

**Understanding the Sexual-selves of
Iranian-American Women:
A Qualitative Study**

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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY CANDIDATE'S CERTIFICATION

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge that any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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**ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF
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ARISING FROM THIS THESIS**

PUBLICATIONS

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- Rashidian, M. (2007). Gender Roles and Power Dynamics: Counseling Strategies for Working with Iranian-American Women. American Counseling Annual Convention, Detroit, Michigan. March 21-25.
- Rashidian, M. (2006). Understanding the Sexual-Selves of Middle-Eastern-American Women. Inaugural Postgraduate Research Conference, Faculty of Education, Health and Professional Studies. University of New England, Armidale NSW, Australia. August 8-11.
- Rashidian, M., Smart, R., Meji'a, O. L. (2006). Understanding the Sexual Selves of Middle Eastern-American Women. American Counseling Association, Canadian Counseling Association Annual Convention. Montreal, Canada, Education Session. March 30-April 3.
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative research is to explore the perception of Iranian-American women about their sexual-selves and gender role formations. Additionally, the research discusses issues which contributed to the formation of their sexual-selves, gender roles, and gender identity, as well as the role culture plays in the lives of these women. The snowball sampling technique was used to identify the 24 participants, aged 18 years and older, among the first generation Iranian-American women living in Southern California, United States. A feminist perspective was selected to provide the theoretical framework to understand each woman's unique experience with respect to her sexual-self and life circumstances. Narrative analysis was utilized to explore the sexual life stories via individual in-depth interview. These stories included childhood to marriage in Iran, the undoing and unlearning process underpinning the development of their sexual-selves, and the influences of the socio-cultural factors that framed the experiences of the participants in both their home and host cultures.

Four life stories were selected to provide an in-depth understanding of the sexual life experiences of these women. While each life story was unique, the analysis revealed several themes, including the impact of power within family and larger society from early childhood; the perception of sex as a taboo societal subject; sex as a 'sinful act' for women and a necessity for men; and patriarchy as a control mechanism in female sexual expression. Themes from the analysis of the full sample included obedience, passiveness, and secrecy as part of gender role; limited sexual awareness; tolerance of sexual abuse within and outside marriage; and the manner in which these women negotiated change as a consequence of the migration process. A significant research finding was that the

participants have maintained various degrees of attachment to their home culture. For many, this attachment was not as strong as their drive for self-determined sexual-self expression. In addition, the women revealed that their self-concept was not totally suppressed from the home culture, but was present in a dormant state until new cultural exposure provided new forms of expression options. The women's stories reveal clearly the workings of power, self-monitoring, deceit or misrepresentation, secrecy, shame, fear, guilt, sinfulness, and an absence of sexually-related education in the shaping of their sexual-selves.

The thesis argues that the concept of the sexual rights of women has to be equated with human rights for significant advances to be made in the equality of women with men. The findings have policy and practice implications of Iranian-American women benefiting from educational programs and community discussion groups. Health professionals will see greater therapeutic gain in their patients by having adequate sensitivity to and familiarity with their patients' culture and language. Researchers will have an information base from which to pursue further research, not only with Iranian women, but also with women of similar cultural backgrounds.

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DEDICATION

To my daughter Shahrzad

And

To all the women whose voices have not been heard

TABLE OF CONTENT

CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY	
CANDIDATE’S CERTIFICATION	ii
ACKNOWLEDGMENT OF PUBLICATIONS AND CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS ARISING FROM THIS THESIS	iii
ABSTRACT	v
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	vii
DEDICATION	ix
CHAPTER 1: THE FIRST GENERATION IRANIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN: A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE	
1.1 Iran: Identity, Religion, and Culture	4
1.1.1 Zoroastrianism	7
1.1.2 Islam	8
1.2 Introducing the First Generation Iranian-American Woman	13
1.3 Overview of Chapters	16
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.1 Historical View of Politics, Power, and Iranian Women	20
2.2 Evolution of Iranian Women’s Liberation	26
2.3 A Context to Understand the Migration of Iranian-American Women	30
2.4 Migrant Women and Cultural Adjustment	33
2.5 Self and Its Relationship to Culture and Gender	38
2.5.1 Female Sexual-Self	39
2.5.2 Sexual-self and Gender Role	45

2.6 Constructionists' View on the Shaping of Women's Sexuality	47
2.7 Power, Gender, and Sexuality: A Feminist View	51
2.8 Individualist vs. Collectivist Self-Construct	54
2.9 Sexual Experiences of Women	57
2.10 Religion, Culture, and the Sexual Rights of Women in Iran	60
2.11 Conclusion	66

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 The Researcher as an Insider	68
3.2 Selecting an Appropriate Methodology	75
3.2.1 Narrative and Narrative Inquiry	77
3.2.1.1 Narrative Knowing and Analysis	80
3.2.1.2 Narrative Process in This Study	82
3.3 Selection and Recruitment Methods	83
3.3.1 Ethics Approval and Ethical Considerations	83
3.3.2 Identification and Recruitment Process	85
3.4 Interviewing the Participants	88
3.4.1 Interview Questions	96
3.5 Data Analysis	99
3.6 Validity and Rigor of the Research	103
3.7 Reflection on the Research Experience	106
3.8 Limitations and Challenges of the Study	108
3.9 Descriptions of Participants at the Time of Interview	111
3.10 Conclusion	116

**CHAPTER 4: VOICES FROM IRANIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN:
FOUR LIFE STORIES**

4.1 The Story of Mahnaz	117
4.2 The Story of Mitra	130
4.3 The Story of Aida	138
4.4 The Story of Ziba	149
4.5 Conclusion	158

CHAPTER 5: GIRLHOOD TO MARRIAGE

5.1 Girlhood in Iran	160
5.1.1 Positioning Within the Family	162
5.1.2 Family Honor	165
5.1.3 Traditional Cultural Values	167
5.1.4 Interplay of Religious and Traditional Values	170
5.1.5 Indirect Messages about Sex and Gender	172
5.2 Girlhood and Sexual-Self	174
5.2.1 Communication With Mothers About Puberty and Menstruation	174
5.2.2 Learning the Meaning of Virginity	178
5.2.3 Sex as a Social Taboo, and Associated Guilt, Shame, and Fear ...	183
5.2.4 Having Secret Lives and Experiencing First Love	191
5.3 Sexual Experiences Within Marriage	195
5.3.1 Confirming Virginity and Loss of Virginity	197
5.3.2 Life and Sex Within Marriage	200
5.4 Conclusion	204

**CHAPTER 6: THE UNDOING, UNLEARNING, RE-LEARNING
PROCESS OF SEXUAL-SELF**

6.1 Origins of the Undoing and Unlearning Process 207
6.2 Leaving the Past Behind 219
6.3 Moving Towards a Discovery of Sexual-Self 225
6.4 Re-learning Process Resulting From Emerging Sexual-Selves 237
**6.5 The Evolved Sexual-Self and Accepting Their
Current Sexual-Selves 245**
6.6 Conclusion 257

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

7.1 Cultural Attachment 262
7.1.1 Fear, Shame, and Guilt as Part of Cultural Attachment 264
7.1.2 Meaning of Sexual-Self from Girlhood to Marriage 267
7.1.3 Meaning of the Undoing, Unlearning, and Re-learning Process ... 273
7.1.4 Current Sexual-Self Perception 279
7.1.5 Examination of Feminist Application 283
7.2 Implications for Policy and Practice 285
**7.2.1 Broader Implications: Iranian Women as the
Vehicle for Political Power 286**
7.2.2 Implication for Health Programs and Health Practitioners 289
7.2.3 Implications for Future Research 293
7.3 Limitation of the Study 297
7.4 Conclusion 299

GLOSSARY OF NON-ENGLISH TERMS301

REFERENCES312

Appendix A: Health Professional Contact Letter	338
Appendix B: Participant’s Information Sheet	339
Appendix C: Participant’s Rights	340
Appendix D: Consent Form.....	344
Appendix E: Interview Form	346

LIST OF TABLES

Table 3.1 Information About the Participants	89
Table 3.1 Continued.....	90
Table 3.2 Probing Questions	95
Table 3.3 Primary Questions	97
Table 3.4 Secondary Questions	98
Table 3.5 Reflective Remarks.....	101

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1 Format of the Interview Structure	92
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LIST OF PAINTINGS

Painting 2.1. Andarouni	23
Painting 3.1. My Grandmother	72
Painting 5.1. Country Girl	161
Painting 6.1 The Patriarchal Hand	206
Painting 6.2 Haunting Culture	261