, 2016). Access to ethical pornography is generally neither free nor easily available when compared to mainstream pornographic content. Moreover, access to this type of pornography is even more limited for audiences in non-sexually liberalized contexts, where access to pornographic material, whether mainstream or ethical, is highly restricted.

In conservative religious contexts, the appropriation of women occurs through patriarchal mechanisms that seek to control female sexuality for the benefit of men (Guillaumin, 1996). Resistance is often met with slut-shaming tactics that frame women's sexuality as public property (Hackman et al., 2017). One participant explicitly recognized and named this structural sexual exploitation and sexual violence, and she was the only participant actively engaged in organizing against sexual violence on her religious campus in Canada, responding to the persistent violence she experienced and witnessed. While this activism fostered a sense of pride and resistance, participants from uTehran who experienced sexual violence on university campuses refrained from action due to fear of backlash and severe repercussions. These experiences highlight the lack of systemic support for young women in preventing sexual violence, leaving the responsibility to individuals and rendering them particularly vulnerable within neoliberal, patriarchal, and religious campus contexts.

Finally, an important difference emerged regarding childhood experiences of sexual violence: all five participants who reported experiencing sexual violence as children were Iranian. This pattern may reflect the prevalence of rape culture in both public and private spheres, high levels of shame and victim-blaming that protect perpetrators, limited informal family-based discussions of sex education, and inadequate parental supervision (East et al., 2010).

b) Differences at the Family and Community Level

However, due to social acceleration, younger generations increasingly distance themselves from conservative sexual values and adopt more liberal practices, even as their families continue to uphold traditional and restrictive norms around sexuality. In conservative sex-gender systems

such as Iran, family and community values are largely grounded in patriarchal rules that legitimize the private appropriation of women through marriage. As a result, relationship type significantly shapes women's ability to exercise sexual agency, as sex is legally and socially validated only within marriage. Both Iranian and Brazilian participants reported that their families restricted sexual activity before marriage. These restrictions, rooted in traditional norms and reinforced by state regulations, limited young women's ability to fully exercise agency as unmarried couples lacking legal recognition.

One of the main forms of sexage is the physical charge of members of the group: women, as the appropriated group, are responsible for ensuring the emotional, material, and bodily maintenance of all social actors, including men as the dominant group and other marginalized or disabled groups (Guillaumin, 1996). In this study, the burden of familial responsibility on young women reflected ongoing appropriation, as they were expected to perform care work even today, for example, all single mothers in both contexts retained full custody after divorce. Some participants reported that these traditional family structures and associated responsibilities significantly shaped their dating experiences and sexual activities. In contexts such as Iran, concealment emerged as a crucial strategy for women engaging in sexual relationships in order to navigate a socio-legal landscape in which women's bodies are closely tied to family honor (Arjmand & Ziari, 2020). Whereas in Canada, only participants who grew up in more religious families or communities similarly reported stronger familial influence on their dating and sexual experiences, often in the form of restrictions. These findings align with scholarship emphasizing that sexual agency is socially and relationally embedded rather than purely individual. Concepts such as "bonded agency" and the "embedded self" highlight how family, peer, and community relationships shape agency through both constraint and enablement (Phạm, 2013; Prins, 2006).

Sexual agency thus involves strategic negotiation of relationships, social expectations, and cultural and structural contexts (Bell, 2012; Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014). Within such systems, young women become particularly vulnerable when encountering abusive or violent partners prior to marriage. Fear of family disapproval in conservative contexts, and uncertainty about appropriate relationship norms in neoliberal contexts with the possibility of victim blaming culture, often prevents them from seeking refuge or support from their families. This vulnerability is further intensified by the absence of comprehensive sex education during earlier stages of life, both at school and within families. None of the participants from uTehran reported receiving any form of sex education from their families, reflecting the strong taboo surrounding discussions of sexuality in Iran. This silence leaves young women more exposed to sexual violence and less equipped to navigate sexual relationships safely.

While some participants from uOttawa reported receiving limited sex education from their families, primarily from their mothers, in accordance with the literature (Nogueira Avelar e Silva et al., 2016), these discussions were largely framed around warnings about the dangers of sex, reflecting the parents' own exposure to traditional and conservative perspectives within patriarchal contexts. Sex was often portrayed as unpleasant, risky, and primarily oriented toward men's pleasure. Rather than fostering sexual agency, family-based sex education frequently reinforced patriarchal norms by instilling fear of men and framing sex as an act performed for male satisfaction. Even when pleasure was nominally acknowledged, it was often minimized, as illustrated by Nina's mother, who remarked, "Sex is not even that great; I sometimes love food better than sex."

Ultimately, whether due to the absence of sex education or the prevalence of fear-based and patriarchal messaging, the outcome was largely similar across contexts. Sexual norms

emphasizing male-centered pleasure were internalized by young women through family discourse and broader patriarchal socialization. When combined with capitalist values, women's sexuality became increasingly framed as a commodity (Guillaumin, 1996; Bay-Cheng, 2015), something to be offered in exchange for affection, validation, or relationship stability. As a result, some young women remained in abusive relationships or engaged in unwanted sexual practices out of fear of losing their partners, illustrating how inadequate or harmful sex education undermines preventive agency rather than strengthening it. In conservative sexual contexts like Iran, where the state polices women's sexual activity, young women were cautious about sharing their sexual experiences, even with supportive friends, due to the high risks associated with disclosure. In contrast, in more sexually liberal contexts, sexual activity was less stigmatized or policed, yet support from friends was not always sufficient when encountering sexual violence, as peers were not necessarily like-minded or trustworthy. Across both contexts, neoliberal and patriarchal logics emphasized that it was the women's responsibility to protect themselves, reinforcing rape culture and placing the burden of care and prevention on potential survivors.

c) Differences at the State/Institutional level

The majority of differences between the two contexts stem from the role of the state and the distinct biopolitical regimes shaping each sex–gender system, one conservative and theocratic, the other liberal democratic. Young women in Iran consistently identified environmental and regulatory constraints as shaping their dating experiences (Sadeghi, 2007). Participants described restrictions on meeting partners in public spaces when the partner was not a husband, a constraint that was even more severe for those in non-heterosexual relationships due to criminalization and harsher legal sanctions. Participants from uTehran further reported that state regulations and

situational constraints limited their sexual activities because of safety concerns and the risks associated with engaging in pre- or extra-marital relationships under Iranian law.

In sexually restrictive contexts like Iran, where dating outside of marriage is socially and legally constrained, women exercised greater control to resist these limitations. Among non-heterosexual participants, alternative dating scripts emerged, centered on equality and friendship rather than traditional gender roles, with intersectional factors supporting more equitable relationships. Engaging in sexual activity outside of marriage in such contexts can be understood as an act of resistance against the biopolitical control and regulations imposed by the state. In the absence of a supportive system, where gender-based discrimination and sexual violence are often legitimized even within regulations, overt sexual violence in public spaces is more prevalent, and perpetrators may act with confidence that societal norms and regulations could result in victim-blaming rather than survivor-centered responses (Abdmolaei, 2014; Yaghoobi, 2012). In contrast, in a context like Canada, where the state has enacted regulations to prevent sexual violence and does not strictly police young women's sexual behaviors, covert forms of sexage persist in private spaces. Furthermore, institutional support for survivors is often ineffective, as highlighted in the literature (Colpitts, 2022; Ostrich, 2025), resulting in similar experiences of vulnerability and helplessness for young women.

While some participants in both contexts reported fear of pregnancy as a factor constraining sexual activity, participants from uTehran emphasized additional concerns related to limited access to contraception and heightened fear of unwanted pregnancy due to the criminalization of abortion and restricted access to reproductive healthcare in Iran. Research shows that supportive family planning policies improve adolescent health outcomes, with states that provide contraceptive access reporting lower teen pregnancy rates, although evidence regarding STI

outcomes and minority health disparities remains mixed (Zori et al., 2023). More broadly, state policies shape sexual health through access to family planning services, sexual violence prevention, and legal frameworks (Averett et al., 2002; Anderson, 2014; DeGue et al., 2013; DeMatteo et al., 2015). Although international frameworks promote non-discriminatory sexual policies (Gruskin & Ferguson, 2009), implementation remains uneven. In contexts such as Iran, policies and regulations function not to support women, but to control sexual activity and appropriate women's bodies in service of a patriarchal theocratic system.

As discussed in the similarities section, support from medical professionals was crucial for fostering sexual agency among young women in both contexts. However, Iranian participants reported negative and unsupportive experiences with the medical system, particularly when seeking help prior to marriage or while in relationships. Restrictive state regulations and biopolitical controls (Foucault, 2007), combined with judgmental medical practices, heightened participants' vulnerability and eroded trust in healthcare institutions, often resulting in retraumatization rather than support. Participants consistently described Iran's health and legal systems as "not supportive," with gender segregation further contributing to isolation and loneliness around sex-related concerns.

Differences were also evident in participants' attitudes toward state-level policies addressing sexual violence. In Iran, most participants expressed deep distrust in the state's capacity to protect survivors, viewing policies as largely symbolic and non-survivor-centered (Rahbari, 2020). As a result, when experiencing sexual violence, most young women in Iran did not seek institutional support, citing ineffective procedures, distrust in reporting mechanisms, retraumatizing processes, and a lack of supportive policies. Victim-blaming, social indifference, and hopelessness about receiving meaningful support emerged as key interpersonal and systemic

barriers. While some acknowledged the existence of hotlines, their effectiveness and quality were widely questioned. In contrast, most participants in Canada assumed that policies against sexual violence existed and were generally effective, though some noted limitations and the lack of truly survivor-centered approaches. At the university level, participants in both contexts were largely unaware of the specific content or implementation of sexual violence policies. However, participants from uTehran overwhelmingly believed that universities, and the broader system, either lacked such policies or had no intention of enforcing them.

The state and policymakers were often perceived as contributing to sexual violence by policing women's bodies and suppressing sexual agency (Abdmolaei, 2014; Yaghoobi, 2012). Consequently, while many young women challenge traditional norms regarding sexuality (Golestaneh, 2022), their sexual autonomy in Iran remains heavily constrained by systemic barriers, including unsupportive health and legal systems and gender segregation, which intensify isolation around sexuality. This distrust reflects the influence of neoliberal patriarchal capitalist systems, which place the burden of navigating sexual markets and surviving sexual violence largely on young women. In conservative contexts, restrictive policies around sexuality and sexist regulations can exacerbate sexual violence, making it more visible both within institutional systems and in everyday life, while also legitimizing the collective appropriation of women (Guillaumin, 1996) in both public and private spheres. Neoliberal subjectivity emphasizes self-care, individual responsibility, and the internalization of failure, shaping young women into agents who are simultaneously "creatures of exchange" and "creatures of competition" (Cheng, 2016). In response, young Iranian women develop strategies to build supportive circles of sisterhood (Joshan, 2024) and to negotiate their agency with trusted sexual partners.

In Canada, however, neoliberal logics operate differently: legislative and policy measures, while ostensibly protective, often function performatively, shifting responsibility onto women (Ostrich, 2025). At uOttawa, some immigrant and international students also refrained from seeking help, reflecting their heightened vulnerability due to precarious immigration status, in line with the literature (Hutcheson, 2020). This finding underscores that the mere presence of policies does not automatically prevent sexual violence or ensure meaningful support. Without a supportive campus culture, comprehensive sexual education, and sustained awareness-raising, policies remain largely ineffective, particularly for marginalized women, newcomers, and international students who may be unaware of available resources. Moreover, even among participants who did seek help, experiences were often negative, as discussed in the similarities section. Institutional responses frequently lacked a survivor-centered approach, further undermining young women's sexual agency and eroding their trust in the system. Participants described these institutions as operating within a neoliberal, patriarchal, and capitalist framework that prioritizes reputation management, liability, and institutional self-preservation over the needs, safety, and well-being of survivors, rendering policies against sexual violence largely performative and policies operate more as administrative mechanisms than as genuinely survivor-centered frameworks (Ostrich, 2025).

Despite the contrasting contexts of Iran and Canada, the pervasiveness of patriarchal capitalist neoliberal values and norms within each sex–gender system produces more similarities than differences in how sexual values, norms, and expectations are internalized. These dynamics operate as forms of disciplinary power that facilitate the internalization of patriarchal norms, which in turn normalize violence against women and construct sexual activity primarily around men's pleasure as its dominant or assumed purpose. Across both settings, dominant narratives

around sexuality, pleasure, and risk discipline women's bodies and sexual expression, even within liberal frameworks. While state regulations and biopolitics differ, from restrictive and punitive to rights-based, they often exacerbate inequalities or create a perceived sense of protection rather than transforming lived experiences. Sexual agency thus emerges as a contested, uneven process, negotiated within shared normative constraints and mediated by institutional power. The next section introduces a theoretically informed model of "Sexual Agency from Formation to Practice" and examines the key categories through which young women develop and enact sexual agency.

III. Sexual Agency Model

As the literature demonstrates, all young women in this study engaged in strategic negotiations to manage intimate relationships, navigate social expectations, and situate sexual and reproductive choices within broader cultural and structural contexts (Bell, 2012; Barcelos & Gubrium, 2014; Schalet, 2010). These negotiations reflect ongoing efforts to claim sexual rights and to define and regulate women's sexuality under conditions shaped by power and inequality (Scott & Jackson, 2022; Abboud et al., 2019; Bay-Cheng, 2019; Evans et al., 2020; Fetterolf & Sanchez, 2015; Mann, 2016; Pande et al., 2011; Ranganathan et al., 2017; Seabrook et al., 2017; Ward et al., 2018). As Cense (2019) suggests, some young women in this study enacted sexual agency primarily through self-autonomy, while others did so within the context of relational bonds, emphasizing bodily control or the process of becoming a subject through the body.

While Fahs and McClelland (2016) conceptualize sexual agency as both a defense against negative sexual experiences and a precursor to positive, intentional encounters, participants in this study emphasized preventive strategies aimed at reducing exposure to sexual violence and

coercion. Intentional sexual engagement was often framed as a stronger expression of agency, given the greater perceived ability to control the situation, in contrast to experiences marked by force or harm.

Recent scholarship conceptualizes sexual agency as always present, though unevenly expressed depending on social conditions and power relations (Bay-Cheng, 2019). Consistent with this literature, the findings highlight the role of biopolitics, contextual norms, and controlling images in shaping women's sexual subjectivities (Bay-Cheng, 2015). Participants across both contexts described how neoliberal and patriarchal values surrounding women's bodies and sexuality structured their possibilities for action and self-understanding.

Although existing models, such as distinctions between "thick" and "thin" agency (Klocker, 2007) or Bay-Cheng's (2015) typology of *agents, virgins, suits, and losers*, offer valuable descriptive insights, they remain limited in capturing the fluid, dynamic, and life-course–dependent nature of sexual agency. These frameworks tend to freeze agency into fixed categories, whereas the experiences of young women in this study demonstrate that sexual agency is continually renegotiated, reshaped, and reconstituted across time, relationships, and contexts.

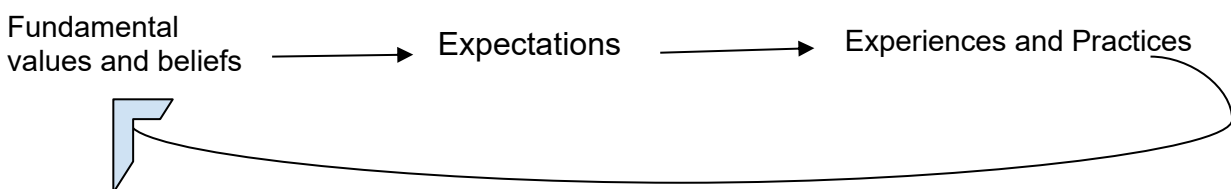
My research led me to elaborate a model of sexual agency. I will now discuss how it develops as an ever-changing phenomenon shaped by one's values, experiences, expectations, and sexual practices over time. This model includes four types of sexual agency: (1) habituated traditional, (2) anomic, (3) updated conflicted, and (4) liberated sexual agency, each with its own defining characteristics. A fifth category, (5) preventive sexual agency, is also introduced.

However, this category does not constitute a standalone or fixed form of agency, as it may be exercised by individuals located within any of the first four categories.

In the following paragraphs, I illustrate a model of sexual agency, from its formation to its practice, as shown in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3

Sexual Agency from Formation to Practice



Fundamental values and beliefs in the model refer to all values, norms, and beliefs that one learns and internalizes through various institutions and means such as culture, religion, family, education, and media. These values are continuously updated depending on the environment and the information one receives as they age and gain more experience. They can also be challenged or replaced throughout the process of unlearning and relearning. People may also resist accepting new values or minimize their exposure to new ideas.

These values can be shaped by all the factors categorized under environmental factors in the previous section describing what impacts or restricts sex, including societal expectations and community values and regulations. For instance, deeming women's sexual activity as being in

service of men versus valuing self-autonomy and independent sexual agency and pleasure for women can be seen as two ends of a continuum regarding fundamental values about sex. These beliefs can also be shaped by religion, culture, community, society, media, education, peers, family, and parents.

The impact of parents in the formation of fundamental values is very crucial since family is the first institution through which individuals learn and internalize social and behavioral values. Besides parents' attitudes toward sexual activities and any sexual education they might provide to their children, they also shape one's self-confidence and teach children self-love and autonomy. In the absence of proper support from parents for their children's life choices, and in the presence of destructive notions expressed toward their daughters, for example, making them insecure, scrutinizing their bodily appearance, criticizing their weight as being too thin or overweight, or pushing them to match the standards that exist in their society or culture, young girls' self-confidence and sense of self-love can be diminished. This can later negatively impact their sexual agency.

For example, although Nina's mother was the only parent who provided some sexual and pleasure education by giving her books about it and assuring her that she could talk about sexual topics with her, she simultaneously made Nina insecure about her body. This resulted in a lack of self-love and body ownership for many years.

On the other hand, participants who did not necessarily receive sexual education from their parents but whose parents were supportive of their life choices and did not reinforce many gendered norms, such as being treated equally compared to their brothers and being encouraged

to feel self-confident, experienced positive impacts on their sexual agency, autonomy, and sense of self-love.

Indeed, all fundamental values and beliefs, such as patriarchal values passed down through culture, family, religion, and media, can be challenged, updated, or replaced by more liberated attitudes toward women's sexuality through experiences, education, and exposure to progressive ideas in media or social movements such as #MeToo. Throughout this process of updating and change, individuals may hold contradictory fundamental values that conflict with one another.

Expectations refer to the ways and forms in which young women might anticipate their sexual encounters. Expectations are usually formed based on the fundamental values, norms, and beliefs one holds or is exposed to. However, in developing expectations, individuals often take environmental and material affordances (for example, financial independence) into consideration. Expectations can form the basis for sexual experiences and practices among young women. Since expectations are formed based on fundamental values and beliefs, if one holds contradictory values and beliefs, their expectations may also show inconsistencies, contradictions, or feelings of restriction. Expectations can also shift across different stages of life. For example, whether one is married or unmarried, young or older, a parent or not, or has changed their country of residence, all can shape how one's expectations differ across life circumstances.

Experience and practice refer to the sexual experiences and encounters young women may have in their lifetimes. Environmental affordances or restrictions, as well as partner characteristics (as elaborated in the section on interpersonal couple factors regarding what

impacts or restricts sex), can shape and influence whether young women's expectations translate into real sexual experiences and practices. The context and geopolitical environment can also impact these experiences. Restrictive laws concerning certain sexual behaviors or policies supporting women's sexual liberties can all influence the ways young women can act as agents in their sexual encounters. For example, being a sexual minority in a context where it is criminalized can restrict sexual behavior and agency in sexual experiences among young sexual minority women.

The role of sexual partners in the experience stage is crucial, as it can influence fundamental values in both positive and negative ways. Having a controlling, self-centered, or unsupportive partner can lead young women to repeatedly engage in unpleasant sexual encounters. When young women repeatedly experience negative or painful sexual encounters, especially in heterosexual relationships, it can lead them to perceive sex as disappointing or unpleasant in general, damaging their self-esteem and confidence.

For example, Mari mentioned that her ex-husband demonstrated "extreme manipulation, extreme gaslighting, extreme control," which led her to feel that she should not be assertive in sexual encounters, even after her separation and in later relationships. Similarly, Hoorah reflected on her experience with her husband, saying: "When I left home, I had that feeling that I am ugly, not sexy, with no talent, stupid, a bad wife, a bad mother. An uneducated person. All the things about a bad girl, a bad mother, a bad wife, I was bad in all of my roles."

On the other hand, a supportive partner can compensate for the lack of confidence and support that family could not provide, positively influencing young women's experiences of sexual agency. For example, Rozita, who did not receive emotional support from her family

while she was in a violent relationship when she was young and is now in a satisfactory marriage with good communication, said: “Having a partner who reassures me makes me feel I don’t need to try hard to be beautiful. Having a safe partner gives confidence.”

In addition, for some participants, certain experiences, such as shock or betrayal, became turning points that prompted them to re-evaluate their fundamental values. Ava’s experience, for instance, illustrates how a partner’s characteristics can significantly shape, or even restrict, one’s sexual activities.

Sexual experiences and practices themselves can also impact or update young women’s fundamental values and beliefs. As girls age and gain more experience, they learn more about their bodies and their bodily reactions. These experiences may encourage them to learn more about their sexual selves, educate themselves, and seek help from professionals, all of which can influence their fundamental values in an ongoing process of change and renewal.

a) *Categories of Sexual Agency*

Based on the model of “*sexual agency from formation to practice*,” I categorized the experiences of young women with their sexual agency into four main categories:

- **Habituated Traditional Sexual Agency:** sexual agency that adheres to established traditional and religious patterns. This type is very close to what Emirbayer and Mische (1998) categorized as *habituated*, referring to agency that adheres to established patterns. In this type, young women primarily believe in traditional-religious rules and regulations as their fundamental values, seeing sexual activity as acceptable only within marriage.

Their expectations align with these values, and they report achieving them in their sexual encounters. (Group 1, presented in results)

- **Anomic Sexual Agency:** Anomic Sexual Agency refers to sexual agency in which individuals challenge specific religious–traditional values that conflict with their sexual desires, for example, the belief that sex is only legitimate within marriage, while still accepting and adhering to certain restrictions, resulting in tensions and inconsistencies in their sexual lives. This form of agency is akin to what Klocker (2007) described as “thin” agency. Individuals with anomic sexual agency hold mixed value systems, combining predominantly religious–traditional beliefs with more liberal perspectives. Notions that challenge traditional and religious norms coexist uneasily with deeply ingrained convictions. This category was more common among participants who identified as religious believers, who sought to reconcile new ideas with their faith while questioning restrictive norms. These women were generally satisfied in conventional heterosexual relationships but remained critical of certain religiously rooted constraints (Group 2, presented in Results).
- **Updated Conflicted Sexual Agency:** sexual agency based on updated liberal values, though with some important restrictions and inconsistencies resulting from partners or the environment. The *updated conflicted sexual agency* category included the majority of participants (12 from uOttawa and 10 from uTehran). This group consisted primarily of graduate students in the humanities and social sciences, who were already familiar with feminist and liberatory ideas. Beyond formal education, many engaged in self-directed sexual education and expressed a strong desire for autonomy in their sexual experiences. (Group 3, presented in Results)

- **Liberated Sexual Agency:** Liberated Sexual Agency refers to sexual agency grounded in liberal sexual values and practices without restrictions. This form of agency emerges from fully liberated sexual norms and the expectation of unrestricted, satisfying sexual experiences with a supportive and communicative partner. It aligns with what Klocker (2007) terms “thick” agency or Bay-Cheng’s (2015) category of “Agents.” In this study, only one participant from uTehran, who was living and studying in Canada at the time of the interview, demonstrated liberated sexual agency (Group 4, presented in Results).

Young women may move between these categories throughout their lives and not necessarily in a linear way from *habituated traditional sexual agency* toward *liberated sexual agency*. Various life experiences, encounters with different value systems, encountering sexual violence, and changes in environmental conditions can all play roles in reforming young women’s values, expectations, and experiences with sexual agency.

Table 9 provides an overview of the types of sexual agency, from formation to practice, along with examples drawn from participants in this study.

Table 9*Types of Sexual Agency: from formation to practice characteristics*

	Values & Beliefs	Expectations	Experiences	Examples
Habituated Traditional Sexual Agency	Traditional religious	Adhering to traditional and religious values With no feeling of restrictions	Satisfactory sexual encounters within traditional religious criteria in agreement with partner	Sara (uOttawa) Yara (uTehran)
Anomic Sexual Agency	Challenging some traditional religious beliefs along with some updated values	Desiring sexual encounters with some updated values With some feelings of restriction	Depending on the level of exposure, level of religiosity, and partner agreement might experience some sexual encounters with the possibility of inconsistencies	Zohreh, Zahra, Fatima (uTehran) Layla, Siri, (uOttawa)
Updated Conflicted Sexual Agency	Holding liberal fundamental values towards sexuality	Expecting a liberated sexual activity with consideration of environmental limitations	Experiencing satisfactory encounters depends on partner characteristics and environmental constraints	Rozita, Haleh (uTehran) Susie, Willow (uOttawa)
Liberated Sexual Agency	Liberal sexual values and beliefs	Expecting a liberatory sexual encounter with no restriction	Satisfactory liberated sexual experiences in agreement with partner (if exists)	Bitra (uTehran)

- **Preventive Sexual Agency:**

In this section, I introduce another form of sexual agency, which I call “Preventive Sexual Agency.” This form of agency refers to an individual’s ability to anticipate, reduce, or respond to unwanted sexual attention or actions, particularly the risk of sexual violence. This category closely aligns with what Fahs and McClelland (2016) describe as being “protected by agency,” which conceptualizes sexual agency as a defensive resource against negative or harmful experiences. From this perspective, sexual agency has often been defined in terms of self-efficacy and the perceived ability to refuse or decline sexual invitations (Levin et al., 2012). Given that sexual violence often involves elements of surprise, unpredictability, and immediate danger, it cannot be fully controlled by survivors or potential victims. Accordingly, while the

model applies to preventive sexual agency, it cannot be assumed that individuals consistently possess or can fully exercise this form of agency. Instead, it is context-dependent, shaped by situational factors, power relations, and structural conditions, and may be mobilized to varying degrees across all four primary categories of sexual agency.

The previously introduced “Sexual Agency from Formation to Practice” model can also explain how preventive sexual agency develops. Unlike other categories, which often emerge from fundamental values and beliefs, preventive sexual agency can sometimes arise from experience and practice. For example, when children encounter sexual violence without prior knowledge about consent or sexual rights, these experiences may become the basis of their values, framing perpetrators, usually men, as dangerous. Conversely, preventive sexual agency can also develop from pre-existing fundamental values, such as knowledge about sexual violence, its existence, and protective strategies, acquired through comprehensive sex education before experiencing an incident. This underscores the importance of consent-based sexual education as a foundation for establishing protective norms and values across a society.

Fundamental values regarding sexual violence in both contexts are shaped by familial and social culture, religion, and existing policies, and are communicated through families, educational systems, and media. These values can either support women’s bodily autonomy or normalize sexual violence, increasing vulnerability. In supportive environments that foster safety, bodily autonomy, and a culture of consent, young women may expect respect and protection in society and may be able to prevent acts of violence before they occur. In contrast, in the absence of such support, and where cultural norms reinforce rape culture, young women are socialized to remain vigilant and cautious at all times, highlighting the limitations imposed on preventive sexual agency by systemic and structural factors.

Due to a high level of distrust in the state and institutions in Iran, participants from uTehran generally had negative expectations of the system and did not anticipate support from policies, even if they existed. In contrast, participants from uOttawa generally assume that the system provides supportive and effective protection. Iranian participants who had migrated to Canada initially expected the Canadian system to be supportive and capable of preventing sexual violence. However, when some of these participants experienced sexual violence at work or school in Canada, they did not receive survivor-centered support, prompting them to re-evaluate and update their fundamental values and beliefs. This experience revealed the persistence of hidden neoliberal patriarchal values and systemic sexism, even within a sexually liberal context, and reshaped their expectations regarding institutional protection and sexual safety. Additionally, feminist social movements in both contexts influenced young women's values, fostering a climate of change in discourse, challenging rape culture, demanding equal rights, and holding the state and perpetrators accountable. These experiences, however, may produce either divergent or convergent outcomes depending on context, prior experiences, and access to supportive networks.

Conclusion

This study sets out to address persistent gaps in the literature that insufficiently examine how women's sexual agency is shaped across diverse geographical, socio-cultural, political, and legal contexts, leaving experiences outside Western settings underrepresented. Prior research has rarely examined the relationship between women's sexual agency and the forms and prevalence of sexual violence (SV) they encounter, nor has it systematically compared how state and institutional policies shape sexual practices and experiences of SV across contexts such as Iran and Canada. In addition, despite documented global increases in sexual violence against women during COVID-19 lockdowns, the effects of the pandemic on dating practices, sexual behavior, and exposure to SV among graduate students have remained largely overlooked.

To address these gaps, this research employed a qualitative comparative design based on in-depth interviews with 31 graduate women in the humanities and social sciences, 16 at the University of Ottawa and 15 at the University of Tehran. This comparative approach demonstrates how differing legal, cultural, and institutional contexts in Canada and Iran shape women's sexual agency, lived experiences of sexuality, and exposure to sexual violence, revealing how distinct socio-political conditions produce varied forms of harm as well as different strategies of navigation, resistance, and response. Guided by a hybrid theoretical framework integrating feminist materialism, intersectionality, and biopolitical analysis, the study addressed four research questions examining how female graduate students in Iran and Canada experience and enact sexual agency and sexual pleasure; how state and institutional protective and preventive policies shape their sexual practices; what forms of sexual violence they encounter and how

university and state policies influence these experiences; and how the COVID-19 pandemic transformed their sexual lives and exposure to sexual violence across the two contexts.

The experiences of female graduate students in Iran and Canada with dating, intimacy, sexual agency, and sexual pleasure are shaped by several shared, pre-existing cultural forces rooted in patriarchal neoliberal capitalism. In both contexts, these forces contribute to the formation of multiple forms of sexage (Guillaumin, 1996), through which women's time, emotional labor, and care work are appropriated and sexual injunctions are normalized. Within the era of emotional capitalism (Illouz, 2017), young women engage in dating and intimate practices while actively constructing cultural templates of selfhood and negotiating forms of self-liberation, all while navigating conditions of "ontological uncertainty" (Illouz, 2021). Dating unfolds as a "numbers game" (Heino et al., 2010), intensified by processes of social acceleration (Rosa, 2013), in which "to be is to be updated" (Chun, 2016, p.2), rendering intimacy increasingly precarious and temporally demanding especially regarding women who are expected to conform to specific look.

In the Canadian context, sexual liberation movements within a democratic framework have shaped socio-political, legal, and regulatory systems aimed at protecting women's sexual rights and preventing sexual violence. However, the persistence of patriarchal norms, reproduced through media, informal education, religion, and intensified by neoliberal capitalism, means that young women's dating and sexual lives remain deeply structured by the sex-gender system (Rubin, 1975). Rather than dismantling patriarchal logics, sexual liberation has often transformed the modalities through which women's bodies, time, and affective labor are appropriated, thereby reproducing sexism in new forms. The expansion of patriarchal capitalism within

neoliberal contexts has also occurred alongside the absence of comprehensive sex and pleasure education capable of challenging patriarchal sexual values and replacing them with genuinely emancipatory norms. As a result, sexual liberation in Canada has not fully liberated women but has instead reshaped practices of objectification and extraction.

In Iran, patriarchal capitalism is reinforced by state regulatory regimes that explicitly govern and control women's sexuality through legal, religious, and biopolitical mechanisms (Foucault, 2007). Yet within a globalized and digitally connected world, accelerated social change has enabled young women to navigate, resist, and at times bypass these restrictions. Despite intensive surveillance and the criminalization of non-marital and non-heterosexual sexual practices, many women engage in dating and sexual relationships outside of marriage, utilizing digital platforms and social media as "third spaces" for intimacy and connection. Nonetheless, the convergence of patriarchal capitalism with state and religious authority continues to shape Iranian women's values, norms, and expectations, fostering deep mistrust toward institutions perceived not as protective but as mechanisms of enforcement and sexualized violence against women.

Across both contexts, the intersecting positions of marginalized women (Crenshaw, 1989) heighten vulnerability in dating and intimate relationships. Economic precarity within neoliberal capitalist systems limits women's ability to negotiate consent, safety, and pleasure. Migrant or newcomer status further compounds these vulnerabilities through cultural unfamiliarity, social isolation, language barriers, and restricted access to support networks. In Iran, sexual orientation represents an additional axis of marginalization, as the criminalization of non-heterosexual identities severely constrains the safety, quality, and visibility of dating and sexual experiences.

In the context of patriarchal capitalism within neoliberal systems, which appropriates women's bodies in various forms and operates alongside the absence of comprehensive sexual and pleasure education, young women initially understand and enact their sexual agency primarily through a patriarchal capitalist lens. Over time, however, as they gain experience and access feminist ideas through their studies, social networks, feminist circles, and digital media, they engage in self-education, updating their values and norms to exercise and negotiate sexual agency within these restrictive contexts. However, it is important to note that relying on social media as the primary source of self-directed sex education may create certain limitations, particularly by reproducing ideological echo chambers (Staggenborg & Ramos, 2023). In addition, it is essential to acknowledge the importance of access to the internet and the existence of infrastructure, as unequal access may further marginalize some women by restricting their ability to engage in the free flow of data and information. Feminist social movements play a key role in this process, providing a sense of collectivity and framing sexual rights and agency as systemic rather than individual issues. Yet, the pervasive logic of patriarchal capitalism presents risks: for example, using pornography as a source of sexual education can inadvertently reinforce commodified and patriarchal notions of sexuality. Some women, informed by feminist activism, seek alternatives, such as ethical pornography, to navigate these challenges.

The absence of formal education that secures equal sexual rights compels young women to educate themselves within the neoliberal logic, addressing sexual and pleasure-related issues individually rather than collectively. Digital platforms have transformed this process, enabling young women to access education, connect with feminist movements, and mobilize globally to challenge systemic oppression, transcending geographical boundaries. While previous research has highlighted the role of parents in shaping sexual agency, this study emphasizes the critical

role of supportive partners in fostering “agentic sexual agency.” Parental openness alone is insufficient if it does not cultivate a sense of bodily autonomy and self-worth; conversely, parents who demonstrate respect and support for their daughters’ decisions, even without explicit conversations about sex, can positively influence their sexual confidence and agency.

Exercising sexual agency remains a constant challenge due to the lack of education and the prevalence of patriarchal and capitalist norms that commodify women’s bodies and place them under social, religious, and market scrutiny. Over time, women may gain agency through experience and age, yet age can also limit their capacity to navigate the capitalist sexual market, as societal standards often devalue women’s sexual worth with age. In both Canada and Iran, the patriarchal capitalist sex-gender system normalizes the appropriation of women’s sexuality, and the presence of protective policies alone does not automatically transform deeply ingrained norms and values. Therefore, to challenge these norms and shift rape culture toward a framework that respects women’s sexual autonomy and prioritizes women’s pleasure, a comprehensive and systemic approach to sexual and pleasure education is necessary—one that complements existing policies and legislation. In Iran, restrictive policies actively limit sexual agency, adding layers of legal and biopolitical control that prevent young women from fully becoming agentic sexual agents. By contrast, changes in geopolitical context or the implementation of policies that secure equal sexual rights can update young women’s expectations, values, and practices, allowing them to exercise agency more fully. Overall, the development of sexual agency is an ongoing, lifelong process, continuously shaped and reshaped by social, cultural, legal, and political conditions (see Figure 2).

Forms of sexual violence experienced by female graduate students in Iran and Canada were largely similar, although public verbal or physical harassment on the street was more

prevalent in Iran. This disparity may reflect the absence of clear protective policies, the lack of dominant sexual rights narratives, and the pervasive biopolitical regulation of women's bodies by the state, including mandatory hijab laws that structure women's visibility in public space. Such regulatory regimes can indirectly contribute to conditions in which perpetrators perceive greater latitude to enact sexual violence in public settings, where accountability and institutional protection are often limited. While many Iranian women resist these restrictive regulations and engage in sexual and dating activities outside marriage, state-enforced control over women's bodies contributes to normalized gender-based violence (GBV), reinforced by a culture of victim-blaming that further heightens women's vulnerability.

In Canada, despite the existence of numerous policies aimed at securing women's sexual rights and preventing sexual violence, young women still frequently experience sexual violence, with patterns broadly comparable to those in Iran, aside from lower rates of street harassment. This similarity reflects the underlying patriarchal capitalist sex/gender system present in both contexts, where sexual violence operates as one mechanism through which women's bodies and time are appropriated. Under neoliberal logic, moral action is framed as achieving personal desires through competition, often disregarding the autonomy or well-being of others (Downey et al., 2023). Within this framework, men in positions of power may exploit women sexually, with societal norms, religion, and media providing tacit approval, while survivors experience insecurity, isolation, and stigma. Religious and cultural interpretations that associate sex with guilt or sin further suppress discussion of sexual violence and limit women's access to supportive frameworks.

The presence of policies in Canada contributes to shifting public discourse and partially deterring perpetrators in visible spaces, yet in practice, sexual violence persists in workplaces

and campuses due to low awareness among women, isolation in graduate student populations, and performative, non-survivor-centered institutional responses (Ostrich, 2025). In Iran, the absence of supportive policies reinforces women's mistrust in the system's ability to protect their sexual rights.

In both contexts, feminist movements play a crucial role in raising awareness, creating networks and communities, challenging sexist patriarchal norms, and providing collective empowerment (Wiens et al., 2021). Movements such as #MeToo in Canada and grassroots campaigns in Iran have helped create public discourse on sexual violence, reduce victim-blaming, and foster resistance to GBV. Nonetheless, as long as patriarchal capitalism continues to commodify women's sexuality and enforce sexage, institutional policies alone cannot prevent sexual violence; systemic cultural change remains necessary to disrupt the cycle of exploitation and control over women's bodies.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected graduate students' sexual practices and exposure to sexual violence in remarkably similar ways across these two distinct socio-cultural and legal contexts. State-enforced lockdowns and COVID-19 measures in both settings made women's experiences even more alike than before. During confinement, young women in graduate school became increasingly isolated and detached from their support networks, with marginalized populations facing heightened vulnerability. Rising anxiety and loneliness prompted a shift to digital spaces, normalizing dating and social interaction through online platforms. Health restrictions limited opportunities for social engagement, and those who did meet new people were more vulnerable due to the absence of community support and safe public spaces.

For some, the pandemic offered a chance to slow down and strengthen connections with partners, but for others, it forced them to remain in abusive relationships due to limited options and mobility. In the neoliberal context, the pandemic reinforced state control over daily life, rendering issues such as sexual violence secondary, with women left to navigate risks with minimal resources. Despite rising reports of sexual violence and increasing public awareness, institutions, including the University of Tehran, failed to implement supportive policies or resources for students during COVID-19. At the University of Ottawa, survivor-centered policies were not introduced; only general statements were issued, leaving most students in both contexts feeling unsupported.

Although the types of sexual violence experienced during the pandemic mirrored pre-pandemic patterns, women's vulnerability was heightened. This demonstrates that in a patriarchal neoliberal capitalist world, crises like COVID-19 can push women's security and rights to the margins. These conditions underscore the urgent need for cultural change, including transforming rape culture into a culture of consent and safety during "normal" times, to ensure better protection, agency, and equitable life experiences for women during future crises.

After the sexual liberation movement, which largely shifted sex into the private realm and expanded women's control over when and how to engage in sexual activity, as well as access to birth control, patriarchy quickly reasserted its dominance over women's bodies. Liberated sex was re-appropriated: women continued to be positioned as sexual objects, expected to welcome unsolicited desire, and rendered vulnerable to disrespect and violence. The critical missing component of sexual liberation was comprehensive education; without it, liberation remained partial and fragile.

In the absence of widespread, comprehensive sexual and pleasure education grounded in equality, patriarchal norms persist through family, religion, and the patriarchal media market across both contexts. In Iran and parts of the Middle East, the state further enforces restrictive policies that directly regulate women's sexuality. Together, these institutions generate broadly similar lived experiences for young women in both Iran and Canada, despite their distinct legal and cultural frameworks. Although the Canadian state formally endorses individual liberty, the lack of a coherent national framework for sexuality and pleasure education, combined with limited cultural shifts away from rape culture toward consent and safety, forces women to navigate sexuality within fragmented, contradictory normative environments. As a result, women remain exposed to violence and stigma through the cumulative effects of these regulatory structures.

The *Model of Sexual Agency: From Formation to Practice* elucidates the dynamic interplay among fundamental values, expectations, and experiences. Values, shaped by family, culture, religion, media, and education, evolve through exposure to alternative perspectives, with parents playing a pivotal role in fostering self-confidence, bodily autonomy, and self-worth. Expectations derived from these values inform anticipations of sexual encounters and shift across life stages and social environments. Experiences, in turn, reshape both values and expectations, as supportive or controlling partners and contextual conditions can either expand or constrain agency. From this model emerged four forms of sexual agency, habituated traditional, anomic, updated conflicted, and liberated, reflecting varying degrees of autonomy, constraint, and alignment between values, expectations, and practices. Crucially, the model demonstrates that sexual agency is not fixed but develops across the life course and can be transformed through exposure to new norms and contexts.

Addressing sexual agency and sexual violence therefore requires the transformation of fundamental values and norms. Patriarchal culture continues to suppress women's agency and reproduce cycles of sexage, yet these cycles can be disrupted through collective resistance. Structural problems cannot be resolved through individual strategies alone; sustained support from friends, partners, and broader feminist alliances is essential. In Western contexts, patriarchal claims over women's bodies persisted even after sexual liberation, with the pervasiveness of sexual violence becoming more visible through movements such as #MeToo. Enabled by digital connectivity, these movements fostered collective recognition and solidarity; however, acknowledgment without institutional and cultural change remains insufficient.

Education is central to dismantling rape culture. Young people must be taught not only what constitutes acceptable sexual behavior, but also how to exercise sexual agency, respect consent, and engage ethically with others. This education should also address how systems of domination, such as patriarchy, feudalism, and heteronormative social orders, and forms of economic capture, such as scopic, emotional, and surveillance capitalism in the neoliberal era, operate and shape sexual relations. Reliance on families alone is inadequate; sexuality is a social issue that demands standardized, inclusive, and continuously updated education. In the absence of such education, women are often compelled to self-educate through patriarchal and commercialized channels, most notably the pornography industry, thereby reinforcing exploitation under neoliberal capitalism. Comprehensive sexual and pleasure education is therefore essential to interrupt cycles of sexual violence, challenge patriarchal appropriation of women's bodies, and foster agency at both individual and cultural levels.

It is also important to reflect on my positionality in concluding this study. As an Iranian diasporic woman conducting research across Canada and Iran, and working between Farsi and

English, my standpoint has shaped both the possibilities and limitations of this research. This positionality facilitated access to participants, fostered trust, and enabled a more culturally nuanced reading of sexuality, gender norms, and institutional dynamics. At the same time, it required ongoing reflexivity in navigating insider/outsider positioning, managing translation across linguistic and cultural contexts, and avoiding over-identification with participants' experiences. My in-betweenness made certain dynamics more visible, particularly around autonomy, sexuality, and gendered regulation, while also demanding careful attention to how meaning is interpreted and represented. Ultimately, this research is co-constructed through relational encounters, and my positionality is an active part of how knowledge was produced and understood.

Future research could further develop and test the analytical framework used in this study across different populations and institutional contexts. In particular, examining second- and fourth-generation immigrant students in Canada would deepen understanding of how migration histories, racialization processes, and generational positioning shape experiences and interpretations of sexual violence within higher education. Applying the model in other national and institutional settings would also strengthen its analytical robustness by clarifying how disciplinary power, biopolitical governance, and patriarchal–neoliberal structures operate under different cultural and policy regimes. These comparative extensions would refine the conceptual tools developed here and expand their applicability for analyzing gendered violence across diverse contexts. More broadly, this direction contributes to advancing feminist scholarship and informing more context-sensitive educational practices and policy responses that better address the structural conditions shaping sexual violence. This research concludes by emphasizing the urgency of mobilizing toward a fifth wave of feminist activism centered on comprehensive

sexual education. While self-education in the digital age is important, it must be complemented by unified, state-supported programs. Education spanning from elementary school through university and workplace training can socialize all members of society, including men, around consent, pleasure, and bodily autonomy. Such initiatives must also engage conservative, newcomer, and religious communities to cultivate a culture that affirms women's sexual agency and actively challenges patriarchal heterocentered norms. When paired with supportive policies, comprehensive education holds the potential to reshape expectations, reduce sexual violence, and promote a culture grounded in consent, autonomy, and sexual well-being.

References

- Abbey, A., & McAuslan, P. (2004). A longitudinal examination of male college students' perpetration of sexual assault. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 72*(5), 747.
- Abbey, A., Wegner, R., Pierce, J., & Jacques-Tiura, A. J. (2012). Patterns of sexual aggression in a community sample of young men: Risk factors associated with persistence, desistance, and initiation over a 1-year interval. *Psychology of Violence, 2*(1), 1.
- Abboud, S., Lanier, Y., Sweet Jemmott, L., & Sommers, M. S. (2019). Navigating virginites: Enactment of sexual agency among Arab women in the USA. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 21*(10), 1103–1116. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2018.1539249>
- Abdi, S., & Van Gilder, B. (2016). Cultural (in)visibility and identity dissonance: Queer Iranian-American women and their negotiation of existence. *Journal of International and Intercultural Communication, 9*(1), 69–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17513057.2016.1120850>
- Abdmolaei, S. (2014). (Re)Fashioning resistance. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ame.2014.090204>
- Abraham, M., & Tastsoglou, E. (2016). Addressing domestic violence in Canada and the United States: The uneasy co-habitation of women and the state. *Current Sociology, 64*(4), 568–585. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392116639221>
- Abramova, O., Baumann, A., Krasnova, H., & Buxmann, P. (2016). Gender differences in online dating: What do we know so far? A systematic literature review. *2016 49th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)*, 3858–3867. <https://doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2016.481>
- Adams, C. J. (2015). Consumer vision: Speciesism, misogyny, and media. In *Critical animal and media studies* (pp. 56–73). Routledge. <https://api.taylorfrancis.com/content/chapters/edit/download?identifierName=doi&identifierValue=10.4324/9781315731674-12&type=chapterpdf>
- Adkins, L., & Leonard, D. (1996). Reconstructing French feminism: Commodification, materialism and sex. *Feminist Perspectives on the Past and Present Advisory Editorial Board, 1*.
- Afary, J. (2009). *Sexual politics in modern Iran*. Cambridge University Press. <https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=NQaNBOdRGP4C>
- Aghtaie, N. (2011). Breaking the silence: Rape law in Iran and controlling women's sexuality. *International Approaches to Rape, 121*.
- Ahmed, M. Z., Ahmed, O., Aibao, Z., Hanbin, S., Siyu, L., & Ahmad, A. (2020). Epidemic of COVID-19 in China and associated psychological problems. *Asian Journal of Psychiatry, 51*, 102092.

- Alarcão, V., Stefanovska-Petkovska, M., Candeias, P., & Pascoal, P. M. (2022). Exploring intersectional variations in sexual pleasure, sexual autonomy, and important correlates. *Social Sciences, 11*(11), 496.
- Alford, S., Cheetham, N., & Hauser, D. (2005). *Science & success in developing countries: Holistic programs that work to prevent teen pregnancy, HIV & sexually transmitted infections*. Advocates for Youth.
- Anderson, G. D. (2014). Child sexual abuse prevention policy: An analysis of Erin's Law. *Social Work in Public Health, 29*(3), 196–206. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19371918.2013.776321>
- Ansari, U., Cobham, B., Etim, E. M., Ahamad, H. M., Owan, N. O., Tijani, Y., Cockcroft, A., & Andersson, N. (2017). Insights into intimate partner violence in pregnancy: Findings from a cross-sectional study in two states in Nigeria. *Violence Against Women, 23*(4), 469–481. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801216644072>
- Arjmand, R., & Ziari, M. (2020). Sexuality and concealment among Iranian young women. *Sexualities, 23*(3), 393–405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460718797047>
- Armstrong, E. A., England, P., & Fogarty, A. C. K. (2012). Accounting for women's orgasm and sexual enjoyment in college hookups and relationships. *American Sociological Review, 77*(3), 435–462. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412445802>
- Armstrong, E. A., Gleckman-Krut, M., & Johnson, L. (2018). Silence, power, and inequality: An intersectional approach to sexual violence. *Annual Review of Sociology, 44*, 99–122. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-soc-073117-041410>
- Armstrong, E. A., Hamilton, L., & Sweeney, B. (2006). Sexual assault on campus: A multilevel, integrative approach to party rape. *Social Problems, 53*(4), 483–499.
- AsrIran. (2020). Statistics regarding women and children's sexual harassment in Iran. <https://www.asriran.com/fa/news/742607>
- Atkins, D. N., & Bradford, W. D. (2021). The effect of state-level sex education policies on youth sexual behaviors. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 50*(6), 2321–2333. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-020-01867-9>
- Attwood, F., Smith, C., & Barker, M. (2018). 'I'm just curious and still exploring myself': Young people and pornography. *New Media & Society, 20*(10), 3738–3759. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818759271>
- Australian Human Rights Commission. (n.d.). Australian Government. Retrieved January 22, 2026, from <https://www.ag.gov.au/rights-and-protections/human-rights-and-anti-discrimination/australian-human-rights-commission>

- Averett, S. L., Rees, D. I., & Argys, L. M. (2002). The impact of government policies and neighborhood characteristics on teenage sexual activity and contraceptive use. *American Journal of Public Health, 92*(11), 1773–1778. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.92.11.1773>
- Azéma, C., Cardoso, S., & Monjou, M. (2010). Émergences du design et complexité sémantique des sextoys. <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers/drs2010/researchpapers/4/>
- Ballester-Arnal, R., Castro-Calvo, J., García-Barba, M., Ruiz-Palomino, E., & Gil-Llario, M. D. (2021). Problematic and non-problematic engagement in online sexual activities across the lifespan. *Computers in Human Behavior, 120*, 106774.
- Barcelos, C. A., & Gubrium, A. C. (2014). Reproducing stories: Strategic narratives of teen pregnancy and motherhood. *Social Problems, 61*(3), 466–481.
- Barnett, M. D., Moore, J. M., Woolford, B. A., & Riggs, S. A. (2018). Interest in partner orgasm: Sex differences and relationships with attachment strategies. *Personality and Individual Differences, 124*, 194–200. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.paid.2017.12.016>
- Basmechi, F. (2023). *The Iranian #MeToo movement* [Unpublished manuscript or Doctoral dissertation].
- Basmechi, F., Barnes, D., & Heydari, M. (2022). Hashtag activism: Tactical maneuvering in an online anti-mandatory hijab movement. *Sociological Spectrum, 42*(1), 18–39. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02732173.2021.2024467>
- Bastian, S. C. (2021). *Sexual pleasure across the life course: Heterosexual women's narratives* (Publication No. 287697161) [Master's thesis, California State University, Northridge]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Bauman, Z. (2013). *Liquid love: On the frailty of human bonds*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Bay-Cheng, L. Y. (2015). The agency line: A neoliberal metric for appraising young women's sexuality. *Sex Roles, 73*(7–8), 279–291. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-015-0526-y>
- Bay-Cheng, L. Y. (2019). Agency is everywhere, but agency is not enough: A conceptual analysis of young women's sexual agency. *The Journal of Sex Research, 56*(4–5), 462–474. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2019.1578330>
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2009). Losing the traditional: Individualization and 'precarious freedoms.' In *Identity in Question* (pp. 13–36). SAGE Publications.
- Bell, S. A. (2012). Young people and sexual agency in rural Uganda. *Culture, Health & Sexuality, 14*(3), 283–296. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2011.635808>
- Belsey, C. (1994). Postmodern love: Questioning the metaphysics of desire. *New Literary History, 25*(3), 683–705. <https://doi.org/10.2307/469471>

- Bendroth, M. L. (1996). *Fundamentalism and gender, 1875 to the present*. Yale University Press.
- Benoit, C., Shumka, L., Phillips, R., Kennedy, M. C., & Belle-Isle, L. M. (2015). *Issue brief: Sexual violence against women in Canada* (Vol. 33). Status of Women Canada. <https://refugeereseach.net/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Benoit-et-al-2015.-Issue-brief-Sexual-violence-against-women-in-Canada.pdf>
- Bhuptani, P. H., & Messman-Moore, T. L. (2019). Blame and shame in sexual assault. In W. T. O'Donohue & P. A. Schewe (Eds.), *Handbook of sexual assault and sexual assault prevention* (pp. 309–322). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-23645-8_18
- Blackledge, C. (2004). *The story of V: A natural history of female sexuality*. Rutgers University Press.
- Blair, S. L., & Madigan, T. J. (2016). Dating attitudes and expectations among young Chinese adults: An examination of gender differences. *The Journal of Chinese Sociology*, 3(1), Article 12. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40711-016-0034-1>
- Bloom, B. E., Sorin, C. R., Oaks, L., & Wagman, J. A. (2023). Graduate students' knowledge and utilization of campus sexual violence and sexual harassment resources. *Journal of American College Health*, 71(5), 1328–1331. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2021.1942010>
- Bonilla-Zorita, G., Griffiths, M. D., & Kuss, D. J. (2021). Online dating and problematic use: A systematic review. *International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction*, 19(6), 2245–2278. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11469-020-00318-9>
- Borumandnia, N., Khadembashi, N., Tabatabaei, M., & Alavi Majd, H. (2020). The prevalence rate of sexual violence worldwide: A trend analysis. *BMC Public Health*, 20(1), Article 1835. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09926-5>
- Boryczka, J. (2009). Whose responsibility? The politics of sex education policy in the United States. *Politics & Gender*, 5(2), 185–210. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X09000154>
- Bowling, J., Montanaro, E., Guerrero-Ordóñez, S., Joshi, S., & Gioia, D. (2021). Perceived changes in sexuality during the COVID-19 pandemic among adults in the United States. *Sexes*, 2(3), 268–281. <https://doi.org/10.3390/sexes2030026>
- Bozon, M. (2008). Les pratiques et rencontres sexuelles: Un répertoire qui s'élargit [Sexual practices and encounters: A widening repertoire]. *Sociétés contemporaines*, (71), 31–55.
- Branch, L. S. (2024). *Criminal Code, RSC 1985, c C-46, s 271*. Government of Canada. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/c-46/section-271.html>
- Braun, V., Gavey, N., & McPhillips, K. (2003). The 'fair deal'? Unpacking accounts of reciprocity in heterosexual. *Sexualities*, 6(2), 237–261. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460703006002005>

- Breiding, M. J., Basile, K. C., Klevens, J., & Smith, S. G. (2017). Economic insecurity and intimate partner and sexual violence victimization. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 53(4), 457–464. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.amepre.2017.03.021>
- Brodie, J. (2007). Canada's three Ds: The rise and decline of the gender-based policy capacity. In *Remapping Gender in the New Global Order* (pp. 180–198). Routledge.
- Broidy, L., Cauffman, E., Espelage, D. L., Mazerolle, P., & Piquero, A. (2003). Sex differences in empathy and its relation to juvenile offending. *Violence and Victims*, 18(5), 503–516.
- Brown, S. L., & Shinohara, S. K. (2013). Dating relationships in older adulthood: A national portrait. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 75(5), 1194–1202. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12065>
- Bryant, J., & Schofield, T. (2007). Feminine sexual subjectivities: Bodies, agency and life history. *Sexualities*, 10(3), 321–340. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460707078321>
- Cacioppo, J. T., Cacioppo, S., Gonzaga, G. C., Ogburn, E. L., & VanderWeele, T. J. (2013). Marital satisfaction and break-ups differ across on-line and off-line meeting venues. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 110(25), 10135–10140. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1222447110>
- Camerini, L., & Diviani, N. (2012). Activism, health and the Net: Are new media shaping our perception of uncertainty? *Interactions: Studies in Communication & Culture*, 3(3), 335–343. https://doi.org/10.1386/iscc.3.3.335_1
- Cameron, J. J., & Curry, E. (2020). Gender roles and date context in hypothetical scripts for a woman and a man on a first date in the twenty-first century. *Sex Roles*, 82(5–6), 345–362. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-019-01056-6>
- Campbell, J. (1988). Pornography: Is it a feminist issue? *Australian Feminist Studies*, 3(7–8), 155–169. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08164649.1988.9961611>
- Canadian Red Cross. (2021, December 9). *The shadow pandemic: Increased sexual- and gender-based violence during COVID-19*. <https://www.redcross.ca/blog/2021/12/the-shadow-pandemic-increased-sexual-and-gender-based-violence-during-covid-19>
- Canadian Women's Foundation. (2022, November 22). *The facts about sexual assault and harassment*. <https://canadianwomen.org/the-facts/sexual-assault-harassment/>
- Candel, O.-S., & Jitaru, M. (2021). COVID-19 and romantic relationships. *Encyclopedia*, 1(4), 1162–1172. <https://doi.org/10.3390/encyclopedia1040088>
- Cantor, D., Fisher, B., Chibnall, S. H., Townsend, R., Lee, H., Thomas, G., Bruce, C., & Westat, I. (2015). *Report on the AAU campus climate survey on sexual assault and sexual misconduct*. Association of American Universities.

- Cao, L. (2023). Intersectional highlighting in queer immigrants' English learning through dating: Dominant ideologies, individual agency, and implications for second language education. *Linguistics and Education*, 78, Article 101254. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.linged.2023.101254>
- Cao, W., Fang, Z., Hou, G., Han, M., Xu, X., Dong, J., & Zheng, J. (2020). The psychological impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on college students in China. *Psychiatry Research*, 287, Article 112934. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.psychres.2020.112934>
- Carr, J. L., & VanDeusen, K. M. (2004). Risk factors for male sexual aggression on college campuses. *Journal of Family Violence*, 19(5), 279–289. <https://doi.org/10.1023/B:JOFV.0000042078.10908.20>
- Carroll, W. K., & Shaw, M. (2001). Consolidating a neoliberal policy bloc in Canada, 1976 to 1996. *Canadian Public Policy / Analyse de Politiques*, 27(2), 195–217. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3552174>
- Carter, J. (2012). What is commitment? Women's accounts of intimate attachment. *Families, Relationships and Societies*, 1(2), 137–153. <https://doi.org/10.1332/204674312X641215>
- Carter, J. (2017). Why marry? The role of tradition in women's marital aspirations. *Sociological Research Online*, 22(1), 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.4162>
- Carter, J., & Duncan, S. (2017). Wedding paradoxes: Individualized conformity and the 'perfect day.' *The Sociological Review*, 65(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12366>
- Catlin, M., Scherr, K. C., Barlett, C. P., Jacobs, E., & Normile, C. J. (2021). Bounded blame: The effects of victim–perpetrator relationship and victimization history on judgments of sexual violence. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(15–16), NP8800–NP8823. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260519846863>
- Cense, M. (2019). Rethinking sexual agency: Proposing a multicomponent model based on young people's life stories. *Sex Education*, 19(3), 247–262. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2018.1535968>
- Chadwick, S. B., Raisanen, J. C., Goldey, K. L., & van Anders, S. (2018). Strategizing to make pornography worthwhile: A qualitative exploration of women's agentic engagement with sexual media. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 47, 1853–1868. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-018-1202-3>
- Chandra, J. (2020, April 2). National Commission for Women records a rise in complaints since the start of lockdown. *The Hindu*. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/national-commission-for-women-records-a-rise-in-complaints-since-the-start-of-lockdown/article31241492.ece>
- Cheng, S. (2016). Neoliberalizing sex, normativizing love. In S. Springer, K. Birch, & J. MacLeavy (Eds.), *Handbook of neoliberalism* (pp. 227–236). Routledge.

- Chico, E. A. (2018). *Sexual agency during adolescence: Relationships, desire and negotiation* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Illinois at Chicago]. Indigo.
- Chmielewski, J. F., Bowman, C. P., & Tolman, D. L. (2020). Pathways to pleasure and protection: Exploring embodiment, desire, and entitlement to pleasure as predictors of Black and White young women's sexual agency. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 44(3), 307–322. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684320917395>
- Christie, N. (1986). The ideal victim. In E. A. Fattah (Ed.), *From crime policy to victim policy* (pp. 17–30). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-08305-3_2
- Christopher, F. S., & Frandsen, M. M. (1990). Strategies of influence in sex and dating. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 7(1), 89–105. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407590071005>
- Chun, W. H. K. (2016). *Updating to remain the same: Habitual new media*. MIT Press.
- Ciclitira, K. (2004). Pornography, women and feminism: Between pleasure and politics. *Sexualities*, 7(3), 281–301. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1363460704040143>
- Clark, L., & Stitzlein, S. M. (2018). Neoliberal narratives and the logic of abstinence only education: Why are we still having this conversation? *Gender and Education*, 30(3), 322–340. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2016.1203883>
- Collins, P. H. (2017). On violence, intersectionality and transversal politics. *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 40(9), 1460–1473. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2017.1317827>
- Colpitts, E. M. (2022). ‘Not even close to enough:’ sexual violence, intersectionality, and the neoliberal university. *Gender and Education*, 34(2), 151–166. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09540253.2021.1924362>
- Comunello, F., Parisi, L., & Ieracitano, F. (2021). Negotiating gender scripts in mobile dating apps: Between affordances, usage norms and practices. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(8), 1140–1156. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2020.1787485>
- Connell, R. (2010). Understanding neoliberalism. In A. Saad-Filho & D. Johnston (Eds.), *Neoliberalism: A Critical Reader*. Pluto Press.
- Conroy, S. (2021). Spousal violence in Canada, 2019. *Juristat: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics*, 4–39. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2021001/article/00016-eng.htm>
- Coontz, S. (2006). *Marriage, a history: How love conquered marriage*. Penguin Books.
- Corsianos, M. (2007). Mainstream pornography and “women”: Questioning sexual agency. *Critical Sociology*, 33(5–6), 863–885. <https://doi.org/10.1163/156916307X230359>

- Cotter, A., & Savage, L. (2019). Gender-based violence and unwanted sexual behaviour in Canada, 2018: Initial findings from the Survey of Safety in Public and Private Spaces. *Juristat: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics*, 1–49. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2019001/article/00017-eng.htm>
- Crenshaw, K. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 1989(1), 139–168.
- Curtin, N., Ward, L. M., Merriwether, A., & Caruthers, A. (2011). Femininity ideology and sexual health in young women: A focus on sexual knowledge, embodiment, and agency. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 23(1), 48–62. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2010.524694>
- Dahlberg, L. L., & Krug, E. G. (2006). Violence: A global public health problem. *Ciência & Saúde Coletiva*, 11(2), 277–292. <https://doi.org/10.1590/S1413-81232006000200007>
- Damari, B., Tabrizchi, N., & Riazi-Isfahani, S. (2016). Designing a national plan for improving sexual health in Iran: An experience of an Islamic country. *Medical Journal of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, 30, Article 407.
- Daskalopoulou, A., & Zanette, M. C. (2020). Women’s consumption of pornography: Pleasure, contestation, and empowerment. *Sociology*, 54(5), 969–986. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0038038520918847>
- De Beauvoir, S. (1949). *The second sex*. Knopf.
- Dean Marshall, N., Partridge, B. J., Mason, J., Purba, C., Sian, A., Tanner, J., & Martin, R. (2023). “It’s gone from more of convenience to necessity at this point”: Exploring online dating use in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic: A thematic analysis. *Social Sciences*, 12(10), Article 567. <https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci12100567>
- DeGue, S., Massetti, G. M., Holt, M. K., Tharp, A. T., Valle, L. A., Matjasko, J. L., & Lippy, C. (2013). Identifying links between sexual violence and youth violence perpetration: New opportunities for sexual violence prevention. *Psychology of Violence*, 3(2), 140–156. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0031548>
- Dehkordi, A. H., & Heydari, H. (2024). The prevalence of domestic violence in Iran: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Jundishapur Journal of Chronic Disease Care*, 14(1), Article e138870. <https://doi.org/10.5812/jjcdc-138870>
- DeMatteo, D., Murphy, M., Galloway, M., & Krauss, D. A. (2015). A national survey of United States sexually violent person legislation: Policy, procedures, and practice. *International Journal of Forensic Mental Health*, 14(4), 245–266. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14999013.2015.1110847>
- Department of Justice Canada. (2025, October 27). *Minister Fraser, Premier Eby, and Attorney General Sharma underscore collaboration behind Canada’s new bail and sentencing reforms*.

Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/department-justice/news/2025/10/minister-fraser-premier-ebby-and-attorney-general-sharma-underscore-collaboration-behind-canadas-new-bail-and-sentencing-reforms.html>

- Dlamini, N. J. (2021). Gender-based violence, twin pandemic to COVID-19. *Critical Sociology*, 47(4–5), 583–590. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0896920520975465>
- Doan, T. T. (2010). *Online dating: Determining the presence of a stigma* (Publication No. 763418263) [Doctoral dissertation, Adler School of Professional Psychology]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.
- Douglass, C. H., Wright, C. J., Davis, A. C., & Lim, M. S. (2018). Correlates of in-person and technology-facilitated sexual harassment from an online survey among young Australians. *Sexual Health*, 15(4), 361–365. <https://doi.org/10.1071/SH17180>
- Downey, L., Iacobucci, A., & Pyles, M. A. (2023). Sexualized violence and neoliberal discourse. *Violence Against Women*, 29(3–4), 527–547. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778012221094071>
- Duby, Z., Bergh, K., Jonas, K., Reddy, T., Bunce, B., Fowler, C., & Mathews, C. (2023). “Men rule... this is the normal thing. We normalise it and it’s wrong”: Gendered power in decision-making around sex and condom use in heterosexual relationships amongst adolescents and young people in South Africa. *AIDS and Behavior*, 27(6), 2015–2029. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-022-03935-8>
- Duck, S. (1991). *Understanding relationships*. Guilford Press.
- Duguay, S., Dietzel, C., & Myles, D. (2024). The year of the “virtual date”: Reimagining dating app affordances during the COVID-19 pandemic. *New Media & Society*, 26(3), 1384–1402. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448211072257>
- Duncan, S. (2011). The world we have made? Individualisation and personal life in the 1950s. *The Sociological Review*, 59(2), 242–265. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-954X.2011.02008.x>
- Dworkin, A. (1981). *Pornography: Men possessing women*. Perigee.
- East, P. L., Chien, N. C., Adams, J. A., Hokoda, A., & Maier, A. (2010). Links between sisters’ sexual and dating victimization: The roles of neighborhood crime and parental controls. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 24(6), 698–708. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021669>
- Eaton, A. A., Jacobs, H., & Ruvalcaba, Y. (2017). *Nationwide online study of nonconsensual porn victimization and perpetration: A summary report*. Cyber Civil Rights Initiative.
- Eaton, A. A., & Rose, S. (2011). Has dating become more egalitarian? A 35 year review using sex roles. *Sex Roles*, 64(11–12), 843–862. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-010-9884-2>

- Eleuteri, S., Alessi, F., Petruccelli, F., & Saladino, V. (2022). The global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on individuals' and couples' sexuality. *Frontiers in Psychology, 12*, Article 798260. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.798260>
- Ellison, N., Heino, R., & Gibbs, J. (2006). Managing impressions online: Self-presentation processes in the online dating environment. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 11*(2), 415–441. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2006.00020.x>
- Emirbayer, M., & Mische, A. (1998). What is agency? *American Journal of Sociology, 103*(4), 962–1023. <https://doi.org/10.1086/231294>
- Emmers-Sommer, T. M., Farrell, J., Gentry, A., Stevens, S., Eckstein, J., Battocletti, J., & Gardener, C. (2010). First date sexual expectations: The effects of who asked, who paid, date location, and gender. *Communication Studies, 61*(3), 339–355. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510971003752676>
- Erikson, E. H. (1968). *Identity: Youth and crisis*. W. W. Norton & Company.
- Evans, M. L., Lindauer, M., & Farrell, M. E. (2020). A pandemic within a pandemic, Intimate partner violence during Covid-19. *New England Journal of Medicine, 383*(24), 2302–2304. <https://doi.org/10.1056/NEJMp2024046>
- Fahs, B., & McClelland, S. I. (2016). When sex and power collide: An argument for critical sexuality studies. *The Journal of Sex Research, 53*(4–5), 392–416. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2016.1152454>
- Fairchild, K. (2023). Understanding street harassment as gendered violence: Past, present, and future. *Sexuality & Culture, 27*(3), 1140–1159. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-022-09998-y>
- Fallah, M. Y., Talemi, A. N., Bagheri, M., Allameh, Y., Mazloumirad, M., Zandnia, F., Gheitarani, B., & Ghahari, S. (2019). Attachment styles, marital conflicts, coping strategies, and sexual satisfaction in spouse abused and non-abused women. *Journal of Pharmaceutical Research International, 26*(4), 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.9734/jpri/2019/v26i430138>
- Falquet, J. (2014). Neoliberal capitalism: An ally for women? Materialist and imbricationist feminist perspectives. In C. Verschuur, I. Guérin, & H. Guétat-Bernard (Eds.), *Under development: Gender* (pp. 236–256). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137356826_12
- Falquet, J. (2024). Francophone materialist feminism, the missing link: Towards a Marxist feminism that accounts for the interlockedness of sex, race and class. *Capital & Class, 48*(2), 231–251. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03098168241234090>
- Faramarzi, M., Esmailzadeh, S., & Mosavi, S. (2005). A comparison of abused and non-abused women's definitions of domestic violence and attitudes to acceptance of male dominance. *European Journal of Obstetrics & Gynecology and Reproductive Biology, 122*(2), 225–231. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ejogrb.2005.02.013>

- Fararu. (2025, December 8). *Record of 63 femicides in Iran since the beginning of the year* [ثبت ۶۳ مورد زن‌کشی در ایران از ابتدای سال]. <https://fararu.com/fa/news/917470>
- Fedina, L., Holmes, J. L., & Backes, B. L. (2018). Campus sexual assault: A systematic review of prevalence research from 2000 to 2015. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 19*(1), 76–93. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838016631129>
- Fehr, B., Sprecher, S., & Underwood, L. G. (Eds.). (2009). *The science of compassionate love: Theory, research, and applications*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Fetterolf, J. C., & Sanchez, D. T. (2015). The costs and benefits of perceived sexual agency for men and women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 44*(4), 961–970. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-014-0408-x>
- Finkel, E. J., Eastwick, P. W., Karney, B. R., Reis, H. T., & Sprecher, S. (2012). Online dating: A critical analysis from the perspective of psychological science. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest, 13*(1), 3–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1529100612436522>
- Ford, J. V., Corona Vargas, E., Finotelli Jr., I., Fortenberry, J. D., Kismödi, E., Philpott, A., Rubio-Aurioles, E., & Coleman, E. (2019). Why pleasure matters: Its global relevance for sexual health, sexual rights and wellbeing. *International Journal of Sexual Health, 31*(3), 217–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2019.1654587>
- Foucault, M. (1978). *The history of sexuality: Volume 1. An introduction* (R. Hurley, Trans.). Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison* (A. Sheridan, Trans.). Vintage Books.
- Foucault, M. (2003). *“Society must be defended”: Lectures at the Collège de France 1975–1976* (D. Macey, Trans.). Picador.
- Foucault, M. (2007). *Security, territory, population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977–78*. Springer.
- Frederick, D. A., John, H., Garcia, J. R., & Lloyd, E. A. (2018). Differences in orgasm frequency among gay, lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual men and women in a US national sample. *Archives of Sexual Behavior, 47*(1), 273–288. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-017-0939-z>
- Galles-Watnick, R., & McClain, C. (2023, February 2). *From looking for love to swiping the field: Online dating in the U.S.* Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2023/02/02/from-looking-for-love-to-swiping-the-field-online-dating-in-the-u-s/>
- Gallagher, B. G. (1999). *Chaldean immigrant women, gender and family* [Doctoral dissertation, Wayne State University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global.

- Gassó, A. M., Mueller-Johnson, K., Agustina, J. R., & Gómez-Durán, E. L. (2021). Exploring sexting and online sexual victimization during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(12), Article 6662. <https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18126662>
- Gaudet, S., Marchand, I., Bujaki, M., & Bourgeault, I. L. (2022). Women and gender equity in academia through the conceptual lens of care. *Journal of Gender Studies*, 31(1), 74–86. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09589236.2021.1944848>
- Ghahari, S., M. K., A., & Yousefi, H. (2006). The prevalence of spouse abuse among married students of Islamic Azad University of Tonekabon in 1383. *Journal of Mazandaran University of Medical Sciences*, 15(50), 101–107.
- Giami, A., & de Colomby, P. (1997). La vie sexuelle des amateurs de pornographie [The sexual life of pornography fans]. *Sexologies*, 6(22), 40–47.
- Giddens, A. (2013). *The consequences of modernity*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Gill, R. (2019). Post-postfeminism?: New feminist visibilities in postfeminist times. In *An intergenerational feminist media studies* (pp. 54-74). Routledge.
- Glick, P., Sakalli-Ugurlu, N., Ferreira, M. C., & Souza, M. A. D. (2002). Ambivalent sexism and attitudes toward wife abuse in Turkey and Brazil. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 26(4), 292–297. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1471-6402.t01-1-00068>
- Goddard, C., & Wierzbicka, A. (2004). Cultural scripts: What are they and what are they good for? *Intercultural Pragmatics*, 1(2), 153–166. <https://doi.org/10.1515/iprg.2004.1.2.153>
- Goldey, K. L., Posh, A. R., Bell, S. N., & van Anders, S. M. (2016). Defining pleasure: A focus group study of solitary and partnered sexual pleasure in queer and heterosexual women. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 45(8), 2137–2154. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-016-0704-8>
- Golestaneh, M. (2022). Negotiating commitment: White marriage in Iran. *Journal of Comparative Family Studies*, 52(4), 689–714. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jcfs.52.4.08>
- Government of Canada. (2014). *Sexual assault and other sexual offences, An estimation of the economic impact of violent victimization in Canada, 2009*. https://www.justice.gc.ca/eng/rp-pr/cj-jp/victim/rr14_01/p10.html
- Government of Canada. (2025, February 11). *COVID-19: Canada's response*. <https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/diseases/2019-novel-coronavirus-infection/canadas-reponse.html>
- Gruskin, S., & Ferguson, L. (2009). Government regulation of sex and sexuality: In their own words. *Reproductive Health Matters*, 17(34), 108–118. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080\(09\)34483-3](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0968-8080(09)34483-3)

- Guadagno, R. E., Okdie, B. M., & Kruse, S. A. (2012). Dating deception: Gender, online dating, and exaggerated self-presentation. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 28(2), 642–647. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2011.11.010>
- Guillaumin, C. (1996). *The practice of power and belief in nature*. Routledge.
- Hackman, C. L., Pember, S. E., Wilkerson, A. H., Burton, W., & Usdan, S. L. (2017). Slut-shaming and victim-blaming: A qualitative investigation of undergraduate students' perceptions of sexual violence. *Sex Education*, 17(6), 697–711. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2017.1362332>
- Hajnasiri, H., Ghanei Gheshlagh, R., Sayehmiri, K., Moafi, F., & Farajzadeh, M. (2016). Domestic violence among Iranian women: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Iranian Red Crescent Medical Journal*, 18(6), Article e34971. <https://doi.org/10.5812/ircmj.34971>
- Hall, J. A., Park, N., Song, H., & Cody, M. J. (2010). Strategic misrepresentation in online dating: The effects of gender, self-monitoring, and personality traits. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27(1), 117–135. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407509349633>
- Hamid, H. B. binti A. (2021). Exploring victim blaming attitudes in cases of rape and sexual violence: The relationship with patriarchy. *Malaysian Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 6(11), 384–391. <https://doi.org/10.47405/mjssh.v6i11.1147>
- Haraway, D. (2013). Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective 1. In *Women, science, and technology* (pp. 455-472). Routledge.
- Harder, S. K. (2021). The emotional bystander – sexting and image-based sexual abuse among young adults. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 24(5), 655–669. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1757631>
- Hardy, S. (2015). Pornography and erotica. In G. Ritzer (Ed.), *The Blackwell encyclopedia of sociology* (1st ed.). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781405165518.wbeosp059.pub2>
- HarrasWatch. (2019, April 4). *Don't talk about sexual harassment to not depreciate university's dignity*. <https://harasswatch.com/news/1255>
- Hawley, J. S. (1994). *Fundamentalism and gender*. Oxford University Press.
- Hawramy, F. (2012, March 6). Discrimination in Iran's temporary marriage law goes unchecked. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2012/mar/06/iran-temporary-marriage-law-sigheh>
- Heino, R. D., Ellison, N. B., & Gibbs, J. L. (2010). Relationshopping: Investigating the market metaphor in online dating. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 27(4), 427–447. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510361614>

- Hemmati, S. (2020, August 16). Saeed Madani's account of silent assaults [Article in Persian]. *Shargh Newspaper*.
- Hennessy, R. (2012). *Materialist feminism and the politics of discourse*. Routledge.
- Henry, N., Flynn, A., & Powell, A. (2020). Technology-facilitated domestic and sexual violence: A review. *Violence Against Women*, 26(15–16), 1828–1854. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801219875821>
- Herbenick, D., Reece, M., Schick, V., Sanders, S. A., Dodge, B., & Fortenberry, J. D. (2010). Sexual behavior in the United States: Results from a national probability sample of men and women ages 14–94. *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, 7(s5), 255–265. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1743-6109.2010.02012.x>
- Hill, D. (2018, April 30). *Report finds women in Canada still face systemic inequality, encourages action*. Canadian Women's Foundation. <https://canadianwomen.org/blog/report-finds-women-in-canada-still-face-systemic-inequality-encourages-action/>
- Hite, S. (1989). *The Hite report: On female sexuality*. Pandora.
- Hobbs, M., Owen, S., & Gerber, L. (2017). Liquid love? Dating apps, sex, relationships and the digital transformation of intimacy. *Journal of Sociology*, 53(2), 271–284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783316662718>
- Holt, L., Hollowell, A., Truong, T., Bentley-Edwards, K., Myers, E., Erkanli, A., Chen, E. L., & Swartz, J. (2023). Reported changes in romantic and sexual behavior among college and graduate students during COVID-19. *Journal of American College Health*, 1–7. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07448481.2023.2283747>
- Horne, S., & Zimmer-Gembeck, M. J. (2005). Female sexual subjectivity and well-being: Comparing late adolescents with different sexual experiences. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 2, 25–40. <https://doi.org/10.1525/srsp.2005.2.3.25>
- Horvat, S. (2016). *The radicality of love*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Hosseini, S. B. (2021). *Women and suicide in Iran: Law, marriage and honour-killing*. Routledge.
- House of Commons of Canada. (n.d.). *Canadian parliamentary system, Our procedure, Procedural info*. https://www.ourcommons.ca/procedure/our-procedure/parliamentaryFramework/c_g_parliamentaryframework-e.html
- Htun, M., & Weldon, S. L. (2010). When do governments promote women's rights? A framework for the comparative analysis of sex equality policy. *Perspectives on Politics*, 8(1), 207–216. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S153759270999231X>
- Huff, C. (2022). A crisis of campus sexual assault. *Monitor on Psychology*, 53(3), 56.

- Amnesty International. (n.d.). *Iran 2024*. Retrieved January 14, 2026, from <https://www.amnesty.org/en/location/middle-east-and-north-africa/middle-east/iran/report-iran/>
- Human Rights Watch. (2025). *Iran events of 2024*. Retrieved January 14, 2026, from <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2025/country-chapters/iran>
- Iran Human Rights. (2024, September 3). *100 executions recorded in August in Iran; at least 402 executed in 2024*. <https://iranhr.net/en/articles/6896/>
- Humphreys, T. P. (2000). *Sexual consent in heterosexual dating relationships: Attitudes and behaviours of university students* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Guelph]. The Atrium. <https://atrium.lib.uoguelph.ca/handle/10214/22064>
- Hungrige, A. (2016). *Women's masturbation: An exploration of the influence of shame, guilt, and religiosity* [Master's thesis, Texas Woman's University]. TWU Repository. <https://twu-ir.tdl.org/items/10bd7940-b9d1-4dfe-9fc2-a705656907e2>
- Hutcheson, S. (2020). Sexual violence, representation, and racialized identities: Implications for international students. *Journal of International Students*, 10(1), 191–221. <https://doi.org/10.32674/jis.v10i1.1118>
- Ibrahim, D. (2022). Canadian residential facilities for victims of abuse, 2020/2021. *Juristat: Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics*, 4–38.
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity Press.
- Illouz, E. (2017). *Emotions as commodities: Capitalism, consumption and authenticity*. Routledge.
- Illouz, E. (2019). *The end of love: A sociology of negative relations*. Oxford University Press.
- Illouz, E. (2021). *The end of love: A sociology of negative relations*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Immigration, Refugees and Citizenship Canada. (2019, January 2). *Assessing a common-law relationship*. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/corporate/publications-manuals/operational-bulletins-manuals/permanent-residence/non-economic-classes/family-class-determining-spouse/assessing-common.html>
- Impett, E. A., & Peplau, L. A. (2003). Sexual compliance: Gender, motivational, and relationship perspectives. *Journal of Sex Research*, 40(1), 87–100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224490309552169>
- Iran International. (2024, September 21). *Iranians remember victims killed in 'Woman, Life, Freedom' movement*. <https://v1.iranintl.com/en/202409207601>

- Irby, C. A. (2014). Moving beyond agency: A review of gender and intimate relationships in conservative religions. *Sociology Compass*, 8(11), 1269–1280. <https://doi.org/10.1111/soc4.12212>
- ISNA. (2007, November 25). *International Day for the Elimination of Gender Based Violence against Women, the most prevalent violation to the human rights in today's world*. <https://www.isna.ir/news/8609-01930>
- Jabbarinejad, N., Jabbarinejad, R., Ardebili, M. E., & Naserbakht, M. (2023). *Intimate partner violence in premarital relationships in Iran: Prevalence, associated factors and predictors of violence among educated Iranian women* [Preprint]. PsyArXiv. <https://doi.org/10.31234/osf.io/qu25k>
- Jackson, M. (1983). Sexual liberation or social control?: Some aspects of the relationship between feminism and the social construction of sexual knowledge in the early twentieth century. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 6(1), 1–17. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395\(83\)90072-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/0277-5395(83)90072-5)
- Jackson, S. (1996). Heterosexuality as a problem for feminist theory. In L. Adkins & V. Merchant (Eds.), *Sexualizing the social* (pp. 15–34). Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-24549-9_2
- Jackson, S. (2001). Why a materialist feminism is (still) possible, and necessary. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 24(3–4), 283–293. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395\(01\)00187-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(01)00187-X)
- Jamieson, L. (1999). Intimacy transformed? A critical look at the 'pure relationship.' *Sociology*, 33(3), 477–494. <https://doi.org/10.1177/S003803859900029X>
- Jetelina, K. K., Knell, G., & Molsberry, R. J. (2021). Changes in intimate partner violence during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic in the USA. *Injury Prevention*, 27(1), 93–97. <https://doi.org/10.1136/injuryprev-2020-043831>
- Johanis, T. C., Midgley, C. E., & Lockwood, P. (2024). Desperate or desirable? Perceptions of individuals seeking dates online and offline. *Personal Relationships*, 31(1), 78–90. <https://doi.org/10.1111/perc.12523>
- Joshan, M. (2024). *#MeToo movement in Iran: From self-blame to sisterhood* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Ottawa]. RUOR. <https://ruor.uottawa.ca/items/88aa07c6-0307-49e5-aa61-63e505a7616c>
- Jovanovic, J., & Williams, J. C. (2018). Gender, sexual agency, and friends with benefits relationships. *Sexuality & Culture*, 22, 555–576. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-017-9484-8>
- Julie2024. (2024, May 10). *Sexual and reproductive rights in Iran: Battling restrictive laws and discriminatory practices*. Hrana. <https://www.en-hrana.org/sexual-and-reproductive-rights-in-iran-battling-restrictive-laws-and-discriminatory-practices/>

- Juteau, D., & Laurin, N. (1989). From nuns to surrogate mothers: Evolution of the forms of the appropriation of women. *Feminist Issues*, 9(1), 13–40. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685600>
- Kaan, H. (1844). *Psychopathia sexualis*. Voss.
- Kågesten, A., & van Reeuwijk, M. (2021). *Adolescent sexual wellbeing: A conceptual framework* [Preprint]. SocArXiv. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/ckf3>
- Kaivanara, M. (2016). Virginity dilemma: Re-creating virginity through hymenoplasty in Iran. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 18(1), 71–83. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691058.2015.1060532>
- Kar, M. (2007). *A brief history of grassroots struggle to end stoning* (A. Roya, Trans.). Stop Stoning Forever Campaign.
- Kavanagh, N. M., Menon, A., & Heinze, J. E. (2021). Does health vulnerability predict voting for right-wing populist parties in Europe? *American Political Science Review*, 115(3), 1104–1109. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S000305542100028X>
- Kelly, A. (1988). Sex stereotypes and school science: A three year follow-up. *Educational Studies*, 14(2), 151–163. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0305569880140203>
- Khamenei, A. (2018). *Can hijab save Western women?* <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5986/10-facts-by-Ayatollah-Khamenei-Can-hijab-save-Western-women>
- Klein, V., Becker, I., & Štulhofer, A. (2018). Parenting, communication about sexuality, and the development of adolescent women's sexual agency: A longitudinal assessment. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 47(7), 1486–1498. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-018-0873-y>
- Klinkenberg, D., & Rose, S. (1994). Dating scripts of gay men and lesbians. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 26(4), 23–35. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v26n04_02
- Klocker, N. (2007). An example of 'thin' agency: Child domestic workers in Tanzania. In *Global perspectives on rural childhood and youth* (pp. 100–111). Routledge.
- Kodaka, M. (2020). Female pleasure matters: The transnational phenomenon of an alternative to male desire-centred pornography. In *Japan beyond its borders: Transnational approaches to film and media* (p. 101). Seibunsha.
- Kontula, O. (2009). *Between sexual desire and reality: The evolution of sex in Finland*. Väestöliitto, The Family Federation of Finland.
- Koshan, J., Mosher, J. E., & Wieggers, W. (2021). *Domestic violence and access to justice: A mapping of relevant laws, policies and justice system components across Canada*. CanLII. https://ablawg.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/Blog_JK_JM_WW_eBook_Intro.pdf

- Kraus, F. (2017). The practice of masturbation for women: The end of a taboo? *Sexologies*, 26(4), e35–e41. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sexol.2017.09.009>
- Krause, K. H., DeGue, S., Kilmer, G., & Niolon, P. H. (2023). Prevalence and correlates of non-dating sexual violence, sexual dating violence, and physical dating violence victimization among U.S. high school students during the COVID-19 pandemic: Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey, United States, 2021. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 38(9–10), 6961–6984. <https://doi.org/10.1177/08862605221140038>
- Krebs, C. P., Lindquist, C. H., Warner, T. D., Fisher, B. S., & Martin, S. L. (2007). *The campus sexual assault (CSA) study: Final report*. National Institute of Justice, US Department of Justice. <https://www.ojp.gov/ncjrs/virtual-library/abstracts/campus-sexual-assault-csa-study>
- Kurdi, M., & Hosseiniozari, A. S. (2015). Women's experiences of sexual harassment types. *Social Welfare*, 15(57), 7–30. <http://refahj.uswr.ac.ir/article-1-2161-fa.html>
- Laan, E. T. M., Klein, V., Werner, M. A., van Lunsen, R. H. W., & Janssen, E. (2021). In pursuit of pleasure: A biopsychosocial perspective on sexual pleasure and gender. *International Journal of Sexual Health*, 33(4), 516–536. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19317611.2021.1965689>
- Lagoudi, E. (2022, September 20). *The dowry – symbol of patriarchy or totem of female creativity?* Europeana. <https://www.europeana.eu/en/stories/the-dowry>
- Langille, D. B., Hughes, J., Murphy, G. T., & Rigby, J. A. (2005). Socio-economic factors and adolescent sexual activity and behaviour in Nova Scotia. *Canadian Journal of Public Health*, 96(4), 313–318. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF03405173>
- Lauer, S., & Yodanis, C. (2010). The deinstitutionalization of marriage revisited: A new institutional approach to marriage. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 2(1), 58–72. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1756-2589.2010.00039.x>
- Lazard, A. J., Scheinfeld, E., Bernhardt, J. M., Wilcox, G. B., & Suran, M. (2015). Detecting themes of public concern: A text mining analysis of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Ebola live Twitter chat. *American Journal of Infection Control*, 43(10), 1109–1111. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajic.2015.05.025>
- Lehmiller, J. J., Garcia, J. R., Gesselman, A. N., & Mark, K. P. (2022). Less sex, but more sexual diversity: Changes in sexual behavior during the COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic. In *Leisure in the time of coronavirus* (pp. 178–187). Routledge.
- Lenhart, A., Ybarra, M., Zickuhr, K., & Price-Feeney, M. (2016). *Online harassment, digital abuse, and cyberstalking in America*. Data & Society Research Institute. <https://policycommons.net/artifacts/12513946/online-harassment-digital-abuses-and-cyberstalking-in-america/13412066/>
- Lerner, G. (1986). *The creation of patriarchy*. Oxford University Press.

- Levin, D. S., Ward, L. M., & Neilson, E. C. (2012). Formative sexual communications, sexual agency and coercion, and youth sexual health. *Social Service Review*, 86(3), 487–516. <https://doi.org/10.1086/667785>
- Li, J., Yang, Z., Qiu, H., Wang, Y., Jian, L., Ji, J., & Li, K. (2020). Anxiety and depression among general population in China at the peak of the COVID-19 epidemic. *World Psychiatry*, 19(2), 249–250. <https://doi.org/10.1002/wps.20758>
- Liberman, R. (2015). ‘It’s a really great tool’: Feminist pornography and the promotion of sexual subjectivity. *Porn Studies*, 2(2–3), 174–191. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2015.1051913>
- Lindberg, L. D., Pleasure, Z. H., & Douglas-Hall, A. (2020). *Assessing state-level variations in high school students’ sexual and contraceptive behavior: The 2019 Youth Risk Behavior Surveys*. Guttmacher Institute. <https://www.guttmacher.org/report/youth-risk-behavior-surveys-2019>
- Linder, J. R., & Collins, W. A. (2005). Parent and peer predictors of physical aggression and conflict management in romantic relationships in early adulthood. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 19(2), 252–262. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0893-3200.19.2.252>
- Lo, S.-K., Hsieh, A.-Y., & Chiu, Y.-P. (2013). Contradictory deceptive behavior in online dating. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 29(4), 1755–1762. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.02.010>
- MacCharles, T. (2016). *Sexual Violence and Harassment Action Plan Act (Supporting Survivors and Challenging Sexual Violence and Harassment)*, 2016. Legislative Assembly of Ontario. <https://www.ola.org/en/legislative-business/bills/parliament-41/session-1/bill-132>
- Macdonald, F. (2025, February 14). *Dating apps could be in trouble – here’s what might take their place*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cg7zxxgxdggjo>
- Machado, S., Wiedmeyer, M., Watt, S., Servin, A. E., & Goldenberg, S. (2022). Determinants and inequities in sexual and reproductive health (SRH) care access among im/migrant women in Canada: Findings of a comprehensive review (2008–2018). *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health*, 24(1), 256–299. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10903-021-01184-w>
- Mahdavi, P. (2007). Passionate uprisings: Young people, sexuality and politics in post-revolutionary Iran. *Culture, Health & Sexuality*, 9(5), 445–457. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691050601170378>
- Mahmood, S. (2010). Feminist theory, embodiment, and the docile agent: Some reflections on the Egyptian Islamic revival. In *Readings in the theory of religion*. Routledge.
- Mahoney, A. R., & Knudson-Martin, C. (2009). Gender equality in intimate relationships. In *Couples, gender, and power: Creating change in intimate relationships* (pp. 3–16). Basic Books.
- Malamuth, N. M., Addison, T., & Koss, M. (2000). Pornography and sexual aggression: Are there reliable effects and can we understand them? *Annual Review of Sex Research*, 11(1), 26–91.

- Mann, E. S. (2016). Latina girls, sexual agency, and the contradictions of neoliberalism. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 13(4), 330–340. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-016-0237-x>
- Marshall, G. A., & Furr, L. A. (2010). Factors that affect women’s attitudes toward domestic violence in Turkey. *Violence & Victims*, 25(2), 265–281. <https://doi.org/10.1891/0886-6708.25.2.265>
- Martin, K. (1996). *Puberty, sexuality, and the self*. Routledge.
- Marty, M. E., & Appleby, R. S. (1993). *Fundamentalisms and the state: Remaking politics, economies, and militance* (Vol. 3). University of Chicago Press.
- Masters, N. T., Casey, E., Wells, E. A., & Morrison, D. M. (2013). Sexual scripts among young heterosexually active men and women: Continuity and change. *The Journal of Sex Research*, 50(5), 409–420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2012.661102>
- Mathieu, N.-C. (1990). When yielding is not consenting. *Feminist Issues*, 10(1), 51–90. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF02685608>
- Maxwell, C. D., Robinson, A. L., & Post, L. A. (2003). The nature and predictors of sexual victimization and offending among adolescents. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 32, 465–477. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1025988523313>
- McBain, S. (2021). Total sexual liberation: A cultural history of the struggle to free the body. *New Statesman*, 150(5617), 44–46.
- McCabe, M. P. (1984). Toward a theory of adolescent dating. *Adolescence*, 19(73), 159–170.
- McClain, C., & Galles-Watnick, R. (2023, February 2). *Key findings about online dating in the U.S.* Pew Research Center. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/02/02/key-findings-about-online-dating-in-the-u-s/>
- McDaniel, C. O., Jr. (1969). Dating roles and reasons for dating. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 31(1), 97–107. <https://doi.org/10.2307/349998>
- McGann, P. J. (2007). Healing (disorderly) desire: Medical-therapeutic regulation of sexuality. In *Handbook of the new sexuality studies* (pp. 390–402). Routledge.
- McMahon, S., O’Connor, J., & Seabrook, R. (2021). Not just an undergraduate issue: Campus climate and sexual violence among graduate students. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(7–8), NP4296–NP4314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518790216>
- Means, A. J. (2022). Foucault, biopolitics, and the critique of state reason. *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 54(12), 1968–1969. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131857.2021.1871895>

- Mengzhen, L., Berezina, E., & Benjamin, J. (2024). Insights into young adults' views on long-term and short-term romantic relationships in the United Kingdom. *Sexuality & Culture*, 28(4), 1407–1423. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-023-10183-y>
- Mercer, C. H., Clifton, S., Riddell, J., Tanton, C., Freeman, L., Copas, A. J., Dema, E., Pérez, R. B., Gibbs, J., & Macdowall, W. (2022). Impacts of COVID-19 on sexual behaviour in Britain: Findings from a large, quasi-representative survey (Natsal-COVID). *Sexually Transmitted Infections*, 98(7), 469–477. <https://doi.org/10.1136/sextrans-2021-055215>
- Merkin, D. (2018, January 5). Publicly, we say #MeToo. Privately, we have misgivings. *International New York Times*.
- Middle East Institute. (n.d.). *Iran's COVID-19 pandemic response: Mission critical*. <https://www.mei.edu/publications/irans-covid-19-pandemic-response-mission-critical>
- Miller, E., & Silverman, J. G. (2010). Reproductive coercion and partner violence: Implications for clinical assessment of unintended pregnancy. *Expert Review of Obstetrics & Gynecology*, 5(5), 511–515. <https://doi.org/10.1586/eog.10.44>
- Millett, K. (1970). *Sexual politics*. Columbia University Press.
- Mills, M., & Blossfeld, H.-P. (2006). Globalization, uncertainty and the early life course: A theoretical framework. In *Globalization, uncertainty and youth in society* (pp. 1–23). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203003206>
- Milstein, S., Hilliard, T. E., Hall, S., Knox, D., & Hunter, G. (2020). Factors that impact college students' perceptions of sexual pleasure and satisfaction. *American Journal of Sexuality Education*, 15(1), 99–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15546128.2019.1675563>
- Minina, A., Masè, S., & Smith, J. (2022). Commodifying love: Value conflict in online dating. *Journal of Marketing Management*, 38(1–2), 98–126. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2022.2033815>
- Mir-Hosseini, Z. (2011). Criminalizing sexuality: Zina laws as violence against women in Muslim contexts. *Sur - International Journal on Human Rights*, 15(1), 7–21.
- Montemurro, B. (2014). *Deserving desire: Women's stories of sexual evolution*. Rutgers University Press.
- Mosavi, S. A., Babazadeh, R., Najmabadi, K. M., & Shariati, M. (2014). Assessing Iranian adolescent girls' needs for sexual and reproductive health information. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, 55(1), 107–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2013.11.029>
- Motamedi, M., Merghati-Khoei, E., Shahbazi, M., Rahimi-Naghani, S., Salehi, M., Karimi, M., Hajebi, A., & Khalajabadi-Farahani, F. (2016). Paradoxical attitudes toward premarital dating and sexual encounters in Tehran, Iran: A cross-sectional study. *Reproductive Health*, 13(1), Article 102. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-016-0210-4>

- Naeimi, M., & Kjaran, J. I. (2022). Schooling (hetero)normative practices in the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Sex Education, 22*(3), 243–259. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681811.2021.1911797>
- Naghavi, A., Amani, S., Bagheri, M., & De Mol, J. (2019). A critical analysis of intimate partner sexual violence in Iran. *Frontiers in Psychology, 10*, Article 2729. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02729>
- National Center for Education Statistics. (2014). *Enrollment in elementary, secondary, and degree-granting postsecondary institutions, by level and control of institution, enrollment level, and attendance status and sex of student: Selected years, fall 1990 through fall 2026* (Table 105.20). Digest of Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d16/tables/dt16_105.20.asp?current=yes
- National Crime Agency. (2016). *Emerging new threat in online dating: Initial trends in internet dating-initiated sexual assaults*. <http://www.nationalcrimeagency.gov.uk/publications/670-emerging-new-threat-in-onlinedating-initial-trends-in-internet-dating-initiated-serious-sexual-assaults/file>
- Nayeri, M. H. (2012). *New Islamic penal code of the Islamic Republic of Iran: An overview*. Iran Human Rights Documentation Center.
- Nicolson, P. (1994). Anatomy and destiny: Sexuality and the female body. In *Female sexuality: Psychology, biology and social context* (pp. 7–25). Wiley.
- Nicolson, P., & Burr, J. (2003). What is ‘normal’ about women’s (hetero) sexual desire and orgasm?: A report of an in-depth interview study. *Social Science & Medicine, 57*(9), 1735–1745. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536\(02\)00547-1](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-9536(02)00547-1)
- Nikparvar, F., Stith, S., Anderson, J., & Panaghi, L. (2021). Intimate partner violence in Iran: Factors associated with physical aggression victimization and perpetration. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence, 36*(5–6), 2772–2790. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260518759060>
- Niolon, P. H., Vivolo-Kantor, A. M., Latzman, N. E., Valle, L. A., Kuoh, H., Burton, T., Taylor, B. G., & Tharp, A. T. (2015). Prevalence of teen dating violence and co-occurring risk factors among middle school youth in high-risk urban communities. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 56*(2), S5–S13. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2014.07.019>
- Nogueira Avelar e Silva, R., van de Bongardt, D., van de Looij-Jansen, P., Wijtzes, A., & Raat, H. (2016). Mother– and father–adolescent relationships and early sexual intercourse. *Pediatrics, 138*(6), Article e20160782. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2016-0782>
- O’Connor, J., Smith, L., Woerner, J., & Khan, A. (2024). Protective factors for sexual violence perpetration among high school and college students: A systematic review. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse, 25*(2), 1073–1087. <https://doi.org/10.1177/15248380231171189>

- Oesterling, C., Harder, A., Borg, C., & de Jong, P. (2025). Factors involved in vulvar pain during sexual activity and persistence in sexual activity amidst pain. *PLoS One*, *20*(5), Article e0306086. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0306086>
- Opperman, E., Braun, V., Clarke, V., & Rogers, C. (2014). “It feels so good it almost hurts”: Young adults’ experiences of orgasm and sexual pleasure. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *51*(5), 503–515. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2012.753982>
- Osterlund, K. (2017). Love, freedom and governance: Same-sex marriage in Canada. In *Marital rights* (pp. 115–132). Routledge.
- Ostridge, L. (2025). Sexual violence, secrets, and work: Ruling relations of campus sexual violence policy. *Canadian Review of Sociology/Revue Canadienne de Sociologie*, *62*(1), 34–54. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12491>
- O’Sullivan, L. F., & Brooks-Gunn, J. (2005). The timing of changes in girls’ sexual cognitions and behaviors in early adolescence: A prospective, cohort study. *Journal of Adolescent Health*, *37*(3), 211–219. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2004.08.019>
- Oxford Reference. (n.d.). Nafaqah. In *Oxford reference*. <https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100221229>
- Palmer, L. (2020). Dating in the age of Tinder: Swiping for love? In J. Carter & L. Arocha (Eds.), *Romantic relationships in a time of ‘cold intimacies’* (pp. 129–149). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-29256-0_7
- Pande, R. P., Falle, T. Y., Rathod, S., Edmeades, J., & Krishnan, S. (2011). ‘If your husband calls, you have to go’: Understanding sexual agency among young married women in urban South India. *Sexual Health*, *8*(1), 102–109. <https://doi.org/10.1071/SH10025>
- Peng, K. (2020). To be attractive or to be authentic? How two competing motivations influence self-presentation in online dating. *Internet Research*, *30*(4), 1143–1165. <https://doi.org/10.1108/INTR-03-2019-0095>
- Pera, A. (2020). Cognitive, behavioral, and emotional disorders in populations affected by the COVID-19 outbreak. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *11*, Article 2263. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2020.02263>
- Petersen, J. L., & Hyde, J. S. (2010). A meta-analytic review of research on gender differences in sexuality, 1993–2007. *Psychological Bulletin*, *136*(1), 21–38. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0017504>
- Phạm, Q. N. (2013). Enduring bonds: Politics and life outside freedom as autonomy. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, *38*(1), 29–48. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0304375412465676>
- Phayer, J. M. (2017). *Sexual liberation and religion in nineteenth century Europe*. Routledge.

- Poole, L. (2022). *Polyamory politics in Canada: Problems and possibilities* [Master's thesis, Simon Fraser University]. Summit. <https://summit.sfu.ca/item/35401>
- Porter, A. (2012). Neo-conservatism, neo-liberalism and Canadian social policy: Challenges for feminism. *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme*.
- Powell, A., & Henry, N. (2017). *Sexual violence in a digital age*. Palgrave Macmillan. <https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-58047-4>
- Powell, A., & Henry, N. (2019). Technology-facilitated sexual violence victimization: Results from an online survey of Australian adults. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 34(17), 3637–3665. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260516672055>
- Powell, A., Henry, N., & Flynn, A. (2018). Image-based sexual abuse. In *Routledge handbook of critical criminology* (pp. 305–315). Routledge.
- Prins, B. (2006). Narrative accounts of origins: A blind spot in the intersectional approach? *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 13(3), 277–290. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506806065757>
- Qur'an. (n.d.). The Qur'an.
- Rahbari, L. (2020). Violence in premarital relationships in Iran: An exploratory qualitative research. In *Gender and sexuality in Muslim cultures* (pp. 238–259). Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004429215_012
- Ranganathan, M., MacPhail, C., Pettifor, A., Kahn, K., Khoza, N., Twine, R., Watts, C., & Heise, L. (2017). Young women's perceptions of transactional sex and sexual agency: A qualitative study in the context of rural South Africa. *BMC Public Health*, 17(1), Article 666. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-017-4636-6>
- Rich, A. (1980). Compulsory heterosexuality and lesbian existence. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 5(4), 631–660.
- Richardson, D. (2005). Desiring sameness? The rise of a neoliberal politics of normalisation. *Antipode*, 37(3), 515–535. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.0066-4812.2005.00509.x>
- Ringrose, J., Regehr, K., & Milne, B. (2021). *Understanding and combatting youth experiences of image-based sexual harassment and abuse*. University College London. <https://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/id/eprint/10139669/>
- Rintaugu, E. G., Kamau, J., Amusa, L. O., & Toriola, A. L. (2014). The forbidden acts: Prevalence of sexual harassment among university female athletes. *African Journal for Physical Health Education, Recreation and Dance*, 20(3), 974–990.

- Rittenhour, K. (2022). *Sexual interaction in action: Consent and agency in the sexual communications of early adolescents and adults* [Doctoral dissertation, The University of Iowa]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Roberts, N., Donovan, C., & Durey, M. (2019). Agency, resistance and the non-‘ideal’ victim: How women deal with sexual violence. *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, 3(3), 323–338. <https://doi.org/10.1332/239868019X15627574979311>
- Robinson, K. H. (2005). Reinforcing hegemonic masculinities through sexual harassment: Issues of identity, power and popularity in secondary schools. *Gender and Education*, 17(1), 19–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0954025042000301285>
- Rodríguez-Díaz, F. J., Herrero, J., Rodríguez-Franco, L., Bringas-Molleda, C., Paíno-Quesada, S. G., & Pérez, B. (2017). Validation of dating violence questionnaire-R (DVQ-R). *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, 17(1), 77–84. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijchp.2016.09.001>
- Rodríguez-García-de-Cortázar, A., González-Calo, I., & Gómez-Bueno, C. (2025). What is the patriarchy doing in our bed? Violent sexual-affective experiences among youth. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 22(1), 424–434. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-024-00956-x>
- Rodziewicz, M. (2020). The legal debate on the phenomenon of ‘white marriages’ in contemporary Iran. *Anthropology of the Middle East*, 15(1), 66–82. <https://doi.org/10.3167/ame.2020.150105>
- Rollero, C., & Tartaglia, S. (2019). The effect of sexism and rape myths on victim blame. *Sexuality & Culture*, 23(1), 209–219. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12119-018-9549-8>
- Romero Rodríguez, J. M., Aznar Díaz, I., Hinojo Lucena, F. J., & Gómez García, G. (2022). *Sexting in times of confinement: An analysis of sending online sexual content before and during COVID-19 pandemic amongst university students*. University of Granada. <https://digibug.ugr.es/handle/10481/89937>
- Rosa, H. (2013). *Social acceleration: A new theory of modernity*. Columbia University Press.
- Rosa, H., Wajeman, J., & Dodd, N. (2017). De-synchronization, dynamic stabilization, dispositional squeeze. In *The sociology of speed: Digital, organizational, and social temporalities* (pp. 25–41). Oxford University Press.
- Rose, S. (2005). Going too far? Sex, sin and social policy. *Social Forces*, 84(2), 1207–1232. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sof.2006.0032>
- Rose, S., & Frieze, I. H. (1989). Young singles’ scripts for a first date. *Gender & Society*, 3(2), 258–268. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243889003002006>
- Rose, S., & Zand, D. (2020). Lesbian dating and courtship from young adulthood to midlife. In *Midlife lesbian relationships* (pp. 77–104). Routledge.

- Rosenfeld, M. J., & Thomas, R. J. (2012). Searching for a mate: The rise of the internet as a social intermediary. *American Sociological Review*, 77(4), 523–547. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0003122412448050>
- Rosenthal, M. N., Smidt, A. M., & Freyd, J. J. (2016). Still second class: Sexual harassment of graduate students. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40(3), 364–377. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684316644838>
- Ross, L. K. (2022). The survivor imperative: Sexual violence, victimhood, and neoliberalism. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 48(1), 51–75. <https://doi.org/10.1086/720413>
- Rostami, F. (2021). An analysis of sexual harassment on Iranian campuses. *International Journal of Educational Development*, 87, Article 102498. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijedudev.2021.102498>
- Rowatt, W. C., Cunningham, M. R., & Druen, P. B. (1999). Lying to get a date: The effect of facial physical attractiveness on the willingness to deceive prospective dating partners. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 16(2), 209–223. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407599162005>
- Rowland, D. L., Kolba, T. N., McNabney, S. M., Uribe, D., & Hevesi, K. (2020). Why and how women masturbate, and the relationship to orgasmic response. *Journal of Sex & Marital Therapy*, 46(4), 361–376. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0092623X.2020.1717700>
- Rubin, G. (1975). The traffic in women: Notes on the "political economy" of sex. In R. R. Reiter (Ed.), *Toward an anthropology of women* (pp. 157–210). Monthly Review Press.
- Rudman, L. A., Fetterolf, J. C., & Sanchez, D. T. (2013). What motivates the sexual double standard? More support for male versus female control theory. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 39(2), 250–263. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167212472375>
- Sadeghi, F. (2008). Negotiating with modernity: Young women and sexuality in Iran. *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 28(2), 250–259. <https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201x-2008-005>
- Salari, N., Hosseinian-Far, A., Jalali, R., Vaisi-Raygani, A., Rasoulpoor, S., Mohammadi, M., ... & Khaledi-Paveh, B. (2020). Prevalence of stress, anxiety, depression among the general population during the COVID-19 pandemic: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Globalization and Health*, 16(1), Article 57. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-020-00589-w>
- Sawer, M. (2007). Wearing your politics on your sleeve: The role of political colours in social movements. *Social Movement Studies*, 6(1), 39–56. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14742830701251294>
- Schalet, A. (2010). Sexual subjectivity revisited: The significance of relationships in Dutch and American girls' experiences of sexuality. *Gender & Society*, 24(3), 304–329. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243210368400>

- Scharff, C. (2016). Gender and neoliberalism: Young women as ideal neoliberal subjects. In S. Springer, K. Birch, & J. MacLeavy (Eds.), *Handbook of neoliberalism* (pp. 217–226). Routledge.
- Schmitz, A., Sachse-Tührer, S., Zillmann, D., & Blossfeld, H.-P. (2011). Myths and facts about online mate choice: Contemporary beliefs and empirical findings. *Zeitschrift für Familienforschung*, 23(3), 358–381.
- Scott, K. (2016). Performing labour: Ethical spectatorship and the communication of labour conditions in pornography. *Porn Studies*, 3(2), 120–132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23268743.2016.1184475>
- Scott, S., & Jackson, S. (2022). Sexual skirmishes and feminist factions: Twenty-five years of debate on women and sexuality. In *Feminism and sexuality* (pp. 1–32). Edinburgh University Press.
- Seabrook, R. C., Ward, L. M., Cortina, L. M., Giaccardi, S., & Lippman, J. R. (2017). Girl power or powerless girl? Television, sexual scripts, and sexual agency in sexually active young women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 41(2), 240–253. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684316677028>
- Sedghi, H. (1997). Women, the state, and development: Appraising secular and religious gender politics in Iran. In N. J. Sabaratnam (Ed.), *The gendered new world order*. Routledge.
- Sedghi, H. (2007). *Women and politics in Iran: Veiling, unveiling, and reveiling*. Cambridge University Press.
- Setty, E. (2020). *Risk and harm in youth sexting: Young people's perspectives*. Routledge.
- Setty, E., & Dobson, E. (2025). Young people's 'post-digital' relationships during COVID-19 'lockdowns' in England. *New Media & Society*, 27(11), 6295–6314. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448241266770>
- Setty, E., Hunt, J., & Ringrose, J. (2025). From behaviours to interactions: Reframing conceptualisations of the nature and causes of sexual harm among young people. *Journal of Sexual Aggression*, 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13552600.2025.2521078>
- Shahrokni, N. (2022). Gender politics and the state in postrevolutionary Iran. In *The IB Tauris handbook of sociology and the Middle East* (p. 57). Bloomsbury Academic.
- Sharabi, L. L. (2024). The enduring effect of internet dating: Meeting online and the road to marriage. *Communication Research*, 51(3), 259–284. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00936502221127498>
- Sharabi, L. L., & Caughlin, J. P. (2019). Deception in online dating: Significance and implications for the first offline date. *New Media & Society*, 21(1), 229–247. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818792425>
- Sharifi, N. (2018). *Female bodies and sexuality in Iran and the search for defiance*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-60976-8>

- Silva, J. M., & Vieira, P. J. (2014). Geographies of sexualities in Brazil: Between national invisibility and subordinate inclusion in postcolonial networks of knowledge production. *Geography Compass*, 8(10), 767–777. <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12165>
- Simon, W., & Gagnon, J. H. (1986). Sexual scripts: Permanence and change. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 15, 97–120. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01542219>
- Simonovic, D. (2020). *Violence against women, its causes and consequences regarding COVID-19 and the increase of domestic violence against women*. Submission to the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women.
- Sit, V., & Stermac, L. (2021). Improving formal support after sexual assault: Recommendations from survivors living in poverty in Canada. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 36(3–4), 1823–1843. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260517744761>
- Smart, C. (2007). *Personal life: New directions in sociological thinking*. Polity Press.
- Smith-Marek, E. N., Cafferky, B., Dharnidharka, P., Mallory, A. B., Dominguez, M., High, J., ... & Mendez, M. (2015). Effects of childhood experiences of family violence on adult partner violence: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 7(4), 498–519. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jftr.12113>
- Smooth, W. G. (2013). Intersectionality from theoretical framework to policy intervention. In A. R. Wilson (Ed.), *Situating intersectionality* (pp. 11–41). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Staggenborg, S., & Ramos, H. (2023). *Social movements* (4th ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Statistics Canada. (2015, November 23). *Criminal victimization in Canada, 2014*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2015001/article/14241-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2020, September 14). *The Daily, One in ten women students sexually assaulted in a postsecondary setting*. <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/daily-quotidien/200914/dq200914a-eng.htm>
- Statistics Canada. (2023, October 27). *Women in the labour market: Increased potential, pay, and participation*. <https://www.statcan.gc.ca/o1/en/plus/4823-women-labour-market-increased-potential-pay-and-participation>
- Stavridou, A., Samiakou, C., Kourti, A., Tsiorou, S., Panagouli, E., Thirios, A., ... & Tsitsika, A. (2021). Sexual activity in adolescents and young adults through COVID-19 pandemic. *Children*, 8(7), Article 577. <https://doi.org/10.3390/children8070577>
- Stenning, P., Mitra-Kahn, T., & Gunby, C. (2013). Sexual violence against female university students in the UK: A case study. *Rivista di Criminologia, Vittimologia e Sicurezza*, 7(2), 100–118.

- Stepp, H. (2016). *The impact of patriarchal religions on the creation of oppressive cultures of female purity and the contribution to rape culture* [Doctoral dissertation, Baylor University]. Baylor University Repository.
- Straus, M. A. (1979). Measuring intramarital conflict and violence: The Conflict Tactics Scale. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 41(1), 75–88. <https://doi.org/10.2307/351733>
- Straus, M. A. (2004). Prevalence of violence against dating partners by male and female university students worldwide. *Violence Against Women*, 10(7), 790–811. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077801204265552>
- Sutton, T. E., Culatta, E., Boyle, K. M., & Turner, J. L. (2021). Individual vulnerability and organizational context as risks for sexual harassment among female graduate students. *Social Currents*, 8(3), 229–248. <https://doi.org/10.1177/23294965211001394>
- Tabet, P. (2012). Through the looking-glass: Sexual-economic exchange. In F. Grange Omokaro & F. Reysoo (Eds.), *Chic, chèque, choc: Transactions autour des corps et stratégies amoureuses contemporaines* (pp. 39–51). Graduate Institute Publications.
- Tadayon, M., Hatami-Manesh, Z., Sharifi, N., Najar, S., Saki, A., & Pajohideh, Z. (2018). The relationship between function and sexual satisfaction with sexual violence among women in Ahvaz, Iran. *Electronic Physician*, 10(4), 6608–6615. <https://doi.org/10.19082/6608>
- Takács, Á. (2017). Biopolitics and biopower: The Foucauldian approach and its contemporary relevance. In P. Kakuk (Ed.), *Bioethics and biopolitics: Theories, applications and connections* (pp. 3–15). Springer.
- Tang, S., & Zuo, J. (2000). Dating attitudes and behaviors of American and Chinese college students. *The Social Science Journal*, 37(1), 68–78. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0362-3319\(99\)00066-X](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0362-3319(99)00066-X)
- Taormino, T., Penley, C., Shimizu, C., & Miller-Young, M. (Eds.). (2013). *The feminist porn book: The politics of producing pleasure*. The Feminist Press at CUNY.
- Tavassolian, N. (2016, May 2). *Sexual harassment in Islamic penal code*. Radio Zamaneh. <https://www.radiozamaneh.com/261562/>
- Terman, R. (2007). *The Stop Stoning Forever Campaign: A report*. Women Living Under Muslim Laws.
- Tharp, A. T., DeGue, S., Valle, L. A., Brookmeyer, K. A., Massetti, G. M., & Matjasko, J. L. (2013). A systematic qualitative review of risk and protective factors for sexual violence perpetration. *Trauma, Violence, & Abuse*, 14(2), 133–167. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1524838012470031>
- Thorburn, B., Gavey, N., Single, G., Wech, A., Calder-Dawe, O., & Benton-Greig, P. (2021). To send or not to send nudes: New Zealand girls critically discuss the contradictory gendered pressures of teenage sexting. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 85, Article 102448. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2021.102448>

- Tolman, D. L. (2012). Female adolescents, sexual empowerment and desire: A missing discourse of gender inequity. *Sex Roles*, 66(11), 746–757. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-012-0122-x>
- Toma, C. L. (2015). Online dating. In C. R. Berger & M. E. Roloff (Eds.), *The international encyclopedia of interpersonal communication* (pp. 1–5). Wiley.
- Toma, C. L., & Hancock, J. T. (2012). What lies beneath: The linguistic traces of deception in online dating profiles. *Journal of Communication*, 62(1), 78–97. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01619.x>
- Toma, C. L., Hancock, J. T., & Ellison, N. B. (2008). Separating fact from fiction: An examination of deceptive self-presentation in online dating profiles. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin*, 34(8), 1023–1036. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167208318067>
- Toplu-Demirtaş, E., Hatipoğlu-Sümer, Z., & White, J. W. (2013). The relation between dating violence victimization and commitment among Turkish college women: Does the investment model matter? *International Journal of Conflict and Violence*, 7(2), 203–215.
- Toplu-Demirtaş, E., Öztemür, G., & Fincham, F. D. (2022). Perceptions of dating violence: Assessment and antecedents. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 37(1–2), NP48–NP75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260520914558>
- Torabi, A. (2018, September 26). *The hidden reality of sexual assault in Iran*. University of Bristol Policy Blog. <https://policystudies.blogs.bristol.ac.uk/2018/09/26/the-hidden-reality-of-sexual-assault-in-iran/>
- Turkle, S. (2011). *Life on the screen*. Simon & Schuster. (Original work published 1995)
- UN Women. (n.d.). *Iran (Islamic Republic of)*. UN Women Data Hub. Retrieved January 22, 2026, from <https://data.unwomen.org/country/iran-islamic-republic-of>
- UN Women. (2021). *Handbook on gender-responsive police services for women and girls subject to violence*. <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2021/01/handbook-gender-responsive-police-services>
- University of Ottawa. (n.d.). Policy 67b: Prevention of sexual violence. Retrieved January 25, 2026, from <https://www.uottawa.ca/about-us/leadership-governance/policies-regulations/policy-67b-prevention-sexual-violence>
- University of Tehran. (n.d.). *Student statistics at the University of Tehran in the new academic year: 70% of students study in graduate programs* [In Persian]. <https://news.ut.ac.ir/fa/news/37496>
- Ureña, J., Romera, E. M., Casas, J. A., Viejo, C., & Ortega-Ruiz, R. (2015). Psychometric properties of psychological dating violence questionnaire: A study with young couples. *International Journal of Clinical and Health Psychology*, 15(1), 52–60. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijchp.2014.10.001>

- U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. (2017). *Q&A on campus sexual misconduct*. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/qa-title-ix-201709.pdf>
- Vagi, K. J., Rothman, E. F., Latzman, N. E., Tharp, A. T., Hall, D. M., & Breiding, M. J. (2013). Beyond correlates: A review of risk and protective factors for adolescent dating violence perpetration. *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, 42, 633–649. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10964-013-9907-7>
- Valadbaygi, K. (2021). Hybrid neoliberalism: Capitalist development in contemporary Iran. *New Political Economy*, 26(3), 313–327. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13563467.2020.1729715>
- Valdes, F. (1996). Unpacking hetero-patriarchy: Tracing the conflation of sex, gender & sexual orientation to its origins. *Yale Journal of Law & the Humanities*, 8(1), 161–211.
- Vameghi, M., Feizzadeh, A., Mirabzadeh, A., & Feizzadeh, G. (2010). Exposure to domestic violence between parents: A perspective from Tehran, Iran. *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, 25(6), 1006–1021. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0886260509340532>
- Van Ditzhuijzen, J., & Overeem, A. (2025). Pleasure-inclusive sex education, sexual agency, and sexual well-being in adolescents and young adults: A scoping review. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 54(4), 1627–1648. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10508-025-03103-8>
- Van Hooff, J. (2016). *Modern couples?: Continuity and change in heterosexual relationships*. Routledge.
- van Rees, B., Spiering, M., & Laan, E. (2016). Orgasmeconsistentie van lesbische en heteroseksuele vrouwen tijdens partnerseks: De rol van clitorale stimulatie [Orgasm consistency of lesbian and heterosexual women during partner sex: The role of clitoral stimulation]. *Tijdschrift voor Seksuologie*, 40, 1–10.
- Vanderwoerd, J. R., & Cheng, A. (2017). Sexual violence on religious campuses. *Canadian Journal of Higher Education*, 47(2), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1040529ar>
- Vandeweerd, C., Myers, J., Coulter, M., Yalcin, A., & Corvin, J. (2016). Positives and negatives of online dating according to women 50+. *Journal of Women & Aging*, 28(3), 259–270. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08952841.2015.1137435>
- Vanwesenbeeck, I., Cense, M., van Reeuwijk, M., & Westeneng, J. (2021). Understanding sexual agency: Implications for sexual health programming. *Sexes*, 2(4), 438–454. <https://doi.org/10.3390/sexes2040030>
- Velayati, M. (2012). The Iranian state's religo-ideological policies and their impact on young migrant women in Tabriz. In H. Afshar (Ed.), *Women and fluid identities* (pp. 127–145). Palgrave Macmillan.

- Vendemia, M. A., & Coduto, K. D. (2022). Online daters' sexually explicit media consumption and imagined interactions. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *126*, Article 106981. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2021.106981>
- Walther, J. B. (2007). Selective self-presentation in computer-mediated communication: Hyperpersonal dimensions of technology, language, and cognition. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *23*(5), 2538–2557. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2006.05.002>
- Ward, L. M., Seabrook, R. C., Grower, P., Giaccardi, S., & Lippman, J. R. (2018). Sexual object or sexual subject? Media use, self-sexualization, and sexual agency among undergraduate women. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, *42*(1), 29–43. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684317737940>
- Weitbrecht, E. M., & Whitton, S. W. (2020). College students' motivations for “hooking up”: Similarities and differences in motives by gender and partner type. *Couple and Family Psychology: Research and Practice*, *9*(3), 123–136. <https://doi.org/10.1037/cfp0000142>
- Wheeler, B. (2022). *Sexual harassment in the digital world: Developing and validating a new measure of cyber-sexual harassment* [Master's thesis, Arizona State University]. ProQuest Dissertations & Theses Global.
- Whitty, M., & Carr, A. (2017). *Cyberspace romance: The psychology of online relationships*. Bloomsbury.
- Widman, L., Maheux, A. J., Craig, E., Evans-Paulson, R., & Choukas-Bradley, S. (2022). Sexual communication between adolescent partners: A scoping review and directions for future research. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *59*(8), 984–999. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2022.2099787>
- Wiens, B. I., MacDonald, S., MacArthur, M., & Radzikowska, M. (2021). *Networked feminisms: Activist assemblies and digital practices*. Bloomsbury.
- Wignall, L., Portch, E., McCormack, M., Owens, R., Cascalheira, C. J., Attard-Johnson, J., & Cole, T. (2021). Changes in sexual desire and behaviors among UK young adults during social lockdown due to COVID-19. *The Journal of Sex Research*, *58*(8), 976–985. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00224499.2021.1897067>
- Wilcox, M. M. (2006). Outlaws or in-laws?: Queer theory, LGBT studies, and religious studies. *Journal of Homosexuality*, *52*(1–2), 73–100. https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v52n01_04
- Wildermuth, S. M. (2001). Love on the line: Participants' descriptions of computer-mediated close relationships. *Qualitative Research Reports in Communication*, *2*(1), 17–24.
- Wincentak, K., Connolly, J., & Card, N. (2017). Teen dating violence: A meta-analytic review of prevalence rates. *Psychology of Violence*, *7*(2), 224–241. <https://doi.org/10.1037/vio0000090>
- Wittig, M. (1980). *The straight mind: And other essays*. Beacon Press.

- Wolf, C., Jr. (2000). Globalization: Meaning and measurement. *Critical Review*, 14(1), 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08913810008443543>
- Wolfe, D. A., Scott, K., Reitzel-Jaffe, D., Wekerle, C., Grasley, C., & Straatman, A.-L. (2001). Development and validation of the Conflict in Adolescent Dating Relationships Inventory. *Psychological Assessment*, 13(2), 277–293. <https://doi.org/10.1037/1040-3590.13.2.277>
- Women and Gender Equality Canada. (2024, July 17). *Sexual violence and consent*. Government of Canada. <https://www.canada.ca/en/women-gender-equality/campaigns/gender-based-violence-its-not-just/sexual-violence-and-consent.html>
- World Bank. (n.d.-a). *Gender data portal: Iran, Islamic Rep.* Retrieved October 30, 2024, from <https://genderdata.worldbank.org/en/economies/iran-islamic-rep>
- World Bank. (n.d.-b). *World development indicators*. Retrieved January 22, 2026, from <https://data.worldbank.org>
- World Health Organization. (n.d.). *Sexual health*. <https://www.who.int/health-topics/sexual-health>
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Violence info – Sexual violence*. <http://apps.who.int/violence-info/sexual-violence>
- World Population Review. (2022). *Rape statistics by country 2022*. <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/rape-statistics-by-country>
- Yaghoobi, C. (2012). Iranian women and shifting sexual ideologies, 1850–2010. In S. S. Hamzeh (Ed.), *Sexuality in Muslim contexts: Restrictions and resistance* (pp. 52–79). Zed Books.
- Yaghoobi, C. (2024). Love on hold: Social distancing and relationships in early Iranian COVID-19 experiences. *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 20(3), 350–372. <https://doi.org/10.1215/15525864-11234567>
- Yarger, J., Gutmann-Gonzalez, A., Han, S., Borgen, N., & Decker, M. J. (2021). Young people's romantic relationships and sexual activity before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), Article 1780. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-021-11818-1>
- Ybarra, M. L., & Mitchell, K. J. (2013). Prevalence rates of male and female sexual violence perpetrators in a national sample of adolescents. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 167(12), 1125–1134. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2013.2503>
- Ybarra, M. L., Mitchell, K. J., Hamburger, M., Diener-West, M., & Leaf, P. J. (2011). X-rated material and perpetration of sexually aggressive behavior among children and adolescents: Is there a link? *Aggressive Behavior*, 37(1), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ab.20367>
- Ybarra, M. L., & Thompson, R. E. (2018). Predicting the emergence of sexual violence in adolescence. *Prevention Science*, 19(4), 403–415. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-017-0810-4>

- Zarrinnegar, D. (2022). Agents of change: Women's sexual uprisings in modern Iran. *Intersect: The Stanford Journal of Science, Technology, and Society*, 15(2), Article 2. <https://ojs.stanford.edu/ojs/index.php/intersect/article/view/2151>
- Zinzow, H. M., & Thompson, M. (2015). A longitudinal study of risk factors for repeated sexual coercion and assault in US college men. *Archives of Sexual Behavior*, 44, 213–222.
- Zori, G., Walker, A. F., King, L., Duncan, R. P., Dayton, K., & Foti, S. (2023). The impact of state policy on adverse teen sexual health outcomes in the United States: A scoping review. *Sexuality Research and Social Policy*, 20(1), 160–176. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13178-022-00770-3>
- Zuboff, S. (2019). *The age of surveillance capitalism: The fight for a human future at the new frontier of power*. PublicAffairs.

Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Guide

Demographic Questions:

In the consent form, include the demographic questions below:

- 1) What is your sex?
- 2) How old are you?
- 3) What is your current level of education? MA or PhD?
- 4) Do you work? Part-time or full-time? What is your occupation?
- 5) Where do you live?
- 6) Where is your birthplace?
- 7) Do you recognize yourself as a person with an ethnic minority status? If yes, please specify.
- 8) How would you define the economic situation in your family growing up?
Very Challenging
Challenging
Comfortable
Very Comfortable
- 9) How would you define your current economic situation?
Very Challenging
Challenging
Comfortable
Very Comfortable
- 10) Are you in a relationship now?
If yes, how would you describe your current relationship?
- 11) Do you have any children? If yes, how many?
- 12) Do you have a religious affiliation? Or background?
What option describes you best?
Active believer
Passive believer
Others- please specify:

Interview Session:

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Remind the participants they have the right to withdraw from the interview at any time without consequences.

Are you ready to start the interview?

Part 1: Dating and Intimacy

Could we talk about your experience of dating?

- 1- Are you dating? If yes, where and how do you usually meet people?
Are you on dating apps? Why or why not?
If yes, Which app? Why?
- 2- Imagine you want to go on a date, can you walk me through the process of finding a person up to the point of the end of the first date?
- 3- What would a perfect date be for you? What are the kinds of things that get in the way of a perfect date?
- 4- What is an ideal intimate relationship for you?
- 5- Have you faced problems with your sexual relationships? For example, things do not go the way that you were hoping. If yes, how? And what was the reason?
- 6- Do you consider that sex and intimacy are connected?
- 7- Can you describe one of your relationships that didn't go well?
We know the COVID-19 pandemic changed people's lives in many aspects almost worldwide.
- 8- Where were you during the pandemic? Were you living with someone? With Whom?
- 9- Were you in a relationship at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic?
If yes, how was it?
- 10- Were you dating as well? How was your experience with dating during the pandemic?
- 11- How did the pandemic alter your experience of dating?

Part 2: Sex and pleasure, porn

I am interested in exploring women's relationship to control and shaping their sexual encounters.

- 1- Can we talk about your last sexual relationship? (with whom, where, how)
- 2- How typical is this last encounter of your sexual relationships?
If not typical, in what ways it was different? And what is a typical sexual relationship to you?
- 3- Can you share some of your experiences regarding decision making during your sexual encounters?
- 4- Let's talk about the constraints. What do you feel restricts your freedom or control over your sexual activities?
- 5- What are the main factors influencing your sexual experiences?
What are the factors that might restrict your control over your sexual encounters, choices, options, and decisions?
- 6- Is watching pornography part of your sexual practices?
If yes, from which source? When and how porn is included in your sexual practices?
- 7- Is sexual pleasure a priority for you? Can you explain?
- 8- Is there any sexual activity that you experimented or would like to experiment?
Did you experience it? Why or why not?
- 9- Have you engaged in sexual practices just to please your partner?
- 10- May I ask you what is your sexual orientation?
Who are the people you have revealed your orientation?

Who are the ones you have not revealed it? Any reason?

Let's talk about the COVID-19 pandemic time.

11- How did the pandemic alter your sexual habits?

12- Did you change the way you present yourself during the pandemic?

Part 3: Sexual Violence (SV)

Could we talk about sexual violence?

1- Have you experienced any sexual violence in your life?

From whom? How did you react?

Did you seek help? Why or why not?

Did you get enough support?

2- In your sexual experiences, have you ever felt forced into engaging in a sexual activity?

3- How has encountering sexual violence affected your sexual life?

4- Do you know if your previous and the current educational institutions as well as the country that you live/used to live in have policies regarding SV?

5- Do you know if SV have increased or decreased in the past years? In your specific context/country/school?

6- Did you experience any SV during the pandemic?

If yes:

Who was/were coming from? What did you do in response?

Did you seek help? Why or why not?

Did you get support?

Was the violence you experienced similar or different from the one(s) you experience before the pandemic?

7- Do you have a support group? Family? Friends? Were you in connection with your support group?

8- Which university you were attending at the time? Are/were there any specific policies to prevent incidents of SV in the school you are/were attending?

Concluding Questions

- Is there anything else you would like to share regarding the topics that we discussed?

Possible Probe Questions (come after each focus question)

- Tell me more about this.
- Describe what that felt like to you.
- I don't understand, can you explain this to me?

Possible Reflection Questions

- What did you think about this?

Appendix B: Similarities & Differences in Results in Two Contexts Tables

Table 10

Summarizing Similarities in Results in Two Contexts

Dating	
Relationship status	<p>uTehran: 3 single & 12 in a relationship</p> <p>uOttawa: 5 single & 11 in a relationship</p>
Date Modality	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Traditional in-person only: 7 from uTehran; 8 from uOttawa</p>
Dating Scripts	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Traditional-Cultural Script: Followed by about half of participants from both contexts, mainly among those from religious or conservative backgrounds.</p> <p>Friendship script: Followed by half of the participants from both contexts</p>
Factors Impacting Dating Experiences	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Age; experience level; personal mood and goals; communication skills; shared interests and values; dating environment (calm etc.); respect and trust; intersectional factors</p> <p>Community/family Level</p> <p>family responsibilities; traditional family structures;</p>
Ideal Dates	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Good communication and connection; attentiveness and emotional support; sense of humor; shared values; mutual trust</p>
Appearance & Self-Presentation on First Dates	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Authentic: About half of the participants from both contexts- Preference for comfortable and authentic clothing; casual style among online app users; two religious participants (one per context) preferred non-sexualized clothing.</p> <p>Attractive: About half of the participants from both contexts- Aiming for an appealing, put-together look without being overly formal; younger participants were more attentive to their appearance.</p>

<p>COVID-19 and dating</p>	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Overall impacts: Similar across contexts; dating felt less safe.</p> <p>Normalizations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Normalization of video/virtual dates <p>State/Institutional level</p> <p>Overall impacts: Restrictions and lockdowns halted or complicated in-person dating.</p>
<p>Intimacy</p>	
<p>Ideal Intimate Relationship</p>	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Similar across both contexts: strong communication (26 out of 31), emotional connection and love, supportiveness, shared values, and a satisfying sexual relationship and attraction (only 4: 2 from uOttawa and 2 from uTehran).</p>
<p>Bad Intimate Relationship</p>	<p>Similar across contexts</p> <p>Individual level</p> <p>Often occurring when participants were younger: feeling uncared for or not prioritized; Inconsistent communication and follow-up; partner expecting “mothering”; lack of shared values; presence of violence.</p>
<p>Sex and intimacy</p>	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Connected: 25 participants (12 uOttawa; 13 uTehran) felt a close link between sex and emotional intimacy.</p> <p>Not connected: 6 participants (4 from uOttawa, 2 Canadian, 2 Iranian, and 2 from uTehran) did not experience a strong connection between the two.</p>
<p>Intimacy & COVID- 19</p>	<p>Individual level</p> <p>In a relationship during COVID-19: 7 participants across both contexts were dating their partners and became more intimate; using technology for long-distance contact, reported more time together and deeper bonding.</p> <p>Not dating partners during COVID-19 (12 participants): Included those married but not “dating” within marriage; those with pre-existing relationship problems worsened by confinement; health-related separation; intersectional challenges (e.g., sexual minority</p>

	participants in Iran needing feasible private spaces); some sought connection through online apps or third spaces to cope with loneliness.
Sex, Pleasure, Sexual Agency	
Meaning & Purpose of Sex	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Both contexts</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sex as a holistic experience 2. Sex as recreational 3. Sex as satisfying male partners (more than half, especially in conservative or religious contexts)
Factors Impacting or Restricting Sex	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Age, experience, self-esteem, internalized restrictive values, physical/mental health, media, pornography, sexual education, safety, respect, trust, orgasm/satisfaction, sexual violence/trauma, partner characteristics/performance, duration, connection/intimacy, communication</p> <p>Community/family Level</p> <p>Community values, family</p>
Ideal Sex	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Feeling loved, safe, secure; foreplay and afterplay; comfort, open communication, fun; duration and frequency; mutual understanding and care; consensual relationship</p>
Sexual Pleasure Priority	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Yes: 15 participants (7 uOttawa; 8 uTehran)</p> <p>No: 15 participants (9 uOttawa; 6 uTehran)</p> <p>Variable: 1 uTehran participant, depending on menstrual cycle</p>
Pornography Use	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Yes: 11 participants (5 uOttawa, 3 non-Iranian ethical, 2 Iranian any source; 6 uTehran, 5 any available resources, 1 concerned about ethical aspect)</p> <p>No: 19 participants (10 uOttawa; 9 uTehran)</p>

Masterbation	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Yes: 19 participants (10 uOttawa; 9 uTehran)</p> <p>Occasionally: 4 uTehran</p> <p>No: 6 participants (3 uOttawa, 2 religious; 3 uTehran, religious)</p>
Sexual and Pleasure Education	<p>About half in both contexts never received comprehensive sexual education (family or institutions).</p> <p>Pleasure education was largely absent.</p> <p>Community/family Level & State/Institutional level</p> <p>Some received some sex ed: uOttawa, family (not as a pleasant activity, focus on preventions) + institutions; uTehran, mainly institutions (biology/sexual health)</p> <p>Individual level</p> <p>Self-education: 27 out of 31 expressed at least one kind of self-education including: use of pornography, social media (~1/3), therapy/sexologists, academic/feminist studies or films/podcasts (~2/3), friend circles, social/feminist movements</p>
Sexual agency	<p>Group 1: Traditional religious values (1 uOttawa)</p> <p>Group 2: Traditional with some liberal updates</p> <p>Group 3: Majority (12 uOttawa; 10 uTehran), exposed to feminist/liberatory ideas, strong autonomy, some environmental and value conflict</p> <p>Group 4: Fully liberated sexual values (1 uTehran), unrestricted, fulfilling sex with supportive/communicative partner</p>
Sexual Experiences During the COVID-19 pandemic	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Improved: 3 participants in committed relationships/married (more time together)</p> <p>Less or no activity: ~1/3 participants</p> <p>Roughly the same activity: ~1/2 participants, some adjustments; includes partnered and single participants with unchanged sexual activity.</p>
SV	
Forms of SV	Verbal Harassment (19), Physical Harassment (17), Online Harassment (9), Stalking (5), Rape (2)
Settings of SV	Private spaces, School, Work, Public Transport

From whom?	Strangers (70 -both), Intimate Partner Violence (16-Both), Classmates or Professors (12-Both), Coworkers or Superiors (11-Both), Friends and Peers (5-Both)	
Responses by participants encountering SV Individual level	Freeze or nothing	Physical sexual harassment, lack of unawareness of what SV is
	Escape	If possible, depending on the context, using strategies developed to fool perpetrators
	Ignore	In case of verbal sexual harassment or indecent exposure
	Resist and Surround	Work as a process for some, but in case of possibility of danger due to power imbalances and IPV young women might surround.
	Resist	If possible, by attacking and shouting back, long lasting resistance: starting a campaign against SV on campus
	Block and report	Online SV
	+ Community/family Level & State/Institutional level Getting help	From partner, therapists, family members, friends, institutions (work, school)
	Not getting help	Feeling of shame and guilt self blame, culture of victim blame, feeling vulnerable, seeing the issue as a couple private matter, unawareness of SV, want to forget, fast encounter in street
Support Received	Community/family Level Family and partners; friends (not always sufficient)/ Iran sisterhood; therapists/sexologists. State/Institutional level institutions (limited support)	
	Individual level	

Impact on Women	Self-blame and shame; lower self-confidence; fear of judgment; feeling unsafe; loss of trust/fear of men; increased caution; trauma; interrupted sexual activity; relationship avoidance; helplessness
Causes of Sexual Violence	Individual level, Community/family Level, State/Institutional level Patriarchal culture (majority across both contexts); religion (for those raised in religious contexts); lack of sexual education (~1/3 of participants). lack of supportive policies/community.
Prevention of Sexual Violence	Individual level, Community/family Level, State/Institutional level Cultural change; sexual education and awareness; age and experience, feminist circles and support networks.
School Policy Against SV	State/Institutional level uOttawa: Only 5 participants aware of campus policies. uTehran: None aware
School SV Prevention Policy During COVID-19	State/Institutional level uOttawa: Only one participant vaguely recalled measures; rest unaware. uTehran: None aware of any pandemic-related SV-prevention policies.
Sexual Violence During the Covid-19 Pandemic	Individual level 16 participants (8 uOttawa; 8 uTehran) did not experience SV. 15 participants (8 uOttawa; 7 uTehran) experienced some form of SV, including intimate partner violence All noted experiences were similar to pre-pandemic.
Sexual Violence Support Group	Community/family Level 3 participants had no support group (1 uOttawa; 2 uTehran). Family support: 12 participants (5 uOttawa; 7 uTehran). Friends as support: 22 participants (11 each context).
SV Rate	~Half believe SV has increased (both contexts). Some unsure or think rates remained the same due to lack of statistics/social change.

Table 11
Summarizing Differences in Results in Two Contexts

Dating	
Dating modality	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Used online dating apps: 8 from uOttawa</p> <p>Used the “third space”: 8 from uTehran</p>
Factors Impacting Dating Experiences	<p>State/Institutional level</p> <p>Dating environment (esp. restrictions and regulations in Iran for uTehran participants)</p>
Ideal Dates	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Physical attraction (8 Iranian participants, 3 uOttawa, 5 uTehran)</p>
COVID-19 and dating	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Normalizations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increased normalization of online dating apps (uOttawa) • Normalization of using the third space (uTehran)
Intimacy: None	
Sex, Pleasure, Sexual Agency	
Factors Impacting or Restricting Sex	<p>Community/family Level</p> <p>Societal expectations, community value (to have sex, not to have sex), kind of relationship</p> <p>State/Institutional level</p> <p>Regulations, situational constraints, concerns about pregnancy/contraceptive access (among participants in Iran)</p> <p>Individual level</p>

	physical attraction (Iranian participants)	
Pornography Use	Individual level Ethical aspect	
Sexual and Pleasure Education	Community/family Level uTehran none from family	
SV		
Kind	More street harassment in conservative contexts; indecent exposure (the proof process in Iran, taboo)	
Settings of SV	Street (majority more conservative), Church, Club, Date	
From whom?	Family (6-Iranian), Date (5-uOttawa)	
Responses by participants encountering SV	State/Institutional level Not getting help	intersectional aspect (immigrant), systematic inattention and feeling helpless
Support Received	State/Institutional level Institutions (limited support; many Iranian women did not seek institutional help); people in public.	
Impact on Women	Individual level Pride in resistance.	
Causes of Sexual Violence	State/Institutional level lack of supportive policies/community (Iran: criminalization of sexual activity outside marriage intensifies the problem)	
State-Level Policies Against SV	State/Institutional level Iran: Most participants distrust state ability to protect; policies seen as non-survivor-centered; some mention hotlines but question their quality. Canada: Most assume policies exist and are effective; a few note limitations and non-survivor-centered aspects.	

<p>School Policy Against SV</p>	<p>State/Institutional level</p> <p>uOttawa: Only 5 participants aware of campus policies.</p> <p>uTehran: None aware; distrust in system’s willingness to implement policies.</p>
<p>Sexual Violence During the Covid-19 Pandemic</p>	<p>Individual level</p> <p>Violence during dates (from uOttawa).</p>
<p>SV Rate</p>	<p>Fewer than one-third believe SV decreased (all Iranian).</p>