

Marriage and Motherhood: Influences on Women's Power in Sexual Relationships

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This paper examines how the institutions of “marriage” and “motherhood” shape married women’s power in their sexual relationships with their spouse. Specifically, we analyze whether, how, and under what conditions marriage and motherhood can enhance or inhibit married women’s ability to negotiate sex, negotiate condom use, have any say in their partner’s extramarital relations, or leave a partner if they desire. As part of this analysis, we also examine women’s and men’s own perceptions of marriage and motherhood. Our study takes place in the urban slums of Bangalore city, in southern India.

Justification: Social science researchers have most often examined women’s status, power, autonomy or gender inequalities as determinants of fertility or child mortality, or, more recently, of sexual and reproductive health outcomes (Blanc, 2001). Where women’s power or status has been examined as an outcome itself, studies have most often analyzed education, employment, family structure or social, cultural and economic status as its determinants (e.g., Malhotra and Mather, 1997). In many developing countries, including India, the two social institutions which often most define a woman’s life are marriage and motherhood. Researchers from demographic and sociological perspectives have examined entry into marriage and its consequences for young women in terms of outcomes such as reproductive health status, education, and opportunities for employment. However, only a few discuss the influence of marriage on sexuality and sexual negotiation (Wolff et al., 2000), and there is very limited discussion in the literature of “motherhood” as an institution along with marriage.

Our paper contributes to the literature in several ways. First, our paper focuses specifically on how the institutions of marriage and motherhood influence women’s power in their sexual relationships with their spouse, that is, their ability to negotiate sex, negotiate condom use, have any say in their partner’s extramarital relations, or leave a partner if they desire. Second, to date, few studies have explored men’s perspectives on marriage and sexual relationships. In this paper, we examine both men’s and women’s perspectives on and experiences of marriage and sexual relationships. Finally, in addition to analyzing the constraints these institutions place on women’s power vis-à-vis sexual and marital relations, we also explore the ways in which women create spaces within the contexts of marriage and motherhood to negotiate their sexual and marital environments.

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Our focus on power in sexual relations within marriage is motivated in part by a growing recognition that women's susceptibility to HIV and other sexually-transmitted infections is likely to be heightened within the marital context since typically they do not have the right to refuse or negotiate sex with their spouse. There is also increasing discussion, though limited empirical evidence, of how young women's ability to negotiate sex and condom use is constrained by familial and social pressure to prove fertility. However, there is a dearth of empirical data on the ways in which the institutions of "marriage" and "motherhood" shape women's power and contribute to women's susceptibility to HIV. Our study addresses this gap.

Study Description and Data: This analysis uses qualitative data from research on gender, power, and HIV conducted in Karnataka state, India, from 2002 - 2006. Research was conducted as part of a collaborative research program between Samuha/Samraksha, an NGO based in Bangalore city, and two US-based organizations, the University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW).

In 2003 and 2004 focus group discussions (FGDs, with 3-6 people per discussion) and in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with married men and women of varying age-groups. Nineteen FGDs and 20 IDIs were conducted with women, while 8 FGDs and 16 IDIs were conducted with men. These data have been coded and analyzed using Atlas-ti qualitative software. Analyses are exploring differences by participants' sex, age, number of years married, number of children, occupation, and educational attainment.

Preliminary Findings and Proposed Further Analyses: Preliminary analysis of the transcripts reveals that both men and women consider marriage and motherhood key in defining a woman. Further, marriage and motherhood define very clear, largely restrictive spheres of being for women. Married women have limited power to control their sexual experiences with their husbands or to discuss condom use. Infidelity is the norm among men, who often use condoms with their extramarital partners, but rarely – if ever – with their wives. They expect their wives to be available for sex at any time, and to be naïve about sex and contraception until their husbands teach them. Women also have limited control over motherhood, specifically, when and how many children they have. Real or suspected infertility is dreaded as it could lead to further loss of status as a woman, or being thrown out of the house.

In brief: there are very rigid norms for a "good" woman – she is one who is a "good" wife and mother, who accepts everything her husband does and wants, who is naïve about sex, who has no ambitions beyond serving her husband and managing her home, and who bears children. Both women and men are acutely aware of their expected roles, and of the constraints placed on women by marriage, in particular, and motherhood to a lesser degree. Women voice strongly negative views about marriage, sex and husbands. On the contrary, men voice strongly favorable views about marriage, sex, and the idea of having a wife. Our paper analyzes how these roles, norms, and expectations of marriage and motherhood, change over the marital life cycle. We examine whether and how these are

influenced by age, stage of life, education and employment status, and how they relate to women's potential vulnerability to HIV and STIs.

Through this analysis, we learn that marriage and motherhood are not unequivocally restrictive. On the contrary, women do create spaces for resistance and negotiation within these contexts. First, several respondents discuss how conforming to expected roles -- being a 'good' wife and mother -- gives them the leeway to then make other demands, whether for timing of sex, or other issues in their marital lives. For example, as the person most responsible for the children's well-being, a woman can use her role as a responsible mother to negotiate some space for herself. Because of her responsibility for her children, she can justify getting a job and not sharing her earnings with her husband, refuse sex, chide her husband about irresponsible behaviors, and even sometimes leave her husband and re-marry. We explore further the extent to which women use their conformity to traditional roles to gain agency, and discuss where this situation falls in relation to the concept of 'empowerment'.

Second, women may create spaces for negotiation by highlighting familial and societal expectations regarding men's duties and responsibilities as husbands and fathers. A "good" husband is supposed to provide for his wife and family. Men's consumption of alcohol, and violence against a wife, are tolerated so long as a man still performs his expected duties. If he reneges on his role as provider, a wife then has social sanction to act. She can earn and withhold those earnings from him, she can refuse him sex, she can call on the family and community to support her, and she can leave him with no slur on her character. In our paper, we explore how programs addressing women's and men's vulnerability to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections may take into account the constraints and opportunities posed by the institutions of "marriage" and "motherhood."

References

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