CHAPTER 1
THE FIRST GENERATION IRANIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN:
A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The topic of this thesis, the female sexual-self, has been the focus of many research studies. What their sexual-self constitutes has been a subject in the discussions of women living in many parts of the world, including the United States (Abolhassani, 2000; Andersen, 1999; Anderson & Cyranowski, 1995; Baumeister, 2000; Daniluk, 1993; Offman & Matheson, 2004; Potgieter & Khan, 2005; Shapiro & Schwarz, 1997). However, a review of scholarly literature reveals that discussion of Iranian-American migrant women’s perceptions of their sexual-selves seldom has found a place in women’s or ethnic studies. The resulting picture, at best, is simplistic and confusing; it mainly relegates Iranian-American women to an “exotic” and mysterious position with which they have had to deal on a personal basis (Bernard, 1980; Karimi-Hakkak, 1991).

The focus of this research is to explore and thereby gain insights into the sexual-selves of first generation Iranian-American migrant women through their perceptions of their life experiences, including their attachments and responses to life events and lifestyles in Iran (the home country) and in the United States (the host country). Specifically, it seeks to document what sense these women make of their gender roles, sexuality, and sexual identity. Further, the research process offers a channel by which these women are able to give voice to their life stories regarding their sexual-selves. The study explores events in the life
histories of the women whose lives began in Iran, and later adjusted to a new culture in the United States. The research questions are as follows:

1. How do Iranian-American women, looking back at their lives, living both in Iran and in the United States, make sense of their sexual-selves?
2. What insights can be gained from studying the meaning of the sexual-selves of Iranian-American women?
3. In what theoretical contexts can the life experiences of Iranian-American women in Iran and the United States be viewed to achieve a better insight into the structuring and current meaning of the sexual-selves of the women, while maintaining the integrity of their perceptions?

The story of the Iranian-American woman, from her own perspective, in her own voice and words, has not been adequately documented. Their views of themselves, whether due to cultural or self-imposed limitations or expectations, have remained private thoughts and have not entered public social discourses. This is more evident where their sexuality is concerned. A perusal of research studies in the English and Farsi (the official and cultural language of Iran) languages reveals minimal accounts of topics related to the sexuality of Iranian-American women. There is some research in English and Farsi regarding their status as it relates to culture, religion, politics, and the dominant male presence in history and the current society of Iran (Afary, 2009; Kousha, 2002; Moghadam, 2004; Paidar, 1995; Ramazani, 1993; Shahidian, 1999; Stowasser, 1994). Furthermore, in the West, since 1979, the period of post Iranian revolution, the
media has had a simplistic outlook of Iranian women as shy, unsophisticated, and submissive individuals.

The exploration of first generation Iranian-American women’s sexual-selves is a complex process (Rashidian, 2002). The general perception of women by others, whether in the home or host cultural environment, has tended to intermingle with their own to form responses to social demands and expectations that promote their survival as they envision it. Other pertinent issues include the identification of factors prompting the formation of their gender role. An issue that confounds their own perceptions of themselves is the knowledge and evidence that they can be equally educated as men, and can perform in capacities at levels equal to men, but are positioned to accept role assignments and achievement levels not equal to that of men. To further confound those self-perceptions, the role designations for women within the family and societal structure are decided by male members. How culture, religion, and civil law operate to influence women’s lives has been a prime source of concern for women (Afary, 2009; Amanat, 1993; Keddie, 1998; Mackey, 1998). Another primary issue is the subjugation of women’s freedom to express self. Some researchers (Afary, 2009; Floor, 2008; Mackey, 1998; Shahidian, 2003) have noted that limitations exist on what an Iranian woman is able to express, to whom she is allowed to express it, how she says it, and to what degree she is able to refer to it without fear of losing her status as a khanoum (ladylike).1

Associated with all of these issues is the system of behaviors the Iranian woman devises to meet the various and sometimes conflicting demands to be all

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1 The full meaning of the term, khanoum, along with other Farsi terms introduced in this thesis, is provided in the Glossary of Non-English Terms on page 301.
she is expected to be; she may pretend to be in agreement with them when she may not necessarily be. Women have been left with few avenues to which to turn to find real solutions to the problems such a dichotomy creates (Afary, 2009). Being given limited options in their social system is an underlying and dominant concern for them in their relationships with men. Also a concern is the manner in which they deal with the male dominance of history and tradition. The unspoken, but real challenge to men and for women themselves is to get men to gradually relinquish this prevailing dominance (Afary, 2009; Floor, 2008; Mackey, 1998).

1.1 Iran: Identity, Religion, and Culture

To fully understand the context of the present research and its findings, it is important for the reader to have a basic understanding of Iranian history and culture. Iran is located in the Middle East. It is a country of diverse ethnic mix, with many religions and languages, and with distinctions from and similarities to the approximately twenty countries that spread across North Africa to Central West Asia, and a small portion of Eastern Europe (Mackey, 1998; Naff, 1980). Iranians are a people who have a very old and highly complex culture, the combination of whose values, humanity, geographic location, and natural resources have thrust them into a contemporary arena of intriguing international economic, political, and military strategies.

Although erroneously considered as such, Iranians are not Arabs, ethnically or genetically. They are Caucasian and primarily refer to themselves as Persians, originally a group of people who established themselves about one millennium B. C. on Iran’s high central plateau. The early inhabitants were
descendants of an Indo-European group that originally migrated out of central Asia. They were known as Aryans. It is for that Iran, the land of the Aryans, is named. It covers a vast population East and West of Iran (Floor, 2008; Frye, 1975; Hillman, 1990; Mackey, 1998). About 100 years ago, during his reign, Reza Shah Pahlavi, changed the name of the country from “Persia” to “Iran,” which is defined as the land of the Aariaee (Aryans). The name of their language is Farsi, meaning a language that belongs to the people of Pars, Persian.

Iran, within its borders, contains other non-Aryan groups who speak their own languages and possess variations of Persian culture. They migrated in different times of history to the land of Persia. Among the most populous groups are 12 million Azerbaijanis who speak Turkish rather than Farsi, and 6 million Kurds. Other tribes who have been influential and who have had some level of power over the successive governments of Iran are the approximately 1 million Baluchis of southeastern Iran, seven hundred thousand Lurs from the central Zagros Mountains, and roughly 1 million Bakhtiaris, located in the southern Zagros, all of whom share language and religion with the Persians. Further, there are 1.2 million Turkmans spreading out from the eastern shore of the Caspian Sea, who speak a dialect of Turkish, and follow the Sunni sect of Islam. There are seven hundred thousand to 1 million Qashqais of central Iran, who speak a dialect of Turkish and essentially ignore religion (Frye, 1975; Mackey, 1998).

Other less numerous groups include the half million Arabs, concentrated in the southwestern province of Khuzestan. They are the only Arabic speakers in Iran. Gilakis and Mazanderanis, numbering 2.5 million, live within their own folk culture on the Caspian Sea’s coastal plain, yet they too form an important part of Iran’s population. According to the CIA World Factbook, 2009, among the
one percent of the population of Iran, are African-Iranians who live in the village of Lashar, located in southeastern part of Iran, Sistan, Baluchestan, and the Persian Gulf area. According to Bastide (1965) and Behnam (1968), Africans were brought to the Persian Gulf by the Portuguese as early as the sixteenth century for slavery and to work in the oil industry. They were called Ahle-i-Hava (Flowers of the Winds). They are considered native Iranians and their African culture has influenced local Iranians.

Having a varied mix of language, ethnicity, culture, politics, and religion is common among countries across the world (Frye, 1975). Such a mix of societal components, often operating under a pervading system of traditions and norms, loosely or tightly organized culturally, economically, or politically, tends to form an identity of that country and its inhabitants (Hillman, 1990). Today, the Persians, the original people of Iran, are the largest ethnic group, claiming approximately 50 percent of the Iranian population, approximately 60 million. Often ethnically mixed, those who identify themselves as Persian all speak Farsi, and almost all adhere to the Shia sect of Islam. These Persians regard themselves as the true heirs of Iran's history and traditions, and are the guardians and promulgators of its legacies (Mackey, 1998).

Although predominantly a Muslim nation, both in terms of population majority and government rule, historically, many religions of the world have been and are still being practiced in Iran (Floor, 2008; Hillman, 1990; Mackey, 1998). The religions that have the greatest number of followers are Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Baha’ism, and Zoroastrianism, but the identity of the various peoples in this region is determined in different ways. Some identify
themselves by ethnicity, and others by country, but the majority identify themselves as Persians (Mackey, 1998).

1.1.1 Zoroastrianism

In Iran, the pervading cultural system had its origins in ancient Persia. Out of its empire-building ambitions and the incursions of peoples into its culture over centuries, came a vast array of changes in art, architecture, mores, and traditions. What emerged as well was the philosophy of the just ruler, Zoroasta, and the religion, Zoroastrianism (Irving, 1979). The intertwining of culture and religion over the vastness of time formed the basic identity of Persian culture, one so strongly woven that it has persisted throughout the centuries to the present. This is the Iran, the Persian culture, to which Iranians of varied backgrounds and diverse ethnic and religious persuasions are attached and give allegiance (Irving, 1979).

An underlying potent theme is the evolution of the historical Iran of Persia, from the reign of Cyrus the Great, 2500 years ago, to an Iran of the present, under the influence of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini (Afary, 2009) regime since 1979. Persians had historically been a people who believed in justice, peace, and good over evil even before Zoroastrianism was established. Cyrus embraced the Persian religious ideology of Zoroasta because he believed that Zoroastrianism had been defined by God, the ultimate deity, and he had been entrusted by God to join the people of Earth together into one empire of justice and peace (Hillman, 1990; Mackey, 1998). Zoroastrianism, as a religion of the people, became the contractual core of the relationship between the King and his subjects, for the people believed that difficult times would befall those who
assisted the wicked, while blessings would be added to those who cast aside the wicked from power. Zoroastrianism was a dynamic force in the makeup of Iranians, as well as in their cultural practice (Hillman, 1990; Mackey, 1998).

Zoroastrian observances and practices are the remnants of the religion of pre-Islamic Iran, which in a sense, for the sake of cultural survival, are suppressed in memory but also occupy a place of prominence and importance in regular cultural and ceremonial observance, both public and private, and remain the prevailing base of belief for all Iranians (Mackey, 1998). Shahidian (2003), in an article by Moghadam (2004), reports that the pre-Islamic practice of Zoroastrianism has remained firmly intact in Iran’s cultural heritage. Islam, the prevailing religion in Iran, has not been able to eliminate the stronghold of this ancient religion despite determined actions from various factions. As part of the cultural assimilation, every Iranian learns to observe cultural events, religious philosophy, and practice attributed to Zoroasta. A pertinent example is the Persian New Year (an event conceived and started by Zoroasta), practiced by all Iranians, worldwide, regardless of their religious background. Additionally, the three motives for life – Good Words, Good Thoughts, and Good Deeds – established by Zoroasta, have been followed by Iranians throughout history (Irving, 1979).

1.1.2 Islam

Islam was introduced in Iran with the Arab invasion of 636 A.D, but it was between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries that Shia Islam was adopted as the main religion in Iran. Iranians, however, placed on it their own stamp of culture and identity to sanctify it (Hillman, 1990; Irving, 1979; Mackey, 1998).
This cultural stamping can be seen in other cultures where Islam is practiced. In Africa, the practice of Islam is under evolution, shaped by changing social, economic, and political conditions (Kraxberger, 2005; Marcovitz, 2007). Not only does Islam have a strong presence in Iran and Africa, its religious hold reaches from North Africa to Europe, from the Middle East to parts of South and Southeast Asia, and has had a decided impact in these cultural locations.

Islam’s Shia sect had its beginning with the Honorable Prophet Muhammad (Richard, 1995), under whose leadership the religion was known for its stance and defense of social justice (Afary & Anderson, 2005). Prophet Muhammad, a man of dynamic spirit, deep abiding faith, expansive spirituality, embracing persona, and powerful leadership, brought the Islamic religion to an international place in the world. It was he who presented the “…perfect passivity before God and perfect activity before man. He was the mirror who reflected the world of God and he saw nothing except God and through God” (Bill & Leiden, 1979, p. 156). Under his reign, with a theology that emphasized submission to the will of God, he became known as the model spiritual and temporal leader of society.

At his death, Muhammad left Islam without a new leader to carry forward his spiritual work. It was not until the fourth caliph selected by the Islamic tribal council that Imam Ali, Prophet Muhammad’s closest relative, was named as caliph (Richard, 1995). By this time, Islam had been divided into two factions (Afary & Anderson, 2005): the Sunni, who represented the establishment and the people, but who also were responsible for injustices and inequality; and the Shia, who were the anti-establishment followers of Ali Muhammad and held that only members of the house of the Prophet Muhammad could be leaders of the faith.
Imam Ali was a leader of justice and was seen as a vigorous and shining example of leadership. Even today he is revered as the hero of the downtrodden (Richard, 1995).

Ali’s son, Hussein, led the Islamic world in a similar fashion as his father; and he, like his father, was assassinated, dying a martyr. For centuries after Hussein, the Shia people suffered under the rule of frequently changing and unjust rulers. It has been noted that the culture, in accord with its history, has borne a burden of grief. Shiism has been portrayed with suffering and passion in the name of righteousness (Afary & Anderson, 2005; Fischer, 1980; Halm, 1997; Mackey, 1989; Mahjub, 1979; Momen, 1985).

The Shia have continued to believe that only members of the Prophet’s family line were the keepers of religious knowledge and wisdom over all others. From this basic principle, an elitism of religious leaders called the Imams, Twelver Shiism, was formed and it was they who were sought out as the source of truth during 680-873 AD (Momen, 1985). These twelvers, beginning with Imam Ali, and ending with Muhammad Al Muntazar, the Hidden Imam, were the perfect persons, representatives of God, in whom the Iranian Shia entrusted with leadership, absolutism, elitism, and obedience, the components of religious authority in Islam. Shia religious theology had at its center these twelve who were the authorized interpreters of God’s revelation. As agents of God, the Imams were expected to guide the faithful to do His will (Afary and Anderson, 2005; Fischer, 1980; Halm, 1997; Mackey, 1989; Mahjub, 1979; Momen, 1985). A commentary on the presence of the twelvers in Islamic religious consideration is the continued religious observance of them by Shia Muslims in Iran today.
Since Shia Islam was established in Iran as the state religion under the Safavieh Dynasty approximately 500 years ago, Iran has been under a dual form of government where the factions, the government of the kings or monarchs, and the religious clergy vied for power to mandate order and justice (Afary, 2009; Mackey, 1989). Shiism began to undermine the secular government by attacking its imperfections and eventually assumed the authority to publicly guard against the corruption of the kings. A long lived period of tension transpired between government and clergy with the aim of gaining the allegiance and support of the people. Theologically, Shiism is reputed to be the protector and unifying force of society, but in practice, it is an authoritarian and elitist power, and since the 1979 revolution, it simultaneously has become both state and religious authority, a precedent in Iranian history (Afary, 2009; Afary & Anderson, 2005; Mackey, 1989).

Contemporary Iran was shaped by several pertinent events beginning with the death of the ruler, Mohammad Karin Khan Zand and the end of the Zand Dynasty in 1779. Iran’s new leader, Agha Mohammad Khan, of the Qajar tribe, vowed to establish a reunified Iran. The Qajar Dynasty of Kings ruled from 1794 to 1925 when the integrity, unity and fate of Iran was weakened during World War I (1914 -1918) from the occupation of Russian, British and Ottoman troops. The Qajar Dynasty’s last king, Ahmad Shah, finally relinquished his leadership with the coup d’etat of February 1921 when Reza Khan Pahlavi assumed political control of Iran. He was a powerful military leader who within four years of leadership suppressed rebellions and established order in society. Reza Shah’s reign was marked by his actions to modernize Iran through the education of its people and the expansion of its political contacts in the western world. During his sixteen-year reign from 1925 to 1941, Iran became a country of great industry and urbanization. Mohammad Reza Shah, the son of Reza Khan,
embraced his father’s purpose of a modern Iran and continued with projects toward this end. His reign and control was a target for rivaling opponents, but with the assistance of Iran’s security and intelligence organization, the SAVAK, they were suppressed and marginalized. By the mid-1970’s, however, Islamic leaders were using populist ideology associated with Islamic principles to establish political unrest toward the overthrow of the Shah’s governmental reign. In 1979, during Reza Shah’s absence from the country for health reasons, the exiled cleric, Ayatollah Khomeini, returned, ousted the Shah in what is known as the Iranian Revolution of 1979. He established the first Islamic government of Iran under Khomeini rule (Afary, 1996; Ahmed, 1991; Karimi-Hakkak, 1991; Molavi, 2005).

It could be said that Iranians have been in search of that elusive promise of justice for themselves and their nation, but in fact, they have been the subjects of powerful monarchal and religious leaders. Looking at contemporary Iran, it is a remarkable fact that it was Cyrus the Great, the first King of Iran, 2500 years ago, who established the first declaration of human rights, where it can be found that women had the same rights as men. Since that time, the status of women has gone through many changes, from complete suppression during the Qajar dynasty to the openness and freedom offered by the Pahlavi dynasty to the return to suppression of the Islamic Republic of Iran of the late 20th century to date. The evolution of thought in the sphere of rights for women has been subject to and corrupted by the pursuit and exercise of power between monarchy, religion, and culture (Fischer, 1980; Krimi-Hakkak, 1991; Mackey, 1989; Molavi, 2005).
1.2 Introducing the First Generation Iranian-American Woman

The Iranian-American woman is first an Iranian, and as such, her personal outlook and place in society are shaped, in part, by her experience in the particular culture of origin (Afary, 2009; Kousha, 2002; Ramazani, 1993; Stowasser, 1994). Those women who have migrated to the United States fall into three major groups of female Iranians – upper class, upper middle class, and students. The first two groups came to the U.S for a variety of reasons (i.e., political issues, religious background, escape from new Islamic rules, feeling unsafe due to the war with Iran/Iraq, etc.). The majority of these women came to the United States with their husbands and/or parents between 1977 and 1990. Among this group most came for political reasons, right before and shortly after Iran’s revolution (Hanassab, 1993; Kousha, 2002; Moaveni, 2005; Molavi, 2005).

According to the United States census 2000, Iranians differ from other United States migrants in that they do not fit into the stereotype of a poor, oppressed people. Many came to the United States with money, some English fluency, a good education, and a strong background in business. Only a few had no fluency in English. The majority of participants left Iran to escape the changes introduced during Iran’s 1979 revolution. Iranians living in the United States live in small communities next to each other. According to United States 2000 census, the current United States resident population of Iranian-Americans is approximately 2,000,000, of which one half are women. The religions represented

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2 The Iran-Iraq War, 1980–88, extended military conflict between Iran and Iraq. It formally began on Sept. 22, 1980, with an Iraqi land and air attack of western Iran. Iraqi president Saddam Hussein claimed as the motive for his attack on Iran, a defensive argument over the Shatt al Arab, a waterway that empties into the Persian Gulf and forms the border between Iran and Iraq. Estimates of the number of dead are up to 1.5 million.
among them are Muslim, Jewish, Armenian Christian, Zoroastrian, and some Persian Christians. They all speak Farsi and many speak English and a third language. The highest concentration of Iranians is in southern California, about 700,000 people. The second highest is in Washington D.C., estimated at 100,000. From a small beginning of perhaps no more than 15,000 individuals in 1965, the Iranian population of the United States has grown rapidly over a short period of time.

The demographic profile of the Iranian immigrant community in the United States, based on the 1990 United States census, reveals that the marked increase in migration can be explained through two important events. First and prior to the revolution, the government and many of its citizens with substantial wealth could afford to finance higher educational opportunities abroad. By 1977, Iran had more students abroad – 227,597 – than any other country in the world. By 1979, in the United States alone, there were 51,310 college students, ranking first among foreign nationalities. Second, after the revolution in 1979, not only did many of these students opt to remain in the United States, many of their relatives joined them, later becoming naturalized citizens or residents. Based on the 1990 and 2000 census figures, one can draw a fairly accurate portrait of this community: Although coming from a non-English speaking country, 84% of Iranian-Americans (both men and women) speak fluent English. Regarding their education, 46% had a Bachelor’s degree or higher, which ranks the group among the highest educated of other recently-arrived immigrant groups, but higher than natives in terms of educational achievement. This high academic achievement has undoubtedly contributed to the high occupational and financial accomplishment of Iranians. Less than half (43%) of Iranians are in professional and managerial positions, 35% are in technical and administrative positions, 10%
are in various services, and the remaining are spread over farming, craft, and laborer. About 48% of the Iranian-American communities are dual income earners, and 22% own their own businesses. Median family income is $55,501 (substantially above the national average of $35,492), per capita income is $18,040, and 92% of Iranians have a mortgage.

During the past three to four decades, most of the Iranian women who remained legally in the United States did so without great financial hardship, as they arrived with sufficient financial support from families. They did experience other hardships. Mahdi (1999), stated that “identity reconstruction” (p. 53) and finding a home in the United States were new concepts in the lives of these women, and that “the first experience of these families in migration is cultural confusion and normlessness” (p. 56). Mahdi (1999) has argued the importance of paying attention to the Iranian migration to the United States by emphasizing that migration is never an easy process, as it requires many sacrifices and social and gender role modifications. It seems women had maintained their home country’s belief system, even though they occupied professional status in the job market as Americans, and their occupational status did not lead to a significant degree of adjustment in the host country (Mahdi, 1999). While the major portion of migration occurred during 1979 – 1990, more Iranian women have continued to relocate to the United States since that time.

Mahdi (1999) highlights that in leaving the collective system in Iran to live in the individualistic system of life in the United States, Iranian family members all experienced role adjustment. The absences of the support and network systems once available to them serve to test the value of family and family relationships. Many women, as they gain higher levels of education, and assume
higher levels of professional involvement, make adjustments in their family roles and impact the role of men, who traditionally have been the sole providers. Women gain more understanding of their potential, and therefore, a greater satisfaction about themselves in their gender role and role identity. Since sexual-self concept serves as an umbrella embracing the concepts of gender role, gender identity, and sexuality, it is important to explore the perceptions of the Iranian-American women’s sexual-selves.

### 1.3 Overview of Chapters

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 has provided an overview of the research, setting out its aim and focus, and presenting research questions to be answered. It also describes the historical framework from which to gain an understanding of Iranian culture and religion, and their impact on the lives of Iranian-American women.

Chapter 2 is the examination of research literature associated with female gender role and female sexual-self formation. It discusses the social contexts of female gender role and sexual-self. The chapter further discusses sexual-self formation of women in general from a feminist perspective and provides a comparative view of the specific information available on the Iranian-American woman’s sexual-self construct.

Chapter 3 outlines the methodology utilized in this study. The chapter provides a rationale for the choice of qualitative approach and in-depth interview to collect and analyze the narrative data. In addition, the chapter offers a personal profile of the researcher as an insider.
Chapter 4 is the first of three analytical chapters that present and discuss the findings of the research. Among the 24 participants’ stories, an in-depth exploration of the narratives of four women provides the opportunity for a thorough examination of the participants’ life experiences, events, feelings, and meanings associated with life events as they have impacted the sexual-self and gender role constructs, as well as their relationships.

Chapter 5 explores the participants’ lives from childhood through the marriage ritual and examines the participants’ experiences in relation to their beliefs, values, and traditions as girls in Iran. The examination includes the internalization process of messages about ‘feminine’ attributes received during childhood and adolescence. For participants, these phases of life served as a foundation for adulthood formation of sexual-self.

Chapter 6 explores the participants’ struggles during the process of unlearning and revisiting their childhood role to reorient and establish their sexual-selves. This chapter addresses the pain and challenges of the participants during these undoing, unlearning and restructuring changes, as they desired to learn about their sexual-selves. The struggles, the pain and changes were a lifelong process for most of the participants. The chapter explores the participants’ arrival at a new or sustained place of awareness, self-reflection, and sexual-self actualization, in keeping with their dual cultural home and host demands, and sexual-self repositioning. This chapter also examines the part that distance from culture in space and time plays in developing a sense of empowerment and the exercise of freedom.
Chapter 7 integrates the findings of this study. It discusses the emerging themes from the literature review and narrative data, and identifies factors contributing to sexual-self and gender role formation. This chapter also delineates the contributions of research, new insights gained from the study, clinical implications, and policies that can further help Iranian-American women’s continued redefinition of their sexual-selves.
CHAPTER 2:
LITERATURE REVIEW

This research is about gaining insight into the perception of the sexual-selves of Iranian-American women currently living in the United States. The issues explored have relevance to life experiences, in both the home (Iran) and host (United States) cultures. The exploration of these important life matters may shed understanding of the ways these women view themselves as women and as sexual beings. The issues include the following questions: In what ways have life experiences of growing up in Iran influenced the sexual-self formation and the gender role of the participants? How do they discuss their sexual-selves? How have their sexual-selves been formed and shaped as a result of the home and host life experiences? Sociologists are interested in exploring how people’s lives are handled and how perceptions are formed (Callero, 2003; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 2002). This study will examine how perceptions about life experiences were constructed; the degree of self-freedom the women possessed to voice and explore their sexual-selves; the women’s narratives of their sexual-selves to make sense of their sexuality and relationships; and identifying factors contributing to their gender role and sexual-selves.

Historically, the understanding of women has often been derived from viewpoints contained primarily in the writings and discussions of Westerners and men (Bill & Leiden, 1979). Many of the contemporary understandings of Iranians living in the West have been formed as well from these same western views. The inference is that the viewpoints of Iranian-American women shaped from their own experiences have been absent from these writings or discussions.
With the increase of Iranian immigrants to the United States in the last three decades, however, new expressions by Iranians concerning their history, culture, religion, identity, the roles of women in society, and the realities of religious doctrine versus practice are now becoming more available and widely debated, particularly given the political discourses in the West about the Middle East (Afary, 2009; Kian-Thiebaut, 2005; Kousha, 2002; Mahdi, 1999; Mir-Hosseini, 1999; Moaveni, 2005; Molavi, 2005; Ramazani, 1993; Shahidian, 2003). The current research is significant in that it provides an original exploration of the sexual-selves of female Iranian migrants to the United States through their own individually voiced viewpoints.

The purpose of this review is to look critically at the existing literature that facilitates the understanding of the sexual-selves of Iranian-American women and their life experiences. Additionally, the review seeks to construct a conceptual foundation to support the current research. This process begins with establishing a historical base for examining Iranian women in the context of politics and power.

### 2.1 Historical View of Politics, Power, and Iranian Women

It is important to establish the political context that shapes the lives of women born and living in Iran before we can delve into the lives of these women. The historical context, as discussed in Chapter 1, is a look at the remarkable and varied impacts that transitioning governmental powers from the pre-Pahlavi dynasty (1920) to the present (2010) have had on the lives of Iranian women. Iranian women have come from an existence of strict governmental control over their lives and sexual-selves under the Qajar reign from 1795 to 1925.
(Abolhassani, 2000; Afary, 2009; Sadeghi, 2008). Under the Pahlavi Dynasty (1925 - 1979), they went through the process of enforced female gender liberation (Afary, 2009; Afary & Anderson, 2005) only to return to strict cultural control over women after the 1979 Iranian revolution, which began with the Ayatollah Khomeini rule, and has extended to the present. This historical look also notes the evolution and efforts of the Iranian feminist movement (Afary, 2009; Ebadi, 2002; Kian-thiebaut, 2005; Sadeghi, 2005; Sadeghi, 1999; Sanasarian, 1982).

During the Qajar Dynasty, Bibi Khanum Astardabadi (1852 - 1920) “an outspoken and prominent Qajar woman” (Sadeghi, 2008, p. 25) stated, “Behind the closed doors at home, prohibited from everything in life, education, training and social life, women are regarded as mindless, like infants; they are confined to the burdens of household work, and childbearing and are considered the slaves and servants of their husbands....” This was her way of opposing the view of women in society when she made reference to society’s prohibition of education, training, and participation in a public social life (Sadeghi, 2008, p. 25). In relation to women’s absence in Iran’s society during the Qajar era, Seyyed Jamalzadeh, a famous novelist, commented, “No women can be seen in this country of men, but strangely, half of the walking populations in the streets are wrapped in black bags from head to the toe without even an opening to breathe.” Those same women, however, during the Constitutional Revolution (1905 - 1911) took their veils off in the middle of streets in Tehran, and shouted, “Long live freedom...We must...live the way we want!” (Sadeghi, 2008, p. 25). The women were traditionally outfitted in a chador, a rubandeh (a short veiled mask covering their face except eyes), and a chaqchur (loose pants). These women were called zai’feh (weak gender), having a moti’eh (obedient status). These women were forced to live in houses with long walls and rooms with no window openings to the
outside world called Andarouni. Although they were heavily controlled in all aspects of life by men, women still found ways to oppose the societal rules designed for them (Sadeghi, 2008; Sanasarian, 1982). Included in this chapter, is one of the researcher’s paintings as an attempt to visually capture this image of women (see Painting 2.1).

Among the famous women advocates during this era (1905 – 1911), Zinat Pasha, from the city of Tabriz, is recognized as a leader of women who demonstrated against concession (Sadeghi, 2008). Another advocate of woman’s rights, Naser al-Din Shah’s most influential wife, Anis al-Dowleh, helped spread riots. Eventually, taking small steps forward, women were able to have schools (elementary level). These women, secluded and veiled, finally managed to change the course of history for Iranian women, while not having any coherent ideology, organizational framework, specific leadership, or even adequate followers. Their desire for a free life, however, helped them to continue implementing what they believed were the right steps to take (Afari, 1989; Sadeghi, 2008). Having access to education became the key to women’s development and their efforts to change patriarchal control towards the end of the Qajar regime as the Pahlavi dynasty commenced (Afary, 2009; Ebadi, 2002; Hegland, 2005; Howard, 2002).

Historically, women’s lives and their roles in Iran have been tightly controlled by the patriarchal system (Afary, 2009; Floor, 2008; Howard, 2002). Not only were women subjugated, there was a very strong culture of preferring sons over daughters, which had adverse impact on women’s status right from the
moment of birth onwards. In many patriarchal cultures, the preservation and
continuance of the race, becomes more important than individuals. In Iranian
culture it was considered a nang (social disgrace) to give birth to a girl. Such
women were called dokhtar-zaa (capable of giving birth to girls only) in the Qajar
era, and husbands were allowed to bring in a new bride in the hope of having a
son. Not only was this practice encouraged by the civil law, the patriarchal
system assured the control of women privately and publicly. During the Qajar
rule, women were told to cover themselves in order to be honorably protected
from men and to maintain family namous (honor). In exchange for compliance
with this order, women in the Iranian home and societal environments were told
they would hold an honorable status for themselves. This historical paradox of
being totally controlled by men in order to hold a place of honor in society, one
that had no rights, no authority but plenty of responsibilities, and no pleasure is
a continuing plight for Iranian women, even in present times (Abolhassani, 2000;
Keddie & Hoogland, 1986). After the Qajar dynasty, changes in women’s status
in Iranian society were initiated by Reza Shah Pahlavi, at the beginning of his
dynasty. He suppressed the power of religious establishments. He introduced
policies that altered Iranian women’s lives by making unveiling mandatory. He
paved the way for a westernized lifestyle for women by providing education,
supporting the wearing of westernized clothes, and forging the way for women
to work outside the home. It was in 1936-37 that 70 women for the first time
attended the University of Tehran (Sadeghi, 2008). Reza Shah Pahlavi, with only
a handful of female organizations, engaged in unparalleled changes in the
society during the 1930s, and provided women the opportunity to establish a
movement for women’s rights. These organizations, and others, gained some
level of independence in the late 1940s. As women from privileged families attempted to help women with education and independence, their movement began to gain a national and international recognition. At the same time, there were other groups of women from the lower and middle classes that actively opposed western style liberation and modernization of women. They represented an eclectic mix of the political left, the secular, and the Islamic perspective. They became critical of the new female status and the underlying objective for political and economic reforms. The Shah, from a higher level, attempted to dis-empower the clerics whose social, cultural, and political power over women and gender relations were framed in patriarchal conservative norms. He changed the rules of marriage, divorce, education, and traditions related to personal and social namous (honor) (Afshari, 2001; Akhavi, 1980; Saikal, 1980).

Women’s rights movements were very evident during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi during the late 1950s to 1979 (Kian-Thiebaut, 2005; Paidar, 1995; Sadeghi, 2008). From 1979, the quest for gender egalitarianism and women’s rights in the new Islamic Republic of Iran provoked a new facet of women’s political behavior, class background, and diverse responses to disparity, unfairness, bias, and prejudiced practices. Women who had been against the Pahlavi policies emerged as strong advocates of the new regime. The groups of advocates or adversaries of women’s rights remained divided on the achievement of balanced participation of women with men in political, legal, social, and economic politics. With the initial promise of continued support of women’s rights by Khomeini, women had been openly speaking out on their own behalf until it was clear the revolutionary regime had reneged on its promised platform to support women’s rights. The end result is evident in the presentation
of different approaches to gender role, gender relations, women’s role in the household and the broader community, and women’s involvement in politics and feminism. Women continued to maintain a presence in the Islamic country of Iran but at a subdued level. A point to note is that historically, Iranian women’s responses to political change have differed by class, status, ideological dispositions, and religious outlooks (Ebadi, 2002; Mackey, 1998; Sadeghi, 2008). This historical view has seen the Iranian woman as both a suppressed individual and an assertive one.

2.2 Evolution of Iranian Women’s Liberation

To both contemporary Iran as well as to the outside world, the image of the Iranian woman is largely one of a traditionally black-veiled, shy, and secretive individual. Some writers, having objected to this simplistic view, have argued that the use of the hijab (veil) in Islamic doctrine and cultural practice are different in historical perspective, content, and motivation (Barlas, 2002; Engineer, 1992; Mernissi, 1991; Stowasser, 1994). The more complex view is grounded in the evolution of political and social events. Women in Iran have been a source of mystery to the world. This mystique has its roots in Iranian history. During the reign of Cyrus the Great, there was no evidence of women in drawings, paintings, and writings about life and culture (Mackey, 1989). There is no pictorial presence of women with men in this early history. Although the paintings, drawings, or sculptures have primarily indicated the presence of men in society, the literature revealed Cyrus deemed women’s rights as human rights because he declared that he will never let any of his governors look down on or insult the inhabitants of his nations (Behnam, 1986). He is also quoted as saying, “If anyone oppresses others, should it happen, I will take his/her rights back and
penalize the oppressors” (Pritchard, 1958, p. 203). From this early historical account, woman’s place in society goes forward with a cyclical scaling up and scaling down of her status, as evidenced in the Qajar and Pahlavi dynasties. While their social status and physical mobility were stifled by the revolutionary regime, contemporary Iranian women are in silent and secret protest of their treatment as humans. This is especially true of those who directly received or inherited new ideas about themselves as women from the Pahlavi dynasty (Algar, 1969; Elwell-Sutton, 1978; Hillman, 1990).

The effect the historical political policies of these aforementioned kings, shahs, or revolutionary religious leaders had on women during their reigns provides a framework for Iranian women’s perceptions of themselves (Sanasarian, 1982). The change of the name from Persia to Iran by Reza Shah (Frye, 1975; Hillman, 1990; Mackey, 1998) was symbolic of the old glory period of war and conquest. In like manner, as part of his policy changes, Reza Shah did conduct war but against the powerful clergy in Iran, fighting for law, education, land, religious ceremony and women’s freedom from Islamic Laws. He engaged, by government decree, in a fight for social change and nationalism and releasing women in 1935 from the need to be shrouded in the chador, the tent-veil, a symbol of religious tradition and sub-ordinance of women. Simultaneously, his was a strategy and an announcement of intent to involve women in the resurgence of the Iran of old (Frye, 1975; Hillman, 1990). Some effects of Reza Shah’s action opened the doors of social change for women. In particular, in the period from 1935 to 1976, women earned the right to vote, benefit from the Family Protection Bill to sue for divorce, deny their husbands a second wife, and win custody of their children in a dissolved marriage (Frye, 1975; Hillman, 1990). The bill abolished the Shia practice of temporary marriage and raised the legal
age of marriage for girls from nine to fifteen. Women’s groups began to organize in support of the Shah’s policies.

The greater majority of the population was not in support of the new rules and saw them as a threat to the system of patriarchy and the family. The rights of women even in intellectual circles were being opposed. There were also factions among women who resisted and opposed the liberation movement. Among women of the lower and lower middle classes, who perceived the protection and security of Islamic ideology to be beneficial, many doubted the proposed benefits of the liberation for women (Afary, 2009; Afshari, 2001). This change in social climate was a precursor to the 1979 revolutionary war from which emerged Iran’s new leader, Khomeini, who again mandated, by law and intimidation, that women, Muslim and non-Muslim alike, be garbed in the hijab (veil), be segregated from men in public places such as schools, parks, beaches, and generally submit to strict regulation of their lives.

The revolution in Iran in 1979 brought a major shift in the social status of Iranian women. From that time to the present, societal forces of Iran – primarily a male-dominated society – have forced women to endure a greater level of suppression and oppression than was the case during the pre-revolution period (Afary & Anderson, 2005; Ebadi, 2002). This period saw a new democratic public movement in Iran, in which newspapers carried the arguments of leading female intellectuals in favor of women’s rights – an end to polygamy, veiling, and isolation from societal functioning, and easy male divorce. Gender reform was one of the main issues of the revolution, and was in opposition to the unequal positioning, the disparate treatment and suffering of women as related to men (Afary & Anderson, 2005; Ebadi, 2002). All national and international
demonstrations and feminist movements witnessed the fall and demise of women's rights in Iran at the end of the Pahlavi Dynasty. Iranian women said, “In the Dawn of Freedom, We Have No Freedom” (Millett, 1982, p. 139). Michael Foucault, the French philosopher and the critical writer on sexualities, traveled to Iran twice during 1979 to observe the unfolding of Iran's revolution (Afary & Anderson, 2005) and witnessed many of the culture's institutional changes and its impact on individuals, particularly women. According to Afary and Anderson (2005), while in Iran, Foucault stated that he was in the country because he believed all philosophical and political principles of Iran as it related to women had to be re-thought; every principle that had contributed to oppression had to be reexamined and that “…humanity was at 'point zero' insofar as political thought was concerned, and that Iran offered a new hope!” He stated that no “western intellectual with any integrity” could afford to be indifferent to what was going on in Iran, referring especially to the Iranian women's resistance. He asserted that Iran was a nation that had reached “dead ends” on a number of social and political fronts (p. 75).

Foucault's view of Iran's revolution (Afary & Anderson, 2005) was prophetic of the danger of clergy authoritarianism and its power over women's lives. Evidence of his prophetic insights came to pass shortly after Khomeini (Iran's new Islamic leader) assumed power. Among his first tasks as the new leader was restricting women's rights by abrogating the Family Protection Law; prohibiting women from serving in the judiciary; initiating a law for divorce to become an exclusively male privilege; excluding women from sports, including Olympic teams; and ordering women to wear the hijab (veil), chador (tent), and magnaee (head scarf).
2.3 A Context to Understand the Migration of Iranian-American Women

The rapid deterioration in human rights of women in Iran led to substantial emigration of Iranians, particularly among the educated class. Ultimately, there was a sizeable exodus of upper- and middle-class women from Iran, causing disruption of family ties. The participants of this research study were among this group destined for the United States, some with families, some with husbands only, and others alone as students.

There were many destinations for migrating Iranians, including Germany, Canada, and Australia (Jalali, 1982; Shahidian, 1999). A qualitative study by Bauer (2000) revealed that groups of Iranian women who migrated to Germany and Canada came to “understand some of the dilemmas facing Iranian refugee women in balancing their own yearning with the expectations and demands placed on them by the Iranian and non-Iranian communities with which they interacted.” (p. 180). One insight gained by these immigrant women was their newly gained awareness about the “lack of attention to gender inequalities in their political organizations” (p.180). Other women found that their expectations were confronted and compromised by family members. In both Canada and Germany, Iranian women were faced with responsibilities for household, and faced with limited domestic support in their new life environment. Bauer’s qualitative study further revealed that “the Iranian women refugees were engaged in the project of reconstructing themselves, looking for ways creatively to balance commitment to family and community with pursuit of self-definition” (p. 181) and to re-define their gender roles and gender identities, despite all the obstacles faced. In order to maintain connection to their home culture, Iranian
women were encouraged to re-create some of the traditional concepts of the Iranian lifestyle, such as taking care of their husbands and children, instead of responding to newer opportunities, such as employment and making new social connections. Iranian men, on the other hand, showed inclination to “want to create a little Iran for themselves” (Bauer, 2000. p. 188).

Moghadam (2004) describes varying views of Iranian women’s rights, womanhood, and women’s self-representation. One view held that with the advent of cultural modernization, Iranian women, during the Pahlavi dynasty, lost their namous (honor) and their “genuine Iranian cultural identity” by becoming acculturated to Western life (gharbzadegi – the term for this phenomenon) long before they journeyed to the West. According to Moghadam (2004), this view is a misrepresentation made by Bouatta and Cherifati-Merabtine (1994), who present an image that is antithetical to that of Iranian women prior to Iran’s revolution in 1979 and their subsequent immigration to the United States.

Migration is a twisted trap of inconsistent alterations that can increase a woman’s sense of control over her life, or become an additional obstacle over her life. Shahidian’s (1999) study introduced two obstacles of gender and sexuality for Iranian women who migrated to Canada. First, modification in class, social position, and gender relations could either enhance or limit the opportunities available to migrated women. Second, Iranian families strongly emphasized the maintenance of home culture traditional values by enforcing those values on their daughters, a way for their children to remember their Iranian cultural roots. Studies on Iranian families residing in the United States have shown similar results of the influence of culture on values (Ghaffarian, 1998; Ghaffarian, 1987; Jalali, 1982). These studies have concluded that change of culture facilitates
reshaping of gender role and sexual identity of Iranian women. However, migration does not always entail freedom of sexual expression since maintaining home cultural identity becomes a symbol of the home value system (Jalali, 1982; Shahidian, 1999).

According to Williams and Berry (1991) cultural adjustment includes the resultant changes in an individual after having come in contact with a different culture. Among the changes the process cultivates are attitudinal ones. Attitudes can be a source of strong emotions and preferences. In a new culture, attitude formation is normal and expected and can be a survival-enriching process, but it can also result in interpersonal tension, in which new beliefs are at odds with old norms or beliefs (Hojat et al., 2000). New beliefs can bring with them a degree of acceptance and favor, while old beliefs can bring a degree of alienation and lack of belonging. Taken to an extreme, the combination can cause culture shock and possible loss of individual identity.

Cultural adjustment is as complex as culture itself. Whiting (1976) points out “the need to un-package the concept of culture; that is, to analyze those aspects of culture that make a difference in understanding human behavior” (p. 307). Whiting further states that in the adjustment process, two factors are important to consider: the degree of retention of the original culture, and the degree of involvement in the new one. Erickson and Al-Timimi (2001) discuss the level of difficulty, stressfulness, and challenge of the adjustment process that stems from attachment to the culture of origin. Factors affecting this process include country of origin; age at the time of migration; socio-economic level both abroad and in the United States; length of time of, and reason for migration; ability to visit the home country; having family members living in the United
States; fluency in the English language; having a clear accent; and having a plan to live in the United States. Inherent in the migration process is the physical and emotional departure from one cultural set of norms to the sudden, but also gradual introduction into a new set of cultural norms. Both of these processes involve the disciplining and revealing of the self as expected by the home and host cultures.

2.4 Migrant Women and Cultural Adjustment

Portes and Rumbaut (1996) have identified three stages of migration. The contemplation of and decision to relocate is the first. The journey, the actual physical transplanting of the person and personal effects, and the initial impressions of the new country constitute the second. The third stage is the adjustment to the new country, society, and way of life. The expectations of the migration process of men and women differ, as do their responses to the changes. Therefore gender is a key influencing factor of the migratory experience, and not surprisingly, the role adjustment for women is far more complicated. Women tend not to be involved in the decision-making process to immigrate, hence their desires are generally not consulted, nor is there any expectation for them to make independent decisions. Where the decision was made for them, it was made by their patriarchal system (Cole, Espin, & Rothblum, 1992). As a result, and because of the immediate operating presence of a second set of culturally-based gender prescriptions, their adjustment to the new cultural environment and gender role alterations becomes more complicated than that of men (Arrddondo-Dowd, 1981). It is at this point that traditional and western role expectations meet, but with each woman having her own uniqueness and pace in making the cultural adjustments. The younger the
migrant, the faster the adjustment process. The pace of adjustment is dependent on other factors as well, including the degree of choice, the amount of preparation done before relocation (Levy-Warren, 1987) and the amount of stress experienced prior to leaving the home culture (Portes & Rumbaut, 1996).

In an analysis of migrant cultural adjustment, women are seen as the symbol of cultural values and the transmitters and preservers of tradition (Yuval-Davis, 1992, 1997). Their role is the key to the stability of the collectivity or total group identity and cohesion. It is the proper behavior and the control of women in the areas of marriage and divorce that ensures the boundaries of the collective system remains intact. Despite the breadth, scope, and impact of the cultural adjustment process to affect the transformation of behavior, values, culture, and traditions of a migrant group, it is a woman’s behavior, and often her sexual behavior, that becomes the center of attention.

The cultural adjustment process for migrant women from traditional societies (historically or culturally controlled) transitioning to socially open societies provides a whole new range of possibilities in terms of gender roles and sexual behavior (Espin, 1984; Espin, 1987; Espin et al., 1990; Goodenow & Espin, 1993). Migrant women have new options, some of them real and others imagined, stemming from fictionalized renditions in various media, including films. Sorting out real from fantasy, and then determining what to accept for her use under the scrutiny of her home culture’s values is a complex process for most migrant women.

Davis and Chavez (1985) found that parents of young migrants have fears that their offspring will be corrupted, based on stereotypic projections of sexual behavior of the new culture in the United States. The United States is a primary
destination choice of new migrants and the notion of considerable sexual freedom associated with its culture is broadly found in the international media. This widespread view of the new culture creates a serious concern for immigrant families and community leaders newly arrived in the country. It is feared that young girls, in particular, will stray from traditional value systems because attitudes about dating and marriage are so sharply different between western values and those of the home culture. Most parents face a dilemma regarding to what degree they should allow their children to go out socially and mix with the opposite sex, or to what degree they should adhere to the traditional sex distinctions accepted by their home culture. In some families, there is not great concern regarding a son’s association with the opposite sex; sons are allowed to date, but daughters are not given the same opportunities. The study by Davis and Chavez (1985) found that the migrant offspring were less likely to mix with peers of western culture than some parents feared, which by itself is an indication of the influence and hold of the home culture.

Female Iranian migrants were found more likely to take a position on premarital sex, marriage, and family much like that of mainstream American society (Abolhassani, 2000; Ghaffarian, 1998; Ghaffarian, 1987; Tohidi, 1993). However, Hannassab and Tidwell (1989) found that some young Iranian women feel as if they are being torn by two different directional forces – mainstream and home cultures – and this continuing dilemma creates confusion and a sense of loss for them. In another study, Hanassab (1991) and Hanassab and Tidwell (1993) found that Iranian immigrants who come to the U.S. as children, adolescents, or young adults achieved the greatest adjustment.
As in the previously cited study by Hanassab (1991) of Iranian migrants, a study by Soto (1983), of Puerto Rican women living in the United States, found a significant correlation between the exposure time to western culture and the acquisition of new attitudes toward intimate relationships and sex roles of each gender. Asian-Americans have many cultural characteristics in common with Hispanics: family values, appropriateness of sexuality within the context of marriage, and restraint of sexuality and modesty, to name a few. The research also showed that Asian-American women tend to be reluctant to obtain sexual and reproductive care, resulting in late treatment of breast and cervical cancer and other problems (Okazaki, 2002).

In Asian cultures, as with Middle Eastern cultures, and mainly Iran, discussion and expression of sexuality before marriage is deemed very inappropriate. Patriarchy in Asia is a dominant aspect of culture, making open expression of sexuality by women to be seen as having a negative effect on social status and family integrity. The data that is available regarding sex knowledge, attitude, and norms among Asian-Americans reveal a moderately conservative position (Meston, Trapnell, & Gorzalka, 1998; Okazaki, 2002). These scholars have examined attitudes of Asian migrants towards sex, based on the length of exposure to North American (U.S and Canada) culture. In general, it was reported that Asian women have a more conservative attitude towards sex, sexuality, and gender difference than do North American women. They particularly demonstrated a negative response to the non-committed type of sexual involvement. Other aspects of the struggle of migrant women living in the new host culture are their feelings of guilt, shame, and betrayal for having relinquished some of the home culture attachments. Taking on social interaction structures of the mainstream culture in order to make socially based adjustments
also resulted in these feelings. Some of these changes are for practical and convenience reasons.

Where more revisions, awareness, and development take place in the sexual-self, more conflict arises within the family, relating to the concept of sexual-self expression. As this occurs, the individual is considered more ‘Americanized’. An example of this is the use of host cultural language to engage dialogue about dating, sexual expression, and perceptions of self and others. These adjustment changes are experienced by both young and middle-aged migrant women, but the tendency for them is isolation and being secretive about their feelings of shame and guilt (Espin et al., 1990; Rodriguez-Nogues, 1983). As a way of overcoming feelings of guilt and shame and preserving their connection to earlier social norms, these women have reserved those prior norms for their private lives at home – food, clothes, language, music, reading and writing in the language, social or ceremonial gatherings, etc.; but in their public lives are the expressions of assumed behavioral constructs of the mainstream culture – movies, eating in restaurants, use of mainstream language, social amenities, etc.

Several studies in Europe, the United States, and other parts of the world feature women’s experience and adjustment to the external life of a new culture during the migration process (Andizian et al., 1983; Gabaccia, 1994; Gabaccia, 1992; Phizacklea, 1983). However, the subjective experience of migrant women has received minimal attention. Of the existing research on migrant women, little attention has been given to the gender role factors contributing to the buildup of their sexual-self perceptions. Peddraza (1991) has stated that “research on migrant women...needs to be chronicled including ...the private world of migrant women and their community, and the contribution migrant women made to
[that] private sphere” (p.318). Experiences of migrant women in general in this review raise questions about Iranian migrant women in particular with respect to the fact that they were born and raised in a collectivist system and migrated to the individualistic system of United States. As part of the migration process gender role has been explored in several studies.

2.5 Self and Its Relationship to Culture and Gender

Before discussing the culture-gender dynamic, it is important to describe some basic terms – gender, gender role, gender identity, gender stereotype, and self. Gender represents the behaviors or patterns of activity that a society or culture deems appropriate for men and women (Beasley, 2005; Butler, 2006; Connell, 1987). According to the literature (Butler, 2006; Connell, 1987), gender role is the degree to which a person adopts the gender-specific behaviors ascribed by his or her cultures. Gender role is, therefore, a set of perceived norms that have been assigned to women and men by their culture (Connell, 1987). Gender identity is the degree to which a person is aware of the assumptive proclivities agreed upon for his/her gender (Butler, 2006). Gender stereotypes are the set of perceived thoughts and behavior characteristics typically associated with men and women (Butler, 2006).

While self is an individualistic construction in western culture, according to Markus and Kitayama (1991), many cultures stress the connectedness of the individual and society, indicating that relationships and social groups shape and greatly influence one’s identity. One who represents oneself is inextricably intertwined with the representations of others. The core principle of this construct is self as connected to others. Research has found, for example, that
before a person assigns specific character or personality traits to himself or herself, the individual self or self-construct has been molded by gendered social interactions, gender-typed social roles, and gender-related expectations (Damon & Hart, 1988; Eagly, 1987; Rosenberg, 1992). It can be argued that in both collectivist and individualist cultures men are prompted to lead the family and find a distinguished place for themselves in the society by maintaining an individualist and autonomist role. Women, on the other hand, are generally more collectivists and maintain a passive role by taking care of family, helping, serving, following and obeying rules.

The independent-interdependent self-construct of Markus and Kitayama (1991), Hofsted (1984), and Triandis et al. (1986, 1988) is one of the contexts in which the current study will examine the way Iranian-American women constructed their interpersonal relationships. Additionally, within this context, examination will be made of life adjustments in response to the two different sets of cultural norms in the host and home cultures. The entity, self, has as one of its aspects the sexual-self or those thoughts, desires, understandings, and behaviors that establish the sexuality and gender role of an individual.

2.5.1 Female Sexual-Self

The topic of sexual-self has been the focus of many research studies (Anderson, 1999; Anderson & Cyranowski, 1995; Baumeister, 2000; Daniluk, 1993; Offman & Matheson, 2004; Potgieter & Khan, 2005; Shapiro & Schwarz, 1997). Often emphasized is the notion that sexual-self perception and sexuality are two different concepts. However, the terms have been used interchangeably by researchers to discuss “the value that one places on oneself as a sexual being,
including sexual identity and perceptions of sexual acceptability” (Mayers, Heller & Heller, 2003, p. 207). For the purpose of this research, the female sexual-self includes the individual’s thoughts about the nature of her participation as a woman in relationships with others, especially men. These are her perceptions of herself. This participation is a manifestation of her desires, needs, ideas, sense of freedom of expression, education, social orientation and expectations, and self-developed value system. A women’s sexual-self is tantamount to the value she gives to herself as a woman in a sexual role. Such a role takes on different meanings, depending upon with whom she is interacting; it may include gender role, sexual-identity, and sexuality (Mayers et al. 2003).

Social constructionists place a high emphasis on social hierarchies as a major influencing role. They have argued that sexual perceptions of what is real are formed and defined by the meaning-making of the situations; that is, they developed from a social context as individuals have interacted with others, then interpreted and ascribed meaning to the actions and words around them (Berger & Luckman, 1967; Blumer, 1969). They further claim that sexuality is a collection of social norms, values, and expectations that have been shaped by social power positions and hierarchies (Foucault, 1980; Gagnon & Parker, 1995; Harding, 1998; Vance, 1984).

Wade and Tavris (1999) stated that, “as a social construct” gender refers to “all the duties, rights, and behaviors a culture considers appropriate for males and females” (p. 16). This concept relates to the social constructionist view, that sexuality itself is socially constructed and places a much greater emphasis on the influence that social experience has in shaping a person’s sexual perception (Kelly, 2001). Social constructionists argue about the reality of the potential for
human consciousness, behavior, and physical experience. Social forces, namely definition, regulation, organization, and categorization are required to stimulate this potential; they also bring attention to social control of sexuality (Foucault, 1980). In short, the social constructionists state that sex is a social product, the same as gender.

According to Wade and Tavris (1999), “A culture’s attitudes and practices regarding gender are deeply embedded in its history, environment, economy, and survival needs” (p. 24). Gilligan (1982) has focused on the female self as a relational being with the core focus on the early emotional interactions of individuals that form a foundation of all relationships (Daniluk, 1998; Jack, 1991; Katz, Boggiano & Silvern, 1993). It is this core focus on the meaning of early relation socialization that may also explain gender-based characteristics (Katz et al., 1993). Surrey (1991) stated, “... for women, the primary experience of self is relational, that is, the self is organized and developed in the context of important relationships” (p. 52).

Women may also express loss of self within the context of relationships (Jack, 1991). Jack proposed three rationalizations of loss of self in women. First, there is a loss of self as a result of a woman’s loss of personal expression in reaction and contribution to the relationship. The woman then is not able to voice her own independent sense of self and becomes a part of the ‘we’ concept with her husband or significant other. This relational communication mechanism becomes a substitute for the individual self expressed as ‘I’, a necessary concept for the woman to maintain her own voice and voice channeling. Second, a woman may lose her sense of self as she perceives the need “to fit into an image provided by someone else” (p. 32). In this context, the “someone else” may be
her parents or the culture in which she is living. The third reason for loss of self is that women fear “they may be wrong” (Jack, 1991, p. 33). Fear is considered to be the prime reason women lose their voice, resulting in a change that serves to “discount femininity itself, its knowledge, its perspective, and its values” (Jack, 1991, p.33). Ultimately, women, in an attempt to achieve connectedness or relatedness, start to change and reduce their sense of self.

Many approaches have been implemented to study individuals’ sexual-selves in different populations (Andersen, 1999; Breakwell & Millward, 1997; Mona, 1998; Potgieter & Khan, 2005; Shapiro & Schwarz, 1997; Squiers, 1998; Van Bruggen, Runtz & Kadlec, 2006). The qualitative research of Mayers et al (2003), concluded that an individual declining the worth placed on him/herself as a sexual being creates a unique variety of reactions experienced by a person and may harm the sexual-self image. The qualitative studies of Offman and Matheson (2004) and Mayers et al (2003), further reveal damage that can be done to an individual’s sexual-self perception through negative life events, a negative view of a woman’s sexual-self, and its potential to impact her relationships.

Williams and Leiblum (2002) state that most women are raised in families and cultures whose messages about female sexual expression are conflicting on the one hand, and limiting on the other. Women are often taught to consider their genitals as shameful, their sexual feelings as sinful, their exploration of their bodies as dirty, and their premarital sexual activity as damaging to their worth and reputation. Religious and cultural taboos on masturbation, dating, and sex education leave many women unaware of even the most basic facts of their female anatomy and leave them with feelings of guilt and shame. The effects of a shameful experience cannot be invalidated without some repair and punishment
because it is not the behavior that is considered to be bad, but the person him or herself who is at fault (Resneck & Sannes, 1991). Shame and guilt may happen concurrently. When a person has agreed to the wrongdoing and still feels badly, he or she is trapped with the shame (Piers & Singer, 1971).

In traditional Iranian culture (Abolhassani, 2000; Sadeghi, 1996; Sadeghi, 1980; Shahidian, 1994), as in other patriarchal cultures, many young girls feel exposed if any part of their body is not covered. Their training and observation of family female role models during early childhood teach them to cover their chest, to be modest, especially in front of men, or they may risk violating a cultural taboo. A woman who enjoys her sexuality is in danger of abandoning her cultural norms. Daughters look to their mothers for affirmation of their sexual behavior. A mother who wants to follow cultural dictates and defend her daughter from harm may, at the same time, experience repercussions from a clash with culture in wanting to support her daughter’s sexuality (Floor, 2008).

It is a commonly accepted fact that culture is transferred from generation to generation through family, education, society, and other cultural aspects. Gender sexuality, excepting biological factors, is also learned behavior. Research studies not only identify very early manifestations of gender role differentiation in childhood, and even infancy, but a continued processing of role identification throughout adulthood. Individual, attitudinal, and physical experiences that may or may not conflict with cultural norms are also passed on to offspring. Considerable research has been done that discusses various aspects and outcomes of these cultural determinants that lead to the formation of female sexual-self (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). This formation can begin as early as
childhood, as a consequence of learned behavior that has evolved from generations of practice or tradition.

The study of women’s experience in culture and history (Afary, 2009; Parker & Aggleton, 2007; Sadeghi, 2008; Seidman, Fischer & Meeks, 2008), reveals that the definitions of, standards for, and control of female sexuality are heavily affected by male sexual pleasure and are justified in the name of religion, tradition, morality, and society. More often than not, women’s own expressions or definitions of their sexuality and sexual behavior are silenced, forbidden, or condemned. Laumann and Mahay (2002) suggest that female sexual concept and behavior are basically controlled by social factors, even though generally thought to be issues of personal and individual choice. A discussion by females of sexual desire is formed essentially by social constructs. This preconditioning may fashion a woman’s own desire as it relates to men (Simon & Gagnon, 1987).

Crosby and Miller (2002) indicate that while individual and cultural factors influence adolescent female sexual behavior, the family, particularly the parents, are the most powerful socializing influence in the life of a young female teen, as they are in an ideal position to shape young attitudes and behaviors. In this family context, female adolescent sexual health is to a large degree dependent upon what is and is not communicated. Other research (Dilorio, Kelley & Hockenberry-Eaton, 1999; Dutra, Miller, & Forehand, 1999; Miller, Kotchick, Dorsey, Forehand, & Ham, 1998) proposes that evidence exists that supports mothers as being a prime influence in the sexual behavior of female adolescents. Although family and maternal influences are key forces in the shaping of adolescent sexual behavior, these elements are in competition with other social influences, such as peers. Thus, it is seen in these studies that the determining factors of adolescent sexual behavior come from multiple sources.
2.5.2 Sexual-Self and Gender Role

The new migrant woman is quickly confronted with decisions for a new way of life. She is unprepared for exposures to relationships of all kinds and with men of all types, particularly in western countries. The new exposures extend to societal information, including sexual information, ability to work and be employed, and educational opportunities, all of which offer a potential for a new lifestyle. Granting herself the permission to be exposed to new information presented by her new culture, including that affecting her sexual-self, appears to occur without regard for prior learning and life experiences (Necef, 1994). The uniqueness and combination of being physically separated and emotionally distanced from familial connections in the home country environment can release the power of women to examine and question their sexual-selves, gender/sex role, and sexuality (Rogler, 1994). Home culture restrictions and reprisals for gender role prescription violations are absent in the context of the new host environment. However, as some studies have shown, the migrant woman does not find the expression of personal power regarding her sexual-self an easy process because of her own deep-rooted internalization of home culture and family norms (Espin, 1994).

Self alteration for the migrant woman commences when the individual has been transplanted in the new cultural environment away from the extended family and network of friends. The dilemma of how to progress through decision-making amid the bombardment of new cultural stimuli requires a resourceful re-modeling of self (Porters & Rumbaut, 1996). Taking a critical look at new insights about taken-for-granted assumptions is a beginning step on the path to new ‘self’ alternatives. This reflection may result in an unlearning of prior
knowledge or old lessons and a disassembling of the network of social constructs or mechanisms accumulated in the home culture to allow for new self formulation (Necef, 1994; Rogler, 1994). On the other hand, the self reflection for some people may be a heightened rigidity of the home structured self because of extreme loss, camouflaged needs, or perceived imposition, injury or disrespect to family (Espin, 1994).

Migrant women making their way through the unlearning and re-learning process often undergo a paradoxical experience. On the one hand, while the dominant culture’s sexism or sexual behavior trends may be less restrictive, they also send migrant women back to retrenchment into the restrictions of home culture tradition for protection (Essed & Goldberg, 2002). This so-called protection from the dominant culture subjects her simultaneously to the gender suppression imposed by home culture. A woman’s sexual-self and gender role have been positioned within the family structure to carry considerable responsibility for the family value system and family honor. Her role has a larger social purpose: to be evidence of or to prove the existence of integrity or decay of social groups, from family to nation. In traditional societies, the female gender role can be seen as a strategy to maintain compliance to the rules of traditional gender roles. In other words, a daughter’s behavior, seen as moral or immoral, is tantamount to the morals of the family. This is a struggle and a dilemma of cultural viewpoint for the migrant woman in the United States where becoming Americanized is considered the same as or similar to being sexually promiscuous (Espin, 1995).
There is seemingly an automatic struggle for the existence and preservation of the home culture in the migration process. Families strive to maintain cultural and emotional stability within the structure of the new and dominant culture. Controlling women's sexual roles and behavior is seen as central and tantamount to the regulation of and connection to the traditional culture. From the view of an outsider, the migrant woman appears to be restricted in her self-government and opportunity for self-fulfillment (Espin, 1999; Yuval-Davis, 1992). The migrant woman's life is a dichotomy, a battle of two sets of cultural forces pulling her in opposite directions. On one hand, this pull enforces the continued compliance with the prescriptions of her home culture's gender-determined role; and on the other hand, lures her to let go of home culture values, accept the host culture values, and realize the potential for a new sense of sexual-self. The migrant woman's constant struggle is to find a common ground between these two opposing cultural forces. Seeking a way to handle the duality of her existence, migrant women may internalize their oppression, only to be expressed through conflicts when they attempt to express their sexuality (Bonierbale et al., 1981; Valverde, 1985).

2.6 Constructionists’ View on the Shaping of Women’s Sexuality

The constructionists view gender as a construct that identifies particular transactions that are understood to be appropriate to one’s sex. According to this definition, gender does not reside in the person, but exists in those interactions that society interprets or designates as gender appropriate, or that society has designed for gender (Bohan, 1997). Staples (1973), further indicates that the constructionists emphasize cross-cultural variation, and make an argument that sexuality is related to culture. What sexual partners do to each other, and how
they respond to each other is a product of cultural rules and roles, subjectivity, and conscious decision. It is not only a biological determinant. Kitzinger (1987), in her discussion of social constructionists, included feminist input to show that human sexuality stems from patriarchal society and its use and suppression of women.

Baumeister (2000) suggests that because female sexuality is malleable and responsive to culture, this malleability offers greater opportunity for culture to exert a controlling influence on female sexual concept and behavior. He further asserts that male desire, in contrast, is a constant, not being subject to cultural constraints and controls, and maintains a powerful self-propelling role in human sexuality. In that culture can effectively apply powerful limitations on women, and can repress them, their sexual esteem will be lower than that of men. As a woman’s sexuality is made malleable by social situational factors, her internal powers – attitude considerations – will play much less of a role in the expression of her sexuality (Baumeister, 2000).

Herzog (2004) contends that in societies where the mode of thought is racist or nationalist, it is the woman’s body that serves as the standard for analyzing the principles of commitment, belonging, obligation, and loyalty to the collective national community. This gendered body of knowledge overlays that of racism and nationalism (Anthias & Yuval-Davis, 1992). The overlapping is joined with the dichotomous world construct of distinctions made between men and women. These distinctions also run along the line of the worldview of biological differences and hierarchical role division, and power relations originating from these differences. Thus, as a response to their sexuality, women of immigrant communities are subjected to maltreatment at the hand of racism.
Espin (1995) asserts that world religious leaders, who are primarily male, tend to have a preoccupation with the sexuality of women. It is becoming more apparent that the focal point of Christian, Muslim, and other fundamentalist agendas is women, their role, and their control (Calhoun et al. 2004; Yuval-Davis, 1992; Yuval-Davis & Stoetzel, 2002). During times when social and/or political unrest thrust rejection, racism, and scorn upon immigrant communities, the self-appointed protectors of morality and tradition take advantage of events to control women’s sexuality and behavior under the guise of preserving tradition. It is purported that the subservience of women is a kind of steadying influence in the community. Referring specifically to women in the Middle East, the Lebanese author, Acced (1991) asserts that:

*Sexuality seems to have a revolutionary potential so strong that many political women and men are afraid of it. They prefer, therefore, to dismiss its importance by arguing that it is not as central as other factors, such as economic and political determination... however... sexuality is much more central to social and political problems... than previously thought, and ...unless a sexual revolution is incorporated into political revolution, there will be no real transformation of social relations.* (p. 239)

Foucault (1980) further argues that sexuality is not private. Brettell and Sargent (1993) also show that sexuality resides in the public domain in many cultures, where it is subjected to control and legislation. The sexuality of women of Iran may have been central to the Iranian revolution. This chapter previously discussed the historical control of Iranian women from the Qajar to the Pahlavi dynasties, to the current Islamic Republic of Iran, in the name of women’s honor and status. This being the case, there is perhaps the need to examine, among men and women, the level of sex education, knowledge of sexuality, awareness of gender role, and the sense of women’s empowerment in Iran and other nations.
sharing similar modalities of governmental rule (Shahidian, 1996; Yeganeh & Keddie, 1986).

There is a scarcity of research on the sexuality of Middle Eastern women, including Iranian-American women. The literature does make reference to the lack of open discussion of sex related topics, especially among unmarried youth (Khan & Khanum, 2000). Many young people who have reached maturity have a poor education about sex. Society expects that women should not learn about sexual relationships until after marriage. More often than not, besides various forms of the media (Afari, 2009), the primary source of details regarding sex comes from married friends (Floor, 2008). Reflecting on the target population of the current study, some of which are young adults, the issue of sex education may be construed as an important item of sexual-self formation.

Feminists in general have been strong advocates for the elimination of those factors in society that resist or suppress women’s ascendance to a place of equality in society with that of men, a place where her full potential as a total human being can be actualized and felt by all of humanity (Opie, 1991; Papanec, 1994; Peters & Wolper, 1996). Iranian feminists, not very visible in the world community, nonetheless, have been active within their own situational limits to strengthen strategies for their empowerment (Kian-Thiebant, 2005). Regardless of the current feminist movement in Iran, there is a lack of adequate social support systems and education available to Iranian women (Afary, 2009; Moghissi, 1996; Rahnavard, 1982; Sanasarian, 1982). Feminist theoretical concepts have been beneficial from educational and tactical points of view to assist women in their liberation efforts (Peters & Wolper, 1996). The next section will examine the role of power in that process from the social feminist perspective.
2.7 Power, Gender, and Sexuality: A Feminist View

Academic feminists have been instrumental in establishing the qualitative method of research as important to utilizing personal knowledge to understand human interaction and behavior and revealing injustices and hardships in women’s lives. Vygotsky’s (1978) theory of learning proposed that personally meaningful knowledge is socially constructed through shared understandings. Cultural feminists emphasize historical, holistic, and collective orientations to experience (Gilman, 1988). In feminist epistemologies, value is ascribed to experience as well as to knowledge (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1986). Feminist therapeutic professionals embrace emotion as a means of learning about self and relationships (Schaef, 1981). Similar to McCormack (2004), the feminist theory was used to create an analytical procedure called “storying stories” (p. 219), by having conversational interviews, and looking at them through multiple lenses such as active listening, narrative processes, language, contexts, and moments, to “highlight both the individuality and the complexity of a life” (p. 219). Thought is reflective of a person’s holistic experience; communicated thought is a form of knowledge that is transferred automatically with a level of emotion.

Many contemporary feminists throughout the world, including those in Iran (Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006), share a common goal: they seek to develop a theoretical framework independent of the dominant male perspective. Much of the work by feminists has been devoted to the tasks of opposing women’s subordination and class oppression, and looking for possibilities to eliminate these two strategies of suppression concepts in both individual and collective cultural systems. While the concept of power is central to both subordination and
oppression in social relationships, only a few feminists, the likes of Allen (1999), Hartsock (1983, 1996), Yeatmann (1997), and Young (2003), as well as Foucault (1980) the critical writer on sexualities, have made significant contribution to the concept of power as it relates to women’s gender roles.

From his postmodernist analysis, Foucault (1980) extrapolated that power emerges from everyday social interaction as a dynamic and constantly moving set of force relations that permeate the social body fabric. His analysis illustrates how power travels through the relational wiring of the social body, subjecting individuals to it while also creating them as subjects (Foucault, 1983). Foucault’s extensive analysis of power has propelled him to the cutting edge in discussions of power among other feminists (Allen, 1999; Bartky, 1990; Bordo, 1993; Butler, 1990, 1993, 1997; Diamond & Quinby, 1988; Fraser, 1989; Hekman, 1996; McLaren, 2002; McNay, 1992; McWhorter, 1999; Sawicki, 1991; Young, 1990).

In order to better understand the concept of power in the formation of the self, a review of Foucault’s theory is of value. Foucault’s thoughts about the panopticon, a metaphor for a historic shift in power relations, may be used as a guide to examine power in the sexual-self construct (1977). The panopticon was a late 18th century prison system designed by Jeremy Bentham that consisted of a central guard tower (Foucault 1975). Guards inside the tower could see into any cell; the prisoners could not see inside the tower in the panopticon. At times, the prison population became no longer regulated by direct supervision, but by the possibility of being seen. In effect, inmates internalized the guard function, becoming their own captors. The exercise of power shifted from unilateral action by the strong against the weak, to a more multifaceted, participatory, and self-regulatory regime. In a sense, power became democratized, though often still
tyrannical (Boje, 1995). Boje (1995) stated that Foucault referred to panoptic gaze as “multiple, automatic, continuous, hierarchical, and anonymous power functioning in a network of relationship from top to bottom, from bottom to top, as well as laterally, to hold an enterprise together” (p. 1027).

Foucault (1977) has theorized that various forms of social power can be applied in such a way that when the targeted subjects knowingly have been placed under constant surveillance for a given period, the subjects will begin to self-monitor. Even when the surveillance or monitoring has ceased the subjects through such monitoring or “gazing” (p. 201) as it is termed, gradually evolve to be their own monitoring or surveillance instrument and lock themselves into prescribed behaviors. Foucault (1983) is of the belief that social power’s submissive effects can be extended indefinitely without break in the control of its subjects. Power can become spread, but as Foucault’s panopticon illustrates, spread power is not necessarily more benign and is not unilateral like law. Even the oppressors are oppressed, even though by no means to the same degree as the oppressed. Norms operate even if the state is not watching. Norms are frequently internalized. However, when a person refuses to become his own personal panopticon, a neighbor or family member might become their jailor instead.

Foucault’s theory of gazing can be applied to Iran after the 1979 revolution (Afary, 2009). The revolutionary leader of Iran implemented a system of surveillance of its followers and non-Muslims, using clerics and vigilantes to ensure compliance with Islamic state laws and religious practices. Muslim citizens were required to participate in Friday prayer, to fast during the month of Ramadan, to avoid contact with the ritually impure (Chafiq, 2006), to perform
ablution, and to participate in the ritual of mourning in Moharram. Anyone caught in violation of these practices was met with an array of severe punishments. Women could be beaten or knifed for not wearing the hijab (veil). Information was relentlessly gathered as a way to document and enforce the power of the regime. Many citizens who internalized this moralist posture acted to force the rulings on others who were not as stringent in their private observances (Akhavi, 1980; Balata, 1979; Cottam, 1989). This is Foucault’s gazing in practice. The spread of the gazing from authority to its citizens is in evidence. In a matter of years, many people had accepted the regime’s ideas based on the notion of an imagined Utopian community of early Islam that would eliminate any vestiges of Western influence. Gender hierarchy (Butler, 2006) was seen as an important step to that end. Some mechanism of control has existed, from the Pahlavi dynasty under the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, during which the SAVAK (Saikal, 1980), the Iranian secret services, searched out and controlled people of Iran and made unveiling mandatory for women (Akhavi, 1980; Cottam, 1989; Floor, 2008; Floor, 1983), to the current regime, which has forced women to veil. There is a need to examine the maintenance of the Iranian government’s panopticon operation in the name of cultural cleansing and chastity of women. Foucault’s concept of gazing (Boje, 1995), has implications for the way in which the female sexual-self is constructed. The next section examines its role in the shaping of the female sexual-self and culture as a strong determinant in the formation of it.

2.8 Individualist vs. Collectivist Self-Construct

Many scholars embrace Markus and Kitayama’s (1991) independent and interdependent self-construct theory. Scholars, in their discussions of self, point
out the individualistic tendencies of people in western cultures and collectivistic tendencies of people in eastern and developing countries. They note that individuals in both culture types have characteristics and attributes of their opposite cultural counterparts. The interdependent self not only engages in original independent thoughts, but it has awareness of internal experience and feelings that are private and separate from others. In the same way, on the opposite perspective, the individualist self has experiences attributable to the social proclivities of the collectivist aspect of the construct (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Triandis, 1989). Markus and Kitayama noted that the unique individualist self operates within a definite set of limitations – one’s own store of thoughts, feelings, and actions – in its social interactions. The collectivist self operates from a base of multilayered social relationships – an embracing network of people relations (Geertz, 1975).

In empirical studies, it was found that the norm of the culture was generally more individualistic in Northern and Western Europe, North America and Australia, while the norm of the culture was generally more collectivist in cultures of Africa, Asia, South America and the Pacific Islands (Hofstede, 1984; Miller, 1988; Shweder & Bourne, 1984; Triandis, et al., 1986). In one such cross-cultural empirical study, it was affirmed, not surprisingly, that in China and Japan, a major portion of the concept of self and culture were in contrast to that in the United States (Lewis, 1989; Peak, 1989; Schneider & Silverman, 2003). Markus and Kitayama (1991), in referring to the Western notion of self as separate from the context of culture, were emphatic in their writings that self defined as separate from circumstantial or situational context, environment, or culture is not an adequate description. They further state that self is the other or the self-in-relation-to other that is directly related to individual experience.
In an attempt to capture an understanding of self, scholars have identified and made use of different cultural and/or social constructs and theories and used them as models for the formation of cognitive understanding about culture and self. Bourdieu (1977) posited a “Theory of Practice,” linking a concept called macro structure and culture to the experiences and relationships people have in social situations. They found the theory quite favorable to their study of individualist and collectivist selves. The theory has a focus on the way social structures become internalized by individuals having common positioning in the social hierarchy. Bourdieu put forth the innovative concept of “systems of durable, transposable dispositions and principles of the generation and structuring of practices and representations, which can be objectively 'regulated and regularized' without in any way being the product of obedience to rules” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 72). This concept, “habitus”, as Bourdieu refers to it, is a reflection of culture and is comprised of “internalized structures, ways of perceiving, interpreting and acting” that members of a class have in common. Further traits of habitus include tastes, dispositions, beliefs, expectations, and aspirations, and are depicted as “unique internal traits” shared by a group or class members, not to be considered as possessions owned by the individual. The concept of habitues is extended to embrace “the taken for granted” and what is known as common sense, but all traits become a part of the fabric of self at the beginning of the socialization experiences. According to Singelis (1994), the individualistic and collectivistic self constructs are fundamental components of self and could be categorized as habitus knowledge because they are defined in a sociological framework and are shared among members of groups.
2.9 Sexual Experiences of Women

The issues of Iranian-American women’s sexual-selves and gender roles (Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006) are a representation of the struggle of women across the world and are but one microcosmic sampling and view of the universal debate of women’s rights at the United Nations and World Health Organization levels. The complexity and diversity of interrelated issues have received much local and international attention.

The quantitative study of Mohammadkhani, et al., (2009) examined different types of intimate abuse such as sexual coercion, psychological aggression, and physical assault by husbands in the context of current marital relationships. The results revealed that among married Iranian men and women, sexual coercion victims experienced some factors with the victims of nonsexual types of marital abuse, and this experience seemed to be to a certain extent gender dependent. Additionally, low self-control and high violent socialization were the common predictors of violence. Similar results were revealed by Logan et al., (2007) about non-Iranian women and their experience of coercive sexual activities. In their study (Logan et al., 2007), the concept of feeling degraded within the context of sexual activities was highlighted significantly in a mixed methods examination of sexual coercion and degradation among women in violent relationships, who did not report forced sex. A comparative study on the experience of sexual coercion across different developing countries revealed that most of the Iranian women participants, perceived their wedding night as violent and traumatic due to forced initial penetration (Heise et al., 1996). The study revealed that sexual coercion is more frequent among familiar persons, including husbands, than strangers (Heise et al., 1995). The influencing factors of coerced
sex included male dominance, cultural entitlement to sex, the respondents’ belief that men and women have radically different sex drives, and culturally embedded ideas of gender norms and roles (Adekunle & Ladipo, 1992). In many instances, women felt they had no choices or options to avoid the sexual encounters. Secrecy, however, was the most common response to sexual coercion, no matter the relation of the perpetrator. Coercive sex is frequent within marriage in many other developing countries (Santhya, Haberland, Ram, Sinha, & Hohanly, 2007).

Other studies (Ajuwon, Olley, Akintola & Akin-Jimoh, 2004) suggest that developing countries have more instances of coercive sex than developed or western countries. A study of Wagman et al. (2008), gives cultural orientation, male viewpoint and dominance as key contributing factors to sexual coercion as a strategy for obtaining sexual pleasure. Chapter 7, explores how the Iranian-American’s response to instances of sexual-self suppression, are similar to another developing countries and in other cultures. In research studies, women’s issues are often positioned in the context of sexual health discussions. Nath’s study (2000) of an all female group, for example, clearly articulates women’s self-perceptions, gender identity, gender roles, and political rights, as issues to be addressed, but all in relation to reducing the transmission and instances of sexually transmitted diseases (STD) and HIV/AIDS. Nath reported, “...it is becoming more and more clear that gender-based discrimination is a central cause and consequence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic” (p. 101). In working with women in India, there were frequently raised questions about the possibility for a woman to be assertive in her sexual relationships with men (Nath, 2000). This questioning indicates a search for ways to create and achieve safe sexual engagement that would also address the nature of male interaction with them.
Self-reported information regarding the knowledge, attitudes and practices of persons with HIV/AIDS in the Iranian at-risk sub-populations of female adults and adolescents indicates that respondents had a low level of awareness and education concerning the danger, prevalence, and interventions of HIV/AIDS, and that an even lower level of awareness exists among people with high-risk behaviors (Tehrani & Malek-Afzali, 2008). The same is true of STIs (Sexually Transmissible Infections). For example, a primary finding of Pitts and Clarke (2002) study of Human Papilloma Virus is that the knowledge base of women concerning this sexually transmitted disease was generally low.

Extra-marital sex among male partners and polygamy in Iran are the sanctioned social mechanisms that allow for sexual promiscuity and constitute an explanation for the higher instances of HIV/AIDS and STI among Muslims (Kapiga, 1996; Kapiga & Lugalla, 2002). Women, on the other hand, are victim to this multiple sex partner practice and are at high risk of infection, as they are limited by culture to sexual expression with their husbands only (Peyman et al., 2009). It has been recommended that the Islamic Republic of Iran offer more comprehensive and reliable information about HIV/AIDS and STI prevention programs in order to implement effective intervention (Meda, 1999).

According to Few (1997), research on sexuality and the formation of sexual identities has brought a focus on their cultural meanings. This idea is borne out by many researchers who discuss the various social norms and constructs affecting women’s sexual-selves and gender roles. In her discussion, Few cites Week (1985), who poses the question, “To what degree can sexuality or sexual identity or gender role be changed if it is formed or constructed by social factors?” Week’s position is that the meanings of sex, sexuality, gender
differences, and political and economic power aspects of culture would have to be changed, mainly, because there is not one sexuality, but many sexualities and experiences of it. The research position that culture would have to be changed to achieve greater equality among men and women has validity for the recommended routes of change. Currently, these routes of change have been education campaigns primarily for women. This means that education programs for men would complement the change. In the aforementioned community project (Nath, 2000), the focus of change was the empowering of women to create that change. There is a need to evaluate the level of self-empowerment gained through education alone as it relates to the Iranian women’s gender role and sexual-selves.

2.10 Religion, Culture, and the Sexual Rights of Women in Iran

Over the last three to four decades, research literature by Islamic scholars has discussed the subjects of human rights, discrimination, suppression, and the role of culture and religion on the behavior, conditions, and treatment of women (Afary, 2009; Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006; Floor, 2008; Kousha, 2002; Sadeghi, 2008; Salehi-Isfahani, 2000). Not only has it emphasized a distinct difference between cultural and religious influence, but it has gone further to show that prevailing views of Islam’s role in the shaping of a woman’s place in society and her relation to men are, in some instances, simply falsely aligned to religion. In other instances, the definition of a woman’s role has stemmed from an alteration or re-interpretation of Islamic doctrine or law to perpetuate or condone cultural practice. Many scholars use the Qu’ran as the basis of their arguments (Fernea & Bezifqan, 1977).
Fatima Mernissi (2003) an acclaimed Middle Eastern anthropologist, has argued that Islamic societies have both an implicit and explicit theory of female sexuality, which are contradictory, creating a double standard for women. The explicit theory implies that men are aggressive in sex. For a better understanding of the implicit theory it is best to refer to Imam Ghazali’s quotes in Mernissi (2000), in which he viewed Islamic societies’ control of women for the sake of men, to prevent the men from becoming distracted from their social and religious duties. These societies believe that they can function productively only if male dominance is promoted through sexual isolation and control of women. Mernissi (2003) indicated that in societies where there are methods of close examination and oppression of women’s behavior, the concept of female sexuality is passive.

Wiebke (1993), in examining the historical role of culture in Islam, traced the changes in economic and political conditions of Islamic societies and showed how these changes brought about a more discriminatory view of women. For example, the importance of the hijab (veil) can be seen in its historical and current use as a cultural practice. Contrary to some Islamic writers’ asserting its connection to Islam, scholarly examination of the Qur’an does not reveal reference for its use either within the household of Prophet Mohammad, nor outside in the far reaches of the Muslim world. The Qur’an makes no reference to what attire women are to wear except to state that men and women should dress modestly (Barlas, 2002).

A group of Islamic scholars (Badawi, 1995; Engineer, 1992; Hussain, 1984; Yamani, 1996) also has claimed that Islam is not the reason for female discrimination in this region. They make a further claim that the treatment of
Islamic women emanates from Islamic law that has a basis in cultural norms predating the existence of Islam. This assertion not only makes an argument for culture as a historical factor in the discrimination of women, but alludes to the influence of culture on religious law. For Badawi (1995), it is not Islam itself but the cultural interpretation of it that has created discrimination against women in the Islamic world. Cultural analysts, Ahmed (1991) and Mahajan (1997) stated that cultural traditions are central to gender discriminatory practices and are explicit in their examples of how the intelligentsia of the culture interpret and use the Qur’an and the teachings of Mohammad to condone cultural beliefs.

The contradictions, double standards, and opposing positions of culture and religion govern the issue of what a woman should do regarding her sexual behavior. On the one hand, the Qur’an accepts human sexuality and stipulates that it is to be enjoyed by men and women, but within the bounds of marriage. Opposing this religious-based view are those who, for cultural or traditional reasons, believe that female sexual desire represents a danger to society. These opinion holders, who are usually men, are also the final decision makers on matters of dispute between religion and culture. The danger alluded to here is the possible loss of family honor, a sacred status that women have the duty to uphold (Floor, 2008). The knowledge of the vulnerability of women to sexual violation of religious tenets and cultural traditions throughout history is a continual source of fear and anxiety, as any violation will result in shame and dishonor to the family. The ultimate redress for causing such dishonor is severe punishment at the hand of a male member of the family (Frenea & Bezirgan, 1977).
The presence of female discriminatory practice or gender differentiation, as it is referred to by Ahmed (1991) and others, is a prevailing concern for all women of Middle Eastern extract. There is further agreement among researchers that eliminating or drastically changing the Middle Eastern patriarchal structure and practice is a key ingredient necessary in the Muslim world to improve conditions for women. Haddad and Esposito (1998) agree that patriarchy is the core of female discrimination; however, they believe that the patriarchal system is mainly a cultural actuality which has evolved over centuries. It is culture, not the religion of Islam that is the cause of the discrimination against women (Afkhami, 1995; Ahmed, 1988; Badawi, 1995; Nasr, 1987; Shariati, 1979; Tabattabai, 1984).

Many traditional and cultural norms and practices over the centuries remained unchanged, even during the Pahlavi era. Regarding her family, the Iranian woman is expected to maintain a passive role in her life by accepting marriage and following her parents’ and husband’s recommendations (Afary, 2009; Floor, 2008). By so doing, she maintains her own good image and her family’s good image in the society and accepts that men have more sexual freedom than women in that society. Women must be virgins until they are married, show no sexual interest, and maintain a passive role in their relationships with their husbands, while men may fulfill their sexual needs outside of marriage. A woman is considered to be either pure or shameful, so parents make sure their daughters are chaste. Many marriages are not about partners loving each other, but are about the wishes of the parents. Even if the woman does not consent to marriage, it still takes place because marriage is really about a union between the families. While in contemporary Iranian
society, some girls may have the opportunity to select their husbands, the ultimate decision is made by her family members (Floor, 2008; Parnian, 2006).

Family plays an important role in Iranian lives (Mackey, 1998), overruling any other relationships. However, current Islamic rule has had its major influence in the family dynamic since the revolution, by underscoring the family rules (Shapurian & Hojat, 1985). While divorce is a possibility, it is still contrary to the norms of the society and women are expected to stay married in order to maintain the respect of the family, even if they are unhappy. Iranian men are able to make decisions and plans for both themselves and their wives (Floor, 2008; Givens & Hirschman, 1994; Nassehi-Behnam, 1985; Parnian, 2006; Shapurian & Hojat, 1985). Males in many Middle Eastern cultures occupy the strongest of positions within the family structure and are groomed for those positions from birth, as they are the preferred gender to hold positions of important decision-making. The concept of son preference governs this practice (Coombs, Coombs, & McClelland, 1975).

In some Mediterranean and Muslim countries, the historically significant son preference has existed. Studies reveal that the reasons for son preference have to do with parents’ reliance on sons for security in old age, particularly where social, economic, and legal institutions are highly patriarchal. These are the prime perceived values for having sons over daughters (Coombs, Coombs, & McClelland, 1975). Other core reasons for son preference in the Middle East, East and South Asia, and North Africa are that sons continue the family line through their names and are generally recipients of inheritance. Girls are primarily considered an economic burden to the birth family. In accord with the dowry system, there is a large financial outlay by her family at marriage. After marriage,
the girls typically become members of their husband’s family. During old age of her birth family and her husband’s family, a girl as a wife and as a daughter is expected to be the caretaker of both sides (Hesketh & Xing, 2006). According to Islamic inheritance law, a son receives twice as much as a daughter, a brother receives twice as much as a sister, and a husband receives twice as much as a wife (Nasir & Kalla, 2006). Similar concepts and Islamic laws have been applied to Muslim Iranians universally (Parnian, 2006).

Nasir and Kalla (2006) have further argued that there is a need to understand the wider social historical contexts – cultural and ideological concepts – of gender bias in Muslim societies. Their studies showed that wealthy community attitudes contributed to son preference. Among wealthy Muslim families the pressure to have sons is even higher in order to maintain wealth and family honor. The application of the son preference facilitates the increase in a family’s finances and the preservation of its family name (Agnihotri, 2000). Studies from many Asian countries suggest that in the patriarchal system women are socially and financially dependent upon men (Bongarts 2001; Hussain et al, 2000). More recent thinking on contemporary gender and sexual norms and their contribution to awareness of women’s sexual rights in Iran is provided by Afary (2009) and Kousha (2002) and Mahdi (2001). Although social norms are slowly becoming more liberal with changing views amongst both young women and men about intimacy in marital relationships, there are serious legal and societal impediments to gender and sexual equality.


2.11 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the behavior of women, in or out of their roles as defined by culture, has multiple functions in the personal and social spheres. Throughout the world, the socialization of women is shaped by the particular culture’s ideals of virtue. It includes norms for the manner in which women display their sexuality and express their sexual desires. A woman’s right or privilege to reproduce is often appropriated, and thus is regulated by legislative action to establish control over the community (Jaggar & Bordo 1989).

The literature has shown that some theorists believe that a woman’s freedom to experience and, perhaps, even explore her sexuality continues to be restrained by the meanings culture will assign to her actions. Richgels (1992) writes that “…women gain access to class through their sexual behavior and breaking the sexual rules of a culture can at once declass them…because one of the most important functions of sexual behavior for women has been to maintain their class status and economic survival, the desire for sexual expression in a freely chosen union has been a luxury many women still cannot afford…” (p. 130). Laumann and Mahay (2002) suggested that “one cannot discuss women’s sexuality without acknowledging the influences of culture, societal oppression (i.e., racism, classism, and sexism), and institutional oppression such as biases in public health research and practice” (p. 43).

Societal shifts in direction, emphasis, values, and principles regarding definitions and taken-for-granted assumptions and clinical practice and research all join to create a particular view of the world. As the old is repeatedly replaced by new views, a critical question is raised regarding how substantive the changes
are. In other words, are these changes superimposed over unchanged pre-
dispositional external standards imposed on women? By the same token, to what
extent are women being allowed to explore, without reprisal, their own sexuality
(Altman, 1984).
CHAPTER 3
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides a description of the methods used to conduct the research. The chapter consists of four sections. The first section is a summary description of my life story and experience as it relates to this research. The second section is an overview of the method selected for this research with a justification for its approach. Section three provides a detailed description of the (a) research design, (b) procedure selected, (c) sample selection, (d) a profile of the participants, and (e) information about data collection and analysis. The final section discusses the limitations and challenges of the study.

3.1 The Researcher as an Insider

This research is an outgrowth of my own experiences and observations as an Iranian-American. Although a native born Iranian, grounded in the culture of the region, I have lived under different cultural conditions in several countries, including the United States, where I have resided for almost 30 years. While there is the obvious connection with my Iranian background, much has transpired in my life that has steered me to the current research.

In my life, I have had contact with Iranian women as professional associates, clients, friends, and family, so my knowledge and perceptions of the culture are partially based upon my on-going current life experiences. Although my direct contact with Iran over these years has been limited, I do qualify as an insider in my culture. The motivation to do something positive that is both
personally stimulating and helpful in making a meaningful contribution to others has been a persistent pattern in my life. I cannot recall a time when I have not wanted to be of help to others to improve the quality of their lives in one capacity or another as a woman, parent, counselor, artist, or teacher.

During the last decade, my research efforts have dealt with the sexual-selves of the Iranian-American women. The topic of my Masters thesis was a study of the factors impacting the sexuality of Iranian-American women. My current research deals with a more in-depth research effort to understand the perceptions of Iranian-American women’s sexual-selves and how they have been structured.

Fifty-one years ago, I was born in the south-western part of Iran to an upper middle-class, moderately traditional and religious Muslim family, of which I am the oldest of seven. I have two sisters and two brothers. Because my family was considered upper middle-class, I had contact with a diverse mix of people. As a child under five years of age, one could see me having fun with children of my age, attending kindergarten and speaking with other children in some type of broken language. I went to an all-girl’s school at age six, played with girls most of the time and remained there through high school. It was early at the all girl school when I began to paint. No matter where I visited, I was always accompanied by someone or a group. These visits were always education-focused, and I was expected to do well, focus on achievement, be a “good girl,” and set a good example for my sisters. In the 4th grade, I joined the Girl Scouts, where I learned survival skills – camping, hiking, leadership, planning and organizing, and creative expression.
I was quite happy in the Girl Scouts. I had international friends who traveled home during the summer and returned with stories, artifacts, and other treasures that gave me a little education to the world and opened my eyes to other places and cultures. It sparked my curiosity about places, people, things, and ideas. This period was filled with social activity. As I learned more about sports, I began to be active on all-girls’ teams. I also began to do more painting. At 13 years old, I found myself engaged in leadership positions. I had a reputation for being an excellent student, and was being considered for various types of responsibility. Educationally, I was ahead and had a busy life. I always had been one to ask questions. I had an insatiable curiosity regarding safe topics, but by the 8th or 9th grade, my questions turned to the society, the world, my own growth, and the world around me. I was a voracious reader, wanting to know about everything.

My foreign friends were talking about puberty and menstruation, a new and totally unfamiliar concept for me, as my mother and female family members had not informed me of these basic changes to the female body. By the time I experienced my first menstrual cycle I was “in the know.” In high school as boys began to show interest in me, my parents began to control my activities and my relationships with my friends. I got the message that I was to associate more with my female Iranian friends and to stay away from the international group of friends I had known. My mother attempted to inculcate religious practices by having me pray five times a day and fast for the holy month of Ramadan. To escape this control, I focused on my painting. My Girl Scout activities were being limited.
At the age of 16, I was suddenly faced with an arranged engagement. I did not like the control that was being exerted on me and I disagreed with the prospect of marriage to my cousin. I wanted to do something about it, so when the opportunity came for me to go to high school to study mathematics as my future professional field\(^3\), I took advantage of it to get away from these new expectations of me. I moved to Tehran, the capital city of Iran, to live with my grandmother.

My grandmother born during the Qajar dynasty, and married at age 9, had perhaps the highest status of all women of my family that I can recall; she was called beebee (lady of highest status). Painting 3.1 is her portrait as I remembered her. Even when she was sitting inside her room and in the company of other women, she had her chador wrapped all around her while wearing a white scarf as well. She used to tell me that the chador and scarf were significant to women of high status. She constantly reminded her daughters-in-law and her own daughters to wear the chador in the presence of men and when going out.

Growing up in an environment in which the country was rapidly moving towards modernization on a daily basis, I usually did not have to focus on whether to wear the chador. Still, even though I was able to wear the latest fashions of Paris, Rome, and Milan, there were certain places in which I found myself forced to wear the chador. For that reason, I did my best to refuse to go to those places and avoided any social gathering that required me to be covered even partially.

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\(^3\) In Iran, students are required to select their field of study, such as mathematics, science, literature, etc., starting with senior high school instead of college.
Life in Tehran gave me an opportunity to take care of my curiosity and questions about everything. I was told I was an attractive girl, and the boys were really giving me a lot of attention. However, I was too wrapped up in my own life’s activity to respond to them. About a year after being in Tehran, in the 11th grade, I met my current husband. He was my high school mathematics teacher. It was love at first sight for us. Despite family disagreement and the conflicts that ensued, we married against the wishes of my family when I was 18 years old. In 1978, six months after I finished high school, we moved to the United States for educational purposes and have lived in southern California ever since.
Life in California was busy, and the main focus was my college education. I got a degree in electrical engineering, a pursuit in an area my parents wished for me. The year after our arrival in California, there was a major revolution in Iran. The 1979 revolution saw the demise of the monarchy and the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Many Iranian families soon began to oppose the new Islamic laws for themselves and, in particular those that applied to women, since veiling became mandatory. Many women believed that the new regime dramatically curbed human rights, including freedom of speech and personal freedom. In some respects, the impact on Iranian families, and in particular Iranian women, was perceived as draconian. Many educated families started sending their daughters overseas to escape the regime.

As women were not encouraged to take engineering jobs in Iran, we decided not to return. For three years I worked as an electrical engineer in the United States, but I did not like the profession. It was then that I decided to go to medical school. I began to volunteer in medical clinics and hospitals, and was placed in the OB/GYN area, where I met many Iranian women who were reluctant to speak with the attending physicians. The women asked me to be their spokesperson, but I could not figure out why this was necessary. As I observed this situation, it was here that I got the idea of becoming a psychotherapist. As I began my internship, I found more situations in which Iranian women again were not able to communicate with their physicians.

A few years after Iran’s 1979 revolution, when I paid a visit to Iran after living in the United States for 18 years, prior to stepping outside the plane in Mehrabad Airport, I had to cover myself head to toe in a loose, long jacket, and wear a maghnaee, too. Still, that was not enough and I was reminded by one of the
guards to cover some of my hair showing on my forehead. At that time, I recalled asking myself why women were back to the pre-Pahlavi era, Qajar dynasty. While in Tehran that summer, I observed that women’s freedoms were being eroded on a daily basis. During that time, several questions occurred to me. For example, why the women of Iran, during the peak time of the world’s modernization, had to be veiled again? They were veiled during the Qajar dynasty (pre-1936), they went through a massive period of struggle to unveil during Pahlavi’s dynasty (1936 – 1979), and back to the veil, weeks after the revolution in 1979, and to the present (Sedghi, 2005). Why was veiling and unveiling significant to the government? To me, physical veiling was not the significant point. To me, veiling was symbolic of women’s oppression and suppression as human beings and a sign to avoid and to decline their existence in the society by covering them in a piece of black fabric. While the unveiling was symbolic of Westernization and modernization (Sedghi, 1999), the veiling was more than just rebirth of Islamic fundamentalist laws that had been suppressed during the Pahlavi Dynasty or cultural authenticity. It was about learning the truth of the status of a woman’s gender role in connection with the politics, religion, and culture of Iran (Fanon, 1967).

As part of my Masters program in counseling, I conducted quantitative research regarding factors that impact sexuality of this Iranian population. This research left me with many unanswered questions. Based on my observations and personal and professional contacts with this population as ‘an insider’ member of the community, and as I came to better understand the complex issues facing Iranian women living in America, I gradually became more motivated to continue my research. As an Iranian-American woman and as a counselor, it has been my increased desire to improve the quality of their lives,
and this desire has led me to this doctoral program. Following the completion of my Masters degree in Counseling Psychology in 2002, and while completing my internship as part of the requirements to become a marriage and family therapist, Dr. Rie Mitchell, Dean of the College of Educational Psychology, knowing about my personal and professional interest, provided encouragement, which led me to undertake a doctoral degree. In addition to professional support, on a personal level, my husband, who is an academician, supported the idea. In 2004, I learned about the collaborative doctoral program between the University of New England in Australia and California State University, Fullerton. This program was a perfect fit for my research needs and my interests. Qualitative research and a better understanding of the feminist paradigm gave me the confidence, courage and framework to delve into this study.

3.2 Selecting an Appropriate Methodology

I selected a qualitative research paradigm to answer the questions I identified in Chapter 1. Qualitative research is the study of a particular phenomenon (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1983) and focuses on understanding and interpreting human actions (Clandinin, 2007). Denzin and Lincoln (2000) provide the following description of qualitative research.

Qualitative research is multi-method in focus, involving an interpretive naturalistic approach to its subject matter… qualitative researchers study things in their natural setting attempting to make sense of, or interpret phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. Qualitative research involves the studied use of and collection of a variety of empirical materials… that describe routine and problematic moments and meaning in individuals’ lives. (p. 3)
Qualitative research facilitates and allows new insights and theory to emerge as the study develops (Bogdon & Biklen, 1998). In many textbooks, qualitative research has been given the connotation of “thick description” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 1998; Denzin, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 2000; Patton, 1990). This term was originated by Geertz (1973), and followed by other researchers such as Denzin (1989), who stated:

A thick description…does not record what a person is doing. It goes beyond mere fact and surface appearances. It presents detail, context, emotion, and the webs of social relationships that join person to one another. Thick description evokes emotionality and selffeelings. It establishes the significance of an experience, or the sequence of events, for the person or persons in question. In thick description, the voices, feelings, actions, and meanings of interacting individuals are heard. (p. 83)

Denzin (1989) expanded the description of qualitative research by stating, “It gives the context of an act; it states the intentions and meanings that organize the action; … it traces the evolution and development of the act; … it presents the action as a text that can then be interpreted” (p. 33). It embraces a socially constructed nature of reality, the intimate relationship between the researcher and the topic studied, and the situational constraints that shape inquiry. Nelson et al. (1994), stated, “Qualitative research is drawn to a broad, interpretive, post experimental, postmodern feminist and critical sensibility…” (p. 4).

Qualitative research studies phenomena in their ordinary settings, and attempts to make sense of phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them. In that sense, qualitative research considers the use of a variety of empirical resources of case studies such as (a) personal experience, (b) life story, (c) interview, and (d) cultural texts and productions. Observational,
chronological, interactional, and visual texts can illustrate habitual and challenging moments and meaning in individuals’ lives. Hence, qualitative researchers position a wide range of interrelated interpretive practices, hoping always to get a better understanding of the subject matter at hand (Denzin & Lincoln 2005).

The qualitative research method was selected for this research to respond to the need for a study of the phenomenon of Iranian-American women’s sexual-selves. In this research, the phenomenon of interest is the understanding of the sexual-selves of Iranian-American women. Qualitative research is a suitable method for this study since it allows the researcher to describe stories of the participants, to make sense of the stories, and to make meaningful interpretations of their stories, voicing the narrative telling of stories in written form. This study explores the sexual-selves of the first generation of Iranian women who migrated to the United States. The phases of life explored included childhood, teen years, marriage, and migration to the United States, the adjustment process, and the current belief system governing their sexual-selves. As the information was provided by the participants, a deep level of exploration into these women’s lives revealed themes based on life events that gave meaning to those events, and helped them to form their own interpretations of the events. These provided powerful insights for the researcher to analyze.

### 3.2.1 Narrative and Narrative Inquiry

The selected method to collect the data is a narrative life history approach (Polkinghorne, 1995, 2005). The narrative method was chosen because it allows people to recall their life experiences (Clandinin, 2007), and covers the wholeness
of a person’s life. The main purposes of knowing about particular personal experiences across time are to (a) gain awareness about individual’s life events, (b) determine how those events affected them, and (c) explore and develop a deeper understanding of how people give meanings to their life events. Narratives help the researcher to understand how those meanings impact the participants’ lives, decision-making, perceptions, and belief systems, and even how their lives were constructed (Minichiello et al., 2004).

The Iranian-American women’s concept of sexual-self is a personal, private matter that has evolved from years of interactions with others, giving each woman a unique experience, set of perceptions, and belief system that emanate from those events. Their personal experiences include their unique feelings, responses, acceptances, rejections, consequences, and current viewpoints about themselves as members of society.

In research, the term “narrative” refers to stories provided by participants as well as the narrative and narrative analysis formulated by the researcher during the course of the research (Kramp, 1995). Narrative is a social, interactive communication tool that gives structure and meaning to experience. As a research tool, it is an effective approach to the systematic study of personal experiences and meaning-making of life events (Reissman, 1993). It is the telling or narrating of narrative research, and it is both a process and product that peculiarly characterize it as a method of inquiry (Reissman, 1993). While narrative inquiry has been found to be a lengthy and time consuming undertaking, its value rests in (a) the researcher’s constant awareness of the evolution of the process; (b) the appropriateness of the interview technique; (c) the researcher’s ability to listen to, hear, and duplicate what is actually being said.
by the storyteller, avoiding the easy path of making generalizations; and (d) the analysis and interpretation of the narrated stories (Bruner, 1996; McEwan & Egan, 1995).

There is some ambiguity in the use of terms “story” and “narrative.” Story is the personal and familiar accounting given in a conversational way, while narrative denotes a different class of telling, having formal characteristics. Narrative can have variable structures to which a story cannot be applied. Story is a narrative structure that organizes or employs human events. It is a construction made by the teller or narrator, and is transmitted through cultural expression. While this definition does not eliminate the ambiguity of terms, it does assist in the employment of narrative inquiry as a research method (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Bruner, 1996; Connelly & Clandinin 1994; Goodson, 1995; Polkinghorne, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1995; Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

In an attempt to achieve some degree of clarity in the use and understanding of the nature of story and narrative, Baxter-Magolda (1992) concluded that narrative tended to be an umbrella term inclusive of story and narrative inquiry. While story and narrative inquiry are examples of narrative, the formats and characteristics of some narrative extend beyond the bounds of story and narrative inquiry. Narrative has traditionally been understood in a general way, inclusive of various responses from short answer questions to write-ups of field notes and transcriptions of interviews, case studies, and autobiographies (Baxter-Magolda, 1992; Bruner, 1996; Carr, 1985).

Since the late 1970s, feminist researchers have become passionate about choosing interviews for the study of women (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, 2003). Asking open-ended questions from women during interviews allows for more
natural, unplanned exploration and exchanges of information between interviewer and interviewee. As Patton (1990, 2002) stated, the purpose of interviewing people is to find out what is on their minds, what they think or how they feel about something. To achieve this goal, the in-depth interview (Minichiello et al., 2004), a major technique used in qualitative research (Patton, 1990), was applied in order to discover and to explore the participants’ feelings, perceptions, thoughts, and belief systems as they relate to their sexual-selves.

Key to the effectiveness of the narrative method is the interview component. Full attention and listening skills during the interview process are essential in getting with exactness what the storyteller has to tell. The informality of the interview talk enhances narrative inquiry and lends to the telling of stories easily, with freedom and detail as prompted by the researcher. The process is without question focused on the participant and her power and ability to construct the resultant narrative that becomes the rich texts to be subjected to analysis and interpretation. According to Polkinghorne (1988),

\[\text{Narrative is the fundamental scheme for linking individual human actions and events into interrelated aspects of an understandable composite . . . a meaning structure that organizes events and human actions into a whole, thereby attributing significance to individual actions and events according to their effect on the whole.} \text{ (p. 13)}\]

3.2.1.1 Narrative Knowing and Analysis. According to Morgan (1993), in social research, the explanation of research procedures is made through its methodology and explores ways to achieve a reflective awareness of why researchers use their methods in the ways that they do. In the process of mapping the methodology and narrative as analysis, the main characteristics of
the narrative research process of Clandinin (2007) were considered and implemented in this study. The applicable characteristics of this study suggest a focus on the individual life story, collection of their life experiences via in-depth individual interviews, and the chronological re-telling of participant stories. Following the interviews, the steps included providing descriptions of the context of the individual stories, identification of themes, and interpretation of themes.

Basic to the use of the terms, “story” and “narrative” is the understanding that narrative is a way of knowing and, as such, is a part of the cognitive inventory. Narrative knowing is a natural and culturally-transmitted expression medium in the form of a story. According to Rorty (1979) “narrative knowing” is the response to the question, “How do we come to endow experience with meaning?” or, in other words, “What is the meaning of experience?” It is grounded in a contextualism that is based on a concern for the human condition. It is a story that attends to the personal, the specific, and the particular. The researcher, who interprets the accounted experience and events of the storyteller, needs available to him or her, the awareness of alternative meanings (Bruner, 1996). Verification of truth or proof, as in logical scientific knowing, is not a requirement of narrative knowing, but the truth – the appearance or likelihood that something is or “could be” true or real – is an appropriate criterion for narrative knowing. Put more simply, narrative knowing is the extent of the storyteller’s understanding of experience and events as expressed in the story told (Bruner, 1991; Didion, 1961; Greene, 1991; Polkinghorne, 1988; Turner & Bruner, 1986).
Important factors in narrative research are (a) the provision of a suitable channel for the participant’s story to be heard, and (b) the narrative interpretation the researcher gives to the story (Coles, 1989; Mishler, 1986; Reissman, 1993). The construction of the story knowledge also depends upon the subjectivity of the storyteller; what actually happened or was experienced by them. However, the object of narrative inquiry is understanding – the outcome of interpretation – rather than explanation (Reissman, 1993).

3.2.1.2 Narrative Process in This Study. Several key characteristics of the narrative research process were followed in this research. These included (a) using in-depth interviews to collect data, (b) focusing on exploring the participants’ individual experiences, and (c) re-telling the stories in a chronological sequence that allows for better understanding of the evolution of sexual-selves.

The stories were analyzed for elements that included interaction, continuity, and situation. The key characteristics of the process of re-telling included:

1. Transcribing the conversation from the audiotape after each interview;
2. Identifying the themes of the story by recognizing setting, action, problems, and resolution;
3. Organizing the themes into sequences in order to add depth and understanding of the participants’ experiences; and
4. Describing the context or setting of the individual stories, which included the participants, other people involved in their stories, physical setting, events, and actions.
All interviews were conducted by the researcher. For the participants who did not speak English or for those who did not speak Farsi, careful attention to language and questions about the effect of conducting the interview in English or Farsi were incorporated into the sessions.

3.3 Selection and Recruitment Methods

This segment provides details about the research process. This process included seeking ethics approval and considering ethical issues in the selection of participants, and in the interview process; and identification and recruitment of participants.

3.3.1 Ethics Approval and Ethical Considerations

This research was approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of New England with the original Approval No. HREC Authority Number [HE06/040], valid to [March 29, 2007]. An application for an extension to an existing, approved protocol was filed and the new HREC Authority Number, Approval No. [HE06/029], valid to [March 29, 2008] was issued.

This research was about a culturally taboo, sensitive topic. The participants were facing the risk of emotional disturbance as a result of recalling past and current events of life. This consideration was clearly explained in the consent form, and prior to the interview it was addressed verbally. In order to reduce the possible emotional discomfort during the interview the following precautions were considered in recruiting and interviewing the participants:
• They had the right to stop or refuse to continue with the interview at any time.
• They had the right to refuse to answer any question(s).
• The selection of time, place, and date of interview was selected by the participants.
• In addition to collecting the names of participants, known support systems (i.e., close friends, relatives, doctors) were identified prior to the beginning of each interview. In addition, the name of a local counseling center was provided, should a participant experience emotional discomfort after the interview was over.
• The interviewer ensured that the interview setting was comfortable for the participants.
• The interviewer ensured and guaranteed privacy and confidentiality.

No known negative results occurred as a result of participation in the interviews. The researcher provided support and ample time to those participants who, during the interview process, became emotional at times; they were able to resolve and regain their control shortly after their emotional experiences. The private setting selected by the participants permitted them to experience their emotional events freely, safely, and as comfortably as possible. In addition to the previously mentioned personal security provided for the recorded tapes, all the hard-copy transcriptions are held in a safety box that requires a password. In the computer, all the transcriptions are also saved on a hard drive requiring a password for access. Data from this research will be retained for five years and then destroyed.
3.3.2 Identification and Recruitment Process

The criteria for participation included being a first-generation Iranian-American woman who resided in Southern California and who was at least eighteen years old. The process of identifying potential participants included (a) contacting more than 150 Iranian-American health professionals with an initial phone call to explain and to provide preliminary information, (b) setting up meetings for those who wanted further information about the research, (c) traveling for face-to-face meetings with the professionals, (d) dealing with delays due to re-scheduling and scheduling conflicts, and (e) obtaining their agreement to introduce the research to their patients. This process lasted approximately four months.

Upon confirmation of interest, the Health Professional Contact Letter (Appendix A), Participant’s Information Sheet (Appendix B), and Participant’s Rights (Appendix C) were mailed to health professionals. It was agreed that the professionals would first verbally introduce the nature of research to the potential participants and then provide them with the Participant’s Information Sheet and the Participant’s Rights forms. The contact information for reaching the researcher was provided on the forms should the women be interested in participating and/or had questions about the nature of the research. The goal was that once a potential participant made the initial phone call, the researcher would call the participant to discuss her availability to take part in the research.

While the Iranian-American health professionals showed interest during the initial contacts, once it was time to provide the information to their clients, they declined. They all consistently responded in the same way: “We do not talk about this subject with our patients.” Many of the professionals, particularly
Iranians, both male and female, while agreeing that research would be valuable, stated that it was difficult for them to bring up the topic with their patients due to cultural taboos. They felt that it was not appropriate for health professionals to approach their patients and suggest that they provide such significant private information for research purposes. Only one of the participants was recruited through contacts with Iranian-American health professionals.

Due to the sensitivity of the research topic among the Iranian-American community and the difficulty in recruiting participants via conventional methods, snowball sampling became the major source for recruiting participants. “Snowball sampling involves using networks to identify the sample...Snowball sampling refers to the process of accumulation, as each participant suggests another participant....” (Minichiello et al., 2004, p. 195). This method was further useful since it identified participants whose particular beliefs and ideologies were not visible among the Iranian-American community. Once participant number one was identified and met the criteria for this research, she was asked if she would introduce the research to other eligible Iranian-American women. The snowball sampling included multiple sources. The researcher received names and phone numbers of potential participants from most Southern California counties, including L.A. County, Orange County, Riverside County, Ventura County, Santa Barbara County, and San Diego County. This process repeated itself and all the participants were willingly able to identify further potential participants. This process continued until the information reached its saturation point where no new information was received during interviews.
During the interview process, participants offered referrals to contact more professionals and other women. The researcher traveled to the participants’ locations across Southern California, was supportive of the women’s choice to participate or not, had non-judgmental acceptance, and was open to questions. The combination of all these strategies and information received provided the trust and support needed for the potential participants to make informed decisions about participating. It was agreed that the women themselves would contact the researcher for the interview session once they consented to participate. The procedures for recruitment into the study remained the same for each participant. During the first phone contact, the researcher confirmed the caller’s eligibility. Potential participants continued to contact the researcher from various areas. The researcher received 185 calls. The majority of them refused to participate because the interview involved audio-taping of the conversations. There may have been other reasons, most notably the sensitivity of the research topic. Many of them stated that it was not appropriate to talk about sex, but were interested to know about this research. Some requested information and wanted to think about participation further. The participant information sheet was mailed to them; a few of these were actually willing to participate. The potential participants who met the criteria for participation were asked for a time and date for an initial interview. Upon agreement, prior to the interview, a Consent Form (see Appendix D) was provided for the participant to read, evaluate, accept, and sign. This form gave the participants detailed information about the research process, terms, and conditions involved in the process. Eventually, 24 interviews were completed by March 1, 2008. Four of the 24 interviews required a second interview. Details of the issues probed during the first and second interview are provided in a later section.
3.4 Interviewing the Participants

Participants came from a wide geographical area in southern California, covering an area of about 300 miles. During the initial meeting, participants asked many questions about the nature of the interview, how it was going to be conducted, confidentiality, and the application of the research. The prime concern for many women was confidentiality and the use of the research. During the initial meeting, the Participant’s Information Sheet (Appendix B) and the Participant’s Rights form (Appendix C) were provided to them.

The women asked many questions about the history of the research and the researcher’s motive for initiating research about a topic that was culturally taboo to discuss. They also questioned the researcher’s credentials, counseling techniques and approach, and theoretical orientation, as well as why the researcher was conducting this research through an Australian university. The researcher answered these and all subsequent questions. The fact that the researcher was a woman from Iran, with professional experience, a background in the field of counseling, and had published prior research, facilitated the establishment of rapport with the participants.

Twenty-four in-depth individual interviews were conducted between May 2006 and March 2008. For four of the participants, the researcher requested a second interview. All of the four participants agreed to have a second interview. Each interview was conducted at a location that was convenient, comfortable, safe, and private. The chosen places for interviews included the participants’ residences, small office conference rooms, private rooms in parents’ homes, and their own private offices. After 24 sets of interviews were completed, data saturation occurred and no new information was forthcoming. The
demographic profile of the participants shows differences in age, marital status, years of residency in United States, current education, employment and socio-economic status (see Table 3.1). Most women migrated to the United States around the late 1970s and early 1980. The researcher relied on the participants telling her what they thought their social class was based on their education, family background, income, lifestyle and status in the community.

Table 3.1: Information About the Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants Names</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>Year Of Immigration</th>
<th>Socio-economic Status</th>
<th>Level of Education</th>
<th>Employment Status</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Parvin</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Low-Middle Class</td>
<td>M.S. Art</td>
<td>Full Time Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gooleen</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>B.S. in Engineering</td>
<td>Full Time Employment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahin</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1984</td>
<td>Upper Middle Class</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Self Employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahnaz</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>M.S. History</td>
<td>College Faculty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shahin</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>Second Marriage</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Record Company Manager</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fakhree</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Low Middle Class</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Hairstylist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taraneh</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>M.S. Mathematics</td>
<td>College Faculty Member</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soraya</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>Widow and Divorced</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Low Middle Class</td>
<td>B.S. in Economics</td>
<td>Hairstylist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farah</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>1985</td>
<td>Low Middle Class</td>
<td>College Student</td>
<td>Intern Position</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahroukh</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1980</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Housewife</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parynaz</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>1978</td>
<td>Middle Class</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Produce Transport</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mehry</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1977</td>
<td>Low Middle Class</td>
<td>High School Diploma</td>
<td>Medical office Secretary</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The approach for the interviews was an informal conversational style (Minichiello et al., 1995). All participants had the opportunity to refuse tape recording while sharing sensitive information. None of the participants made such a request at any time. All initial interviews lasted between 2 and 4 hours.
The first interview focused on three areas of life: (a) growing up as girls in Iran, (b) moving away and the unlearning process, and (c) the women they are now. As stated earlier, four of the participants required a second interview to gain more insight and a more in-depth exploration of what had been reported by them during the first interview. The second interview lasted about 1½ hours. Some participants used a mix of Farsi and English language during the interviews, but mostly, interviews were conducted in Farsi. All the interviews were tape recorded (see Figure 3.1).

During the course of the interview, knowing and being aware of the sensitivity of the topic, the researcher attempted to establish an atmosphere in which the participants felt safe enough to tell freely their sexual experiences and feelings. This was necessary because in in-depth interviews the research depends on the researcher’s establishment of a relationship that allows the participants to provide access to their own perspectives. Being a female interviewer and being from the same culture made this process a less challenging one.

The critical part of establishing a relationship occurred at the very beginning stage of the interview. It was necessary to show positive regard and encouragement. At this point, in order to be involved with the participant, the researcher had to orient herself physically to the participants to show them that she was with them, and that she was listening carefully to their stories and concerns. Her physical involvement included her posture, eye contact with them, and general physical position, such as how she sat with them to show her genuine attention and active listening. The researcher demonstrated unconditional and nonjudgmental acceptance of each participant and her story by listening to and communicating her understanding of each participant’s
feelings and emotions in response to her story. In this way, they could understand themselves more fully and act on their understanding. This process facilitated help, offered a sense of safety, and encouraged the participants to begin to tell their stories.

So that the researcher could have a more in-depth attendance, the process involved her ability to tune in to the nonverbal as well as the verbal messages of the participants. For example, Mahnaz initially did not maintain any eye contact when sharing her story, due to shame experienced during the interview. Aida had her arms crossed most of the time, representing her defensiveness, which still remained with her after years of being away from her abusive ex-husband. Some of the participants had angry tones of voice; in particular, when sharing stories about their marriages. The researcher was aware that the participants did
not know her and that it was difficult for them to discuss sexuality with a total stranger; for some it was the first time having such a personal discussion. Being aware of these concepts and responding to them was very critical; otherwise, if the participants were ambivalent, they would have become upset about the non-attending cues originating from the researcher as their interviewer, resulting in an early loss of the participants during the interview process.

After establishing a relationship, the researcher also needed to provide verbal and non-verbal encouragement for the participants to share their thoughts, feelings, and behaviors without her interrupting them as they were exploring. The researcher was able to do that by using words such as “umhum,” nodding her head, repeating one or more words of the participants, and open hand gestures. This process helped the researcher to tune in to what the participants were communicating and it helped the participants to feel in control of their interview process. There were moments of silence, which were highly powerful. Silence kept the focus on the participants and allowed the participants to direct the content of the interview. Silence allowed the participants to feel free to speak when they felt ready, and to verbalize their feelings. They did not feel pressured, rushed, or pushed to come up with an altered response; it was rather a response that was filled with genuine feelings and emotion, which they then offered as a result of feeling safe. The emphasis on establishing a non-judgmental and safe environment was to help participants feel comfortable telling their stories, thus helping the researcher to gain an understanding of the participants’ life experiences, and perceive their worlds. This process was a successful approach in every interview; the participants were willing, candid, and cooperative in telling their sexual stories. The participants felt confident that the researcher would pass on their stories about themselves (Peterson & Nisenholz, 1999).
One general question began each interview: “Looking back at your life, living in both cultures, tell me, how do you make sense of your sexual experiences today?” This question usually was followed by a silence of about two to three minutes. Next, the common response from the participants was, “How can I begin to answer?” The researcher would reply, “You can answer from any time of your life that you feel comfortable talking about first. Perhaps you can tell me about your sexual experiences throughout your life. How did you learn about your sexuality?”

All of the participants felt excited about telling their stories, even when at times they felt anxious about telling their sexual stories. While this was the first time participating in such an interview for all of them, the sense of pride and power, and the freedom to tell was easily recognized as a strong energy force throughout the interview setting. This energy was filled with joy, fear, laughter, sorrow, sadness, happiness, confusion, anger, disappointment, sense of loss, hope, hopelessness, strength, and determination. They believed that it was the right thing to do for them and that it was long overdue as well. Usually, the audio tape recording was soon forgotten, once they started to tell their stories. The more they shared, the more comfortable they felt, and the more feelings emerged to the surface, freely, willingly, and genuinely. The researcher too, shared her feelings of sadness and laughter, trying to be supportive and sensitive, and making sure that the participants were able to continue or take a break when they needed to, since some of the stories were so heartbreaking. The researcher encouraged the participants to take their time, even if that meant that they needed to reschedule the interview meeting to another time. None of them asked to re-schedule, and all were willing to use the time to tell it all “once and for all” and “to get it off of my chest.”
During each interview, the researcher paid attention to ethical considerations. As the participants were sharing their stories and related facts, the researcher made sure they were not suffering emotionally or needing to take a break, and reminded them that they could stop anytime. The participants willingly talked, starting with their childhood, then going through adulthood, talking about key events and experiences that took place in their lives. For as long as the participants were talking about their experiences, there was no interruption from the researcher. Occasionally, there was a need for probing. Probing became an important data collection technique during the interview process (see Table 3.2). Probing was done as an attempt to seek information or to provoke further information (Gubrium & Holstein, 2003).

Table 3.2: Probing Questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Direct probing:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Tell me more”…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Go on ….”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“What is your opinion about what happened?”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indirect probing:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>“Then?”…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Um-hum” (often accompanied by a nod of head)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“…And?”…</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“And to you, that means…?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The repetition of the last few words: “…you were confused…”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Give me an example”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“I wonder what some of your thoughts are on ….”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
3.4.1 Interview Questions

For this research, a series of in-depth, open-ended interview questions were designed. The interview questions were conceptualized based on the researcher’s personal experiences, and further formulated based on ideas that emerged from the literature review, as well as occasional revisions based on earlier interviews. The questions were divided into primary questions and secondary questions. The primary questions consisted of background information, such as demographics and childhood and family history, followed by more focused questions on knowledge, experience, values, feelings, reflections, and interpretations of the participants’ sexual lives (see Table 3.3). The secondary questions were used to provide more meaning, reflections, interpretations, and exploration during the interview process. These questions probed the feelings associated with experiences and encouraged reflections on the formation of self and gender role (see Table 3.4).

Sexual-self is shaped by socio-cultural factors, norms, and values about sex and sexuality, as well as information on sex and sexual expression. The primary and secondary questions allowed the exploration of the influence of socio-cultural factors and experiences in the informants’ original and host countries that have shaped their experiences. Since this study takes a sociological perspective, a validated measure or definition for sexual-self was not appropriate as the study attempted to give voice to women’s perception of their sexual selves and explain it as how they understood and articulated it.
Table 3.3: Primary Questions

1. Please tell me what your experience was like as a female child growing up in Iran? *(Background information about upbringing, gender role development, and sexual messages received as a female child, teen, power position within the family, family socio-economic level, male female comparison, educational accessibility and level, marriage)*

2. How has your experience of growing up as a girl in Iran impacted your sexual life past and present? What happened? What were the circumstances? *(Information on pre- and post-marital sexual activities, sexual development)*

3. Please tell me about the significant events, challenges, issues that had the most impact. *(Looking for secrets; how did it happen, what purpose did it serve, why was it necessary, and what were the consequences, changes)*

4. Please tell me the impact of those events on you, your family, your community, and your friends *(The concept of devaluing/degrading, how this takes place. How is it organized? What are the consequences for her, how did she make sense out of them? How did it affect her relationship with family and partner? Cultural, psychological, developmental, and social).*

5. Please tell me how you coped with those situations? *(Coping strategies such as friend’s network, support system availability and accessibility)*

6. Please tell me about your experiences of coming to United States as a woman? *(Transition, changes)*

7. What was different for you, compared to living in Iran? *(Similarities, differences, gender role, sexual development)*

8. How did the differences impact your life as a woman? *(Transition, changes, developments)*

9. How did you cope with the differences? *(Support network within and outside Iranian community)*

10. Tell me about your perceptions of the United States culture as the woman you are today? *(Messages she received as a sexual being, current gender role and sexual development, and perception)*

11. Please tell me about the key events such as puberty, sexual relationship(s), marriage, and separation/divorce [if applicable]
Table 3.4: Secondary Questions

1. Please tell me about your sexual-self. How well do you know your sexual-self? (Information on sexual development and gender role)

2. Have you honestly examined your beliefs and assumptions about what you want, what you need? If so, how have you done this? (Information on gender role and sexual development)

3. Do you know what your body looks like? Do you know how your genital feels and what it looks like? (Information on gender role, sexual development)

4. How do you feel about yourself as a woman? (Self awareness)

5. To what extent do you feel free to express your erotic urges, sexual wants, sexual activities, and your capacity for sexual pleasure? (Transition, changes, sexual developments)

6. To what degree do you feel comfortable sharing about your sexual-self with anyone in the past or present? (Information support system, trust, fear, shame, guilt)

7. Please tell me how you feel about yourself as a woman today and what influential factors contribute to this view of yourself (Impact of socialization)

8. What have you learned to feel about yourself as a sexual woman? (Sexual development)

9. What do you know about your body as a sexual woman? (Gender role, sexual development)

10. Have you been able to accept your body as it is? (Gender role, sexual development)

11. How has your familiarity or unfamiliarity with your body impacted your sexuality? (Gender role and sexual development)

12. Do you know how your genital responses to touch? Do you know how to feel pleasure by touching your genital? (Sexual development, gender role)

13. Can you tell your husband/partner about your sexual desires, wants, and erotic feelings? (Gender role, sexual development)

14. Do you experience orgasm? (Sexual awareness)

15. Are you aware of your sexual feelings as an individual being? (Sexual awareness)

16. Do you fantasize about sex? (Freedom of expression)
17. Can you connect or identify with your sexual feelings? (Sexual awareness)

18. Are you afraid of exploring your sexual feelings? (Social)

19. How do you cope with your feelings of guilt, fear, and shame? (Social)

20. What does “bad thing” mean? (To explore if she still holds this view. How does she make sense of her experiences as a result of having a “bad thing” perspective?)

21. How did you learn that sex is a sinful act? (To explore if she still holds this view and its impact on her sexual-self)

22. How do you believe your sexual-self is shaped by the messages you have received throughout your life? (Information)

23. Looking back on your life, living in both cultures, tell me, how do you make sense of your sexual experiences today? What are the consequences and how have they impacted your sexuality? (Looking for the messages she has received as a sexual being, her current sexual development, beliefs, awareness, attitude, assertiveness, and level of functioning)

24. To what degree do you feel free and comfortable to talk to your physician about sexually related concerns? (Social, cultural)

3.5 Data Analysis

To formulate themes and categories of concepts, data collected from interviews were interpreted and analyzed using a narrative method. To begin the process of analysis, the recorded interviews needed transcription. The researcher did all the transcriptions herself. In each transcript, participants were given a pseudonym in order to maintain privacy and confidentiality. Also, for additional confidentiality, their job titles were changed to a different profession, but of the same socio-economic equivalent. Strict security measures for storage of the audio tapes were followed. They are stored in a locked safety box in the home of the researcher, who is the only person to have access to its secret code.
After each interview, the researcher listened to the audio tape and wrote comments. For those who spoke in Farsi, the first set of transcriptions was done in Farsi, verbatim, and the content was translated into English. All transcriptions were checked against the original recording for their accuracy. Due to the nature of normal conversations, many of the words and sentences were repeated and therefore, where possible, editing was used to achieve clarity of what was shared by the participants. All of the participants’ “uhumm”, “uhaa”, and similar terms in Farsi, such as “areh”, were included in transcriptions. During the transcription process, supervisors were frequently involved in the review of transcriptions, and in the details of questioning of terms, and concepts. At times, for the purpose of clarification, there was the need to return to original raw data to confirm interpretation of concepts. The same process applied to generation of themes.

Narrative analysis was used to analyze and interpret the data collected (Polkinghorne, 2005). Themes and categories as they emerged were compared with the existing data collected from literature review, recursively (Polkinghorne, 2005). In data analysis, in order to capture the nuances and depth of the stories, and their meanings, perceptions, and uniqueness, the researcher notes details, pauses, overlaps, stretched sounds, intonations, partial words, and expressions of agreement and acknowledgment. Reporting such details of stories carries great importance because they tell not only what is said, but how things are said. The researcher conducted an analysis of how the dialogue unfolded and how it was influenced by the cultural norms of the participants. She kept a journal of each interview to record the participant’s reflections on the interview, which made a positive contribution to identifying those themes. Table 3.5 shows excerpts of the researcher’s reflective comments emerging from the interview.
Table 3.5: Reflective Remarks

Mahin said, “I am not comfortable, but my goals include taking care of my kids and my husband and make them happy. When I see them happy, then I am happy.” Mahin tried to hide from me her sadness and the pressure of bursting into tears with a fake smile. With all the professional success in her life, she is a very lonely woman, one that has buried herself under tons of work and responsibilities in order to avoid her sadness and loneliness. More of this interview review will be covered later….

When Farah said, “…my mother told me never to touch myself. I couldn’t make sense out of what she was telling me and she told me not to ask any questions about ‘it’ either… I feel as if my own self is unrecognizable to me as it has been since then…” This sounded very strong to me. In her conversation with me she tried to appear strong, but there was a sense of minimization of her feelings, as she couldn’t even look at me…I need to follow this issue up with the other women.

Mehry and her husband refused to have children since they did not want anyone to know she had sex. She had learned sex was a sinful act and only bad girls get involved in such activities. She stated, “…I don’t want to talk about sex… I am not sure why I am here but wanted to meet with you…” While she was wearing thick pants and sweater, she kept covering herself with a long jacket. Her focus remained primarily on her professional accomplishments, such as who she was. I need to better understand the meaning behind this behavior.

The next stage of analysis involved developing themes. The key themes related to the participants’ sexual-selves were (a) culture, (b) gender/role, (c) sex as a cultural taboo, (d) self, (e) the impact of migration, (f) the process of unlearning and re-learning, and (g) current view of sexual-self. From the participants’ recounting of their individual stories, themes and categories of related narratives were constructed. The themes were constructed from emerging categories as they related to the research question. The techniques used to gather
themes were based on the word repetitions, native terms, a careful reading of 24 sets of one-on-one tape-recorded interview transcriptions (approximately 75 hours), and a detailed study of linguistic characteristics such as metaphors, transition, and connectors. Colloquial Farsi terms, some of which do not have an English equivalent, were used by participants to give special meaning to their experiences, and used by the researcher to explore and extract meaning from the participants. Analysis of descriptive terms in the native language (Farsi) was also used as a way of understanding the experiences and exploring what they meant to the participants. The themes are added to offer depth to the understanding of the participants’ experiences.

The use of narrative empowered participants to explore and to share their own unique life stories. They felt safe to re-live and re-examine their life events as they were experienced throughout their lives. In an earlier part of this chapter it was indicated that qualitative research has been given the meaning of thick description (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Creswell, 1998; Denzin, 1989; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Marshall & Rossman, 1999; Patton, 1990, 2002). Thick descriptions allowed participants to explore and get in touch with a deeper part of their selves, thus enabling them to reveal their true emotions and feelings. Therefore, participants were able to recall significant events of life and re-live their experiences as if it were taking place all over again; this time, during the interview process. These experiences and these descriptions allow an understanding of how the participants understand and make meaning of their sexual-selves.

During the initial stage of analysis, comparison was made among the first five transcribed interviews where words, sentences, and paragraphs were
organized into concepts and categories. These categories included (a) gender role, (b) sexual messages received about growing up in Iran, (c) culture of the family, (d) power positions within the family, (e) interaction with others, (f) sense of power, (g) control over participants’ lives and marriages, and (h) migration process. As the interviews progressed, the next stage of analysis focused on the formation of more categories and the synthesizing of their categories. During this process, codes and categories were compared to assure merging of data and the development of the main themes.

Areas of exploration included (a) experiences of growing up in Iran as girls, (b) undoing, unlearning, and re-learning process as result of migration, and (c) women they have become today as a result of life experiences. Some of the detailed themes that emerged as a result of life experiences included (a) menstruation, (b) arranged marriages versus dating, (c) marrying outside their ethnic group, (d) sexual experiences, (e) sex education in schools and at home, (f) parents’ passivity versus active involvement in their daughters’ lives from the points of view of both mothers and daughters, (g) silence about sex in their families, (h) physical and emotional reactions to sex, (i) level of comfort to participate in the sex act, (j) responsiveness to sex, and (k) ability to initiate the sex act. No computer software was used to develop themes; they were identified and recorded manually.

3.6 Validity and Rigor of the Research

The main three components needed to achieve rigor in a research study are validity, reliability, and verification of data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Miles & Huberman, 1994). According to Miles and
Huberman (1994), one of the contributing factors to validity of qualitative research is the researcher as a reliable “information gathering instrument” (p. 38). These components, in particular validity, were applied to the selection of participants, researcher’s position, and consideration of whether the objectives of this research were met. They also brought clarity to the research process.

As stated earlier, prior to, and at times during, an interview, a number of participants indicated that they were curious about the researcher’s background and her reasons for studying this topic. Once information about her background and experience was shared with participants, they expressed their comfort, gratitude, and support of the study. The researcher perceived these questions as the participants’ ways of guaranteeing that the intention of the research was for academic purposes. Their similar questions served as a reminder for the researcher to keep the focus of research on understanding of participants’ experiences and the meanings behind the experiences from their perspectives. These steps helped in eliciting interview data that provided information that was closer to participant’s life experiences and helped with ensuring validity.

It has been suggested that a researcher needs to maintain careful record keeping as a way to communicate with important audiences, such as self as the first audience; then the readers of the research report, who need to know about the nature of the research in order to assess the credibility of the research; and finally, other researchers who show interest in the analysis of the data (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The factors that qualified her position as an instrumental researcher for this study have been specified at the beginning of this chapter. These factors influenced the choice of research topic. Since I am an Iranian-American woman, having my own experiences, I made a conscious effort to
separate out my own views, to minimize bias. For this study, the documentation consists of verbal and non-verbal observation during individual face-to-face interviews. Shortly after each interview, I wrote an interview summary in order to capture the initial experiences and to highlight immediate key information observed from the interview. In this way, I obtained an initial understanding of every participant’s life story. The benefits of documenting early impressions as part of interview summaries enhanced and supported the data analysis. In addition, it provided a resource for quick review of each participant’s life experience. The initial findings and documentation became instrumental to the continuation of further data collection by providing direction for validating the study findings.

Similar concepts apply to reliability as an important part of qualitative research, according to Denzin and Lincoln (2005), Gubrium and Holstein (2002), and Miles and Huberman (1994). They have proposed that reliability for life stories can be achieved by audio-tape recording and note-taking. Earlier in the chapter it was indicated that the method of choice for data collection was in-depth interviews in which the data was accurately captured by audio-taping. For each interview, separate sets of tapes were assigned and the tape recorder was tested for accuracy of functioning during the interview process, in order to be able to capture any level of sound, movements, or emotions. Further, as indicated earlier, in order to maintain confidentiality and to be certain that every word was captured and recorded as part of the analysis, all the transcriptions were done by the researcher. These transcripts were compared with the recorded interviews to ensure that the data capture was comprehensive.
There were two steps in the post interview process: transcription and interpretation. This was an important part of analysis, as knowledge gained from it effectively and efficiently addressed the original research goal. Each interview was treated as a separate and unique situation, compared to other stories. Therefore, each tape was transcribed verbatim and was read line-by-line. Each transcript was revisited many times to examine and to verify their meanings, since the ultimate aim of the life story analysis is the interpretation of experience (Josselson & Lieblich, 1995).

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that verification is an important part of analysis by stating that “verification may be as brief as a fleeting second thought crossing the analyst’s mind during writing, with a short excursion back to the field notes, or it may be thorough and elaborate, with a lengthy argumentation and review among colleagues” (p.11). At the initial process of analysis, verification was attained by separate and independent reading of the transcripts and the emerging themes by the researcher’s two academic supervisors. Within this context, the meanings that emerged from the data have been tested for their truthfulness; that is, their validity. This process was achieved and verified by comparing key themes that emerged from data collection during all interviews.

3.7 Reflection on the Research Experience

In presenting my roles as a researcher and as an insider, I have shown how these have been used in forming the offered life stories and how my outlook may have shaped the findings (Polinkinghorne, 1995). As stated earlier in this
chapter, this study emerged from my personal and professional experiences. I would like first to provide a historical aspect of my interest in this research.

In the first section of the chapter, I have provided an account of my own life experiences growing up in Iran and as an Iranian immigrant woman who came to the US shortly before the 1979 revolution in Iran. The pre-revolution unrest, the change in the focus of the political regime after the 1979 revolution, the political and social instability created by increasingly restrictive laws, and the Iran-Iraq war were some of the major triggers that led to a large exodus of Iranians from Iran to the west. There are many stories similar to mine, which represent experiences of women in Iran's history at the beginning of 21st century. Historically, with each change of government, a new status and a new identity for Iranian women have been among the first and prime tasks of the government. The veiling of Iranian women has never been limited to Muslim Iranians only. It is a general custom for all women who live in Iran, including Jewish, Catholics, Christians, Bahaiees, or any other religion they practice. It is a social law and norm.

Chapters 1 and 2 have presented a political view of veiling and unveiling in the context of political power in the historical and continual politics of Iran. The search continues, trying to make sense of political power in society and religion as it relates to women’s sexuality and gender as the core concern of Iranian politics. This search includes women’s quests for answers, and historical attempts and struggles to find a recognized place for themselves in the society of Iran. Many of these attempts have taken place secretly among high status women, challenging and sabotaging culture and patriarchal dominating propensities. Iranian women’s quest for their human rights still continues at the
present time, both implicitly and explicitly, within and across the borders of Iran. Aside from these experiences, as an Iranian-American woman living in Southern California, I was able to relate to many of the stories shared.

My identity as a professional is located in my experiences as a therapist. Once I joined this doctoral program, I realized that in order to succeed, I needed to develop my academic skills, as they were limited. I did not have a sociology background. However, in order to conceptualize qualitative research, that knowledge was needed and extra time was required for learning sociology and increasing my knowledge in this area. My engineering and science backgrounds were not helpful to this research. Learning about sociology helped me gain a better understanding of the participants’ stories and mutual life experiences. Through this experience, I have gained a new level of awareness about myself and my own identity that ultimately has shaped different tasks in my life, and above all, has fueled my desire to continue with this research topic.

3.8 Limitations and Challenges of the Study

The topic of this research is culturally taboo in any Iranian setting, for professionals and for Iranian-American women. For an Iranian-American woman to go against the culture and do research on this topic is even more of an offense to the culture. Through this process I have learned the reasons behind not being able to find participants early on in my research. Perhaps the historical taboo aspect of sexually related topics did influence the recruitment process for this study. However, some of the women were willing to share their stories and I was told that I was one of them and “enough was enough.” However, for me as a female Iranian, doing research on a culturally taboo topic was not an easy task,
aside from my limited knowledge in sociology. When I spoke to many people about the nature of my research, neither male nor female knew how to respond to me. On one hand, they knew this was an academic process and part of my doctoral degree. On the other hand, they looked down on me, since a respectable Iranian woman would never approach a topic related to sex, female sexuality, and even female gender role. Some jokingly asked me what I was going to teach them about sex. How did I learn how to have sex? Why is my research about sex? Am I going to teach women how to have sex? And many more questions, some highly offensive too! Even my husband was questioned about the nature of my research, as an Iranian man. Some pretended to be “open minded” and indicated an interest in participating. They supported my motives for doing this study; however, they refused to step forward as participants. This experience and the increasing personal and professional negative, judgmental reactions toward me caused me to control the amount of information I was giving to people when they asked about it. As a result, recruitment of participants became a complex process and one that was done secretly. The negative comments became evidence of the need for this research and gave me extra motivation to complete this research, as it was long overdue.

Due to the small number of participants, the findings in this research cannot be generalized or applied to the larger population of Iranian-American women and their sexualities. Additionally, there has been little published on the experiences of Iranian-American women’s sexual-selves. The gathering of data from each participant through in-depth interviews has been the participants’ stories, what they offered as life’s trials, and the significance of these factors to their lives. The interviews were extensive, lasting from 2-4 hours, and yielding many hours of data. The verbatim transcripts provided thick descriptions. The
second interviews provided more explanation and rationalization of what was shared during the first interviews. Additionally, regardless of considerable age range among the participants, many shared the same cultural values, belief systems, and life experiences. Nonetheless, the study sample is small, and limited to one geographic area. To redress some of these limitations, the researcher has documented her personal understanding in order to recognize and acknowledge the participants’ world and the meaning behind their words.

This research was self-funded. The cost included vast travel time and expenses across Southern California, first to call on, and next to meet with health professionals in order to recruit participants. Expenses were also incurred in making copies and in postage costs to mail research information to 150 professionals; to make calls and set the appointments; to conduct the interviews; to obtain the materials needed, such as tape recorders, tapes, recorders, transcribing machine, books, journals, etc.; and cost of time to transcribe, edit, etc. The cost of travel to other parts of United States was considered prohibitive. Although there may be some difference in the experiences of Iranian immigrant women in other parts of United States, these differences are unlikely to be so substantial that the experiences of the study participants are not transferable or applicable to their experiences. The 24 in-depth interviews were conducted within a two-year time period, but could have been done in half of the time had there not been extensive travel logistics, and considerations of appropriate data saturation point. Furthermore, at the last minute some participants chose not to be interviewed, and other informants had to be located.
3.9 Descriptions of Participants at the Time of Interview

This section describes each participant. For confidentiality, their names are pseudonyms and their job titles are somewhat altered.

**Parvin.** A 50-year-old Muslim middle-class, divorced woman, Parvin migrated to the United States with her husband. At the time she had a high school diploma and one child. After having three children and divorcing, she earned a Master’s degree in cinema and became a movie producer. She has been residing in the San Fernando Valley for the past 28 years, while maintaining an Iranian-American lifestyle for herself. During the interview, she used both English and Farsi languages. The interview was conducted at her house.

**Gooleen.** A 49-year-old Muslim middle-class, married woman, with a Bachelor’s degree in Electrical Engineering, Gooleen works full time, and is a mother of two college-aged boys. She migrated to the United States in 1979 with her three older brothers at age 17, and continued to live with them until age 20, when she married her boyfriend while still attending the university in San Fernando Valley. She maintains an American lifestyle, but follows Iranian traditional celebrations such as Persian New Year.

**Mahin.** A 46-year-old Muslim upper-class, married, self employed, high school graduate, Mahin migrated to the United States 22 years ago with her husband and oldest child, and now has two sons. She is the main breadwinner for her family and has an upscale Iranian lifestyle, living in San Fernando Valley, California. She practices the majority of Iranian traditions within her family.
**Mahnaz.** A 52-year-old Muslim divorced, middle-class, mother of two, Mahnaz came to the United States in 1977 with her fiancé but did not marry him. She later married another Iranian man in Los Angeles. She never returned home. Currently, she is a part time college faculty member and has no relationship with any man.

**Shahin.** A 48-year-old Muslim middle-class, married woman, Shahin migrated to the United States in 1980 with her first husband. She got divorced a few years later and lived on her own for many years until she married for the second time. She is has a high school diploma from Iran and has two part time jobs as a travel agent and another in a record company. She does not have any children.

**Fakhree.** A 51-year-old Muslim low-middle-class, married woman and mother of twin college-aged children, a boy and a girl, Fakhree migrated to Los Angeles with her husband in 1978 and made a few trips to Iran to visit family members. While unhappy with her marriage, she desires to stay with her husband. She is currently working as a hair stylist and holds a Master’s degree in business.

**Taraneh.** A 47-year-old Muslim middle-class, divorced woman and mother of a 20-year-old daughter, Taraneh moved to Southern California in 1980 with her older brother after finishing high school in Iran, and later attended college. Later, she married a South-American man. Their marriage did not last for long. Currently she is a full-time college professor, holds a Master’s degree in mathematics and has no desire to have other relationships with men.
**Soraya.** A 60-year-old Muslim low-middle-class widow-divorced woman, mother of two adult children, Soraya moved to Spain prior to migrating to United States. She lived in Spain for five years post revolution. A few years after moving to United States she lost her husband in a car accident, which changed her lifestyle significantly. She married for the second time a few years ago, but the marriage did not last long since she still felt devoted to her first husband. Currently, she holds a Bachelor’s degree in economics, is a grandmother of one girl, and works as a hair stylist.

**Farah.** A 26-year-old Muslim low-middle-class single woman, Farah lives with her parents and two younger siblings while holding a Bachelor’s degree in accounting and holding a full time job as a manager in a company. She moved to Southern California with her family in 1985 and has a secret relationship with her boyfriend.

**Mahroukh.** A 55-year-old Muslim married women, mother of two children and grandmother of one child, Mahroukh has a high school diploma from Iran, and moved to Southern California with her husband in 1980. She has a middle-class lifestyle and is a house-wife.

**Parynaz.** A 47-year-old low-middle-class Muslim divorced woman, mother of one child who moved to Southern California in 1978 with her parents, Parynaz married her husband shortly afterwards but the marriage did not last long. She holds a high school diploma and currently owns a produce company. She has been through many relationships since her divorce but has no desire to marry again.
Mehry. A 55-year-old Muslim married woman who has no children and was married in Iran, Mehry holds a high school diploma from Iran and has had a low-middle-class lifestyle in Southern California, since 1977. She works as a medical office secretary.

Bahareh. A 47-year-old Muslim married low-middle-class woman, mother of two children who moved to Southern California in 1978 while married, Bahareh is currently unemployed, and holds a high school diploma from Iran. She frequently travels between Iran and United States to visit family members.

Touran. A 50-year-old Muslim married woman, mother of two children who moved to Southern California in 1982 with her husband, Touran has a middle-class lifestyle, holds a high school diploma from Iran and has a part time job as a hair stylist.

Mitra. A 43-year-old Muslim divorced woman, mother of three children, Mitra moved to Southern California in 1985. She holds a high school diploma from Iran. She works as a makeup artist, and has a middle-class lifestyle.

Seema. A 63-year-old separated Muslim woman who moved to Southern California in 1980, Seema frequently travels between Iran and United States in order to maintain her status as a married woman. She resides in Southern California most of the time and has a middle-class lifestyle. She is unemployed and holds a high school diploma from Iran.

Nastaran. A 30-year-old Muslim single woman who has lived with her parents and siblings since 1983 with a middle-class lifestyle in Southern California, Nastaran is attending university while holding a part time job. She has a secret relationship with her boyfriend.
**Yasaman.** A 50-year-old Muslim, married woman, mother of four children, who moved to Southern California in 1987, Yasaman is a housewife, has a middle-class lifestyle, and currently holds a high school diploma from Iran.

**Rafat.** A 70-year-old Muslim, married, mother of two who moved to Los Angeles in 1980 and currently has a middle-class lifestyle, Rafat is self-employed and her husband lives in Iran. Rafat lives with her children most of the time. She has a high school diploma from Iran.

**Sharareh.** A 49-year-old married Muslim woman, mother of four children, who moved to Southern California in 1978 and lived with her cousin until she got married, Sharareh currently holds a Bachelor’s degree, has an upper-class lifestyle, and is self-employed.

**Ziba.** A 28-year-old Muslim single woman who lives with her parents and older brother while attending university and working part time, Ziba moved to Southern California in 1983 and her family has a middle-class lifestyle. She has a secret relationship with her non-Iranian boyfriend.

**Setareh.** A 52-year-old Jewish married woman who lives with her husband and two adult children, Setareh has an upper-class lifestyle and holds a high-school diploma from Iran. She is currently a housewife and moved to United States in 1980.

**Aida.** A 46-year-old German-Iranian-Jewish-Muslim divorced woman, who has two children, Aida has a high school diploma from Iran and is self employed while living an upper-class lifestyle. She has been in many relationships since her move to the United States.
Mahtab. A 33-year-old single Hispanic-Iranian-Muslim-Catholic woman who lives by herself, Mahtab currently holds an MBA, and is a jewelry designer. She moved to Southern California with her parents at age 2 and lived primarily with her Iranian father until she moved on her own at the age of 30. She has an upper-class lifestyle on her own and has been through a number of relationships with non-Iranian men.

3.10 Conclusion

The methodology for this study was qualitative research, using the narrative approach to collect data. The chapter presented details of the ethical approval process, issues in identification and recruitment of participants, the data collection and analysis methods. Twenty-four interviews with Iranian-American women were successfully conducted and the narrative analysis was completed. All privacy and ethical concerns were addressed. The researcher introduced herself with an autobiography to explain her affinity for this research as well as the possible compromising issues that might arise from her being an Iranian-American woman herself. Some of the challenges and limitations of the present research have been highlighted in the present chapter. A further discussion of some of these issues is presented in the discussion chapter. The next chapter presents the detailed life stories of four participants.
CHAPTER 4

VOICES FROM IRANIAN-AMERICAN WOMEN:
FOUR LIFE STORIES

The stories in this chapter span a range of experiences shared by countless Iranian-American women. From 24 interviews conducted, I selected the following four women to present as personal profiles. The criteria for the selection of the four stories were based on the differences that related to the participants’ age, marital status, education, length of residency in the United States, children of mix marriage, and pre and post marital sexual experiences. These four narratives articulate the themes traversing all other interviews. These themes are fully developed in the next two chapters. Every woman participating in this research felt it imperative to speak the unspoken and by so doing, challenged the status quo. Individually and collectively, they want their voices and stories heard. The reader is introduced to the women on a personal basis.

4.1 The Story of Mahnaz

Everything is soft and curved in Mahnaz’s living room, no sharp angles or hard surfaces anywhere. Plush chenille chairs overlook a small table topped in leather. Yellow drapes diffuse light from a window opposite a series of framed prints, Monet’s Water Lilies. Nothing here suggests her Persian heritage. This is her sanctuary and it has taken Mahnaz some time to let me in. She first heard about my research from a friend, but was unsure whether to trust me. Even after she became certain, safety still worried her. But, she says, a stronger need eventually won out. She needed to make herself heard.
Enough is enough…I simply have to get things off my chest.

The 52-year-old leans forward to explain her internal struggle, clasping her hands as if in prayer. She tells me that she is at a life stage where she can make her own decisions. But it was not always like this. Born in the southwestern city of Abadan, Mahnaz was the first child of six. Her parents considered themselves modern Iranians, more open to new ideas than many other families sharing their upscale neighborhood. Historically, her family had been involved in the oil business, priding itself on helping to implement several cutting-edge, industry-wide changes. Her father had distinguished himself in the profession of his father and was hoping his first child would carry on the tradition. But Mahnaz was a girl.

Since birth, I was a disappointment for being female.

Her parent’s disappointment was further influenced by a very unfortunate incident in her childhood. She remembers playing with her younger brother’s wind-up monkey when she was five years old. The tail broke off and she started crying, afraid of being punished by her mother. A seemingly sympathetic housekeeper led her to a basement bathroom and calmed her, saying that he could fix the toy and Mahnaz’s mother would never know. But if he helped her, she would have to do something in return. Without waiting he pulled her pants and underwear to her knees and sat on the toilet. Then he grabbed Mahnaz around the waist and lifted her onto his lap, instructing her to spread her legs and straddle him.

He rubbed his penis against her crotch and belly, eventually attempting to penetrate her. But Mahnaz said it hurt so he rubbed against the outside of her vagina instead. Suddenly, her mother burst through the door. She yanked
Mahnaz from the bathroom and began hitting her, asking her why she was half naked with a grown man. Mahnaz recalls being terrified and confused, unsure what she had done wrong. The next day, she was taken to the principal’s office at a nearby school. An old woman took her hand, leading Mahnaz away from her mother.

*I thought my mother was dropping me off forever. I was so scared. I started screaming. I thought she was still punishing me for what happened. I begged her to take me home, but she left without me.*

The next day, she began vomiting and could not stop. The last thing she remembers is being taken to the hospital. Later, at home, the housekeeper was gone. Rather than report the assault and attempted rape to the police, her parents had dismissed him with a generous severance bonus, fearing that he might spread rumors and damage the family’s aberou (honor).

*My parents were so preoccupied thinking about how to explain to others what happened. People might actually have said that a five-year old girl seduced a grown man. That was the mentality back then.*

Mahnaz was taken to a doctor several days later to ascertain if she was still a virgin. She was, but did not really understand what virginity meant. To her, it was the same as *“being a good girl.”* But she could never be a good girl after what happened and therefore she was not a virgin, an understanding her mother gave her years later. She was a *“bad girl.”* Mahnaz was very confused. While the episode was highly traumatic, she also recalls that she had liked it when the housekeeper rubbed his penis against her. It gave her pleasure and she wanted more. But pleasure, she believed, would mean more punishment. And if she was punished, then she would need a reward. It seemed logical to her that
the reward would be pleasure. Eventually, the five-year-old girl correlated pleasure with punishment and combined both by masturbating.

A bad girl means someone like me who uses self-sex as a way of self-punishment for becoming the shame of the family, and experiences pleasure as a reward for self-punishment.

Shortly after her molestation, Mahnaz reconciled herself to the forbidden act of masturbation, without having a real understanding of what it was she was doing.

Two men touched me just a few days apart. One was our housekeeper, the other a male doctor. They both knew that I was touched inappropriately. I was touched by a man, and I let it happen.

Mahnaz reports feeling increasingly isolated within her family after the molestation, the object of scrutiny and distrust. She explains her parent’s thinking “…If she could seduce a grown man at age five, what would she be capable of as a teenager…” Her mother frequently reminded Mahnaz that she was kharaab (damaged) and treated her with disdain. She isolated Mahnaz from her sisters concerned that Mahnaz would relay her molestation experience and thereby share something ‘inappropriate’. Consequently, her sisters came to regard her with suspicion and avoided her. Meanwhile, her brothers were encouraged to keep her under constant surveillance and report back to her mother. Lonely and isolated within her own home, masturbation became Mahnaz’s only consolation. And it became her secret. If her self pleasuring/punishment were to be revealed, she felt that she would be banished from home forever.
Around the age of nine, Mahnaz caught a cold. A family friend practiced medicine nearby so Mahnaz’s mother sent the child to see him. It was lunch time and the staff was gone, but luckily, the doctor had not left yet. During the examination, he ran his hands across Mahnaz’s still undeveloped chest, then her entire body. His touch felt strange, but she was afraid to say anything. Then he said that he needed to hold her in his arms to check her throat. Suddenly, he began kissing her.

*He was gentle and apparently enjoying it and I did not say anything to stop him. But I was afraid and thought I did something wrong that made me get sick.\textquotedbl\" Therefore,\textquotedbl\” she reasoned, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft I am a bad girl again. Touching of that kind was my punishment and the pleasure I experienced was my reward for being punished...I never told anybody about that before.*

She says, reaching for a glass of water on her leather-lined table, \textquoteleft\textquoteleft No one in my family found out about his behavior, about his kissing and touching me...\textquoteright\textquoteright Mahnaz continued to feel ostracized by her family. And she continued to keep secrets. At 13, her body began to change. Its new curvy shape and the sudden attention from boys delighted her. She described herself as very beautiful. For the first time in her life, she felt happy and wanted. But she had “millions of questions and no one to ask them to.” The scattered information she picked up about puberty only made her more resolute in keeping her secrets hidden.

*I had to keep my dark secret. I was not pure. In my mind, I was not a virgin, which meant I had no rights, did not deserve good things and was the shame of my family.*

Her biggest fear was that someone would find out what had happened to her in the past. As she developed, her home life grew worse. Her mother became even more suspicious and controlling, attempting to monitor Mahnaz’s
every move. She was not allowed to talk with boys or visit female friends. Only school was allowed, and even then, her brothers escorted her there and back.

Mahnaz tells a story to explain what it was like. One day, shortly after her 13th birthday, the family visited an aunt in Karaj, a city outside Tehran. They stayed at the aunt’s house a few days. A male cousin in his early 20s complimented Mahnaz in front of her mother. It was an innocent remark, intended to make her feel welcome. Yet when Mahnaz responded to her cousin’s remark with a “girly, shy smile,” her mother became furious. Days later, after they returned home, her father beat her with a belt, saying that she had flirted with her cousin to arouse his sexual interest.

About three weeks later, she got her first period and had no idea what to do. Luckily, a friend from school explained things to her by telephone. Unfortunately, Mahnaz did not think to wash her panties. She tossed them in the hamper and when her parents discovered them, they mistook her dried menstrual blood for the blood of a ruptured hymen. Mahnaz could not remember how many times her father hit her with his belt. The pain made her lose count after the tenth or eleventh stroke. Her mother kept screaming that she had ruined their image in the neighborhood and among other family members. Mahnaz was too embarrassed to tell her parents what really happened. She curled into a little ball on floor as her father continued beating her. She remembers her mother’s voice fading and the pain receding, even though welts
covered her body and blood was running down her back from where the belt buckle had cut into her flesh.\textsuperscript{4}

Next, her father dragged her by her hair to the car. Her mother joined they some minutes later, hurling at Mahnaz a small bag packed with some of her belongings. They drove for a long time through darkness, Mahnaz alone in the back seat. She remembers asking several times where they were going, terrified by her parent’s refusal to answer. Their silence was excruciating.

\textit{It was just like when I was five years old. I was taken away from home and I did not know what I did wrong.}

Mahnaz cradles a pillow between her arms and cries quietly for a long time. When she begins speaking again, it is in a different voice; slow and soft, like a child who is very tired. “They took me to a whorehouse outside the city and told me that’s where I belong.” She begins sobbing uncontrollably, burying her face in the pillow.

“Take your time,” I tell her. “We can continue when you feel better.” “No,” she says, “I am fine. I always cry when I remember this stuff. I just never had anyone to share it with before. I never felt safe before.” “So what happened next?” I ask.

“...I begged them to forgive me. I finally told my father I had my period and I begged them to take me to a doctor...” If the doctor said she was not a virgin, then she would willingly resign herself to the brothel. They agreed to her

\textsuperscript{4} The definitions of the various Farsi terms introduced in this thesis are provided in the Glossary of Non-English Terms on page 301.
proposal. Back home after the examination, she spent the next two days alone in a dark room, crying and recovering from the beating.

*I experienced the same kind of confusion as when I was five years old and was punished for my behavior with the housekeeper.*

This time though, she knew more about virginity. She knew she was a virgin, and considered that good. But, as she recalls, hopelessness set in. “I did not know what I did wrong.” She decided to commit suicide by overdosing on sleeping pills. She felt relieved that the confusion would end and she would be free. Mahnaz cannot recall who found her, only that her stomach was pumped at the hospital. “Apparently, I didn’t take enough pills.” After the procedure, the hospital released the 13-year-old Mahnaz to a family friend. On the car ride home, she began crying, terrified that her mother would learn about the incident. The family friend was a young married man with two kids and Mahnaz trusted him. He asked why she was crying and his concern touched her deeply.

*That was the first time anyone had asked about me so kindly. It was so new to me. No one had paid any attention to my feelings.*

She opened up to him, explaining what she did and why. He was shocked by what he heard and held her like a father should, comforting and consoling her with his protective embrace. But…then he fondled her breasts. Mahnaz experienced a new wave of confusion. “…I couldn’t take it anymore. At a stoplight, I jumped from his car and ran home…” But that was not the end of him. He continued to pursue Mahnaz. He was a trusted family friend with free access to Mahnaz’s house. And she could not inform anyone about his advances.

*I would have been dead meat at once.*
He touched her whenever possible and she let him because she did not want anyone learning about his actions. He kissed her and touched her body, but never had intercourse with her. Eventually, she says, she liked it when he kissed and touched her. She began arranging for them to meet for oral sex. She still does not know why.

*Maybe I needed to be loved. He used kind words. I never heard those words about me from anyone before. In his arms I felt so secure. I was not in love with him, but he gave me comfort.*

When the man’s wife discovered the relationship, she went straight to Mahnaz’s father. The woman wanted to protect Mahnaz from her husband. But the husband lied, claiming instead that Mahnaz had tried to seduce him. Mahnaz also lied and said nothing had happened. By this time, she was an expert at keeping secrets. Still, she was again beaten with a belt by her father, this time even more severely. “That did it,” she says.

*I made my second suicide attempt by overdosing on pills less than four months from the first time.*

By this time, she was 14 years old. This time, she took enough pills. Coming into consciousness at the hospital, the first thing she heard was her mother’s voice, urging the hospital staff to “…let her die. She is the shame of our family. She should be dead…” But Mahnaz survived. She wanted to speak with the family friend, but never saw or heard from him again. Her parents became even stricter, hiring a driver to take Mahnaz to school, once her refuge from home and place where she felt wanted. But school had changed after her second suicide attempt. She no longer liked it when boys looked at her. “Sex became a sign of punishment.” More and more, she felt confused about her emotions. Masturbation continued to serve as both sentence and solace.
I masturbated as a way to punish myself when my thoughts and actions were unclear to me, and orgasm became my reward for self-punishment.

Her mother’s verbal abuse became more intense. Several times a day, “my mother used to say that she wished I was dead, that it was embarrassing to have a daughter like me, that I was no good.” She frequently made such comments in front of Mahnaz’s siblings and other family members, among them her grandmother. This grandmother often berated Mahnaz’s mother for being a bad parent, not strict enough. “Why don’t you try raising her? See if you can do better,” Mahnaz’s mother challenged. Much to the family’s astonishment, the grandmother agreed.

Mahnaz was sent to Tehran and the grandmother was given a monthly allowance for extra expenses. Mahnaz never saw any of that money and indeed, the grandmother proved worse than her mother. But she lacked the physical stamina and the financial resources to keep Mahnaz under constant surveillance. Therefore, Mahnaz had more freedom than ever before. She liked her new school and made friends, even began socializing with boys her age. She wore conservative outfits at home around grandma, and then changed when she left. Fooling the old woman was easy, especially for a girl skilled at keeping secrets. At last, Mahnaz started to enjoy her life. But her happiness did not last long. One day, her parents arrived and announced that she would be married. They were rejoicing. At last, they said, their “problem” was solved. Finally, they knew what to do with Mahnaz.

The groom they selected was 20 years older than Mahnaz. He was an engineer and widower with two children. He knew about her past and seemed not to care. He needed a woman to look after his kids. And the prospect of
nightly sex with the beautiful young Mahnaz certainly did not hurt matrimonial negotiations. Her parents were overjoyed by their good fortune. During her engagement party, Mahnaz felt

So detached! I felt like I was separated from my body and was sitting somewhere watching a movie about me. Nothing seemed real. I was completely numb.

After the wedding party, she went to her room and swallowed an entire bottle of pain medicine. She began writing a suicide note but was not able to finish. She remembers her fiancé sitting next to her hospital bed, looking sad and concerned. Later, they talked.

Do you see the pattern? I saw a man after my suicide attempt and again I opened up to him. Isn’t this strange?

 Unlike the last man, however, this one did not take advantage of her. He decided to help, but explained that he could no longer marry her. That was fine with Mahnaz. What happened next “was a miracle.” He sent Mahnaz to the United States and paid for her living expenses. He spoke with her parents and told them to leave her alone. They had no problem complying. Although she was free, Mahnaz also realized that her banishment was complete. “At last, they got rid of the black sheep.” Short of death, she was now as far away as possible from her family. And that, she says sadly, is what they always wanted.

After moving to Los Angeles, Mahnaz started to get some of her emotional and physical strength back. She stayed with her fiancé’s cousin, a nurturing woman with three daughters who had been living in the United States for over a decade. By the time Mahnaz was 18, she had a part time job and had finished high school and enrolled in a community college. There she met the man who would become her future husband. He was Persian (Iranian) and
seemed to understand her. They spent their wedding night in a small cabin in the Sierra Madre Mountains. She was 22 years old and still a virgin. She found intercourse with her new husband dull and boring.

All I remember is sudden pain and blood. He came in me and it was all over. All the pain and suffering in my life was for that five minutes.

Two years later they had a child. The year after that, another was born. The sex never improved, though to others they seemed like a perfect couple. She explained that it was not hard to fool people and keep her unhappiness hidden. After five years of marriage, her husband said he no longer wanted sex. Mahnaz did not mind. Sex with him was never enjoyable and she still had masturbation, her secret even from him. They began drifting apart and Mahnaz let herself go, no longer attending to her hair or nails, never bothering with makeup and sometimes neglecting to bathe for several days. She had taken to hiding her body in baggy clothes, leaving only hands and face exposed. When she walked in on her husband having sex with a neighbor ten years into their marriage, she was not surprised. The divorce was a bit of a relief. At that point, her focus was exclusively on her children.

I gradually forgot about myself. Let me show you pictures so you can see what I’m talking about.

She pulls an album from a low shelf under the Monet prints and opens it to images of her in her mid 20s, a few years into her marriage. The woman in the pictures reminds me of a young, Kathryn Zeta Jones, breathtakingly gorgeous.
“How do you feel when you see these pictures?” I ask. “What do you see?”

I see my youth and my soul, my beautiful face and body, what I used to be. And I see how I was wasted and shattered, crushed. I see what I can never return to or get back. I see myself gone and destroyed. I see what I did not see before and what my parents and others failed to see about me, the true me, my true self, as I meant to be, as God created me to be with all the uniqueness he gave me.

“And what about today, your sexual self?”

I am used to myself as I am. I am my own friend, partner and lover. I know what I like and how to please myself when I masturbate. I have no expectations of myself. I am free.

After this interview, I felt drained and depressed. Mahnaz’s story was difficult to hear. By age 13, she had experienced more abuse and suffering than many people endure over the course of an entire life. Still, children tend to be more resilient than they are sometimes given credit for. But then again, everyone has a breaking point. And Mahnaz is acutely aware that hers was reached long ago. Looking at pictures of herself as a young woman, Mahnaz expressed feeling like her life has been broken, shattered, irrevocably lost. Today, while a full-time working professional at a high ranking local university, she is a woman without hope, trapped by the past and resigned to a life of joyless sexual solitude.

More than the other three women whose stories follow, Mahnaz remains bound by Persian culture and her early history. The next woman profiled is close to Mahnaz in age, but more acculturated to her new environment. Persian culture and the past still have a strong grip on her identity; she did not feel herself being strangled by it.
4.2 The Story of Mitra

Mitra is a 54-year-old cosmetologist who lives on a quiet street in a Los Angeles suburb. Two large pomegranate trees and an avocado sapling shade a modest front yard where she grows orchids. She explains that the trees protect against direct sun, yet still allow enough light for the fragile flowers to bloom. This is the third year she has tried growing cattleyas. She has not seen any results yet, but is not giving up. Eventually, she says, they will bloom. They just require a lot of work first.

Despite sweltering Southern California heat, Mitra is clad in black, her signature color. Her posture is regal, her manners elegant, her uncertain eyes dark as black olives. She carefully removes her gardening gloves and invites me inside. Once settled in comfortable chairs, requisite small talk and formal pleasantries exchanged, I decide to begin our interview. I start with the question that begins all my interviews,

“...how do you make sense of your sexual experiences?”

Mitra’s sentences stumble as she searches for a way to begin. “I was deluded, deceived, and cheated. I was fooled. ...when I was only 14 years old ...” Suddenly, it is as if memories of teenage life suck the air from her lungs, making her chest collapse inwards. She bursts into tears, unable to continue. I ask if she is all right. I ask her what just happened. She remains silent, a pained and fearfull expression on her face. Several minutes pass until at last, she is able to continue. With difficulty, she recounts her first memories of sex, which are intertwined with memories of marriage. Back in Iran at age 14, Mitra’s parents announced that she would soon be married to a 22-year-old man from her upper
class neighborhood. His family had approached hers with the marriage proposal.

Mitra’s father negotiated a substantial Mehrieh (capital or equity paid by the groom’s family in event dishonorable acts on his part cause divorce). The Mehrieh amounted to almost $250,000 in Iranian currency, a very large amount for the time. For her jahaz (dowry), Mitra’s parents agreed to give jewelry, dishes and other household items. Although the legal age of marriage in Iran was 16, Mitra’s father – a powerful man with strong ties to local community leaders – was able to circumvent the law. The small town in many respects was isolated from the modern changes then underway in Iran and that were more readily evidenced in the nation’s cities.

Women in Mitra’s town wore traditional clothes, not the Western fashions then in vogue throughout cities. Girls never looked back at boys loitering in doorways or leaning against walls. They never ran, laughed, or raised their voices. They spoke slowly and softly, never making swift or jerky movements. Every motion and intonation was designed to convey chastity and femininity, desirable attributes alluring to potential suitors. The highest aspiration for girls in such towns was to become a Khanoum (lady). Khanoums shunned western dress and followed the hijab (modesty and morality connoted by veiling the hair). Yet a double standard organized gender from birth. Mitra explains:

*Having girls was considered a sign of shame. Girls were considered effete, abject, a debilitated kind of people. It was humiliating to be a girl. They fed us with simple food while the best part went to boys … They prayed for infants to be born boys and not girls.*
In towns like Mitra’s, a powerful businessman could influence the local legal establishment. And her father did just that. More than anything, Mitra was stunned by the news of her impending marriage. Certainly, she did not love this man. And she knew nothing of sex. Her first period was still six months in the future. She remembers thinking of marriage like a game approved by her parents.

*If they were okay with me playing it, then I should accept to play. Therefore, I agreed to marriage.*

All her life, her parents had been regulating Mitra’s play, discouraging activities that might suggest she was anything less than a proper lady. Whether it involved participating in certain games, playing with other children, or even just talking with boys, her activities were frequently curtailed with the reminder that she was a *khanoum* and needed to behave accordingly. The word *khanoum*, she explains, “was so much part of my life as it still is today.”

Marriage was the game her parents sanctioned, one she could play while remaining a proper lady. Plus, the white gown made her happy, and she loved the party given after her ceremony. But Mitra was completely unprepared for what came next. After the party, the newlyweds returned to her in-law’s house. Her new husband wanted sex from the 14-year-old girl, but he was confused. Alone in his bedroom, her husband without any delay, while approaching her, explained that he needed to penetrate her, then show his family a bloody white cloth, proof that her hymen had been intact before intercourse. She remembers his family knocking at the door and demanding the bloody cloth, making jokes about what they considered unnecessary delay. She used words like “torture”, “agony” and “great misery” to describe her first sexual experience.
Up to that night, I was not allowed to touch a man. All of the sudden, I had to open my legs as wide as possible for him… The only feeling I had was fear.

Two years later, Mitra gave birth to her first child. Two years after that, a second arrived. She did her best to be a good khanoum and dutiful wife, raising children and satisfying her husband’s wants, even though he was cheating on her. His desires were paramount, hers subordinate or nonexistent. It had always been this way, she thought. Wives must treat their husbands like gods. Her female friends all agreed and women’s sexual satisfaction was never discussed. Mitra led this small town life for the next nine years. Then, when she was 23, her husband decided to move his family to Los Angeles. The move had nothing to do with politics or economics. It was about his own and her family’s aberou (honor).

Her husband had a cousin who had moved to Los Angeles the year before. This cousin frequently boasted of his opulent lifestyle in the new county. Mitra’s husband was eager to keep up for appearances sake. Still in his early thirties, he wanted to make a big splash among Los Angeles’s Persian community and impress relatives back in Iran.

He sent Mitra and the children to Los Angeles first, while he remained behind, tying up loose ends before relocating. Meanwhile, she moved in with extended family in Los Angeles, finding that her life changed little. Mitra found the same old social structures constraining her. Daily life among émigré relatives proved to be a microcosm of upper class life in small town Iran. But the outside culture still affected her closed world, first by way of her husband. Though little changed for Mitra, her husband found new opportunities for infidelity in Los Angeles’s sexually permissive environment. Though Iran accords married men a
large degree of leniency with respect to infidelity, there are still limits. For instance, a man must not have sexual relations with a married woman. But in Los Angeles, anything went. Even though she never loved her husband, Mitra became deeply unhappy. She consulted her parents about her husband’s affairs. Their advice: Don’t complain. “A good khanoum goes to her husband’s house in a wedding gown and leaves in a burial shroud. She arrives in white and she leaves in white.” As Mitra says:

I belonged to my husband for the rest of my life. My parents showed me I had no other choice.

Her in-laws were no help either. They would not even acknowledge that their son had done anything wrong. As she tells me this, Mitra’s tone becomes more urgent. No longer is she lost in grief, stumbling though sentences. Her words rush forward with a sense of urgency as she leans forward, peering intently into my eyes. Gone is her fear of judgment and need for reassurance. She seems overtaken with anger and passionate intensity.

I became more and more shattered, crushed. Things couldn’t continue as they had been. What else was there for me to lose? I had to do something.

Mitra looked outside herself at what was available. Western women became alternative models for femininity. She saw them on television and at the store, working in a variety of occupations and pursuing myriad interests. Mitra realized that it was possible to have her own thoughts and desires and still be a woman. A woman could think her own thoughts, make independent decisions and most importantly to Mitra, support oneself. But not all women are khanoums, and this, she says, created conflict for her. She was taught to regard herself as next to nothing compared with her husband. How could she possibly be both an independent woman and khanoum?
Mitra was not sure where she found the courage to ask for divorce. But she found it, and much to her surprise, her husband agreed to grant her request. It was not as if she were entitled to sever marital ties. He could have just as easily sent her back to Iran. His will was all, his decision law. Suddenly free from the formal bonds of marriage, Mitra turned her attention inward, to the psychic struggle between ideals and desires. She had always aspired to be a khanoum. But she realized she needed more, and that fulfilling her desires might jeopardize her ideals. The divorce brought a new kind of loneliness into her life, but also time for reflection. After a prolonged period of internal debate, Mitra was able to reach reconciliation.

*I eventually realized that being a khanoum doesn’t need to mean forgetting about my needs. I don’t need to obey and follow like a dead person. I can have an opinion, a voice, needs, and many, many wants. There was no need for me to avoid these things. I can have them and still remain a khanoum.*

Mitra looks away in silence. Eventually, she says: “I managed to bring together my khanoum part and the real me. I learned to bring the two together.” Then she draws her legs to her chest, embracing them in a fetal position as she sobs into her dress. When she is able to continue, she tells me that her husband readily agreed to pay for cosmetology lessons and provide any other financial support she might need. Nine years after their divorce, he still pays her mortgage. This type of arrangement is not unusual in Persian culture. It is a modern-day extension of a very old concept, jayrat, which means that a woman belongs to one man only, from virginity to death. According to the logic of jayrat, if Mitra were to undergo financial hardship, economic need might force her to marry another man. And remarriage to another man makes the first husband look bad. So it is better to provide for a divorced wife. Any monetary expense will cost less than the loss of the man’s aberou. But aberou is not the only
concern for Mitra’s ex-husband. Mitra has custody of their children. Failure to maintain economic control means more opportunity for another man to influence the children’s lives. Mitra says her ex-husband is a good man, despite his ongoing infidelity during their marriage. He provides for her and the kids. Nevertheless, she is not comfortable with her economic situation. “He still has some control over me. I feel it and it is so evident. It is my plan to gain economic independence.” She wants to open her own hair salon someday. This is the main goal in her life right now. Cultivation of her sexual self seems less pressing.

There have been other men besides my husband, but somehow, I’m still not comfortable. I can’t find the courage to continue new relationships.

She says her belief system is fixed. It reminds her that all men are the same as her ex-husband. She wonders: “What if they become as abusive as he was? What if they start having affairs?” Nine years after her divorce, Mitra says that it is too painful to repeat the past. “I just got out of it” she says.

It’s not easy to put aside the belief that men can do whatever they want and women have to put up with it… There is no trust.

She says she is unwilling to repeat the same cycle. And if that means not having another relationship, so be it. “That’s okay, it really is, at least for now, it really is okay. “… I’m still scared, still fearful. I am not ready for a relationship yet.” She says she is happy with where she is at today and that she does not want to lose anything she has gained. However, one man she is sexually involved with might be a risk. He lives in Iran and wants her to move back and marry him. They became close due to his gentleness, but they have only known each other two months. That’s not enough time, she says. And
He is only 40 years old—no green card, no real job. Maybe he only wants to marry me to get his green card.

For some reason,” she continues, “only younger men are attracted to me. Maybe they want to take advantage of me. I don’t know. It’s hard to trust Iranian men.

Still, her relationships with men in non-sexual situations have changed since her divorce. At first, she was embarrassed to even trim the hair of her male clients. Touching them seemed inappropriate and unladylike. Compare that with a recent event she suddenly recounts, the first example of change that springs to her mind. A few weeks ago, a male colleague invited her to attend a professional training seminar with him. She agreed and had a great time. Their relationship lacks any sexual component. Still, he is a man. And Mitra feels completely comfortable with him. They laugh, joke, and have great conversations. But just as quickly as she finishes telling about this man, sadness overtakes her.

Why was I told that a girl would be bad if she enjoyed herself? Why wouldn’t she be a lady? Everyone in LA enjoys themselves and none of them are bad people. They are all enjoying themselves and I still have my reservations.

Again, Mitra bursts into tears that lapse into lingering silence. “What happened just now?” I ask.

Believe it or not, I’m still looking for that ultimate level of khanoum. I wonder if I’ll reach that level someday. I don’t know why I become so doubtful. Even now, talking with you, it feels like I am doing something wrong that can make me look bad. Maybe I really am a bad person.

She questions whether an ultimate level of khanoum exists at all. Maybe it is just a mirage and she should focus on the here and now, living for the present moment. Only in this way, she says, will she be able to find herself. Doing as
much, she says, requires self acceptance. “I am the khanoum of my life. Maybe it’s time to accept that fact. I am the adult of my life today.” Along with economic independence, Mitra ranks self-acceptance highest on her list of priorities. Then, she brings our conversation full circle by recalling the question I started our interview with.

\[I\ don’t\ know\ anything\ about\ my\ sexual\ self\ and\ it\ will\ take\ awhile\ for\ me\ to\ discover\ it.\ When\ I\ do,\ I’ll\ find\ you\ and\ let\ you\ know\ about\ my\ new\ experiences.\]

After the interview, we discover that light rain has broken the afternoon heat, blanketing Mitra’s front yard in warm moisture. She smiles and says it is good for the orchids. I left Mitra with mixed feelings. She reminded me of someone standing in a doorframe, unsure whether to enter the room or instead close the door. Her early life seemed a single-minded exercise in intensive indoctrination. The message: a girl must be a khanoum above all else. It is encouraging that she understands how this concept has permeated her life. But recognizing the extent of its influence and stopping its effects will prove far more difficult for her. The next woman, Aida, has no problem facing direct challenges. In fact, she seems fearless. Her personality helped her overcome some serious adversities in life. But despite her achievements even she is not free from Persian culture and her own past.

4.3 The Story of Aida

Aida owns an upscale designer boutique in Los Angeles that specializes in women’s haute couture. She imports from top European designers and shopping is by appointment only. The rich and powerful consider themselves fortunate to receive an invitation to her seasonal fashion shows. Getting here
was not easy for her. There was always money in her family, but she is a woman. And women in Iranian communities, she says, are less than second class citizens. They’re considered zaeefeh (weak and mindless).

*Why do you think I worked 24/7 for the past 15 years? To prove to them we are not zaeefeh.*

Her voice rises in anger and a muscular male employee suddenly appears at her office door. She nods to him and holds up two fingers. Minutes later, he returns with coffee and a plate of cookies. She tells him to close the shop and lock the door on his way out. Aida is 47 years old but looks closer to 30. She was born in a mid-sized German city to an Iranian father and German-Jewish mother. Her father owned two hotels, a car dealership and several bars. They lived a secular, European lifestyle. Her early memories are of conflict. Her parents always fought, she says. By the time she was four, they were divorced. After the divorce, her mother worried that Aida would be kidnapped by her father and taken to Iran. So Aida was frequently hidden with her mother’s friends – people she did not know well and felt disconnected from.

One day, the five-year-old Aida was playing in the yard of one of her mother’s friends. She saw her father standing outside the gate. He told her to grab her coat and some toys from inside. She did. That was the last time she saw Germany. Her father drove for 72 hours straight until they reached his home town in Northern Iran. Aida was happy to see her father, but confused. Culture shock made things worse.

Everyone spoke Farsi or the local northern Iranian language, which was unique to that region. Only her father could understand German. And since she had been raised in a secular, European environment, small town Persian life...
proved utterly incomprehensible. Aida felt very alone and dependent on her dad. This dependence on her father increased shortly after she was kidnapped. Back in Germany, Aida’s mother committed suicide.

People in Aida’s new community treated her with an almost reverential awe. She was blond; European physical traits were much admired among Persians. She was also a bit chubby arousak (doll-like) she says. She remembers strangers wanting to hold her and make her laugh. Despite all this attention, she still felt disconnected from her surroundings, frequently frightened. Bathing was particularly ominous. In this part of Iran, people washed themselves at public baths. Aida recalls being subjected to a cleaning ritual wherein she was forced to run seven times under the overhead shower spray. She remembers women in the showers putting henna on their hair for coloring, and how it looked like blood running down their faces.

*I felt disgusted every time. I hated looking at those naked bodies. I didn’t want to be washed by others.*

At home things were worse. Her father had remarried soon after divorcing Aida’s mother. Aida recalls her stepmother treating her badly when alone, and her father’s reluctance to believe as much. Finally, Aida tape recorded the woman’s harsh words. They were delivered in a language she could not understand, but their tone made the meaning more than clear. Once her father listened to those tapes, he decided to divorce the woman.

Soon after, he met another woman, one who seemed to take a genuine interest in Aida. But things changed once the woman became her father’s third wife. Aida recalls the woman trying to drive a wedge between father and daughter. She spread rumors at Aida’s school, telling teachers that Aida and her
father slept together, implying theirs was an incestuous relationship. Truth was, he read to Aida at night, frequently spending many hours with the child. Nevertheless, the jealous stepmother’s allegations made it to court and Aida’s father almost lost custody of her. He managed to “fix it” with corrupt officials, Aida recalls. She was not removed from her new home.

But neither was her stepmother. Her father remained married and hired a nanny for Aida. The nanny helped Aida learn a Turkish version of Farsi. One of her earliest memories of the new language concerns a conversation with her stepmother. Some two or three years after making incest allegations, Aida’s stepmother told the 11-year-old girl intimate details of her sex life, describing oral sex with her father in vivid detail. The stepmother, Aida recalls, was clearly excited by her own descriptions, frequently touching her breasts and genitals as Aida listened, confused and alarmed by the woman’s behavior. These words and gestures were things Aida felt she should not witness. Each time the woman spoke of her sex life, Aida’s fear of her grew.

School was no sanctuary from this life at home. Aida was singled out because of her looks; blue-eyed blonde with pale, almost translucent skin. The original Persian civilization had been a race of blonde-haired, green-eyed Indo-Europeans. This was before intermingling with Arab cultures. In popular consciousness, especially in small Northern towns like Aida’s, blonde hair and light skin signify a privileged connection with asseell (an authentic) Persian essence. Her looks were something of a fetish. And the fact that she was from Europe only added to her prestige. Her differences made her popular. Nevertheless, she felt alone and disconnected.
I had a lot of respect among people, and they loved my accent, but I felt alone all the time and that is how I grew up. I couldn’t connect with others.

When she reached puberty there were no female role models to emulate. Her mother was dead. Her stepmother was treacherous. She no longer had a Nanny. Her first period surprised her. Since she had no one else to turn to, she told her father that she was bleeding and had no idea why. He said, “Okay, you’re a woman now.” And that was all. Then he drove her to a drug store and showed her what to buy.

From an early age I learned to do everything by myself. For as long as I can think back, no one has ever been there for me, no matter what the circumstances were.

The adolescent Aida liked her changing body and so did the boys. “…Boys used to send me letters, give me notes and follow me home from school…” They gave her their phone numbers and told her she was beautiful. She loved the attention. But her father hated it. Rumors began circulating that Aida was unchaste. Married women started the gossip, worried that their husbands would desire Aida and perhaps propose that she become a second wife. Though untrue, the rumors nevertheless diminished her father’s aberou (honor). He began making her dress differently, in baggy clothes to cover her developing body. He frequently assaulted neighborhood boys who followed her home. It was his right to beat them, she recalls. He hired a chauffer to drive Aida everywhere and keep her under constant surveillance. She had done nothing wrong, yet, she says, she was being punished.

Here was someone who married a German-Jewish woman and lived in Germany for 20 years. All of the sudden, he becomes this closed-minded, traditional Muslim man. And he forced me to become a traditional Iranian girl.
Daily life became increasingly oppressive. By age 16, she had developed a sense of humor. Sometimes she would joke with a friend at school, saying that she would have to put herself “up for sale” in order to escape her father’s house. By “up for sale,” she meant marriage. But one day, she says, “...it actually happened. I was placed on sale by my own father.” Without any forewarning, her father unceremoniously announced Aida was to be married to a man 20 years her senior. Within a week, she met her future husband during a chaperoned visit. Nothing they said to each other went unheard by supervising family members. They met again two weeks later, also under family scrutiny. A week later, they were married. Approximately 30 days had elapsed from her father’s surprise announcement to her marriage.

Before the marriage was finalized, Aida’s virginity required certification by a gynecologist. The reason for this was to protect the interests of both families. First, the groom would get a substantiated virgin. Second, Aida’s family would be protected in the event the groom claimed that she was not a virgin and tried to renege on the financial terms of their marriage agreement.

By age 16, Aida knew about virginity. It was located somewhere inside the body, but she did not know where. She also knew it was sinful to touch her genitals, and that a man must never touch them. Her aunt took her to the gynecologist, but refused to explain why. Aida shudders when recalling the female gynecologist who seemed more like a drill sergeant than medical professional, barking orders at Aida.
Take off your clothes, get on the table, spread your legs as wide as you can.

Can you imagine that?” Aida asks. “All my life I was told to keep my legs together and never touch my vagina. Now this strange woman has permission to look at my vagina.

Aida asked for information, but none was given. So she assumed the worst, taking the examination for some kind of punishment. She remembers crying and begging the gynecologist to stop. “I felt so hopeless and helpless, fearful and lonely and ashamed of being a girl. I didn’t have a mother to call for support. I called on God for help.” The gynecologist told Aida’s aunt that the girl had an especially thick hymen. Then she said that Aida would bleed profusely after penetration and should be near a hospital on her wedding night in case of complications. Terrified, Aida asked for an explanation. The gynecologist ignored her and spoke instead to her aunt, saying that the wedding night would be painful for Aida but very pleasurable for her husband. Then the two older women began laughing.

All of a sudden, I saw myself stepping into a different world. I walked into the darkness of the unknown.

Any remaining hope that marriage might mean better life was shattered on her wedding day. It was the third time she had seen her husband. He knocked at the dressing room door. When she answered, he began berating her for answering the door without being fully dressed. Never mind that only women occupied the dressing area or that she was answering his knock. Another man might have seen her. The sinking feeling she experienced at that moment grew in intensity over the next 15 years of marriage. Her husband was a jealous man, keeping Aida cloistered at home with the curtains drawn. She
was not allowed to look outside, much less go out unaccompanied by her new chauffer.

Aida recalled that her husband had a very large penis and seemingly insatiable sex drive. Every night of their marriage he demanded sex, telling Aida it was her duty to provide it, regardless of whether she wanted it. She never wanted it. He did not engage in foreplay and was unconcerned with her pleasure. Night after night for 15 years, his routine remained unvaried. He would spit into her vagina to lubricate it, then mount her in the missionary position, usually at 20 minute intervals four to six times per night. Aida was never relaxed or excited. She says sex with him always hurt. She describes it as rape.

Some 10 years and two kids into this loveless marriage, Aida was given more freedom. She was allowed to walk to the store unaccompanied and conduct other minor errands around town. One day, she noticed a man standing on a hillside not far from her house. He looked to be in love with someone and Aida found herself wishing she could experience the same sentiments. And she wished that someone would love her like that. How lucky the woman he loves is, she thought. One day she ran into this man in the street. Much to her surprise, he confessed that it was her, Aida, with whom he was in love. He slipped her his telephone number and begged her to call. New feelings suddenly awoke in her. She was filled with a sense of possibility and hope, excitement and longing. Eventually, she worked up enough nerve to call him. His voice caressed her and aroused long suppressed yearnings. He was patient and encouraging, listening to her needs and hearing her desires.
I felt so warm. This was a new kind of warmth. All I could do was think of him and his tone of voice, the way he looked at me, the desire that was in his eyes.

I became myself when I was talking with him on the phone…” She says. “…I was able to talk about my sexual desires, and express myself, the real me, the self that I lost when I was four years old, that was never valued or acknowledged or loved.

She becomes silent, burying her head between her hands as if in prayer. She cries softly and then raises her head, “I’m telling you something I have never told to anyone.” She says that if members of the Persian community knew about her affair, their opinion of her would change. Instantly, she would become an evil woman in their eyes. She searches my eyes, perhaps wondering if I will judge her. I tell her what I think. She is a very brave woman. She says that eventually she met her lover in person. It was an accident. They just happened to both be in the same place at the same time, a deserted square on the edge of town.

As God is my witness, we didn’t even touch each other. He was only smelling my hair and talking to me, saying how he wanted to smell me, nothing else. Suddenly, she says, I had this massive discharge coming out of my vagina and running all over my legs. It felt so good. Even today, I have no way of explaining it. It was a feeling I never experienced before or after.

They made love that afternoon, the first of three times they would be together. “It felt good,” she says, “…it felt right. His kiss was different. It tasted good. It felt right when I was touching his body. It felt right to do…” For the first time in her life, she felt truly alive. But her happiness did not last long. Both lovers became worried for the other’s safety. The Iranian Revolution was at its height and infidelity was a very serious crime. Aida’s lover decided to relocate to Russia and phoned her with the news, arranging a last meeting at his place to say goodbye. She remembers holding him and crying into his shoulder
when she heard the knocking on his door. It was the police. Someone learned of their affair and turned them in. She looked for a place to hide while he stalled for time. It was useless. The police kicked down the door and dragged them both to jail.

The police hurled insults at Aida, calling her an unchaste woman, a whore. Meanwhile, she could hear her lover screaming. He was being beaten in a cell down the hall. Her father and husband arrived, both with enough influence to get her released into their custody for the night. It would have been a great dishonor for them if she spent the night in a cell. Nevertheless, her sentence at sunrise was to remain the same: Death by stoning. It was the only way to restore the family honor after Aida’s transgression.

That night, Aida was left alone in her room. Something inside her snapped. Her lover had rekindled her desire for life. She was determined that this would not be her last night on earth. Quickly, she packed a bag, grabbed some cash and her passport, then climbed out her window. She managed to find a taxi and by the morning was at a friend’s house in Istanbul. She called her husband, who seemed repentant and willing to take her back, no questions asked. He promised to fix things with the authorities and treat her better in the future. She was on the verge of returning until she spoke with her father. He warned of what was in store for her at home. Her husband was lying. He wanted her back so he could have her killed.

So she left for Los Angeles with the Iranian equivalent of some $200 to her name. She found a job and “worked like a dog for five years,” renting a shabby apartment and struggling through an often threadbare, immigrant existence. Some three years later, she reconciled with her father and borrowed start-up
capital for a small business. Two years after that, her business was showing substantial profit. By then, she had managed to obtain green cards for her kids and they were living with her. For her first five years in Los Angeles, she missed them terribly. But her husband never let them visit, claiming their daughters would be raised to be whores, just like their mother. Eventually, he let them immigrate. By then, he was remarried and the daughters reminded him of old wounds to his aberou. During these last 10 years, Aida has devoted herself to the business. She has become a rich and powerful woman, not financially dependent on any man. Still, “it doesn’t matter than I live in Los Angeles. My culture has followed me and is still haunting me.”

Currently, she is sexually active and very much in touch with her desires. She lives with an ex-boyfriend who provides her with emotional support. They have an open relationship based on mutual trust and understanding. Mostly, they share emotional, not sexual intimacy. Other men satisfy her sexual needs. She prefers to establish close emotional bonds with men before having sex with them. Usually, she only dates one man at a time, but she likes to leave her options open. She prefers taking an active role, being the one who gets to pick who she has sex with, rather than the one who gets picked. And she likes taking an active role during sex itself, preferring to be on top.

*This is the time for me to enjoy myself and my womanhood. If I allow myself, I can have sex at least six or seven times a day.*

But she often feels ashamed afterwards because she is unmarried. She keeps her sex life secret, hidden from most people. She says she wants people in the Persian community to think she is a chaste woman. Deliberately creating a false impression is one thing; her feelings are another. She says that guilt after
sex is inappropriate. This is a new country and the old rules no longer apply. She is no longer subject to the Persian way of thinking. Still, “I do relapse from time to time—actually, most of the time.” When shop sales slump, she blames the downturn on her sexual activity. She tells herself that God is punishing her for sinful acts, even though she knows better.

*We women need to stop being our own betrayers. We need to stop giving in to these rules and being our own worst enemies.*

Aida comes across as a strong person who possesses immense determination. She has overcome huge obstacles that the Persian culture put in her way. By building a financially lucrative business, she holds a great deal of power. Yet despite all this, she is not free from her past. She fears feeling vulnerable in sexual relationships and hides her emotions. Such secrecy protects her, but also keeps her from connecting with others.

The woman profiled in the next story connects easily with other people. She belongs to a younger generation and moved to the United States at an earlier age than the other three women. Like the rest – and so many others not profiled here – she too experienced and narrated events in her life. What is especially noteworthy about her life is how she has managed to reconcile Persian and United States culture, satisfying the demands of both up to a point.

### 4.4 The Story of Ziba

Before agreeing to an interview, Ziba wanted more information. She arranged a preliminary meeting at a coffee shop near a place where she was training as a nurse. She asked if we could meet after her shift. At the coffee
shop, Ziba recognizes me first and waves. I am one of the few people not wearing scrubs or a lab coat. After a quick handshake, she made her way to the counter, greeting several people with smiles and warm hellos on the way.

The 27-year-old woman moves with ease and assurance, like a dancer. Several men in the shop stop talking and watch her walk, eager for her glance or perhaps even a few words. When Ziba returned, she wanted to know specifically more about confidentiality. “Who will transcribe our interview? Is this research for profit?” She asked these questions in Farsi because, she explained, she did not want people at nearby tables to know what we were talking about. It must remain secret.

I tell her that I transcribe all interviews myself and that my research was not for commercial purposes. Since we were speaking in Farsi, and while she requested to meet in that coffee shop to possibly do the interview, still Ziba declines, saying one cannot be too careful. You can never be sure who might be listening. She nods in the direction of a man two tables away with dark hair and aquiline features. She says she has seen him around the hospital before. Maybe he understands Farsi and he is not even Iranian.

We agree to speak at her parent’s house. Ziba’s older brother, Anoush, is spending the weekend with friends, and her father is out of town on business, as usual. With only her mother there, we will have privacy. Ziba’s father is rarely home. So Ziba usually shares her mother’s bed. When Anoush, the man of the house, is away, Ziba sleeps in his room. As man of the house, he has the largest room. On rare occasions when her parents sleep together, Ziba takes the living room couch. The house sits close to the street in a working class neighborhood near a freeway. Her mother greets us at the door, quiet and reserved. She keeps
her hair covered with a scarf and her whole body concealed by long, draping garments. Only her face and hands remain visible.

“Shoes must be left at the door. This is a deeply religious household, a place for prayer. Shoes would dirty its sanctity, making it unclean and unworthy of Allah.” Ziba lies to her mother, introducing me as a colleague from the hospital. The older woman stares at my feet, perhaps checking for nail polish. In fundamentalist households, a manicure means that a woman does not pray. And good Persians do not go around advertising their beliefs. Secularism must be kept to oneself.

There is nothing unusual in her beliefs. A small minority of the Persian population harbors deep religious sentiments. What is unusual is the cold reception I get. Regardless of religion, all Persians treat their guests with the utmost honor. It is a deeply ingrained cultural precept that transcends religion. Guests are given the best seat at the table, the best food in the house, and the finest of everything. Universally, Persian women offer their guests food and drink, rarely taking no for an answer. Ziba’s mother, on the other hand, does not even offer her hand, much less tea. In most North American households, this would mean nothing. But among Persians in a traditional Persian household, it can only indicate an intentional insult.

Ziba’s demeanor changes as soon as we enter the house. Her confident, questioning voice becomes hushed, almost a whisper. She suddenly seems awkward, her gestures rigid and subdued as she leads me past the living room and its wall of bearded Muslim Imams, their photographs doctored to look as if they had halos emanating from their heads. Pictures of her father and brother decorate the opposite wall, but Ziba’s image is nowhere to be seen. Ziba tells her
mother that she is taking me to Anoush’s room so we can talk privately. Her mother glares at me. Once inside Anoush’s room with the door locked, Ziba becomes the woman at the coffee shop again. She removes her sweater and sits on a bed opposite a chair she offers me. She smiles and starts from the beginning.

She was born in Iran but moved to India when she was five. Her father traveled for business and, just like now, spent most of his time away from home. Basically, she says, she and her brother were raised by her mother. And in many respects, living in India was the same as life in the United States. There as here, her family was part of an expatriate community, rarely mixing with the indigenous population. The Indian friends they did have were extremely devout Muslims, never Hindus. India did not require women to wear the *hijab*. And though deeply religious, Ziba’s mother never forced it upon her. Instead, she cut Ziba’s hair short and dressed her like a boy; short-sleeves and skirts were forbidden. Long pants were mandatory, regardless of weather. Ziba was told that good Muslim girls did not wear skirts or short-sleeved shirts. And they never talked with boys. Even as a child, Ziba questioned her mother’s mandates. She wanted to know why there seemed to be one set of rules for boys and another for girls. And where did these rules come from? Her mother’s answers were always the same. She told Ziba that things have always been this way. Such is fate and such is life. Get used to it and do not ask so many questions.

When Ziba was 11 years old, her father’s business brought the family to the United States. They moved to their present address. English was forbidden in the new house, as were American friends. Anoush was 15 when the family moved. Soon after arrival, he started dating a Vietnamese girl from school,
something he kept secret from their parents for over 18 months. Ziba says she always had been close with Anoush, but this brought them closer. She became his confidant. He shared pictures of his girlfriend and spoke of the relationship. Like Ziba, Anoush was told any interaction with the opposite sex was *zeshteh* (sinful and shameful behavior) that leads to loss of family honor. Nevertheless,

*He did it anyway and it was okay for him to do it in the end.*

The 18-month-plus secret was revealed when one day after school, Ziba, Anoush, and his girlfriend were eating sandwiches at the kitchen table. The siblings had no need to fear discovery since their mother was at work. But she came home early that day and discovered the three of them together. Anoush tried explaining, but his mother said nothing. Instead, she withdrew and locked herself in her room. She came out only after Anoush’s friend left, and began screaming at him. How could he do this and why – and why a Vietnamese girl of all people? But, Ziba says, Anoush never cared. He did what he wanted to. Eventually, the parents relented, adopting a kind of “Don’t ask, don’t tell policy. They just ignored my brother’s actions since they knew he wouldn’t listen to them. And besides, he was a boy.” But Ziba was a girl.

*As for me, everything I did was under a microscope. I couldn’t talk on the phone. If I did, it had to be with a girl. My mom would pick up the phone just to make sure I was talking with a girl.*

Once Ziba started high school, things began changing. “...It got really bad for my mom because I started working and she felt like she was losing control over me...” Her mother worried that Ziba was becoming *Americanized*, prey to hostile cultural forces. She did not want Ziba participating in activities away from the house. And Ziba continued to fear her mother’s anger and reproaches,
as well as being hit. She wanted a life like those led by her friends at school, but also wanted to be a good Muslim girl, someone who did not bring shame upon her family. I ask how she managed relationships with her peers and she smiles, saying “I had a secret relationship.”

At 16, Ziba started dating an Indian boy from school. She hid the relationship, even from Anoush. Only a few friends at school knew. Her smile does not last long, so I ask her to elaborate. “Tell me about your relationship with him.”

Well, um ... well, there were bad situations ... because he ended up raping me and that was my first sexual experience.

“Are you able to talk about it?”

You mean now, or was I able to talk about it with my family?

“Well, both ... whichever is easier for you now.”

I guess I’m able to talk about it and I may get emotional, but ... I um ... I was at his parent’s house and we were laying in bed looking at pictures and one thing led to another and, you know.

Her eyes dart around the room, seemingly seeking something solid to focus on. Her hands shake and her voice trembles.

I just didn’t want to do that, you know. I didn’t. I mean, I knew about sex. But I just didn’t want to do that. I wanted to save myself for marriage. That’s what I wanted, but he didn’t listen. I said no and screamed and all that stuff, but it happened anyway. I lost my virginity and after that I didn’t tell anyone. I couldn’t. And I didn’t report it or anything.
She bursts into tears, then lapses into silence. Eventually, she continues. “I couldn’t tell my mom since I had no idea what she would do. I thought she might send me to India or Iran. I just couldn’t tell anyone.” I thanked Ziba for sharing her secret with me. “How was it for you to keep this inside for over 10 years?” I say. “Tell me about the feelings behind keeping this secret for so long.”

She wipes her eyes and blows her nose, then explains that rape in itself is bad enough. Living in a culture that puts a high premium on virginity made it even worse.

A lot of stories are told about how on your wedding night the mother-in-law comes in to check if you’re really a virgin. So I freaked out. I just lost my virginity and I figured “now my life is over.” Basically, I have to marry this guy now.

Ziba stayed with him for another year, during which his sexual abusiveness increased. She believed that he was her only chance for marriage. “...I felt so dirty and so used,” she says between sobs. “I just thought that my life was over, that no one would love me, nobody would want to marry me...” She folds forward at the waist, clutching her stomach as if she was just punched. Her breath is labored and shallow, punctuated by occasional coughs as she chokes on tears. Several minutes pass before she continues. The relationship ended when Ziba left for college, but not the pain and confusion of rape. She says she eventually came to terms with the rape per-se, realizing that she was still desirable even though she was not a virgin. She dated other men and cultivated serious relationships with three. All were accepting and understanding. None of them judged her for being a victim of sexual violence. But none of them were Persian or Indian. And this was a problem. All her life, Ziba expected to marry a Persian or Indian man. Now that option seemed impossible. The immediate
emotional pain of rape was past, but not its long-term consequences. Despite this, college was a life-changing experience for Ziba.

*It was the first time I heard my own voice and what I really sounded like.*

It also gave her a broader perspective on her life, enabling her to contrast the individualist ethos of North America with what she calls the ghabeeleh (collectivist culture) she grew up in. In North America, she explains, the focus is on the individual and his or her personal attributes. In Persian culture, the emphasis is on the collective unit, the family. Whatever an individual does has an impact on the honor of the entire family, both those living abroad and those back in Iran. Thus, an individual’s desires and behavior must remain subordinate to the family as a whole.

*Every single decision you make and everything you do involves your family honor and family name...It’s a culture that places a high premium on keeping secrets...In collectivist culture, there’s more importance on keeping the unit safe, keeping everything together and not letting it fall apart... Usually,” she says, “it’s the mother that keeps all the secrets. She’s the holder of the secrets.*

Sometimes cultures clash in Ziba’s intimate relationships with men. “They don’t understand why I’m so attached to my mother. They don’t understand why I have to respect my parents.” She says her boyfriends are frequently frustrated by her relationship with her parents. She attributes this to the fact that her boyfriends grew up in a culture that values autonomy and personal decision making.

*If they want to watch a movie, they can go watch a movie. They don’t have to tell their parents. If they want to go on vacation, they go on vacation. I’m much more traditional.*
The bottom line is: “The hardest part of it is trying to get them to accept the details of my culture that aren’t part of the khodet sava bashee (individualistic) culture they grew up with.” And admittedly, dating an Indian or Persian man might make things easier. A shared cultural background would eliminate a lot of misunderstanding. But, she says, “I never took that chance.”

I didn’t want to have that conversation and say, ‘Hey, by the way, I’m not a virgin. So if your mom wants to come and check the sheets after our first night together, that’s not going to happen.’ I just never wanted to have that kind of conversation.

Ziba’s words are somewhat sarcastic, but she is crying as she speaks. Her current boyfriend is an American and she says it has been a great year and a half with him so far. But she has not told her mother about the relationship, though she plans to someday, once she figures out how.

Sometimes I think that my first boyfriend took a whole lot more away from me. Consciously, I know that I have the power to be with anyone I want to be with, but unconsciously, I’m still running away from anyone who is from my culture. And part of me always wonders why I do that, why I’m only attracted to American men.

Ziba falls silent, gives me a long look, then shrugs. She pulls her sweater over her head and collects her things. She shifts her weight as if to stand, then pauses and leans forward. She tells me that the person I’ve been listening to is her real self, a talkative, outgoing woman. Her brother knows her true self and so do her friends at the hospital. When she is home, she becomes someone else. She needs to keep her true self a secret. But, she adds, this is the culture that she was born into. She says that she needs to make the best of what she has been given.
All these rules and regulations I have to follow—I follow them to a certain point and then my true self comes out. It questions whatever I need to question and I find my own understanding. But I do it in a respectful way where I follow the traditional morals and values that I’ve grown up with.

Her voice drops to a whisper as she guides me to the front door and says goodbye. Her mother is nowhere to be seen. Ziba lives something of a double life, aware of her roles as well as her true self. Because of her age and relatively limited exposure to Persian culture in Iran, I believe she will be fine. She will recover from her trauma, unlike many of the women I interviewed. She best represents those who will successfully reconcile Persian and the United States culture and develop a healthy sense of sexual self.

**4.5 Conclusion**

The stories these four women provide broad and far-reaching insights into the nature of gender relationships, institutional relationships, culture's unquestioning hold on and shaping of individual thought systems and behavior, of historical social practice through generational transfer, the preservation of male dominance in the society, the suppression of the human female spirit and the positioning of women in society. The stories also reveal the effects of history's role in the relationship between male dominance and female suppression. Chapter 5 will delve more deeply on the lives of these women from childhood through marriage.
CHAPTER 5

GIRLHOOD TO MARRIAGE

Somewhere, somehow, along the line something happened. It may have been big, it may have been small; but somewhere, I learned not to talk about sex. [Mehry]

The focus of this chapter is to examine arzesh-haa (shared values), bavar-haa (beliefs), and sonat-haa (traditions) of the participants’ experiences, and to gain an understanding of their thinking through their narratives. As noted in the methodology chapter, the participants are first generation Iranian women, 18 years and older, who migrated to the United States after Iran’s revolution in 1979. They came from all walks of life and, as migrants, brought with them a lifetime of diverse experiences and belief systems to the host country.

The concept of understanding sexual-self is at the heart of this research. The interviews focused on allowing the participants to share their life stories as related to their sexual experiences. These stories were based upon their recollections of their unique cultural perspectives and value systems during their upbringing as girls in Iran. Many participants disclosed how they distanced themselves from their internalized perceptions, and how, as a result of these experiences, they became the women they are today. The degree of difference varied, with some participants continuing to function with their original internalized perceptions.

The participants have offered their life stories and perceptions of their sexual-selves, often for the first time. The stories refer to the chronological events and experiences of the participants’ lives and their own understanding of
their sexual-selves as they explored retrospectively their life events and experiences. This chapter shows the impact of growing up in Iran as the foundation for the sexual-self. This part of the storyline begins during childhood and concludes in the marital years; it sets the stage for the subsequent two storylines in Chapters 6 and 7. The “Girlhood in Iran” theme examines the process of receiving and internalizing messages during the pre-puberty phase of life, which, in turn, serves as a foundational aspect of the puberty phase. Painting 5.1 tries to capture the image of an Iranian girl growing up in her village. The “sexual-self” theme explores how the sexual-self was formed by the messages the participants received as teens about their femaleness. This chapter also examines the theme of “emerging womanhood,” which entails the process of getting married, and for most participants, their wedding night and the loss of their virginity.

5.1 Girlhood in Iran

The profiles described in Chapter 4 highlight the importance of understanding how femininity was constructed in the participants’ families. From the narrative presented in this chapter, one can consider how femininity in general and gender roles in particular are constructed in a family and how clashes between generations with different traditions and perspectives help produce a prescribed gender role. Once these larger issues are considered, the elements in the story of Mahnaz, Aida, Mitra, and Ziba are no longer specific to them. They become general themes, part of a much wider social process. The profile of all the participants is provided in Table 3.1.
5.1.1 Positioning Within the Family

The participants’ birth order often had a bearing on the way a child was treated by her family and community. Being the last or second to last child meant not only parents, but any male, younger or elder in the community was in a position to instruct the young girl on what they could or could not do. For some of the participants, having been the first-born child was an additional burden to the usual growing up process as a girl. This was due to the entrenched son preference, which often meant that parents aspired to have a son as their first-born. When a girl occupied that position, there was a sense of discontentment. The mother received messages of displeasure and blame not only from her husband, but also from her parents and in-laws. This in turn made many parents transfer their discontent to the first-born girl. For example, Parvin was the first-born child of her father’s second marriage, and both wives lived together. Her father also had a number of seejeh (temporary marriage) wives living with them. Parvin’s mother was fearful of having a havoo (younger permanent second or third wife) since her husband wanted another first-born son. She believed that she did not fulfill her duty as a second wife as she did not give birth to a son first. Parvin’s mother was disappointed to have a daughter as her first-born child, since a female child could have jeopardized her role as a second wife. Parvin learned that a son is much more preferred in her family. She also learned that her status in the family was lower than that of her brothers regardless of her birth order. To survive within her family system, she further learned to find a position for herself in the family by becoming a tomboy.
As a girl I was a disappointment to both of my parents since the beginning … I tried to be like my older brothers, and became a tomboy so that both my parents would like me and accept me… I was a tomboy.” That means a girl who could go everywhere, with her brothers.

Gooleen was raised in a family with three older brothers. She limited herself to boys’ activities. She became a tomboy as a way to survive among boys until she reached puberty. Her parents were happy to have only one girl. Mahin has one younger sister and a younger brother. When she was a child, her parents said her genitals should never be touched, especially by others. They told her that boys could harm her, so she became fearful of them. To protect herself against possible harm, she developed an aggressive approach towards boys “…to keep them in their place…” as she does today.

Fakhree was born and raised in a traditional Islamic family. She started to question the role differences between boys and girls at an early age. As a child, she learned that survival required khafeh shoodan (self-suppression), being toodar (reticent), and hiding feelings.

My father was a very harsh and restrictive man, and even my mother obeyed him. He controlled how we behaved. He even complained about the way we sat, ate, and chewed gum. We had to sit in a certain way, which was the traditional form of seating on the floor. We were not allowed to just say hello to our father. We actually had to stand up in front of him in the morning, then say hello to him and to my mother next.

Each part of Iran offered its own unique local sub-culture. Taraneh was born in the northern part of Iran, a religious area near the Caspian Sea, unlike Mahnaz, who was born at the southern border, a relatively less religious part of Iran. Although permitted supervised interaction with boys, Taraneh, nevertheless, was exposed to restrictions that limited her physical activities.
We were reminded that that is the way it is because of the society and culture. It was not only our parents looking after girls of that area, it was the whole town watching us and everyone knew where we were and what we were doing all the time. We had over a thousand eyes on us. It was very hard… I accepted my parents’ and brothers’ way of protection and controlling me, as it was the part of our culture---as a girl I didn’t know that I can say to others that they had no right to keep an eye on me the way they did. My parents were enough, but that was part of the culture. I had no way of communicating about that… [tearful].

Mehry is the oldest child of seven. She has five sisters and one brother. Her father was a university professor, and Mehry considered her mother to be very intelligent. Mehry attended some of the most exclusive schools in Iran, with members of royalty as classmates. Classes were taught mainly in French, supplemented with Farsi. Like at home, her school had restrictive rules for girls. Her social network included classmates, siblings and female cousins, while her brothers were free to do any activities. “…I learned ice skating under severe monitoring by both male and female nannies all the time.”

Touran says she was raised in a down to earth kind of family. She was the youngest of five, with two older brothers and two older sisters. Like Aida, whose life story was presented in detail in Chapter 4, Touran was an arousak (a blonde-haired chubby child who looks like a doll). The first Persians are reputed to have been green-eyed blondes, and today, in a country where most people have dark hair, Touran appeared exotic. As a child, she found her family life nurturing; the wider community was, however, a different story.

For some of the participants, whether they lived in Iran or a different country, the rules were the same. For example, Nastran is a middle child with one older and one younger sister. She never attended school in Iran. At age six, her family moved to Libya. A few years later, they relocated to Los Angeles.
In Los Angeles, my school was a mix of boys and girls. I think a lot of this topic that we are discussing now. It was more of a taboo when we immigrated to America.

Setareh is the fourth child of a Jewish family. She had two older brothers and one sister. She remembers feeling constantly controlled by everyone around her, from family members to local shopkeepers. “It was a sophisticated and fast communication network” designed to ensnare any girl who deviated from tradition.

5.1.2 Family Honor

The concept of aberou (family honor) played an important part in the upbringing of many participants. For as long as they could remember, they had to eta-at (obey) many rules established at home by parents, brothers, and uncles. Then, there were the rules of the neighborhood and community in which they lived. School also had its separate rules. Everyone older, and every male – even younger brothers – in their lives seemed to be the aghah (a male figure authoritarian person, father, brother, the wise man of the neighborhood or family), and they had to follow the aghahs’ rules. To the participants, the concept of living as individuals and having their own separate opinion did not exist. It was the opinions and traditions of family and extended family as a group, or of the community, that mattered, and no one person on his or her own was taken seriously, women in particular. In their patriarchal system, the participants unknowingly experienced many events that resulted in bringing shame to their families, consequently putting the family’s honor in jeopardy, and therefore, affecting the extended families, neighborhood, and finally the community.
There were consequences such as verbal warnings, being forced out of the home, or no contact with others for days. Sometimes physical punishment was involved. It was said that their actions were bad (this word has the same meaning and pronunciation in the Farsi language as in English), but there was no other explanation given, except “A good girl doesn’t do what they did and as result the family aberou was damaged and gone.” As the participants grew up, they learned that boys had their own responsibilities to maintain family aberou by becoming geerattee (zealous, sense of honor) and to develop their sense of dignity by not tolerating any insults against their family; in particular, those that were caused by the wrongdoing of females such as younger or older sisters, or even girls in the neighborhood. If any dishonorable actions occurred, the boys were encouraged to take action and to show backbone and not allow anyone (male) to approach or make sexual advances to their sisters or the girls in the neighborhood.

For girls to prevent such situations, they had to act as khanoums (ladylike), which meant to follow the rules set by the society for honorable women. The rules included not talking to boys, not staying out past a certain time, not visiting or being visited by even females. The rules further included, not meeting anyone without an adult or a brother present, and not having any relationship or sexual contact with the opposite sex prior to getting married. Any challenge of the traditions was considered a jalat (wrongdoing) act for girls and one that could damage family honor permanently.

For a few participants, like Soraya, not having any brothers did not make it easier on them, because male cousins were even a greater concern. The culture allows cousins to get married. She was prohibited from contact with any of her
male cousins in the name of protection from possible harms from them, which basically was the issue of protection of aberou (family honor). Bahareh was born in a traditional small town. She was raised to maintain aberou and from her mother she learned about toaroon (false promises and social hypocrisy): “... I was a very shy girl. It was bad for a girl to talk to others beside the family members...”

Sharareh got the impression that most of what she did as a social being was considered bad. She was punished for eating ice cream in the streets where the public could see her tongue licking something. She had not known that such a normal non-gendered activity was considered a sexual act for a girl. While no one gave her any explanation, she, suddenly, was considered to be disrespectful and the shame of the family.

I took away family aberou because of licking an ice cream in public... [laughing]... there was no way for me to grasp what was my mother even talking about...in my wildest imagination as a child I even couldn’t understand what did she talk about...I only became confused and that was it.

5.1.3 Traditional Cultural Values

What an individual is taught or experiences during childhood is usually carried with him/her throughout life. The individuals discussed in this chapter shared stories that demonstrate this proposition. Mahnaz was raised in upper-class privilege in Southern Iran, while Aida and Taraneh grew up middle class in the northwestern region of the country. Mitra lived a lower middle-class life in central Iran, the geographic region that was home to all of the remaining participants. Regardless of class or region, all participants shared a traditional
and closed cultural value system, a moderate or a shared variant or semi-traditional Iranian cultural background.

Most other participants were introduced to the concept of *khanoum* (ladylike) early in life. The dominance of *aberou* was profoundly influential in participants’ lives, as it was for most participants having a traditional cultural background. Regardless of class and geography, all participants had to follow rules without receiving any explanations. All felt confused by this lack of information. Parynaz describes her parents as *liberal and open minded* in contrast to the rest of her family; however, the *hush-hush* conversations among family members frequently confused her. Although her parents were not forceful about rules, her environment forced her mother and Parynaz to follow traditions of the local sub-culture.

*I was very close to my mother. However, in Iran, as it is the main tradition, my aunts, and other relatives were interfering and telling us what to do and how to do it. Unfortunately, I was brought up as a conservative traditional house girl in the Turk part of Iran where the people are highly traditional and conservative. … My mother and people around me taught me how to prepare myself to take care of my future husband and my sons, how to cook the best food, and how to clean the house. I was trained to be the best kadbanoo (traditional Iranian housewife) that there was. All I learned was how to provide the best service as a wife in terms of cooking, cleaning and raising children.  

A few participants who left Iran before the age of six had early childhood exposure to western culture, but nonetheless, were raised with the traditional values of Iranian culture. Ziba and Nastaran were exposed to two different cultures as a girl. After being kidnapped from Germany, Aida was forced to adjust to a new culture without knowing its language. The imposition of traditional values confused and shocked her, leaving bitter memories as an adult. Yasaman, similar to a few other participants, was told to cover her body, even
from uncles. She received lots of do’s and don’ts without explanation to understand why rules needed to be applied. Mahtab is the only child in her family. Although she was born in Iran, she moved to Los Angeles at the age of two. Her mother is Latino-Catholic and her father Iranian-Muslim. Her parents divorced when she was 8 years old. After a brief time, custody was given to her father. He believed Mahtab needed to be raised in Iranian culture because it produces respectable girls.

“I was surrounded by my friends from American culture and my Iranian culture and with both I felt different. I learned to formulate my own standards with both cultures combined. There was so much fear of from both of my parents. I felt isolated. My father was attentive, but I couldn’t warm up to him. He had too much power over me. He had single-handedly changed the course of my life. He was stern, and along with his attention to me came bursts of anger and criticism that I didn’t do anything right.

Mahtab grew up in a nexus of diverse cultural influences. She had difficulty reconciling different aspects of her identity, frequently confused by ostensibly opposed ideals of Iranian, Hispanic, and mainstream United States Anglo culture. Regardless of their relatively moderate upbringing, these women shared similar experiences with women raised in more traditional families.

For many participants, such as Farah, from an early age, keeping secrets became central to their lives. Farah believed like other participants that if anyone discovered her secrets, she would become beechareh bad bakht (helpless and bad luck). Letting herself or anyone else touch her genitals would lead to the same consequences. A girl who was beechareh bad bakht would shame her family and neighborhood. This expectation did not apply to boys; therefore, she learned and developed the idea that boys are more powerful and smarter than girls, a belief she still holds today. At age five, Farah learned that girls needed to behave
differently than boys. “That was when I started to learn the differences between boys and girls and that boys have more power, and girls have to be khanoums.”

Some of the participants shared an upbringing characterized by a less stringent application of traditional values. Gooleen came from a middle-class family. As the only girl among four siblings, she developed a tomboyish attitude. She became confused about why she could not make any connection with girls. Mahroukh does not recall having a “good memory of her childhood.” Her activities were limited by her parents. Rafat was taught to focus on attaining “chaste perfection and nobility.” As a young girl, she had no idea what these words meant. Sharareh felt paralyzed. Restrictions on her movements and moral injunctions soon led her to conclude that “everything was bad for a girl to do.”

5.1.4 **Interplay of Religious and Traditional Values**

Many participants belonged to highly religious and conservative families. Islamic rituals were introduced as early as age five. Indoctrination ensured that the girls would learn to pray five times a day, memorize Arabic prayers, and learn to read the Qur’an. However, during their childhood, religious practices made little sense and some of them resisted these requirements. Some of the participants, like Ziba, were forced to learn the Qur’an and pray. Taraneh was not forced to read the Qur’an or pray five times a day as a child. However, her parents taught her to follow Islamic ritual daily.

*My mother told me that when I turned nine, I would have to do what she did every day. I had no idea what she meant by that and I didn’t do any, even when I was nine.*
Cleanliness was a concept used in conjunction with others, such as purity and virginity, to keep focused the idea among women that since they were somehow innately dirty or had a propensity to be unclean, extraordinary measures were taken to keep clean. Soraya and many others saw the deep influence that *najes* (impurity) had on their mothers. To maintain *paak* (cleanliness), her mother religiously washed dishes and laundry several times each day. As girls, Aida, Soraya, and other participants were taken to *goussll* (ritual showers) to rejuvenate their feminine *paak*.

Many of the participants were unable to separate what was Islamic from what was traditional. While they learned to pray at an early age, with their mothers, their maternal role models blended Muslim femininity with a traditional Iranian lifestyle. Some were like Bahareh, who covered herself as a Muslim girl (i.e., wore the *hijab*), but never prayed. Still, she was told she had to follow Islamic rules.

As stated in Chapter 2, while Iran is primarily an Islamic country, other religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, are practiced as well. Strict adherence to state prescribed Islamic rules seemed to have received more attention at times than the observance of ones’ own religious practice. For example, Setareh followed Jewish traditions to maintain *aberou*, to have a respectable family image in her community just as any other Iranian family did. Her family observed Shabbat and Yom Kippur. However, Setareh seldom went to the synagogue as a child. She was not forced to learn Hebrew. However, she was constantly told that God punishes sinful girls if they do not obey the rules. Mahroukh, though Muslim, was not required to pray much or learn the Qur’an. Her family focused on preventing sinful acts. This made the young Mahroukh
extra cautious and often uncertain of her actions. She became fearful and guilt ridden.

Some of the participants were raised in secular households. While the main Islamic rituals were not practiced in day-to-day life, these households were nevertheless influenced by the Islamic environment. Mahnaz was raised by a family of non-practicing Muslims, but nonetheless she was still bound by Islamic rules. Her family made her fear God and the idea of becoming a sinful child. Though Gooleen “never wore a chador (veil),” she feels that she may as well have. The shadow of her brothers constantly covered her. They escorted Gooleen almost everywhere. Parvin’s father had multiple wives, most of them living together. She learned that a man could make decisions for all female family members. She thought if she avoided sinful acts, her father would love her, but she was unable to determine what was sinful.

Most participants were taught about tahrīm, meaning a girl’s choices were limited and her value as a person was one-half the value of a male. Yet none of the participants understood the rules as children. They only obeyed and learned to fear reprisals from God for sin. They learned to feel shame, guilt, and fear to uphold family honor.

5.1.5 Indirect Messages about Sex and Gender

The participants all had experiences during their childhood where parents or others communicated indirect messages about their behavior without real meaning being transferred. Rather than understanding, the participants experienced fear, or shame or guilt as responses. These messages generated
confusion and mystery as well. Mahin was constantly told by her parents, “Don’t let anyone do something to you.” But she was not told what that something was. Many of the participants, like Fakhree, were warned of possible physical injuries that could change their lives. They were told that running and jumping was bad for a girl and reminded to keep their legs crossed when sitting. Setareh had to keep her hair in a ponytail. Left loose, it could have enticed men. Mahtab tried to make sense of what was bad in her Latino and Persian cultures, only to become confused all the time. Touran recalls parental reactions to her tree climbing. “My mother used to scream, telling me not to do those activities, saying that if I fell, I would rip myself apart.” Taraneh, similar to other participants, was told to avoid certain physical activities.

Looking back, the participants concluded that their gender role was defined by social positioning rather than who they were as people. With their assigned family and community roles, came certain responsibilities and expectations. These expectations became a part of their daily lives, which were monitored not just by family members and relatives, but by neighbors and entire communities. They were constantly reminded of the prescribed rules for women. Even before reaching puberty, they were repeatedly told that when these rules were broken, there would be negative consequences. The next theme, “girlhood and sexual-self,” explores the experiences of the participants during the puberty and adolescence phase of their lives.
5.2 Girlhood and Sexual-self

The extent to which, due to shame and guilt, I have kept parts of myself hidden from everyone in my life, and even from myself, is the extent to which I have built walls against my happiness and what is out there. [Parvin]

Parvin’s words here capture the curtain of secrecy behind which most of the participants lived as children and are indicative of the perceptions of many of them. The early sexual-self formation consisted mainly of *payghamhayeh bojrang* (perplexing communication) inferences coupled with an information void. From these inferred communications the participants received vague notions that something existed regarding them as girls that they could not know or participate in fully. Since they could not grasp the meaning of the mystery, Parvin and others have kept part of themselves hidden and “…built walls against … what is out there…” including their sexual-selves.

The participants explained how sexuality was heavily influenced by the social context in which they grew up. While some of the participants had serious doubts, still they idealized and internalized family and social systems. Sex was not discussed openly in their families; instead, messages about sex were communicated indirectly.

5.2.1 Communication with Mothers about Puberty and Menstruation

Most of the participants’ reactions to the menstrual cycle were influenced by having or not having prior knowledge of the menstrual cycle. Some of the participants had some degree of support from family members. For participants
lacking any preparatory information, the first menstrual period was a “disturbing shock.” For those with limited knowledge, it was a “surprise.” For a few more well-informed participants who were expecting it, the onset of menstruation was “exciting” and a sign of “relief.”

Many mothers did not discuss menstruation with participants during puberty; they only reminded them to be careful during physical activities otherwise, like Touran, they might become pareh beshe (ripped apart). Touran, without adequate information had concluded that her menstrual cycle had been the result of some internal organ or tissue being severely damaged.

I thought, well, my mother was right and I was ripped apart… I had no idea what did it mean and was so frightened about the whole situation… [laughing].

Seema learned about menstruation from her friends because she made inquiry of those who had their monthly periods. According to Seema, her friends did not volunteer information and her mother only made minor and vague references to the experience. As she had so many unanswered questions, Seema learned to keep menstruation a private subject.

While I experienced the pain and the discomfort every month, it felt as I was carrying a secret with me all the time...that secret was inside of me.

A few participants experienced an old ritual related to receiving their first period. Soraya remembers her mother approaching her in an unfriendly manner and giving her fearful messages when Soraya first received her cycle. Soraya did not have any prior knowledge of the puberty process and had no idea what to do with herself once the event transpired. She felt fearful and thought that perhaps she had done something wrong, which exacerbated her confusion.
It was so bad, that when I got my period...uhmm... kids at school...talked about it too... Some of them who had their period before I got mine, claimed that once they got their period, their mothers slapped them in their faces...[tearful]... so that their face would have gain a permanent glowing kind of skin ... I even couldn’t related to that and I had this fear of what to tell and who to tell it to.

Fakhree tearfully shared her experience of not having understood anything about puberty process or the changes that young girls experienced during the process. One day she saw blood and out of embarrassment told her aunt instead of her mother.

She... all of a sudden... very hard... slapped me on both side of my face while laughing ... I was shocked ... she explained to me as part of the rasm (ritual), when a girl receives her period for the first time she needs to be slapped in her face and become red in order for her to maintain pinkish glow in her face for the rest of her life which would have eliminated the use of makeup since Persian men don’t like makeup also could make a woman more beautiful and may have attracted other men’s attention to her...I have no idea what was she talking about...her action was abusive to me.

The shame the participants felt about menstruation made participants such as Mahroukh hide her cycle from her mother for as long as she could. She still recalls her mother’s anger. She was told girls could easily become pregnant once they had their cycle.

She told me I could become more shameful to the family if I become involved with a boy and to keep my cycle a private matter, in particular from my father, until I became pure every month.

A few of the participants stated that their mothers claimed that their daughters received their cycle “rather early,” without any explanation. They were “hoping that, at a later time”, the girls “would pick up some explanations from their friends at school.” Those participants, like Shahin, who received their cycle between the ages of eleven and fourteen, felt alone and scared. She also “hated”
the experience since it “stopped” her from playing with boys in boys’ activities, which had made her feel as if she were a real person. Many of the girls’ reactions the first time they saw blood was fear and shock. They screamed, shouted, and cried, and because no one was there to answer them, some kept asking God why they were bleeding. A few not only were not given any information, but were misinformed about the cycle. Bahareh learned from her mother that bleeding means a loss of virginity for a girl. Her first experience made her feel hopeless until one of her female cousins accidentally found out about it. Bahareh was horrified; she thought something bad had happened to her or that she had done something wrong. She actually believed she lost her virginity just as her mother described.

No one touched me, no one looked at me or I looked at any boys… I was shocked… I was a bad girl. I was so frightened since I was about to be disowned. I was the shame of my family and community… I lost the family aberou…I was about to kill myself.

Mitra was married at age fourteen; however, she had not yet had her first cycle. She started her period six months into her marriage and became fearful; she was unaware that girls experienced such a thing. Finally, her mother had to give her some basic information, but it was totally inadequate. In fact, she had eaten red berries earlier that day and her mother told her what she was experiencing was not blood but the result of having eaten too many berries.

The group of participants who had a mild to moderate level of familiarity with menstruation expressed sentiments of excitement upon their first cycle. Taraneh mostly learned about menstruation from her cousin who actually experienced it before she did.
I had mixed feelings of both fear and embarrassment...I questioned why boys didn’t have it and why I did have to hide it from everyone...I thought being a girl was a bad thing and I was punished for it.

For those participants with some information and knowledge, receiving their first menstrual cycle was still a surprising event. Their surprise was the lack of their understanding of this new experiential knowledge and what it would mean for them. For many of the participants, such as Parynaz, the experience of menstruation and puberty led them to believe that having a cycle every month was a *najes* (dirty), *beehaya* (shameful), and *gonah* (sinful) part of being a girl. They thought that each month a girl, by bleeding, was reminded of her *najessee* (dirtiness, impurity) and that they had to keep their period a secret from all men, even their fathers and brothers. To eliminate *najessee* (impurity), a girl learned to do the ritual of *goussil* (taking a ritual purifying bath) after her period was over. Otherwise she could not sit with others as her body was still in the *najes* (impure) state.

*No one could or would give me an answer to why God would make a woman so dirty once a month and why boys were staying so pure all the time.*

Irrespective of the level of information, almost all participants felt guilty and ashamed every month for receiving their period. For many participants, the experience of their monthly period became an added secret to their lives.

### 5.2.2 Learning the Meaning of Virginity

The participants who had entered puberty soon started understanding some of the implications of menstruation and virginity as they related to the family *aberou* (honor). Few had any specific understanding of what *bekarat*
(virginity) was, but had only superficial information. For the participants, as young girls, family and virginity became synonymous with aberou and chastity, and anything outside these experiences was equivalent to guilt, shame, fear, and sinfulness. Through verbal and non-verbal messages, they all learned that the concept of virginity was vital to their existence. They further learned that virginity had to be preserved. Most of the participants, however, had no concept of how they could save their bekarat (virginity), a concept that had no physical reality to them.

There was no problem for boys…but for girls was different...since no one would have respected that girl anymore…the girl would have consider unchaste having a relationship prior marriage…the girl was not considered pure anymore … she was a second hand girl after that...even if physically she was still a virgin, since she had a relationship, the image that was left behind was like she had lost her virginity anyway...she no longer was pure...you see, virginity was not only a physical factor...virginity had a deeper meaning to it…a girl had to stay virgin both physically and mentally, or emotionally...if a girl had the courage to talk to boys...then mentally she was not a virgin girl anymore…it means she had impure, unchaste thoughts about boys...and that impurity was not acceptable in the society...even in the United States, in Los Angeles...families follow the same rule...in some families still when it comes to marriage, families are looking for a pure virgin girl...Iranian families do ask lots of questions.

Parvin said that her mother believed a girl should not know most of the things about herself since knowing would open up awareness about herself and she could misuse the information. While trying to learn and cope with their experience of menstruation, the participants noticed the changes in their bodies. The only message given to Setareh was not to ever touch her gole (flower; a metaphor used for genitals) since it “would die before blossoming” and she would end up having no value as a girl. She had not learned the concept of sex and did not know what took place between a man and a woman until her wedding night.
I was told that my flower has to stay within a certain size and for me to wear tight girdles and a long pant in order to eliminate enlargement of my flower. Wearing a girdle and a long pant also eliminated easy access to my flower should one was aiming to touch it…I still wear the girdle everyday and sometimes I even go to bed with it.

Many similar experiences were shared. Suddenly, at puberty, talking to boys became a bad and sinful act, but they received no further explanation. They were told not to do anything, such as talking to boys, which could attract the attention of people in the neighborhood in a negative way, as it would impact the family aberou. Setareh said:

*It was the entire neighborhood that made decisions for a girl too…Everyone in my neighborhood knew my schedule, such as butcher, cleaner, the baker, banker… I was told boys and girls were like cotton balls and fire and they just had to stay away from each other…my mother told me that boys were evil people and their job is to deflower girls at my age…I was so fearful of boys that I even started to hate my brothers and father…I thought if boys do such a bad things to girls, my brothers too must be capable of doing the same to me too.*

Some participants’ mothers taught them that even a touch of a hand could cause loss of virginity. Although some of the participants learned that their bekarat (virginity) was vital for them and that they had to remain a bakereh (virgin) until marriage, they did not know what it meant to have sex or how it was related to virginity. They blamed their mothers for not educating them about virginity and sex. Although Mahroukh followed her mother’s instructions about not having intercourse with her boyfriend, she was confused about the effect of touching and kissing each other.

*Since he touched my body, I always thought that was it…my virginity was gone…I thought I was what we called ‘dokhtareh dashtmalee shodeh’ [a second hand unchaste girl]…I was forced to marry him… he also promised to marry me too… [silence].*
Most participants experienced emotional stress over their *pardeh bekarat* (hymen). A few mothers believed that even sharing a bus ride with boys could cause loss of virginity. That idea prevented Soraya from participating in after-school programs. Seema was never told what the *bekarat* was that she could lose during playtime, but she was warned not to play certain games to ensure not losing it. For many participants, the thought of losing their virginity prior to getting married became a *kabous* (nightmare). Shahin recalled her fear and shared how her mother constantly warned her of the possible loss of her virginity.

*We were told that even during sport activities, girls should not run or climb up the trees, or jump over things...since the most important thing for a girl was her virginity in our culture...if a girl loses her bekarat prior to marriage she automatically becomes lakeh nang (sign of disgrace, dishonor, and shame) of the family and her community. The father or brothers usually at times like that would do some harm to the girl and to the man who did it in order to bring back their sharaf (respect and aberou) otherwise they are called ‘beesharaf’ (dishonorable). Virginity, even if a girl was 10 or 60 years old...she had to remain a virgin and the divorced or widow women were not allowed to engage themselves in any sexual activities ...sort of going back to a virgin state.*  
*[Soraya]*

*She told me almost every day that my pardeh bekarat (hymen) was my jewel, and if they take it away from me before marriage, I would be a second hand book and no one wants to read a second hand book to read. After first reading they just toss the book. So, you make sure you keep your bekarat for your marriage.* [Shahin]

One consistent finding that emerged was the fact that there was no name given to the woman’s vagina; the participants referred to their vagina with slang and euphemistic types of references. For example, for Taraneh it was *efat* (virtue, modesty). Parvin, at age seven, learned about her *baagh* (garden), the name given to her vagina, and that it was a prohibited area, not to be touched by anyone,
even herself. Mahin learned from her family and friends that having a naaz (coyness) was a big responsibility, which included her family respect and aberou.

*I had no idea what virginity looked like, but I knew it had something to do with touching my ‘naaz’.*

At first, for participants who had some knowledge about the importance of maintaining their virginity, this concept became the primary task of their lives. They therefore, found alternative ways to educate themselves, and the main source of information became their peers, who also had limited information. However, these participants were able to share information among friends and cousins, read books, and thereby, learn more about sex and the female reproductive system.

Nastaran tearfully said it was not easy to talk about certain things like virginity, in particular with parents. After losing her virginity prior to getting married, she knew that it was not something to discuss with her parents. During her teen years, she had a difficult time understanding the differences in the rules for boys and girls regarding sexual conduct. Today, she still is unable to talk to her female gynecologist or freely express her sexual needs; she carries the same fear of being judged as she had been when she lost her virginity prior to getting married.

*I know that culture has a lot to do with it, but still it is not easy to talk about sex … I probably won’t marry a Persian man or a pure one… they still prefer to marry someone who still is a virgin… culture is a big part of our life… there are so many things… I wouldn’t be able to follow it, as it is… I do have some of my Persian culture… traditions… Values… Such as be in a family environment and spend time with them… be respectful … that is the bottom line… what we are today is all about and the result of our upbringing… and whatever comes with that… there should be more open communication between mothers and daughters… [Silence].*
For these participants, the research interview was their first time having an in-depth discussion about the loss of virginity prior to getting married, and at times they felt ashamed and uncomfortable. They were told as young girls that a girl must always remain a virgin, go to her husband’s house in a white dress (wedding gown), and leave her husband’s house in a white dress (a white shroud used to cover a woman after she dies). Farah told of her family, after being in the United States, continuing to remind her about the cultural values of keeping her virginity and that she could still dishonor the family though living in Los Angeles. In the end she lost her virginity, but did not marry her boyfriend.

I have done a horrible thing by losing my virginity and remained sexually active with my boyfriend...if my parents ever find out about this, that would be the end of life for me and the end of the world for them... none of my American friends were virgin, and they were surprise about me and how I was thinking about keeping it.

5.2.3 Sex as a Social Taboo, and Associated Guilt, Shame, and Fear

All of the participants learned that sex was a taboo subject for discussion. Unless an incident in the family provoked discussion, which was usually brief, no verbal reference was made to it. Sex was an unknown mysterious phenomenon. Outside the home, many participants did learn from other girls of their own age range and shared whatever knowledge with them, but such exchanges were kept secret and protected from family members. Once Touran experienced her menstrual cycle, she began to pay attention to her physical changes. She had a hard time with her efat (modesty - usually reserved for
women and not for men). It was her mission to keep it safe, unharmed, and untouched for her wedding night.

Many participants grew to consider, as Fakhree did, that it was society’s position to prevent them from knowing about sex. Without any knowledge of sex or the female reproductive system, engaging in discussion about sex would not be feasible. Another factor prohibiting such discussion was the absence of specific sex-related vocabulary.

Not having anyone to provide her with sexual education, Fakhree was unable to identify her sexual feelings:

*I was not sure if my feelings were bad or sinful... my feelings were even causing me having physical reactions such as discharges from my “private” at the same time... and sometimes I think I had orgasm... I even thought there must be something wrong with me and had developed some sort of serious illness... I was so frightened... my sister told me that those were normal feelings but I should not discuss them with anyone else in the family or among friends... it was bad to share.*

Many participants failed to understand sex and their sexual-selves; they perceived sex as a sinful act prior to marriage. They also had some confusion as to how sex was defined in the Farsi language and the meaning behind it. Some referred to sex as *ham bastaree* (sharing bed). Fakhree said, “...we don’t have a word for sex in Farsi. It is basically *ameezesh-e-jensee* (mixing bodies)...it is a reference, not a name for sex.”

For some of the participants, the memories of this part of their pasts were very clear. The first message Parvin received as a teen was that sex was a shameful act and a subject reserved for adults in private conversations. She was told not to talk about it even with her friends, although she did. She learned that
another attempt to put sex out of her consciousness during puberty was not to permit anyone to touch her vagina, even herself. She shared an incident that has been on her mind all her life.

One time my sister and I were in the room, also, had our infant sister, and was been fed at that moment. My sister took the baby’s bottle away from her and rubbed it against her lower belly. I called my mother and reported that my sister is rubbing the bottle against her baghesh (a metaphor used for vagina) My mother put a metal spoon on top of the heater, aiming to punish both of us, one for wrong doing and me for reporting about it. I remember we screamed so hard, cried so hard, since then, seriously, this is the first time, and the last time that I talked and shared something. I learned not share information, not to share feelings.

Parvin, therefore, never discussed her puberty with her mother. As Parvin grew up, she observed her father with more than one wife and many other seejeh (temporary marriages). She learned men could approach women however and whenever they wanted. Her childhood molestation by her uncle at the age of seven was another confirmation of her beliefs. She had kept this information private until this interview. Her father told her that if a man approached a woman for sex it was because the woman herself somehow gave that signal. Sex was presented as an “an evil act for a girl” but boys were free to do it. These narrated events have three underlying themes; sex is bad, sex is not to be discussed, and women are the basic reason for it being bad. The culture dealt with women in such a way regarding sex and sexuality that the participants became fearful of being or doing anything; they developed negative feelings and thoughts about themselves. To accept responsibility for their actions and the supposed bad effects of their actions, they essentially exercised the one option they perceived they had, and that was to internalize the culture’s indictments of them. They felt that being a female was the main reason for how they were
treated and how they felt about themselves. Many participants at one time or another received vague, false, confusing, concocted, contradictory, or perverted messages about sex through verbal admonishments and through their own observations of family life events. Sharareh overheard her mother and a friend talking about how the friend’s husband wanted to have anal sex with her. She could not make any sense of what she overheard. Her mother was constantly saying *khakbarsarm* (hope to die) while listening to her friend’s anal sex experience. She wondered what made her mother want to die while listening to her friend and why her friend would allow a man to insert his penis in her anal area. At the same time they were talking about the experience of certain pleasure! Sharareh’s uncertainty led her to fear her mother: “… all my mother had to do was to look at me in her own special way to create the biggest sinful feeling in me when I did something wrong meaning even if a boy looked at me…” Bahareh’s only formal sexual education was received from her mother.

*Her way of telling me about sex was interesting and felt as if it came out of science fictions books …she told me that men by holding a girls hand will end up releasing strange liquid from their hands on the girls legs and by that a girl loses her virginity and ends up pregnant, and become the shame of the family and her life…it was hard for me to imagine something like that, but it came from my mother.*

Some of the participants had more access to consistent and factual information. However, even that was not sufficient to help them form an adequate belief system, to understand themselves as women, or to relate to the variety of messages given to them. For those with limited and minimal information, however, the meanings of the messages were surprising and puzzling as the participants tried to relate them to their more reliable information. Shahin simply stated that no one talked about what sex was.
I was told not to let anyone touch my jewel (a metaphor for Vagina), but I had no idea how even if one touched my jewel I could have lost my pardeh bekarat (Hymen) and why everyone was so concerned about it...it was one thing to lose my jewel, whatever that jewel looked like, but why would a husband want for his wife to lose a valuable jewel anyway? How was he able to replace it with something more valuable... the problem was that I had no idea what was it that I was hiding in as my jewel.

Many times she wished to lose the invisible part of her jewel. She was told that her virginity looked like a pardeh (shield-hymen) located between her legs inside her jewel. She was told to keep her legs closed to prevent dropping her pardeh from between her two legs.

That became my biggest worry in my life at the time to keep boys away from my jewel and to keep my pardeh from ripping apart or falling outside of my onjaa (A metaphor used for vagina).

The messages become stronger once Shahin received her menstrual cycle; she began to feel badly about herself as a girl, but came to realize that she was beautiful, and felt good about being a girl. “...I learned to accept myself as a woman and still be active in sport and be pretty also...” This reality did not exempt her from having to take care of her jewel, for she still had to limit physical activities such as jumping up and down, climbing trees, and horseback riding.

The participants learned that a respectful girl never makes a reference to sex. This was difficult when their bodies began to mature. They wondered about the physical changes that suddenly occurred. At this time Mahroukh’s mother provided new information that if a boy touched her felaan (genital) she would become a dastmalee (second-hand; unchaste) girl. She learned from her friends that some of them never washed their felaan. Mahroukh felt like a dastmalee girl since she and her boyfriend touched each other and kissed. She felt that she deserved to be punished, and when her parents found out about her
having a boyfriend, she did learn her lesson about what it meant to be in contact with a boy before getting married.

Finally the disaster I was waiting for happened. My parents learned about my secret boyfriend. It was really bad...I don’t know how to describe the magnitude of its badness. ... I was held hostage at my own house, locked in a room... no one had the right to visit me, to talk to me, to feed me, or to have any kind of contact with me, not even my sisters who lived in the same house with me...I was punished beyond anyone’s imagination... I was punished, abused, beaten physically every day, verbally abused every day...I was not allowed to say anything or explain anything...[crying]...it was a bad time of my life...I never wanted to be touched by anyone anymore.

The sin of sex was a recurring and pervasive theme during puberty and the teen years. The participants ultimately had to accept that sex oon kare bad (the bad act) was a sinful and shameful act for a girl. It was the most zesht (ugly) and ghabeeh (un-chaste and prohibited) act that anyone could engage in. Taraneh believed and heard from others that she was a beautiful girl with lots of curves and dark long hair. As the changes in her genital area was noticed, she was told to wear long dresses to cover the front part of her body and hip areas and to walk in a certain way to draw less attention. She was also told not to ever touch her efat (modesty – also used as a metaphor for female genitals) or risk losing what was in it, for doing so was sinful. She commented that her efat was all she was as a girl. Eventually she had to accept the reality of life for girls:

It was wrong to do ‘on kar’ (A metaphor used for having sex)…sex before marriage was a sinful act which would have destroyed a girl’s life and family aberou in their society in particular in our small rural area where everyone knew each other.

Parynaz, similar to other participants in this category, learned that to talk about sex was not socially acceptable and honorable for a young girl.
All I heard about sex was bad, my caregivers always added negative, sinful, prefix to the word sex or naming women whom she didn’t like with this added prefixes to degrade them...such as for example ‘zaneekeh jendeh’ (prostitute woman) or in general a woman who was sexually active without having a husband which included divorced, and widow women too...everyone, even women, if they didn’t like another woman, they would say about her that ‘leave her, she is nothing but a jendeh (whore).

I learned to cover and suffocate my feelings by eating and eating... I learned to punish myself for being a female child by over eating... I was trying to hide myself...eating was the only thing that made me feel good even if it was for a few minutes...every time I had my period, I hated myself... I hated my ojagh (oven, her metaphor for vagina) since it was a sign my sinfulness and shame of my family.

Nastaran, while growing up, learned that certain subjects were not for discussion, regardless of where they lived – in Iran, Libya, or the United States. She said sex was not something that was talked about in her family and it was basically understood that she was not allowed to have sex until she married. Mahtab, too, learned that sex was a taboo subject in both of her parents’ Latino and Iranian cultures, as well as in the American culture – but more so, on her father’s side. Mahtab’s father made sure that his daughter was safe in his own way. He hired her for summer jobs at his office as a way to protect her from interacting with boys in Los Angeles and to stay away from trouble (meaning having sex with boys). She learned about sex and puberty in Los Angeles while attending Catholic school.

I think the first sexual conversation I had with my mom...had nothing to do with sex; she was trying to explain to me that I was going to have my period... [laughing]...that was it... she was trying to tell me what to do with it and why I was going to get it... [laughing].

Farah recalled that no one talked about sex when she was in Iran. Her mother told her that only a zaneekeh bee haya (unchaste woman) talks about sex.
Sex was only for men; women had no business knowing about, talking about, or sharing information about sex. Although talking about sex was considered a bad thing for a woman, her mother did not keep her sexual activities hidden from Farah. She was interested to know what her genitals looked like, but she was too embarrassed to find out. The main message for Farah was not to touch herself.

*I saw my parents having sex. Seeing my mother on top of my father while he was holding her down and she was making sounds, was a bad experience for me... They were both totally naked and it felt like my mother was suffering, I hated my father to force my mother on top of him... Later, it was a question for me all the time, how a woman can sit on top of a man? [laughing]... I was fearful too... I was angry at them too... I knew something was happening between my parents, and it was okay for them to share a bed, it felt like they did a big sin. I was not fully familiar with the term sex, but I knew at age 12, having sex was a sinful act especially when a woman does it. My mother was on the top, which means she was acting sinfully... It is like my own 'self' is unrecognizable to me as it has been since then... I have never touched myself at all in my whole life... I don't know what 'my thing' (vagina) looks like.*

At puberty, despite the accumulation of prescribed behaviors for a girl, the participants had already developed their own secret set of subjective moral standards. Attempts to reconcile the differences brought a great deal of confusion, as there were mixed messages received from a variety of sources, conflicts in their own mind, challenges with self beliefs, new information that was not well understood, and a self-determination that was not allowed to express itself. This level of independent thinking caused an emotional separation from family and home environment. For most, it became a struggle between responding to their feelings and following what was expected. It was then that the participants needed to learn more about their sexual-selves and to internalize this knowledge. In most cases, a realistic understanding of their sexual selves did not occur because of the discrepancy in their own thinking and the constant
external messages. Guilt based on the belief that they had done something wrong, bad, and unforgivable usually set in. As their guilt increased, they developed more shame, and began to believe that they, themselves, were bad.

5.2.4 Having Secret Lives and Experiencing First Love

The participants learned to have secret lives since they had to behave one way to the outside world, while maintaining another private, inside, secret life. The outside life was the perfect image needed to maintain their aberou (reputation); the inside secret life was what they wanted to be. Their job was to maintain the perfect outside image. However, for Mahtab, Farah, Shahin, Gooleen, Nastaran, and Ziba, who had sexual intercourse prior to getting married, this image was not possible to keep. Their secret lives became part of their outside lives and the images of their sexual-selves became sinful, shameful, and guilt-ridden. However, somewhere in their unconscious mind it felt right, and there was no guilt, shame, or sinfulness. These six participants were among the group of Iranian immigrants who migrated to the United States when they were single young adults.

Gooleen kept her relationship with her boyfriend a secret, and only her brothers knew about it. Gradually, her relationship went to the next level. Eventually, she was thinking of having sex with him. Ultimately, she did have sex with her boyfriend. She felt bad about having had sex before her marriage. Gooleen's secrecy about her sexual expression in first love was an extension of the teachings of her culture, her attempts and disappointments to be the khanoum (ladylike) that her Iranian culture had prescribed for young women so that the honor of her family could be held high.
It was shameful to let anyone know about my boyfriend and my family wanted me to keep it until my boyfriend and I got married.

When he touched me, I felt my heart was pumping so hard, like the cartoon movies, have you seen the heart moves, and starts to pump, that’s the way I felt. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t. I was so nervous. The very first time he touched me... That was a good feeling... I keep telling him, don’t touch me...[laughing, blushing, kept her head down, no eye contact with the researcher, shyness]...we started to kiss... it was good until he pushed his tongue into my mouth, it became disgusting... I didn’t know what to do.

I was crying... [very low tone of voice, blushing, looking down]...I wasn’t feeling good anymore. But I didn’t stop him...I had sex before getting married...it was what my mother told me not to do.

I never saw a penis before...when I refused to have sex with him, he masturbated in front of me. It was so horrible and I felt dirty...but, he masturbated me and that was my first sexual experience...when he touched my onjaam [down there] it felt good...and we had sex.

The participants as girls kept secret their first loves and their interest in boys. They were so frightened of their mothers that they never disclosed their feelings. A few were even nervous during the interview, while recalling their feelings. They felt perhaps the interviewer would think of them as “bad women”, as Parvin said. At the same time they felt excited about having the opportunity to share their perceptions. The participants recalled that making one wrong move, making them “bad girls” would have set them apart from others as well as their families, but the experience of love was exciting.

Touran, like a few others, fell in love with the boy next door. This was very common since the participants had no permission to go elsewhere to meet other people. Their neighborhood was their only world. She recalled her deep feelings as if she was experiencing them in the present time:
I still feel the joy and the love of the first boy I ever loved...he was about eighteen... I felt like wanting to see him every day, all the time...I missed him all the time...uhhh...I felt like I loved him so much...now that I am thinking about him I miss him, and I am sad now that I am thinking about him...(tearful)... laughing... it was the first time my heart larzeed (palpitation - when a person's feels their heart is shaking as result of losing it or giving it away to another person when someone is deeply in love)...it was not bad...but now, that I am thinking back in the days...I really loved him...it felt so good.

Touran never felt the same about another man. She remained a virgin until she was married.

Having a boyfriend, being interested in a boy, or accepting the attention of boys brought about a new level of secrecy for the participants. Having a secret boyfriend gave some girls a different level of power and confidence. Mahroukh said, “...I was receiving a different type of attention that was not familiar to me...I was told that I was attractive... beautiful...sexy...and I even didn't know what it meant at the time...” These girls liked feeling attractive and enjoyed boys following them around. They liked boys admiring and talking about their beauty, but it all had to be kept as a secret joy. They also liked looking at boys, too. For Taraneh, this was a new kind of excitement. When her body changed, all of a sudden, looking at boys seemed different and brought an emotional pleasure not experienced before this time in her life. These new experiences for her required the continued security of secrecy to protect her from family’s dictations. Parvin was unable to freely express her sexual feelings with her boyfriend. She did not have the words for them; however she became an artist which eventually allowed her to express her feelings in her paintings.
Instead I painted my feelings, and wrote poems about them...expressing my feelings would have been like definitely...it was the feeling of degrading or de-valuing myself in order to say to a man that you want them for example, and similar expressions of feelings...somehow my feelings were admired in the form of art...expressing feelings was shame, it was shameful.

Shahin, similar to the experiences of some of her friends, managed to keep relationships with boys a secret from her mother and uncles and even some friends. Two years after receiving her period at the age of thirteen, she felt sexual and confused most of the time. Shahin had her first orgasm while horseback riding. She was not sure what happened, but horseback riding became a habit for her. She felt as if no one should know about her good feeling. However, at a party, when a boy touched her jewel, she experienced the same good feeling.

*I was fearful, but excited, I felt shameful that a boy finally managed to touch my jewel, but I liked the feeling... I was not sure if I was a virgin or not... for a while I thought I lost my virginity.*

Being constantly worried about losing her virginity and someone touching her jewel, she wished to lose it and to be over with it. Shahin stated that as a young girl she felt “wanting to be touched in her jewel (vagina)” all the time. However, she remained a virgin until marriage.

When Mahtab was sexually active as a single Iranian-American girl, she felt she was mature enough to decide if having sex was the right choice for her. When her father decided to talk to her about the birds and the bees, she simply told him that “he has missed the boat long time ago.” Whatever variety of sexual experience was contemplated or actually participated in, as long as they were sex related or had some type of sexual orientation or connotation, the experiences carried with them feelings of fear, shame, guilt, and sinfulness.
5.3 Sexual Experiences Within Marriage

No one said anything to me that I was getting married that night...there was no prior discussion...all of a sudden there were many people around and some man put a ring on my finger...I took the ring off of my finger and gave it to my father and told him I had no idea that I was getting married and to whom?...at the time I was only seventeen and no one took me seriously... it was a done deal. [Rafat]

This section discusses the experiences of women within marriage. The themes include arranged marriages, confirming virginity and loss of virginity, life and sex within marriage, and staying within abusive and unhappy marriages. The impact of these experiences on the participants’ psychological and emotional health as well as their understanding of their sexual-self is described.

Most of the participants in particular, those who married in Iran, were unable to choose their husbands. Personal choice based on romantic love was not usually possible; marriage was viewed as a family affair, decided by the parents of the young couple, similar to the process when the participants’ mothers got married. There were even a few participants whose fathers and mothers gave their consent without informing their daughters. The participants were considered cheshmeh-ghoosh-basteh or aftab-mahtab-nadeedeh (pure at the level of being too naïve) to make such a major decision for themselves.

For one thing, parents did not want their daughters to make a mistake and return to them as divorced wives, for this would have brought the shame to the family and lowered their social standing in the community. Besides, it was not safe to have a single sexually experienced woman in the home, since the girl could have come to harm or be approached by other men for sex. Additionally,
this single woman could have a “corrupting influence” on those who could potentially learn about sex and sexuality.

In traditional conservative families, while the brides often had either minimal or no knowledge of their future husbands’ appearance or personality prior to getting married, the same applied to the grooms, too, of course, because they relied on their mothers’ and sisters’ choices to find a bride for them. Most men asked their mothers and sisters to go to khastegaree (requesting permission to marry someone’s daughter) to request the hand of a daughter who had been highly recommended as a future wife. This process gave the groom an opportunity to observe and evaluate his future wife.

In the process of khastegaree, once marriage was approved, some of the girls were allowed to date their assigned fiancés only briefly (maybe once or twice as a way to get to know each other) before marrying. Such meetings were supervised by older family members. Sometimes, a younger or older brother would accompany the new future couple; they were never allowed to be alone.

Of those who migrated to the United States as single girls, some had the opportunity to find their future husbands while at college. Cultural factors still made both parties follow most of the traditional rules, as they would have in Iran. It was simply not permissible to have romantic relationships with other students while Iranian students and families were present in their existing community.
5.3.1 Confirming Virginity and Loss of Virginity

Seventeen of the participants had to undergo a physical examination before their marriage in Iran, to ensure their virginity prior to their wedding night. Next to losing their virginity, this process was one of their most traumatic experiences. For most, the first shock of the marital process was to learn that their mothers did not believe they were virgins, even though they had followed all the steps to maintain their virginity. To establish proof of their virginity, they had to be examined physically by a doctor who would provide a virginity certificate to both families. Being intimately touched by an unfamiliar person was the second shock. They felt ashamed, embarrassed, and hurt by knowing they were not trusted. They felt demoralized by not being informed previously of the physical invasion to their bodies. The participants had no one in whom they could confide. They felt isolated, betrayed, powerless, and alone during this painful process.

I don’t know why even my mother did not believe that I was a virgin…I had to be examined by a doctor to validate my virginity…during examination I had no idea what was going to happen… the doctor told me to remove my panty and to open up my legs…he opened my vagina by his hands, looked inside and said she is okay…I was shaking like a bird…the examination took a few short second, but the negative impact of it has lasted a life time. [Yasaman]

My future husband’s family asked for virginity certification…they would not allow the marriage to take place without that certificate…it was the most frightening experience of my life at the time… I even never changed my cloths in front to my mother, now, I had to open my legs in front of a stranger for him to look at my most private place…[crying]…I even didn’t look at mine before…the doctor was searching for something and looking deep inside of me… I was so humiliated… I felt so alone…[crying]…why no one believed me. [Fakhree]
For many of the participants, sexual feelings did not suddenly occur when they finally started having intercourse. Even if their initiation into sex occurred on their wedding night, sanctioned by society and their parents, it was not easy to erase all of the earlier negative messages that kept them anxious and inhibited. During their first sexual experiences, they were self-conscious, confused, embarrassed, fearful, angry, and felt sinful. It was a painful, joyless process, and they wondered why they had to suffer and be punished that way. They wondered why their husbands and families wanted them to commit a sinful act and why it was suddenly okay to do so!

The wedding night was a series of shocks for the bride. Behind closed doors, but within earshot of loud celebrations and verbal and impatient urgings of the community to get on with producing the blood-stained sheet, the participant was confronted for the first time with the completely unclothed body of a man, one she hardly knew, but who was also her husband. The next shock was to perform with him an act she had never seen, that had not been defined, described, or explained to her, and that she was helpless to know what to do to participate in it. She further was not able to comprehend why a bloody sheet would be the product of activity. The next shock was the experience of painful invasion of her body, the unclothed and naked intimacy of coitus, and the confusions set off in her mind as a result. A very personal shock and disbelief was to learn that she had lost the sacred virginity from its hiding place, that the entire community was rejoicing over it and that she had lost in a few minutes what family and community all of her life had bid her to protect in the name of family honor. The profound shock was to learn that she had performed the ultimate sinful act of sex.
The participants, not knowing what to expect, recalled their intense fear of the first nuptial night. They spoke about the humiliation, surprise, and confusion experienced from this ritual to publicly inform the community of their chastity throughout their life. They voiced anger over the discovery of having lost in a brief and painful episode the thing that had occupied their attention and been the source of much stressful emotion for years. They were in disbelief, felt a sense of abandonment by their parents, as they would no longer live at home, and felt crushed because they had not been trusted. The trauma of these experiences was a determining factor in shaping the nature of their sexual-selves and sexual lives.

All of a sudden it was okay for me to lose my virginity to this stranger…it was so hard for me to do a sinful act…all my life I was told to keep my legs together, now all of a sudden I had to open them wide to this stranger [tearful]…called my husband [shouting] and let him do this sinful act to me and unchaste me…[Crying]…all because he could do what he wanted to do with me…because he was a man… and I had to obey as his wife…[quiet voice]. [Mahroukh]

After the ceremony we were send to our bedroom and he told me to take my clothes off…there were people outside our bedroom cheering and calling his name telling him to hurry up and what was taking him so long… he asked for my white fabric to have it ready…I had no idea what was going to happen…I was frightened…I knew it was time to have sex but I had no idea what it was…he showed me his huge penis and he pushed it inside me…I was bleeding and he wiped my blood in the white fabric, took it outside and everyone started to cheer even more…[crying].

Perhaps the biggest discovery for me was the fact that men do not have any respect for women during sex and in particular during wedding night. [Yasaman]
5.3.2 Life and Sex Within Marriage

The participants shared and explored the range of challenges they faced throughout their lives as married women. Each participant talked about her sexual problems as a wife. The problems ranged from fear of sex, lack of knowledge about sex, lack of knowledge about her husband’s expectations, rape within marriage, and other challenges. As many participants were married before getting to know their husbands, they found it difficult to love their husbands. They also felt that they no longer had a place at their parents’ house. Marriage was a guarantee of having food and shelter for the rest of a girl’s life and, in return, she was to be devoted to her husband’s and her children’s well-being and needs. The destiny of a good wife and a good mother was to be obedient and seldom be allowed to do anything for herself.

Of the 24 study participants, many had children. Fear of losing their children to their husbands as per Iranian divorce laws, forced them to remain in unhappy marriages for the sake of the children. Other reasons for remaining married were to receive financial support and avoid being labeled as a divorced woman. Fear of God and His punishment made them follow their husbands’ orders even more. Also, as stated above there was no other place available to which they could go; no options left.

A few of the participants had to share the initial part of their married life with in-laws. They were considerably younger than their husbands and were expected to abide by cultural perceptions about appropriate gender roles. The requirement to value male supremacy and to seek acceptance by the in-laws led to an oppressive situation in which the young women lacked their own voices and the ability to make personal decisions. This created a situation in which most
newly married women, young and inexperienced, felt lonely and isolated. Being responsible for the creation of family life, many participants got pregnant soon after getting married. Many of the participants felt overwhelmed by the sudden changes in their lives – becoming a wife, mother, daughter-in-law, and leaving their families at such a young age.

The early years of marriage presented several major and sudden changes in the lives of the participants. They lost their virginity, their family, and their single lifestyle. They gained a husband, housekeeping duties, a sex life, in-laws, and one or two children. Whatever difficulties, adjustments, or trials they may have experienced had to be dealt with or coped with. Participants shaped their behavior to conform to the expectation that males were aggressive while females were restrained, resulting in accepting their husbands as active initiators in sex while they remained the passive and pleasing wife. They learned that men had a different level of sexual expectations and needs and, while it was expected of them, a wife was unable to meet all the needs of her husband. A few participants reported knowing that their husbands had had affairs, sometimes from the beginning of their marriage.

As inexperienced young women, even though married, the participants did not know their personal sexual likes and dislikes. They did not know what sexually stimulated them and were unable to relate to their feelings and identify them as sexually related. They felt sexually resentful most of the time. They felt they had no rights of their own, but must be accommodating whenever their husbands were sexually interested. They also felt that they must avoid exhibiting strong sexual desire, even towards the husband, or they would have been considered unchaste women.
Having sex with him became a chore...I became more fearful and hateful of him...he forced me to have sex...my entire body was getting locked up and my vagina would not open for penetration...I begun to hate myself for being a woman...I hated me for being a woman. [Rafat]

After many years the participants still remembered the early period of their marriage and the difficulties they experienced as a result of the sudden changes in their life situation. They recalled a period of their life that was not their choice, and in which they had no interest. They did not feel love towards the strangers called their life partners, their husbands. It was life that the participants had no part in designing. Their orientation to life was just to be accepted as a good girl because that was the tradition to follow as a girl in Iran. The idea prescribed by their families, basically by their mothers, was that they would grow to love their husbands as their mothers loved theirs.

My mother told me love will come later...she told me to follow her footsteps and it will all be fine...I had to serve my husband’s sexual needs no matter what and disobeying him would have given him permission to treat me as he was pleased...my mother told me I will learn as I go along with my husband and he will teach me what to do as a wife. [Setareh]

A few participants felt raped during their wedding night and in every episode of sex afterwards.

At my wedding night...[tearful]...while I was being raped by this man as my husband, guests were outside my bedroom waiting to see the bloody white fabric and kept knocking at the door and encouraging this man to hurry up,...and... made fun of him for delaying...he was raping me...I was hurting and crying [crying now]...he acted like an animal on top of me and pushed his penis in me...[crying]...I lost my chastity and family honor that I tried so hard to keep...my family aberou was taken away from me just like that in a few minutes...[crying]...I learned that was sex but it always felt like rape to me.
Knowing that their parents were also aware of their daughters’ feelings, the participants felt as if their husbands were permitted to rape them. For some of the participants this resulted in suicidal thoughts and attempts. Eventually, coming to terms with the role of being a passive wife, they accepted this role and found it was a way to be accepted by their husbands and his family. However, to be passive on a long term basis meant giving up control over their bodies and souls.

I did not love him… I just didn’t want to stay married to him… but my parents kept telling me that people were going to talk bad about them and it was going to damage their aberou… they told me I had to stay with my husband, to obey him and leave him in the white kafan (dead white outfit)… I thought of running away… I was afraid that he was going to find me and to kill me… he could and no law would found him guilty since he had the right to take care of his honor. [Rafat]

The participants' culmination of childhood and commencement of adulthood was essentially marked by their engagement announcement, the confirmation of virginity process, the marriage ceremony, and their sexual experiences on the wedding night. However, the personal trauma associated with these events ranked highest in the minds of most of participants who were the center of those experiences.

Across all the participants’ narratives a common thread was the strong emotions about being belittled and degraded because their feeling and experiences were disregarded and invalidated by their husbands and families. Their retrospective journeys through their narrated experiences show how the impositions of culture through family structure and socio-political norms and rules shaped the formation of their sexual-selves and gender roles. The suppression of their sexual-selves was accompanied by feelings of fear, shame, and guilt overlaid by internal and external messages of worthlessness and
inadequacy. The combination of all these factors served primarily to maintain an image of family honor and the continuation of social structure, but one which caused enormous emotional damage to all the participants.

5.4 Conclusion

The focus of this chapter was to describe the participants’ narratives of their life events, from childhood to the marital process, in relation to the formation of their sexual-selves and gender roles. The participants described key events and experiences they thought significant in shaping their sexual-selves. As their disclosures unfolded, the participants began to make connections between events. They were able to identify recurring responses to their experiences, determine factors for their responses to events, and understand persistent or altered views from an individual or cultural viewpoint. Finally, they could form and ask new questions regarding their relationship to larger social structures – patriarchy, religion, culture, and society. Some had altered notions of their sexual-selves, while others considered their lives to be more pro-survival by maintaining the values of their home culture. Important to all participants was the opportunity to voice the nature of their experiences, their own feelings and perceptions of those experiences, without censor.
CHAPTER 6
THE UNDOING, UNLEARNING, RE-LEARNING
PROCESS OF SEXUAL-SELF

The themes presented in this chapter are largely about the participants’ struggles to undo and re-structure their learned role and to leave behind their old and prescribed selves, as a result of how they saw the world. This chapter describes the pain and the challenges the participants faced because of their desire to change and learn more about their sexual-selves. As pointed out in the previous chapter, the participants had a difficult time integrating what was called the “sexual-self” into their lives in a meaningful way. These were difficult issues for them to face, considering their upbringing. Painting 6.1 is a depiction of the Iranian woman’s inescapable attachment to her culture and its patriarchal system.

This chapter will try to reveal the depth of pain many of these women felt about their sexual-selves while remaining hopeful that they would find some answers. By going through a review of their lives, many of these women have gained a better self-understanding. This process of change has taught participants that it is possible for them to change, grow, and unearth their true selves as separate and sexual beings.5

5 The definitions of the various Farsi terms introduced in this thesis are provided in the Glossary of Non-English Terms on page 301.
6.1 Origins of the Undoing and Unlearning Process

During adolescence and marriage, many of the participants reached a point in life at which they decided that they were ready for the experience of individuation, regardless of where and how they were living. This process of self-recognition was gradual, beginning with the belief that it was possible to have different and independent thoughts apart from others around them. They began to see themselves as separate beings from others, and finally could acknowledge that what was occurring around them culturally did not have as much use to them as before.

There was a constant struggle between doubt and self-assurance that what they were doing was right. There were moments when they feared others would find out about the inner struggles they were experiencing. To develop a separate and different way of seeing the world was taking a big risk, one that could have had many repercussions, such as abandonment. There were moments of relapse to *vabastegee sonatee* (cultural attachment), in which they had to remind themselves that it was acceptable to have independent thoughts, as long as this difference remained their secret. For some of the participants, this process offered a greater level of confidence. This new level of self-awareness helped them to continue to accept and interpret the meaning of new information, which finally assisted them in the undoing and unlearning of old beliefs and habits.

The process of undoing and unlearning for most of the participants occurred after several events in their lives. For example, after her divorce, Shahin came to the realization that she did not know herself and was living in a dream of constant activities in which there was never a moment of self-recollection. She needed to find her true identity – self as a free woman. The
process of becoming aware of her sexual-self is something she chose to begin because she was ready to experience the fullness of life.

I learned from early on men leave us... [tearful... silence]... for example, my dad left me... [crying quietly... silence and crying continued for about five minutes]...I felt like... I have been through this many many times, but still... uhm... I felt when my dad left, then my brother left us... [tearful]...no matter how good my mother was or how good I was... [silence...crying]...you know... fuck men... [crying]...I felt I am not going to meet them again... you know... which was okay... it worked fine. It was to my benefit. Oh, and also, my first marriage, I made sure that he leaves me, because I had that belief that men leave, and I made the poor thing leave, I made sure that he doesn’t succeed, that he was never good enough, or he was not going to be good enough, then, so he left, so, then, I was right. Men do leave us... so I did the same.

From childhood, a few of the participants sub-consciously developed a boyish attitude to resist parental and societal orders, and provide a personal security mechanism for warding off unwanted attention from family and community. Somehow, without using words, behaviorally they were opposing the system, even if they were frightened, confused, and did not know what they were doing. For example, Mahin, while always afraid of boys, fearing that they would harm her, thought if any of them got close to her, she would hurt them for sure. As a result, she developed an aggressive and assertive personality as a young teen. At about seventeen she was able to gain her family’s trust and moved to the capital city to live with grandparents, but she never felt free from her mother’s messages. Eventually, she kept her thoughts to herself and everything in life became her secrets. The struggle between her self-determination and cultural expectation did not allow Mahin to fully explore who she was at that stage, as cultural messages kept invading her reasoning. She went to the university in Tehran, but she did not feel comfortable sitting next to male students. At this stage of her life any discomfort she may have experienced
in her interactions with male students was attenuated because she was
determined to live her life abroad.

*I always had the dream of getting married to someone who could take me to either France or to the United States. Marriage was a way out of Iran and away from my mother. My marriage was not out of love, and I continued with my bossy attitude.*

Soon after she and her husband arrived in the United States, she became the breadwinner of the house. With that change she met other men, opening new vistas for other relationships. She did not enjoy her sexual relationship with her husband, as he was unable to satisfy her. This was just one example of her personal exploration, in which she found herself hungry for new experiences in life.

For Fakhree, the chance to change her life started out with having an arranged marriage. A mother of two college students at the time of the interview, she owned a dry cleaning business, and her husband was a bus driver. She says she has changed a great deal but she believes her religious Muslim family background, her *bad* traditional culture, and worst of all, her mother’s voice, still haunt her. After living in the United States for over thirty years, she believes that her traditional Persian values are still with her and guiding her life. Fakhree has been able to create a balance for herself and her family by maintaining an American attitude outside the home, but an Iranian traditional home environment to satisfy her husband, who has changed a little, and to maintain *aberou* (social respect) within the Iranian community. Fakhree and her husband are both struggling with how their children have become “Americanized”. She is concerned about what other Iranians say about them. Every time her family visits her from Iran, she has to hire someone to run the dry
cleaning business since, according to her parents, it is \textit{bad} for a woman to have such exposure to men and their intimate apparel.

Taraneh, a \textit{motalageh} (divorsee), had a challenging attitude from childhood, when she wanted to play with boys, and regardless of consequences, she did. At a time when all women had to cover their hair, she decided to stay home and limit her social life. For her, that was resisting the system. Her response to having to cover her hair is an example of the self-determining of what a sexual-self can or cannot do.

\textit{I didn't understand why I had to cover my beautiful hair. Our town was famous for its natural beauty. Part of its beauty was women working in the rice fields while holding and carrying their children on their back. They usually had beautiful colorful cultural outfit on, and their hairs were nicely shaped with the outfit. It was like that for centuries...that life style is unique to Caspian Sea area... I wasn't going to let them change us by wearing a maghnaee (head scarf).}

She came to the United States at the age of seventeen and was told to live with her brothers. This circumstance limited her choices to select a university elsewhere and she attended a local college. At first she became fearful of living in a big city; she was afraid she would not be able to take care of herself. She even thought that left to her own devices she would not be able to make decisions that would measure up to those a man would make for her. For a while she regretted moving to the United States.

\textit{I was still with my brothers and my cousins... I was not alone... I got busy with school and later with work as well... amazingly; I did not feel alone or missed my parents.}

Farah, growing up with the concept of \textit{khanoum} (ladylike) as a way of life, and being a disappointment to her family for having been born a girl, questioned her existence, which became her secret search for herself. She felt guilty,
ashamed, and sinful about all she heard about herself, but at the same time she felt like she had not done anything wrong, as her parents claimed she did. Farah’s desire to be a good girl and the messages she received about her sinful sexual-self was the source of constant struggle to have a sense of who she really was.

Farah witnessed an incident she perceived to be a cultural norm violation, according to teachings of her family, particularly her mother. She believed that sex for a woman was a sinful act. When she was about fifteen, she saw for the first time her parents having sex. That was a wakeup call that her parents were the sinful ones, and not her.

I didn’t know what to do as I was watching them and they didn’t know I was there… later, it was a question for me all the time, how and why a woman can sit on top of a man? [laughing].

Farah’s reckoning with the discrepancy between what she had been taught with what she observed in those, her mother particularly, who taught her was an ordinary process in her life, as was the case with many other participants. Such occurrences brought her to consider what it meant to be taught these lessons. She continued to search for answers by watching American made movies, despite her parents’ disapproval and belief that only prostitute girls and women watch movies.

If a woman had approached a man in the movies, my mother would have said something like zaneekeh bee haya (a shameless woman, acting like a prostitute)... my mother would send us kids to our rooms and stated that those were bad acts and we should not look at them...that is how I learned perhaps initially, that a woman is not supposed to act first and sex is not about a woman’s desire... but my mother was one of the bad girls herself... I saw it myself how jendeh (prostitute) she could be with my father.
Farah’s friendship with her aunt offered her different messages since her aunt primarily lived in the United States. While at first Farah thought of her aunt as a bad, sinful woman, since she had learned from her mother that all women who live in the United States were prostitutes, Farah still felt comfortable maintaining her relationship with her aunt via letters and phone calls. Receiving double-standard messages from what her mother and society were telling her, and what her aunt was telling her, made Farah feel even more confused. Every time her aunt came back to Iran, Farah saw a better and more accomplished person than her mother, even if her aunt was a sinful woman.

I thought of her as an expert in just about everything. She became my ideal person. She became my role model. I felt that I was so less of her. I felt so shy around her. I have the same feelings around boys. I came to Los Angeles when I was seventeen, and even after all this time I experience the same feeling of shyness, guilt, the shame, the fear, the sweating... [silence].

Mahroukh came from the southern part of Iran where there was a considerable number of British, Americans, and Germans living near the oil fields. While her friends were limited to her sisters, she was able to listen to the conversations of foreign girls her age, some of whom even attended her school. What they shared was dissimilar to Mahroukh’s life experiences. In this environment, she managed to spend time reading books, poems, and foreign newspapers through which she acquired new knowledge and explored new viewpoints. The short time she was in a Girl Scouts program also gave her additional awareness about more possibilities available for a girl than what she had been told. She learned that she could have the same level of freedom as boys, going to movies and public swimming pools with her friends, bringing them home to visit, reading the books of her choice, choosing the person and the time to marry, and generally having more freedom of choice and expression of
opinion. The sad part was that she could not share her thoughts and information with anyone but her sisters. She had an arranged marriage at age sixteen with someone she did not know. Her husband was abusive and controlling. After reviewing and reflecting on her life story, she believed she had repeated the same pattern several times by accepting and complying with what she calls abusive behavior when she knew that her family and her society were wrong. Secretly, throughout her life, in her mind she constantly focused on what she learned from her foreign friends, hoping that some day she would live as they with more freedom.

[silence]... it is amazing... now that I am talking about it... I can see a pattern in my life... a pattern that was generated by my parents... even with my sisters... we all fell in that trap and followed it for the rest of our lives.

Mahroukh felt her rights were taken away by her parents every time her parents used force by beating her up, locking her in her room, or not allowing her to have any contact with the outside world, all in the name of saving her from evil men and from losing her virginity. This was not for her benefit but for maintaining her parents’ reputation. She accepted these realities, but did not agree with them.

They made me learn and to believe that wanting, desiring, feelings, are not for a female... that I should disregard them and they became the don’ts of my life... I took with me this concept, this perception, this foundation to my first husband’s home and he added to it his belief system about women and I took it all in and made it my own belief system... I accepted to become punished, to accept physical and verbal abuse as part of being a najib (chaste) wife... how my feelings, my desires were never a consideration in life even in my life... I allowed him to force himself on me and rape me almost every night, in the name of marriage, in the name of serving my husband.
Parynaz, belonging to a conservative family with relaxed strictures, knew that there was more to life than her Iranian existence showed her. She was able to read books and newspapers, and question the system of different rules for men and women. While living in Iran, she knew that her life would be about maintaining traditions and following her mother’s and other female relative’s footsteps. However, she was looking for an opportunity to build a different life for herself. One way to become separate from her family was to fail the entry exam to the university, and she deliberately did just that. Her family’s aberou was in jeopardy. Shortly after, she was sent to Los Angeles to stay with relatives until the family could decide what to do with her. After arriving in Los Angeles, and wanting more freedom for herself, Parynaz married a black Jamaican man. In this scenario, beginning with her early childhood experiences, it can be seen that Parynaz had an early childhood commencement of her undoing and unlearning. Her predisposition to life is attributable to the opportunities made available by her family lifestyle. Allowed the freedom to explore data from printed materials, from which she extracted viewpoints to be more self-determined, Parynaz accumulated the personal power needed to express her sexual-self.

I just wanted to use him to get out of my house and gain my freedom... I knew I was dropping a bomb on my family, but I just had to do this for myself... while it gave me a great joy and satisfaction to do it... it was like taking revenge for all the hard time they gave me while growing up, for all the sacrifices I made while in Iran... for all the inhibitions I had to face since I was a girl... for all the irrational do’s and don’ts they told me all my life... [tearful... silence].

Touran is among the participants who were unable to challenge the system of arranged marriage in Iran. She reconciled herself to marriage, as she did not perceive any other options without undue consequences. She openly
spoke of sacrificing her body and emotions to maintain her sense of self and physical well being. Acquiescing for her was a form of protection, a way to keep safe from harm and unwanted reprisal, at least for a while. Not being in love with her husband, she assumed that if she agreed to have sex with him she would be considered a beehaya (unchaste girl). She was confused by her earlier upbringing, which mandated that she should not allow anyone to touch her. She internalized this concept to a point that it was difficult for her to accept having sex with her husband who was nothing to her but a stranger. She had difficulty accepting and trusting that it was legal and acceptable to have sex with her husband and to allow him to touch her body in the name of marriage and not call her a beehaya afterwards. She did not want to be called beehaya by anyone, and therefore, continued to be what she first was told to be by her parents. During the interview, Touran stated that after getting married she realized that she would never have a chance to express herself since her Iranian culture made her fearful to be expressive about herself. Touran learned that asking for sex would destroy all of her honor and an Iranian woman could not afford a loss of this magnitude.

I have learned to believe that a marriage is based on a woman’s sacrifice for her family and sex is only a small part of it for her husband pleasure... my mother lived like that, my grandmother lived like that, I think my sisters are doing the same thing... it does not matter where we live, we are ultimately Iranians and have our own culture... [silence...sad].

Seema challenged the cultural norms of her Iranian homeland. Married at nineteen, and not having her husband living at home due to his job gave her more freedom to concentrate on herself. Finally, after the 1979 revolution her husband sent her to the United States with the children and intended to join them later. Seema lived with his brother for six years, and went to college and
finished her degree. While living away from her husband in the United States, she noticed significant differences, such as the relationship between men and women. She found American women’s lives very disgraceful, but soon she got used to it. She even thought of getting a divorce despite the fact that divorce culturally is not a good action for an Iranian woman.

For Sharareh, dreaming became her escape. While her behavior and words were controlled, she learned that no one could see her thoughts, and she could keep her voice to herself, and dream about what she desired. Sharareh made several attempts to gain freedom by talking to her mother, but it was not possible. Finally, she managed to leave Iran and move to the United States. She left a highly controlled environment behind and never thought she would have the ability to survive outside Iran. Despite all the difficulties and fear of living in a different country, Sharareh was determined to follow the dictates of her true self in order to have a life free of her home culture no matter the consequences or risks she would encounter.

For me to come to this country where there was no control I felt kind of lost about what to do and therefore I maintained the same technique that I knew how to work with and how to survive… I believed, I accepted that in life there must be at least one person who should control everything and the others to follow… and I classified that as being responsible.

Yasaman was not a happy girl either, getting married at age fifteen, and divorced at the end of fifteen. “...it was like my life started with a vague childhood, short teenager single life, a teen married life and divorced as a teen too...” She, therefore, found herself in the position of challenging many factors, such as living at her parents’ house as a divorced woman at age sixteen. Not being welcomed as a divorced woman in her parents’ house, her sister took her
in. Yasaman was able to have more freedom at the sister’s house. She was able to feel relaxed and have time to think about her future. Also, she found time to meet other people more freely. Her father repeatedly reminded her about not having any other relationships with men since, in his view, his daughter was still married to her divorced husband. It was shameful for his daughter to remarry and to have sex with another man. “... he told me many times not to embarrass him in public by getting married again...” In addition to her father’s warnings, Yasaman’s uncle physically abused her to frighten her and to eliminate the possibility of Yasaman’s remarrying. However, as soon as she met her second husband at the age of seventeen, and received the promise of living in a different country in exchange for helping to raise his children, she agreed to marry for the second time. Her second husband was kind to her. However, he was unable to satisfy her sexually. During this time she learned more about sex and sexual pleasure. She was looking for the ultimate sexual pleasure described to her by friends and from reading books and articles about sex. From reading books, Yasaman soon discovered that she and her husband had two different ways of thinking about sex and sexuality. For her husband, sex was about his physical needs. For Yasaman, sex was a means of recognizing herself as a person, validating her desires, and knowing more about herself as a woman. She also learned how to have sex by becoming more educated about its process. However, her husband refused to do what she desired and he did not think all that was necessary. But Yasaman continued her search for more answers. She learned how to masturbate. Yasaman’s experience with men, marriage, and divorce is a representation of the power exerted on her by her father, the family patriarch, and her husband, whose wishes she felt she had to obey as well. Obeying was her way of complying with the way patriarchy works, but the fact
of continuing to educate herself and to find options for sexual expression was an undoing and unlearning mechanism.

Most of my friends have told me the same thing happening to them too... then, I was happy with masturbation and that was all about sex...that is the most that I remember... I never let him know about masturbation... I was too embarrassed to let him to find out about my secret... I thought sex was for his pleasure and I was doing something wrong and sinful for experiencing pleasure and masturbating myself for pleasure.

Soraya is a 60-year-old widow and divorcée who lives with her daughter, son, and son-in-law. She got married after high school, lived in Spain with her husband and two children for five years, and moved to Los Angeles, where she lost her husband in a car accident at the age of forty. After becoming a widow, she completed cosmetology training and worked as a hair stylist in Los Angeles, earning enough money to maintain a lower middle-class lifestyle, which was totally different from her prior more comfortable living arrangement.

Soraya married another Iranian man in Los Angeles and divorced within a year. The experiences of a second marriage and divorce gave her new realizations about Iranian culture. She learned that as a widow or a divorced wife she was not welcomed back to her parent’s house. She learned that as a divorcée her social status was even lower than that of a widowed woman because the culture viewed her acceptance of divorce as a strategy for pursuing a loose lifestyle.

[laughing]... I was considered used or second hand ... I was not even a popular woman among my married female friends after my divorce.

There has been and are always things that Iranian women should not do... starting from childhood like... exercise, maintain virginity, not get divorced, not become or stay a widow... it is all about what is between our legs, the so-called
shahrab beheshtee (highway to heaven) for men... not about who we are... let them have the ownership of that slimy, ugly-looking piece of tunnel and let them define who we are... [laughing]... and where we can be placed in the society... by men... [laughing and tearful]... I don't care anymore.

6.2 Leaving the Past Behind

The upheaval associated with the Iranian revolution led many hundreds of thousands of families to decide to leave Iran either before or after the outbreak of the revolution. Most participants were not given the opportunity to participate in the decision to move; nor was living abroad centered on the needs of the participants. It was a choice that their parents, husbands, and in-laws made primarily because of their need to save the family wealth and lifestyle or because of their inability to tolerate the harsh censorship regulations that adversely affected freedom of expression in all forms. Those families who had any association with the Pahlavi dynasty were also compelled to move out of Iran to avoid political persecution. The participants simply went along with their family’s choice to migrate.

Many were surprised that Iran’s new government did not change, but rather became more established. Those few who left their wealth at home ended up losing all or most of it. For these groups of participants, the question was how their husbands and family members would make a decision about what to do next. The participants reported that there were many questions in the minds of their families – How could they make a new life for themselves in a new society when there was no knowledge available about how to build this new life? The participants had questions for themselves. Would they have a new role,
and if so, how would it be different from the old role? What rules would govern their new role?

For most of the participants, the change was downsizing their lifestyle, since the majority of those who migrated to the United States were among the middle- to upper-class families in Iran. The move from the pre-revolutionary controlled, but financially secure life in Iran to the open life of the United States was overwhelming and beyond their understanding. They were overwhelmed with the new and unfamiliar demands of their new lives: the need to learn English, to learn about the new society, to work, to go to college in order to have financial stability, and to live in small, inexpensive apartments instead of houses similar to those owned in Iran. For some, this downsizing in lifestyle meant they had to work as a cashier or waitress in a restaurant, all the while fearing the possibility that another Iranian might walk in and discover their being an Iranian waitress serving hotdogs and hamburgers. The degree of emotional pain felt as a result of migration varied by individual. The pain was felt not only by the participants but also by their husbands; the husbands were not able to provide for the family as they had in Iran, which affected their pride and therefore, their relationships with their wives. In the United States, they had to live in a one- or two-bedroom apartment, a stark contrast to their Iranian houses with large landscaped gardens full of fruit trees, roses, herbs, and waterfalls, the perfect place to do their famous Iranian barbeques.

In their struggle for sexual autonomy and its fresh expressions, the participants broke through some of the most sacred traditions, which for centuries had bound their gender. As stated in Chapter 2, prior to and during the 1979 Iranian revolution, the Iranian feminists and a few international
feminists had already begun fighting for women’s rights in Iran. Many of the participants had already started to undo, unlearn, and challenge the existing system that was dictating how their lives were to be lived. The participants made many implicit, explicit, successful, and unsuccessful attempts to make changes to their lives; they did not know that the political situation would offer them the change they wanted to plot a new course for their lives.

For example, during Iran’s revolution, since Mahroukh’s husband was going to lose a substantial amount of money, he moved his family to the United States. Mahroukh already had knowledge of the advantages of living in the United States from listening to the conversations of the American-Iranian girls. She gladly agreed to leave Iran, even if it was temporary. Among many changes that moving to the United States brought to her, she started to learn about herself and her sexuality for the first time without restriction.

Rafat recalled her life as belonging to the generation of dominated and oppressed Iranians at home and in the host society. In terms of sexuality, this oppression led to Rafat’s developing a psychosomatic reaction to her husband’s sexual demands. She was unable to have sex with him as her vagina would not accept penal penetration. This situation aggravated her husband; however, Rafat used the medical problem as an excuse to refuse sex to her husband. She also refused to see a doctor, making the excuse that it was sinful and she was ashamed to discuss sexually related issues with anyone “...he also didn’t want anyone to know that he couldn’t penetrate me...people could have talked and say he wasn’t man enough...” Rafat ultimately asked for a divorce but since her husband held the right of refusal, it was declined. However, after her husband gave her legal permission to leave Iran, she was sent to Germany first, and then
to the United States, with some of her children (boys), so that they could attend good colleges and universities. She gladly accepted. Sadly, as soon as she left for Germany, her sister was assigned to Rafat’s husband as a seejeh (temporary marriage) by parents on both sides of the family.

For many participants, making the transition was not easy. Shahin described her challenges surviving in the Iranian-American society. She had a difficult time not allowing her home culture, which “... moved with me...it was haunting me...,” to influence her relationship with men. She believed that the Iranian society in America was “as controlling as” it was in Iran and she felt she was therefore controlled and judged for her actions; it did not feel good to remain close to her community. She preferred having free reign in which to develop relationships with men after her divorce.

I had to cheat ... It was like I was living in Iran ... It really was the same... It was like I had my American passport, opportunities for my job, to travel which was the same as Iran for me. The rest of it too, was like living in Iran. I had to live clean, I had to maintain respect, and maintain the family good name... maintain aberou and be a bahaya (chaste-full; high moral) girl... and I did... and... I honestly, not only because of that, I did not think that Iranian guys deserved me. I thought they were full of shit... they are not loyal... they live in their own la la land.

Shahin blamed her culture as the prime source of the moshgel (problem) that allows negative treatment of women both in Iran and abroad.

You see, that is also our culture... the reason, I think...we Iranian women are afraid to talk about sex and/or have sex, or are afraid of losing our virginity... it is not only the parents, it is also the suckers they are going to marry with us... Because Iranian man is the kind of sucker who takes other women’s virginity, but he wants his wife to be a virgin... then, looks down at his wife if she is not a virgin, even if he himself had taken at least twenty-five other women’s virginities away from them. So, I’m like... F--- them.
Shahin continued to state that she was not going to give in to them “… having fun with me... having sex with me... or even enjoy my conversation... you won’t believe in my travel time, doing modeling, any job I took over…” At this stage of her life, Shahin learned to enjoy turning men down for relationships and for sex. After her divorce, she did not date Persian men, because she did not think they deserved her.

I mean face it... They would start to have fun with me, next they would have asked me why was I divorced, how did I lose my virginity, if I had dated anyone before marriage and if I had dated anyone after my divorce and prior to meeting them... well, f--- you Iranian men... when did you lose your virginity and how many relationship did you have before you met with me? ... so what I did was I traveled, did my thing and had fun, and kept mine and my family reputation here intact and clean since I was not doing my dating in Los Angeles., where it could have been noticed by anyone in the Persian community. I traveled and had fun.

For Sharareh, moving to United States was not an easy process. She had limited interaction with other families and other parts of the society, and even though she had moved to Los Angeles, she maintained a similar lifestyle for herself. She believed that was the only safe lifestyle to have and to maintain. Moving away from a collective system to an open society such as United States did not provide initially an adequate sense of cultural safety and sense of empowerment for women such as Sharareh. Unfamiliarity with the host culture did not provide the comfort or level of confidence to make life adjustment.

I remember the day I was leaving Iran, I was crying like it was the end of my life... I was so frightened since I had no idea what was waiting for me and truly I didn’t want to leave my parents and siblings behind but since I was not accepted to any university in Iran, that did not leave a good image of me or my family among others who knew us such as other relatives, neighbors and some other people... so the safest way for me to leave the country and that by itself was a good damage control kind of act.
Leaving the past behind did not come easy for most participants. For those who moved with parents or as married wives, the challenge was apparent, since the Iranian culture still was a part of their lives. The participants were living with parents, husbands, or in-laws, either in the same houses or apartments, or in the same communities. Moving away and leaving the previous life behind was less challenging for the participants who moved to the United States as unmarried virgin girls, who had no immediate contacts with any other family members in the United States. It became easier for this group to blend with the American population. In any event, they too had moments of feeling guilty, ashamed, and fearful, wondering at times if their actions were wrong. What if their new outfit was too revealing? What if their opinion of what was taking place around them was not welcomed? It was difficult to share or ask questions about their new observations. For Farah, on the other hand, one of the challenges was that her high school diploma was not accepted in the United States. Similar to most of the participants, her English was not good either.

_Things were so strange and confusing, I saw boys and girls in high school and much younger than me going around with boys in front of everyone, all the teachers, principles, friends, oh my God… I was terrified by what I saw… I got so confused not knowing what was happening… Things were so different… the kids at school had different mentality._

All of the participants were looking for a way to relate to the new information, and trying to decide what cultural adjustments they needed to make as Iranian women. The following section describes some of the struggles of ultimate cultural adjustment.
6.3 Moving Towards a Discovery of Sexual-Self

Growing up, the participants had no doubt that they were Persians. It was the term they used to introduce themselves. For some, keeping the dream of going back to Iran made it easier to live in America, since that was the only life they knew. As life took its course, and as they moved to the United States, a sense of the old self remained intact for some participants, while others began to acknowledge and discover their true selves, which was a new challenge.

At the beginning of their new lives in the United States, many of the participants followed the same traditions as other Iranian women. They cooked their families’ favorite Iranian lunches and dinners and made breakfast for their families as a way to normalize their new lifestyle. Soon, they realized that life in the United States did not allow the husband and children to return home for lunch, and often not everyone came home at the same time to have dinner together. Due to work and school requirements, everyone had a different schedule, which was out of the participants’ control. It was soon apparent the participants had more time for themselves.

No matter the changes that living in the United States brought them, the participants’ community largely managed to maintain the same home culture, even in the United States. The revolution in Iran brought many Iranians together, to live in the same neighborhood and small communities in the United States. This created an environment with similar cultural norms to the ones in Iran, and for women it meant following the same concepts, such as nejabat (chastity), bahaya (high morals), aberou (respectable social status), and khanoum (lady). At times, it felt as if the whole country of Iran and its culture had moved with them to the United States. After a short time, the participants were able to
shop at Iranian grocery markets and even purchase similar items they had in Iran. Import/export businesses were soon established by the Iranian merchants, and life became as if nothing had changed and no re-location had happened. In some areas of Southern California, the smell of Persian food was common in many neighborhoods – foods such as freshly baked naan barbaree, chello kabab, and ghormeh sabzee, mostly favored by men. A new social classification concept arose among themselves that asked Iranian-Americans with which social class to associate. New terms introduced were adam hessabee (high status people), bazaree (low class people), shahee (those who followed Pahlavi regime), and khomeinis (those who followed Khomeini and who were resisted by most Iranians). Each term presented a different class of Iranian that brought in a different level of expectations for women.

For some participants, adjusting to the new society became situational, a concept of fealan (as needed for now). When the situation demanded it, depending on which class representative was being spoken to, the United States became a country that was great and offered quality to the Iranian lifestyle, or it was the worst country for Iranians to live in. However, situational or not, soon some of the participants learned that the United States offered many opportunities to women, including the ones taken away from them in Iran shortly after the revolution, such as the right to divorce. However, there were a few participants who believed that these were not rights or freedoms, but rather privileges that the American women had. Some of the participants considered the openness of sex and sexuality to be beesharmee (brazenness), a bad thing for them to adopt. Some of the participants followed their family’s belief system and called American women jendehe (prostitute) for the way they dressed and openly talked about their wants and desires and freely expressed themselves sexually.
They thought that sex outside of marriage was a disgraceful and dishonorable act.

Fakhree, for example, believes there has not been that much difference in her life as a result of moving to the United States. She believes she has kept and maintained the same Iranian value system for herself, and that she is the good woman she is today as a result of her home country value system. She further claims that perhaps her ability to tolerate Iranian sonat (culture) exists because although as a young child she wanted to have more freedom, she could see in her present life how “beautiful” those values were and she appreciates them more than ever.

Now, I can see my parents were good parents and they taught me moral values, the kind that I am proud of and rely on… I am the kind of a person I am because of those value systems.

Some participants discovered soon after their arrival that being an Iranian woman in the United States was different from being an Iranian woman in Iran, both pre- and post-revolution. While these differences were evident and understandable, no one pointed them out, or perhaps it was unnecessary because the participants simply followed their husbands’ and in-laws’ agendas or they followed what their parents arranged for them. Therefore, for a while the participants continued to be subservient to men, similar to their lives in Iran, and put either husbands or family members in charge of decision-making. Those participants who seriously sought to keep their “Iranian-ness” undercover from their families were in a younger age group. It was a process of ethnic vagueness for them even though their families tried to find for them an Iranian role in the United States by talking about Iranian culture, poetry, music, and history, and
reminding them that Iran was a wonderful place. For some, this relieved their bitterness toward Iranian-ness, and for others, it had the opposite effect.

For younger participants, going out with American friends, having a boyfriend, and informing parents usually ended with the participant bursting into tears, families resentfully accusing her and questioning her lack of acceptance of “her culture’s ways.” The participants’ responses were, “It’s your entire fault for raising me here; what did you expect?” Families mostly used these attitudes to justify why young Iranian-American girls could not be friends with American girls, or why they could not go to the movies with American or even Iranian friends, or why they could not wear short skirts or short pants and tank tops. Younger participants questioned whether the parents were honest or whether this was all calculatingly planned. The result of these actions and restrictions on the parents’ side resulted in girls becoming adept at lying, since they felt they had to fit in with the culturally accepted American lifestyle outside their home’s Iranian environment.

It took time to become this deceptive, but they were not prepared to live under the pretence of being someone they were not. This group of participants tried to be themselves, tried to communicate their expectations to their parents and their passions to their sex partners, hoping they would be respected and encouraged, but they only experienced disappointment. It took the failure of these attempted relationships to realize that their Iranian selves were not applicable in the American community. Simultaneously their newly developed American self was not acceptable within their Iranian community.

On the other hand, the experience of older women was more varied. Soraya’s relationship experience with American men was somewhat different.
She learned that once an American man hears the word “no,” they walk away. However, the same does not apply to the Iranian-American men. They tend to think that a woman’s saying “no” to them is an act of naaz kordan (being silly and hard to get) and it actually means “yes.” This is the difference between the two cultures. Iranian men are demanding and confronting; they believe manhood gives them the automatic authority to be demanding and women should comply with their demands, as it is expected in Iranian culture.

Soraya’s experience of living in Spain was different from that of the United States. In Spain, for the first time, she was able to experience what it meant to live in the present and not worry so much about the past and the future.

I noticed how much we have lost by living in an Iranian environment. We used to live in the past and worry about the past and more worry about the future and feeling sorry for the past and even sorrier for what we could not achieve in the future.

Mahroukh’s parents were visiting her in Los Angeles when she learned of her husband’s affairs. One day she confronted him about his affairs with other women in front of her parents. That same night he raped her since she refused to have sex with him. She had severe anal bleeding and was taken to the hospital. She filed for divorce after that. Mahroukh married another Iranian man and it was unsuccessful. Her second husband had arousal dysfunction and did not want to see a doctor for it. Instead he asked Mahroukh to accept him and to put aside her sexual feelings.

After all, he felt as an Iranian man he could demand that and for me to accept... he has very low sexual desire, he has erectile dysfunction... he is not going to do anything about it since that means in Iranian culture he is not man enough and this is a major factor in an Iranian men’s life... if he seek professional and medical
help, then he first has to admit to himself that he cannot get his penis working to the point of even screw up a woman… if he is not able to screw up, then he is not man enough, and this is a shameful fact for a man of this culture.

Mahroukh learned many things about life and herself while living in Los Angeles. When she was living in Iran, she was not valued, and her opinions, wants, and desires did not matter, not only to others, but even to herself. Working in a famous financial institution, she learned that her opinions and recommendations were valued by all other employees and employers.

I learned that women... can do just about anything... when I was working everyone loved me at work... I was shocked to see that... later, I was comparing the new responses I was receiving from what I received back home... In Iran, I was considered a low graded woman, someone with no opinion of herself, an incapable woman... a dependent one too... however, in the United States I was telling people what to do... I learned about my potentials, my options, my power and my knowledge.

She began to gain a new level of respect among her colleagues and the more she learned and studied, the more she learned about her value as a person. She also noticed differences in her personal life. She saw other married women doing even less than half of what she had done for her family, and how much more their husbands respected them.

Iran is a very closed society... it is either the culture telling us what to do or it is the religion, however, I believe that religion is also part of the same culture in which it determines people’s actions, thoughts, behavior and believe system... I have made lots of mistakes by following both... I started to learn about the real me in Los Angeles.

While professionally, Mahroukh became a successful woman, she felt something was missing from her life. Not being sexually active and not having a relationship was becoming an issue for her. By this time, she felt free to explore and to have other relationships. Her second marriage did not offer any
resolution to her sex life as her husband was not capable of meeting her sexual needs.

I missed reaching orgasm while I was emotionally and physically connect with someone I loved... I never experienced that connection in my life, and with neither of my marriages... sex for me was nothing but struggle... eventually, it became a closed chapter of my life... I started to hate sex... I refused having sex with my second husband, and while going through menopause, my vagina became dry, and penetration became very difficult.

Mahroukh has two children from her first, and one from her second husband. She is no longer feeling sexual and she is not sure what has caused her lack of desire. “...was it my first marriage, or my second husband arousal problem, or is it my age now?” She has reached a point in her life at which she accepts that there is nothing that she can do about her sexual life. Mahroukh regrets not having had a chance to show how full of love she is, how warm and passionate she could have been, and how she could have shown her romantic and affectionate side.

And now I am only a friend for my husband... I don't want to bring it up to him and make him feel shameful and powerless since he has been good and gentle to me and my first two kids... I need to survive. So, if this means no sex, okay, I will take what he has offered me... I am tired of bringing the sex topic up. I am afraid of getting divorce again... what am I going to do then... I have three kids.

There were some participants living in the United States without their families who, like Bahareh, felt really comfortable residing in California. To her surprise, she never missed her family or the life she had back home in Iran. However, she was being reminded by her mother, every time they talked, about how to maintain her good qualities and how not to become a bad girl:
So, it was like having my mother next to me twenty four hours seven days a week...she was always on the phone with me... I am surprise how did she let me stay here by myself.

Despite this high degree of comfort, there were some experienced restrictions; Bahareh’s Catholic high school limited her as did her Catholic friends, who did not have boyfriends. On the other hand, college was an open society. At first, she had problems initiating relationships with men. Eventually she became more comfortable around boys.

I was so afraid to make contact with anyone... I could recognize the differences and I liked them, however, I did not have the courage to start a relationship or even talk to another boy... but I liked what I saw... I enjoyed seeing others having relationships.

In contrast to Bahareh, Sharareh felt relieved, living in Los Angeles and not having her mother’s control around her. She started to develop her own perception of things. For Sharareh the re-learning process was a new start.

It was like to learning to walk again... but I liked the freedom wanted to discover myself for the first time.

While continuing with school, Sharareh refused to meet boys and wanted to finish her degree first and get a chance to experience new things in life. “... I was tired and wanted to free myself from all and all the past...”

When Bahareh met her Iranian ex-husband, she felt very comfortable with him. After a short four months they had their first sexual contact in the form of oral sex. She felt fine having sex with him and did not feel fearful about it. Up to that day, she never knew about male orgasm. Their first sexual experience however, did not include intercourse. She was still a virgin for about a year after
their first sexual contact and he just masturbated her as a way to maintain her virginity.

*He believed that an Iranian girl should not lose her virginity prior to marriage and he was not sure if he would have become my husband.*

But she was unaware that women can enjoy sex, too. Not only did she not have an orgasm during that first year, she did not have any for the next ten years. Later, she learned that their sexual relationship was horrible.

*It was okay at the beginning… I thought what I had was sex and had no idea that women too have orgasm… he even did not tell me about it and of course he himself did not know about female orgasm… just like any other Persian men, he was only concern about his own pleasure and believed women are to participate in sexual activities for men pleasure only… and I believed that too.*

Bahareh found out that her husband had affairs. She was told by her friends it was not important, that men have different types of sexual needs, and that it is not in the *sha’n* (status) of Iranian women to provide for those types of sexual needs. “...per our culture it was okay for him to do so…” She remembered seeing an Iranian gynecologist, and another time, an Iranian family physician. When she told them of her lack of orgasm and how her husband now had affairs, both of these physicians confronted her for not making any attempt to satisfy her husband, and that she should have patience and should follow up with his desires, since he was her husband.

*They both told me as a wife my job is to satisfy my husband and follow up with his sexual demands… that it is shameful for an Iranian woman to ask for sexual satisfaction…they both told me that I am a woman and it was my prime responsibility making sure my husband was sexually satisfied was part of my job as a wife… if he is not satisfied in bed, not only I was making a sin, but it was my fault that he was unhappy in bed… that I should never confront him with his sexual problem.*
She was shocked that none of the doctors asked her about how she felt about her experiences physically or emotionally. She actually heard from other female Iranian friends that they were receiving similar messages from the Iranian-American doctors and therapists. The focus was only on her husband’s sexual well being. “… and I left both offices in tears… feeling so lonely and sad… angry at God for making me a woman to become a servant for men…” During the next ten years she and her husband lived like two roommates. After ten years of living like that, facing health issues such as heart problems, depression, and anxiety, and being prescribed medication, she found the courage to ask for a divorce.

*He had this false belief system that sexual pleasure was only for men… he never wanted to reconsider his believe and told me his friends were the same … maybe he felt insecure about his manhood, maybe he was told by his other Iranian friends that women were not worth it to be pleased by men… I have no idea… Iranian men, ordinary or professionals, are going to be the same both in Iran or any other parts of universe.*

One issue that a number of the participants talked about was that they did not know how to take care of themselves. They did not learn how to ask for their rights; in fact, they were not sure that they had any rights. Actually, they had no concept of women’s rights, or that such rights were legally and socially available to them in the United States, as Iran’s culture had no provisions for these rights. When they became aware of these ideas, they did not think the rights and laws applied to them as Iranian-Americans. Parvin said that it was not until the police came to her house when her husband beat her that she learned she had rights. But that did not help much.
In order to survive, I have learned to disregard my wants, needs and rights... I was forced to disregard my wants... by no one but my parents... I was a girl after all, the oldest one too which should have been a boy... I was perhaps been punished for not coming to this world as a boy... therefore I had no rights since the beginning, and my parents for sure made me aware of it. I am used to it... I am used to disregard everything ... those kinds of reactions made me believe that I was a worthless piece of nothing... that I did not have any rights, and I should not have asked for anything and be grateful for what I was given... even in the form of abuse by the people who were supposed to love me and take care of me like my parents and my first husband ... [silence ... tearful ... hiding her face while looking out of the window ...].

In their new cultural setting, the participants found themselves simultaneously experiencing the openness of the United States culture and the guarded structure of their transplanted Iranian culture in which their earlier formed sexual-selves were being exposed to new options for self definition. The dual experiences gave the participants cause to look at their sexual-selves in a new light. Moving towards a better realization of what their sexual-selves meant many of the participants acquired a new terminology to express the changes they felt. All participants used the English terminology to express concepts such as “my sex desire,” “my sexual feelings.” There was no embarrassment in using sexual terms in the English language.

For many of the participants using English words represented an anti-traditional behavior and simultaneously represented the part of them that had become the Iranian-American woman. Mahin and Parvin stated that in their families the term, doset daram, (I love you) was not allowed. Some of the participants were not allowed to use this or similar affectionate terms among family members. Hence, all expressions of love were difficult, especially in Farsi. For example, Parvin, Mahnaz and Aida, did not recall hearing these terms from their parents and Aida seldom recalled her husband using them with her.
However, some participants, Mahtab, Soraya and Shahin, felt confident in using the English version of erotic terms because English to them seemed more expressive. They indicated that such words did not carry the emotional burden of culture that Farsi did. Setareh shared her experience saying, “…sex talk using English terms sounds romantic and beautiful, but in Farsi, it is ugly and sinful…” Parynaz said,

*Somehow it feels right to say these words in English instead of Farsi… in English they don’t sound dirty but in Farsi I am even embarrassed to think about them.*

For Nastaran and other younger generation participants, using English terminology came naturally since they were not so familiar with the Farsi sexual terms. Married or single, the participants began to have an easier time using sexual terms. However, those who were still married, such as Fakhree, stated that:

*If I want to say something like that to my husband, I would say “I love you honey” and this is something that I cannot say in Farsi, it just sounds funny… and unacceptable to say.*

The participants revealed that the expression of sexual terms in English sounded consequence-free, whereas in Farsi the same words gave them the feeling that they were doing something bad and unacceptable. The use of the English language facilitated a freer exploration of their sexual-selves in a more relaxed and confident way. Having the ability to express their feelings at least in English offered many of the participants a higher level of motivation. The language transfer was a vehicle for less inhibited self expression, individual assertion, a feeling of personal importance and a process of self-empowerment.
The realization that there was an alternate way to see, interpret, and express a sexual-self is a major finding in this study. Not surprisingly, this new self-awareness was a point of change, and one that brought a mix of conflicting emotions as well as an education experience that enabled the women to reconnect with themselves. In the following section, the participants’ stories focus on an examination of the benefits and risks associated with new expressions of their sexual-selves.

6.4 Re-Learning Process Resulting From Emerging Sexual-Selves

In a new country and a new culture, many participants experienced confusion about their sexual-selves and their sexual identity. Married or unmarried, the participants found themselves in a clash against tradition. They found themselves alone and confused. In this confusion, many questions needed to be sorted out. Should they try to cut out the influence of tradition and family on their life choices? Should they stay in a relationship with men who thought they possessed every part of them? Should men dictate to them how to feel, how to be, and how to exist as women? Could they afford to be honest about their sexuality? Did they need to continue to conform to traditional expectations of Iranian men who liked the idea of believing wives were to obey and to follow their sexual demands?

Mahin spent a lot of time with her lover. He was married and had two little children. He knew how to say things to push her sensitive buttons by playing music and choosing the right words. He selected certain songs to pass on his messages to her without attracting anyone’s attention. He knew what
Mahin liked and what she enjoyed the most. Mahin was able to pick up his messages by listening to the music and the songs he played at the studio.

That was so joyful and gave me good feelings. The kind of feelings I never experience before. They were unique to me. I learned what it means to care and love someone in a passionate way. I felt like a teenage again. I forgot that I had two kids and a husband and a very sensitive job.

Mahin described the differences between having sex with her husband versus her lover. Her husband never, not even once, touched her vagina. He even covered her with a blanket while he had sex with her. “I was not able to feel his skin and touch him directly.” Their sex was very straightforward and routine and she lost her passion experiencing sex that way. Her lover performed differently. He always had sex with her in a new way and a new style. The experience was totally different.

It was exciting. He was warm and passionate, just like I was. He knew what to say and what to do and how to touch me. He had the perfect size, too… [laughing hard]. For the first time in my life, I learned what orgasm was, since I had never experienced it before. I was surprised when I had an orgasm while having sex. I had no idea that was part of having sex. It was during my affair that I learned the meaning of having sex. I never experienced orgasm with my husband.

After Mahin’s affair, she felt guilty about hurting her husband. She believed for a while that she was a bad woman for him and that she had been wrong. She believed that she not only hurt him, but many other important people in her life. Looking back, she questions how she could have done such a thing as have an affair. Her lover was not even good looking!

How could I have loved him… but… you know… I really did not love him… I was looking for someone to complete me and fulfill my needs… what was missing in my life was passionate love, care, sex… you see, I had sex with my husband, but maybe once every two or three weeks. It was not even a good sex…looking back, I
wish that I would have started having sex at age thirteen or fourteen. That could have prevented my current feelings about sex and lack of having sex. Perhaps it was lack of love and lack of sexual experience that made me having an affair. I feel that I am still so vulnerable when it comes to sex… [silence].

At another point she said:

God showed me that when someone loves another, they don’t always bring flowers, the fact that my husband was able to forgive me showed me how much he loved me.

As Mahin was not happy with sex within her marital relationship, she sought another avenue. Her self-determination or individualistic tendencies to survive as a sexual-self were strong. This lasted for as long as she was able to create new strategies for expression, such as having the lover. When she had depleted all of her known or perceived options for sexual expression, the sexual-self again complied with expected social norms, causing her to discontinue the affair and remain with her husband.

Another look at Mahin’s and other participants’ determined sexual-self expression efforts suggests that social structures or institutions have not been able to regulate what the participants have done sexually. One reason was that the sexual-self urge has been very strong for them. Though the sexual-self had been repressed, some form of expression could not have been contained by law, policy, tradition, religion, or social strictures. The participants’ stories demonstrate this. While these social structures did modify behavior, the natural urge remained until the participants were no longer able to create new solutions for its expression.
According to the narratives, cultural limitations on sexual-self expression can be stringent, as in Iranian culture, but where the sexual-self’s options were undermined the sexual-self began to limit the need for that expression, as in the case of Mehry.

*It must have been far more than good for me to consider any man to spend the rest of my life with... how could you know all of this without becoming engaged in a relationship? All of these are important... I would have definitely have lots of sex with guys... if their sex was not perfect I would not have continued with the relationship.*

Mahroukh shared her real self. She stated if she had had the same opportunities before her marriage as after, she would have finished her education prior to getting married and she would have had sex with the man she was going to marry prior to marriage. In addition to other qualities a man needed to have, his sex performance would have been her main concern. Mahroukh learned about oral sex and masturbation. Sex for her was no longer about having intercourse. She wanted to explore more about sex and sexuality and became a sexually demanding wife. The newly gained knowledge provided new awareness and became her *donyayeh khyale* (secret fantasy land). As she continued with her dream and fantasy of having romantic sex with him, she began reading books on how to have sex and how to masturbate. That became her new world. She made up a world for herself that was beautiful and she felt beautiful in it, but her husband was not a part of it anymore. She had wonderful sex in her new world and she felt comfortable feeling good about having sex.

Mahroukh has tried to convince her husband to seek medical and professional help. It was as if he had no more desire for sex and he had become very out of touch with sex. Sex had no more meaning to her husband, but he
kept telling Mahroukh that she has the problem, since she was the one asking for sex, and she should seek professional help for her excessive sexual desire and *kejalat bekesh* (to be ashamed for asking for sex).

Initially, Fakhree did not like the type of freedoms that American women had. She felt that the United States environment was very open, and that women in the United States had too much freedom, to the point that it is more harmful than it is useful to them. She went back to Iran three times, and was able to witness and examine the differences, but eventually she was more interested in staying in the United States than in Iran.

*I loved my interaction with people... they don't question what you do... whereas in Iran, every move of mine was and is questionable... by everyone... and everyone is trying to hit on you even my cousin tried to hit on me the last time I was in Iran... and I was married... in the United States, cousins are like brother and sisters... I don't know... but I am definitely more comfortable here.*

Fakhree sees herself on her way to becoming a separate person from her parents. She believes her parents cannot understand her and her changes, and she cannot understand them and their expectations, particularly after years of being married and living away from them. That means to her that she does not want to live in Iran again since the culture cannot accept her current way of thinking, view of life, and view of herself.

*None of us have an understanding of each other, therefore, what is the point of going back there again?... it is hurtful, it is painful to know that every move of mine is analyzed and receives a wrong interpretation, starting even with my own family... if I dance there is going to be a talk about it... if I stay quiet, there is going to be a talk about it and an interpretation which is far from reality... Society does not accept me any way. I have changed, everything about me has changed ... I have grown old here... I didn’t know that I have changed and how much I have changed, but I am happy about it all.*
Shahin was an experienced traveler before getting married. Because of her prior trips overseas, she was familiar with her new environment. There was less fear and fewer unknown factors in the United States for her than for other participants. Once they arrived and after they had made initial moving adjustments, she just said to her husband:

_We were not meant to be together and that is how we left and for four years I hit the streets and I had so much fun…You know, I traveled all over the world, I was in five different countries each year, and had different boyfriends all the time._

Shahin learned from her mother to be independent. Once Shahin and her husband moved to the United States, she quickly learned everything about the United States way of life. She became so independent when she was still married that there was nothing for her husband to do as a man.

_I wouldn’t even let him try to do things since I gave him the impression that he would for sure fuck it up what he was going to do…it made him feel less of himself and not enough of a man… I was not ready to be contributed to… I was just up to proving that I did not need anyone, I did not need a man in my life… I am independent… so he couldn’t even show up when he could… poor thing… I don’t do this with my current husband… I make sure that he knows I love him … that I need him… I make sure that he knows I miss him… [Crying]… my first husband was only ‘I thank you for doing this. You were my ticket to get out of Iran with him.’ I told him now I can do anything and meet with anyone I want to…thank you for taking my virginity away…as a husband honorably and officially._

Parynaz learned that life had more to offer when she moved to Los Angeles and looked at other lifestyles and other women. She started to pick up information and soon found that adaptation involved a level of willingness to adjust to this new environment, which for her meant putting aside the fear of culture.
It had to do with how a woman of my culture was thirsty, had desire to change, and how much passion was there to make the change for her. It all had to do with the level of awareness. It had to do with how much a girl of my area was brainwashed or not... to have the flexibility to change... to have motivation to learn... it had to do with how one was able to look at the differences and appreciate them, welcome them or not and have the capacity for any new information.

For Parynaz, “thinking outside of the box” about sex and wanting to change herself was associated with experiencing high levels of shame, guilt, and fear of rejection.

We Iranian women have been brainwashed by our closest people in our lives that it is bad, it is sinful, it is shameful, to think about sex, to talk about sex, and worst of all to feel sexual.

Soon after getting married, Parynaz had her only child from her husband. Parynaz’s sexual relationship with her Jamaican husband sent her to therapy. She had no idea how to have sex or to comply with a man so sexually experienced as her husband. She filed for divorce and walked away. She had a number of short-term sexual relationships with different men. She said, “...I became a good mistress...” However, she was never sexually satisfied until she found a female American sex surrogate coach, who taught her about her body and sexual desires and feelings. She taught her how to express her emotions, and how to have sex.

I hated God for making me a female... I was just a piece of dead meat, a dead fish...I have no idea how he enjoyed having sex with me... I ended up in therapy for four days per week... I had to take high doses of psych medication to gain control over my feelings... again I had no voice.
In one of Parynaz’s later relationships, she had sex with an Iranian-American man who lived in the United States for a number of years, and because of her sexual aggressiveness in bed, he called her jendeh (whore).

Why was I a whore? Simply because I had other boyfriends and was not a virgin at the time he had sex with me… go figure… however, he himself who has been with God knows how many other women before me that did not make him a male prostitute… this is nothing but a cultural education… a cultural message, a religious message… for lack of communication about sex… perhaps that is the reasons my mother never talked about sexual satisfaction … sex was nothing but a bad thing… it is sinful… if a girl was involved with a boy prior to marriage… she is nothing but a whore.

Soraya, on the other hand, felt that when she gave men the pleasure they were after, she felt used by them. It made her feel ashamed and guilty about her sex act when she allowed others to use her for their pleasure. She felt she was always the loser, just as her aunts used to tell her she would feel.

Even when I loved having sex with my husband… [silence]… [tearful]…after his death, I never allowed myself to think that if I had any other relationship, I can and should enjoyed it too…That if my partners left the relationship it had nothing to do with using me and taking advantage of me… [tearful]… But this is how I made a believe for myself. For these particular reasons…that is why I have stayed away from having any other relationships. I don’t think I can have another one… [tearful]… [silence]…I am not the only one you know.

Soraya’s customers told her the same thing during their haircut appointments. It did not matter how old they were; as long as they were divorced or widows, and had other relationships, it all ended the same and it all gave them the same feelings. They shared the same culture, and shared similar concepts and beliefs. Soraya believed her new relationships with Iranian men were the main issues in her life. She stated that Iranian men could easily change their minds about maintaining the relationship and leave their female partners
once they become older. They always look for a virgin no matter how old they become, or if they have been married before, or have had relationships before, which they all have anyway. In the context of the Iranian male viewpoints regarding women, she stated:

_They don’t care about hurting women… I even don’t think that they are aware of hurting women’s feeling by their behaviors… this is a normal respond and behavior for the Iranian men… therefore it is hard to trust them in the long run._

Taraneh moved on after getting married and got divorced a few years later from a Nicaraguan man. She has one daughter, who became a well-known beauty pageant queen in some area of the United States. Taraneh has placed herself in an area in which her culture expects her to be a devoted Iranian woman and mother, meaning “… _making sacrifices_ …” She thought if she had a relationship, it would be wrong and to a degree, it would be a dirty and sinful act.

_Still at the bottom of my heart, I cannot be free from my culture which has taught me not to be with anyone else but my husband…that I cannot have a boyfriend and have sex with him … it is not right and it is sinful._

### 6.5 The Evolved Sexual-Self and Accepting Their Current Sexual-Selves

The participants spoke about the evolution of their sexual-selves and acceptance of their current sexual-selves, an important theme that emerged strongly in the data. Never before in life, or at least prior to this interview, had any of the participants ever really stopped and honestly examined their beliefs or assumptions about what they needed and wanted sexually. Some admitted not
knowing what sexual-self was. For others, as life evolved, they began to become more aware of their sexual-selves. There were moments of shame and guilt. Often, shame was confused with guilt, which became a roadblock to preventing participants from recognizing something in them that was unique to them. The participants learned that their selves were not something that they could create consciously, and if they had created them, what they considered their selves was nothing but their shakseeat-e-sakhtegee (false-self). This is particularly true as it relates to their sexual-selves. For each participant, there was a certain time in her life when she felt foolish for realizing that the attention that her husband or lover gave to her was more a quest for sexual satisfaction than a search for a meaningful loving marriage or relationship. But they kept quiet due to shame, a sense of the sinfulness of wanting sex, and the guilt of refusing roles and rules if they were to confront their spouses. While many were too shy to verbalize their own perceptions and feelings of their sexual-self, their desire to continue to tell their stories became stronger. They felt motivated to share their most private thoughts, their life-long-kept sexual secrets, and to tell the tale of their sexual-selves.

Some of the participants gave a new meaning to the word khanoum a sexual one, since the khanoum (lady, Iranian style) as it was defined by home culture was only a sarab (mirage). Behavioral changes occurred based on their new awareness and on the revised meaning they had given to the word khanoum. Suddenly, “...it feels good to make choices even if they are mistakes...”

Bahareh believes that to get to know a woman is to get to know her sexual-self. She now believes that all feelings of fear, guilt, and shame have to be put aside in order for a woman to enjoy her sexuality. However, she has not been
able to enjoy her sexuality fully as the concept of sex as a shameful, sinful act was inculcated early in her childhood by the family and the society.

Bahareh is still trying to find her true self. She still has a lot of pain and bitterness she needs to leave behind. She hopes that one day she can become free of these cultural constraints. All the hours of therapy have not helped her to accomplish this yet; she only wants to get out of her past and have the power to set new goals for herself. It is a new challenge for her to think of herself as a free woman, to think independently, and to make her own decisions for the first time.

_I am just realizing how tired and lonely I am...At least it is good to be aware of these feelings...I am going to do something about them, too...through more psychotherapy...I need to find out what I want for myself...I have not done that yet...that is the key to finding myself...to knowing what I want...all my life my mother has told me or dictated to me about what to do...except for my divorce...I wanted to be independent, and that is why I don’t want to ever marry again...I have made decisions out of desperation... But now, I have to ask myself about what I want first...before making decisions...[tearful]...It is time to feel alive...[crying]._

Mahnaz felt overwhelmed because she revealed a secret part of herself. She claimed not having a peaceful life, but she is more at peace with herself now. To a degree, she has forgiven her parents, and she does not want to see them again. She has gone to an American therapist in order to forget about her past.

_My sexual-self is just me...who I am today...I am now used to myself...I am my own friend, partner, lover...I do masturbation and therefore, I know how to please myself sexually... I don't need a man and I feel free._
Soraya too, revealed that she had never felt in love with any man in her life not even with her husband.

*My hands and my knees have been shaken for my kids but not for any man…I need a second chance to live, to fall in love, and therefore to get to know myself as a woman…it is too late for me now… my voice needed to be heard years ago…but, I am here now*[tearful].

Mahroukh feels, as the older woman, embarrassed to talk about her sexuality, particularly with her husband. Both of her husbands took care of only their sexual needs, regardless of how they treated Mahroukh. She claims to be working very hard on herself to resolve her sexual needs. “…the only solution was to ignore and disregard my sexual feelings, my sexual-self…”

Mehry reminded herself that it was hard for her to be expressive. She feels ashamed and embarrassed for participating. There was a part of her wanting to say something about sex even if it made her an indecent woman. She mostly referred to sex as ‘it’.

*I am still an old fashion Iranian lady…my mother taught me all I know about how to be a lady…I am still the same innocent girl she raises and wanted me to stay that way…I think this is beautiful for a woman and what makes me special…I am pure, simple and innocent…what I said about ‘it’ is sinful act no matter how you look at it and no self part of me should include ‘it’.*

Mitra, at this part of the interview, did not know how her new approach to self expression was going to be perceived by others. She is at the stage of life in which she questions herself about the changes that have taken place in her life. “…I have never had the guts to talk and now I am doing completely the opposite…” Today, she has more knowledge about herself as a sexual woman.
Today I am the khanoum of my life...I have earned that title. Perhaps it is the time to accept this fact, take it, enjoy it and move forward with it... I am the adult of my life today, while this may be true, I don’t have an answer for you yet... I don’t know about my sexual-self and it takes awhile for me to find that part to me.

Parvin shared about her negative physical symptoms when she had sex “…I get lots of lower abdominal pain…” Parvin still finds seeing a gynecologist difficult. Her physical exams are always delayed due to her shame and fear of being touched by another person, even a female physician. The memory of her mother putting a hot spoon on the lower part of her stomach when she was six years old when she talked about her sister touching her baghesh (metaphor for vagina) still haunts her. She has learned to distract herself by focusing on filmmaking and writing documentaries. This way she does not have to think about men and sex.

You know, when I am writing, it feels like I am having sex with my words. You cannot believe it. My writing is about collecting all of my desires, which are buried deep inside of me, and once I recognize them in my private time, when no one is around to know about them, I feel relieved, and it feels as good as having sex... writing. Yeah, it gives you that kind of satisfaction.

Seema has agreed to follow her husband’s leads in life. They may return to Iran sometime soon, while their children are going to stay in California. “…I will go with him since my children are grown up and they don’t need me as much…” She believes her life is with her husband, regardless of how she feels about him sexually.

What can I say...I am the same shy girl who follows her mother’s advice... I am aware of the fact that my feelings are shut down and it is not easy for me to be expressive about me and my sexual feelings...I am over sixty, and for an old woman of my age, talking about sex is ghabeel (shameful).
Rafat, after getting divorced, continues to live in Los Angeles. At seventy, she does not see any hope for herself, and her sexuality does not play any part in her life anymore. However, she wanted others to hear her story. She wanted other women to discover their value and to understand the importance of acknowledging and appreciating themselves as women.

For me (laughing)…what else is left for me to do… I am no longer ashamed of being a woman… but… I just want to enjoy the time I have left for me next to my kids and grandkids.

Setareh says if it were not for her way of life, she would have been a different person. She does not know how to be sexual, but at times she feels the biggest part of her is missing. “…The part that needs to be touched, to cared for, to be indulged…I don’t know if that is my sexual-self…but…when I feel that way, I feel good about me…That is all I know about myself…” Setareh has a hard time talking about her sexuality at this new time in her life. For her, there are more issues that still control her life as a free woman. She blames not only her Iranian culture but also the combination of Islam and Judaism as factors in her life that prevent her from feeling like a free sexual woman. “…I still feel I have be to an Iranian-Muslim-Jewish woman… I am used to it…”

Setareh has seen many doctors to correct her physical pain and discomfort during sexual intercourse with her husband. There is no physical abnormality to correct. Doctors have told her it is the fear related to being controlled and abused that makes her body sub-consciously reject penetration. She has given up hope of recovering from her emotional pain and feels that she has not been permitted to feel sexual, or to be expressive about her desires and sexual feelings.
It is too late for me… I just gave up… all I know about sex is that it is a painful process, and I don’t see myself as part of the equation… I am in it, but I am not in it at the same time… doctors tell me it is in my head… of course it is in my head… What do you think all those years of brainwashing did to me… now, it is too late to reverse it.

Fakhree revealed a secret that she had kept since it happened. She fell in love with a boy in her neighborhood, and even now, she is in love with him even after years of marriage.

Don’t you think that is a crime?... After all this time, he is still on my mind as if I had seen him yesterday... I am glad it is off of my chest now... I missed him, and so I have never been able to connect with my husband.

Fakhree decided to stay in her unhappy marriage. While claiming she is a sexual and passionate woman, she learned to put her sexuality aside for the sake of saving her marriage. She does not know when and how she can show her passion and sexual desires to her husband since he is not receptive to her level of sexuality. “…I don’t live for myself and therefore, I don’t know about my sexual-self…”

Sharareh did not like anything about being a woman in Iran. However, she also believes that women are sex objects in the United States and she does not want to be considered one. She still has lots of emotional ties with her home culture. These ties do not allow her to be and to feel free about her sexuality. She could never see herself as fully expressive about her sexual needs, regardless of how long she has lived outside Iran.

I still don’t really know what a sexual woman is... all about... What I know is that, to a degree, I am just like my mother, only a far more realistic one... and I am still working on me... but culture travels with us... and it stays with us... everything is bad for a girl to do, including having fun and feeling sexual, too... my sexual-self is a mixture of my culture and my mother.
Fakhree and Sharareh’s stories are representations of passiveness resulting from years of being exposed to power forced upon them to the point of gazing; that is, they became the very monitoring mechanism for themselves that their culture had been. In reviewing this group of participants’ stories, it is evident that messages imposed by the power of patriarchal positioning could serve as a frame of functioning for these women and limit their thought processes, limit their sense of self. Those who were younger as a result of less exposure to imposed power and therefore not fully gazed by it, found ways to learn about assertiveness and self empowerment as a way to approach life in the United States.

Yasaman revealed how much of a good life and “too many good opportunities” she has lost. Now she knows about her abilities and potential, and how she can be expressive about what she wants. But still, she has difficulty being sexually expressive. After two divorces, Yasaman began her current, significant relationship with another Iranian-American man. Once the relationship became sexual, she experienced orgasm for the first time. One thing that has not changed (and she believes probably never will) is her parents’ control and constant checking up on her. Today, Yasaman realizes how much she has missed in life. At the same time, she has learned about her value as a woman.

I have learned about my abilities, potentials, I am able to express what I want … I have been able to get a college degree, and I am making a fairly good living… It is not much, but it is all mine… I see my kids sometimes, and my life is… I feel comfortable and peaceful for the first time in my life, and I don’t want to trade it for anything else.
Yasaman is currently living with her male partner. She does not want to change anything about her lifestyle. All she thinks about is how to enjoy every single moment of her life, regardless of the cultural limitations that still surround her. She was able to reveal her side of the untold story, and she expressed happiness about participating in this research.

[silence, tearful]... I feel... great...It is like something heavy was lifted off my shoulders... I never thought talking about my feelings was such a good thing... I never felt so safe to do this... Someone finally heard my story and my voice... without judging me ...please make sure that you pass on my voice and the voices of other participants to the whole world... People should know what kinds of crimes are committed in the name of honorable culture... It destroys lives ... Only a few of us are lucky enough to make it... I am one of the lucky ones... Thank you.

Ziba is planning to tell her mother about her pre-marriage sexual activities regardless of the fact that she may be perceived as “a damaged girl” and no longer a “good Muslim girl.” On one hand, she still feels attached to her mother and continues to “protect and preserve” her family honor when she is within her community by pretending to be a traditional Iranian girl. On the other, the newly gained awareness about herself reveals her identity as a non-traditional Iranian-American girl. Maintaining a balance between both cultures has been an ongoing challenge for her.

My sexuality is a huge part of my...when I can’t express it, then I can be myself in front of my own family and therefore, it becomes difficult to have a self and a sexual-self. My true-self if trying to fit into my home culture, but I have to hide it because I am always scared of shaming my family more so than I have...I hope I can change that...this is my hope in a large in nutshell.

Farah has learned that, as a young Iranian-American girl, she has made many unnecessary sacrifices in the name of her culture. She believes that not even her own parents have ever gotten to know her real potential, values, or the
real Farah as she is today. They never got to know her because they were so busy mapping out her life for her, without including her in the process or asking her what she wanted to do with her life. “...They never understood me...”

All of what I said...I want to be far more expressive, far more demanding, I want and need to find myself, my soul, to get to know myself separate from my culture, my parents, my boyfriend, my female friends, my aunts, and just about anyone I know. You are asking me to tell you about my sexual- self...It is funny, I even don’t know myself, so how can I tell you about my sexual side... I am hopeful that some day, I can find my own separate path in life.

Taraneh believes her sexual-self is her current self, the way she is today. However, her mother’s voice still guides her about how to remain a respectable Iranian girl by not being sexually active without a husband. Despite the fact that she is divorced and has been living in Los Angeles for the past several years, Taraneh still was not clear about the concept of her sexual-self. While professionally she is an independent woman, emotionally and behaviorally she is still the same innocent girl who lived near the Caspian Sea. Though she has lived in the United States since the age of seventeen, she is still unable to speak freely about her sexuality.

I feel I am a free woman ... It took many years to get where I am today, at least professionally, but I don’t know if there is going to be a time for me to be sexually free... That’s where I am struggling, and it has to do with my Iranian culture... I am just unable to feel sexual... or maybe I have trained myself not to feel sexual... I don’t know... I don’t know my sexual-self... since it is safer not to know that part of me ... I feel safer...and responsible...as a woman... having dual cultures and accepting both of them... With all the power I posses, I am still so weak in the area of sex and talking about it.

Perhaps if I could feel comfortable taking care of my feelings and desires, I could become a better mother, too...to not be so afraid of violating the rules that I have to be and act in a certain way to be accepted by my culture and its people... that is to swallow and ignore my feelings and desires of having sex and talk about my
sexual-self... I don’t know when the right time is for me to talk about my sexual desires and who I should talk to about them.

Mahtab, a single Iranian-American woman, believes that her mother’s Latino-American culture gave her the sexual attitude that she experiences today. Mahtab is able to talk about her sexuality and has been sexually active for a few years. She has been in different relationships with Americans and Latinos but not with an Iranian man, yet. She has learned to play two roles – an Iranian one when she is among the Iranian population and an American one when she is at work or attending other social gatherings. Mahtab does not believe that her parents need to know that she is sexually active today. Her father has made many attempts to arrange for Mahtab to meet with Iranian men and to get married. However, Mahtab’s response has been to reject her Iranian father’s actions. She believes she is free to make decisions for herself. Her Latino mother encourages this attitude.

Mahtab is looking for both sex and intimacy. For Mahtab, feeling sexual begins with emotional connection with her partner. She is looking for a physical connection. Her partner must be emotionally and intellectually compatible. There must be a compatibility of interest and value system. To find the right partner, she embarked on a plan to meet one new partner each week for a year. She has dated about twenty men so far, and is continuing with her project, which she has planned carefully. Mahtab feels that if all her criteria are not met, having sex with someone would be like an invasion of her privacy.

Privacy to me is my entire female organs... that is the physical part... In regards to my feelings, invasion of my privacy means, for example, when I am with my partner, and I simply don’t want to have sex with him when he has the desire...and I don’t feel connected emotionally, that exactly what it is...If I am not connected emotionally, I cannot feel intimate and sexually be with someone at
the time...I have to be emotionally connected... [silence]...It is also like taking my control away from me.

Gooleen finds herself to be a very sexual woman. She does not have any problem talking about sex with her husband and asking him for sex. Her husband is her first boyfriend and he guided her about how to have sex. However, she did not stop with her initial sexual education. She wanted to know more and found her answers elsewhere.

Oh, from T.V., books, videos, [laughing], and I brought variety into my sex life to have a better relationship with my husband. I looked at those videos and learned what to do from them different positions. I didn't want to be just a piece of meat for him to do what ever he wanted. NO. I did more things than he did. I look at the videos for the first few minutes and followed what they do. We are both horny people.

Aida said she no longer feels as the zaefeh (weak and mindless woman) after divorce and years of living in United States. She has been sexually active and has had many different sexual partners. She is highly sexually assertive and wants nothing less than how she is being sexually satisfied. However, her feelings are not fully internalized as a changed woman.

I am still doubtful about what I do... at the end of the day, I become that Iranian woman with all the guilt, shame, and all that I have been fed with. It is safe to feel that way since that has been my comfort zone and I know how to handle it. When I am in my sexual mood, I have to fake my assertiveness...the only time I felt my sexual-self is when I had my little affair with my lover back in Iran... That is the only memory that I will cherish for the rest of my life...I hope to see him again someday.

Nastaran, a single, Iranian-American woman, a “...day time American girl and night time Persian girl...” believes her sexual-self is the woman she is today. She believes it is her true identity, part of her personality, how she respects herself. Sexuality, in her opinion, is what a woman should appreciate as part of
her womanhood. A woman should have sex in such a way that she is satisfied not only physically but emotionally as well. Nastaran knows that her parents are disappointed in her because she is following her heart and not her parents’ plans for her. Her studies have helped her to know more about herself as a person and as an individual. This is different from the collective system in which she was raised. She is looking for a job within a humanitarian organization, where she can learn more about people, and women in particular. She wants to help women find their true identity as individuals, independent from men.

I think women should be themselves… to do what they feel comfortable with… what they feel …that is their selves… culture is a big part of my life… there are so many things… I wouldn’t be able to follow it as it is… I do have some of my Persian culture… traditions… values… such as being in a family environment and spending time with them… being respectful… the bottom line is… what I am today is all about, and the result of, my upbringing… and whatever comes with that… there should be more open communication between mothers and daughters… [silence]… I am a passionate, sexual woman… A part of this passion is a search for myself, to know my soul, to know myself as I was created by God, not by what my parents and my society told me to be.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter described the participants’ process of making adjustments in their sexual-selves. This process explored the origins of the un-doing and un-learning of the cultural constructs the participants acquired during their normal maturation process, and the degree to which the un-doing and un-learning occurred. The chapter further explored the process of re-learning once the participants were exposed to another culture. The final theme of the chapter looked at the evolved sexual-self and the acceptance of the current sexual-self.
The themes explored some changing aspects of the sexual-self of some participants and the personal struggles with those changes.

Many of the participants, with their migration to the United States, experienced sudden and dramatic changes in cultural exposures. These exposures were shocking and contemptible for some, alluring for others, and exciting for the rest. A few participants began their un-doing and un-learning processes early in their lives, when their families relocated to Spain, Libya, and India. They found these cultures had less cultural strictures than did Iran, and their stay in those countries provided valuable experience in cross-cultural adjustments in their sexual-selves.

The participants spoke of restrictive ‘do’s and don’ts’ received from their home cultural environment about their sexual-selves and gender roles. The play out of these restrictions on their sexuality started a process during which they began to learn to trust themselves more. They were able to readjust their viewpoints about themselves; challenge cultural value systems, family traditions, and their own behavioral limits; learn the boundaries of their sexual-selves from their own perspectives; and find a safe environment in which they could explore their sexual-selves with the least negative fallout and reprisal. But this process proved to be painful. The women had one of two options: to exercise individual freedom and expression and divest themselves of home culture norms, thus bringing on the displeasure, disfavor, ostracism, and possible punishment from their home community; or forego individual freedom and personal expression, adhere to cultural norms, and live in the favor of their new cultural community. Some of the participants chose the former option, some chose the later, and some
found ways to express their individual sexual-selves, as well as partially comply with the norms of the home country.

For other participants, the undoing and un-learning process began in Iran where the children of resident foreign national families had social interaction with Iranian youngsters, introducing ideas, cultural practices, vicarious travel through pictures, stories, books, and souvenirs from Britain, Germany, and the United States. The process was a gradient introduction of different ideas, cultural norms, and expression freedoms that served to form the sexual-self differently from the other two groups.

In most cases, the participants struggled with the limitations of their host culture attachments in their desires to explore the offerings of the dominant United States culture. Many of these offerings were educational, professional, and relational opportunities not available to them prior to migrating to the United States. For some older participants, the safety and security of not having to step outside their Iranian community cultural confines avoided any disturbance of the sexual-selves they had accepted for themselves. Another group of migrant Iranian women were continually challenged by having to be members of two cultures, one Iranian and the other the United States. They had little choice but to function in both cultures, but they found freedom in one and social restrictions in the other. On the other hand, they discovered an inability to escape the one and much personal and social risk in operating too freely in the other. For them, the self and sexual-self were being changed with and without their volition, and they incurred some difficulty in establishing who their selves and their sexual-selves were. The participants talked about what I came to identify as their ‘true-selves’ and they gave different meanings to this term based
upon their life experiences. Their understanding of true-self was primarily about gender role, gender identity, and their level of empowerment within their social strata. Their true-self seems to be influenced by two factors. The first one included a combination of performances and conformations to the expectations of others. The second framework of their true-self consisted of a self that was based on internal hidden values, which may or may not have been brought to the surface as it depended on various circumstances and consequences.

A number of significant themes emerged from the analysis of the participants’ struggles. Self-determination is a driving force in the formation of self and sexual-self. Taking care of the sexual-self needs is a basic survival urge, that when suppressed, weakens the urge to survive. Acceptance of culture by the participants was not synonymous with agreement with culture. While culture is a determinant of sexual-self formation, the self is a factor in that formation, and it is the nature and ability to utilize and exert power over the other that provides the most influencing impact in that formation. Through their narrative explorations, the participants gained a new level of awareness regarding their potential to change. Painting 6.2 captures the diligence of the participants in their efforts to put a stop to their struggle as women.
CHAPTER 7
DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings regarding the participants’ perceptions of their sexual-selves. The chapter is divided into two main sections. The first half of the chapter discusses some of the major findings of the thesis and locates these findings in the context of available literature. The second half of the chapter discusses the contributions of this research in terms of new insights about Iranian-American women, makes suggestions for policy on women’s rights and their sexual health as well as discusses some of the recommendations to counselors for policy and practice. Implications of the present study in relation to future research are also discussed. Finally the chapter presents an overview of the limitations of the study.

7.1 Cultural Attachment

“Cultural attachment” is a socially constructed concept and mechanism that operates to preserve the existence of the social structure. It is frequently associated with the concept of cultural interdependence. For the participants, cultural attachment not only meant they were able to identify with Iranian culture and maintain their connection, but it also translated into an inability to easily or quickly break away from a relationship with that culture. The only way to explain the Iranian-American women's attachment to their culture is to understand the entire frame of reference of that culture. Who the Iranian-American woman is culturally is an integral component of cultural attachment. That identity is partially formed from generational culture transference and the
political play of state rule. Such identity is also bound by personal vested male interest in the maintenance of a patriarchal system that simultaneously rewards and punishes women with a superficial cultural status of honor. For participants, female identity is a cultural one, not an individual one. There was, however, an accompanying orientation of a sexual-self that was hidden from family and society. It was out of this self that secrecy became a safe and useful tool for survival.

From the narratives, all of the aspects of the participants' womanhood, except for childbearing and the raising of children, were closeted with secrecy and the withholding of information. In the culture was a practice of secrecy that served to control their position in social functioning. For example, the participants did not learn much about the anatomy or physiology of their bodies, their menstrual cycle, procreation, or their sexuality, except what life experience could teach them. Being apparently too culturally offensive to reside in language expression, the participants were instructed not to speak of their bodies, not to engage in discussion about relationships between men and women, not to discuss sex, their sexuality, and not to give expression to any physical or emotional changes they themselves experienced. They were oriented to remain silent.

Cultural attachment is persistently reinforced by frequent messages received from what Bowlby (1969) has called “environment of evolutionary adaptedness” (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999. p.718). In maintaining the social status-quo, they were rewarded with a continued connection with family, friends, and social environment. To cope, the participants developed survival patterns in order to meet the social demands that promoted strength and general adaptation,
a phenomenon observed in a majority of stories told by the participants. The participants developed a model of physical and emotional survival that presented an apparent alignment with culture, but camouflaged and suppressed their individual needs and desires. The research shows this cultural attachment as a divisive mechanism operating against the individual, and ultimately affecting sexual-self formation, the nature of survival decisions, and instinctive responses to life experiences. These concepts will be discussed in more detail later in the chapter.

7.1.1 Fear, Shame, and Guilt as Part of Cultural Attachment

Fear was introduced early to the participants as a way to keep them from danger, especially from interacting with boys. Violation of norms often produced the threat of losing one’s family’s support, so fear was a frequently used form of social control. For the participants, feeling ashamed was their response to not complying with cultural expectations. It also was a form of control to inhibit individual and personal expression. This concept was defined by Scheff (1994) as “the master socializing effect because of its powerful interpersonal pull” (p. 792). Guilt is an awareness of having done something unacceptable and has been seen as a combination of fear and shame. They can each function in tandem or separately as a social control construct to determine behavior. The data presented in this thesis shows how after long-term exposure to interactive social stimuli these emotional responses act to keep the participant within the boundaries of social norms. In so doing, the participants become unwittingly attached to their childhood culture that traverses the lines of memory and recall of cultural experiences that dictate behavior.
It can be argued that the participants’ cultural attachment appears to be strong, as evidenced by their fear of presenting their new sexual-selves in their Iranian-American communities. Their role as women was clearly defined and prescribed in Iran, which left little room to conceive of an alternative for them, even when they gained new awareness about the reality of a woman's sexuality and her role as a person. She, though unknowingly and unwillingly, maintained her *khanoum* status.

The environment of Iranian culture was particularly set up to produce the perfect female offspring that is culturally accepted. This cultural creation is a good girl, *khanoum*, who maintains family honor by following the rules and the norms. This concept captures the Iranian girl's childhood orientation, which carries over into adulthood and marriage, where she maintains these attachments. The father figure is replaced with a husband whose role is the same except for sexual involvement.

The undoing, unlearning, and re-learning process brought participants to new levels of awareness and a level of comfort in their adjusted lives. However, in their range of comfort, they ran the gamut of being completely uncomfortable talking about sexual-self to being very comfortable talking about sexual-self. Further discussion of the unlearning and re-learning process is provided later in the chapter. There were those who acknowledged their sexual feelings for the first time, and those who were not willing to acknowledge those feelings. At the other end of the spectrum were participants who openly discussed their feelings and were, in some ways, adapting to American culture. Some younger single participants were sexually active prior to marriage, while others were still attached to their home culture which required them to be virgin till they got
married. Social abandonment for the participants defying cultural norms was an emotional and physical prospect. Their efforts to live in two cultures often had them straddling the divide, unable and unwilling to let one (the home culture) go, and unable to avoid even partial adjustment of the other (United States culture).

Foucault found that culture’s socialization process gave people a set of norms, values and behaviors that were internalized, and from which decisions were made for the survival of the individual and preservation of the culture (Boje, 1994; Foucault, 1977). In Iranian culture, the women, under the control of a patriarchal system, religious state, and changing political persuasions, received messages from their society that defined them as less than equal citizens. They came to live with the specific prescriptions ascribed for their behavior and role in life. Participants reported being under constant surveillance by their families and communities. They received from them instructions, reminders, and warnings of their expected behavior, with threatened punishment for any failure to conform to them. From the daily exposure to social norms, participants internalized cultural messages that shaped their sexual-selves. As a consequence of this internalization, feelings of guilt, shame, and fear operated to shape their sexual-self as prescribed by the home culture.

In those earlier years, family members were the guards, the monitors, the “gazers” (Foucault, 1980, 1977) of female behavior, and an ever-present and continuous source of control in their lives. Since the concept of aberou (honor) both for the young women and their families is dependent on women’s chastity, there was little chance for a woman to arrive at the marriage ceremony with her virginity not intact. After moving to the United States, where social norms
permitted more sexual expression with little to no direct monitoring, the participants continued to make decisions in compliance with old culture social norms. As they said, “My culture haunts me no matter where I go.” The participants had become their own monitors, their own gazers, their own suppressors. They had become the vehicles by which their culture would stand the tests of relocation, time, and cross-cultural exposure, at the partial sacrifice of their selves. This study demonstrates that the acculturation process in Iran, specifically the patriarchal system, continued to have a direct and purposeful impact on the formation of the sexual-selves of women, even when these women left their country.

7.1.2 Meaning of Sexual-Self from Girlhood to Marriage

A significant finding of this study, as revealed so vividly by the narratives of the participants, is that family power is a determinant of sexual-self formation. As a control mechanism, family power was in evidence in many ways in a female child’s life. As female children, they held the lowest position in the family hierarchy. In that position, they could be told what to do by any male in the family, no matter his age. They were taught they had no right to object to what they were told. The participants observed that boys were treated with a different level of respect, allowed to participate in different types of social interactions, and were free to roam as they chose. Girls did not enjoy these privileges, nor could they make sense of the disparity between boys and girls. However, this treatment of boys was perceived to make boys more deserving and more powerful than girls in society. These differences in treatment of boys and girls were some of the initially recalled indications of sexual-self formation.
While sexual-self formation was not a concept taught to the participants, these perceptions of disparate experiences gave them definite feelings, thoughts, and actions, and played a large part in the formation of their sexual identity and their perceived place in society. The experience of constant warnings from family members and the community about childhood expectations and choices was perceived as limiting their options to be girls. However, the participants were not allowed to discuss their feelings or views with male family members, and they made secret expression of them with selected female members of family and friends. These reflections support the view expressed by feminists that a “re-education” of the assumptions learned about gender and sexuality is needed, to develop views that are more in line with how these women wanted to express themselves (Connell, 1987; Ebadi & Moaveni, 2006). This study also revealed and documented how secrecy, an individually created social construct, became a form of protection and security for the participants. In order to have any sense of self, they resorted to secrecy, which gave them some semblance of power. During early childhood, simply being quiet and not responding to family admonishing concerning normal youthful activities led the participants to use secrecy to avoid any potential upset with family.

During the teen years the mechanism of secrecy for the participants continued as social constrictions grow more intense. Youthful activities were now seen as a possible threat to or a potential violation of prescribed gender role, and were met with ever-increasing objections to their sexual-self expressions. Secrecy served as an instrument of power in that it kept hidden the participants’ responses and warded off potential reprisal from family members. Not surprisingly, as described in Chapter 5, secrecy camouflages individual responses to early life experiences and simultaneously presents a passive mode
of behavior in apparent compliance to social norms (Hyde, 1996; Whitfield, 1991).

Consistent with the literature reviewed in Chapter 2, family is central to the Iranian lifestyle (Mackey, 1998). The participants idealized and internalized family as a source of ‘rightness.’ As teens, this rightness took the form of obedience, and support and acceptance of the concept *khanoum* (ladylike), in order to preserve family honor. From puberty, daily life experience was heavily occasioned with girl-shaping messages from family members, especially the mother. Being told what to do was so common that the participants perceived that as normal, without realizing they were losing their sense of self, individualism, and personal power. This concept corresponds with the theory of independent and interdependent self-construct indicated by Markus and Kitayama (1991), and has implication for the impact families had on the participants’ lives. Participants spoke about the dilemma this created for them once they had constructed new understandings for themselves about their identity and experiences as women, and how they reinterpreted past interactions.

Brooks-Gunn and Peterson (1983) and Petersen and Taylor (1980) have argued that puberty should be seen as the critical point for changes in behavior and social contact. The narratives show that the physical and emotional changes, with their accompanying sexual feelings and evolving interests, led to a parental initiated decrease of the participants’ social interactions. With the appearance of these changes, the girls were met with the challenge to discover effective ways to understand them, and to find someone who could help them with the logic behind the physical and emotional changes.
Gender role, gender identity, and gender stereotype have relevance here (Beasley, 2005; Butler, 2006; Connell, 1987). The participants’ female gender role was encompassed in the concept of *khanoum* (ladylike) and *khanoum* serves the function of preserving family honor. Any imposition to cultural dictation brought to them the feelings of fear, guilt, and shame as a consequence of wanting to make their own choices. The participants, in line with their acceptance of family direction, internalized the prescribed gender role as their own gender identity. As a consequence, they formed an image that was idealized in the culture and became the foundation for their behavior, actions, thoughts, beliefs, and motives for the rest of their lives.

The use of power and its impact on the way the participants responded to life was a finding that had relevance to their sexual-self formation (Afary, 2009; Bohan, 1997; Kitzinger, 1987). According to the constructionist theory (Bohan, 1997; Kitzinger, 1987) the self is formed both from individual determinism and social norms. In the teen years many participants were being prepared for marriage, some as early as age 14, and the relationship with the mother was one of a strong power struggle. The participants coming into their own maturity made attempts, albeit minor, to pull away from familial restraints. When their individualism was expressed, it was met with cultural consequences. For many of the participants, at times when they allowed themselves to show some level of power, family and society objected. These experiences from the participants’ standpoint had to do with loss of self-esteem and personal empowerment. The participants learned at the point of marriage that the selves they had become were mere tools to preserve and raise the social status of the family. This was evidence and an unspoken admission of the suppression the participants had
endured. The sense of individual power they had secretly assumed for themselves was suddenly dissipated.

The participants confessed not knowing who they were and being confused about who they were expected to be. Their new sexual-selves, individual identities and gender roles had become an extension of the culture in order to maintain intact the traditional aspects of culture, family, and patriarchy. Bourdieu's (1977) concept of loss of individuality supports this finding. The nature of this new social identity resulted in their loss of individuality and personal power, but brought an assumption of status and responsibility without power. The results of the current study suggest this status was assigned by cultural powers, but not felt by the participants. Their real sexual-selves were suppressed to live in failed expectation and disappointment, unable to surface again within the confines of their cultural existence. The real status to which the participants were relegated was one of subservience, obedience, and the superficial symbolism of honor.

According to the narratives of the participants, sex was a taboo subject (Afary, 2009; Afary & Anderson, 2005; Floor, 2008). For the participants, not having the permission to discuss sex created considerable mystery about sex. It was the mystery that made them feel fearful, sinful, ashamed, and guilty whenever the subject came up directly or by inference. Any experience containing these emotions was perceived by families to be wayward leanings in the participants and subject to consequences that participants perceived as threatening to their position of khanoum.
Appearing in the participants’ stories was the perception of cultural expectation to have a life similar to their mothers. The expectation became evident in the concepts of khanoum, a good wife, no discussion of sex, no awareness or education about sex, acceptance of prescribed gender role, and obedience. One of the findings of this research was that they were expected to maintain cultural norms prescribed for a woman, by example or through teaching. Another finding is the participants’ perception that they were the embodiment of that culture, spanning generations to achieve the future preservation of the culture. As evidenced from the narratives, cultural expectations have been an evolving reality throughout the participants’ lives since birth, when their social norm designation automatically separated them from boys in the name of gender. In the teen years and young adulthood, as many of the participants were stepping into marriage, their gender role and gender identity prepared them as a medium for and embodiment of the culture.

The findings revealed that the presence of khanoum, as part of the gender role concept, served to facilitate the suppression of the status and lifestyle of women. Khanoum was the vehicle to nurture the acceptance of gender role as women’s gender identity. This acceptance of suppression in the name of social norms was not conscious acceptance because it was applied to the entire population of women in Iran in the name of culture. The participants did not perceive the suppression as such because it was an evolving process, from birth throughout life. The acceptance of suppression also served as a defense mechanism, a way to avoid facing cultural consequences. Forms of suppression included denial of freedom of mobility, continuing flow of messages stipulating what they could not be, messages that devalued them because they were girls, and limitations on what subjects they could discuss. Their sexual-self was
relegated to a condition of non-existence. The participants explained they did not have a sense of who they were and only followed what they were told to do in order to be a good girl, good wife, good mother, and a khanoum.

For the participants then, gazing became the consequence of lifelong acceptance and internalization of social norms in the name of khanoum. The participants became their own cultural monitors as supported by their expression, “My culture haunts me.” This concept has been supported and explained in-depth as the Foucault panopticon theory (Boje, 1995; Foucault, 1977; Foucault, 1975; Ricouer, 1988). The concept of “my culture haunts me” continued to impact the way the participants viewed their lives and made decisions during their migration process.

7.1.3 Meaning of the Undoing, Unlearning, and Re-learning Process

The origin of undoing and unlearning for the participants started with the realization that their life experiences had had some type of impact on them with which they were not in agreement. For many, this disagreement originated at different times in life and was caused by different life experiences. The life experiences may have occurred during childhood, teen years, marriage, or a combination of some or all. What is evident is that this realization occurred with each participant. Participants realized boys were given more freedom of action, had more choices, and had fewer limitations than they experienced. One of the reasons that boys were receiving different treatment from family members and society is related to the concept of “son preference.” The narratives showed that the participants experienced discrimination and disparate treatment within the
system. For example, the concept of *khanoum* was used as a way to control the participant’s position within their families and larger society; all participants reviewed the meaning and significance of this previously taken-for-granted concept on their lives.

At the beginning of migration, the participants clung to Iranian cultural norms until their husbands’ work demands gave them free time to explore new ways, or their own work demands thrust them into the host culture environment. Their cross-cultural interaction gave them new information and viewpoints with which to consider new options for their self expression. The significant unlearning of *khanoum* was a process that took place all along the way as the participants were exposed to new information and cultural norms. Levy and Warren (1987) found that wherever traditional and western role expectations come together, cultural adjustments are made with the uniqueness of a woman’s own experience and pace.

The participants’ experiences with leaving the past behind first took the form of moving to the United States. For many of them, the move was initially considered to be a temporary re-location until the revolution was over. Those who realized their re-location was to be permanent felt the need and the pressure to maintain their home cultural values and perspective in all areas of life. Along this line, they found themselves rejecting and refusing host culture norms, and developed an attitude to resist adjustment to the host culture. It was only when their interaction within the host culture brought them to a level of comfort away from the Iranian community that the participants began to actively explore the offerings of the host culture. The “leaving the past behind” was the point of realizing there were more options available, and that they could experience
them. The cross-cultural adjustment process (Whiting, 1976) for the participants had its variations. The younger participants, exposed to different school environments once they arrived in the United States, began host culture exploration quickly. Some of the older participants who were very attached to the home culture found that the United States culture had little to offer them as women and did not achieve a level of comfort to approach cross-cultural exploration. Many participants whose interaction and comfort level were more gradual found a balance in their cross-cultural explorations and Iranian culture participation.

Going through gender role alteration for the participants came about as a result of an additional set of culture based gender prescriptions (Arrddondo-Dowd, 1981), and was central to the discovery of the participants’ sexual-selves. The sexual-self in the United States culture began to emerge as participants discovered the privileges available to women in the host culture. Some of these privileges were freedom to move about in public without covering their heads; freedom to attend away-from-home functions without a male escort; right to personal safety as a married or single woman; right to a divorce under the law; and right to an abortion. Becoming aware of these privileges and being able to take advantage of them was an empowering process for the participants. Having the right of choice gave the participants a new sense about themselves as individuals and women. That a choice was theirs to make, offered a sense of personal value. The sexual-self, in the openness of United States society, found options for expression that were gratifying and frightening. Sexual-self emergence also came with the various types of exposure to the host culture – movies, books, television, schools, work environments, people in public places, and official encounters.
One of the findings of this study was that becoming acquainted with their emerging sexual-selves was a consequence of new culture offerings made available to the participants. For the participants, these offerings varied in their form, but were common in their effect. They were all enlightening or educational; that is, they allowed for new realizations, new understandings, and new viewpoints. Whether from books, daily experiences, electronic media, social interactions, or observations, each instance of information intake for the participants opened up new ways to look at themselves as women. With each addition of new data, the participants made comparisons and mental registrations about themselves and other women they read about or observed. The participants found themselves coming to know who they could be as women and compared their findings with who they had been in Iran. In the open United States society, they became less fearful of having thoughts that addressed their sexual-selves, even though the concept was unfamiliar. With the new informational exposure, they found they were gradually able to take small behavior risks, such as advancing out in public without headdress and experiencing no censorship. Each new step of this type was empowering, giving them courage to become other than they had been, and one step closer to who they envisioned themselves to be.

Operating simultaneously with this personal education was the constant question of what would happen if each new personal adventure were to become public knowledge in the Iranian community in both home and host culture. The participants debated with themselves about who they would become, were they to engage in an activity such as having lunch with a male colleague, that would not have been sanctioned by the home culture. The clashes between the two cultures placed them in a dilemma, but it was one that many of the participants
were excited about solving. As part of this self-reflection came a new way of knowing and understanding the world, a new sense of self, a new level of personal power that guided the decisions for their new lives. While their attachment to the old culture continued to monitor their life conduct, the middle aged to younger participants managed to extend themselves into the host culture, the younger ones more than others. The older group of participants rejected the new social norms. They were reconciled with being the sexual-selves as shaped by their home culture. The depth of exposure to the home culture tended to determine how attached the participants were to the home culture. The hold of culture can be manifested in different ways.

One of the unique contributions from the narratives was evidence that the acceptance of culture does not mean agreement with culture. This finding is supported by the experiences of many participants such as Aida, Mahtab, Mahnaz, and Ziba. These participants accepted the home culture in Iran, but had not agreed with it and found in the United States they were able to adapt to the new culture. To circumvent family retaliation, they kept their thoughts private, as secrets. With this protection in place, they managed to keep their true sexual-self intact and concealed from the external world. Once in the United States, and separated from the home culture experience, many of the participants felt freer to explore hidden thoughts and to summon the courage to acknowledge them. The finding that a woman struggles to find a balance between the two opposing cultures is supported by Espin (1995). In the process, she is able to find a different direction for her sexual-self because it has not been fully subdued by her home culture.
Many participants eventually were able to make a gradual cultural adjustment to life in the United States. As Chapter 6 revealed, the participants did not experience a sudden reversal or alteration of their sexual-selves upon arriving in United States. As they attempted to explore newly presented social constructs, they learned that preserved in their minds were home cultural norms that maintained the participants’ prime gender roles and sexuality as they had been molded in their home culture. For many of the participants, the home culture remained operative in their responses to the new culture, and continued to impose its binding social norms on the sexual-self. The undoing, unlearning, and re-learning process monitored and adjusted the selection of the participants’ experiences and determined the extent of sexual-self reformation. This finding runs parallel to Shahidian’s (1999) observation of obstacles of gender during migration (Huang & Akhtar, 2005) in that the adjustment for women is more difficult than that for men. Cultural and family stability are dependent upon the fulfillment of a woman’s gender role. A critical factor challenging the sexual-self of the home culture was confronting the openness of female sexuality in the United States. Another critical factor pointed out by the participants was their coming to understand that their Iranian culture used the concept of chastity and honor to control women’s sexuality. While changes in gender roles and perceptions of sexual-selves occurred during migration, there were other reasons for those changes. Many participants found solace in the escape from existing cultural traditions and limitations imposed on women (Akhtar, 1992). They also carried some discomfort in not knowing the impact the limitations had on their view of self, well-being, and behavior (Akhtar, 1992; Escoll 1992; Mahler, et al., 1975).
A number of the participant’s feared change and letting go of Iranian belief systems. Some experienced a paradoxical option in which the American culture’s sexual behavior expectations returned them to what Essed and Goldberg (2002) refers to as retrenchment. This was a return to the restrictions of home culture tradition for protection, even though those restrictions continued to impose gender suppression. They struggled with this paradox that limited willingness to go through changes. Many participants, finding themselves torn between the desire to be open and the desire to remain loyal to their Iranian-American community’s home culture suffered (Hojat et al., 2000), for their own sexual norms were in direct competition with American ones. According to Espin (1995), “This is a major struggle that women face during migration process” (p. 6). Struggling with their emerging selves brought the participants to a place of being able to determine for themselves who they were sexually.

### 7.1.4 Current Sexual-Self Perception

Participants used metaphors in Farsi, their native tongue, to refer to sex and sexuality. Using terminology that directly names the sexual concept was avoided. This was not surprising as in Iran, individuals and communities largely use metaphors to describe and discuss sex and sexuality. There are few common usage terms in Farsi that are direct and explicit. The use of such terms, particularly for sex, is considered to be crude and ill mannered. The few terms that do exist for expressing love were so rarely used that most participants had either never heard of them or did not see them being used by friends and/or families. After living in the United States and learning English, many participants felt safe to use English language to make similar references. It can be surmised that social constructs intrinsic to or related to the home culture
cannot be spoken of in a sexual context by the participants. The realm of sex for the participants is so filled with pejorative meaning that the participants’ cultural attachment would only allow metaphoric reference in Farsi. Sex remained a taboo subject after years away from the home culture. Those participants who spoke English were more expressive about their sexual concerns than those who were mainly limited to their native language. Another aspect of this avoidance of sex is the lack of empowerment. Participants did not feel sufficiently empowered to speak to sexually related concepts. This finding indicates that the participants, regardless of living in an individualistic culture and making life adjustments for at least a few years, were still unable to feel free to be expressive in their own native language of Farsi. Feeling limited to be expressive sexually is still a concern among participants. They continue to be monitored by the initially internalized norms of the collective system of Iran.

The participants’ struggle with the coming together of two sets of cultural norms has remained a factor in their sexual-self identity and gender role. Their cultural attachment and sexual-self expression are governed by their perception of the power their home culture has to negatively impact their lives. The cultural attachment and sexual-self expression are also governed by the participants’ own accumulation of individual power and certainty to determine the sexual-self they would like to be. The home culture, even in the new location, continues to represent a powerful threat where behavior could be seen as deviant. Many participants found that pervasive in their thoughts were the ideas that they would be “bad” if they were to engage in the new social or sex related activities of the host culture. It was the participants themselves who became the monitoring agents of their behavior and reputation. While the power
of culture over them could be curtailed, complete elimination of it did not seem possible.

For the participants, the sexual-self of the Iranian-American women was a concept that evolved. The traditional practice in the home culture of preventing discussion of sex by the participants left them with scant, if any, information to know that sex or sexual expression actually existed. This absence of sex information plus other methods of sexual-self repression left the participants’ sexual-self in a denied or non-existent state. Even after puberty, when the participants began to acquire some secret information from friends, they repressed it because they knew that their families expected them “not to know” anything about sex and sexuality till they got married. For most participants, it was after living in the host culture for some time that they began to articulate their sexual needs and desires and an understanding of their sexual-self began to emerge.

A finding in this study is that the suppression of the sexual-self had left the participant devoid of personal power. In the home culture, the outward manifestation of the sexual-self simply conformed to the dictates of gender role assumption. For many of the participants’ sexual-self had been dormant or camouflaged. However, living in the United States, with its more open culture empowered participants to allow their sexual-self to emerge. The emerging sexual-self began to differentiate between the sexual-self of Iran and the more active sexual-self that developed in the openness of the United States culture.

Participants initially maintained the same gender role of the home culture behavior and belief systems in the new society in order to prove honor and to maintain their home culture values. Yuval-Davis (1992) stated this process is
done as a way to obey and to maintain the traditional gender role to support and to follow the family value system. The findings revealed that some participants had a strong willingness to change and to gain a higher level of self-concept. This concept supports the data presented in Chapter 6, which highlights that participants’ sexual-self perception evolved through the experience of actually living in the new culture and through the integration of new sexual beliefs. These beliefs enabled the participants to represent themselves differently from the stereotypic lifestyle of the home culture and made them feel free to explore their sexual-selves. They were empowered to determine new sexual boundaries for their sexual activities.

As some feminists (Yeatmann, 1997; Young, 2003) indicate, there is a constant struggle between the urge to survive as self and the urge to survive within culture. This feminist concept corresponds with some of the participants’ own findings regarding their own sexual-self reformation and the determination to establish themselves as women despite home culture impositions or patriarchal holdings. They could now accept or disagree with those impositions. They now had the knowledge and evidence that as females they could be educated and perform in capacities equal to those of men; and decisions concerning themselves could be made by themselves. Other such participant discoveries concerned their relationships within culture, religion, and civil law (Espin, 1995); these occupied considerable attention of the participants.

The participants who put aside and changed their assigned gender role as women found courage to put an end to their subservient response. To accomplish this new gender role, the participants underwent an empowering process involving self-education and a gradual interaction in the host culture
until a level of safety and comfort was achieved. Being motivated by these accomplishments, the participants took a risk to speak up for themselves. Gaining education provided opportunity for the participants to learn what was missing in their lives. They ultimately felt safer to be expressive about their wants and needs. Education brought a sense of empowerment that further encouraged participants to voice their needs and concerns. This was a gradual process. Each participant, at her own level of empowerment, had been able to bypass the imposed power of the home culture that limited her life in different ways. Finally, while some have, many of the participants have not been able to leave behind the stronghold of the patriarchal culture of Iran that continues to constrain the evolution of their sexual-selves. In several studies, it was found that women tended to maintain the home culture attachment during the migration process (Cole, Espin, & Rothblum, 1992; Portes & Rothblum, 1996).

7.1.5 Examination of Feminist Application

Feminist theoretical framework has informed and guided this research. Cultural feminists have emphasized the importance of historical, holistic, and collective orientations to understand experience (Gilman, 1988). Along this line of thought, feminists in Iran (Ebadi & Moaveni, 2005) view the plight of women as a struggle against culture, as there is not an aspect of it that does not place limits on their sexual-selves. Generational culture transference has had an impact on sexual-self formation. The narratives indicated that the participants realized that the roles their mothers and aunts played were a form of cultural subterfuge. They saw that their unquestioned conformity to the daily practice of cultural constructs was a way of using them for societal gain.
Other feminists have put forward emotion as a means of learning about self and relationships (Schaef, 1981). In sharing their experiences, the participants expressed their emotions. In observing the presence of their emotions, they could see the manner in which they had dealt with them previously, sometimes suppressing them, other times disregarding them, but rarely showing them. These emotional responses allowed them to know something of whom they were and the nature of the relationships in which they were involved.

While the traditional and physical hijab is a public statement and symbolic confinement of Iranian women’s expression of their sexual-selves, there exists a more impinging hijab impacting women: the emotional hijab, the one that harnesses negative emotions about self and continually defines the self of women as the culture has prescribed. The narratives reflect that the participants were exposed to two sets of hijab. The participants spoke about their feelings, surfacing in response to the dehumanizing treatment by their spouses and society. This is the hijab that engulfed them with feelings of shame, guilt and fear. This was the hijab that held secret these feelings and made it difficult in the cross-cultural setting to communicate their concerns for themselves.

Although years of closeted and pent-up emotions and feelings had surrounded their experiences, resulting in a dampening effect on their sexual-selves, the verbalization of those emotions gave the participants emotional release. Critical self-reflection assisted in the unraveling of the hold that some of their early experiences had on these women. Consistent with a feminist perspective, the primary contribution of this research is that the participants, who had not been able to acknowledge or express their sexual-self feelings prior to this study, had opportunity to do both in the present research. They are able to
speak more freely about their sexual-selves and their roles as women and are thereby validated.

### 7.2 Implications for Policy and Practice

A significant insight of this research is the non-consideration of Iranian women’s rights as human rights including sexual rights and sexual health (Hesketh & Zing, 2006; Kapiga, 1996; Kapiga & Lugalla, 2002; Meda, 1999; Tehrani & Malek-Afzali, 2008). Iranian women’s rights issues have been emerging increasingly more in research literature over the past thirty years, but they have only been referred to mainly as women’s issues, not human rights (Ebadi & Moaveni, 2005). The findings of this research show that an absence of the reference to Iranian women’s rights as human rights surreptitiously transfers an implied message that the status of Iranian women’s rights is not equal to the status and rights of Iranian men.

Some of the most prominent advocates of women’s rights state that the concept of power is central to subordination and oppression of women (Allen, 1999; Foucault 1980; Hartsock, 1996, Hartsock, 1983; Yeatmann, 1997; Young, 2003). These feminists also contend that power is a significant contributing factor in the structuring of self; and that self is structured by the socialization process of an individual’s culture. In the present study, the participants spoke of the limitations placed on their childhood activities and the painful memories and inhibitions suffered. For some, the consequences of these childhood activities continue in some form or the other to this day and their search to find ways to overcome the obstacles life presents continues as well. They spoke of becoming who they were as a result of these experiences. Although the participants did
not use the term ‘socialization process’, but the strict orientation to their gender roles were in fact the process to orient them to the cultural norms for Iranian women.

Other feminists (Bohan, 1997; Bohan, 1990; Kitzinger, 1987; Staples, 1973) view gender as a construct formed from those interactions society designates as appropriate to gender. Kitzinger (1987) in discussing social constructionism, highlights the feminist view to show the use of power in patriarchal societies for the suppression of women to influence the expression of their sexuality. Power is a force from the standpoint that the individual or force upon which it is being exerted is lessened in some way. Patriarchy, by definition, a male oriented social construct, was the system through which the participants were not allowed to explore themselves as individuals and were gradually overcome by the power of patriarchy to smother attempts of individualism. With the potential for exacting punitive response on the participant for behavior that did not meet the social norm, patriarchy represented a power that in essence prevented opportunity to know and understand self, except in the context of what is expected by others. Self-determined actualization of self did not occur and sexual-self was minimally explored.

7.2.1 Broader Implications: Iranian Women as the Vehicle for Political Power

The discussion here cannot be fully appreciated without noting that there is a historic precedent for recognizing the importance of Iranian women, as defined by their sexual role, as a vehicle or tool for the creation and maintenance of a political power base. Women in Iranian political history have had a special
and shifting place. Prior to the Pahlavi Dynasty [1920 – 1979] (Mackey, 1998), they traditionally had not been heirs to governmental posts, elected officials, appointed officials, or decision-makers. Where some few may have been appointed, they held positions with no authority and were clothed in the full hijab to perform their duties. Essentially, they had not been in positions to establish policy. Iranian women have had a vital place in history, but it probably has not been viewed broadly in society, if at all, or in literature as a powerful dynamic. In modern times, for at least a century in Iran, women’s issues have dominated the political landscape beginning with the Qajar Dynasty late in the 19th century where there were tight social strictures on the expression of their sexual-selves, not too dissimilar to those of the post-1979 revolution. The lives of women were regulated, with the assistance of the patriarchal system, through policy enactment. When Reza Shah came to reign [1936-1979], he threw out strictures and policy that discriminated against women and made it policy for Iranian women to have rights equal to that of men and to exercise them (Mackey, 1998). For this political stance, the Pahlavi reign was commended internationally and it led to opportunities for educational and cultural reforms to modernize Iran. Political policy related to the social and sexual roles of women significantly determined the prosperity of society and the social health of its population. The two governmental reigns of the 20th century (the Pahlavi period and the post 1979 theocratic governments) show stark contrast in the characteristics of life, one where Iranian women sought out their own destinies and the other where they were not allowed to have a destiny. With the reign of Khomeini, after the 1979 Iranian revolution, women’s roles suddenly reverted to the policies and practices of the Qajar era. History has recorded political policy in Iran that made women central to the political platform, just as had been the case during the
Pahlavi dynasty, with the exception that the sexual role of women since the revolution is enforced and played upon to control and limit life for women.

It can be seen that Iranian women, by the definition or prescription of their sexual role, have been the prime platform item for political power thrusts. Chapter 1 pointed out that women’s history in Iran, particularly for the past century, has evolved in such a way that women, in one way or another, have been central to the structuring of political policy and the direction for the country’s lifestyle. The major thrust in the political platforms of Reza Shah Pahlavi and his son, Mohammad Reza Shah, was the liberation of women as a group from oppressive social structures. Their policies on women focused attention on the plight of women in Iran and ushered them into the limelight of international prominence. One of the key thrusts in the political platform of Khomeini, the 1979 Islamic revolutionary leader, was the subjugation of women’s roles and societal functioning as the means to establishing his power and a successful political reign. Irrespective of political shifts in governmental power in Tehran, at a societal level, cultural norms played an important and defining role in determining gender roles. For many participants who lived their earlier formative years in Iran during the reign of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the pressure to conform to traditional gender norms was more of a potent force than any changes in the laws of his government that gave them more rights and powers. Even though many of the younger participants left Iran in the period immediately before or after the revolution, they too did not escape the social constructs of family aberou (honor) and concepts of young girls conforming to prescribed roles for khanoums that were enforced by their mothers. This study highlights how this has manifested itself in the day-to-day lives of women, with respect to how they were forced to conform to their gender role and to have
limited opportunity to express or not express their sexuality. This cultural context shaped the formation of their sexual self and to undo it required considerable courage. Their new environment in the United States provided in part a context for possible change.

7.2.2 Implication for Health Programs and Health Practitioners

With the continued and increasing introduction of people from other countries to the United States, clinicians and counseling professionals are seeing cultural phenomena in immigrants with which they are unfamiliar, and which they are not able to correctly interpret with their current cultural orientations and language facility. This applies to the participants of this study, who, having explored books, television programs, videos, movies, and friends to educate themselves to a new level of awareness, still had a need for additional professional assistance. In seeking out professional assistance, most of the participants with insufficient English language fluency, found when they sought assistance from American professionals, that they were not understood because of two basic barriers: language and unfamiliarity with Iranian culture. The main implication here is there is a need for counselors to be knowledgeable about Iranian culture and gender role in the Iranian-American community.

For comprehensive counseling to be effective, the following areas should be addressed: development and assessment of Iranian-American women’s sexual beliefs; consideration of Iranian-American women’s current view of themselves as individuals; the presence, values, and types of interpersonal relationships; level of communication skills related to sexual topics; and lifestyle
development. These strategies will assist Iranian-American women to feel comfortable and safe in disclosing their sexual-selves and related needs. A safe setting provides less anxiety, fear, shame, and guilt. The participants become more flexible in dialogue and more choices for sexual conversation are made possible. This policy can be expanded with the following factors that are imperative to consider as part of the counseling strategies:

- Effective counselors are aware of the sensitivity to sex topics of the Iranian-American woman.
- Effective counselors focus on affect regulation, sense of empowerment, gender role, view of self as an individual, and sexual education as a core counseling strategy when working with Iranian-American women’s sexually-related challenges and needs.
- Counselor consideration of factors that appear to be correlated with a low level of sexual activity in inter- and extra-marital relationships that include being able to face social difficulties, poor self-esteem and self-worth, constant discouragement from talking about sex, feelings of self-doubt, and feelings of grief as a result of the inability to feel safe and to be sexually expressive.
- Counselor assistance to this population to increase tolerance for unpleasant affective experiences in order for Iranian-American women to learn to survive challenging moments in life without having to engage in unhealthy sexual decision-making.
As support group facilitators, culturally-specific group counselors should be aware of the following:

- Unique values, beliefs, behaviors, and histories that directly impact the health and efficacy of interventions for this population.
- The need for cultural strengths used as building blocks for change.
- The need to get clarity from Iranian-American women on terms and core belief systems, and asking “how” questions.
- Things that are attractive to Iranian-American women – empowerment, goal-oriented education, support, trust, and acceptance of who they are.
- The importance of the Iranian-American woman’s role in the culture context (migration, new role, new needs, adjustment process, and social discrimination).

The management of education, internships, standardization of professional counseling skills and delivery falls under the auspices of various institutions. Regarding Iranian-American women, colleges and universities should provide and promote curricular offerings in Iranian-American women’s cultural studies, Iranian-American women’s sexuality, Iranian-American women’s gender roles, the impact of culture on sexual-self perception and Iranian-American women’s sexual emotional health. Training should be offered to counselors and students alike so that they can become knowledgeable individuals and educators for gender role and sexually related concerns for the wider Iranian-American population. There should be available to counselors local and online seminars sponsored by local and national organizations to remain abreast of new research findings and innovations. Such organizations
include the American Counseling Association, the American Psychological Association, and the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapists. Professional organizations regularly should establish and review policy, procedure, standards, and regulations to govern professional service delivery, and conduct audits of the delivery site to ensure that Iranian-American women’s needs are being professionally cared for. Professional organizations with educational institutions should conduct internships in which professional student counselors practice their skills in a controlled environment to produce top-of-the-line counselors.

For the participants who moved to the United States to reside in a new culture, the new awareness of their sexual-selves provoked strong personal feelings, and fostered a new level of understanding about their sexual-selves. This research has drawn attention to this population’s un-doing, unlearning, and re-learning process in a new culture, and the changes impacting their sexual-selves in the new home environment. In this regard, the findings may provide new considerations for other health practitioners.

This research provides information that can be used by other health professionals such as social workers as well as doctors and nurses to provide a safe environment for women to recognize that their voices are important and can be heard. Such an environment may help women to eliminate their reluctance to talk about their sexuality. It is expected that the result will be more comfortable feelings about their sexual-selves, increased cultural awareness, and identification of factors that have made sex a taboo topic for this population.
7.2.3 Implications for Future Research

This study has examined different aspects of Iranian-American women’s lives from the feminist perspective and identified a number of significant issues that have implications for not only policy and practice, but also future research. The new insights regarding the sexual lives of Iranian-American women generated by this research have raised other questions about Iranian women. The answers to these questions previously have been taken for granted, perhaps for many reasons, but a primary reason is that long existing cultural viewpoints related to Iranian women’s gender role, sexual-self formation, and health issues have not been examined in research.

An important aspect of the research process was the participants’ unprecedented interest in an agreement to tell their sexual stories even though they believed these stories to be a taboo topic. Having learned of the research by word of mouth, they were the ones who made the request to be interviewed. They had the urge to tell their stories and felt the meanings these stories gave to their lives were critical information for the public to know. It was important to them to show other women of the same culture that it was safe and acceptable to talk about their sexual-selves. For all of the participants this was the first time of sharing their sexual secrets, desires, beliefs, wants, feelings, and emotions. They did so freely and willingly, and felt good about their storytelling.

The voices of women who had grown up in more gender equal home environments and had more positive sexual and marital experiences were limited and difficult to locate. This does not mean that such women do not exist and that there are women in Iran who have a positive sexual life experience. It is possible that women with positive experiences decided not to take part in the
study because of how I approached the focus of the research question. Future research studies need to be cognizant of the self-selection bias that is inherent in this type of research and need to actively seek participants whose life stories point to a different set of experiences.

As this study revealed, culture has been a major factor in the constructing of Iranian-American women’s sexual-self, gender role, gender identity, and knowledge about sex. The narratives have indicated that many of the messages received by the participants throughout their lives regarding their roles as women have been confusing and have resulted in a sense of self-worthlessness. This confusion stemmed from being denied biological and sexual needs and desires; and denied the right to have choices and to express themselves, particularly about sexuality. It is essential, then, for future research to be culture based and to explore non-traditional models of social interaction, especially between men and women as partners, and within all hierarchal levels of the society. In the framework of these concepts must be an approach to life that makes sense to Iranian women and which gives them a sense of value to themselves and to others.

Within this broader research agenda, there are research implications for all forms of violence against women including sexual abuse both within and outside marriage. Iranian women are vulnerable to abuse of power because of their low level of education, passiveness resulting from life in a collective system, and emotional manipulation. Research is needed to illuminate the relationship between the forms and types of power used to impose on Iranian women the prescribed social norms and gender roles. Such research should highlight the power available to these women to willingly accept those norms, or to reject or
oppose them. This study underscored the fact that participants frequently perceived a lack of choice in their lives in accepting nonconsensual sex from their husbands. These two mechanisms of non-consensual sex and imposed power contained in Heise et al (1995) – a definition of sexual coercion – are considered to be key aspects of intimate relationships. Qualitative research is needed to explore the depth of negative feelings connected with sexual coercion. In relation to all forms of abuse – emotional, sexual, physical, etc. – secrecy was the most common response, no matter the nature or area of the violation of participants, indicating lack of empowerment for self-help, lack of options, lack of knowledge, and lack of interactive resources.

Another focus of future research is the other side of these Iranian women’s struggles, and that is the perceived need for the range and repertoire of strategies and tactics used by men to interact with women as an investment in and preservation of their own power and quality of survival. In other words, what is the perceived nature of self in many men that requires their negative and controlling responses and interactions with women? Policy implications arising out of the findings of such research could have considerable bearing on the nature of personal and group social interactions and societal structure.

While this research was conducted on a small sample, the participants’ narratives provide rich insights. It would be of benefit to Iranian women if further research explores Iranian women’s gender roles, social order in Iranian culture, gender awareness, and impact of culture on patriarchal factors related to those of the Iranian culture living in the United States and elsewhere. The findings from this research would provide clinicians with a number of insights related to counseling of Iranian-American women regarding their sexually
related concerns and needs. Additionally, the findings could assist in the development of new counseling strategies that assist this population in gaining higher levels of awareness about their sexual-selves, their gender-roles, and their sexually related challenges. Future research could also focus on identifying groups of people who consider themselves as Iranian and who live in Iran, but come from other cultures. Cross-cultural studies using Foucault’s concept of ‘gazing’ would be of value to understand the experiences of immigrant women from other patriarchal cultures. The interplay of gender and religion may help in better understanding of social construction of women’s sexuality rather than an exclusive focus on religion alone.

While the literature is scant on the sexual experiences of Iranian women, it is almost non-existent on other expressions of sexuality and sexual orientation for Iranian women other than in the context of heterosexual relationships. In popular literature and contemporary films from the Middle East and South Asia, there are works that have covertly or explicitly focused on lesbian relationships in patriarchal cultures. While such novels, films and social commentary have led some to express ‘moral’ outrage, there is also a ‘grudging’ acceptance of existence of same-sex relationships. However, similar to any patriarchal society’s inherent double-standards for men and women, it is relatively more commonplace to find references to gay unmarried men or married men who have both heterosexual and homosexual relationships, whereas women’s experiences of lesbian relationships are kept secret to maintain the traditional concept of ‘family honor.’ With the difficulties and sensitivities in undertaking this research study, the researcher did not probe same-sex relationships unless such information was volunteered. The concept of lesbianism was not revealed by any of the participants and therefore not explored in this study. Given that lesbianism is
fairly consistent across cultures, further research about Iranian lesbianism as a specific focus is recommended. This research may identify lesbian and gay samples from Iran (or abroad), in order to explore their experiences, and seek, to identify differences and/or similarities of the participants’ experiences with those from Western societies. Although many of the participants did not find their sexual relationship with their husbands satisfying, none of the participants in the present study spoke about their yearning or experiences of same-sex relationships. The strict control on the behavior of Iranian women makes it difficult to have a sexual relationship outside of marriage. The acceptability of females being socially close to one another and the lack of options for expression of sexuality may make some women seek sexual satisfaction with the same gender as a less risky solution. It would be useful for future research studies to explore sexual experiences of women with regard to same-sex relationships and give voice to their stories of sexual-selves. Such women are not only oppressed by social constructs of acceptable gender norms and sexual expression but are further marginalized and silenced by society’s lack of acknowledgment of the legitimacy of their sexual orientation and feelings.

7.3 Limitation of the Study

While this research makes a significant contribution to the literature at many levels, there were limitations that too need to be acknowledged. Some of the challenges and limitations in undertaking the present research study have been highlighted in Chapter 3. In this section, only some of the key limitations will be re-emphasized. The research focused only on Iranian-American women residing in southern California and did not include women who live in Iran; therefore, only limited voices were heard and limited stories were shared.
However, regardless of the considerable age difference among the participants, most shared the same cultural values, belief systems, and life experiences. An important factor that has potentially limited the findings of this research was the sample size of the 24 participants. Hence, due to the small number of participants, the findings in this research cannot be generalized or applied to the larger population of Iranian-American women and their sexualities. Additional limitations to this thesis include the obvious fact that participants of this research cannot be considered representative of all Iranian women. The Iranian women who migrated to the United States are different from those who live in Iran because of various levels of social and personal adaptations and adjustments made post-migration, and the changes that have occurred to them as a result of the migration and exposure to a different culture. Some of the themes – culturally taboo topics to talk about, sinfulness of sex, no pre-marital sexual activity, maintaining virginity, and family honor – must be generalized carefully. As a result of a fear of sharing and the nature of data collection by tape recording of the interviews, some potential participants refused to participate. Another limitation of this study is the absence of men’s stories to bring to the analysis process a balancing view of the factors that have shaped the sexual-self formation of gender relations in Iran.

As an Iranian-American woman living in southern California and raised as a girl in Iran, I was able to relate to many of the stories shared, which brought memories long-buried in my mind back to the surface. Having these similar experiences in mind, I may have brought some of my own biases into the interpretation. Further, research exploring sexual-self formation of persons in different locations of United States and in other countries, and their ways of adjustments may extend the insights and findings of this study.
7.4 Conclusion

This qualitative research was designed to explore the sexual-selves of Iranian-American women. The results demonstrated the primary significance of cultural factors that impact Iranian-American women’s sexual-selves. The process has been a unique in-depth experience both for the participants as well as for me, as the participants re-lived their lives, explored, interpreted, and reflected on the meanings, all of which were revealed for the first time.

This study’s central question is how Iranian-American women have made sense of their sexual-selves living in the cultures of both Iran and United States. Within the context of all the scholarly works examined by this researcher, there tend to be two fundamental categories that contribute to their sexual-selves formation: the inherent and qualitative individualistic, intuitive, perceptive, intellectual, volitional, and rational aspects of the individual human spirit on the one hand, and the institutionalized familial, cultural, religious, traditional, and interactive aspects of the social environment on the other. Operating in both of these categories of factors is the exertion of power from one category against the other. However, amidst the contest of individual and culture are other pairs of power struggles operating: Religion against religion; religion versus culture; young against old; traditionalism against modernism; governments against the people; and the poor against the rich, to name a few. These contests do not exist by themselves; they interact at some level, in some fashion, one with the other, and exert power in whatever way needed to maintain the current hegemonies. It can be posited then, that the aim of increased and sustained power of one over the other is an abiding preoccupation throughout the structure of society. Embedded in culture throughout all of its social constructs is the struggle for
power between men and women, and between women whereby oppressed women become the oppressors for their own daughters and daughters-in-law.

With respect to the Iranian-American woman, through socialization, she found an imbalance of power operating between her self and her culture. The power exerted on her from family with a patriarchal structure, religion, and government for the preservation of these various institutions, reached the point where she had little power with which to exert back for her developing her own individual sense of identity. When power is exerted heavily, the result is suppression. In such a suppressed condition, an attempt to exert power back is often met with abandonment, punishment, or death.

This thesis has provided rich insights into the narratives of 24 Iranian-American immigrant women in their journey towards making meaning of their life experiences and the evolution of the sexual self. These narratives indicate that there is still a long road ahead for many women in terms of unlearning and re-learning about their sexuality. The present study will hopefully provide encouragement to Iranian as well as non-Iranian women, both within their home countries or their adopted homeland, to share their stories. Consideration of their life stories which may include similar or different life experiences to those of the study participants are vital for developing a better understanding of women’s perceptions of their sexual-selves and to empower them to make changes for themselves.
GLOSSARY OF NON-ENGLISH TERMS

Aariaee........................................Aryans – The original Persians

Aberou ........................................Family honor within family and society;
respectable social status; Reputation; Credit.

Adam hessabee ........................... High status people.

Aftab-mahtab-nadeedeh .............Pure at the level of being too naïve.

Aghah .........................................A male figure authoritarian person, father,
brother; the wise man of the neighborhood or
family.

Akhysh, rahat shoodam ..............Relieved.

Ameezesh-e-jensee .....................Mixing bodies – a metaphor used by
participants for having sex.

Andarouni .................................Inner compartment; the Persian equivalent of a
small haram where wives, children, servants
lived; women’s quarters.

Areh..........................................Yes.

Arousak .....................................A blonde-haired chubby child who “looks like
a doll”.

Arzesh-haa .................................Values.

Asir ...........................................Captive.

Asseell....................................... Authentic.

Baagh .................................Garden – a metaphor used by participants for
female genitals.
Bad .................................Bad; wrong; this word has the same meaning and pronunciation in the Farsi language as in English.

Baghesh .................................False name for vagina – a metaphor used by participants for female genitals.

Bahaya .................................High morals; Chastfull woman.

Bakereh .................................Virgin.

Bavar-haa .................................Beliefs.

Bazandeh .................................Failure; loser.

Bazaree .................................Fundamentalist, but usually rich and wealthy too.

Be-dam .................................To give as in a sexual act; sexual act of a woman is considered giving ‘it’ away; introducing participation in sex as a sinful act and wrongdoing of a woman; participating in sex willingly as a way of giving away her honor.

Beebee .................................Lady of highest social status.

Beechareh bad bakht ..............................Helpless and bad luck.

Beehaya .................................Unchaste girl.

Beesharaf .................................Dishonorable; Roguish.

Beesharmee .................................Brazenness.

Behaya .................................Shameful.

Bekarat .................................Virginity.

Chador .................................Tent, referring to a long veil that covers women from head to toe.
Chaqchur .........................Loose pants used by women primarily during Qajar dynasty.

Chello kabab ..........................Iranian national dish consisting of white rice decorated with Safaran, beef kabab, grilled tomato and onions served with Somagh (a form of spice locally grown to Iran), butter and fresh herbs.

Cheshmeh-ghoosh-baste ..........Closed eyes and closed ears – a metaphor used by Iranian referring to a chaste and pure virgin girl.

Daa-dan ..............................To give – a metaphor used to refer to a woman's sexual activity as a low act and dirty concept. The woman who becomes involved in the act of sex is considered a loose woman who has given her vagina away. See “Kar-dan”.

Dastmalee ............................Second-hand and unchaste – a metaphor used to refer to a girl who prior to marriage has been sexually involved with a man with or without losing her virginity. Dast means hands and mallee means touched by a man.

Dast-nakhordeh .....................Untouched; still virgin – a metaphor used to refer to a girl who maintains her virginity prior to marriage and has not had any relationships with men even in the form of social activity. Dast means hands and nakhordeh means untouched by a man.

Delam khalee shood ..........Delam means stomach, khalle means empty and shood means done. This is a metaphor used as a way to show when one is trying to give vent to her emotions.
Doing their khaktosaree .......... An evil act done primarily by a woman, causing her to deserve punishment such as death. *Khak* means dirt, *to* means on top and *saree* means head, meaning one deserves to die and buried when having sex. A metaphor used by participants for having sex even as a married woman.

Dokhtar-Zaa.........................A metaphor used for women who have given birth to girls only.

Donyayeh khyalee....................Dream world.

Doset daram .........................I love you.

Efat .................................Virtue, chaste, modesty.

Eta-at .................................To obey – obedient.

Fealan .................................As needed for now.

Felaan .................................A metaphor used by participants for vagina.

Fitna .................................Seductive behavior of a women; chaos caused by sexual or seduction; serious trouble resulting from sexual erotic moves, (Arabic word).

Gaa-ee-dan .............................The English colloquial equivalent means to have sex in a disrespectful fashion, used by men similar to Kar-dan.

Geerattee .............................Zealous, sense of honor.

Ghabeeh ...............................Un-chaste and prohibited, (Arabic word).

Ghabeeleleh.............................A metaphor used for collectivist culture.

Gharbzadegi ..........................Acculturated to Western life – westernized.
Ghormeh sabzee ......................A favorite Iranian dish mostly favored by Iranian men, made with deep fried herbs such as parsley, cilantro, green onions and spinach, mixed with chopped lamb, red kidney beans, and spices and cooked slowly with dried lemon, served with white rice and saffron, a spice. The preparation of this dish involves hours of labor which includes cleaning vegetables, fine chopping, deep frying which could add up to average 6-7 hours for one mean.

Gole...........................................Flower – a metaphor used by participants for female genitals.

Gonah .................................Sinful act.

Goussll................................. Taking a ritual purifying bath after menstrual period and after having sex with ones spouse. The consequence of not goosling for a woman is limited socialization with family members and physical closeness with her husband as result of maintaining bodily impurity and maintaining najes (impure) status. (Arabic word).

Ham bastaree ........................Man and women sharing a bed and engaged in sexual activity.

Ham-aagushy ..........................Sharing an embrace – a metaphor used to refer to act of sex.

Ham-bastary ............................Sharing a bed – a metaphor used to refer to act of sex.

Ham-khaabegee ......................Sleeping together – a metaphor used to refer to act of sex.
Hammam raftan .................Taking a ritual bath as a way to clean the impurity of body as result of having sex with a woman.

Havoo.........................Second or third or more legal wives

Harzeh................................Licentious; risqué; indecent; lewd; lustful.

Hijab ................................Cover; a headscarf worn by Muslim women, sometimes including a veil, chador [tent] that covers the face except the eyes, or just allows an opening of the roundness of face. A total hijab includes the covering of all parts of a female body except hands, feet and eyes. (Arabic word).

Hendel zadan ....................Pumping – to start the engine with a handle. A metaphor used to refer to act of sex for men treating a woman disrespectfully and only focusing on their manly sexual needs.

Hojb – O – Haya ....................Modesty, mainly referring to a woman's modesty.

Izzat ..................................Family honor (Arabic word).

Johaz.................................Dowry.

Jalat ........................................Wrongdoing.

Jayrat.................................To maintain honorable male Iranian image.

Jendeh .................................Female prostitute.

Kafan....................................Dead person’s white outfit.

Kabous .................................Nightmare.

Kadbanoo............................Traditional Iranian housewife.
Kar-dan ..............................To do – a metaphor used in referring to a man’s sexual activity when he considers sex a low act and dirty concept. The English colloquial equivalent means to have sex in a disrespectful fashion, used by men similarly to Gaa-ee-dan. The concept of Kar-dan means men are in charge of having sex (i.e. kar-dam-sh, meaning a man did it to her and a man took her]. See “Daa-dan”.

Kejalat bekesh ........................Shame on you.

Kharaab.................................Damaged; A term used for unchast women.

Khafeh shoodan .......................Self-suppression.

Khak bar sary kardan ..............Something bad happening to a woman – the act of khaktosaree. See “Doing their khaktosaree”.

Khakbarsarm ............................A phrase used by women wishing to die. See “Khak barsary kardan”.

Khanoum ...............................Ladylike; Docile woman, Iranian style of a lady (modest, obedient, speaking in a soft tone of voice, does not look into the eye when spoken with, voices no opinion, devotes her life to her family, one man woman). See “Aftab-mahtab-nadeedeh”.

Kharab.................................Risqué; indecent; lewd.

Khastegaree ............................In Iranian culture, refers to obtaining formal permission and/or requesting permission to marry someone’s daughter.

Khomeinis ..............................Those who followed Khomeini and who were resisted by most Iranians after 1979 Iranian revolution.
Khoshgelam……………………….My beauty

Lakeh nang………………………Sign of disgrace, dishonor and shame.

Maghnaee ...............................Part of Islamic hijab; long oversized head scarf, covering entire head, neck, shoulders and upper back of a woman to be used on top of a long loose jacket. Usually it comes in black or dark brown or navy blue colors (Arabic word).

Mahr ........................................Dowry.

Mehrieh .................................Marriage-portion.

Moshgel .................................Problem.

Motalageh ..............................Divorcee (Arabic word).

Moti’eh .................................Obedient (Arabic word).

Naan barbaree ........................A traditional breakfast of wheat bread Iranians consume on a daily basis in most areas of Iran, in particular, the north and Tehran. Many Iranian-American bakeries in the United States make this bread for the Iranian population.

Naaz .................................Coyness – a metaphor used by participants for female genitals.

Najes .................................Dirty – impure person or object from religious perspective (Arabic word).

Najessee ...............................Dirtiness; impurity (Arabic word).

Najib .................................Chaste women (Arabic word).

Namous .................................Social, public, and personal honor, a term used by men in reference to their women folk (Arabic word).

Nang .................................Social disgrace.
Nashodanee .........................Dilemma; impossible concept to take place.

Nejabat ..............................A woman’s chastity.

On- kar ...............................Doing that – a metaphor used by participants for having sex.

Onjaa .................................Down there – a metaphor used by participants for female genitals.

Oon kare bad ..........................The bad act – a metaphor used to make reference to having sex for women.

Paak ..................................Cleanliness religiously and spiritually.

Pardeh .................................Shield; a metaphor used by participants referring to hymen.

Pardeh bekarat .......................Hymen.

Pareh beshe ...........................Ripped apart – a metaphor used for losing virginity.

Paygamhayeh bojrang ............Perplexing communication.

Rasm ..................................Ritual; Norm; Culture.

Rubandeh .............................A short scarf used to mask the entire women’s face except the eyes.

Qaid ....................................Cultural rules and limitations woman are expected to accept, to respect and to carry out (Arabic word).

Salah-e-khodam ......................Self-choice, sense of empowerment.

Sarab ..................................Mirage.

Sar-boland booddan ..................To have ones head up – a metaphor used to refer to a family of known high family honor.
Sar-boland kardan ..................To have the ability to keep one’s head up – a metaphor for maintaining family honor in the community.

Seejeh ..............................Temporary marriage, could last for an hour and for as long as many years (Arabic word).

Sha’n .................................An acceptable and respectable mode of operation for a woman (Arabic word).

Shahee .................................Population who followed and maintained their loyalty to Pahlavi regime after 1979 Iran’s revolution.

Shahrah beheshtee ...................Highway to heaven – a metaphor used by participants for female genitals.

Shakseet-e- sakhtegee ...............Pseudo-self or false self.

Sharaf .................................Respect and honor.

Sonat .................................Tradition (Arabic word).

Sonat-haa .............................Traditions.

Tahrim .................................Limits – meaning a girl’s choices were limited and her value as a person was one-half the value of a male (Arabic word).

Toarooof .............................Complement; Offer. (Arabic word).

Toodar .................................Keeping to oneself – reticent, silent, uncommunicative.

Vabastegee sonatee ..................Cultural attachment.

Vali .................................Legal guardian (Arabic word).
Vazyfeh-ye-zanashooi Marital duty, in particular, as it relates to a woman’s availability to respond to her husband's sexual demands.

Zaeefeh A term used by fundamentalists to refer to the female gender as intellectually weak and women as second class citizens (Arabic word).

Zaneekeh jendehe prostitute woman.

Zaneekeh bee haya unchaste, shameful woman.

Zesht unchaste; ugly.
References


Appendix A
Health Professional Contact Letter

School of Health
Armidale, NSW 2351,
Australia

HEALTH PROFESSIONAL CONTACT LETTER

Re: Research Project – ‘Understanding the Sexual Selves of Iranian-American Women’

Dear [                      ],

I would like to introduce and present my Ph.D. research topic in progress, ‘Understanding the Sexual Selves of Iranian-American Women’, to you. Attached, please find a document called “Informants Information Sheet” that provides information to the potential participant regarding the project and specific information outlining what their participation includes.

Informants who meet the criteria of participation are those who:

1 – Are female, 18 years of age and older.

2 – Are Iranian women and the first generation, residing in California.

I would appreciate your providing information about this research to any potential informant. If at any time there is a need for more information, please contact me. I will gladly contact potential informants to answer questions if they wish to take part. They may contact me directly at (818) 422-0375 or (818) 745-1014. These phone numbers also appear on the information sheet.

Thank you for your support of this research project.

Sincerely,

Mitra Rashidian, M.S.
Ph.D. Student
Appendix B
Participant’s Information Sheet

Title of Research: ‘Understanding The Sexual Selves of Iranian-American Women’

Principal Investigator: Mitra Rashidian, Ph.D. candidate, School of Health, University of New England, Armidale, Australia. Tel. (818) 422-0375. Rashidianmitra@aol.com

Research Co-Supervisor: Professor Victor Minichiello, PhD.

Dean, Faculty of Education, Health and Professional Studies, University of New England
Tel. (612 6773 3862), email: vminichi@pobox.une.edu.au

Research Supervisor: Dr. Rafat Hussain, Ph.D. Associate Professor, School of Health, University of New England. Tel. (61-2 6773 3678), email: rhussain@une.edu.au

AIM OF THE STUDY
This study is being done to gain insights into the sexuality of first generation Iranian-American women, and to explore the factors that have shaped their perceptions of their sexual experiences. To date, there is extremely limited research on the sexuality of Iranian women. Hence, perceptions within the healthcare sector, academia and the media can be based on stereotypes that may have little resemblance to the real-life perceptions and experiences of immigrant Iranian women themselves.

WHAT IS REQUIRED OF YOU
To be a participant in this research you will have to agree to be interviewed by the researcher. The interviewer will ask questions of you regarding the sexually related aspects of your experiences, concerns, and expressions, as they relate to past, present and future. The interview will take place at a pre-determined location of your choice (your home, my office at the university, etc.). The length of each interview session will generally last between 60-90 minutes. A follow-up second interview may be required to clarify issues and fill in any gaps. The interview(s) will be tape-recorded with your permission.
PARTICIPANTS’ RIGHTS

This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of the University of New England (Approval No. [HE06/040], Valid to [March 29, 2007]). As the content of these interviews will be highly sensitive, all information will be treated with care, so as not to cause you unnecessary emotional distress. At any time, you may contact the researcher to talk about your participation (contact details below). There will be contact numbers of independent counsellors in your local area as needed.

At any time throughout the research process you may withdraw your participation. If you choose to withdraw, all information collected from you will be destroyed.

All information gathered from you (including tapes) will be coded to ensure that only the researcher and supervisors know your identity. The narratives that you provide will form the basis of the researcher’s Ph.D. thesis and will be presented and published. However, all efforts will be made to ensure that all information provided by you is coded in such a way that this information cannot be traced back to you by any person other than the researcher. After a period of five (5) years, all original data including tapes will be destroyed, in keeping with the policies of the University.

You are encouraged to contact the researcher or supervisors to discuss your participation in the study, and to have any questions answered.

As a Marriage and Family Therapist Intern, this researcher is a mandated reporter and bound by the legal and ethical professional standards of the California Board of Behavioral Sciences in addition to the other professional organizations of which she is a member.

Thank you for your interest in this project.
Should you have any complaints concerning the manner in which the research is conducted, please contact the Research Ethics Officer at the following address:

Research Services
University of New England
Armidale, NSW 2351
Telephone: (02) 6773 3543
Email: Ethics@metz.une.edu.au
PARTICIPANTS’ RIGHTS

This project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics committee of the University of New England (Approval No. [HE06/029, Valid to [March 29, 2008]). As the content of these interviews will be highly sensitive, all information will be treated with care, so as not to cause you unnecessary emotional distress. At any time, you may contact the researcher to talk about your participation (contact details below). There will be contact numbers of independent counsellors in your local area as needed.

At any time throughout the research process you may withdraw your participation. If you choose to withdraw, all information collected from you will be destroyed.

All information gathered from you (including tapes) will be coded to ensure that only the researcher and supervisors know your identity. The narratives that you provide will form the basis of the researcher’s Ph.D. thesis and will be presented and published. However, all efforts will be made to ensure that all information provided by you is coded in such a way that this information cannot be traced back to you by any person other than the researcher. After a period of five (5) years, all original data including tapes will be destroyed, in keeping with the policies of the University.

You are encouraged to contact the researcher or supervisors to discuss your participation in the study, and to have any questions answered.

As a Marriage and Family Therapist Intern, this researcher is a mandated reporter and bound by the legal and ethical professional standards of the California Board of Behavioral Sciences in addition to the other professional organizations of which she is a member.

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Telephone: (02) 6773 3543
Email: Ethics@metz.une.edu.au
Appendix D
Consent Form

School of Health
Armidale, NSW 2351,
Australia

CONSENT FORM

Title of Research: ‘Understanding The Sexual Selves of Iranian-American Women’

Principal Investigator: Mitra Rashidian, Ph.D. Candidate, School of Health, University of New England, Armidale, Australia. Tel. (818) 422-0375. Rashidianmitra@aol.com

Research Co-Supervisor: Professor Victor Minichiello, PhD.
Dean, Faculty of Education, Health and Professional Studies. University of New England Tel. (612 6773 3862), email: vminichi@pobox.une.edu.au

Research Supervisors Dr. Rafat Hussain, Ph.D. Associate Professor, School of Health, University of New England. Tel. (61-2 6773 3678), email: rhussain@une.edu.au

I, .................................................... have read the information contained in the ‘Informant Information Sheet’ attached, and have had any queries satisfactorily answered.

By signing this consent form, I am agreeing to be interviewed by the researcher and understand that information gathered will be published appropriately. I understand that all information provided by me will be coded so that I remain anonymous to all but the researcher and supervisors. I understand that I may withdraw my participation at any time without providing a reason. If I choose to do this, I understand that all information gathered about me will be destroyed and not used in any manner. I also understand that the researcher is bound by the professional standards and ethics of the California Board of Behavioral Sciences in addition to the other professional organizations of which she is a member.
I AGREE / DO NOT AGREE to have the interviews tape-recorded (please circle)

………………………………………… …../…./…..
Signed by participant date

………………………………………… …../…./…..
Witnessed by researcher date

NOTE (Duplicate copies to be used. One copy will be retained by the informant)
Appendix E

Interview Guide

Topic Area 1: Home Country Girl

To ask the immigrant woman to tell what her experience was like as a female child growing up in her home country.

In the narrative response the researcher will be looking for information regarding:

- Participant’s gender role
- Sexual messages received
- Culture of the family
- Power positions within the family
- Family socio-economic level
- Educational level of family members
- Participant’s puberty

To ask the immigrant woman to give her perception of the consequences and life experiences that resulted from the various paths she followed.

In the narrative response the researcher will be looking for information regarding:

- Keeping secrets
  
  [How does this happen? What purpose does it serve? Why is it necessary? What are the consequences?]

- Concept of devaluing/degrading
  
  [How does this take place? How is it organized? What are the consequences for her? How does she make sense of it now? Has it affected her relationships with her family? Her partners?]

- Meaning of “bad things”
What is her definition? Does she still hold this view? How does she make sense of her experiences as a result of having a “bad thing” perspective?

The consequences of sex not being hidden

What is her perception of the consequences?

**Topic Area 2: Female in Transition**

To ask the immigrant woman to talk about her experience coming to a new culture and how she makes sense of her sexual experiences.

In the narrative response the researcher will be looking for similarities and differences regarding

- New experiences in a new culture
- Messages she perceives and receives
- Women’s sexuality

**Topic Area 3: Woman Now**

To ask the immigrant woman to talk about her perceptions of the western culture as a grown woman and the messages she receives as a sexual being.

In the narrative response the researcher will be looking for indications of

- Sexual development
- Sexual beliefs
- Sexual awareness
- Sexual attitude
- Sexual assertiveness
- Sexual functioning