



Sexual Pleasure as a Woman's Human Right: Experiences from a Grassroots Training Program in Turkey

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In Turkey, genderized notions of sexuality are instilled in children from a very early age. It is common practice for boy children to be told to show their penises to relatives and neighbors and to be proud of this, whereas girl children are warned that it is shameful to expose, even by mistake, a quick glimpse of their underwear while playing. Women's negative associations with sexuality are further exacerbated by the importance given to preserving virginity until marriage and customary practices in some regions such as displaying a sheet stained with blood as proof of the bride's virginity on "the first night" of marriage. If a woman fails to prove she is a virgin at the time of marriage, she is likely not only to be disgraced, looked down upon, and seen as less worthy, but in some regions she may even suffer the customary practice of an "honor killing." Men, on the other hand, are allowed, and even encouraged, to have sexual encounters prior to marriage and sexual experience is often perceived as proof of "manhood."

"Women and sexuality" remains a strong taboo in Turkey. Most women have access to little or no information as the issue is not addressed in either the formal education system or informal systems such as the family or the community. The closest any adult education program comes to addressing the topic is in a technical manner through reproductive health education, without the social and the cultural perspectives of control and oppression, much less the psychological and individual perspectives of desire and pleasure. What little most women know about sexuality is mostly based on misinformation and social myths all of which serve to support the strict codes of conduct which severely limit women's sexual experience.

The social and cultural constructs around sexuality need to be placed within the context of the patriarchal nature of society which is riddled with gender inequalities in both the private and public sphere. Genderized constructs of sexuality are reflected in social myths and popular sayings such as, "Women are by nature sexually passive while men are by nature sexually active;" "A woman's sex drive is less than a man's;" and "A woman's sexuality ends after menopause." The resultant impression is that men need sexual release at all costs while for women sex is a burden to be accepted quietly, merely a responsibility of procreation, devoid of notions of pleasure. This is a social construct which is geared towards undermining women's sexuality, eliminating, controlling, and oppressing it.

WOMEN'S VOICES

CHILDHOOD

When I was eight years old, I was curious about the sexual organ of the neighbor's son and wanted to see what it looked like. When my family found out about this, they confined me to a dark room. After three days of confinement, I was taken to a doctor for a virginity test, and taken out of school. The impact of this experience continued after my marriage. I had difficulty in having sex with my husband. I felt pangs of anxiety and shame.

MENSTRUATION

I had to undergo psychiatric treatment after having my first menstrual cycle because I lost my ability to speak as a result of the fear I experienced. The impact of this dreadful experience continues to this date, despite the fact that I am now a mother of two children.

I will never forget the day I had my first period and how my mother slapped me across the face when I told her. I still don't know why she did it. (Author's note: Mothers slapping their daughters in the face when they have their first menstruation is an old customary practice in Turkey.)

When I had my first period, I even considered committing suicide. Why couldn't they have told me what it was and that it was normal, so that I wouldn't have been so afraid? Now I think I want to explain to my daughter such things as soon as she has grown up a bit.

When I had my first period I thought that I had lost my virginity, ruptured my hymen. My family had explained to me the importance of the hymen and virginity but told me nothing about menstruation or that one day I would menstruate. I still remember the pain and fear I felt that day, and resent my mother for it, but I still can't talk with her about it.

The strong codes of conduct, which define women's sexual behavior, are used as an instrument to keep women under the control of their fathers, husbands, and brothers who assume responsibility for ensuring 'their' women retain their chastity; and if women fail to do so, it is perceived as an acceptable basis for violence against them. In general, sexual codes of conduct serve as a mechanism for restricting women's mobility in the public sphere; and such restrictions are paralleled by the socially expected role of women which consists of marriage, child bearing, and home-making—all within the confines of the private sphere.

The modernization initiatives initiated in the Turkish Republic made public space increasingly accessible to women—although, primarily to those of the higher socio-economic classes—but codes of conduct for women's sexual behavior have continued to be used as a mechanism for "internalized" restrictions on their mobility. Women, who have moved into the public space, have been allowed to do so in return for strict self-imposed codes of conduct regarding their sexual behavior. Although advocates of modernity and of women's rights have raised the issues of women's unequal status in the family, in education, employment, and politics, they have mostly avoided the question of inequalities in sexuality.

The internalization of negative social messages about their sexuality has made it difficult for many women to make free and informed choices about their sexual experiences, thereby, limiting their ability to secure themselves a healthy sex life. Many women associate sexuality with a lack of control, violence, and abuse; and certainly not with pleasure.

There is a clear need to empower women to take better control of their sexual lives and to build an affirmative approach towards sexuality. As a result, women and sexuality has been one of the priority areas in the outreach work of Women for Women's Human Rights (WWHR), an autonomous human rights NGO based in Turkey. The issue of sexuality is an integral part of WWHR's training program, "Human Rights and Legal Literacy Training for Women." The WWHR training program aims to raise women's critical awareness of the laws that affect their lives—whether these are codified laws, customs, traditions or daily practices. Building on the central concept of "women's human rights", the training provides the participants with the information and the skills to put their rights into practice both individually and through solidarity networks and initiatives pressing for social change.

The training consists of fifteen workshop modules on a variety of topics, including legal literacy and democratic means of participation, human rights and women's human rights, civil rights, violence against women and strategies against violence, economic rights, communication

skills, gender-sensitive parenting, sexuality, reproductive rights, the women's movement, and community organizing. The program is currently conducted by specially trained social workers at Community Centers and State Residences for Girls in the seven geographical regions of Turkey. The local training groups each consist of women who meet on a weekly basis. The social workers act as group facilitators leading the participatory exercises and group discussions.

Addressing the issue of sexuality within the framework of a human rights training program is a strategic choice that we justify in two ways. Firstly, a human rights program *for women* must include a discussion of sexuality because sexuality is used as a central mechanism in the patriarchal control of women. The holistic approach of the program provides women with an overview of the systematic violations of their human rights in a variety of contexts and enables them to trace the interconnections. This allows a shift of the framework from an extremely private, individual context into a social, cultural, and political context which facilitates the discussion of sexuality as an issue shaped by the rules of the patriarchal society at large.

Secondly, we believe in the indivisibility of human rights and approach the issue as one of *sexual rights*, a human right to bodily integrity. Sexuality is addressed towards the end of the training. As a result, the previous discussions of the violations of women's human rights in the family, in public life, and in working life set a framework for approaching sexuality as a "human rights" issue. The participants' increased knowledge and legal literacy provides them with a feeling of security and self-confidence which allows them to address some of the taboo issues concerning their sexuality. We believe that it would have been impossible to run the sexuality workshops with the same level of success if they had been self-standing modules rather than as part of an integrated program in which the participants had already developed a general understanding of human rights and the accompanying skills.

WOMEN AND SEXUALITY WITHIN THE WWHR HUMAN RIGHTS AND LEGAL LITERACY TRAINING PROGRAM FOR WOMEN

The issue of "women and sexuality" covers a wide range of issues encompassing reproductive rights and sexual violence against women as well as the more marginalized topics of sexual expression and sexual fulfillment. All of these issues are addressed in different modules throughout the WWHR Human Rights and Legal Literacy Training Program for Women. Sexual violence against women forms part of the modules on

Violence against Women and Strategies against Violence, and there is a separate module on *Reproductive Rights*. The two modules entitled *Women and Sexuality* attempt to facilitate an understanding of sexual rights through the development of an affirmative and empowering perception of sexuality by emphasizing the right to sexual expression, pleasure, and enjoyment. Hence we have attempted to ensure that these two modules are committed to a positive perception of the issue, free of both the negative connotations of sexual violence against women and the functional linkages to reproductive sexuality.

Facilitating the development of an empowering perception of sexuality is not an easy task; particularly, given the internalization of years of social messages enjoining women to suppress their sexual instincts and limit the basis of their sexual experiences to procreation and inculcating a concept of female sexuality as merely passive and quiet acquiescence. This is why we chose to address the issue of sexual violence and reproductive rights in different modules, thus, allowing for a separate space for the participants to be able to focus solely on issues pertaining to their sexual rights. An example provided by one of the group facilitators is a case in point. One day the husband of one of the participants in her group came to the Community Center and said that, initially, he had been opposed to his wife attending this training of "women's rights stuff." But it seemed that now he thought differently. He wanted to thank the group facilitator, particularly in relation to the couple's improved sexual life. He asked, "What have you done to my wife to help her relax about sexuality? I used to be driven to despair chasing after her and she would always tell me that it was shameful and sinful, and that I should stay away from her. Now all that has changed. Please tell me what you told her, so that I can tell my friends who are having the same kind of problem with their wives."

Sexuality is a private matter and many people have difficulty talking about it. The negative social messages that have been internalized by many Turkish women make it even harder for them to talk about sex. At the beginning of the sexuality workshops, women would often lead the discussion onto sexual health or the sexual education of their children. Our workshops placed considerable emphasis on creating an environment of security and mutual trust, so as to enable women to speak about their own experiences. At the start of the program, we establish a series of 'group rules of conduct.' These include the use of 'P' language; not making any judgmental comments; and confidentiality. The sexuality workshops are held towards the end of the training program after the group has met for more than 10 workshops. By the time the sexuality modules come

up, the participants have grown to know each other and the facilitator quite well; and the group rules of conduct have become so well established such that communication amongst the participants is based upon mutual respect and care for each other. Given the taboo nature of the issue, the group facilitator shares some of her own experiences in order to encourage the participants to open up.

The two modules on *Women and Sexuality* take the women through the following steps in order to establish incrementally an empowering definition of sexual rights.

The participants begin with a 'free association' exercise where they are given the phrases 'female sexuality' and 'male sexuality' and all the responses which spontaneously come to their minds are put up on a flip chart. Although there are some women in every group who associate pleasurable things—such as sexual desire, love, attraction, sexiness and sexual pleasure—with women's sexuality, they are invariably in a minority. More typically, most associate women's sexuality with reproduction, motherhood, virginity, fear, being oppressed, or 'a duty'. Men's sexuality, on the other hand, is more often directly associated with sex, pleasure, sexual desire, and the freedom to live it to the full.

WOMEN'S VOICES

LACK OF INFORMATION / MISINFORMATION

Do we really have one hole for urination and another for the blood to pass through during menstruation and for sexual intercourse? Are they not the same hole? I thought we had only one hole.

What is the clitoris for?

Do girls/women feel sexual pleasure, too?

I blame my mother for my lack of information about sexuality. When I was married, I believed that I could get pregnant by kissing. My husband and I both suffered very much due to my ignorance. I do not want to repeat the same mistakes with my daughter.

I wish they had taught all this information that we are learning now back in school. We all grew up with such little information; and most of it was wrong. I don't want my children to grow up the same way!

The group facilitator then asks the participants to review these perceptions and beliefs about the differences between male and female sexuality, and to evaluate whether they are biological or socially-constructed and

imposed. This leads into a discussion of what we call the 'social myths' about sexuality such as the ones mentioned earlier. Here it often becomes necessary for the group facilitator to intervene in order to correct misinformation and compensate for disinformation.

As part of the discussion on how various social myths affect the ways in which women experience sexuality, the participants are divided into small groups of two or three to discuss how their sexuality has been, and still is, controlled/oppressed by their families, partners, society at large, and by the state. The small group context proves more conducive to the sharing of private experiences and allows each participant to take the time and the space to express herself. As can be seen in the box of short quotations from group participants, this exercise usually uncovers many intense, negative experiences of sexuality going back to early childhood memories of punishment for curiosity and exploration, moving into frightful experiences of "the first menstruation" and "the first night of marriage." It is important for the participants to have the safe space to speak out about these negative experiences because talking about them out loud often constitutes the first step of the healing process. Moreover, as more women participate in the discussion, similar experiences are repeated again and again; it is through this repetition that the issue moves from the private to the political.

This discussion is followed by an informational session on the female sexual organs which includes visual handouts depicting and naming the female genitalia. While this seems like a technical, matter-of-fact type of information-sharing exercise, the level of disinformation means that it often culminates in intense discussions. For example, one invariable outcome of this exercise in Turkey is the discovery by the participants that the female sexual organs do not have well-established names in Turkish and that the existing names are associated with derogatory meanings as they are often used as swear words by men. In this way, the participants acknowledge how, as women, they have been deprived of even a common language about sexuality which makes talking about it even more difficult. Another common discovery is that the majority of the participants are not aware that they have a clitoris, the only human organ whose sole function is sexual pleasure. In one group, a participant humorously pointed out to the group facilitator that when she first heard the word, she thought it was the name of a planet. At the conclusion of the exercise, the group facilitator encourages the participants to examine their sexual organs with the help of a mirror when they go home. Hence, the participants are encouraged to start exploring their sexuality; and the natural place to start is through getting to know their bodies.

WOMEN'S VOICES

**VIRGINITY, THE HYMEN ("MEMBRANE OF GIRLHOOD")
AND THE FIRST NIGHT OF MARRIAGE**

During the first couple of years of my marriage, I was unable to have sexual intercourse with my husband due to the strong internalization of the expectations of my family about virginity.

I had to convince my husband that I was a virgin when we got married. I still keep the doctors reports pronouncing me a virgin, "just in case" anyone questions this in the future.

On the night of her marriage, a relative of mine fainted when she saw her husband naked in front of her.

On my wedding night, my husband and I were in a room, and all our relatives were waiting outside the door for us to consummate the marriage, so that the blood-stained sheet could be brought out for everyone to see. When this had been done, his mother came into the room, took me to the bath and washed me. I remember this as one of the worst experiences in my life. I cannot stand having sex with my husband. I don't want him even to touch me. I have never had an orgasm.

On my wedding night I did not bleed. My husband cut his finger so there would be blood to show on the sheet. The next morning he took me straight to the doctor to have my hymen examined. Although my hymen was intact, he still sometimes treats me in a condescending manner. Until today, I still had no idea that it is natural for some women not to bleed.

A friend of mine who was not a virgin arranged her wedding night to coincide with her period; she even changed the date when she realized it was going to be off by a few days. I think it is an unfortunate way to begin a marriage, but if the man/the family insists that pre-marital sex is fine for men and not for women, they deserve to be deceived. I think the same thing about women having their hymens repaired.

For years you are taught that sex and sexuality is the devil to be feared. Then, in one night, it is supposed to become the angel to be loved. This is just not possible!

The modules conclude with a discussion session on "sexual rights" which include the basic right to know and like one's sexual organs, the right to seek sexual experiences independent of marital status, the right to orgasm, the right to expression and pursuit of sexual needs and desires,

and also the right to choose NOT to experience one's sexuality. This is a process whereby the participants first find the safe space to speak about negative experiences and then move these accounts from the private to the political level for a better understanding of what underlies them and how they can be prevented from re-occurring. What follows is an affirmative process of physical self-exploration and the initial steps towards starting to talk about feelings of pleasure, enjoyment and fulfilment, and to associating them with our sexualities as women.

WOMEN'S VOICES

PLEASURE

As I do not get any sexual satisfaction from my husband, despite trying to talk to him about it (and even after seeking therapy), I began to masturbate and give pleasure to myself.

We are poor. We can't buy many things that we might enjoy. We can't do as many things as we would like. But sexual pleasure is something that we can all enjoy. So we should make the best of it!

So women also feel sexual pleasure, just like men do! I think it is very important to know this at the beginning of marriage, so that you can also teach your husband about it.

Instinctively, I have always felt that sex was a natural thing. It is good now to have all this information and to confirm that what I had thought all along was right.

I have a neighbor who talks very openly about sexual pleasure. She was always saying that she could not get enough of her husband and wanted to have sex with him every night. In a few weeks, all my other neighbors began to talk about her as "Ayşe who has it on fire". But she doesn't mind and still talks about it!

The men who keep trying to cover women up because they find women inviting and provocative should be told that when they wear tight jeans women find them the same, and, so they shouldn't dress that way, either!

For the younger participants, the training also has the preventive function of providing them with the information and the skills to prevent any further damage or misconceptions. For the older participants, who have gone through years of negative associations about their sexuality, it marks only the beginning of a long process of coming to terms with the issue, healing and exploring. Almost inevitably, in each group there are moth-

ers who affirm their commitment to preventing their daughters from suffering from the misinformation, disinformation, and fearful oppressions to which they were subjected. And that is a bright ray of hope for the future.