Reproducing The Virginity Imperative: Women's Collusion and Men's Complicity

Among Young Iranians Living in Montreal

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ABSTRACT

Reproducing The Virginity Imperative: Women's Collusion and Men's Complicity
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Zahra (Mona) Ghassemi Zavieh

The present work centres around the question of the virginity imperative, a social contract and regime of power that regulates women's bodies through disciplinary devices surrounding the socially constructed notion of female virginity. Through participant observation and interviews with young people of Iranian origin residing in Montreal, I explain why the virginity imperative persists among this population. Through description of women's social navigation (Vigh 2006) of marriage and education, I argue that women's apparent collusion with restrictive norms does not undermine their agency, but indicates their ability to make decisions that maximize social benefits given their particular circumstances. The argument extends to women's performance of virginity, which is a face-saving tactic and instrumental in the practice of hypergyny among women I interviewed. Nevertheless, I argue, the virginity imperative operates to categorize women according to a virgin/whore dichotomy, rendering unliveable the lives of those who do not adequately perform virginity. Attitudes that define sex as defiling to women contribute to a gendered politics of knowledge resulting in women's limited expression of sexuality as compared to men's, which, along with the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 1988), plays a role in women's lack of expression of dissent. I argue that men's preference for virgin women is incompatible with the love marriages they claim to aspire to, and that men lack reflexivity of the consequences for women of attitudes that reinforce the virginity imperative. Bringing an end to these painful consequences requires public discussion to replace their relegation to, and management within, the private sphere.

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       I also thank my student cohort at Concordia for making my time here such a pleasant experience. My small group of peers was a constant source of new ideas throughout the course of my Master's degree. Magdalena Martinez was especially helpful in agreeing to read and provide comments on the thesis in the last weeks before we both submitted our work. I also thank my professors for their facilitation of this process as well as their own contributions to my thinking. Dr. Kregg Hetherington's weekly writing circle at the Ethnography Lab gave an extra boost to my writing process, as did Dr. Julie Archambault's ethnographic writing class. Dr. Katherine Lemons at McGill, who like Dr. Manoukian, was instrumental in my acceptance at Concordia, also helped me develop some of my early ideas, and her *Feminism and Ethnography* course was not only an excellent resource for its inspiring literature, but was also where I first met and bonded with my dear friend Magdalena. I thank Mark Prentice, who many years ago at Vanier College first introduced me to anthropology, and assisted me with an early version of these ideas in the form of an IB extended essay entitled "The Virgin Bride". I hope that the present work is cooked where the previous was raw.

I must also thank the anonymous contributors to this thesis, my interlocutors, many now friends, without whom this work would not have been possible. I thank the many feminist scholars on whose shoulders I stand. I thank my husband and my three-year-old for their patience and flexibility in giving me the time and space to do the work of this thesis. Finally, I thank my mother, who taught me to question.

I apologize to those I have failed to mention by name. Your help is also appreciated. Any shortcomings in this work remain mine and mine alone.

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Glossary

A

Āberu: reputation, "face".

Āberudāri: saving face.

Āmizesh: Literally, mixing. Sexual intercourse.

Aghd: The ceremony in which a young couple is married from a religious (Islamic) perspective. After the *aghd*, the couple are considered "mahram" as husband and wife, so they may have physical contact and see each other freely. They may also have sex without religious sanction, but some families (and clerics) may prefer that they not do so until after the wedding (*aroosi*), which is a separate ceremony. Part of the reasoning for this is that the woman does not lose her virginity before everything has been finalized and officialised, in case the couple breaks up. Some do the *aghd* and *aroosi* at the same time, but longer engagement periods are becoming more common.

Ahādith: Plural of *hadith*. Sayings attributed to the prophet Muhammad.

Alāghe: love, interest. This is much less strong than "*eshgh*". It may also refer to things a person likes.

Aroos: bride.

Aroosi: wedding ceremony. While the wedding vows are said during the *aghd*, the *aroosi* is the party where the family and relatives are invited. Many of my interlocutors told me that Iranians try to impress others (and save face) by holding big weddings (it is necessary to invite many guests. For example, my husband and I opted for a small wedding in his small town of about 200 guests, mostly from the groom's side. Many of my extended relatives did not show up due to the travel distance).

Āshurā: the 10th day of Moharram, on which Shi'a muslims commemorate the martyrdom of Hussein, the prophet Muhammad's grandson, in the desert of Karbala.

Azab: a virgin man. Not commonly used but only used if specifically referring to the fact that a man has not had sexual intercourse. Arabic: sweet scented stream.

Az zire saghfe pedar be zire saqfe shohar raftan: going from under the roof of the father to under the roof of the husband.

B

Bākere: virgin. Almost exclusively used in reference to women/girls.

Bāzāri: Literally "of the bazaar". One who sells goods in the bazaar, a traditional Iranian marketplace.

Bekārat: virginity, usually refers to women's virginity. The term is sometimes also used to refer to the hymen.

Bisho'ur: (pejorative) foolish, witless.

D

Dāmād: groom.

Dokhtar: girl, virgin, unmarried woman. Also daughter.

Dokhtar dādan: giving a daughter (in marriage).

Dokhtar-e Torshide: An unmarried woman who is deemed to have passed the prima age for marriage. Literally translated as "girl gone sour", this is the farsi equivalent of the English expression "old maid". The term "dokhtar" here thus does not refer to age but to singlehood.

Dor-dor: the practice of Tehrani youth to ride around (especially the richer parts of town) showing off their cars and seeking interaction with the opposite sex and potential mates. Joyriding.

Dustdokhtar: girlfriend

Dusti: friendship, relationship (as in a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship)

Dustpesar: boyfriend

E

Effat: chastity

Eib: a fault or defect. Used by some parents to indicate their children's private parts.

Eshgh: romantic love.

Ezdevāj: marriage

F

Fāheshe: Prostitute/slut.

Fāheshegari: prostitution.

Fitna: chaos.

Fiqh: religious jurisprudence.

G

Gheirat: sexual honor or jealousy

H

Hāl: a person's psycho-emotional state. Also refers to the present.

Hamsar: Literally, same head. Meaning spouse, with a connotation of equality.

Hayā: modesty

Hejle: the practice of relatives checking, on the wedding night (i.e. *shabe zafāf*) whether the bride was a virgin by displaying bloodstained cloth.

Hijabi: refers to a woman who wears the hijab (Islamic head and body covering).

Hoviate jensi(ati): gender identity

I

Idda: A waiting period of three months to four months and one week, required after the dissolution of temporary or permanent marriage, before the woman can marry again. This requirement is intended to ensure paternity in case the woman has become pregnant from the previous marriage. The length of the *idda* period depends on the length of the menstrual cycle and whether the woman is getting her periods.

J

Jahizieh: trousseau. Some scholars have translated this term as "dowry", but I prefer "trousseau" because the household items included in the jahizieh are first and foremost to be used by the bride in maintaining the home, unlike a dowry which is payable to the groom's family. It is true that historically in Iran there was some patrilocality and that perhaps in that case the distinction is not an important one, but as most urban families

nowadays are neolocal, the use of the term "dowry" does not accurately reflect the relation of the goods in question to the people involved in their exchange.

Jins: sex-gender (See Najmabadi 2013)

Jinsi: sexual

Jinsiat: sex, gender

Jinsiati: pertaining to gender

Jodā shodan: to separate

K

Khāss: particular

Khāstegāri: A system of courtship traditionally prevalent in Iran and still in use today by many families (although in some cases it has become a formality). The prospective groom visits the family home of the young woman he desires (or family members have arranged for him to meet with the intention of marriage), usually accompanied by family members. If both parties and their families remain interested, there will be several visits during which the two young people might discuss matters related to marriage and the families will make various negotiations. If all goes well, there will be a *bale borun* (saying yes) ceremony and the couple will afterwards be married. The degree to which the prospective bride has a say in this or the degree to which the union is "arranged" varies. Traditionally, it was not appropriate for a young woman to "choose" her own husband, but today they might meet each other (at university or through work or friends) and then together decide that the young man will come to the *khastegari* of the young woman.

Konkur: Iranian university entrance examination. In Iran, all university applicants must take this exam, and a higher ranking (lower number) leads to more opportunities in terms of both the prestige of the universities one may attend and the type of educational programs one may choose (with more prestigious fields requiring a higher ranking).

L

Layl'at-ul-Qadr: see *shabe Qadr*.

Liāghat: worth

M

Mahram: A *mahram* is a relative whom one is forbidden to marry (thus subject to the incest taboo), or in the case of the husband, one has already married. Under most interpretations of Islam this includes a woman's brothers, father, her grandfathers (and anyone further up the line of direct descent), her uncles and great-uncles, but not cousins. Parallel cousin marriage on the father's side has traditionally been especially common in such societies, as it maintains patrilineally transmitted wealth in the family. Because a *mahram* (except in the case of spouses) is subject to the incest taboo, men and women who are *mahram* may socialize and have personal contact with relative ease.

Mahr/Mahriyeh: a marriage gift payable to the wife at any time after marriage. Nowadays this is usually gold coins. A Hajj trip and a copy of the Qur'an are often automatically stipulated as part of the *mahriyeh* in marriage contracts in Iran.

Mard: man.

Mardsālār: patriarchal

Mardsālāri: patriarchy, in the sense that men hold power and women do not.

Mazhab: religion.

Mazhabi: religious.

Mo`āmele: transaction

Mo`āmele-ye pāyapāyi: bartering transaction

Moderne: modern

Mohabbat: caring.

Moharram: One of the months of the Islamic calendar, a month of mourning for Shi'a muslims.

N

Nafaqeh/nafaqa: maintenance, or living expenses of the bride, which must be provided by the husband.

Nafs: spirit

Najib: pure, noble.

Nejābat: purity, nobility

Niāze jensi: sexual need (this particular usage is common in Farsi although it is not in English, where we might more usually say "sexual desire")

O

Oqde: complex, obsession.

P

Pāki: purity

Parde (or *Parde-ye-Bekārat*): hymen. *Parde* also means curtain.

Pesar: boy.

Pezeshke qānuni: a physician who makes diagnoses in legal cases.

R

Rābete: relationship.

Rābeteye jensi: literally sexual relationship, sometimes refers to the sex act.

Rasm: tradition.

Roshanfekr: intellectual, in some contexts refers to someone having liberal and Western values. Roshanfekre dini also exists: a religious reformer (towards liberalization modernizer).

Ru harfe baqie harf zadan: speaking over others. Giving one's opinion and having it accepted over others'.

Ruspi: sex worker (polite term).

S

Sardie jensi: literally, sexual coldness. Low libido, low appetite for sex.

Saresh be tanesh biarze: their head being worth their body. Indicates that a person is worthy (not a waste of a body).

Sarparast: guardian.

Sat-he farhangi: social level (can be associated with Bourdieu's concept of social capital).

Shabe Qadr: The holiest night in the Islamic calendar.

Shabe Zafāf: see Zafāf.

Shamsi: Literally "of the sun". The Iranian solar calendar. "*Shamsi*" means "solar" in Arabic. The full term is "Hejri Shamsi" because this calendar, like the lunar Islamic calendar, is based on the start date of the prophet Muhammad's *hijra,* or move from Mecca to Medina.

Shir Baha: milk price, a compensation for the wife's breastfeeding of any children from the union.

Shohar: Husband.

Shoharesh bedim: See shohar dādan.

Shohar dādan: To give [a young woman or girl] to a husband (in marriage).

Sighe: Temporary marriage.

Sonnat: Tradition

Sonnati: Traditional

T

Ta'ahhod: commitment

Talāq: divorce

Tamkin: submission. Specifically, a wife's sexual submission to her husband. This is sometimes referred to as "conjugal debt" (such as by Mahdavi 2009).

Tan dādan: literally "giving one's body". To endure (something unpleasant).

Tavānāyi'e māli: monetary ability.

Tiz-hooshan: Literally meaning "The sharpminded", *tiz-hooshan* is the name used in Iran for "schools for the gifted".

Tozih-ul-masā'el: Also known as *resāleh,* literally, "explanation of problems". These are books written by clerics to clarify religious doctrine. All clerics of *mojtahed* status (meaning they can be followed as a "source of emulation") have one, allowing for a certain degree of religious plurality within shi'ism[1].

U

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[1] Thanks to Setrag Manoukian for this detail.

Unjā: "over there"; used by some mothers to indicate their daughters' private parts.

Urf: social convention

V

Vasvase: temptation

Z

Zāye: Wasted. To become zaaye is to become shamed or embarrassed. To say something has become zaaye is to say that something very bad has happened, a calamity has occurred.

Zafāf: wedlock (Arabic)

Shabe zafāf: wedding night, night of consummation "the night when '*avvalin āmizeshe kāmel*' (first complete sexual intercourse) between a girl and boy (wife and husband) occurs which is usually the first night of marriage" (Shirin's definition).

Zan: woman or wife. Implies marriage and non-virginity .

Zan gereftan: getting a wife. The same expression does not apply to husbands, suggesting the gendered gift-giving relationship between a woman's father and her husband.

Zesht: ugly, improper.

Introduction

If I have any agency, it is opened up by the fact that I am constituted by a social world I never chose. That my agency is riven with paradox does not mean it is impossible. It means only that paradox is the condition of its possibility.

—Butler 2004, 3.

The deep crimson of newly shed blood on white fabric is easily identifiable, and while bloodshed often implies an act of violence, the presence of such stains has in certain contexts been celebrated. In vivid contrast to the white of nuptial bed sheets, or the handkerchief given to the bride for the express purpose of its collection, the red of blood, or the absence thereof, is heavily imbued with meaning. While this practice, called *hejle* in Farsi, has been largely abandoned by educated, urban Iranians, it sometimes lives on in another form: a certificate of virginity issued by a doctor. The story of the bloodstained handkerchief has not been forgotten, however. It was repeated to me by many of my research participants during my fieldwork. Young men and women of Iranian identity and origin residing in Montreal, my interlocutors constituted an upwardly mobile and cosmopolitan segment of the Iranian population. Perhaps they would bring up the practice of *hejle* due to the vividness of its account. The fate of a woman, more than that—her honour—depended on her ability to produce the red-stained handkerchief for the groom, to be triumphantly presented to relatives waiting at the door. Although to many contemporary women and men, such a practice may appear arcane, even offensive, the values of the sex-gender system (Najmabadi 2013) underlying such practices seems to nevertheless hold strong. In this thesis, I focus on what I call the "virginity imperative", a body of practice and comportment that stipulates that women must remain virgins until marriage.

In the summer of 2016[2], I conducted participant observation in a number of Iranian cultural and religious institutions and student groups in Montreal, as well as interviews with a total of 30 young people of Iranian origin, recruited through my in-person and online interaction with these different groups. Drawing from that fieldwork

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[2] Late May through August.

and occasionally punctuated by observations drawn from my own experiences growing up as the daughter of Iranian migrants, as well as my travels to Iran[3], my thesis aims to understand the significance of virginity among Iranians residing in Montreal. As I will expound in later sections, however, this population, while it has its own particular demographic characteristics, can not be regarded as entirely separate from its population of origin, as the ease of transnational migration and communication has rendered borders more fluid than those drawn on maps may suggest (Adelkhah 2016). I have therefore refrained from referring to my study population as a "diaspora", for as I found, this term did not resonate with my interlocutors, who generally refer to themselves as Iranians. The term "diaspora" also has particular connotations of separation from homeland and longing to return, both of which did not necessarily apply with many of my interlocutors, some of whom easily traveled between Canada, Iran, and sometimes other countries, and some of whom had no intention of returning to Iran.

Although there have been several waves of migration of Iranians to North America, especially starting after the Second World War (Powell 2005), none of these compared in size or diversity to that following the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Moghissi and Goodman, 1999). Several thousand Iranians arrive in Canada each year, with census data indicating 163, 290 Iranians in Canada in 2011 (The Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed May 2016). Chaichian (2012) claims that Iranian emigrants since 1979 have adopted an "'internationalist national identity' that allows them to respond to the demands of a global market while still maintaining their Iranian cultural identity", which flourishes in Canadian metropolises such as Toronto, affectionately nicknamed "Tehranto" by residents of Iranian origin. Purported reasons for emigrating include a lack of jobs and job security for young people in Iran, the higher pay they can expect to receive overseas, and the lack of ability to "grow and blossom intellectually" in Iran (Motevalli, 2014). Salmani et al. (2010) have proposed "a social justice model" as the primary cause of the recent phenomenon known as *brain drain*, in which educated

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[3] Since 2007 I have visited Iran five times for a total of roughly ten months, spending the majority of my time in the buzzing metropolis of Tehran and the quiet rural town of Vazvan. I have also visited several other cities and villages for shorter periods.

Iranians leave the country[4]. Torbat (2002) also argues that political rather than economic factors are responsible for brain drain from Iran to the United States. The Iranian community in Canada is diverse in terms of class, ethnicity, religion, politics and ideology, and thus forms a "vibrant mix of sub-communities with a common language" (The Canadian Encyclopedia, accessed May 2016).

My research pool displays several dimensions of this diversity. Many of my interlocutors were not originally from Tehran, although the vast majority had lived there for some formative period of their life. Other cities where they lived or had family roots included Esfahan, Mashhad, Gilan, Ahvaaz, Arak, and Sari. A few were from small towns and villages, and represented different ethnic backgrounds. Some had parents from different ethnicities or from different cities, and told me that this impacted on the way they were raised because their parents, coming from different cultures, had different approaches to religion and religiosity, or to childrearing. My participants' own attitudes to religion also varied. While all were of Shi'a background, some had been raised by religious families, others by secular ones. Several of the women I interviewed wore hijab, but some of them told me they were "less religious than [they] looked", while some who did not wear hijab told me that they were religious. Some of my interlocutors told me that they had become more religious, in terms of practice, than their parents, partly through the influence of the Iranian schooling system. Others had gone in the opposite direction, rejecting religion altogether. Still others had converted to or developed an interest in Christianity or in other spiritual practices, sometimes eventually rejecting these as well.

Despite all this variety in backgrounds and personal beliefs, I contend that the Iranian variant of the sex-gender system is deeply imbedded and has not observably changed in this single migrant generation[5]. The literature on sexuality in Iran (Afary 2009, Mahdavi 2009, Rahbari 2016, Mir-Hosseini 2004, Tremayne 2006, Sadeghi 2008)

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[4] During the early twenty-first century, Iran's brain drain, with between 100,000 and 250,000 educated young people leaving the country each year, was one of the highest in the world (Afary 2009).

[5] Time will tell whether my interlocutors do change their views. Most had only been in Canada a few years, and as I show later in the thesis, some had changed some of their views. Others remained skeptical about the possibility of substantial ideological change among adult migrants.

indicates that a virginity imperative has long existed and continues to exist there, as it does in other regions of the world where inheritance and kinship structures are patrilineal and determining paternity is therefore important. Such gendered systems of sexual control are continued in or brought into colonial as well as diasporic and migrant contexts including North America, despite challenges by feminist movements. I was curious to know whether they persisted among my study population. How had Iranian women living in Canada built more liveable lives while negotiating their social structure? How had they responded to the virginity imperative, and how, if at all, did it continue to shape and affect their lives? Did they resist, or uphold it? If they resisted, what kind of arguments did they make against virginity imperatives, and on what forms of knowledge did they draw?

One interlocutor, Erfan, suggested that people who leave Iran after the age of 18 or so do not change their fundamental beliefs. I noticed that responses to some questions were fairly stable. Many of my participants were confused when I asked them about their gender identity (a question that, to most Iranians, is not a question at all, but a given (see Najmabadi 2014)). Most had never questioned the concept of marriage (see Najmabadi 2014), and the majority, typical of middle-class Iranians (see Haeri 1990), regarded temporary marriage in contempt. Most also suspected that casual sex was harmful to the individuals involved. A few, however, were aware of and interested in learning about the different concepts on gender and sexuality that they had encountered in Canada.

Because of my interest in women's narratives and taking the approach of feminist ethnography, from the start my focus was on women, of whom I interviewed 21. I also interviewed 9 men. For all the interviews, I set a target age range of 18-35. I ended up interviewing one woman who was 37 and one who was 39, and I was hard-pressed to find interviewees in the lower end of the range (only six women out of the 21 interviewed were in their twenties, with the youngest being 21 years old, and all the men were in their thirties). There are at least two reasons for this, the first being an ethical and methodological consideration and the second being linked to the available pool of potential interviewees. First, I was reluctant to approach young people who lived with their parents as I was concerned about complications regarding privacy and consent (especially if I was meeting them in a venue where members of their family were

present). Second, independent first generation immigrants must first amass the means to travel to another country. Thus, they have either built work experience through which they could apply for skilled labour immigration, or they had applied to universities as international students, which often means they held at least a bachelor's degree to establish a student record acceptable by universities in Canada.

I was interested in hearing from those in different stages of dealing with virginity imperatives, and my resulting interview set included individuals who were married and unmarried, (including three divorced women), sexually experienced and sexually inexperienced. All were cisgendered and most reported being heterosexual, with two men stating that they had had sexual experiences with other men, one woman reporting that she was bisexual but had realized this later on in her life and was currently engaged to a man, and another woman stating that she might have been interested in women but the question had never occurred in her teenage years. Many were students, and several were employed full-time.[6]

Several of the women (not the majority) were feminists who questioned and critiqued dominant Iranian gender norms, which as we shall see, fundamentally rest on sexual *in*equality. The very structure of Iranian marriage, and, indeed, historically, gender relations in general, is based on an understanding of the sexes as having fundamentally different needs, abilities, responsibilities, and desires. The unequal basis of gender relations survived the "modernization" and feminist projects of the Women's Organization of Iran under the Pahlavi era, and took new fervour after the establishment of the Islamic Republic (see Afary 2009). While, since 1979, Iran has to some degree

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[6] Due to my own status as a student and my initial use of student networks to find and access interviewees, many of my interviewees were students. As my research progressed and my "net" expanded, I also met several whose primary occupation was paid employment. I learned through one of my later interviewees that it was my biased networks and status that had led me to believe that the majority of Iranians in Montreal were students, and that in fact there were many working Iranians, but that these two networks did not mix much due to their different needs and interests. My online and offline networking and participant observation among Iranians did indicate a different "feel" to these two subpopulations: student groups emphasize navigating the student life (I attended a workshop, hosted by *Kanune Towheed*, which runs the Telegram group *MontrealName*, intended to welcome new Farsi-speaking students), while those who work emphasize business networking and self-promotion (such as the networking fair set up by the facebook group "*business montreal*". Another group present on Facebook, "*affection&solidarity group montreal*" had, at the time of the research, a banner promoting their donor, a real estate agent, posters of whom were also prominently displayed at an art show they ran). Some of my interlocutors did mention that immigration and landing was easier as a student than as a skilled worker.

"opened up" (Mahdavi 2009), I was surprised to find many of my interlocutors echoing claims of fundamental psychobiological differences between men and women. Taking a cultural constructivist position, I venture that, raised with such an ontological viewpoint, individuals learn to embody these claims and see them as the natural order of things. Thus, when it is said that men want sex and women want marriage, men come to express desire in sex and women to express a desire in marriage. Social norms may prohibit them from doing otherwise. Disturbingly, I found that there is an attitude held by some men that separates women who are worthy of marriage from those who are sexually available: a virgin/whore dichotomy based on an understanding of sex as fundamentally debasing to women.

The high valuation of virginity, which I regard as a social construct, is of course not unique to Iran. Many scholars have written on the topic in different contexts, and there are clear links between this literature and that on honour and shame in so-called Mediterranean societies (Peristiany 1965; Schneider 1971; Mernissi 1982; Kandiyoti 1988, Cole 1991). The echoes of the "honor and shame" value system can be observed far beyond the Mediterranean, with the Arabic and Farsi equivalent of these terms being expressed in the concepts of *gheirat* (sexual honour and jealousy) and *hayā* (women's modesty and shyness) (Mir-Hosseini 2004). Because most of my interlocutors did not use the discourse of *gheirat* and *hayā* in their disucssions (although a few did), I do not elaborate on these concepts in the body of the thesis. Perhaps my research participants, leaning towards secularity and "modernity", have moved away from this discourse, which has religious overtones. Nevertheless, such discourses may have affected some of their behaviours and attitudes, and contributed to the facework (Goffman 1955) necessary to performing virginity, as well as closed attitudes towards female sexuality. It bears mentioning that there are also parallel values and practices in the western hemisphere, an example of which is "purity culture" among certain Christian Americans (Eltwahawy 2015). Of course, migrant populations also carry their beliefs with them, which brings me to the Iranians of Montreal.

Migrant populations offer some unique characteristics for study: those who have made the decision and gathered the means to leave their country of origin can be broadly labeled part of an "upwardly mobile" class. To leave one's homeland for the unknown is,

presumably, to take an outward view. Especially for young immigrants, it can mean an openness to change. On the other hand, migrant populations, faced with a hostile new environment, sometimes become particularly protective of certain of their values. As Moghissi (1999) has observed, this is also the case for Iranian migrants. Having conducted interviews with women of Iranian origin in Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver, she claims that "maintaining communal dignity and cultural identity" has been emphasized in their communities "at the expense of gender equality and democratic rights" (Moghissi 1999, 207). That research, is, however, a bit dated. I concur that this attitude can be observed to an extent in the religious Iranian Shi'a community, which is the community in which I was raised. Some of my participant observation occurred in three different Iranian mosques or religious centres, and I spoke with people from such communities. One of my interview participants, who arrived in Canada at a young age and was also raised in these communities, attested to the conservative attitudes of her parents and surrounding community, including regarding interactions with the opposite sex, which was not dissimilar from my own experience.

However, the majority of my participants were more recent arrivals. Although my sampling (discussed in the section on methodology) was based on convenience and not representativeness (I entered those communities where Iranians gathered that were accessible to me, and could only interview those who agreed to participate), there has certainly been much immigration during the intervening years. Given Iran's young population and the profile of those who immigrate (often young people seeking to continue their education or find better employment opportunities), a great proportion of these new immigrants are youth. Many scholars have also cited growing dissatisfaction and unrest among youth regarding the regime and the economic situation, and the new generation is more globally connected than the previous. One can observe certain attitudinal differences between this and the generation that immigrated in the 80s. Thus, I imagined my study population as one in which change was likely to be observable. However, my findings suggest that despite some modifications in norms surrounding dating and courtship, marriage values and values surrounding virginity remain largely unaltered. I thus orient my arguments against the findings of Mahdavi (2009), who,

focusing on the elite youth of Upper Tehran, claims that there is a "sexual revolution" in the works among Iranian youth[7].

Given that, as several of my female interviewees expressed, the continued emphasis on virginity represents an unfair burden on girls that disproportionately places limits on their personal freedom, including attempts at control by parents or partners, I believe it is a problem to be addressed. My thesis will detail the perspectives and concerns of women who participated in my research, while also presenting some of the men's attitudes, in hopes of giving a fuller picture of the situation.

Theoretical Framework and Argument

In order to understand virginity, one needs to consider the broader discourse on sex and gender in general and marriage in particular. I use Najmabadi's concept of sex-gender (2013) as opposed to Rubin's sex/gender (1975), to highlight the fact that in the "Iranian context", the bifurcation of the two concepts recognized by Western activists, although it has been taken up by Iranian feminists, is largely unrecognized by the broader public. My understanding of marriage is informed by Lévi-Strauss's (1969[1949]) concept of the *exchange of women* and particularly Rubin's (1975) feminist elaboration of it. That the giving in marriage of women by men is fundamental to the structuring of society—although mutably so, according to Rubin—offers an explanation for why men seek to control the sexuality and/or fertility of their kinswomen, the implication being that women do not have the option to give themselves, ownership of their bodies lying in the hands of men.

I also rely on Najmabadi's (2008) concept of the Iranian "marriage imperative": marriage is a rite of passage to adulthood for both men and women, but perhaps especially of women, given the terminology of *dokhtar* (girl/virgin) and *zan* (woman), the former being valid until a woman is married (the same distinction not typically being made of men).

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[7] While my study location is different from Mahdavi's, it must be noted that many of my participants could have been (and some certainly were) living in Tehran at the time of Mahdavi's research, which makes broad generalizations about Iranian youth in general and fails to adequately consider class and gender dynamics and inequalities in sexual relations.

I am working within the framework of the structure-versus-agency debate: I wish to highlight women's agency in both resisting and co-opting virginity imperatives, and the broader sex-gender system, to their own ends. It is in this context that both hymen repair surgery, (as disruptive of, but also colluding with, prevalent attitudes regarding virginity (Kaivanara 2015)) and practices of hypergyny (which appears anti-feminist, but which can be utilized pragmatically by women in the service of social mobility) become relevant.

While resistance is a fascinating topic, and some of my female interviewees told great stories about their own resistance (secretly having/talking to their boyfriends, marriage used to escape the pressures of home, education used similarly, divorce), there has been some criticism of the focus placed by anthropologists and others on "the romance of resistance". Abu-Lughod (1990) argues that one can display agency even in situations when one is not necessarily resisting. It is with this lens that I wish to examine what I feel is a more prevalent response to the "virginity dilemma": collusion.

Among the women I spoke with, the majority did not identify as feminist, though most acknowledged the problematic nature of virginity values. In their own lives, however, the majority hadn't displayed much outward resistance. They instead accepted the dominant narratives around them and engaged in face-saving in order to convey an image to others, including myself, of an acceptable Iranian woman. Likewise, many of the men did not have much interest in challenging the dominant norms. But as it is women's sexuality that is under scrutiny, perhaps women simply have too much at stake.

Indeed, women have much at stake in part because it is their successful performance of virginity that can ensure them marriage to a desirable man—one who is older, taller, more educated, and richer—and thus a future that is socially and economically secure. As I realized that hypergyny was practiced by my research participants because it afforded a chance at social mobility to women, I came to link it with women's acquiescence to virginity imperatives. In order to secure a desirable match, a woman's safest option is to ensure her virginity before marriage, either through sexual abstinence or through hymen reconstruction surgery. This collusion (even scheming, as one man I spoke to put it), and conformity with virginity imperatives contributes to reproducing the virginity imperative and its valuation by men who either are none-the-

wiser or who "would rather be lied to", as one of my female interviewees put it. But to fail to adequately perform virginity would mean more than losing the possibility of a "good" marriage. It could mean no marriage at all in a society where marriage is deemed necessary and where a married woman has a much higher status than an unmarried one (see Mahdavi 2009), in addition to the loss of face of the woman and, indeed, her family.

Hence, for some women, who can save face and thereby improve their social and economic lot, conforming to the virginity imperative is beneficial. Nevertheless, the continued existence of the virginity imperative can be quite harmful for others: not bleeding on one's wedding night can lead to marital conflict that could potentially be life-threatening in certain circumstances. In other circumstances, such as that of my interlocutor Sara, the policing of the body through forced virginity testing can be incredibly stressful and an affront to one's dignity. Thus I argue that virginity imperatives are not simply a cultural practice assented to by men and women, but are a mechanism by which women's bodies are policed, controlled, and categorized as desirable or undesirable, suitable for marriage or available for fucking.

Some Notes on Method

The fieldwork for this thesis was originally intended to take place in Iran. Due to circumstances surrounding the arrest of Dr. Homa Hoodfar, who had recently retired from teaching at Concordia, only a few weeks before the thesis proposal was submitted, traveling to Iran seemed ill-advised. Consequently, it was not possible to formulate an entirely different research project, and the most expedient solution seemed to be to continue with the project as initially conceived, using the rich base of historical and other literature about Iran, and adding to that some additional literature about the Iranians in Canada. Therefore, although this research took place among Iranians in Canada, the reader should keep in mind that the question of "Iranianness in Canada" or questions of adjusting to life in a new country, although they may be broached, are not central to the research question.

The thesis relies heavily on a series of interviews that were conducted from June through August of 2016. There are several reasons for the interview-based nature of this inquiry. First, given the broad influence of the research topic, a broad "sampling" approach seemed more appropriate than a focus on a few individuals. Second, given the sensitive nature of the topic and the variety of related experiences, a broad sampling "reach" was also necessary in order to elicit the kinds of stories that would adequately illustrate the complexities and complications of the virginity imperative. Dr. Hoodfar had originally suggested I interview 30 women and 15 men, and as these numbers were fairly consistent with the sample sizes of sociological studies on similar topics (Moghissi 1999; Moghissi and Goodman 1999; Shirpak, Maticka-Tyndale and Chinichian 2007 and 2011), I started out with this goal in mind. Therefore, I attempted, within the constraints of the short time allotted for graduate anthropology research at Concordia University, to attend as many events as possible held by varied Iranian groups in Montreal, and to advertise my research on the Facebook pages of such groups.

It soon became clear that although there was a certain overlap in attendees to some of the events, it would be very difficult to truly "get to know" people during the research, as many events were one-off, and those groups that held regular events held them rather infrequently, and there was no guarantee that a particular individual would be present at more than one event held by a particular organization. In other cases I had difficulty consistently attending events (such as Iftars during the month of Ramadan) due to the difficult timing, or had to choose between events held at the same time in different locations.

Consequently, I proceeded by approaching individuals at events and informing them of the research in question. This was often an awkward process, and since for confidentiality reasons, I generally only attempted to approach people while they were alone, it was sometimes difficult. Sometimes the opportunity did not arise and I went home "empty-handed", not having found any potential interviewees. More often, I tried obtaining contact information and only subsequently revealed the research project (usually by contacting those individuals via telegram). As this method often led to rejections, I drew more and more heavily on ad-based interviews towards the end of my research. I had initially posted ads to a couple of student Facebook groups in order to

"jump-start" the interviews. Having settled into fieldwork, I had aimed to reduce my reliance on this method. But when halfway through my fieldwork I realized that I could not complete my intended number of interviews by the end of the summer, I reduced the goal to 20 women and 10 men, and around the beginning of August, I increasingly found Facebook groups or telegram groups (sometimes recommended or suggested by participants) where I would make posts about my research and solicit interviews.

These difficulties are in part due to the nature of urban ethnography. I had difficulty finding a core community. Most of my fieldwork sites were not closed communities but instead formed an open network, where participants were free to come and go. Further, since, at least in the venues I was attending, public discussion of sexuality is rare, I was hard-pressed to find anything especially important or relevant in my fieldwork observations, which forms a third reason for the focus on interviews. Although I received plenty of comments on my marital status (many older women I encountered in mosques, some of whom had known me since my childhood, commented on how early I had married), in the end I decided not to focus on these interactions in my thesis.

Another concern led me to my decision not to include the interactions I had in religious spaces in my thesis. Due to my awareness of the Canadian government's spying in Iranian mosques, I felt uncomfortable observing and writing about people in these spaces. It wasn't clear how to obtain consent (especially given that people attend mosque gatherings on-and-off, and large numbers of people attend on special occasions), and since I was recognized as a member of the community, no-one questioned my presence. On the other hand, I have also heard concerns over the years from those more suspicious of the Iranian government that Iranian government spies attend such spaces, and did not want to be perceived as such either (I sometimes wonder if some of the rejections I received upon soliciting interviews were based on worries due to such an assumption). Consequently, I felt that I would rather avoid writing about my observations in religious spaces altogether. While some of my other material from participant observation is surely interesting, the interviews address the topic much more directly, so for time and space considerations, my thesis focuses on interview data almost exclusively.

The first few interviews with women were considered "pilot" interviews. I conducted them with women I knew, who provided some feedback on the questions. The goal was to use the knowledge gained from these initial interviews to improve the question set. Interviews were open-ended with many of the questions open to interpretation. I adopted a conversational style, asking further questions if the interviewee started on an interesting topic, and sometimes adding some of my own experiences to the discussion in an attempt to make interviewees more comfortable. In general, however, the goal was to finish the set of interview questions that I had decided were "useful". Most interviews took between an hour and an hour and a half to complete. I originally intended to conduct life histories as well, and although I conducted one, time and space constraints did not allow me to conduct additional life histories or include the material from the first life history in the thesis. I believe life histories would nevertheless constitute a valuable addition to this research, although I hope that the present work does shed some light on this important topic.

A Note on Translation and Transliteration

As all but one interview took place in Farsi, all interview excerpts, unless otherwise indicated, are translations. My approach to translation is as follows. I attempt to remain close to the original narration of the text, not changing turns of phrase that are particular to Farsi if the meaning is clear and they do not generate confusion. The idea here is one I borrow from Viveiros de Castro, who believes "a good translation … is one that betrays the destination language, not the source language" (Viveiros de Castro 2004, 3). Where no direct translation is available, I include the italicized Farsi term and a footnote explaining it. Where more than one translation is possible or there are important subtleties that are lost in translation, or the term in question is a recurrent key term, I include the original Farsi term italicized in parentheses. Important Farsi or Arabic terms are also included in the glossary. Where such losses are minor or acceptable and the intended meaning comes across in a simplified English translation, I take the liberty of making that simplification for the sake of readability. Code-switching to English is indicated by underlining.

For transliteration, I have used the system of the *International Journal for Middle East Studies* without diacritical marks except for ' ('ayn) and ā (long alif).

Chapter Summary

The text is organized into three chapters, each of which focuses on different themes related to the core topic of virginity.

In the first chapter, I focus on the tension of structure and agency by using Vigh's concept of social navigation to illustrate the meanings of the twin themes of education and marriage for young Iranian women. I argue that social structure and individual agency are co-constructed: The existing structure provides the limits for individual agency, but individual agency can also disrupt the existing structure. This argument applies to the two domains of life I look at in the chapter: marriage and education.

I provide some background on the structure of Iranian marriage and argue that it fits Claude Levi-Strauss's theory of "the exchange of women". Gayle Rubin's feminist analysis of the former suggested that while Levi-Strauss was correct in positing "the exchange of women" as the basis of many societies, he was amiss in suggesting that this form of exchange formed the basis of culture, as this was a structure that could be modified.

I also look briefly at the history of education in Iran, noting how expectations with regards to education have changed. By examining these two aspects of life, I argue that Iranian women construct their own lives based on the contingencies that are present in their environment, and provide excerpts from my interviews with such women.

I also briefly consider the fact that while spouse selection has become more of an individual endeavour, its basis appears to remain, for many of my interlocutors, a decision based at least partly on economic rationality rather than ideals of romantic love. This background is necessary for the following discussion on virginity.

In the second chapter, I tackle what I call "the virginity imperative", or the social requirement to perform virginity, which I regard as a social construct. Virginity is a further constraint on women's lives that must be navigated. In patriarchal and patrilineal societies, it is necessary for the maintenance of face and for assuring one's marriage

prospects. These efforts are particularly necessitated by an attitude that sees sex as a relation of domination rather than equality (Mernissi 1982). I argue that while some women benefit from adequately performing virginity, those who do not are dehumanized via relegation to "whore" status in the virgin/whore dichotomy. The risk of being seen as a "whore" renders the performance of virginity all the more necessary. Furthermore, the devices of the virginity imperative (the policing of female bodies through virginity testing) make rebellion against virginity imperatives a difficult endeavour, and can inflict psychological trauma. Through illustrations from interviews with women, I argue that women need to perform virginity in order to continue living liveable lives and, also to secure access to a husband, in particular one who will provide for them financially.

In the third chapter, I shift gears to focus on interviews with men. These narratives highlight some of the problems presented by the mixing of "traditional" and "modern" gender norms for young Iranians. While also revealing the stark contrast in the degrees to which young men and women's lives are regulated, my interviews with men, when considered together with those with women, also show the difference in men and women's sexual consciousness: among my interlocutors, men easily discussed matters of sexuality, while women usually did not.

I attribute this difference in part to the belief I found was held by at least one male interlocutor, that sex is unholy. I hold that such a belief is incompatible with the true love that the same interlocutor desires and hopes to find in a spouse, instead advocating that egalitarian relationships are necessary precedent to such love. I discuss sexual pleasure as subject to a politics of knowledge that renders it less accessible to women. I then attempt to develop how women might go about re-appropriating their own pleasure. I argue that feminist discourses have long been silenced in Iran, and that sexuality and virginity are public issues. Women must enter the public discourse, but they are prevented from doing so through mechanisms such as the patriarchal bargain and limitations on their consciousness shaped by the politics of knowledge that limits their expression of their sexuality. In such contexts they are obliged to cope by employing "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985, cited in Afary 2009), and "resorting to trickery" (Mernissi 1982). Assuming that men do not want to fall subject to the forgoing, it us necessary that they allow women space in the public discourse that regulates their own bodies.

Chapter 1: Constructing a Liveable Life: The Continuing Role of Marriage for Educated Young Iranian Women in Montreal

For my mother and father it was not very pleasing for me to [leave my hometown to live and study in Tehran]. But I proved myself to them. You know … If I was in [my hometown], I would necessarily have had to live with my mother and father. Exactly because I knew this, at the age of 18 I was not a very studious kid, but I sat and I studied and I ranked 20th in the *konkur*.[8] So that I could go to Tehran and live alone. I fought for it.

And they really were placed in a situation where…For my parents studying was *infinitely* valued. Because of studies a person can do anything. It doesn't matter at all [what they do]. Meaning I'm sure […] if the same Iranian said I want to come [to Canada] for work, it would be hard.

But for studies, all parents' tongues are short. You know? Because my parents, for example, they would stop [my sisters and I] from doing anything and everything during high school. For what? So that we would study. Now we had studied. Now what were they going to say? You know? Education is a weapon that with it you can… even in more traditional (*sonnati*) and religious (*mazhabi*) families, with studies you can marry late, with studies you can go to this and that city, with studies you can, [pauses] education is really a valuable weapon in the hands of… [laughs] girls.

--Ensieh (31)[9]

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[8] Italicized terms are defined in the glossary.
[9] In order to maintain confidentiality and protect the identities of my interlocutors, all names for individuals identified by their first name only are pseudonyms (Those whose full names are included were individuals

This excerpt from my interview with Ensieh nicely summarizes some of the themes that I intend to address in this chapter and throughout this work. Ensieh's commentary illustrates how young women's agency works within the framework of their social structure. In this chapter I will highlight how this agency is mobilized through the twin themes of marriage and education. I argue that for young Iranian women, these two goals are not necessarily contradictory, but can both be tools toward achieving a better life. Ensieh's narrative also highlights the fact that, as illustrated with further examples below, for the women I interview, living away from family prior to marriage is not normative, and families try to avoid such situations if possible.

Ensieh explained that her sister also would have liked to move out on her own, but that since she was attending a university in their hometown, this was not possible.

Ensieh: See, my own sister is two years older than me. She has studied medicine. She also really had a problem with this issue. […] Then when her age had gone up she didn't like to live with [our] mom. Not necessarily that [our] family is bad or that she has problems with them. It's just that when a person reaches a certain age it just really feels bad…

Mona: But apparently in Iran this is the norm.

Ensieh: It's pretty much the norm. Until marriage you live with your family. Really this is the norm. The norm is pretty much that, you know? Even for example myself…

Mona: But they [young people] like it [to live away from home].

Ensieh: But everyone likes for there to be such a possibility. For my sister there wasn't. Because if in [our hometown] she went and lived in another house, even towards the end my father had accepted it, but my sister herself would say "If I go to another house people will talk

who would have been easily recognizable, and they consented to the inclusion of their names). In addition, I have chosen to leave out or occlude, where necessary, certain specific details from the life narratives that may increase the likelihood of the identification of my interlocutors. I include summaries of certain demographic characteristics in the introduction. Omitting that data in life narratives does not subtract from them or from my argument, which does not address local peculiarities but a broader pattern.

behind my back. They'll keep saying 'What has happened between

you?'"

Mona: Ah, they'll think there's a problem…

Ensieh: If there's no problem what reason would a person have to live

away from their family?

Ensieh tells us that for young Iranian women, the possibility of living away from home is often trumped by efforts at "face-saving" (Goffman 1955, as cited in Hashemi 2015), a concept that will appear again in later chapters. On their part, some young women value and, indeed, "fight for", the increased independence afforded by living alone. Further, education, which is valued by parents, is a strategy for achieving this goal.

Marriage, likewise, is another method through which women can attain independence from their family of origin. Although marriage does entail, to use the Farsi idiom, "leaving the roof of the father to go under the roof of the husband[10]", it does afford a certain freedom and independence and in some ways may be preferable to being single (Mahdavi 2009, Afary 2009). Although marriage and education are sometimes regarded as antithetical, with some scholars arguing that women should be educated in order to avoid early marriage,[11] what I wish to highlight here is this: notwithstanding the fact that both marriage and education are regarded as desirable by urban Iranian parents, as socially valued achievements, both marriage and education are strategically utilized by young women to navigate and improve their social circumstances to their own liking.

One of my main observations presented in this chapter is that despite the social imperative to marry, marriage is often seen by young women as an opportunity rather

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[10] In Farsi, "*Az zire saqfe pedar be zire saqfe shohar raftan"*. It is often necessary to live under the roof of a *mahram* man, for the lack of such a guardian, or *sarparast*, is deemed unacceptable by more traditional, or *sonnati* families, as we will see was the case for Sara, introduced later in the chapter. The lack of the presence of such a guardian can lead to pity or stigma. Acccording to my interlocutor Ali, whom I introduce in chapter 3, it is such *bisarparast* women who, without the social and economic support of their families, are more likely to "endure" (*tan bedan*) to the religiously condoned but socially stigmatized arrangement known as *sighe,* or temporary marriage.

[11] See Tremayne (2006) for a review of some of the literature on this topic and for a discussion of the situation in Yazd, Iran, which at the time of Tremayne's writing was very different from that of my interlocutors.

than something to avoid[12]. Hence, "early" marriages, especially in urban contexts, must not be looked at with the presupposition that they were coerced, but rather, the agency of young women in choosing such marriages in an attempt to navigate and to take control of their own lives must be taken into account. This pragmatic utilization of parental, and societal, expectations in order to attain something personally desirable is a theme I will return to in later chapters. Importantly, it is central to my argument regarding virginity. In that case, societal expectations are conformed to in order to attain desirable outcomes in one's personal life, such as the improved living conditions afforded by hypergyny. On both accounts, it is important to highlight the co-presence, indeed the co-construction, of structural conditions and personal agency: structural conditions provide the framework in which agency may act, and are in turn subject to modification by agents.

As Abu-Lughod (2003) has argued, the absence of resistance to dominant norms does not indicate the absence of agency. And as I will argue in later chapters, absence of overt resistance to what I call, to borrow Najmabadi's phrasing[13], "the virginity imperative", leads to its reproduction. In the case of my research participants, their stories indicate intentional and selective conformity with respect to societal norms while resisting specific manifestations of parental control (thus, the idea of marriage may not be resisted, while whom one marries may be a subject of conflict). The life histories of these women must be read as agentive consequences of their own calculated actions, not as mere subjection to oppressive structural impositions. To understand my interloctors' actions, then, I think it is relevant to consider Vigh's theory of social navigation, which is informed by "attentiveness to the way in which agents seek to draw and actualize their life trajectories in order to increase their social possibilities in a shifting and volatile social environment" (2006, 11).

Given the social upheavals of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the "class reshuffling" (Mahdavi 2009) that followed, the subsequent war with Iraq, and sanctions by the U.S. and other Western nations that are only recently, and with contestation from a number of political actors on both sides, beginning to be lifted, the economic situation in

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[12] On the other hand, for men, whose personal freedom and independence is greater prior to marriage than afterwards (partly due to the fact that they are not subject to virginity imperatives, at least not to the degree that women are), marriage is sometimes put off or avoided by men, as some of my female informants alluded.

[13] Najmabadi discusses "the marriage imperative" in her own work.

Iran over the past few decades has been far from predictable. Furthermore, the changes in social discourse and shifts in degree of morality policing (Mahdavi 2009, Khatam 2010) over various presidential administrations, which have swung between reformist and conservative candidates[14], indicates a socially tumultuous situation that suggests conflict between those who see Iran's future in joining the global economy and those who wish to maintain isolationist policies. The situation is indicative of a deep rift in the worldviews of the populace, which can lead to social tensions and may contribute to a sense of instability. The value of the Rial has hit an all-time low in recent years[15] and youth unemployment is high (Mahdavi 2009), particularly among women. In such a situation, it is reasonable for individuals to "hedge their bets" by doing their best to ensure any available means of economic security.

Hedging one's bets can mean maintaining traditional marriage practices and gender ideology. For those Iranians immigrating to Canada, the pressure to marry remains, through parental pressure and through the way their social situation in Iran has informed their understanding of the world. Nevertheless, several of the young Iranians I spoke with had alternative ideas about what was desirable when it came to marriage, although given social pressures of what Najmabadi has called the *marriage imperative*, the degree to which they are able to actualize these desires is more open to question.

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[14] In recent years, election results have swung from the moderate Khatami first elected in 1997 and re-elected in 2001, to the socially conservative and politically isolationist Ahmadinejad first elected in 2005 and re-elected in 2009, to the moderate Rouhani first elected in 2013 and re-elected in 2017, under whose term dialogue with the US was opened for the first time since the inception of the Islamic Republic. In the 2017 election, the runner-up Ebrahim Raisi won 38.30% of the vote (with a turnout of 73.33% of the electorate), the highest percentage any runner-up has achieved since the revolution of 1979 replaced the Shah's monarchy. Even in the infamously contested 2009 re-election of Ahmadinejad, the runner-up, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, had won only 33.75% of the vote (with a high voter turnout of 85%). This shift from the landslide elections of the 1980s indicates deep divisions among Iranian voters, which reveal themselves in the surprise results of some of the recent elections and most poignantly in the 2009 post-election protests. Of course, when considering these numbers it must be borne in mind that the Supreme leader and elected Council of Guardians filter candidates so that only those they deem suitable can run for the presidency, so it is difficult to gauge, based on these numbers alone, the true preferences of the populace. What I mean to illustrate here is simply that the political situation in Iran has been far from predictable in recent years, as my argument is that lack of predictability encourages a holding on to traditional means of social and economic security.

[15] There was a steep drop in the value of the Rial in 2013, and in 2016 the Rouhani government proposed shifting the unit of currency to the older unit, the toman (worth 10 rials and still more commonly used colloquially), a move that may partly have been a response to the recent decline in the Rial's value. See: Bertrand, Pierre (08/12/2016). Iran considers currency change. Euronews. http://www.euronews.com/2016/12/08/iran-considers-currency-change. Accessed June 19, 2017.

My interlocutors were almost unanimously against what they saw as the pecuniary extravagance of many contemporary marriage ceremonies in Iran, and the majority were in favour of affectionate or love-based marriage that involved mutual compatibility of the partners, as opposed to strictly arranged marriages. Although none of my interlocutors mentioned themselves having had such arrangements, several mentioned that "white marriage", a sort of de-facto cohabiting arrangement (perhaps similar to the *'urfi* marriage practiced in Egypt (El Feki 2013)) which, while not legally recognized, is becoming increasingly popular in Iran.

A few of my interlocutors questioned the very premises of marriage as it is defined in the Iranian Islamic legal tradition (further described below). Specifically, one woman interlocutor, Irsaa, in the context of my asking about temporary marriage[16] questioned not only that practice but the very idea of *mahr* (in the context of permanent marriage as well) as inherently demeaning to women because it implied that the woman was selling her body, rather than partaking in an equal relationship in which she also experienced sexual pleasure[17]. While the majority of Iranian women are not opposed to receiving *mahr*[18], as, although sometimes husbands become reluctant to pay it when

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[16] This is a form of marriage that is legal according to Shi'ite doctrine, but is frowned upon by middle- and upper- class Iranians because it is seen as socially stigmatizing to women who contract them. Married men who take temporary wives are disliked (by their first (permanent) wife, by their wife's family, and also by many members of middle- and upper- class society). Women are seen to (and generally, do) desire permanent marriage due to the economic and social stability it implies. According to many clerics, virgin women are not allowed to enter a temporary marriage without their father's permission, while men (virgin or not) do not require permission. Another reason families may not desire their daughters especially to enter temporary marriage is that temporary marriage does not benefit the families of the individuals involved because it is a contract between individuals rather than families (thanks to Homa Hoodfar for this detail). Like permanent marriage, the religious rules governing temporary marriage favour men's sexual pleasure over women's bodily autonomy. A temporary marriage is seen primarily as "a marriage of pleasure", but men's pleasure is privileged. For example, men can have as many temporary wives as they please, even simultaneously, while women can have one at a time if not already married, and must wait three or four menstrual cycles, known as *idda* after the end of the contract and before contracting a subsequent marriage. The *idda* period is meant to ascertain paternity in case the woman has become pregnant. Her child will then be considered legitimate.

[17] A similar critique is made by a sex worker in Abbas Kiarostami's film *Ten*. She tells the married woman who, having offered her a ride, is questioning her means of living that what they each do is not that different: the married woman sells "in bulk" while the sex worker herself sells "in retail".

[18] Indeed, it has fairly recently, within the last decade or so, become popular to ask for large sums, often gold coins in the amount of the year of the woman's birthdate (the current year of the Iranian calendar, at the time of writing, being 1396). Contrast this with sums popular during the early years of the revolution: five gold coins to represent the five most holy figures in Shi'ite Islam (the prophet Muhammad, his son-in law Ali, his daughter Fatima, and his grandsons Hassan and Hussein) or twelve gold coins representing the twelve Imams of twelver shi'ism (descendants of the prophet starting from Ali and ending with Mahdi).

women ask for it in divorce, it is often a powerful bargaining chip in a legal system that works largely against them (See Longinotto and Mir-Hosseini 1998). As for temporary marriage itself, many of my interlocutors, both men and women, saw it as demeaning to women (as Haeri (1990) has also indicated is the case among the Iranian middle-class), but Ensieh instead saw it as a progressive institution that accorded certain rights and respectability in the context of sex work.

In addition, there has been an increase in openness about sexual activity among young people (Mahdavi 2009) as confirmed by one interlocutor, Narmin, who insisted I talk to people in the lower bracket of my target age-range[19], and by a few of my contacts in Iran. Furthermore, there is an increasing number of women not married by forty-five years of age, and of women who do not want children[20]. I have listed these various unconventional practices and ideological stances to highlight the fact that the situation in Iran and among my interlocutors is far from static. Indeed, as is also the case elsewhere in the Middle East (see El Feki 2013), there is much debate surrounding marriage, sexuality and the rights of women within marriage and in society. The reader should bear this in mind when considering the next section.

In this chapter I attempt to illustrate the "dialectic between individual agency and social forces" (Vigh 2006, 11) by highlighting some of the accounts of women I interviewed. But first, it is necessary to provide some background on what both marriage and education mean in an Iranian context.

The Structure of an Iranian Marriage: The Exchange of Women

Afary asserts that in the 1860s marriage was nearly universal in Iran (2009, 21). Najmabadi's (2008) concept of the "marriage imperative" affirms that this remains the case today. Marriage was (and to a certain extent, remains) a contract between households, in which specific members held specific roles, and a number of economic exchanges occurred in the process. Among urban *bāzāri* and elite families, whom Afary

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While *mahr* is necessary in an Islamic marriage contract, it can also be symbolic: often a copy of the Qur'an and a trip to Hajj is automatically marked down as *mahr* in notary offices, and nothing more than this is required.

[19] Regrettably, I did not succeed in finding and setting up interviews with a sufficient number of younger people (closer to age 20).

[20] Personal communication with Homa Hoodfar.

calls the "old middle class", mothers usually found potential spouses, while fathers or other male guardians negotiated the financial details. The groom's family promised to pay *mahriyeh* (a marriage gift payable to the bride at any time after the marriage)*,* as well as a small *shir baha* (compensation for the woman's breastfeeding of children produced through the union), while the bride's family was responsible for their daughter's *jahiziyeh* (trousseau). The husband was also responsible to provide *nafaqeh* (living expenses, or "maintenance" for the wife) (Afary 2009, 21-22).

The many exchanges involved in the marriage contract show its economic and social importance to all parties involved. The *jahiziyeh,* for example, was accumulated by the bride's family over a period of many years, and served as an incentive for the girl to get married (Afary 2009, 23). Since men were breadwinners (an expectation that remains to this day among most families), a girl's marriage had the added benefit of relieving an economic burden on her family by transferring responsibility for her living expenses to the groom.

Today, both law and social norms dictate the woman's reception of *mahriyeh* and *nafaqeh,* and *jahiziyeh* remains a must as the bride's family's contribution to the couple's new life, while the groom's family provides wedding expenses. Providing official religious sanction to these practices, traditionalist *fiqh*-based texts on marriage "revolve around the twin themes of sexual access and compensation, embodied in the concepts of *tamkin* (submission [man's right and woman's duty]) and *nafaqa* (maintenance [woman's right and man's duty])" (Mir-Hosseini 2004, 4).

Given that young, unmarried women did not traditionally have much economic independence as they were generally confined to the domestic sphere (Afary 2009), women were not in a position to negotiate the terms of their own marriage. The exchange structure present in this marriage system thus leads me to propose that Levi-Strauss' (1969[1949]) theory, in which he posits marriage as based on "the exchange of women" between men, is especially applicable in this context. Lending support to my claim, Tremayne has argued that in Iran, unmarried girls "effectively remain the property of their fathers and under their authority until they marry, at which point the responsibility is transferred to the husband" (2006, 80). Further support for this argument is provided by the common idiom in Farsi that the girl's family *gives* their daughter and

the groom *gets* a wife[21]. The idiom is asymmetrical, with the giving and receiving occurring in one direction—it would be odd to say that one is *giving* their son or *getting* a groom.

The traditionalist clerical establishment in Iran agrees that women's bodies, or at least their sexual parts, belong to men. Marriage is defined in classical *fiqh* texts as "a civil contract to render sex between a man and woman licit" (Mir-Hosseini 2012, 128). Modeled after the contract of sale, the marriage contract "places a wife under her husband's *qiwama,* a mixture of dominion and protection" (Mir Hosseini 2012, 128). A definition of marriage by Muhaqqiq Hilli, "one of the most prominent Shi'a jurists" (Mir Hosseini 2004, 4), goes as follows: "a contract whose object is that of dominion over the vagina, without the right of possession" (Hilli 1985, cited in Mir Hosseini 2004, 4). Such dominion requires that a man have "unhampered sexual access" (Mir Hosseini 2012, 128) to his wife, which gives him the right to control his wife's movements outside of the house and prevent her from engaging in non-obligatory forms of worship, such as fasting, that may interfere with this unhampered access (Mir-Hosseini 2012). Such clerics believe "that men are superior to women, so it is natural for men to dominate" (Mir Hosseini 2004, 3). It bears mentioning, nevertheless, that other clerics advocate more moderate views, with "neo-traditionalists" advocating complementarity between the sexes and "revisionists" proposing gender equality (Mir Hosseini 2004). Mir-Hosseini (2013) tells us that there is an emerging reformist and feminist scholarship in Islam that is in the process of rereading textual sources "in the light of the changed conditions of women and contemporary notions of justice in which gender equality is now inherent […] severing the link between sexuality and inequality in Muslim legal tradition that has sustained gender inequality" (2013, 143). This link, however, cannot be ignored when considering non-egalitarian attitudes surrounding sexuality that persist in societies where these legal traditions have held sway.

The idea of "the exchange of women" gives some indication of why women's virginity (further addressed in Chapter 2) is disproportionately emphasized in relation to that of men. As one of my female interlocutors, Irsaa, mentioned, the term "*dokhtar'e bākere"* (virgin girl) comes naturally, whereas "*pesar'e bākere*" or "*marde bākere*"

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[21] Respectively, *dokhtar dādan* and *zan gereftan.*

(virgin boy and virgin man, respectively), are not typical in Farsi. I was told by other interlocutors that there was an Arabic term for a male virgin, *azab,* but I had never heard it before, and with reason: it was only used in very particular contexts, specifically, religious (*fiqh*) discourse which necessitated such a distinction. It follows that if women are gifts to be exchanged, they ought to be delivered to their recipients "intact" and in their original packaging, as otherwise, they are flawed, damaged, or as a metaphor that dates back to Shakespeare goes, "deflowered".

In Iran, families historically tended to marry off their daughters at a very young age, which allowed them to control the marriage process and guard their daughter's chastity. This practice was condoned by pre-Islamic law under the Sasanid dynasty[22], as well as Islamic law, according to which a girl's age of legal majority was nine lunar years, although a father or male guardian could arrange a marriage contract on the girl's behalf even before this age (Afary 2009). Although some changes were made under Reza Shah raising the minimum age of marriage (from nine to fifteen for girls and from fifteen to eighteen for boys) (Afary 2009), after the Islamic revolution of 1979 the minimum age of marriage for girls was brought down to nine years (Hoodfar and Assadpour 2000). During the reformist Sixth Parliament, the state raised the legal age of marriage for girls to thirteen (Afary 2009). Nevertheless, as companionate marriage[23], in which the husband

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[22] The Sasanian dynasty ruled Iran from 224 to 651 AD.

[23] The trend in promotion of companionate marriage, although roughly contemporaneous with similar trends in Europe (such as with the Bloomsbury Group of which Virginia Woolf was a member) and in the United States (Simmons 2009), has different results in the context of Iran (as discussed by Najmabadi 2005 and Afary 2009) than that in Western countries. Iranian elites at the time were impressed by European modernization and sought to emulate it, and with this came a discourse on the importance of women's education (Najmabadi 1998). Many girls' schools were opened under the argument that women, until recently synonymous with the household, were (in the context of parliamentary reform where men were expected to become modern citizens of the state) now managers of the household who would be better educators of children if they were themselves educated, an argument which worked until women began to enter universities in the 1930s, at which point a shift in discourse was necessary (Najmabadi 1998). However, the Iranian context was different from that of Europe and North America. In addition to strictly arranged marriages, some of the issues critiqued by then-revolutionary writers such as Mirza Fath Ali Akhundzadeh (1812-1878) and Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1854-1896) included polygamy, temporary marriage, pederasty, and sodomy. These writers promoted women's unveiling, believing that this would solve the problem of pederasty (status-defined homosexuality having been prevalent in Iran until then (see Najmabadi 2005)), as men's inclinations to *amrads* (young men who had yet to grow beards) were a result of a perversion of a natural inclination towards women that could not be satisfied when the latter were veiled. Thus the discourse on companionate marriage was accompanied by a shift towards compulsory heterosexuality in emulation of Europe. In her classic memoir, the Qajar princess Taj al-Saltana (1884-1936) expressed a need for romantic love within marriage, as well as a need for women to earn an honorable living to free them from prostitution and poverty in the context of the insufficient incomes of

and wife share mutual affection, began to be emphasized in the nineteenth century, beginning with literary works published between 1920 and 1940 (Afary 2009), women's average age at first marriage has risen, and continues to rise as women attain higher levels of education; it was 19.7 in 1976 and about 22 in 1996, and the gap between the age of rural and urban women at first marriage is decreasing (Nomani and Behdad 2006, Zangeneh 2005, Howard 2002, Aghajanian and Mehryar 2005, as cited in Afary 2009). Thus there is roughly a ten-year difference between the mean age of marriage today and the legal age of marriage (Afary 2009).

Nevertheless, child marriage continues to be legal in Iran under certain circumstances. For girls under 13 and boys under 15, it is legally required that the marriage be approved by a judge who deems it "beneficial to the welfare of the child" (Justice for Iran 2013, 6), while international human rights do not consider child marriage beneficial under any circumstances. According to a report by the organization Justice for Iran, in 2012, 1537 girls below the age of 10, and 29827 girls between 10 and 14, were forced to marry. The girl in such a marriage, is, of course, unable to consent. The continued occurrence of such marriages, which by international standards are considered a form of slavery, emphasizes my point that the legal structure of marriage in Iran is arranged in such a way that the woman (or, in the case of child marriages, the girl) need not freely enter the union, but may do so under coercive circumstances, implying once again that her body is not her own.

In ending this section, I wish to highlight Gayle Rubin's analysis of *the exchange of women*: "If it is women who are being transacted, then it is the men who give and take them who are linked, the woman being a conduit of a relationship rather than partner to it […] The relations of such a system are such that women are in no position to realize the benefits of their own circulation" (Rubin 1975, 174). Rubin's argument shows that this

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male heads of household among the urban working population. Despite these efforts, the discourse on companionate marriage in Iran was not accompanied by the same shifts experienced in the West in the 19th and 20th centuries, including women's increased participation in the economy and the women's rights movement, which achieved legal changes according women more rights within and without marriage, rendering marriage more optional and divorce more acceptable (Afary 2009). For Iranian women, who had fewer rights within marriage, the institution until very recently remained child-centered, and many devoted their lives to an ensuring their daughters got a proper schooling while themselves remaining in unhappy marital unions (Afary 2009). The situation may have begun to change for this most recent generation of Iranian women, who are more educated and among whom there is a trend for later marriage and childbirth.

type of marriage system is fundamentally based on gender inequality, a theme I have touched on above and will return to in following chapters. Importantly, Rubin takes issue with Levi-Strauss' conceptualization of the exchange of women as being at the origin of, and by extension intrinsic to, culture (Rubin 1975, 176). Because culture is, by definition, inventive, Rubin sees the theory of *the exchange of women* as "an initial step toward building an arsenal of concepts with which sexual systems can be described" (Rubin 1975, 177), and eventually, dismantled in favour of more egalitarian ones.

My interlocutors did not describe marriage in terms of Levi-Strauss's theory. And as Mir-Hoseeini (2012) tells us, the logic of "women's sexuality as property and marriage as a form of sale … is so repugnant to modern sensibilities and values, so alien from contemporary Muslims' experience of marriage, that no author can openly admit to following it, but it comes to the surface [in the reasoning of 'neo-traditionalist' texts on 'women's rights in Islam']". While the majority of my interlocutors did not place much emphasis on romantic love, they did emphasize the mutual understanding and affection that would be appropriate to companionate marriage. But as we'll see in later chapters, some of the attitudes they presented (such as men's emphasis on virginity) are not compatible with companionate marriage, which implies mutual respect and equal personhood of the partners. In companionate marriage, I argue, a woman should be free to choose her marriage partner and to give herself in marriage. In recent years, Iranians have been moving towards such a model of marriage (Moaddel 2008, cited in Afary 2009). The dissonance between this new form and the retention of virginity imperatives must be understood as due to the fact that the latter belong to the old system. Recognizing "traditional" Iranian marriage structures as a form of exchange of women allows us to deconstruct it to its elements and reconfigure new, more egalitarian forms in love and marriage.

The Marriage Imperative

The "marriage imperative", as Afsaneh Najmabadi (2008) has called it, falls upon every young Iranian, barring exceptional circumstances. It is such an accepted life stage, marking the passage to adulthood, that, to my surprise, none but one of my female interviewees responded in the positive when I asked whether they had ever resisted the

idea of marriage itself. Marriage is also an opportunity for women to gain upward social mobility, as hypergyny is typically practiced by Iranians, as I can attest from my lifelong observations among the Iranian community in Montreal as well as discussions with my interlocutors.

In Iran, as the literature (Afary 2009, Mahdavi 2009) suggests, married women have a greater degree of freedom than unmarried women, which explains why marriage is desirable to young women (and not just their families and communities). For women who leave home, this sometimes involves some negotiation: in some cases women I met and interviewed had married just prior to leaving Iran, and, on the other side of the coin, some families showed concern with their single daughters living away from home, as seen in the case of Ensieh.

As in other countries in the region, the age of marriage in Iran has risen for both sexes (Dejong et al., cited in Tremayne 2006, 66) in recent years. Nevertheless, marriage remains the norm for both genders.

If a woman fails to marry before a certain age, she is stigmatized. For instance, in Yazd, a town that has "retained most of its traditional and religious characteristics in spite of approaching one of the highest levels of socioeconomic development within the country" and a high female literacy rate (Abassi-Shavazi, cited in Tremayne 2006, 75), there is a high incidence of early marriage (defined as marriage before the age of fifteen) (Tremayne 2006). Tremayne's ethnographic work revealed many negative evaluations of girls who had remained unmarried beyond what was perceived as the ideal marriage age: "Unmarried girls above thirteen years of age were stigmatized as 'something being seriously wrong with her' and as being 'spoilt goods' (Tremayne 2006, 79). Girls over the age of twenty were referred to as having "gone sour" (*dokhtar-e-torshideh)* (Tremayne 2006, 84)*,* and even if such a girl had a respectable career, she would still live with her parents and be regarded as "an object of pity and wonder" (Tremayne 2006, 82). On the other hand, many of Tremayne's interlocutors laughed at the notion of "early marriage", as no stigma was attached to such marriages, which were regarded as ideal. While the age at first marriage is not as low in all parts of the country, the stigmatization of unmarried girls happens elsewhere as well, and women's marriage prospects decrease as they age.

Tremayne argues that "the practice of early marriage has adapted itself to modernity and its imperatives" (Tremayne 2006, 67).

Besides simply avoiding stigmatization, there are several additional reasons why a young Iranian woman would want to get married. Along with productive employment and housing, marriage is among the socioeconomic benchmarks that have traditionally defined adulthood in the Middle East (Hoodfar 1997, as cited in Hashemi 2015). Tremayne supports this notion with her description of an unmarried young woman as being uncertain of her future and identity, and thus in a state of limbo (Tremayne 2006, 84). But employment and housing are traditionally the responsibility of men: even if a wife is employed, the husband is responsible for her financial up-keep, as in Islamic tradition, he is regarded as the breadwinner (Hoodfar 1997, as cited in Hashemi 2015). A woman may thus want to marry to relieve the economic burden on her father (Tremayne 2006, 79). In addition, marriage may provide her with a certain degree of freedom (Vieille 1978, 456 ; cited in Afary 2009) and a means by which she could improve her social status (Afary 2009, Mahdavi 2009). There is also the religious aspect: traditionalist texts on "proper Islamic family life" regularly include chapters on "the virtues of marriage" (Mir Hosseni 2004, 3), which, as a few of my interviewees reminded me, is popularly described as "half of the faith".

One may wonder then, what the motivations for marriage are for secular, educated Iranian women living in Canada. For them, marriage may remain a form of social capital in their communities, as well a way of assuaging concerned parents (I recently encountered a visiting Iranian couple in their seventies who were worried about the marriage prospects of their son and daughter, both in their thirties and living in Montreal). Furthermore, these women may also sense a feeling of unrootedness (as we'll see in Chapter 3). They may also aspire to marry due to the potential of upward mobility if they can find a husband of higher status, as we'll see later in the chapter.

Education for Iranian Women

It is clear from my interviews that education is another strategy for social mobility aspired to by many Iranians. Those who move from smaller towns to Tehran, or from Iran to other countries, are often motivated by the possibility for the improvement in their

living conditions that such movements may entail. In the case of my interview participants, except for a couple of cases who told me they spent their entire life in Esfahan (now Iran's second-largest city in terms of population) almost all my participants, despite the diversity of their origins, had spent some part of their life in Tehran. It would not be amiss to consider Tehran the hub through which an individual aspiring to upward mobility will move. Whether one was born there or went there for university, the road to Canada would almost always pass through Tehran.

The discourse on women's education in Iran began in the late 19th century, when early texts began to promote women's education because as "managers of the household" and educators of children, women's own education could not be allowed to lag behind (Najmabadi 1998). Although today we might claim instead that women ought to be educated for their own sake, these texts must be taken in historical context. They were written within a general ethos of modernization and progress, and their authors were concerned that Iran was lagging behind Europe partly due to women's lack of education. They present, as Najmabadi argues, a sharp contrast with earlier texts in which women are hardly "managers of the household", but synonymous with it. The strategy of these early proponents of women's education succeeded for a time, and girls' schools began to multiply in Iran, particularly in Tehran. However, by the 1930s, as women began to seek higher education, the very arguments that had resulted in women's access to education began to limit it. At that time, women began to reframe and re-envision home as also the nation, embracing some of Reza Shah's projects that would put them at the service of the latter (Najmabadi, 1998).

There has been a certain shift in gender roles in today's Iran, with women playing a more public role than in the past. While in some ways the Islamic revolution overturned the Shah's modernizing project, women continue to be employed in certain public sectors and their rates of education have only risen. In fact, women were active participants in the revolution, although they were later encouraged to resume their domestic role (Sadeghi 2008). Nevertheless, the state employs women in a variety of public sphere positions, which ironically allow them to escape the domestic obligations that the Islamic Republic actively encourages as the proper role of women (Afary 2009).

There is, nevertheless, a tension. Women's role in the home is emphasized by conservative members of government, including the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamene'i. Women's university enrolment exceeded that of men for the first time in Iranian history during the reform era of 1997-2005 (Sadeghi 2008, 253). Since then, there have been various attempts to place quotas that limit women's university enrolment, such as by barring women from entering certain fields. While the proponents of such limitations claim that they are acting in the interest of women as women graduates from these fields have found limited employment, their attitude and choice of corrective measure reflects the biases towards women entering certain male-dominated fields, and re-enforces the idea that men are the ones who ought to get jobs and "bring home the bread", as it were. On my first trip to Iran in 2007, I was told by a male cousin that I ought not to enter civil engineering because "it's a man's field" and by an uncle that these high numbers of university-educated women were "taking jobs away from men", the implication being that men ought rightfully to have jobs, and women, not so much. The idea that women's place is in the home has not entirely gone away.

As I was told by one of my early interviewees, with the revolution of 1979, the enrolment of girls in high school and higher education increased, owing partly to the fact that families, many of whom held traditional values that included the place of a woman as being in the home, had more trust in sending their daughters to school, and specifically, school away from home, under the guidance of the Islamic Republic. This fact is also confirmed by Afary (2009). The stories of my interlocutor Sara, further introduced in Chapter 2, suggest that these families were justified in their trust: the dormitory in the school she attended had tight control over the young women's personal interactions, with strict curfews and an apparent obsession with the possibility of homosexual interactions occurring among roommates who were intimate. She told me that such roommates would often be switched to different dormitory buildings with no explanation. She and some friends were also severely shamed when they snuck out to a party when they were supposed to be attending a nighttime prayer session during *Shabe Ghadr*[24].

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[24] (I) The holiest night in the Islamic calendar, in Arabic *Layl-at-ul-Qadr,* is also referred to in Farsi as *Shab-e-Qadr.* During this night, during which it is said that the Qur'an was revealed, muslims often remain awake all night, praying. In shi'ite tradition there are three *Shabe Qadr*s (19, 21, 23 of Ramadan) because it is unclear on which night the revelation occurred. It is also a night of mourning, as Ali-Ibn-Abi-Talib, the

Nowadays, attitudes toward women's education have largely shifted. This is not limited to urban areas. I know a woman who lives in a small rural town in the province of Esfahan where many of the residents, all known to each other, practice family farming. She resents having been taken out of high school by her older brother in order to be married. Her eldest daughter has a masters' degree and lives in Tehran. Her younger daughter was recently accepted to university in Esfahan and stays in a dorm there, travelling back home on weekends. This dramatic change between generations is indicative of the power of the Islamic Republic in shifting the discourse on women's education.

Education, nevertheless, seems to remain at the service of the family, and may also be viewed as an opportunity to broaden or improve the marriage pool: Sara's family threatened her by telling her "You don't want to study? That's fine. We'll just sell you cheaper", an indication that families also see the marriage of their daughters as an opportunity for social and financial advancement, and may see education as a step in achieving such advancement. On a recent trip to Iran, I visited the campus of Tehran University, and was amused to find prominent posters encouraging student marriage.

This type of strategy seems to indicate that the government, like some families, sees women's education as partly an opportunity to find them a husband[25]. The government continues to emphasize women's roles as wives and mothers, and women,

prophet Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, was reportedly struck during prostration in prayer by the sword of Ibn Muljam on the 19th, (40 AH, or 27 January 661 AD) and died of his wound on the 21st. This means that it is particularly disrespectful from a religious point of view to party on this particular night. It appears that in Iran, like *Moharram* and *Āshurā* ceremonies (see note below), *Shabe Qadr* has been subverted or co-opted by youths who are not interested in religious ceremony but would rather have a little fun.
(II) During the crowded street processions of which, apparently, young women dress well and apply make-up to attract young men, whose chanting and drumming (especially with "modern" equipment such as electronic speakers) some see as "showing off" rather than devotion (personal communication with an older gentleman during my trip to Iran in Fall 2016). As I witnessed in the small town of Vazvan in Fall 2016, in these ceremonies men participate in the chanting, drumming, chest-beating, and self-flagellation with chains in the main part of the street while women follow the procession from the sidewalk. If women do participate (as they did on the night of *Āshurā,* the night before the 10th of Muharram, during my trip), they will walk in a separate contingent behind the men, and will only chant and beat their breast softly as opposed to loudly. It seems that perhaps the motivation of some young people in participating in these religious rituals lies less in the ritual itself than in the potential of meeting prospective mates.
[25] The promotion may otherwise indicate a concern with "morality", as marriage may be seen to alleviate the desire for male and female students to mingle with the intent of sexual or romantic liaisons. Universities are the only educational institution which are co-ed, although gender segregation does occur within the buildings (the dorms described by interlocutors are gender-segregated, and upon entering the library of the university I visited, I noticed designated areas for male and female students to sit and study).

who constitute roughly 60%[26] of the university entrances, are sometimes barred from entering certain fields, perhaps in part due to the idea that men are to be the breadwinners in marriage. This last idea is, interestingly, accepted by many educated women, who continue to practice hypergyny.

Good Girl/Bad Girl: Navigating the Social Field through Calculated Compliance

Ensieh was my second female interviewee whom I did not know beforehand (having first conducted three "pilot" interviews with acquaintances), so I was a bit nervous when I first met her. My contact with her was initiated through an advertisement I posted on a Facebook group run by one of the Iranian student associations in Montreal. She sent me an e-mail, and we set up a rendez-vous. She arrived at the designated intersection by bicycle, and wearing a light flower-printed black top. I introduced myself with a prepared script, and gave her a copy of the interview consent form to peruse. She was a sociology student, and had responded to my ad because she was curious about other Iranians doing social science research in Montreal.

Later, we met at Café Caravane. It was my first time there, and I noted that the walls were covered in paintings of rebellion. One that struck my eye in particular was of the 2009 street protests in Tehran following the re-election of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.[27]

The space was an appropriate one in which to meet Ensieh, who as it turned out had been politically active in Iran. She had also been a rebellious teenager: smoking and sneaking illegal beer into her *tiz-hooshan* middle school in Isfahan, boldly interacting with boys where some other girls wouldn't dare greet them, going out to cafes and the theatre, which she made sure to emphasize were generally deemed "inappropriate" spaces for teenaged girls in her context. "Really, there's no example I can give you here because here people go to the club and it's considered normal. Whatever was not normal for a teenaged girl [I would do]." She enjoyed the feeling of doing things that she was not

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[26] This 2012 article cites the rate of female enrolment at 60% of total university enrolments: Erdbrink, Thomas. "Single Women Gaining Limited Acceptance in Iran." The New York Times. June 12, 2012. Accessed July 26, 2017. http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/13/world/middleeast/single-women-gaining-limited-acceptance-in-iran.html.

[27] The artist, I found upon inquiry, was Sebastian Astwo: http://www.astwo.com/ . On his website, Astwo calls this style of painting "Pol-Hip-Hop".

"supposed" to do—indeed, it seemed that this had been her sole *raison-d'etre* as a teen. When I asked her, as I did in all my interviews, about her sexual orientation, she responded thoughtfully, that had it been as much of a taboo for her to associate with girls as it was for her to associate with boys, she probably would have pursued sexual relationships with girls as well. But given the ease of access to members of one's own gender that Najmabadi (2013) argues is afforded by with the normativity of "homosociality" in Iran, the lack of taboo surrounding access to members of her own sex-gender[28] meant the possibility of sexual contact with the same sex lacked the enticement that relations with boys did.

The interview excerpt I have cited at the beginning of this chapter was generated by my asking, when Ensieh was telling me about her life (where she had lived and for how long, and so on), whether her parents were comfortable with her leaving her hometown to study elsewhere. As this interview took place early in my fieldwork, at this point I knew very little about the conditions young women navigated in Iran. What I did understand regarding young women's options for living arrangements was based on my own experience as the daughter of Iranian migrants to Montreal. As a teenager, I had at times expressed a desire to live alone, which were met by attempts at dissuasion followed by firm statements that it wasn't going to happen. My parents' responses ranged from my father's arguments regarding how unwise this would be from an economical vantage point (clearly living with family was more economically efficient), to my mother's matter-of-fact statements that such an arrangement would be quite improper. In her view, it wasn't a "good sign" for a young woman to live alone, or even a young man for that matter, she would say, judging acquaintances who had done just that. Somehow this judgement was reversed when she met the man who later became my husband—"it means he can manage himself", she suggested, but I digress.

I recounted to Ensieh that when I applied (at seventeen) to several high-calibre universities in the US, my mother suggested that the family might move in order to accommodate my studies. I was deeply upset by this. On the other hand, a male cousin living in Iran had told me that many young women quite easily lived alone at his university campus in Esfahan. Ensieh responded that this was not the case. Her analysis

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[28] Najmabadi's usage. See introduction for a brief discussion of this choice.

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of my cousin's comment was as follows: "See, in us Iranians it is such that we all want to save face (*āberudari bokonim*)[29]. Now, whatever in our minds we think is *āberu,* we start to <u>promote </u>that. Yes, we are like this. No, it wasn't like that."

Perhaps my cousin's comment was also prompted by the fact that as a man, he simply wasn't aware of the struggles his women classmates had likely endured in order to study away from home and live alone. It is not unlikely that, like Ensieh, their endeavours had been met with some resistance. In Ensieh's particular case, she was able to maneuver her parents' valuation of education in order to get something she wanted: the personal freedom and independence that was afforded by living alone. A similar strategy was utilized by Sara (35):[30]

> Me: Are you married?
>
> Sara: I was married and separated.[31]
>
> Me: Oh?
>
> Sara: I married at 22, 21 rather. My marriage was for the sole reason that I did not want to return to [my hometown]. My family is *very sonnati* and *very* strict and *very mardsālār*. Especially in that period when I was a teenager and then became a young adult. This was the 70s. 70 *Shamsi*.[32] Until in 79 I went to the university in Tehran in 1378[33] I was accepted in Tehran and went to [a well-known university in Tehran]. But my family was very strict. They wouldn't even let me go to Tehran. With a thousand and one tricks I was able to choose my field in Tehran and get accepted there. But when my studies were ending […] Since the time I got accepted in Tehran they were trying to get me transferred. But when my studies were ending, I knew there was no way for me not to return to [my hometown] and live in my father's home. The only possibility was to either get married or come

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[29] I have already mentioned "saving face". These are equivalent concepts, *āberu* being a local manifestation of Goffman's concept.

[30] I will more fully introduce Sara in the next chapter.

[31] Sara used the terms *jodā shodam* (I separated) rather than *talāq gereftam* (I got a divorce).

[32] Roughly the 90s in the Gregorian calendar.

[33] Gregorian: 2000.

back. So I… It was the prevalent attitude in our family that if you hadn't gotten married, as a girl, you could not speak over other people (*ru harfe baqie harf bezani*). I, who was very much a rebelle[34], and had gotten the notebook indicating my choice of field from the post office and had changed it so I wouldn't get accepted [in my hometown] and would instead get accepted at Tehran or elsewhere… It was not possible for me to stay in Tehran and work unless I got married. As a result I got married. With the first person… I became friends with someone and got married in Tehran. Just so that I wouldn't have to return. In reality my main reason was so that I wouldn't have to return to [my hometown].

Looking back at some of the basic data I gathered from my female interviewees, an interesting pattern emerges. Some were married and had arrived with their husbands. It at least a couple of cases, these marriages had occurred *because* of their arrival: in Ensieh's case, she married her partner because the Canadian government would not accept their joint immigration application otherwise. Another interviewee mentioned that it would not have been proper to not marry her then-boyfriend when they decided to move to Canada. Among the unmarried women, a few lived with a female roommate or a sister, and there were others who lived alone. It may be significant that those who were single and had family here did live with family. In the narratives of my interviewees, moving away from the family home, if single, usually occurred for study, which sometimes entailed living in university dormitories. This fits the pattern described to me by Ensieh.

It appears that, for many Iranians, resistance, for the sake of propriety, to a daughter living away from home, gives way in the face of the prospect of her receiving a good education. While it may be the case that in some parts of Iran people remain

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[34] My spelling here reflects Sara's pronounciation of the term rebel, which she has "farsified", suggesting a reference to the French feminine version of this term rather than the English, but lacks the French rolling "r" sound.

sceptical of the value of education for girls,[35] this is by and large not the case for the urban classes aspiring to upward mobility.

When I sat down to interview people it became time and time again evident that education was extremely important to the parents of these individuals. This was something I had myself experienced firsthand. Not only that, but Iranians I grew up with in Montreal tended to pursue degrees in the sciences and engineering, as did most of those who arrived later as university students. Of course, university application and immigration selection processes may favour these students. But Ensieh tells me another reason why science and engineering degrees are important:

> Mona: Apparently most Iranians [in Canada] change fields. The majority first go into engineering and such.
>
> Ensieh: Yes, well, you know, it's a middle-class strategy. If at that time you don't go into engineering, that's the thing that has the higher possibility of jobs and at the same time it is something that for everyone is more acceptable. Because it is valued. It's not just us. I have Pakistani friends too; for them it's the same thing.

Another interviewee, Shirin, makes a similar assessment: "As a matter of fact human sciences was one of my interests. Because I couldn't risk not having a job and not having a source of income, I didn't take that direction". Shirin's observation fits well with what seems to be her general life strategy, in which she appears to aim to improve her lot through consciously making choices that maximize her potential for upward mobility.

Shirin: Marriage as Economic Strategy

Despite the fact that education is increasingly available to women in Iran, and indeed, the majority of those who enrol in university are women, marriage remains a domain in which the desire for upward mobility is exercised. This became apparent to me during my fieldwork when I met Shirin, after which the reasoning behind the preferences I had been hearing about for a taller, richer, more educated husband finally became clear.

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[35] See Tremayne (2006).

Shirin was one of the last women I interviewed. A male interviewee had put me in touch with her, and after a couple of failed attempts, we met and had a lengthy discussion. Shirin was an excellent research participant, speaking at length about many important issues to my research, often anticipating them without my prompting.

Shirin had dyed hair, wore bright lipstick, and to my best guess, had had a nose job. She was 31 and single, and I suppose the makeup was a habit she had picked up when, while living in Tehran, she carefully coiffed herself in attempts to attract boys in Tehran. At one point she lamented to me that not only did she struggle to find men of substance, but also had a hard time finding female friends with whom to go *dor-dor* (joyriding).[36] Shirin was not averse to the idea of marriage—but not just any marriage, she made clear—a particular marriage (*ezdevāje khāss*): "Yes but a particular marriage. A person whose head is worth their body (*saresh be tanesh biarze*). We always wanted to change… well this is my social level (*sat'he farhangi*) and I'm not satisfied with it. So let me go up and be satisfied there. A boy that would make us happy…"

Shirin had only been in Canada for a few months, which was the shortest length of time since arrival for any of my interviewees. She was born to a family she described as of medium religiosity and fairly traditional, but "thankfully", not too traditional. From the beginning of Shirin's narrative, it was clear that her family was concerned with social mobility, and this was a value that Shirin herself seemed to follow as rational and reasonable. She had three sisters, and described herself and her siblings as "superior" to relatives regarding education. Shirin expressed a certain disdain for traditional women's roles, which some of her relatives embraced along with patriarchal values. She mentioned a relative who had had three daughters and who intended to get pregnant again until she had a son. She described how another relative would "show off" her boy-child to Shirin, and exclaimed, "What has she ever done? I am not sure she even got her [high school]

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[36] Literally "round and round", this is an activity of youth in (well-off) upper Tehran, in which young people drive in circles aiming to find members of the opposite sex (with the attractiveness of men hinging in part on the expensiveness of their cars). Shirin did not tell me where she lived in Tehran, but she clearly stated a motivation to improve her social-economic class. Therefore, her participation in *dor-dor* does not imply that she lived in upper Tehran, but it does suggest that she actively attempted to mingle with upper-Tehrani youth. As Mahdavi (2009) indicates, youth of different socioeconomic backgrounds and from different parts of town participate in this activity.

diploma, and she has not worked a day in her life[37]. All she has done is gone and slept with her husband".

Shirin expressed that her immediate family was a bit different: her father had always pushed her and her sisters to pursue their studies and "go out and be in the world". It was important for Shirin to have a better life than her parents. She had to be "better" than her mother, receiving a higher education, because "that's how the world works", she explained to me. In the pursuit of a better life, Shirin was in search of a husband who was "better" than her, and didn't discard the possibility of hymen reconstruction surgery[38] in order to secure such a marriage.

I felt Shirin was a unique interviewee, perhaps because of her willingness to openly talk about the issues I was interested in, but also due to her specific positionality and candidness regarding them. I had spoken to women who didn't have much to say because they had no sexual experience, and perhaps more importantly, did not experience conflict with parental or societal ideals of being a "good girl" or a "good daughter". Several other women I had spoken to were outspoken feminists and therefore had plenty to say. Shirin didn't fit either of these categories. My impression of her was of the stereotypical upper-Tehrani girl, complete with "the look", or perhaps one who, as one can gather from her expression of desire for upward mobility, at least aspired to belong to that class. In fact, her aspirations were indicated to me by many of my other interviewees in the form of stereotypes: I commonly asked questions both regarding what my participants desired in an ideal spouse, and what they felt other individuals of either sex-gender in general wanted in a spouse. Many protested that it was not proper to generalize, but the responses they did give were fairly consistent. One of the common themes regarding what women wanted was money. Shirin had something to say about this:

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[37] I have translated Shirin's words directly (*ye ruz tu omresh kar nakarde*) although this phrasing does not recognize the unremunerated work of women in the home. It also bears mentioning that, in Iran, many women have long been employed in agricultural and nomadic economies or, in urban areas, contributed their labour to informal economies, although they viewed their work in such areas as an extension of housework and considered themselves full-time housewives (Afary 2009). "In a survey of 350 working-age women in the more affluent northern area of Tehran in 2001, about 94 percent were earning an income, but only 53 percent described themselves as employed" (Moghadam 2009 as cited in Afary 2009).
[38] I discuss this topic further in a later chapter.

I say unfortunately, in Iran it is dictated a lot that you as a woman are very foolish (*bisho'ur*)[39] to want your husband to have money. But foolish is the person who says that. Because all the psychologists and sociologists say that a certain amount of monetary ability (*tavānāyi-e māli*), well it's necessary for a life.

In Iran they really suppress and say an iron-worshipping girl. Now what's an iron-worshipper? That has a story. But the meaning is that you have no right to want your husband to have an appropriate financial situation. Because the spirit (*nafs*) of marriage is important. Love (*eshgh*) and I don't know, following the tradition of the prophet, that marriage is the tradition of the prophet. But really girls really, especially when their age has gone up, and they have reached a high place socially and monetarily, it's really hard for them to go with someone who is lower than them from this perspective. But well some are forced to. My divorced co-workers, they all had damaged husbands. All of their husbands were lower than them.

As we can see, like Sara (who married her husband to get away from home) and Ensieh (who married, as we will see below, in order to save her joint immigration application to Canada with her partner), Shirin's attitude towards marriage is pragmatic. Like the other women, she is using the social situation in which she finds herself to achieve ends she regards as desirable. This decidedly unromantic view corresponds with what I found to be a surprising result of my fieldwork: when I asked them to define love, nearly all of my interviewees responded with biological explanations. When I asked whether love was important for marriage, they almost all did respond in the positive, but gave caveats. Perhaps love was secondary to other, more "logical" considerations, or "love at first sight" was a myth, and it was important instead that love be cultivated. Even if young people are now more

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[39] A more literal translation is "witless". The Farsi term is highly pejorative, a connotation that is not carried by either of these translations.

likely than in the past to seek out their own marriage partners, it seems they are less often motivated by a belief in romantic love than by the same sense of economic rationality that their forebears used to arrange their children's marriages. Further inquiry in this area may prove fruitful, as my observations go against certain trends, such as the popularity of Valentine's Day in Iran. Perhaps my finding is due to the reliance on narratives and the filtering effect of immigration I have mentioned in the introduction: members of the upwardly mobile middle class may have an interest in presenting themselves as rational rather than emotional[40]. Nevertheless, I feel it is important to state that the popular idea of a sharp distinction between "love marriage" and "arranged marriage" is not a useful one. Clearly, the women and men I interacted with during the course of my research, while not participating in arranged marriages, are just as pragmatic as were prior generations.

On the Limits of Agency

Ensieh, unlike most of my interviewees (who responded in the positive and without hesitation when I asked them whether it was always obvious to them that they would one day be married), did not regard marriage as inevitable. In fact, she had been critical of the institution. She had met a boy around the age of twenty-one and by her mid-twenties the fact had become official with her parents, mostly because there was an expectation on their part that she let them know about such relationships. Although she had chosen her partner, she felt, in retrospect, that all was a matter of circumstance: that's how her life had played itself out. She and her partner hadn't gotten married until Immigration Canada had threatened to close their skilled-worker immigration application if they did not. "We don't have these partner-shmartner games for Iranians", she reported they had informed her.

Rather than assert her agency in the domain of her marriage, Ensieh downplayed it. To Ensieh, marriage was an institution that "society needs more than we ourselves do", and "whether we believe in it or not, we are all following the pattern expected of us". Now, at 31, she was separated from her husband, who had returned to Iran after they had

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[40] Thanks to Setrag Manoukian for this idea.

arrived together in Montreal together two years prior. During my subsequent meetings with her at a restaurant and in her home, she became increasingly open regarding the nature of the separation and her questioning of the path she had taken in life.

Ensieh's ambivalence regarding her marriage, and the circumstances that surrounded it, reveal that there are limits in the extent to which young Iranian women make their own lives. As Vigh puts it, "it must be stressed that we are not free to move entirely as we want. Anyone who has ever sailed will testify to the idiocy of trying to navigate with indifference to the forces of the environment" (2006, 14). Inevitably, certain structural factors will shape these women's life trajectories. But those structures, as I hope to have made sufficiently clear, can always be toyed with, manipulated, and played to one's own tune. Like strings on a sitar, they can be tuned to one's liking, but can only be tightened so far before they break.

In this chapter I have offered excerpts from interviews with three women to illustrate some of the attitudes and strategies young Iranian women take up in order to address the exigencies of life. The fabric of their lives is structured by patterns woven by societal norms. Aware of this, they utilize the pre-existing weave as a jumping point for their own creative endeavours, shaping their own lives through manipulation of the available patterns.

This chapter shows how marriage and education, two major rites of passage to adulthood often employed strategically to achieve a higher socio-economic position, are approached pragmatically by young women. The young women I interacted with recognized the value of these achievements and, in general, did not openly oppose them, but instead utilized them strategically in order to attain some of their life goals. While such strategies may be more or less effective and may result in undesirable outcomes (such as with Sara's husband, whom she later divorced, the reason for which will become clear in the next chapter), they illustrate young women's agentive manipulation of the existing societal framework. This sets the tone for the next chapter, which looks at virginity imperatives as societally imposed on women, but also as responded to, or as strategically manipulated, by them.

Chapter 2: The Virginity Imperative: Power, Pain, and Performance

"We have two kinds [of virginity]: one spiritual (ruhi) and one bodily (jesmi)".
–Rana (32).

When I started discussing virginity with my female interviewees, they often asked me what I meant by it. "I'm asking you," I would respond. "I want to hear what you think it is." The results were interesting. While there were certain trends, with women focusing either on physical or moral aspects, there wasn't any obvious answer that came out of my query. By the time I was done interviewing, I still didn't have a single clear definition of the term *bekārat*, and was no clearer on what it really meant than when I begun my inquiry.

The answer to this conundrum becomes clear when one stops trying to pin down virginity and instead takes a step back and examines the various attempts to pin it down. In this chapter, I argue that virginity is a social construct, which entails a social contract: the virginity imperative. Some may attempt to make it concrete by defining it biologically: virginity, or lack thereof, is inscribed on women's bodies by the intact presence, or absence, of the hymen. Of course, we know that an intact hymen or a broken one is not a reliable indicator for whether a woman has had penetrative vaginal intercourse (let alone other kinds of sex), but physical examination remains a method by which virginity is "determined".[41] On the other hand, virginity is also often claimed as a moral trait.

Given the moral importance of virginity, it is a social requirement that unmarried women present as virgins in order to be regarded as "good" women, and

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[41] Traditionally, as far as I know, there has been no physical means to "determine" male virginity. And given that valuing female virginity has been promoted in patriarchal cultures in which, even if men are expected (based on religious doctrine, for instance) to be virgins upon their (first) marriage, their chances at marriage, and their social standing in general, are not particularly harmed if they are understood not to be virgins. However, at a recent student conference at which I presented, I was informed by a student in the audience, who had conducted research in Iran, that some of her interlocutors had seen a program on state television promoting the idea that it was possible to determine male virginity by examining the man's knees. The audience had laughed at this suggestion. I interpret the endorsement of such a method (documentation regarding which I have not myself found) as an attempt by those who promote female virginity as an indicator of morality to render this regime of classification and its disciplinary devices (which are occasionally used for political ends) more palatable by suggesting the possibility of physically determining virginity is not gender-specific, and that the practice is therefore just and fair.

by extension marriageable women. Thus the contract: by adequately performing virginity, women can expect to attain certain social goods that would otherwise be unavailable to them. I call this "the virginity imperative". The moral—and sometimes, physical (as in displays of "hymeneal"[42] blood)—aspects of virginity are thus necessarily performed by those women who wish to maintain their reputations, which affect their opportunities for marriage, which, as I outlined in the previous chapter, is a significant and valued life achievement and means of accessing social and economic capital. I argue that virginity, like gender (Butler 1994) is performative. In the end, it does not matter what the ideal of virginity is, for it is only an ideal. What does matter is that a woman's performance of virginity "passes": that it is deemed legitimate in the eyes of society, and therefore succeeds in securing the goal of marriage. The virginity imperative is thus also a regime of power which, through disciplinary devices, controls and classifies women.

In this chapter I look at the ways in which various women I spoke with construct and otherwise discuss virginity, and also how they perform virginity both in their day-to-day interactions and in their interactions with me. I argue that this performance is necessitated by the fundamentally unequal gender relations that are established in marriage (as discussed in Chapter 1). The performance is a kind of "facework". After establishing virginity as a structural constraint, I argue that women agentively work within this constraint to further their goals, and, to use a felicitous phrase used by Butler (2004) and taken up by Najmabadi (2014), create more liveable lives.

The Virginity Imperative

In using the term "virginity imperative" I am referring to an implicit social contract, but also to its disciplinary devices: a broad range of phenomena regulating women's bodies through the concept of virginity, which is constructed as both

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[42] In a conversation, during a student conference, with a young woman who was not Iranian but was of middle-eastern origin, she recounted to me that where she comes from the display of hymeneal blood upon marriage remains a contemporary practice, "but everyone knows that it is really chicken-blood; it's just to satisfy the old ladies".

physical and moral. This includes the requirement to remain a "virgin" until marriage, which often means maintaining an intact hymen, and so carefully avoiding any activity that may lead the hymen to break. The virginity imperative also includes the requirement of maintaining the image of a "pure" woman—one who of course does not engage in pre-marital sexual intercourse, but also one who avoids activities that may lead to the questioning of her "purity" (Hashemi 2015), which can include, for example, intermingling with members of the opposite sex to a degree greater than what is deemed proper by her community, or staying out late at night.

The demands of the virginity imperative begin in childhood, when damage to the hymen is an almost constant preoccupation of family members, often female. My interview question "When did you first learn about virginity?" elicited many tales by my female interlocutors of a vague understanding inculcated in childhood, wherein they were taught to be careful not to hurt their genital area (which, as my questions elicited, mothers often vaguely referred to as *unjā* ("over there") or, in certain cases, using the word *eib* (which denotes a fault or defect). As I was reminded time and again, in some families young girls were barred from various sports activities in order to avoid damage to the hymen. One of my interlocutors recalled her younger sister being stripped naked and examined by female relatives after she had fallen while playing outside.

As they get older, girls' movements and interactions with men and boys are carefully guarded, because even "talk" can damage their reputations and chances for marriage. Men, on the other hand, can almost do as they please (Mernissi 1982), as evidenced by the example of Sara's husband, whom we will meet later in the chapter. These concerns continue until such time as the woman is married, but do not necessarily end there.

When a young woman is married, her husband, or perhaps his family, may be concerned with "proof" of the young woman's virginity. The preoccupation with such "proof" is ancient and widespread in patriarchal societies. I do not attempt to address the historical, cultural, or geographical origins of the practices of "proving

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virginity" through the display of hymeneal blood, but as an indicator of their age, they are alluded to in the Old Testament:

> And the damsel's father shall say unto the elders, I gave my daughter unto this
> man to wife, and he hateth her;
> And, lo, he hath given occasions of speech *against her*, saying, I found not thy
> daughter a maid; and yet these *are the tokens of* my daughter's virginity. And they
> shall spread the cloth before the elders of the city.
> (Deut. 22:16-17, King James Bible).

Virginity imperatives are important in societies that are patriarchal and patrilineal, in part because ensuring a young woman's abstention from sexual intercourse prior to marriage helps assure that her children are indeed the husband's. These societies have therefore devised a means of "proving" virginity, and virgin women are more highly valued as brides. Although virginity does not ensure fidelity, other linked practices, such as men choosing to marry younger and/or less educated women, may contribute to a man's confidence that his wife will be less likely to "stray"[43]. Furthermore, in such patriarchal societies men are given license to control the movements of their wives and female relatives. This was indicated in Chapter 1 in the discussion of the Islamic marriage contract, but is also enshrined in the concept of *gheirat.*

According to Afary, in late-nineteenth-century Iran, "A girl's supposed lack of virginity on her wedding night was a 'permanent taint' that dishonored her and her entire family" (2009, 28). It was not uncommon for an older woman to wait at the door to present the bloodstained sheets to relatives, a piece of cloth at once considered proof of the groom's virility and the bride's chastity. If the bride was deemed not to be *dokhtar-e bākere* (a virgin with intact hymen), there would be trouble. In order to guard against such contingencies, some families would obtain a

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[43] Thus hypergyny (women marrying men of higher status), whose economic benefits to women were discussed in the first chapter, potentially benefits men who want more docile, "domesticated" wives. We can see how the education of women, also discussed in the first chapter, would threaten this social order.

midwife's testimony that their daughter was a virgin before the wedding (Afary 2009, 29). As some of my interlocutors attested, such practices still exist in Iran as they do elsewhere: in Morocco it has become fashionable to obtain a certificate of virginity from a doctor to display along with the bride's blood-stained undergarment (Mernissi 1982, 187).

Not conforming to the virginity imperative has undesirable consequences for women, ranging from the extreme case of honour killings, to marital conflict, to hasty marriages arranged by the young woman's family with the aim of preserving honour or "saving face" (Hashemi 2015), to simply being shunned by one's community and being unable to find a husband.

The last of these consequences can be particularly damaging in those societies where marriage is a rite of passage to adulthood, which, as mentioned in Chapter 1, is the case with Iran, something the Iranian scholar of gender Afsaneh Najmabadi has described as "the marriage imperative" (2008). Furthermore, marriage becomes necessary or important to economic security and social status in situations where women don't have the same economic opportunities as men.

To attribute the virginity imperative to religious requirements would be a mistake, as virginity remains important even among secular families. Furthermore, a religion-based argument doesn't fully account for the fact that virginity requirements are highly gendered. In Islam (Iran's majority religion and the purported basis of many of its laws), like the other Abrahamic traditions, pre-marital and extra-marital sex is considered sinful (Mernissi 1982, 186). But in practice, the pressure is disproportionately on women, and there is no "test" for the groom akin to those put to the bride. This may be partly explained by the fact that there is no requirement of exclusive sexual access of wives to their husbands. Indeed, according to Islam, a man can have up to four permanent wives and many concubines, and, in Shi'ism (once again the majority sect in Iran) as many temporary wives as he desires. Regardless, the fact that secular or non-religious Iranians as well as others continue to value virginity tells us that the source of the requirement must be sought elsewhere.

Regarding the gendered nature of virginity imperatives, Mernissi, who discusses Moroccan and other Arab societies, argues that "men ask the impossible: they want access to women for brief sexual encounters before marriage, but once they have decided to marry, they launch into a frantic search for a virgin whom no other man has 'defiled'" (Mernissi 1982,185). Kaivanara's (2015) research shows young Iranian men's preference for virgin brides, suggesting that Mernissi's argument of two-and-a-half decades ago can be extended to the Iran of today. Mernissi goes on to say that "the picture of a male virgin trembling with purity and innocence on the eve of his wedding is, for the Arab man, the height of absurdity" (Mernissi 1982, 185). In contrast, "young women resort [...] to a demeanour of innocence which they adopt all the more fiercely in proportion to the jealousy and suspicion of their fiancé" (Mernissi 1982, 187). Mernissi attributes these performances to the failure of men in the societies she references "to see sexual pleasure as a relation between equals rather than as a mechanism for establishing hierarchy and enforcing power, domination and therefore dehumanization" (Mernissi 1982, 186)[44].

As I will show in this chapter, the performance of innocence was a strategy employed by my female interlocutors, a strategy necessitated by the Iranian context in which, as established in the previous chapter, the spousal relation is indeed one of inequality. In the next chapter, I will show that some Iranian men's attitudes toward sex are not far from the attitudes Mernissi argues are prevalent among Arab men, thus coming full circle to show that virginity imperatives act as a regime of power that is enforced in a context of sexual inequality.

As for Iran, Sadeghi argues that there is a "gender double standard [consisting of attitudes that] privilege men's desire and sexual agency at women's expense" (Sadeghi 2008, 255). Sadeghi cites a study that concluded that 55 percent of Iranian men believed their partner ought to respond to their sexual needs whether or not she was interested, and 81 percent of Iranian men and women

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[44] Although, due to the work of women activists, many legal changes have occurred in recent years in the societies Mernissi discusses as well as Iran, tradition and cultural values do not necessarily change with the pace of legal codes.

believed that women must be virgins before marriage, but only 15 percent of men (and 60 percent of women) were against premarital sexual relationships for men (Mojgan Kahen 1997, cited in Sadeghi 2008, 255). It bears mentioning that, while such views may not be solely attributable to Islam, they are in line with neo-traditional clerics' views that "man is the slave of his own desire" and that "a woman is better able to control her desire than a man" (Mutahhari 1991, cited in Mir-Hosseini 2004, 7), and with the spirit of the marriage contract described in Chapter 1. Clerics like Mutahhari support their views with a selective reading of Western psychological and sociological studies (Mir-Hosseini 2004, 7).

Finally, a reference to women's own personal understanding of virginity is in order. While there are some girls who view their virginity as "an obstacle to be managed in their relationships with boys" (Sadeghi 2008, 255), the younger generation, whether or not they place it in an Islamic framework, still regards virginity as an indication of women's modesty, to which they accord high ideological value (Sadeghi 2008). It is in this context that the facework of virginity becomes necessary.

Virginity as an Aspect of Face

"Where and when did you first learn about sex?" I asked Mahdieh.
"From my husband, " she replied.

I was quite taken aback. This was a standard question in all my interviews, and Mahdieh was the first (and only) to give this particular answer. She was a bit older (37), as she had been sent to me by another woman I had interviewed, Irsaa, who had been particularly enthusiastic about my research. Naïvely, I had assumed Irsaa had transmitted my interview criteria, and when Mahdieh had contacted me, not asking any questions, I had not bothered to elaborate on my research or the criteria. We met in a quiet public library, and it was only then that I realized my blunder. Since we had both come out all this way, we proceeded with the interview,

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which was the only one I did not audio-record, as Mahdieh preferred that I not do so[45].

So far, when I had asked interviewees (both men and women) where they first learned about sex, the answer had almost always been "from friends" or in a few cases with the women, from an older sister or relative. In a couple of cases, such as that of Narmin, women told me that their mothers had been so ashamed to discuss sexual matters, including the practical issue of dealing with periods, that they had delegated this particular discussion to others. As Narmin indicated, her mother "preferred to erase the statement of the problem"[46], thinking that this would make the issue go away.

Such responses confirmed the idea that among Iranians, at least up until the present generation, it is quite uncommon for parents to discuss sexual matters with their children (Rahbari 2016)[47]. Sexual knowledge is deemed inappropriate for children and its display by unmarried women is considered especially improper. This assertion holds true in the broadest sense, which I illustrate with a personal anecdote: as a young as-yet-unmarried adult, I had, on a family picnic with the Noor Cultural Centre, upon hearing a woman ask "what is an IUD?", enthusiastically volunteered an explanation. My mother had taken me aside and told me that what I had done was *zesht* (ugly/improper), as even if I had the information it was not appropriate for me to flaunt it. Worse, it turned out that I had misheard the question, and the woman was not asking about intra-uterine devices after all. To this day, my father exhibits great discomfort when broaching matters related to sexuality; on one occasion when he deemed it absolutely necessary to explain to me

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[45] As a consequence, the contents of my interview with Mahdieh presented in this chapter may not be an exact reproduction of what she said, but, as with my other interviews, are presented in the most accurate manner possible. In this particular case I could only rely on my quickly jotted-down notes and my memory to refer to in this reproduction, rather than a full audio file.

[46] "*Madaram tarjih midād surat'e mas'ale ro pāk kone*". There is an analogy here to schoolwork. Rather than addressing such problems, her mother "solved" them by "erasing them" and pretending they didn't exist.

[47] I find it necessary to caution the reader that Rahbari's article, published in the *Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Family Studies*, is overly generalizing, but nevertheless speaks to certain societal "truths".

what a hymen looks like and why I ought to have mine checked by a doctor[48], he had become visibly red in the face[49].

I did not hide my surprise in response to Mahdieh's response. I recalled my mother, who is in her fifties, telling me at some point during my childhood or teenage years, that a Pakistani friend of hers (whom I assume is similar in age to my mother, or somewhat younger) had not learned about sex until after she was married. I told Mahdieh about this, adding that "perhaps it's not that unusual".

But at this point, Mahdieh qualified her answer:

"Well, I had tried to look it up on my brother's laptop[50] and I saw some videos. But my first experience was with my husband".

This response was revealing. Perhaps she misinterpreted my question at first: I was asking about knowledge, but not of the carnal, embodied type. But the fact that Mahdieh was quick to respond about "learning about sex from her husband", later clarifying that she had perhaps seen or heard something about it beforehand, together with other aspects of her conversation and manner, led me to believe that she was primarily concerned with maintaining appearance as a good, proper, "pure" woman, one who, despite being from a family that was not particularly religious, wouldn't, to use her own words, "go around naked".

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[48] This came after a quarrel that followed my mother's revealing to my father that I had been using tampons, which she had learned upon searching my schoolbag.

[49] It is important to note, for what it is worth, that my parents moved to Montreal in 1991 and have lived here ever since. Judging from my interviewees' descriptions of their parents' attitudes, I think it is safe to say that my own parents' attitudes have not changed from what was common in Iran for their generation.

[50] I find it interesting that this is not her own laptop, but her brother's, a fact of which she makes sure to inform me. During my trips to Iran and conversations and observations there, I have gathered that young people (especially young men) have access to pornographic videos (and any other material that would be deemed objectionable by the authorities, such as uncensored foreign films) through a "black market" as well as the Internet. High-speed Internet access, while far from ubiquitous, is becoming more and more common in Iran, but youth continue to share files through hard drives and USB sticks. My guess is that Mahdieh is talking about a pornographic video, but it appears from her narration that, while viewing it is innocent enough of a confession, it would not be deemed proper for her to possess such material on a personal device of her own.

Knowing very little about me, Mahdieh, quite recently arrived from Iran, seemed to be using her own judgement of what was proper in order to portray to me (a fellow Iranian in at least some sense) what she deemed to be the desirable appearance. Her display of innocence was even more evident when she asked me (perhaps as an earnest question, I thought, though I chose to remain silent) whether the valuing of virginity was not something that she should transmit to her daughter.

This is an example of facework (Goffman 1955, as cited in Hashemi 2015), which refers to the work individuals need to do in social interactions in order to protect their "face", which is defined as "an approved social image or front" (Hashemi 2015). As Hashemi argues in her essay on underprivileged youth in two cities in Iran, *purity* is an important aspect of face. Hashemi's description of purity encompasses what she calls "sexual cleanliness". Hashemi, whose research focuses on class mobility, doesn't elaborate on the latter term, but I assume that she is catching on the same idea I express when I discuss the moral dimensions of virginity.

Virginity as Performative

The facework engaged in by Mahdieh requires a performance on her part. This is not to say that I doubt her claims, but that she intentionally negotiates the manner in which she chooses to depict herself. Other female research participants also "performed" virginity whether or not they engaged in pre-marital sex. Even in the particular case of Shirin, who had had sexual relations, she made an interesting effort at claiming this category/label:

Me: Do you see yourself as a virgin?
Shirin: Well, from the perspective of reality or from the perspective of way of thinking?
Me: (laughing) See…

Shirin: Meaning do you mean [to ask] if I am a virgin or … ? See because the definition is … it depends on the person's definition. If you say it's something physical, well then […]

Regarding *nejābat* (chastity/purity). I don't like fooling around. I feel… I don't feel, I am sure. Well I listen to psychological things a lot. The human spirit is not something that you want to tamper with.

For example that I be with three people at the same time, and then I trick them; at noon I sleep with one person and… I'm sure this is not good for my spirit. And these things are not going to make my spirit happy.

I see myself as *najib* from this perspective because I don't fool around. Meaning I haven't had sex for a long time. And then with whoever I was, I tried to be with them, meaning it was not that I always want to be with a few people at once or to quickly switch between people. Not at all. And then whenever I am with someone I insist that they stay stay stay. And then when I come out for a long time nobody <u>touch</u>es me. No-one. I don't like it.

Me: So… sorry… so you have had sex.

Shirin: And that, [the same as] the number of the fingers of a hand.

In this interview excerpt, Shirin makes it clear that despite being neither sexually inexperienced nor physically "virgin" (she recounted to me how her hymen was broken manually without her consent by a man she was seeing at the time) she doesn't "sleep around". In other words, she is not a whore. A common trope regarding virginity is the virgin/whore dichotomy, discussed by Naber (2006) in an Arab-American context and also touched on by Mahdavi (2009). The dichotomy is useful in showing why it is important to perform virginity: according to this trope, which is present in many societies that value female virginity, one is either a virgin or a whore, the latter being subject to strong social stigma. Thus, not fully meeting the "virginity checklist"[51] may necessitate an attempt to emphasize a distinction from the category of "whore".

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[51] I thank Tristan Biehn for this term.

The many possible definitions and deployments of the concept of virginity lead me to posit virginity as performative, a category that is produced and reproduced through its very performance. Like water trickling over rocks and carving its path until a riverbed is formed, virginity imperatives, once set in place, tend to stay on course. It is up to a brave few to carve new channels and re-route the course of the river.

Control and Co-optation: Navigating the Virginity Imperative

We have seen that virginity is a constraining factor on women's lives. It is expected and therefore necessary. As a constraining factor we may expect it to be met with some resistance. But, like marriage and education as addressed in the previous chapter, we see that not only do many women not resist virginity, but they actively deploy it. This utilitarian approach resounds well with Afary's depiction of women under the Qajar period (1785-1925 A.D.) :

"Women were largely disenfranchised and lived under the authority of men [...] There was a difference between what *fiqh* or even custom required, and the lived experience of women. Within [existing] constraints, women worked ceaselessly to carve out spaces for themselves and to turn to their advantage the very constraints imposed upon them. In short, they worked to become agents of their own lives" (Afary 2009, 19-20).

Here again we see the theme of structure and agency. Women's agency is evident not only in their attitudinal performance of virginity, but also in their performance of its physical aspect. "Tricks" to navigate the physical aspect of virginity imperatives have probably existed as long as the institution itself has been in place. In her discussion of "Virginity and Patriarchy", which focuses on Morocco but generalizes to Arab and Mediterranean societies as well, Mernissi cites the sprinkling of chicken blood on the underpants of "so-called virgins", which were to be displayed after the wedding night (Mernissi 1982,188). Afary (2009, 29)

highlights several options available to girls who lost their virginity before marriage in late nineteenth century Iran, which included hymen reconstruction surgery.

Today, young Iranian women may deploy various strategies, besides the obvious abstention from sexual intercourse, in order to preserve their physical virginity. For example, they may avoid the use of tampons, and avoiding certain sports that are considered potentially damaging to the hymen, such as horseback riding. One of the women I interviewed described her experience at a water park in Iran where unmarried women were given the option of using a device that would supposedly protect their hymen from the water pressure when using the water slide. She and her friends opted not to use the device, but some of them later became concerned and checked each other in the bathroom.

Those women who chose to engage in sexual relations may opt to perform non-vaginal sexual acts, such as anal intercourse, in order to preserve their hymen for marriage (Sadeghi 2009, 255; Kaivanara 2015). One of my male interviewees, Ali, also attested to his fact. Mahdavi found that some young women engaged in same-sex relations for the same reason (Mahdavi 2012), and Afary cites the example of a woman who explained that, in the university environment of mid-1980s Tehran, "[w]ith a woman you felt no matter what you did, you could not lose your virginity" (Afary 2009, 288). While these techniques all evidence creativity in manoeuvering virginity imperatives, they tend to re-entrench gendered structures of inequality through the performance of appropriate gender roles in which unmarried women are constructed as necessarily virginal. Indeed, the virgin/whore dichotomy I mentioned above can be considered one manifestation of a "differential between the human and the less-than-human" (Butler 2014, 2), or, if that argument seems extreme (though I maintain it to be the case and will illustrate with further examples in the next chapter), at least of the "marriageable and the less-than-marriageable", whereby, "the very terms that confer 'humanness' on some individuals are those that deprive certain other individuals of the possibility of achieving that status" (Butler 2014, 2).

Even if the hymen is broken, there is a solution, at least, "for those with higher economic and modern social capital" (Sadeghi 2008, 255; see also Mernissi

1982). Hymenoplasty, or hymen reconstruction surgery, which is today secretly practiced in Iran as in other countries where virginity is highly valued, is the final option when all else fails. But once again, the practice of hymenoplasty, like the precautions against damage to the hymen cited above, re-entrenches the virginity requirement. For Mernissi, "artificial virginity is not only degrading for the woman who buys it, but also for the man who penetrates her and for the couple which is created, a couple locked forever in deception" (Mernissi 1982, 184). Kaivanara (2015) has gathered that some sexually active unmarried Iranian women reject the procedure on these grounds. On the other hand, Kaivanara (2015) has suggested that the prevalence of hymenoplasty undermines the emphasis on virginal brides, as it renders impossible the distinguishing of "true" virgins from "fake" ones (Kaivanara 2015). Indeed, the men I interviewed were well aware of this strategy, but nevertheless, I got the impression from several that they nevertheless held female virginity in high esteem, a fact on which I will elaborate in the next chapter. I have to assume that these men had somehow convinced themselves that, despite the existence, even prevalence, of means of "faking" virginity, *they themselves* would not fall victim to such "tricks".

The phenomenon of hymenoplasty is important as it forcefully brings into question the entire premise of virginity tests (here I refer both to the "test" on the wedding night and on medical examinations intended to shame women arrested for political reasons[52]. If such tests do not distinguish modesty, nor even sexual abstinence, as they are intended, what do they reveal? Apparently, only an inordinate pressure on women to perform to a questionable ideal, an ideal which many of them nevertheless perform, even embrace. But here we have a problem.

Notwithstanding the practicality of the deployment of virginity by certain women who, as I have mentioned, are in fact working within the constraints given to them, my research also made clear that some women were in fact subject to genuine harm as a consequence of the virginity imperatives. One such woman was Sara, who was briefly introduced in the first chapter.

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[52] See Eltahawy (2015) for examples of politically motivated "virginity testing" in the Arab context and Mahdavi (2009) for examples in the Iranian context.

Sara's Story

        I met Sara in a café on Sherbrooke street on a warm day in July. I already knew her through university circles, but I was nervous: I was late, and she had another engagement afterwards. The interview took place after she was done her work for the day, and I had failed to consider the fact that it was rush hour. I had attempted to modify my bus route to make sure I got there on time, and had frantically texted her on the way. She had kindly changed the meeting location from her office to this café, which was closer to the metro station I would be arriving from.

        Not only was I nervous because I was late, but also because I had great respect for Sara. Educated and eloquent, I admired her for her strong work ethic and passion for research. She was everything I wished to be. When I arrived at the café, she waved from an open window, poised as usual. I noticed that we had both cut our hair short since we had last seen each other. But this wasn't our only similarity. As the interview would reveal, Sara's story embodied everything that made me passionate about the topic of virginity. In her I saw a reflection of myself. Sara's position as a fellow researcher made her an invaluable interlocutor: as she told me, she knew what I was looking for and was happy to tell me her story.

        Sara was pulled out of high school when her parents found out she had a boyfriend. Her parents did not allow her to have a telephone in her room (despite the fact that her brother did), subjected her to virginity tests, and tried to marry her to a relative:

> "I had a boyfriend when I was in high school. My family found out. Then they took me out of school for a long time. On and off. They wouldn't let me properly go to school. And with a thousand and one punishments, physical, emotional, all types. It was terrifying. [...] My boyfriend was a university student in another city. It was limited to telephone. When he came we would see each other, but it was mostly long-distance. And then, when I was in the third year of high school and by that time they knew I had a boyfriend, there was beating and all that.

[...] When I was 16 or 17 and they found out I had a boyfriend, my mother picked me up and took me to a gynaecologist, so that she could perform a virginity examination. It was very scary. There was always so much talk about virginity everywhere… a girl shouldn't ride a bicycle, a girl shouldn't ride a horse, she shouldn't fall on the ground… this talk had affected me so that even though I knew I was a virgin, I was so scared I was about to faint." From that time they fell into the idea that "well, let's marry her off" (*shoharesh bedim*). And I was very studious. I was always either the top of the class or the second. I had a very high average above 19[53].

They arranged for someone to come. It was one of their friends who came for *khastegari*. And because I knew at that time—I was 17 or 18—I knew that this type, in general, who take their son's hand and go to the *khastegari* of a 17-year-old-girl, and with attention to the fact that my paternal aunt, who was very traditional, had introduced them, I knew this person was not my type. I showed up in a very untraditional style and tried to behave in a way that they wouldn't like me. But the opposite happened in fact. But then I stood my ground and said no. [...] After I was accepted in university, that boyfriend of mine came [as a *khastegar*] with his father, but my family did not accept.

A few years later, at twenty-one, realizing that her parents wouldn't allow her to continue living in Tehran after her studies, Sara decided to marry a man whom she had met herself. Ten years her senior and having himself had a divorced woman as a girlfriend, he subjected her to the same degrading virginity tests that her family had once forced her to undergo.

He was around thirty-one or so, and had been friends with a divorced girl, and would have sex with her. And he would tell me all about it. On the day when we were supposed to say our wedding vows (*aghd*), he, without having told me anything in advance, had gone himself and gotten an

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[53] In Iran grades are given out of 20 at all levels of schooling.

appointment with a gynaecologist. So that a few hours before we would do *aghd,* he would take me there. He told me that we were going to buy shoes. I told him I didn't want to, I had shoes, but he insisted. In the car he told me "I don't want to live my entire life in doubt". From there I knew for sure that I couldn't live with him. I had stood up in the face of such things. And I knew that this person was not for me. But I couldn't do anything. Because if I said no, it would be messed up (*be ham mikhord*)*.* And everyone was in our house, my dad, my uncle, the whole family. I was thinking about what answer I would give to my dad. They would say "you must not be a virgin that you didn't accept to have the test". I had no road forward and no back road back (*Na rahe pish dashtam na rahe pas dashtam*). [...]

Then when we came home, I was really upset. Meaning it was a deep hit for me. I was deeply upset about this issue. I came and told my mother with an air of sadness, that he had done this kind of thing (*ye hamchin kari kard*). My mother became so happy. She ran and got the letter to show it to my dad. She said, "yes, it is tradition (*rasm*), we have to do this".

Sara divorced her husband four years later, continued pursuing her studies, and moved to Canada. She rightfully felt that the restrictions and coerced virginity testing that her parents, and later her fiancé, had forced her to undergo, were an affront to her dignity. But to not undergo the testing would have meant untold shame, and would disrupt her plans to create the life she wanted. Here, once again, we have a woman navigating difficult waters by acceding to circumstances in order to create a liveable life. In this case, however, it is exceptionally clear that the said circumstances are rather harsh. To borrow from Butler, many aspects of these women's lives are "a practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint" (Butler 2004, 1), but it must at the same time be understood that these constraints, along with "the terms by which we are recognized as human", are "socially articulated and changeable" (Butler 2004, 2).

The performance of virginity ends at a critical juncture in the lives of young women, that rite of passage into adulthood: marriage. It is usually on the wedding

night that the performance reaches its grand finale. Here I will take a step back and discuss what I call "hymeneal blood ritual" in various contexts.

No Hymen? No Diamond:[54] The consequences of failed performance

I have argued that women employ the performance of virginity as a tactic in face-saving. This performance is practical and necessary in situations where economic wellbeing and social inclusion depend on one's ability to secure a "good" marriage. As Shirin told me: "Iranian [men], even if they are 100 times *roshanfekr* (intellectual/enlightened) at the end they want to say that you were not a virgin." Shirin's comment reminds one of the character Emad in Asghar Farhadi's internationally acclaimed film, *The Salesman.* Despite his apparently open-minded, intellectual worldview, he is unable to communicate with his wife, Rana, regarding the driving incident of the film, in which, the viewer must assume, she suffered forcible rape or attempted rape. Instead of helping his wife cope with her pain and suffering following the incident, Emad's first concern was to reclaim his honour through revenge. Shirin's comment and the film's plot both indicate an obsession of "even enlightened Iranian men" with the sexual exclusivity and purity of their wives, something we will see further evidenced by the interviews with men I discuss in the third chapter. The fact that a man might use the comment "you weren't a virgin" to score points in an argument is indicative of a not-so-subtle power-dynamic in which women are always subject to scrutiny of their sexuality. A non-virgin is hardly worth considering, hardly human, and it is for this reason that women must work so hard to ensure that they are perceived as virgins.

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[54] This phrase is the name of a (most likely US-based) facebook group of "men's rights activists", which goes to show that virginity imperatives exist in geographically, culturally and historically diverse locations. Source: Emily Hodgkin. "'No hymen, no diamond': Male activist Facebook group mocked for demanding that women are virgins before they get married." Daily Mail Online. September 30, 2015. Accessed July 27, 2017. http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3252018/No-hymen-no-diamond-Male-activist-Facebook-group-mocked-demanding-women-virgins-married.html.

There is perhaps no time in a woman's life that this work is so important than on the eve of her marriage, as her future is determined by whether the groom and his family are convinced by the performance.

The Violence of Virginity: The Cat Must Be Killed at the Entrance to the Wedding Chamber

The breaking of the hymen is a rite of significance in many societies, past and present.[55] In cultural contexts it has become a ritual marked by the collection of hymeneal blood on white fabric, a handkerchief or sheet, even the woman's underwear (Mernissi 1982), depending on local custom. The fabric is then displayed to the woman's in-laws. Among Armenians, this is called the "Red Apple" tradition, because if a red bloodspot is found on the bedsheet, a tray of red apples will be taken by married women relatives of the groom to the home of the bride's parents (Poghosyan, 2011).

The process of collecting blood from the young woman on the night of first conjugal union was mentioned to me by several of my interlocutors as *hejleh,* and by one person, as *zafāf.* In my Internet searches aiming to learn more about this subject and these particular terms, I found very little. It appears that these terms are somewhat interchangeable (as indicated by an online dictionary)[56] but *hejleh* refers primarily to what has been translated in English as the "bridal chamber", which seems to be where the bride and groom went to consummate their marriage, and *zafāf* is a term of Arabic origin referring to the wedding night, during which penetrative sex is expected to occur.

The ritual is intended to prove the young woman's virginity and her new husband's virility (Afary 2009, 29), almost as if the ritual is one of war and conquest and the nuptial quarters the battlefield. Fatima Mernissi argues that, for societies in

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[55] An incomplete list of discussions of hymeneal blood rituals includes Mernissi (1982) for Morocco, Labidi (2008) for Tunisia, Heyat (2002) for Azerbaijan, Renne (1996) for the Ekiti Yoruba in Nigeria, and Afary (2009) for Iran. Renne also acknowledges the up "until relatively recently … taken for granted" (19) status of the hymen as synonymous with virginity in the US.

[56] "Hejle" (Dictionary Online). Accessed June 22, 2017. http://dictionary.abadis.ir/fatofa/%D8%AD%D8%AC%D9%84%D9%87/.

which this ritual is practiced, sex is seen as "an act of destruction and degradation" (Mernissi 1982).

In my searches for the meaning of the term *hejle* I came across the proverb "*Gorbe ro bayad dame hejle kosht*" (The cat must be killed at the entrance to the bridal chamber). If we ignore the violence inflicted on the cat, and take the expression for its figurative meaning, something along the lines of, "things must be nipped in the bud", it seems innocent enough. Interestingly, according to commentators on a web forum[57] where I found this proverb discussed, it is in fact usually used in reference to shutting down gossiping or complaining voices on the occasion of a wedding. This evokes also the symbolic "shutting-up" of naysayers by sewing several stitches into the fabric that is held over the heads of the bride and groom as sugar is ground over it.[58] But what about the origin of the phrase? According to one commentator, Flying Solo, who cites "gems from [their] Gramma", the story goes as follows. The bride and groom enter the *hejle* (bridal chamber, the site of hymen-breaking) to consummate their marriage, but there is a cat by the entryway that is very noisy and being a nuisance. The groom picks up the cat and wrings its neck, demonstrating his strength and showing the bride what he is capable of, and thus what fate may befall her if she does not behave. This somewhat shocking account suggests that the ritual of *hejle* is one of violence, and the marriage that follows is one based on fundamentally unequal relations.

Fieldwork Encounters with Virginity Ritual

What is the significance of this practice today? Among my interlocutors, it seems to have been largely abandoned. Those who described it to me did so almost as a curious tale worth recounting. Mahdieh, whose apparent concern with maintaining proper appearances I described above, mentioned having been given a handkerchief by her mother to use on her wedding night to wipe her genital area.

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[57] "Hejleh." Iranian.com. Accessed June 22, 2017. https://iranian.com/main/2009/feb/hejleh.html.

[58] Eduljee, K. E. "Zoroastrian Wedding Customs." Zoroastrian Heritage . Accessed June 22, 2017. http://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/marriage/iranian/page2.htm.
Although this page describes these practices as zoroastrian, many of these ritual elements are also present in Iranian Muslim weddings (and I would assume in the weddings of Iranians of other faiths).

Mahdieh's husband had dissuaded her from doing this, telling her it was an "ugly" (*zesht*) practice. At least a couple of other women, however, told me about a more recent version of the enactment of this practice, the use of "virginity certificates" obtained from gynaecologists or midwives in order to prove virginity prior to marriage. Sometimes this is done pre-emptively by the parents as a sort of insurance. In the biblical passage I quoted earlier, it was up to the father to defend his daughter in the face of the accusation of not being a virgin. The same principle applies here.

It goes without saying that, in the case of women who, for whatever reason, either do not bleed when they are expected to (upon first sexual intercourse with their new husband), or who have, whatever the cause, already broken their hymen, both forms of "proving virginity" can be frightening and risky. Sara's narrative is a testament to this fact. Sara is a very strong woman who stood up for what she believed was just. But for other women, escaping this practice of humiliation and degradation may be much more difficult.

For women whose hymens have broken beforehand, there is the option of hymen repair. For Shirin, this was a possible option. She mentioned a friend who had had the surgery and told her new boyfriend that she was a virgin. However, Shirin's friend had not bled when she first had sex with this boyfriend. She had become "*zāye*" (shamed/embarrassed) and was worried that the same thing would happen when she eventually got married. She had gone back to the doctor who had performed the surgery, who told her the suture had come loose. For this reason, Shirin (who had studied a health-related field) told me, doctors recommended only performing such surgeries a few months before marriage, not earlier. However, there is reason to be sceptical about the utility of such surgeries. A study undertaken in Amsterdam, Netherlands, that followed and counselled women seeking hymen reconstruction, found that 17 out of 19 women who went through with the surgery (out of 82 women initially seeking it) "reported no blood loss at first marital intercourse" (Moorst et al. 2012). With a "failure" rate of nearly 90%, one wonders whether women who receive these surgeries actually benefit from them, or whether they suffer silently the abuses of husbands who, expecting the blood signature of the

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virginity contract, remain forever suspicious of whether their wives had remained faithful to its terms.

As I have mentioned earlier, other means by which one may attempt to avert exposure as a non-virgin have existed for a long time. Afary (2009) mentions several nineteenth-century practices. In the "modern version" of the virginity ritual doctors may be sympathetic and even lie in favour of the young woman in order to avert the possibility of harm to her (Mahdavi 2009), but women undergoing these procedures still experience substantial fear and risk. Some may perceive the method of consulting a doctor as "more accurate" (given anatomical variation and the fact that the necessity of blood loss upon first vaginal penetration is, frankly, a myth), but this method represents a continuation of the fetishization of the hymen, appropriation of women's bodies and rendering them subject to public scrutiny, and reduction of women's worth to a culturally constructed (read: fictitious) equation of the intact hymen with purity. This model shames and endangers women who fail to [adequately] perform virginity.

In the Turkish film *Mustang*, a young woman (one of five orphaned sisters subjected to the tyranny of an uncle who decides, once it has been found that they have gone swimming with several boys from their school, that they should be carefully guarded at home and quickly married off) does not bleed on her wedding night. After scrambling and failing to find a spot of blood on the bedsheet, her husband (asking her what he should do, to which she responds apathetically), goes empty-handed to his female relatives. These in-laws of the bride now consult a doctor. During the private examination, the (male) doctor tells the young woman that her hymen is thick and therefore difficult to break, and may break later during sex or during childbirth. He asks her why she had claimed upon entry to the hospital that she had "slept with all the men in the world". She responds, "What difference does it make? I might as well have". The young woman is alluding to how, given the suspicion surrounding her failure to bleed, by the logic of the virgin/whore dichotomy, up until the point where the doctor clears her status as "virgin", she is being classified as "whore". It doesn't matter what she did or did not do, for she is

perceived as having committed an unforgiveable transgression that brings untold shame on her and her family.

Discussion of Gender Violence in the Broader Iranian Community

The devaluation of women inherent in the ritualization and euphemizing of the act of hymen-breaking and the categorizing work of the virgin/whore dichotomy leads to further structural violences. In Asghar Farhadi's film, *The Salesman*, an older man (with an adult daughter who is getting married), takes an open door and a woman in a shower as an invitation. Even after realizing the woman, Rana, is not whom he expected (Ahoo, a sex-worker of whom he was a regular client), he takes advantage of the situation, citing "*vasvase shodam*" (I was tempted) as his sole excuse when he is finally found and reprimanded by the woman's husband, Emad. The result of his temptation is the violence done to Rana, whose crimson blood, the neighbours told Emad, had covered her pale body, the white-glazed bathtub and marble tiles. Expecting her husband home at any moment to their new apartment, Rana had left the door open while she showered, an act which, perhaps, in the mind of her attacker, had defined her as a woman of loose morals, deserving of rape.

In a discussion of the film organized by CafeLitt, an Iranian organization in Montreal that invites speakers to discuss various literary and scholarly topics, to my dismay I heard a woman claiming that "cheating" (as displayed by the elderly man in the film) was somehow more natural to men. In a way her argument justified or excused the act as somehow natural, despite other discussants' protests that it was hard to believe that this character, who also had a heart condition, could commit such an act. Thankfully, the workshop organizer and presenter, both men, were of the opinion that the film revealed the patriarchal privilege accorded to men in Iranian society. The presenter, an Iranian film critic, claimed that the skill of Farhadi was in opening up for discussion such topics, rarely discussed by Iranians. I hope my research does likewise.

Chapter 3: Moving Towards a "Modern" Marriage: Men's Desires and the Requisite Changes

Me: What do you think women look for in a man?
Mehran (31): Three things, in this order: A man᾽s responsibility and his ability to take care of the woman, his love of her, and money.
[⋯]
Me: What about men?
Mehran: I think beauty and charm is their priority.

Look, we have something called marriage, and we have something called love. These two things are very different. Marriage is pretty much a bartering transaction (mo`āmele-ye payapayi). –Ali, 31.

Throughout the time I spent working on data analysis, thinking about my findings, and presenting at conferences, I was repeatedly asked, "but what did the men say?" I continually put off the task of revisiting my interviews with men, until one day one of my women interlocutors presented to me a dilemma she was having. Maryam had been a university acquaintance beforehand and would ask me about my research whenever I ran into her. We had gotten together for lunch and were having an extended conversation covering various topics of mutual concern, including our respective job prospects and what we needed to do to succeed in the job-hunting process, as well as relationship issues. Maryam had been with her Iranian boyfriend for two years, and was hoping to get married. She felt that in her current situation, she was unrooted, floating and uncertain of her future (similar to women described by Tremayne (2006)). She was still a virgin, but her boyfriend had suggested that it would be ok if they had sex. Maryam pressed me several times during our conversation to tell her, based on my own findings, whether it was "actually true" that Iranian men valued virginity. I told her about the various limitations of my own research, and what I had read in the literature (in particular, I discussed some findings from Mahdavi's 2009 book *Passionate Uprisings,* which I had just finished), but was reluctant to give her any personal advice, not knowing how to tactfully approach the issue. Maryam remained unsatisfied, telling me that she felt

perhaps men (like her boyfriend) told their girlfriends that premarital sex would be ok only "to get what they wanted". "Yes, that is sometimes the case." I replied.

After Maryam left I felt uncomfortable with the fact that I had been unable to help her. A few aspects of our conversation left me particularly puzzled. She was 30 years old, and had been with her boyfriend for two years. Did she not feel secure enough in her relationship to be able to assess her boyfriend's intentions? Was sex not also something that *she* wanted? It was apparently not something she felt comfortable engaging in—even with someone who, despite ups and downs, seemed, from what she told me, to love her—at least, not until she had secured something she clearly *did* want: marriage. It seemed as if Maryam, like so many other women, was using her virginity as a bargaining chip in the lottery of marriage, and felt that without it, she would be at a disadvantage.

I reflected on Maryam's lack of expression of sexual desire. In our interview, she had told me she felt Iranian boys were interested in women who were virgins but "in bed, were like porn stars", and that they wanted to empty out all their sexual *oqde* (complex, obsession[59]), on these poor women. I had noted this, but not asked Maryam whether girls did not have fetishes as well. Maryam's seeming disinterest in an exploratory sexuality was in fact prevalent among the women I talked to: another woman told me she had gone to a psychologist to discuss her issues with being unable to or uncomfortable in starting relationships (even friendships) with men if she was not certain of their motivations or end goal. Yet another, who had told me stories about how the other young women in her dormitory in Iran would masturbate, told me that she did not understand why they would do that "when there were so many willing boys around". "Well, that has its own complications", I replied. When I mentioned "sexual need" (*niāz-e-jensi*) she told me that perhaps she had a low libido but that this concept was not something she had ever understood. Even Shirin had claimed that she had "*sardi-e-jensi*" (was sexually "cold").

Women's lack of discussion of, or claims of lack of understanding of or interest in sex was in stark contrast to the discussions of some of the men I interviewed. I had been particularly uncomfortable beginning my interviews with men, and was surprised at how candidly some of them spoke to me about issues that would normally be considered taboo by Iranian social norms, especially if discussed between members of opposite sexes. This

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[59] Maryam seemed to be discussing sexual fetishes.

was the case with Ali, who repeatedly invoked male (but not female) sexual desire as the reason behind many marriages.

Ali: Love, Money and Marriage

Ali, the first man I interviewed, was a thirty-one year-old student who had arrived in Canada a year before, but had also spent some time in Europe. Ali told me that he was from a small town where people were very religious and traditional, but had spent some portion of his life living in dormitories while studying in Tehran. My entire interview with Ali seemed to revolve around a major conflict in Ali's personal life, which concerned the ideal of romantic love (which conflicted with *sonnati* societal norms), the heavy reality of the economic demands of marriage (for men in particular, but also for women who had to collect the goods for their *jahizieh*) as well as the problems caused by the inability to fulfil one's sexual needs. "It's very rare, in our religious society, that you marry someone you love," he had asserted.

Ali had, in his second year of university, fallen in love. Unable to express his interest directly to the woman in question for fear of the embarrassing consequence of gossip among his peers, he had e-mailed her, and experienced rejection. He told me that "this story continued for 11 years" and that he suffered depression as a result. He blamed "the societal conditions" for many of the woes of youth, as he saw them, but when pressed, seemed unable to propose alternatives. Ali seemed unable to reconcile strict religious rules of gender segregation with the requisites of romantic love. He also had come to realize the economic demands that Iranian marriage norms placed on young men, who had to wait years to complete their studies and find a suitable job in order to be considered eligible for marriage. A family would not allow their daughter to marry a jobless man, he asserted. Ali continued to insist that love could solve all problems, but told me that women seemed not to recognize such love. He gave the example of the beloved woman of a friend of his, who had married another (wealthier) man while the former was pursuing his studies in order to later get a job and ask for her hand. This friend, feeling that God had not helped him, had, in retaliation, become a heavy consumer of pornography.

Like many of my interviewees, Ali told me Iranian marriages were transactional, and criticized this state of affairs. His focus on passionate romantic love, was, however, unusual. Most interviewees told me love was all about hormones, and stated that the companionate love that followed the hormone-charged passionate phase was more important than the former. Some explained that it was important to use one's reason in choosing a mate.

Throughout the interview, I made attempts to hinge onto some of Ali's criticisms of society as a starting point for further critical discussion, but he would inevitably thwart my attempts by explaining the issues away as due to some other factor, such as the issue of men's marriage crises being due to Iran's poor economic situation, and not, apparently, due to a need for change in customs that had failed to adapt to the times. Religion was apparently never to blame. In a few instances Ali had seemed almost to support gender equality, telling me that the issue of staggeringly high *mahriyeh* demands was due to the fact that women didn't have many rights in Iranian society. He also believed that it was a problem that it was impossible to tell how many sexual relationships a man had had, but that for a woman, whether she had had sexual experience was evident. He told me about a friend of his whose fiancée had had an affair in his absence of a year and a half, and when she told him "she didn't have a hymen", he had divorced her[60]. But I was disappointed, as although he touched upon these many issues faced by women, he didn't go any further, and through most of the conversation seemed only to see men's issues as he had experienced them and not to concern himself with how the women he spoke of may feel.

 Ali had mentioned, early in our interview, that he had come from a conservative religious background and that he used to be religious, but had (for a time) turned his back on religion. Adding to this the fact that he was not fasting (I met him in the daytime during Ramadan, and he offered me tea of which he also partook), I had assumed he was no longer religious. I was therefore somewhat taken aback when he messaged me some time after our interview, asking if I knew any *hijabi* young women that I could introduce to him to meet with the intent of marriage. I suggested he attend one of the local Iranian mosques and try to meet someone there, and gave him the addresses.

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[60] They had performed and "aghd" ceremony but not an "aroosi", so they were married but had not consummated the marriage.

I had been unable to decipher Ali, but he was nevertheless a good informant. As my first male interviewee, he had opened a window into a world I was wholly unfamiliar with. He had also been the first to tell me about the practice of *hejle* and give me that word for it. His failure to follow through on his criticisms, however, left me perplexed.

Perhaps Ali was more jaded than critical: his inability to marry the woman with whom he had fallen in love had resulted in his finding fault with the traditional system of marriage and courtship but not with many of its underlying premises. He now understood that as a man of little means, he would not have been able to adequately financially support that woman, who enjoyed a more comfortable socio-economic position. He also told me that he had backed off when someone told him that, due to the fact that he was shorter than the woman he was interested in, she would have been terribly embarrassed just standing next to him. Nevertheless, he claimed that in love, a couple would be able to put up with anything. After my many interviews with women and further thinking on the unequal gender relations in Iran, I would put to Ali the following question: "How can there be love between men and women when economic and sexual inequalities separate them?"

The difference in economic opportunities available to men and women in Iran is something I have touched upon in the first chapter. The idealization of hypergyny and gender roles within marriage, with men being the de facto breadwinners, aggravates inequality within marriage. Many of my women interlocutors, despite working or intending to work in their field of study, seemed to assent to this situation. Even Sara, a self-proclaimed feminist, not only tolerated large age differences between herself and her partners, but sought them, telling me she couldn't accept anything less than a large age gap (her current partner was also about ten years older than herself) because younger men were too immature. At least one man, however, wasn't comfortable with large age differences. Nevertheless, our discussion, like the one I had with Ali, strikingly revealed the continued inequalities in men's and women's sexual lives.

Mehran: Mixing the Old and the New

I met Mehran, a 31-year old student who had been in Canada for about five years, at an Iranian-owned café in downtown Montreal. It was my first time there, and I found

the space cozy and charming. It was not more charming than Mehran himself, however, who was handsome and had a friendly demeanour. Mehran seemed to me to be quite the open-minded, caring, thoughtful young man. My interview with him stands in sharp contrast with the interviews with women I present in the first chapter, revealing the very different experiences of young Iranian girls and boys growing up, as well as their different concerns upon reaching young adulthood and beginning to form relationships. At the same time, Mehran's account reveals his attempts at reconciling different systems of courtship in a changing and interconnected world. In his words, many Iranian couples nowadays use a mix of *sonnati* and *moderne* practices in their courtships, and he himself seems to have vacillated between the two. Mehran's approach, like that of many of my interviewees, reveals the messiness of contemporary Iranian discourse on marriage. As discussions in the foregoing chapters have also suggested, the binaries of *love marriage* versus *arranged marriage* or *marriage of convenience,* of *Eastern* versus *Western*, and of *traditional* versus *modern*, do not do justice to the complexity of actual practice. Another point that rings true here is one I made in the introduction, inspired by Adelkhah (2016), is that it is misleading and inaccurate to consider Iranian populations in the home country as separate from those living abroad: the ease of travel and the possibility of marriage and other material and cultural transfers across transnational borders renders a strict distinction inaccurate.

Mehran told me he was born in a village in central Iran, the last of seven siblings. At the age of 12 he went to Tehran and became independent. "It was hard but it took some time and I got used to it", he told me. Partly because he was the youngest and partly because he had become independent early on, he told me, his family had not pressured him to marry (although his sister occasionally worried about him being alone) and did not attempt to make decisions for him, trusting him to take care of his own affairs. A couple of years after arriving in Canada in 2011, he had decided it was time for him to marry.

Me: Have you ever done *khastegari*?

Mehran: Yes I have.

Me: What about having girlfriends?

Mehran: Ummmm… I have had girlfriends. Yes. I've had them in Iran and here […]. But none of my girlfriends were serious. I don't know why but [the relationship] would always end quickly.

Me: They were not serious or …?

Mehran: Usually my choices for girlfriends were not [made] with thought. Or not with me thinking how similar I am to this person. Maybe it was mostly about sexual issues. […] And when [the relationship] went forward a little, then I would realize that from a [manner of] thinking perspective and from an *alāghe* (love, interest) perspective they don't match.

Me: Continuing on this topic […], do you feel for example, I've heard some things regarding what in Iran, girls are after and what boys are after. Do you think the girls for example liked, their intention, did they like themselves…

Mehran: They themselves had the intention of marriage?

Me: Did they themselves have the intention of marriage?

Me: Umm… the Iranian [girl]friends I had yes you would see this in them that they like to marry and, meaning, it wasn't like this, that I say well [she] doesn't want it or doesn't like to. For all of them it was like this that they liked [to marry]. Now maybe they didn't say it directly but they would talk about it. Either about their future or their marriage. It was clear that it was really important and they like to.

Me: Ok. And then *khāstegāri* you said was separate from this?

Mehran: That I went in Iran. I pretty much didn't have anyone here. And I didn't have any candidates (*gozine).* Then, when I went to Iran I wanted to practice (*ejra*) that *sonnati* way. That the family finds someone for me that they feel is appropriate and we go *khāstegāri.* I had picked two or three people and I had given them the responsibility (*beheshun seporde budam).* They had picked a few [girls]. I remember the first one, before we went to their home, I had told the family I'd like to meet the girl in a café or something to see if I even like her. I saw that no, they don't like such a thing to happen […]. With the second one it was a similar story. When I was supposed to go, then the woman I had designated to find me the girl saw me and told me no, you don't match. For those two options

we ended up being unable to go. We went for the third option. We went and it was a very young girl[61]. I had insisted that they let us go out and they had not allowed it. I said maybe everyone is like this and there's no choice, we have to go. It was like the past (*ghadim*). [They told us] you go for an hour in the room and talk to the lady.

Me: It's interesting but I have a strange feeling about that[62].

Mehran: And it was the first time I was seeing her with the two families. I didn't even know who is who (because she had two sisters) until they told us to go in the room. After half an hour, I went and saw […] I said what kind of practice was this? How was it in the past? Is it possible in ten minutes, in half an hour, to get to know someone? I saw I can't think of anything [to say]. How wrong is this practice! I realized that this way is a mistake. Even though maybe she was a good girl, it was a good family […] And sometimes I feel maybe it's a right way, I don't know. But then when we arrived, then I saw that no, it's not a right way […] I decided not to think about it [the possibility of this union].

[…]

Me: Why did you choose to [go] this traditional way?

Mehran: There were two reasons. One reason was that we didn't know anyone, and neither did I have a friend.

Mehran went on to explain that some people are shy and have trouble in the system "here" (in Canada). He gives the example of a Mexican friend who, upon hearing about the *khāstegāri* system from Mehran, expressed interest in going to Iran to get a wife, as he has trouble even finding a date in Canada. He told me about how Iranian courtships nowadays are a combination of modernity and tradition, and that families

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[61] Later in the interview Mehran tells me that she was around 20 and he was around 30 and it was mainly the age difference that he was uncomfortable with (it was not that the girl was too young in the absolute sense): "If you ask men, they really like the girl to be younger. I personally ag… I like her to be younger than me. I prefer for her to be younger than me. But I think than ten years is a lot. It's important for me in a thinking perspective…".

[62] I am referring here to my surprise that such a situation is possible. As I explained to Mehran later in the interview, I had been taught that unrelated men and women could not be alone in a room together. Mehran explained to me that this was a special case because everyone is waiting outside to hear the young people's decision (of whether to pursue the courtship, which will in later stages involve negotiations among the families over such things as *mehrieh*).

often allow the two young people to get to know each other for six months or a year, but that this is also "under control". He then explained the problem with such arrangements:

> Mehran: If I go out with this girl, it's a bit heavy for me. I feel that maybe this girl or that family will become subject to sadness [if I reject her]. A torture of conscience takes me that I have to for sure say that I want her. I still see a bit of a problem in it. I feel like if you say no, the girl's worth will come down with her family […] the family questions what was the problem, why didn't [he] want [her]?

Although the traditional system in Iran had its problems, so did Canadian dating and marriage norms. After his failure to find a bride in Iran, Mehran had returned to Canada and wondered why he had ever made such a decision:

> Me: Was it always clear to you that one day you will marry?
>
> Mehran: Yes. It was always in my plans […] I felt it was a very big stage in my life. I wanted to be ready for it from the perspective of work and economics. When I came here, after a year or two I felt the time has come […] but I don't know, in six seven months, I suddenly concluded that marriage … nothing big is supposed to happen. As a matter of fact why did I see it as such a big thing? It lost its importance for me. Mostly this part is left that if only someone in my life… if my *hāl* (psycho-emotional state) can get better I want to get married. But if not and it is supposed to make me worse, I don't want it. Overall the concept of marriage has become a bit colder for me. Maybe living here had an effect. It was for the first time that I saw people living together without marriage […]. One of my Quebecer friends invited me to his wedding. He [already] had two kids with the person he was marrying. When I saw these things I said no, I don't accept this. For the first or two years I would debate: "no this concept is not right, you have to first get married". Because I saw it as a contract. When you buy a house you sign a contract […]. Between two people, there has to be this contract of marriage, in order for commitment to form (*ta'ahhod shekl begire*). And I really strongly defended it. But after a while I felt, no, it doesn't necessarily need to be like this. You can get to know someone… but not in this way that children are born and you wait 10 years…

Mehran also revealed to me some of the debates he would have with his university peers in Iran about sexual relationships with women:

Mehran: There were two points of view. One opinion was that it's best that before marriage you don't have any relationship with any woman. And the reason was that you should keep your love and interest and excitement for your spouse. For the first person that you're going to be with. But the second group would say that no, you should have relationships with other women. It's better this way…

Me: from a sexual perspective?

Mehran: Any way, friendship, sexual. One of the reasons was that if you have relationships and then you want to be with your spouse there is always a feeling of comparison. You always think that you can easily obtain it with other people. As a result it is not as valuable or strong for you. Because you think "before I was with other people", and you think that you could probably be with other people too. With your first experience with your wife you certainly think everything is over. The other group was against this. They said you better have lots of relationships, and you will be better prepared.

Mehran also had moral qualms about initiating sexual relationships with virgin women:

Mehran: We knew that for a woman it is very hard if you have a sexual relationship and then you don't marry her. What will become of her? And we knew that society accepts this with difficulty. And this girl will have a lot of problems. How is she going to justify why she had a sexual relationship? This very thing would protect us so that we don't go and enter relationships. Which we as boys knew that no-one would find out. But what would happen to that girl? Meaning sometimes this would result in… we knew that if we don't want to marry her, problems would be created for her. This would protect us.

Me: (laughing) So you're an ethical person.

Mehran: Umm… this is my personal view. And I would see around me people who did not think like this. It was not important to them. They would start sexual relationships. And they knew they would not marry [this person] and they would leave her and go. Now this girl would be left and either had to solve this issue for

herself, or she would have psychological issues. Or bad and bad and worse events would befall her. There were my friends; we would talk about it. Yes, I would see, I would hear about it in my surroundings.

Mehran then went on to describe a friend of his who was apparently open-minded with regards to sex, and would advise his (male) friends to go ahead with sexual relationships. This friend befriended a girl and after a while proposed to her. She rejected him and after he pursued her a while for the reason, she told him "I am not a girl (*dokhtar*), I am not a virgin, don't think about marriage".

> Mehran: In her mind she had thought that if the boy knew she was not a virgin he would end the relationship […] This boy was very open-minded and would say the issue is ok, and on the one hand really loved the girl, even the fact that she had been so honest with him and told him, [but on the other hand] for himself it was hard to accept […] and he saw that he couldn't [continue the relationship and marry this woman].
>
> […]
>
> Me: had he himself had sexual relationships?
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> Mehran: he himself hadn't; he said he hadn't. He would say if it comes up it's ok. He would say if it came up I would do it. In thinking he had come to [terms with] this issue but not in practice.
>
> At this point I asked Mehran for a clarification:
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> Me: When someone says girlfriend or boyfriend, in my mind I automatically think they have a sexual relationship.
>
> Mehran: Oh no no no for Iran it is not like this.

I asked him about his own relationships. He laughed and avoided answering the question, speaking instead in general terms:

> There are different styles in Iran. There's a style where you go out together. There is a style where you have [sex]; either you have decided to get married, you have it, at any rate something has happened that you have it. Or, the person doesn't

have a problem. They're[63] not a virgin. You don't see a reason to <u>protect</u> yourself[64]. They have had sex before. For the case in which they are a virgin, that's when you get stuck wondering what to do. Sometimes till the end, the relationship ends and they stay a virgin. For the case in which they weren't [a virgin] there will be a sexual relationship too.

I appreciated Mehran's candid discussion of the issues faced by young women in sexual and romantic relationships, and of the attitudes of young men towards these same issues. As regards these comments on the various styles of dating in Iran, other interlocutors also made similar comments regarding the difference in the meaning of boyfriend or girlfriend in Iran and Canada. Mehran's comments were especially interesting in the way they showed that, from a male perspective, having sex with a non-virgin was not a problem, but a woman's virginity presented a very real barrier. Mehran and Ali both told stories of friends who had rejected women they loved on the basis that they had confessed to not being virgins. These candid accounts were often more revealing than the accounts of women, many of whom were less forthcoming on matters of sexuality.

From Tradition to Modernity: A Fallacy of Binaries

My interviews with Ali and Mehran show that some young Iranian men appear to be conflicted between "traditional" and "modern" marriage systems and systems of gender relations. While Mehran discussed the pros and cons of each of *khāstegāri* and dating as well as whether it was advisable to have sexual relations before marriage, Ali was concerned with the inability to foster love in a gender-segregated (and unequal) society in which women married for economic and men for sexual need. Both of these men, while expressing some glimmer of concern for women, revealed the inequality inherent in the gender systems with which they engaged, and seemed ultimately interested in virgin wives.

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[63] My use of "they" here reflects the fact that Farsi lacks gendered pronouns. Although we have seen there is a gender difference that suggests the person in question is female, I have preferred to use "they" here as it better reflects the fact that the language Mehran is using in this case is not gendered.

[64] Throughout this conversation Mehran seems to use the term "protect" in reference to stopping oneself from having sex. His usage seems to be in the sense of impulse control.

While my questions in this domain tended to be oblique, the responses were clear enough. When I brought up *sighe,* Ali discussed how many men sought divorced women with whom to have such arrangements. If her family was able to support her, Ali told me, a divorced woman would find another husband, but likely one who was himself divorced. At this point in the conversation I took the opportunity to direct his attention to the "unwantedness" of the non-virgin woman, trying to arouse his sympathy. He interrupted me, telling me that "there is a situation in which a woman is born a non-virgin. This is something a legal doctor (*pezeshke qānuni*) will diagnose[65]. If a woman has had sex before marriage, it is clear that she is a faithless (*bi-deen*) person". Mehran, on the other hand, told me, after our interview was over, that "I have come to terms with this issue, but I would still prefer a virgin wife", telling me that such a wife would be more likely to be emotionally faithful. Although my sample size was small, I expect many Iranian men have similar opinions[66].

When I asked another, married man, Ghasem, about female virginity, he first asked whether I had lived in Iran, concluding that since I had not, I could not fully understand. He then told me, "From the perspective of the *urf* of Iranian society, from the generation from which I come (Ghasem was 35), in which pre-marital relations were not yet very normal, I concluded that it was important". He told me regarding non-virgin women, "I can't say she'd be completely unmarriageable, but to a great extent one must question […] The <u>lifestyle</u> of this person is not for me." I found this response somewhat surprising given that Ghasem had told me that his family, although religious, was quite open with himself and his sister. They had even had a sit-down with their children, explaining to them that sex is not a big deal, and that if they wanted to experience it they could, and if they wanted to learn more about it they could. Ghasem's views on the matter were further expressed by his comments on hymenoplasty: "I don't know why it is done but if [..] someone wants to hide a *khata* (transgression) meaning something that they themselves consider a transgression, it's very bad. Very objectionable". The other

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[65] We have seen, in the previous chapter, the trauma of medical examinations of this sort, something Ali's comment appears to ignore.

[66] Mahdavi (2009) suggests this as well, although she fails to adequately critique this situation, opting instead to repeat her claims of a sexual revolution even immediately following the horrific story of a man whose fiancée committed suicide when he called off the marriage after she did not bleed when they first had intercourse.

men I interviewed had similar responses on this issue and for the most part critiqued the act without giving any comment on the context, while some women were more sympathetic.

Another interviewee, himself a reporter, had suggested that he assist me by interviewing men on the topic, suggesting that as a man he knew how to ask men these questions regarding which they may respond to me dishonestly. I declined the offer, which occurred near the end of my fieldwork, as I knew I would be unable to process any additional interviews.

There was one exception among my male interviewees who explicitly stated that "if you ask me about whether I prefer a virgin wife, I can tell you that it is important for me that she not be [a virgin]". Part of his reasoning was that he believed it was psychologically harmful for a person to wait 30 years (the minimum age for a woman he would consider as a marriage partner, himself being 34) before experiencing sex. This man, Erfan, had just responded to my question about hymenoplasty by saying it was something completely immoral (*gheire akhlaghi*), but then conceded that it was sometimes necessary for "preservation of life". Erfan told me he hoped the need for this practice would soon end and that my research would contribute to its ending.

Erfan had also told me, near the beginning of our interview, that he had himself put the question of preference for virgin brides to his friends in Iran. Out of about ten people, he estimated, at least four or five had responded that they did prefer their wife to be a virgin at marriage. He told me that he had asked the same of Iranians "here" (I assume in Montreal), and only one person had responded that they did hold such a preference[67]. He asked this person if they would have the same criterion for a non-Iranian woman. They had responded in the negative. Erfan also told me that he had asked Iranian women living in Montreal whether they would be willing to live with someone without having married them. The response was "yes, but not with an Iranian man". One of his female friends had told him "no Iranian man has the *liāghat* (worth) of living with without marriage". It is interesting that, from what Erfan tells me, Iranians living in

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[67] Though I did not pose the question directly, my results seem to be different from those of Erfan. Perhaps Erfan's friends resembled him ideologically, affecting his "sample" and thus making it different from mine.

Canada seem to hold each other to the standards of their culture of origin, while being more lenient with non-Iranians.

It seems overall that many of my interviewees, both men and women, while favouring some aspects of a "modernized" or "westernized" approach to courtship and marriage, wished to maintain certain aspects of older Iranian social norms. I, having prepared my questions in such a way as to avoid offence to more conservative individuals, was quickly surprised to learn that most of my interviewees, even if they expressed religiosity, accepted at least some form of dating or extended (but, for some, such as Mehran, not too extended) courtship and betrothal period. As the daughter of religiously conservative Iranian migrants, I had been taught that dating was out of question, and, from the time I began high school until I married at 21, my parents had attempted to regulate my comings and goings and interactions with peers. I thought that those who maintained a religious identity would ascribe to the rules to which I had been subjected, but this seemed not to be the case.

This change in the mode of meeting potential mates is perhaps unsurprising. In today's globalized world, young people of all geographical and cultural origins are exposed to various discourses on love and marriage, and, as beings endowed with personal agency, will likely want to exercise it. As young Iranians become educated and more independent, move to cities and migrate internationally and away from extended family members that can arrange *khāstegāri,* this form of courtship becomes modified or replaced by other forms. Still, some young Iranians, for various reasons, continue to practice some form of *khāstegāri.* Importantly, however, the shift from *khāstegāri* to dating does not appear to be accompanied by a deeper shift in attitudes towards gender and sexuality.

As I have mentioned, there were several feminists among my female interlocutors. Irsaa, whose further comments I discuss later in this chapter, notably claimed that "a woman's body is her own", but most women did not engage with me in such discourses and did not emphasize a claim to own their sexuality, and were more concerned with the issues stereotypically depicted as concerns of women, notably, marriage. Men likewise often asserted gender differences in love and sexuality. The depiction of sexual relations I had as a teenager found laughable, that men are interested

in sex while women long for committed relationships (i.e. marriage), seemed to ring true among the majority of my interlocutors. In the following section I wish to reflect a bit on why this is so.

On the one hand, there are the benefits of the old system. Women and men both seem reluctant to let go of these: for women, the prospect of having a husband who will take care of their economic needs is not to be turned down. For men, the promise of sexual and emotional exclusivity suggested by a woman's virgin status seems to be important. While such patterns may appear in "Western" societies as well, they nevertheless come into conflict with other aspects of the "modern" companionate marriage. That is, if we assume the latter implies a relationship that is based on equality. As we saw in the narratives of Ali and Mehran, gender segregation and a traditional *khāstegāri* system appear to be at direct odds with love and even the basic ability to get to know one's future wife. As I have suggested earlier, I question the possibility of companionate love in hierarchical relationships entered into by parties with an *a priori* power asymmetry that mirrors the hierarchy[68]. But more equal gender relations seem not to be the concern of the majority of my interlocutors. Their narratives are largely accepting of a gender ideology that suggests strong innate differences between men and women. By accepting such a discourse, I claim that my interlocutors recreate these differences. The example of differences in sexual desire is especially pertinent and I discuss it further here.

Pleasure and Power

Ali repeatedly invoked male sexual desire, but never that of women. On one occasion where, misunderstanding his use of the general "you" to include myself as a woman, I asked him, for clarification, whether, when he stated that many marriages occurred simply to satisfy sexual needs, he was referring to female sexual desire. He simply responded "no, men's", and moved on. I was amused at Ali's exclusion of women from his discussion of sexual desire, but, especially as he was quite talkative and repeatedly took my questions in his own direction, didn't bother to further query him on

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[68] This leaves open, in principle, the possibility of such love in relationships in which the parties, beginning from an equal footing, consensually engage in power exchange.

it. It seemed that Ali was following a line of thought that did not attribute sexual desire to women. At the time, this made little sense to me, but after my recent encounter with Maryam, I came to the realization that perhaps this idea had a grain of truth, not because women were somehow biologically or psychologically desire-less, but because lack of discussion of female sexual desire made it so that women did not perceive themselves as sexual beings[69].

A similar attitude is noted by El-Feki (2013) in her interactions with Egyptian housewives, who are interested in improving their sex lives with their husbands but are ultimately more preoccupied with increasing their husbands' pleasure in order to better ensure their fidelity. El-Feki explains that studies of the sexual satisfaction of women in Egypt who have undergone genital cutting suggest that it must be taken into consideration that in Egypt, women's sexual pleasure is often linked to the satisfaction of their husbands. They seem to place less emphasis on their own physical pleasure. But the crux lies here: although some of the husbands in question complain that their wives are "boring" in bed, too much initiative in some cases leads to suspicion on the part of the husband regarding where their wife might have picked up any new sexual knowledge (El Feki 2013). Women's sexual passivity is thus encouraged, which might result in women who, as a result of the internalization of such values, define their pleasure otherwise. Nor is the phenomenon exclusive to the Middle East, as we are reminded by the famous phrase "lie back and think of England", apparently from the 1912 journal of one Lady Hillingdon, where she wrote "When I hear his steps outside my door I lie down on my bed, open my legs and think of England."

The realization that women might be socialized not only not to express, but also to believe they lack, sexual desire, led me to think more about sexual desire and pleasure, which were not originally a focus of my inquiries. My mentor Homa Hoodfar had suggested, when I expressed interest in researching virginity, that I also look into pleasure. At the time, I felt perhaps she had misunderstood my line of inquiry: I was not interested in sexual practice and sexuality per se; I was interested in the power dynamics inherent in the gendered structures that impose virginity on women, who were enmeshed

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[69] My findings in this area are consistent with the findings of the sociologist Paul Vieille, who conducted research on peasants and industrial workers in Tehran and its peripheries from 1960 to 1968, which pointed to the conclusion that only men had the right to express their sexual desire (as cited in Afary 2009).

in systems that depended on the exchange of their bodies between men. Only much later, that is, after my encounter with Maryam towards the middle of my writing process, did it occur to me that pleasure itself was subject to these power dynamics. Could it not be said that denying female sexual desire would facilitate the continuation of the Iranian *khāstegāri* marriage system, that is, a system in which men chose women, to use Ali's words, to "meet their sexual needs", whereas women, apparently lacking sexual desire, were perhaps more easily persuaded to accept mates that met other criteria—wealth and the ability to provide—more advantageous to both the woman's family of origin, as well as to the family of procreation that was to be the outcome of the marriage union?

Another very interesting tidbit of information that Ali recounted to me is revealing of the attitudes of some young Iranian men to sex. Prefacing this statement with an account of his credentials (he had spent time in Iranian men's university dormitories where young men from all over the country gathered and had intimate discussions on these topics), Ali told me that, as his many dormitory acquaintances had revealed to him, "When you are in love with a woman, never, in your mind, do you have sex with her. It's impossible. Love is something holy".

I will dissect this statement. Love is holy, and therefore completely separate from sex. Sex is therefore *unholy,* profane, as it were. It follows, taking into account everything else said about virginity, that sex is dirty and defiling, particularly for a woman. I am unsure what happens after marriage that suddenly renders sexual contact acceptable (perhaps it is only to fulfill her duty of satisfying her husband's desire that the woman here assents to what would otherwise be defiling). Nor am I able to reconcile the unholy status of sex with another statement of Ali's, that a man in love doesn't want to "cheat on" his beloved by having sex with other women, and will not do so if he doesn't have "bad friends"—if he can't have sex with her (as sex would defile her), yet experiences a need for sex (clearly, based on Ali's narrative, it is so), but sex with someone else, or masturbation or pornography, would all mean "cheating", how *does* he have sex? Apparently he doesn't, resulting in all the pent-up frustration Ali described. But it's not hard to see where this attitude toward sex leads: if one does not have sex with a woman whom one loves, as sex is unholy, a woman who has had sex is by that act made unholy, and therefore becomes an object of disrespect.

At the same time, once again, if one does not have sex with a beloved woman, perhaps it is a *despised* woman with whom one does have sex. Erfan gave me an example of a friend of his who held such an attitude. When a friend of his told Erfan that he had a girlfriend, Erfan had congratulated him and asked whether they also had sex. His friend had become extremely offended and responded, "No, for those things there are others. But her, I love her". Erfan had emphasized his friend's inability to verbalize "sex" here and his need to replace it with the term "those things", as if sex were such a dirty word that it ought not to be verbalized. The friend's attitude shows that one cannot have sex with a woman one loves. Therefore a woman one does have sex with is not loved. Women available for sex, usually those who lack virginity, are objects of disrespect.

Hence Ali's claim that men who pursued *sighe* (temporary marriage) with divorced women were underserving of respect. According to Ali, *Sighe* had been appropriate at a time when men needed to fulfil their sexual needs when separated by long distances from their wives, but today the institution was being abused. Further, Ali invoked *gheirat* (honor) by telling me that "the first question that would be asked (of a man who wanted to engage in *sighe*) would be 'would you let your own sister become a *sighe*?' No-one would say yes". A proper arrangement would be (permanent) marriage. It appears that here, once again, Ali is invoking that same gender difference in the marriage contract: men want sex, women want security, and a proper man ought not to "use" a woman for sex, but should meet her need for a permanent bond instead. The existence of such attitudes sheds light on why women are less likely to express a desire for sex (and even *sighe*): if sex is dirty, a woman who wants it must also be. Such discourses may even encourage women to suppress any sexual feelings they do experience, or lead them articulate such feeling in some other manner.

A clarification is necessary here: women's sexuality has, historically, not been fully denied in Iran. Indeed, some early Islamic texts and more contemporary clerics' interpretations of them suggest women's sexual urges are stronger than those of men (a young junior cleric I talked to in Iran in Fall 2016 held such a view), hence justifying the need for additional safeguards on women's sexuality (Mir-Hosseni 2004). Looking at Iranian history from the turn of the 19th century, movements advocating women's rights have repeatedly been met by conservative pushback suggesting that increased

participation of women in the public sphere would result in a state of *fitna,* or chaos (see Afary 2009). There has repeatedly been particular concern with any attempt to modify marriage and family law and increase women's sexual freedoms. Hence, it is not that women's sexuality is not acknowledged. Rather, there is an anxiety that surrounds women's own recognition of their sexuality. This anxiety is perhaps what leads to lack of discussion of sexuality, and women's in particular. In fact, many of my interlocutors attested to a lack of discussion of sex in their families.

Among my interviewees, almost no one had had discussions about sex with their parents (although one man told me this situation changed after marriage). One woman told me that her mother would pass her reading material in an attempt to somewhat passively educate her on sexuality. Another had learned from medical textbooks since several members of her family were in the medical field. Some indicated that they had been shocked upon discovering detailed discussions of sex in religious *tozih-ul-masā'el*[70] (explanation of problems) books. However, by and large, my interviewees told me they had learned about sex through their friends. For those involved in the fields of health and sexual education, such a situation is concerning, as it was for Mahdavi (2009), but the attitude of many Iranian parents seems to be well-expressed by one of my female interviewees, Narmin, who told me that "My mother felt if she didn't talk about certain things they would just go away". Several scholars confirm that sexuality has long been a taboo subject in Iran (Rahbari 2016, Mir-Hosseini 2004), although Mahdavi (2009) tells us that things are changing.

Whether and to what extent things are changing with regards to sexuality among Iranians is one of the big questions motivating this research. In the previous chapter I highlighted the fact that some women were simultaneously critical while at the same time performing virginity, and also related the stories of women such as Sara, who indicated that change was needed. In the following sections I aim to further highlight some of this internal dissent, and to further probe the question of why the absence of dissent seems to be more prevalent.

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[70] These are books written by shi'ite clerics that aim to clarify correct Islamic behavior in specific situations. One of the major focuses is ritual purity, and sexual activity is an act that requires particular ritual ablutions, in addition to being subject to detailed regulation regarding what acts are acceptable or not.

Feminism and its Frustrations

"If it were up to me, and it didn't hurt, I would cut off [the hymen] from all newborn girls".
–Taraneh, 31.

This was what one of my female interlocutors told me when I began asking her about virginity. This quotation strongly expresses that there is something about the hymen that is problematic. But it is not the flesh itself: biology cannot be blamed for structures of domination and inequality. "Dolphins have hymens too", Irsaa, another female interlocutor, had repeated several times, a statement[71] which she used to refute the idea that the hymen is God's proof that women are to remain virgins until marriage. Rather, it is the meaning with which humans, and, in particular, patriarchal societies, have imbued the hymen that is at issue, especially where this meaning is the difference between a proper, marriageable woman and one who is unworthy and defiled. As we have seen, such meanings and the systems and structures surrounding them are so deeply woven into the societal fabric that that they are extremely difficult to extract. So much so that Taraneh considers the physical excision of the hymen as a simpler solution to what clearly is, to her, a big problem.

It would seem that, with such a harsh distinction attributed to so fine a piece of flesh as the hymen, women would be in an uproar, and that an obvious avenue for critique would be a feminist approach. Feminists have begun to extend the long-standing fight for equality into the domain of sexuality. Contemporary middle-eastern and Muslim feminists who have taken on such issues include Fatima Mernissi, whose arguments in an essay entitled "Virginity and Patriarchy" I have discussed in Chapter 2. The Egyptian activist-journalist Mona Eltahawy has also taken on "The God of Virginity" (Eltahawi 2015). In her book *Sex and The Citadel,* Shereen El-Feki (2013) highlights feminist activism on sexuality in Egypt and throughout the Arab World. In Iran, the immensely popular poet Forough Farrokhzad in the 1960s opened the taboo door of discussing female sexuality and desire, an act that earned her censorship by the clerical

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[71] I have been unable to verify this claim, but it appears that a number of other animals do have hymens.

establishment (Afary 2009). Activism continues in Iranian communities inside and outside the country to this day. I hope myself, in the preceding sections of this thesis, to have made it adequately clear that equality needs to begin in the bedroom.

Early in my interviews I began asking women, as a final question, whether they identified as feminist. Occasionally, I was surprised by the answer that they were not, given that in the foregoing discussion they had seemed to express feminist ideas. There were, nevertheless, several vocal critics who did identify as feminists. What was going on here? Before attempting an explanation, I will illustrate with an encounter from my participant observation in the field.

During my fieldwork I attended an art vernissage hosted by a group I found on Facebook called "affection&solidarity group montreal". There, I met Zoya Tavangar, who had two paintings on display there, and was also handing out pamphlets advertising art classes she taught. One of the paintings was of a woman of elegant appearance, surrounded by lipsticks in the form of bullets. "A woman's beauty is her weapon", Zoya explained to attendees. Another painting, which I found more interesting, was of a feminine mouth that had been sewn shut. As I was gazing at the painting I overheard two middle-aged men nearby commenting on it in Farsi. As the men were muttering between themselves, they began a conversation with the artist:

"It's political", one man said.
"It's not political," Zoya interjected. "It is social".
"Why is it a woman's mouth?" the man asked.
"Women are usually the ones whose voices are silenced" Zoya had replied.
The man had displayed an incredulous look, and moved on.

Three interesting things happened here. First, Zoya expressed a view, also clearly depicted in her painting, that could easily be described or categorized as feminist. Second, she denied the political nature of the painting and the view expressed therein by relegating its nature to the social realm, which implies that she sees the social as separate

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from the political[72]. Such a move goes against the now worn-out feminist adage that "the personal is political", for the realm of "the social", if, for argument's sake, it is neither overlapping with the "personal", nor "political", is certainly located somewhere between the two. Zoya's disjunction of "social" and "political" realms therefore renders more remote the possibility of joining the personal and political spheres. I did not ask Zoya whether she was a feminist, but I imagine that, like many of my women interlocutors, she may not identify as such[73] despite her awareness and expression of women's silencing, a silencing that is reinforced and redoubled by the third interesting aspect of this encounter, the incredulous expression of the man viewing her painting.

This encounter was just one manifestation of a broad phenomenon of silencing of women's voices, even those that do not out themselves as feminist. I would occasionally attempt to engage with people on this issue. When I had met Mohammad Rad[74] and some of his colleagues late in my fieldwork, I mentioned my feminism, and also the fact that many of my interlocutors had not identified as feminist. The women told me that feminism was a crime in Iran, that it was possible to get arrested on charges of feminism[75]. I took note of this as something I should look further into. Clearly the arrest of Homa Hoodfar, who was incarcerated in Evin prison at the time of my fieldwork, was an instance of this, I thought. I also read, around that time, an article by Ziba Mir-Hosseini about the broad silencing of feminists in Iran (Mir-Hosseini 2016). But Dr. Hoodfar, once herself released, argued that it was not the case that feminism was illegal. Indeed, her knowledge of the Iranian constitution and the fact that feminism was not a

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[72] As Dr. Hoodfar pointed out to me, in Iran, distinguishing between "social" and "political" realms, and claiming certain ideas are social, makes their communication easier because the term "political" is associated with the state, while the "social" has to do with culture.

[73] As also explained by Dr. Hoodfar, the fact that feminism is often presented as an extreme position in Iran and sometimes associated with lesbianism, women familiar with that discourse may claim that they are not feminist while objecting to women's inequality.

[74] Rad conducted a brief interview with me, which he posted on the Telegram channel of his media company, Hodhod. Rad told me that I would now receive a flood of responses, but, barring the interest expressed by Rad and his colleagues, I did not find any new interest or research participants directly through this channel. In the interview with Rad, I had been braver than I had in my previous postings, and had specifically mentioned that I was interested in virginity, as well as my feminist orientation.

[75] This is an oversimplification, but feminists in Iran have been arrested and jailed under various pretexts (personal communication with Dr. Hoodfar).

crime had helped her in her discussion and counter-arguments with her captors[76].

Nevertheless, as multiple media outlets cited and re-cited, a cleric involved in her case

had accused Dr. Hoodfar of "dabbling in feminism"[77]. Although feminism is not illegal in

Iran, these kinds of accusations are part of efforts to squelch feminist movements by

creating difficulties for those who do identify as feminist.

Hoodfar's arrest and its surrounding circumstances do indicate one thing: to be a

feminist in Iran can be a dangerous position to take. Nevertheless there are Iranian

feminists, myself among them. But of course feminism comes in many flavours. During

my preparation for my fieldwork, I had been advised by a department colleague[78] to look

in particular into Islamic Feminism. Mir-Hosseini (2004) and Afary (2009) both argue

that variants of such a feminism exist in Iran, given that secular feminists are often

ignored and shut down, and sometimes considered "agents of Western imperialism"[79].

The unfortunate association of feminism with the secular and monarchical institution of

the Women's Organization of Iran that, under the Pahlavi regime, made several advances

in women's rights, including in the sexual and marital domains, led "conservative clerics

[to portray] feminism as a foreign, elitist concept aimed at the destruction of the Muslim

family" (Afary 2009, 218), and it appears that not much has changed regarding attitudes

to feminism since then.

Thus Islamic feminists look to advance women's rights in Islamic contexts by

arguing that the patriarchal frameworks in which many Islamic societies function are not

part of Islam but are due to patriarchal interpretations of the Quran and *Ahādith*.

Discovering this brand of feminism was exciting, but I was hard-pressed to find any

Iranian Islamic feminists in the field. I did venture into Facebook groups related to

Islamic Feminism and a local Islamic Feminist group in Montreal (several of these

perhaps go well beyond anything currently possible in Iran, as they also advocate for

LGBTQ rights and the end of gender-segregation in places of worship). I met one young

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[76] Dr. Hoodfar mentioned this at the CASCA/IUAES2017 roundtable presentation: Rosita Henry, Faye Harrison, Chandana Mathur, Homa Hoodfar. "A conversation with Homa Hoodfar." Roundtable presented at Mo(u)vment: CASCA/IUAES2017, Ottawa, Canada, May 2017.
[77] This was the first direct charge of feminism, even though feminism is not a crime under the law (personal communication with Dr. Hoodfar).
[78] Thank you to Aryana Soliz.
[79] Dr. Hoodfar explained it thus in one of her talks after being released from Evin and returning to Canada.

Iranian woman at the group I visited in person, who was very excited by my fieldwork. Unfortunately, I confused her in my contacts with someone else who told me she could not participate in an interview as her husband was not comfortable with it, and did not realize my mistake until much later, when I met her again at a later event linked to the group. While my requests for interviews were frequently turned down, I found this case (which turned out to be a case of mistaken identity) particularly vexing.

Where was the voice of feminist critique in Iranian contexts? Fortunately, it isn't entirely absent. I have mentioned my several feminist interlocutors, but suggest that I may have oversampled feminists both because several were in my immediate networks and because my research topic is probably more likely to draw feminists to volunteer as interviewees. Nevertheless, I wish to, and have, highlighted those voices, as they draw attention to issues that deserve consideration. I also recognize the choice not to identify as feminist, and think it is important to attempt to address these issues from positions that are not overtly feminist. As feminist voices have, as I have illustrated, systematically been silenced in this domain, it is essential to consider how such messages can be communicated in a manner that will be adequately received by a broader public.

And here I divert my attention to publics, because it is with respect to the public that the claim that "the personal is political" is made. If the personal is aligned with the private, it is the political that is aligned with the public, and this distinction needs to be untangled.

Private Parts and Their Publics

Virginity, and sexuality in general, is popularly construed as a private matter. However, being as these are "matters of concern" (Habermas, 1989[1962] as cited in Cole and Phillips 2013) to more than solitary individuals and even small groups of individuals, it is important to consider the extent to which these matters are also public. There is a significant tradition of literature on the distinction between public and private spheres, which has been taken up in anthropology.

Jürgen Habermas defines the *public sphere* as "the political space within which citizens of liberal nations deliberate issues of 'common concern'" (1989 [1962]: 36 as cited in Cole and Phillips 2013). Habermas' concept separates out the public from the

private, which other scholars have taken up. However, this interpretation has been debated by a number of scholars. Wright ((2010) as cited in Cole and Phillips 2013) has used the term 'public:private' to reflect how the two domains are co-constituted. Cole and Phillips (2013), who take up Wright's term as useful to their analysis, have argued that "to conceive of the public as a uniform, stable, politically consensual 'sphere' is not only theoretically inadequate but also politically misleading" (3-4). They argue that there are multiple *scales* of publics (2013, 4) and that publics are "cultural spaces with unwritten rules about who is included and who is not, and why" (2013, 6). Philips and Cole further argue that publics are constantly *in formation* (2013, 8), and that "we need to ask […] how they might be re-invented (or invented) in ways that germinate, circulate, and buoy equality projects rather than re-entrenching inequalities" (2013, 8). These numerous critiques have usefully expanded the concept of the public sphere, and we might ask, when considering virginity, whether women are included in the "public" that deliberates it. As noted above, it appears that they are not. The question becomes, then, "how might we re-invent this "public" to be more inclusive of women and their experiences of virginity and marriage imperatives?

The institution of marriage, too, can be usefully regarded in the framework of publics. Marriage is an agreement, or contract, between a number of parties: while being a personal matter between the bride and groom (*aroos va damaad*), but also of their families, it is in addition a legal and religious matter, and thus the correctness of the contract is a 'matter of concern' to state and religious authorities. As an implicit part of that contract, women's virginity becomes "a matter between men" (Mernissi 1982, 183). Sexuality, likewise, is not "just a certain set of physical relationships among individuals", but should be regarded "as bodily reproduction and the construction/reconstruction of power relations in public as well as private spheres" (Sadeghi 2008, 251). Sadeghi's analysis builds on that of Foucault, who pointed out the policing of sex and "the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses" (1978, 25).

From the foregoing discussion in this chapter, it appears that women are largely excluded from the public discourse on sexuality, even their own. Many do not even attempt to engage with this discourse. The question, for those women who want change, is how women ought to position themselves vis-a-vis the publics that regulate their

(supposedly private) bodies. How can women reinsert themselves into the discussion of which their bodies are the subject? How can women seek inclusion in these publics, and how do they legitimize or undermine them? Can women constitute an alternative public, a parallel public (Dewey 2009 as cited in Cole and Phillips 2013) or counter-public (Fraser 1990 as cited in Cole and Phillips 2013) to the "concerns" of marriage, virginity, and sexuality? In order to achieve equality in the domain of sexuality, women must make themselves heard, and thus must achieve recognition in the public sphere. And yet many continue to avoid opening up such discussions. The following section offers further analysis of the situation.

Gender Inequality and the Patriarchal Bargain

Irsaa was one of the women I spoke to who was passionately vocal against the system of the virginity imperative.

For whom is [women's] virginity important? Irsaa had asked me, switching the roles of interviewer and interviewee.

"Men?" I quietly suggested.

"Not really", she had said.

"It's the [men's] mothers. […] Iranian women have an anti-woman culture […]".

[…]

"Why does the mother care?" I asked.

"To show her daughter-in-law was completely pure", came the reply.

Me: "For herself, or for others?"

Irsaa: "To show others!"

We see here the enactment of the patriarchal bargain (Kandiyoti 1988); older women, once themselves subject to the exigencies of the virginity imperative, are now the ones imposing it on younger women. Perhaps they are the ones teaching their sons, men like Ali and Mehran, to value a woman who abides by these rules. And young women, hoping for a 'good catch', or, according to Shirin, "*shohar'e sartar*", that is, a husband whose status is above her own, are obliged to demonstrate their compliance because, in these societies, other forms of social and economic participation will also be

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closed to them if they do not participate in the bargain. Men and women of different generations here collude in reproducing the virginity imperative.

Kandiyoti's (1988) concept of "The Patriarchal Bargain" expresses the idea that by accepting certain restrictions during their youth, women could expect to be integrated as respectable members of society and exercise certain powers in their older age. Kandiyoti claims that the patriarchal bargain exists in the form of "subservience and manipulation" under the "classic patriarchy" characteristic of South and East Asia as well as the Muslim Middle East, and specifically cites Iran as one such society. Afary confirms the status a woman in Iran could traditionally achieve if she assented to the patriarchal bargain in her youth: "As she grew older, the wife could become a powerful matriarch who exercised control over the life of her sons and her daughters-in-law, thereby also asserting increased authority over her husband in his old age" (Afary 2009, 8). Afshar likewise emphasizes the desirability of "becoming something of a matriarch within the domestic sphere", and the necessity of maintaining traditional values so that "all mothers have the prospect of power and prestige" (Afshar 1989, 117).

Thus, the mother in Irsaa's story is taking advantage of her newfound power, which is valuable in itself, even if it is limited. If the daughter-in-law accedes, she too will one day be able to wield such power. Thus, in other words, patriarchy wins over women through inviting them to participate in a system of delayed gratification[80]. Interestingly, Afary (2009) notes, citing Mahnaz Afkami, the leader of the Pahlavi-era Women's Organization of Iran, that in the brief pre-revolutionary years in which the WOI made some advances in women's rights, it was poorer, working class women who were the bravest and most vocal critics of their current situations. Middle-class women were too vested in the existing patriarchal system. As we have seen, some of the upwardly-mobile women I interviewed were also vested in the existing system by which they could attain some form of socioeconomic prosperity. Due to intersections of violence, poorer women are more likely to be subject to sexual and domestic violence (see, for example, Sokoloff and Dupont, 2005). Due to the location and methodology of my research, I did not have access to these women, but it would be interesting to hear what they have to say

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[80] Thanks to Homa Hoodfar for this idea.

on these topics. I have nevertheless attempted to focus on stories that reveal the difficult circumstances women must endure under strict virginity imperatives.

Finally, Nicole-Claude Mathieu offers another perspective explaining why women may accept structural oppression. In her view, it is not that women desire to be oppressed, but that they do not have the means to contest their oppression. Mathieu argues that "[o]ppressor and oppressed are not equal subjects with identical consciousness" (Mathieu 1991d:217, cited in Cole 2016, 4), with material constraints causing limitations on the consciousness of the oppressed (women) (Cole 2016, 4). In the absence of outward resistance, for which a "raised consciousness" would be necessary, Mernissi argues that "each time a woman is cornered between the satisfaction of her own needs and conformity with a contradictory set of demands imposed on her by her social group, she resorts to trickery, which is the corollary of inequality" (Mernissi 1982, 188). Thus, where women are relegated to an unequal status, they employ "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985, cited in Afary 2009, 7). This may be the most attractive, if not the only viable option, in societies that regard "sex [as] defilement, sexual contact [as] a degrading experience which degrades the woman, and by the same token, any men who are linked to her by ties of blood or marriage" (Mernissi 1982, 185). For women in patriarchal societies, who "live with the consequences of cultural conflations of male honour and sexual prowess" (Cole 2015, 5), shame may prevent them from voicing their dissent (Mathieu 1991d:145, cited in Cole 2016, 5), leading them to find other means of coping and navigating social expectations.

My discussion of marriage in the first and second chapters has already demonstrated the unequal basis on which gender relations are laid in Iranian society. In chapter two I have discussed how women sometimes use "weapons of the weak" and occasionally "resort to trickery" in order to acquire a means to a liveable life in a society that does not afford them equal opportunity to independently support themselves and participate in the public sphere. In this chapter I have discussed the idea of "sex as defilement" and how it contributes to the unequal consciousness of young Iranian men and women. Wary of an interest in sexuality leading them to being viewed as "defiled" women, Iranian women justifiably avert their attention elsewhere.

Conclusion: A Sexual Revolution?

At the outset of this research I had one big question: Why does the emphasis on female virginity persist among Iranians, even those who claim to be more "modern", "secular" or "enlightened" (*roshanfekr*) ? In this work I have highlighted some of the contradictions experienced by young Iranians living in Montreal. I reiterate here that these are young people of diverse origins, educated, and who for the most part recently arrived in Canada and spent some formative period of their lives in the metropole of Tehran. Many of the experiences they recount, and much of their formation, took place in Iran. Many experienced some difficulty adjusting to Canadian social and cultural norms, and some attempted to relieve some of that dissonance by embracing or re-emphasizing certain aspects of their Iranian identity.

One might ask why women continue to abide by certain restrictive norms and rules of sexual propriety in Canada, where other discourses on sexuality (specifically, feminist and "sex-positive" discourses) are available to them, and where they may have access to potential partners who are not concerned with virginity imperatives. There may be many reasons for this, including the desire to satisfy parental expectations, or the need to belong that is fulfilled by maintaining connections with the Iranian communities in Montreal, which necessitates following the rules of those communities. Shirin told me that she had considered seeking a husband of a different national origin, but he would have to have a culture similar to her own, because she wouldn't be able to understand someone from a completely different culture. The alternative was to go with an Iranian man, wait until marriage for sex, and get hymen reconstruction surgery. Perhaps significantly, out of the three divorced women I interviewed, one was single and the other two had partners who were not Iranian.

The foregoing chapters have made clear that female virginity continues to be a focus for both men and women. While a few of my female interlocutors rejected virginity imperatives based on their traumatic experiences or their feminist identification (if not

both), many did not outwardly reject virginity imperatives, perhaps offering some mild critique in our interview but not openly and publicly taking arms. Indeed, for these women, performing to the standards of such imperatives was instrumental to living liveable lives, for saving (or maintaining) face, and for ensuring a chance at what they considered a good marriage, something that remains incredibly important in the lives of young Iranians, women in particular. Specifically, hypergyny entails financial benefits for women that it seems many aren't ready to let go of, and with justification. The support and stability of marriage seems to be something these women are interested in, while sexual relations are something they tended to downplay, even if they conceded that a good sexual relationship was important to marriage.

Many women I interviewed didn't appear to seek more equality in their marriage relations. Continually surprised by women choosing to marry "above themselves", I recently had a conversation with my mother on the topic. I questioned why someone would want to put themselves in the inferior position of unequal power dynamics. My mother agreed with me that financial dependence was harmful, but reasoned thus: even if women don't have the same education or economic resources as their husbands, they may still exert power in the relationship. Some women, being clever, are able to tip the balance of power in their favour through their power of persuasion. Those who lack such an ability may well find themselves in a poor situation, but lacking strictly egalitarian appearances, a marriage relationship does not have to result in all power being in the hands of the husband, simply on the basis of his having a better education and a job.

But while this may well be the case, there remains a problem. My mother seems to be discussing a certain feminine charm and quiet behind-the-scenes calculation, something I am sure women living in patriarchal societies have used for centuries, as we have seen with the examples of navigating virginity imperatives, including their physical aspect. What is at issue is that women here are nevertheless operating from a position of inequality. They are employing "weapons of the weak" (Scott 2008). As Mernissi (1982) puts it, their situation of apparent submission forces them to "resort to trickery". As my conversations on hymenoplasty with men suggest, men are not appreciative of such "trickery". But they generally were unconvinced by my attempts at arousing sympathy

for women who were obliged to engage in these practices. When I mentioned to one man that some women broke their hymens in other ways, such as sports, he replied to me, "Yes, well, what percentage of Iranian women do horseback riding or gymnastics? Not very many." The idea was that the vast majority of those seeking hymen reconstruction were doing so in order to "milk" the men they were marrying. This man, who had studied and practiced law, told me that he knew of cases where women married men "as virgins" with the aim of divorcing them later, in order to receive the higher *mahriyeh* that would be given to them because of their virginal status.

While I concede that such cases may exist, this argument disregards structural inequalities that may lead women to resort to such schemes. In a world where women have equal opportunities to acquire economic wealth, and are not differentially valued based on the status of their hymens, there could be no such schemes. Further, the argument disregards the emotional difficulties that women undergoing such procedures may experience: there was the case of a friend of my interlocutor Narmin, who "just needed to feel normal again", and that of Shirin, who did not consent to the breaking of her hymen by a man she was seeing at the time. It's just a piece of flesh," he had told her when she confronted him. "A piece of flesh that was not yours to break" she had corrected him.

In their outright unqualified rejection of hymen reconstruction as deception, men ignore women who have been sexually abused and women whose hymens broke through no fault of their own. In suggesting that "there are cases that can be distinguished by a doctor", men subject women's bodies to devices of power and take "medical evidence" over a woman's own word. What happens to the woman who never realized that her hymen had been broken? Must she be obliged to suffer because her husband requires the proof of her "purity" in blood? Must the girl who breaks her hymen by accident be subject to scrutiny by her family and doctors, and either be obliged to undergo a surgical procedure or forever need to explain to her husband why her hymen was broken? I prompted, but did not press, men on these issues. I took it practically for granted that there would be a shared understanding of such instances, which create a problem for the equation of the hymen with virtue and purity. I now realize that this is not the case.

The woman who resorts to hymen reconstruction and the woman who does not bleed upon intercourse are here subject to suspicion rather than sympathy. And yet men expect women's love. Can a woman love a man that requires her to subject herself to an intrusive medical examination rather than take her at her word? And when men have sex with other women and yet expect their wives to be virgins, the ultimate hypocrisy, can they expect to be loved by the women they marry? It is no wonder that women do not talk about these issues when so much hangs in the balance.

Let us also remember that these "other women" are regarded with contempt. As Irsaa told me, " 'A girl who doesn't have *bekārat* (virginity/a hymen) is good. You can use her, enjoy her, then, like a dirty tissue, through her away' I have heard this many, many times from the tongues of Iranian boys". "I know a twenty-six year-old girl whose [maternal] uncle (*dayi*) rapes her," Sara told me. "She can't say anything because it would become clear that she had a boyfriend [before that]". That an uncle would have a coercive incestuous relationship with his niece in the full security of knowing that she could not speak up because doing so would result in criticism being turned on her rather than him, is revolting. But if women expect things to change, they ought to speak up. If those women who find themselves in a position to speak do so, those who have been forced and threatened into silence may have a fighting chance.

And, if women were to have the audacity to claim their bodies as their own and not as goods to be bartered between men, it is not just women who would benefit. When men claim that they desire such things as love and companionship in marriage, they must allow for a structure that allows such emotions to be cultivated. When women cannot claim their sexuality, they are not equal participants in the pleasures of sex, love, and marriage. Is it surprising that they instead select their husbands using criteria based on economic rationality? What else do they have to gain from the marriage contract?

*   *   *

The present moment in the consciousness of many Iranians, including those I interacted with in Montreal and those "back home", is characterized by a seeming conflict between the old and the new, between the "traditional" and the "modern". The

influx of technology during the lifetime of the present generation of youth has certainly changed their world. New patterns of courtship and dating have emerged, aided by the ease of communication using social media. Sexuality is more openly discussed among youth than among the previous generation (Mahdavi 2009). However, I contend that despite these changes, many of the values surrounding marriage and sexuality still remain. Mahdavi (2009) claims that the secular youth of upper Tehran are leading a "sexual revolution", but her work focuses solely on this group. Afary (2009) also alludes to an incomplete sexual revolution in the works in Iran, citing the feminist movement that is ongoing.

Mahdavi's work unfortunately disregards many issues of class and gender differences. While she does discuss the issue of virginity, she ignores the dynamics of virginity imperatives, even while telling us the story of an interlocutor whose fiancée committed suicide after he told her the marriage was off when she did not bleed after they first had sex. Perhaps Mahdavi's idea of a sexual revolution is based on the fact that the women she is working with *have* acknowledged and claimed their own sexual pleasure, something that I did not observe with my own interlocutors, although I must admit that this may have been partially due to the short period for data collection and the lack of a prolonged period in which to get to know people and conduct multiple interviews. But there's a caveat: the women Mahdavi describes are engaging in their "sexual revolution" in semi-private conditions. They have sex before marriage, but not with men they expect to marry, to whom they perform virginity. Some, as men do with women, drive to poorer parts of Tehran in order to pick up young men for sex. At the same time they are desperately in search of a husband who will meet their economic needs, with many of them pursuing lavish lifestyles of constant partying and going to beauty parlours. They do not feel complete without a husband, and thus subject the unmarried to harsh scrutiny. Marriage and "conjugal debt" (which I take to mean the concept of meeting the sexual needs of one's husband, or *tamkin*) are among her interlocutors' favourite topics of discussion, Mahdavi tells us.

In my view, the situation described by Mahdavi does not represent a sexual revolution, but rather, a rupture between private and public life. I believe that meaningful change for women can only come when the personal meets the political; that is, when

these issues women have long managed secretly and in private are brought to, and discussed in, the public sphere. The behaviours Mahdavi regards as subversive and revolutionary remain enmeshed in a social structure that emphasizes and normalizes male dominance and privilege (Sadeghi 2009), and privatizes and genders women's situation and concerns (Phillips and Cole 2013). I contend that the changes in behaviour observed by Mahdavi are not accompanied by changes in deeply engrained ways of thinking about sexuality and virginity, that, in particular, make life more difficult for women, and result in marriages that are not based on mutual understanding and equality. Moreover, these recent changes, without a change in thought and value systems, are dangerous for women, as is painfully clear in the case of the young woman whose uncle rapes her as a sort of "blackmail". A true sexual revolution means the opening up of a space in which egalitarian sexual relationships are conceivable, and working towards such a goal. If there is to be such a revolution, I would be glad to play my part in it.

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