



Women exercising sexual agency in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the sexual agency exercised by married Muslim women in Bandung, Indonesia, in their marital relationships. Dominant discourses teach that women should obey their husbands, and most women believe that they should serve their husbands sexually whenever required. Sex is a taboo subject and women should not discuss sex or initiate sex. Their sexual desire is not acknowledged. However, in-depth interviews with 42 married women, and some husbands, found that a few exceptional women managed to challenge or negotiate around these dominant discourses. The paper examines their exercise of agency with regard to the initiation of sex, positions and practices that they prefer, their ability to say no to sex, ways to avoid having sex and their demand for mutual pleasure in sex.

1. Introduction

This paper explores women's understanding and reported practice of sex in marriage in Bandung city, West Java, Indonesia. It first establishes the dominant, cultural and religious discourses about sex that prevail in Indonesia, and the Islamic teachings and cultural norms that shape women's understandings. Interview data show that most women follow these teachings and norms, the main thrust of which is that women understand that, in marriage, for men, sex is a right, and for women, a duty. Women feel that if their husband wants to have sex, they must obey. The main body of the paper, however, focuses on women exercising agency in their sexual relationships with their husbands. After discussing some theoretical aspects of agency, the paper examines a. how women express their desire to have sex to their husbands when dominant discourses teach that women should not initiate sex; b. how women express how they want to have sex; c. how women say no to their husbands' requests for sex; d. how women manage to avoid having sex; and e. how women claim sexual pleasure. The main argument is that, in some contexts, some exceptional women can exercise agency, negotiating and even challenging dominant discourses about sex.

The following section presents the dominant discourses on marriage and sexuality in Indonesia according to the academic literature. We argue that in Indonesia, religion and the state have significant influence in controlling women's sexuality. However, Indonesia is famously diverse, with hundreds of ethnic identities, cultures and languages. The Indonesian state has mostly worked to homogenise local cultures, to

create a unified Indonesia, and the 1974 Marriage Law is a good example of such efforts (see below).

2. Dominant discourses on marriage and sexuality: Indonesia context and Islamic perspectives

2.1. The Indonesia Context

Marriage in Indonesia is almost universal and represents an important phase of life. Marriage establishes a new household and marks the achievement of adult economic and social status. A man and a woman should only engage in sexual relations within marriage. The 1974 Marriage Law states that husbands are the heads of families, and that wives are household managers or housewives (Republic of Indonesia, Marriage Law of 1974, Article 31, point 3). Although the implementation of law is commonly weak in Indonesia, this statement, that husbands are the heads of families, is known and accepted throughout Indonesia, no doubt partly because it echoes an Islamic injunction (e.g. Qur'an 4:34).¹

Marriage also signifies the recognition of women's gendered role in society and in the nation. In Indonesia, the gender role attached to women is that of responsibility for the home and family, managing the household, serving the husband and taking care of the children. Men's duty is in the public sphere, as provider, protector and representative of the family (Blackwood, 1995; Robinson, 2009; Suryakusuma, 1996). This gender ideology was taught systematically through school, family, community events and government policies and development

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¹ References to the Qur'an in English can be found in Ali (1993).

programmes during the New Order era (1966–1998).

During the *Reformasi* era, after the downfall of Suharto in 1998, this gender ideology was challenged by many gender activists promoting democracy and human rights. They demanded more equal relations between women and men, encouraged women's participation in the public sphere, in politics, in education, in employment as well as at home (Brenner, 2011; White & Anshor, 2004).

Nevertheless, although the Suharto regime has long ended, its gender ideology remains intact. The state gender ideology influences the gender relations of everyday life and has become a stereotype that governs the allocation of roles between males and females in Indonesian society. Robinson (2009) argues that this state gender ideology has failed to consider diverse gender practices throughout Indonesia. The government has reduced the roles of men and women to the public and private spheres respectively.

Marriage in Indonesia focuses on reproduction. The success of marriage is measured by the presence of children. Parker (2008a, p. 23) showed that there is a close connection between marriage, sexuality and procreation and this sacred triangle is both “the ideal and the norm” in Indonesia. Married women are assessed for their ability to satisfy their husbands' sexual needs and for their reproductive capacity. A childless marriage is viewed as pitiful. It is assumed to be the woman's fault and may become the excuse for her husband to either divorce her or engage in polygynous marriage (Koenjtaraningrat, 1985).²

The dominant gender ideology deployed by the New Order regime presumed normative heterosexuality (Blackwood, 2010; Wieringa, 2012). Heteronormativity “informs the normativity of daily life, including institutions, laws and regulations that impact on the sexual and reproductive lives of members of society as well as the moral imperatives that influence people's personal lives” (Wieringa, 2012, p. 518). According to this norm, socially standard and normal sexual activity occurs only between a man and a woman who are married to each other.

Research on women's sexuality in Indonesia is limited, though there has been a recent upturn (e.g. Bennett & Davies, 2015). Bennett has made a significant contribution with her work on single Muslim women's sexuality in Lombok (2005). She explored single women's identities, expression of desires, relationships and lifestyles prior to marriage. She reported that for single women, the social regulation of women's sexuality is emphasised by guarding their purity. Virginity is highly valued before marriage and guarding one's reputation is an important aspect of being a prospective wife (Bennett, 2005a, 2005b). (See also Idrus, 2003 on the Bugis).

Likewise, research on married women's sexuality is quite limited. Sexual experiences and sexuality within the marital relationship in Indonesia are considered private. Lily Zakiah Munir (2002) investigated power within the marital sexual relationship in Java. She found that Javanese marriage is “a hierarchical-based relationship”, and that sexual relations are based on inequality (Munir, 2002, p. 193). She noted that Javanese tradition and a gender-biased interpretation of Islamic teaching supported each other in promoting women's sexual subordination (Munir, 2002).

The discussion of desire and pleasure is also absent from academic discussion of women's sexuality, partly because of the difficulty of conducting research on this topic. Taboo, shame and silence characterise the discussion of female sexuality. Bennett (2005a) notes that it is not easy for women to explore sexual desires and pleasure in Indonesia. As Jennaaway (2003) reports, their desires are denied in the Indonesian cultural context. Women's sexuality is controlled and regulated. The woman should be passive and submissive, should not be seen to “want sex”, and sexual relations should aim at reproduction (Wieringa, Katjasungkana, & Hidayana, 2007).

² The absence of a child in a marriage is a justification for a man to marry polygynously. (See Indonesian Marriage Law 1974 chapter VIII: 41a).

In general, women are ordered to control their desire. In Makassar, where the majority are Muslim, Idrus (2003) reported that daughters should be closely monitored and guarded by male family members to protect the family honour (*siri*). The women, therefore, should guard their behaviour, which includes not flirting with men or engaging in sex (Idrus, 2003). Similarly, in Lombok, single women have to be polite and refined to avoid damaging their reputation as respectable prospective wives (Bennett, 2005a). In Bali, where most people are Hindus, single women also should not act too aggressively, dress modestly and guard their chastity (Jennaaway, 2002), while married women should be “neither seductive nor lustful” (Parker, 2001, p. 182).

Religion, Islam in particular, mostly shares prescriptions with *adat* concerning women's sexuality (Bennett, 2005a; Idrus, 2003; Munir, 2002; Platt, 2010). They reinforce each other to control women's body and sexuality. For example, the notion of *zina*, an Islamic term for illicit sexual relations, is emphasised more for women than for men. Men who commit *zina* are more tolerated than women (Bennett, 2005b). Women maintain their good reputation in public by choosing appropriate dress. Veiling (wearing the Islamic headscarf, *jilbab*) is one form of controlling the female body and both male and female sexuality (Parker, 2008b; Smith-Hefner, 2007).

2.2. Islamic perspectives

The primary definition, purpose and meaning of marriage in Islam is that it is a contractual deed to organise the sexual life of man and woman in a lawful manner to form family in society. The contract has individual and social significance. It is the contract that permits two persons to engage in sex, which was previously forbidden them, in accordance with the social and religious consensus. However, dominant understandings are that this sexual engagement gives priority to a man to enjoy sex from a woman and not the other way around.³ This definition of marriage is usually used by men to claim that sex in marriage is the husband's right.

Marriage also allocates rights and obligations in marriage for both partners. Two basic duties and rights that are believed to be complementary, and have almost become the consensus among the majority of jurists, are *nafaqa* (Ind. *nafkah*; maintenance) for the husband and *ta'at* (obedience) for the wife. *Nafaqa* is material support that the husband is obliged to provide when he enters married life. This idea is referred to in Q. 2: 233 and Q. 4: 34 (see below). *Ta'at* is considered a wife's duty towards her husband. Most jurists agree that because a husband gives *nafaqa*, he deserves her obedience (Zuhayli, 1985). The idea was derived from Q. 4: 34 which seems to say that the man is ‘in charge of’ the woman:

Men are the protectors and maintainers of (*qawwamun 'ala*) women, because Allah has given the one more (strength) (*faddala*) than the other, and because they support them from their means.

Traditional interpreters argue that men have authority over women in financial matters (Thabari, 1992), and this is expanded to other aspects, such as the mental and physical superiority of men over women, such that men are more rational and stronger than women, who are considered weaker and more emotional (Dunn & Kellison, 2010).

Reformist Muslim scholars understand this verse differently, arguing that privileges and responsibilities are conditional, and that as men and women are partners in marriage, their responsibilities are interdependent (Abu Zayd, 2000; Al-Hibri, 1982; Wadud, 1999). Aboe El Fadl (2001) argues that when both wife and husband contribute to the family income, they share the guardianship of each other. Ali

³ In Islam, the word for marriage is *nikah*, or *zawaj*. Shafi'i jurists define *nikah* as “a contract that grants [the two parties] a permissible sexual enjoyment (*milk wath'*) using the word *inkah* (*n-k-h*) or *tazwij* (*z-w-j*)” (Al-Jaziry, 2003, p. 8). Definitions by other jurists have similar meanings, many specifically recognising *nikah* as a contract that allows a man to enjoy a woman sexually (Al-Jaziry, 2003). For more on this see Riyani, 2016.

(2006) argues that sexuality as described in the Qur'an is based on "mutual consent and reciprocal desires surrounding lawful sexuality" (p. xxv) but has been perverted by many Islamic jurists based on a hierarchical relation between husband and wife in married life. She criticises the *fiqh* (jurisprudential) texts of marriage and sexuality as the jurists tend to classify it under the term "*milk*", which means "ownership, dominion or control" (p. xxv), as the basis for lawful sexual activity. Jurists generally view the marriage contract as "an exchange of lawful sexual access for dower, and continued sexual availability for support" (Ali, 2006, p. 13).

In fact, there are mutual duties and rights stated in the Qur'an: (1) to treat each other adequately (Q. 4: 19); (2) to create marriage in mutual love and affection (Q. 30: 21); and (3) to protect the family from any harm and misconduct (Q. 66: 6). However, traditional attitudes that accept the 'livelihood for sex' transaction in Islam are still considered the standard among Muslims in many countries. The traditional Islamic law regulating marriage and sexuality is still the dominant influence in many Muslim countries, but there have been many recent attempts to reform the law in Indonesia as well as other Muslim countries. Progressive Muslim thinkers such as those cited in the previous paragraph suggest marriage reform to accommodate egalitarian relationships between the sexes, to consider diverse practices among Muslim societies, and to ensure fairness for all.

3. Agency theory

Agency has become an "indispensable theoretical category" (Ortner, 2001, p. 77) – arguably the key word of both practice theory in anthropology and feminist anthropology and sociology. Agency has become indispensable in the study of social contexts where there are dominant, if not hegemonic, discourses, regulations and norms, because a focus on agency enables us to see that in the face of dominant power, subordinated and marginalised groups and individuals make room to move. They are not passive recipients, captives of dominant discourses. Agency is this capacity to negotiate with power in whatever form – as complicity, compromise, deviance, or resistance – and with whatever motivation – whether it be intentional or unintentional, voluntary or involuntary, self-expression, self-interest or group interest. Given the strength of dominant discourses around marriage and sexuality in Bandung, we found the concept of agency useful because women did not always comply with the dominant norms and teachings.

Following Ahearn (2001), this paper takes agency as "the socio-culturally mediated capacity to act" (p. 112). Thus, agency is context-specific, in that it occurs in socio-cultural contexts that both circumscribe women and enable women to exercise agency (Parker, 2005a, 12). One woman's agentic action in one cultural context may be interpreted as docility or radical deviance in another and may differ from one individual woman to another according to religion, class or ethnicity. It is only by considering the specific cultural context that one can gauge the meaning and importance of any particular exercise of agency (Parker, 2005b).

Women tend to exercise agency in the interstices of dominant power. The exercise of agency can take many forms: honing communication skills, reflecting upon experiences, imitating relationships that seem successful, drawing on family, colleagues and friend networks for support and suggestions, and constructing meanings for actions and identities. Women's agency in everyday life, in their 'lived social relations' (McNay, 2004), might not change the world but the exercise of agency can change the conditions under which women live, and even the course of their lives. Nevertheless, for the most part, we found that women tried to negotiate gendered power relations that eventually instantiated male-centeredness in marital sexual relationships. The perceptions and behaviour of the women were still strongly shaped by cultural norms, legal regulations and religious prescriptions. Agency in their sexual relationships with their husbands was "interactively negotiated" over many years in daily life (Ortner, 2006, p. 151).

The exercise of agency can equate to outright rejection and challenge, but more commonly, as in our case, agency was a matter of negotiating around dominant norms to enable women to further their own interests. These negotiation processes can be seen to follow what Kandiyoti called the "patriarchal bargain" (1988, p. 275). Bargaining with patriarchy means the women's strategies to further their own interests left the patriarchy undisturbed (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Nevertheless, the diversity of women's practices and experiences were such that we could see a few individuals carving deviant paths that implied the in-validity of norms and teachings, even if this disagreement was not overt or explicit. A few women exercised a more muscular agency that equated to the "re-signification or the displacement of hegemonic meaning to create space for subversive gender practices" (McNay (2008, p. 167).

In this study, the *possible* agency is the women's capacity to act and to negotiate with their husbands in three aspects: firstly, lessening the husband's dominance in sexual relationships; secondly, encouraging the husband to recognise women's desire; thirdly, pursuing mutual pleasure.

4. Original study and findings

This paper draws upon a larger study by the first author (Riyani, 2016) that examined how Islam influences discourses of sexuality in Indonesia, and in particular how Islamic teachings influence Muslim married women's perceptions and behaviour in their sexual relationships with their husbands. Fieldwork was conducted in Bandung, the capital city of the province of West Java.

West Java is inhabited by more than 43 million people (BPS Jawa Barat, 2011). West Javanese people are usually called *urang sunda* (Sundanese) and this is the dominant ethnic group in this region (Suryadinata, Arifin, & Ananta, 2003). The Sundanese have a different language, culture and history to the Javanese in central and eastern Java.

Historically, women have a high status and are respected in Sundanese society. While today the Sundanese are Muslim, there are still diverse religious beliefs which call upon a pre-Islamic cosmology. For instance, Sunan Ambu is the highest female deity in the celestial world (*kahyangan*), and Nyi Pohaci Sanghiang Sri is the agrarian goddess who provides rice paddies (Tohari, 2013). Scholars believe that following the occupation of Sunda by the Javanese kingdom of Mataram in 1575, there was a shift in Sundanese culture from a rather egalitarian society to a more feudal society (Adimihardja, 1980; Ekadjati, 1995; Kahmad, 2006).

There have been a number of studies of women in West Java. Researchers have focused on women labouring in factories (Hancock, 2001; Matter, 1985; Warouw, 2004, 2008); home industrial employment (Grijns, 1987; Silvey, 2004); adolescent sex workers (Beazley, 2015; Sano, 2012); maternal and infant mortality (Iskandar, Utomo, Hull, Dharmaputra, & Azwar, 1996; Shefner-Rogers, 2004; Utomo, 1996); circumcision and family planning (Newland, 2006, 2001); domestic violence (Binahayati, 2011); the implementation of Islamic *sharia* and its effect on women's wellbeing (Suhadi, 2004; Turmudi, 2004); and women's participation in Sundanese Islam (Millie, 2011). Few studies, however, have examined gender relations, especially in marriage and sexuality, in this region.

The main fieldwork methodology was in-depth interviews of 42 Muslim women, with some repeat interviews, and interviews with some of their husbands. Five of the 42 women are divorced, four are widowed and one is separated from her husband.⁴ The participants' ages are between 18 and 59 years, and their occupations ranged from

⁴ We do not discuss the issue of divorce in this paper, for reasons of space. However, see Riyani, 2016 for discussion of agency among divorcées, which partly uses this same set of participants.

housewives (6), housekeeper (1), petty traders (5) to teachers (20) and lecturers (7). The participants were selected from different educational and economic backgrounds in order that data would come from a range of different experiences and understandings. The participants' educational backgrounds varied, from women who had never finished primary school to women who had a doctorate: never finished primary school (3), finished primary school (6), junior secondary school (2), and senior high school (16). Fifteen of the 16 women who had completed senior high school continued their study at university: diploma (2), bachelor's degree (4), master's degree (3), and doctoral degree (4). A feminist ethnographic approach was used to gather data, exploring women's expectations, desires and practices in marital sexual relationships.

Some of the interviewed women had had the opportunity for a long courtship while others barely knew their partner prior to marriage. Many women were shy and fearful of their first sexual experience. Their lack of knowledge about sexuality and the taboos surrounding talk about sexuality made them vulnerable in their marital sexual relationships. The study found that women have inadequate opportunity to express and explore their sexual desires in marriage.

The interviewed women perceive marriage as a social, cultural and religious obligation they need to fulfil. Most women consider a sexual relationship in marriage as their duty and their husband's right. In this situation it was difficult for most women to refuse sex. Religious and cultural discourses justify and support this view and consider refusal a sin (*dosa*) or taboo (*pamali*). Both discourses emphasise obedience towards husbands in marriage. Islamic teachings about sexuality were very influential and these teachings were perceived as guidance for the marital sexual relationship. Women obtained religious knowledge from various sources, such as marriage guidance manuals, the *kitab* (classical Islamic textbooks) and *pengajian* (religious gatherings), and these play a significant role in directing their perceptions of, and behaviour in, their everyday marital relationships. In fact, Islamic teachings both support and proscribe women's expression of sexual desire in marriage. Unfortunately, the supportive teachings were not well known among women, compared to proscriptive teachings. The latter, male-dominated sources justify and sustain the normative gender ideology that teaches that in heteronormative relationships males are active and superior and females passive and inferior.

5. Women exercising sexual agency

The dominant discourses on marriage and sexuality shape the production and nature of desire. These social, cultural, religious and political discourses regulate the structure of desire and the context in which desires should and should not emerge; they define 'normal' and 'abnormal', appropriate and inappropriate sex (Schwartz & Rutter, 1998). Within this context, some women adopt strategies to negotiate their sexual preference in their marital sexual relationships.

The main body of the paper presents the voices of these few women participants in this study who sometimes negotiate with their husbands about their preferences during sex. These agentic women are able to express their desires in many aspects of sex: a. the initiation of sex; b. how they wanted to have sex; c. saying no to their husbands' requests for sex; d. avoiding sex and keeping sexual activity to a minimum. This paper also presents e. how women mobilise strategies to experience pleasurable sex. In all these stages, we can see women exercising agency.⁵ The paper does not discuss non-agentic women, who did not discuss sex with their husbands, and submissively complied with their husbands' demands for sex even though they objected to these demands.

⁵ Other aspects of the women's sexual relationships – for instance, their knowledge of sex prior to marriage, their courtship experiences, expectations of marriage, "first night" experiences, contraception, violence – are discussed at length in Riyani, 2016.

5.1. Initiating sex

There are times when women desired to engage in sex with their husbands. Several women would rather wait and not talk to the husband about it or initiate sex. However, a few women dared to initiate sex to the husbands, verbally or symbolically, i.e. using body language.

An interesting story is told by Halimah (aged 31), who, without hesitation, would ask her husband to have sex. She would offer it to her husband: "Do you want it (*hoyong teu*, i.e. sex)?" Her husband would answer, "Yes I do, but I am tired right now." Then, Halimah would reply: "Just relax, you do not have to do anything, let me handle that (*biar mamah nu ngeol*)." Her husband would agree. Halimah said, "I heard from *pengajian* that if the wife asks the husband to have sex, she will get *pahala* (reward) from Allah." Further, she said that sex in married life is very important for her. She wants to make the sex in her marriage special so that her husband will always long for it. Based on her experience, this works really well for her marriage. Her husband is affectionate to her and spoils her with gifts.

Rosa, on the other hand, put sex last in her marriage. She is usually unwilling to have sex. However, she experienced a high sexual urge when she was pregnant and would dare herself to tell her husband about her sexual desire and to have sex:

My sexual desire increased significantly during the fourth month of my pregnancy. But my husband worked in another city and when I wanted to have sex and called him to come home, he did not come. Maybe because it was not the weekend yet.

In this case, although Rosa tried to initiate sex, her husband did not comply with her request because of the distance between them. However, some women felt embarrassed if they initiated sex and then were rejected. Leli experienced an uncomfortable feeling about it. She said:

Once I asked my husband to have sex, but he refused. Maybe it was because he was not in the mood. I was really disappointed and irritated. To ask for it, I had to gather all my courage and when he refused, not only was I embarrassed, but also hurt (*sakit hati*).

Although in the end, Leli's husband apologised to her for what had happened, Leli told herself that she would never initiate sex with her husband ever again. When a husband refuses, the wife's proposal stands out, highlighting her unconventional offer and declaration of desire. An unfulfilled wife might try to find rationality behind his refusal, as indicated above. A woman has no language with which to speak out about her desire because she is trained to silence her desire. Both Rosa and Leli mentioned how they had to psyche themselves up, gathering their courage to propose sex. A woman is not supposed to initiate sex, because it is the man's job to do so; a woman is only expected to respond. When a woman initiates sex, this could mean that she is taking control, which may damage her husband's pride. One woman said, "My husband believes that man is in charge of woman (referring to Qur'anic verse Q.S 4: 34 '*arrijalu qawwamuna ala nisa'*) and that includes sexual activity" (Sandra, aged 57). Research by Munir (2002) among Javanese women showed that inequality in sexual relations was influenced not only by Javanese tradition but also by Islamic precepts, including the verse cited above to claim male power over women.

Some women indicated that they have initiated sex, but when they did their husband teased them about it, which made them embarrassed. Consequently, many women say they tend not to do so. Hera (aged 28) said: "As a woman I am shy to ask for sex, so I'd rather not." Many women have never initiated sex (nor intend to), for fear of their husband's (unpleasant) perception of them as sexually experienced or lustful.

To avoid such embarrassment or the risk of being labelled, several women have developed their own strategies for initiating sex without saying anything openly, but using body language. They use indirect invitations such as they beautify themselves, or use perfume, or give a

massage. Sandra (aged 57), for example, said, “Whenever I want to do it [i.e. have intercourse], I dress up nicely, put on my make-up and perfume to attract him.” Another woman, Eha (aged 29), said: “Whenever I want to have sex (*berhubungan*) I touch my husband's private parts and he understands.” Nisa (aged 37) said, “If I want it, I give him a massage so that he understands what I want”. In many cases, the husbands notice these signs and happily acquiesce. One woman, Nida (aged 25), said “My husband almost never refuses to take part.”

5.2. Expressing how they want to have sex

In Indonesia, information about sex and sexuality is not widely available.⁶ Consequently, women have limited, if any, information concerning sex and sexuality prior to marriage. To a certain extent, this affects their sexual interaction with their husbands and makes it difficult for them to express how they want to have sex. Many of the women just comply with their husbands' instruction. Many women are only familiar with one style, which is the so-called “missionary position”, with the man on top, facing the woman. Some women had tried different positions, as instructed by their husbands. Siti (aged 40) for example said:

I told my husband to let us just do the ordinary position (*posisi biasa*) [missionary position] because we are respectable people and do not do weird positions like animals [referring to doggy style].

Mia (aged 25), told me that:

I do not mind doing different positions as asked by my husband as long as it's not anal sex or sex while I have my period because these are forbidden in Islam. I also do not want to do it with the woman on top or in a sitting position because I heard that it would damage both spouses' renal systems.

Several other women confirmed that they would comply with their husbands' requests for different positions during intercourse except for anal sex. Most women knew that anal sex is forbidden in Islam. However, when they felt uncomfortable having sex in unusual positions they would only tell the husband afterward, not while they were doing it. One woman, Edah (aged 43), said that, “If I feel uncomfortable when in such positions, I tell my husband afterwards, not while we are doing it, because it usually ruins his desire.” Another woman, Aas (aged 28), also said that she usually discussed sex positions with her husband and if she felt uncomfortable having sex in some position, she would say to her husband afterwards, “The position that we just did was not that enjoyable for me.” According to some women, trying different positions for sex is necessary, and is related to the duration of intercourse. They communicate with their husbands, telling him the positions that make sex last longer and be more comfortable for them.

Apart from sexual positions, several women also negotiate when to have sex. Several women objected to their husband's demand for sex every day. Iis (aged 40) said:

I am disturbed by my husband's sexual desire: he wants to have sex every day. I feel too tired and unwell to do it that often. I complain to him that he needs to control his desire and make a schedule for having sex. But he gets angry and accuses me of having an affair with another man instead. My husband states that if he misses having sex one day his body feels stiff and fatigued.

Iis said that having sex every day detracts from her worship time. Her husband tried fasting as it is believed to decrease sexual desire, but it did not work. Iis married her husband in 1994 and had been married for 18 years at the time of interview.

⁶ Although resources related to sexual intercourse can be found easily on the internet nowadays, not many married women access them as they consider them “*jorok*” – filthy or vulgar.

Thus, some women negotiate over positions and timing in order to make sex more bearable, comfortable and enjoyable. Some of the husbands comply with their wives' requests while others are irritated by their demands. However, it is obvious that women try continuous negotiation over the frequency of sex and sexual positions.

5.3. Saying no to husbands' requests for sex

There are times when women do not want to have sex. Many women said that when they were tired after working all day they would just go to bed early or sleep in the children's bedroom so that their husbands would not disturb them. Some of the husbands would notice and understand, while others would not. Those who noticed how their wife was feeling would restrain from having sex that night but some would be disappointed or complain; some would get angry and some would forcibly have sex even while the wife was sleeping, without her consent.

Rani said: “My sexual desire decreases whenever I am having economic difficulties. I do not think about sex.” Once she refused her husband who returned from looking for a job in the city empty-handed. She said to him, “No, no, go away. You'd better look for a job and bring me money instead.” When there is no income she becomes worried and dislikes her husband for not trying hard enough to find a job. But one night she saw her husband masturbating and questioned him. Her husband argued that because she did not want to have sex with him, he masturbated.

Another woman, Ijah (aged 59), said: “When my husband wants to have sex but I don't, I never respond to him. When he penetrates me, my body is stiff like a dead banana trunk (*gedebog cau*).”

For many women, sex is not only about a physical union but also involves romantic feelings and intimacy. When a wife cannot love her husband fully, it can influence their sexual relations. Ina (aged 33) said that, “Once I refused my husband when we were about to have intercourse because I suddenly didn't feel like it. I still could not love my husband and it affects me sexually.”

5.4. Avoiding sex and keeping sexual activity to a minimum

Several women devise strategies to excuse themselves from having sex with their husbands whenever they feel unwilling. Some of them pretend to fall asleep or go to bed earlier, sleep in their children's bed or wrap themselves tightly around the bottom to prevent their husband from being able to access their lower half. Some reasons they gave for being unwilling to have sex were fatigue, being unwell, pregnancy, having recently given birth, conflict, economic difficulty, husband's infidelity and abusive behaviour. These factors influence women's desire.

One woman, Tia (aged 36), said: “If I am tired, I fall asleep straight away, because I do not want to have sex.” Aas (aged 28) added that, “If I do not want to have sex, my husband also does not want to do it because it will not be enjoyable for him if I do not respond.” Rani (aged 43) said:

When I am tired I just go to bed early, but sometimes, in the middle of my sleeping, I feel warm in my vagina. I just realise that my husband has already penetrated me while I am sleeping. I am just too sleepy to respond so I just continue my sleeping and ignore what is happening.

A husband's infidelity also disturbs women's desire, especially when the wife realises that the affair involves sex. This was experienced by Nanda (aged 36) whose husband has had an affair with another woman. She knew her husband had had sex with another woman because she could feel that her husband was no longer interested in having sex with her when he came home. “When I found out that my husband had been having an affair and had had sex with her, I did not want to have sex with him. I felt disgust.” Nanda often thinks when she is having intercourse with her husband that he may be infected with sexual diseases

and might transmit a disease to her.

5.5. Claiming sexual pleasure

While many women experience discomfort in sexual relations with their husbands, other women can negotiate with their husbands on how to experience pleasure. One woman argues: “I am a normal human being and I also want to experience orgasm.” (Halimah, aged 31). To build a good understanding concerning their spouse's sexual preferences, good communication is needed. Some couples are quite open in discussing sexual matters, but others are still hesitant. Leli (aged 29) would write down what she wants from her husband concerning sex in their special communication book. For example, once she noticed that her husband seldom asked her to have sex. She shared it with him, writing what she learnt from *pengajian* (religious gathering) about a verse in the Qur'an which states “*nisaukum hartsun lakum*”.⁷ After reading these notes her husband confirmed that it did not mean that he was not interested in sex but that he was concerned about Leli, that she might be tired or unwilling. She further says: “My husband is a very understanding person. In terms of sex he does not want to have pleasure before I experience it. So, timing is very important for us, we never do it when one of us is tired.” Using a communication book is an effective way for them to communicate what they want and what they do not want, and can prevent misunderstandings between them. They can read each other's messages and then discuss.

Sandra (57, Master's degree, lecturer) also pointed to the importance of communication, albeit it took her years to build up the courage to talk to her husband about her lack of sexual pleasure:

In my early years of marriage, I never experienced sexual enjoyment, and I felt down about it and I asked myself why. Then I talked about it to my husband and he understood and now we manage to achieve mutual pleasure.

Tia (aged 36) said:

I told my husband that in sexual relations he should not think only about his sexual satisfaction but that he should hold it until I also reach a climax. That was a Hadith I read in the *pesantren*.⁸

Tia's husband agreed and they even asked each other whether they felt satisfied that night.

Halimah (31, Bachelor's degree, Kindergarten Administrator), mentioned above, elaborated:

I always discuss sex with my husband: what I want and what I do not want. I am a normal human being and I also want to experience orgasm. So, my husband tries hard to make me experience that. Sometimes, I feel powerful when my husband gives up and fails to bring me to orgasm. Later I will ask for compensation in the way of new jewelry or money.

Halimah's experience is quite exceptional compared to other women. There is an ease of communication with her husband concerning sexual matters. They were friends and got married after their university graduation. Halimah said that the key to happiness in marriage is sex. She and her husband always try to reach mutual satisfaction. Having the opportunity to express desire and experience pleasurable sex allowed Halimah and Sandra to manage harmonious marriage relationships.

Orgasm does not happen every time. Several women mentioned that they sometimes reach orgasm while others said they rarely or never experience it. Several women indicated that to reach orgasm they need

their husband to do foreplay. It depends on the husband's skill in stimulating their wives in the beginning as to whether they can have mutual pleasure.

Maya (41, Bachelor's degree, kindergarten teacher) said:

I do not agree with the *Sundanese* proverb *istri mah dulang tinande* (a woman is like a big wooden rice bowl waiting to be filled). A husband should pay attention to how his wife is feeling when he wants to have sex. There is togetherness in sexual relationships and both partners should experience pleasure.

This proverb is popular among the *Sundanese*, suggesting that the wife should obey the husband. However, Maya refused to be like the image described in the proverb, saying that the husband cannot assume the bowl will always be there, ready, willing and able to serve as he wants. Further, she demanded mutuality in her sexual relationship with her partner.

6. Discussion

The interview data reveal several steps in these women's exercise of agency.

Firstly, they are side-stepping, and sometimes challenging head-on, the prescribed cultural and religious norms of appropriate sexual behaviour for women. Sometimes this is explicit, as in Maya's rejection of the *Sundanese* proverb that likens wives to an empty bowl, waiting to be filled, and sometimes not. Some women, such as Halimah, explicitly refused to follow the prescribed norm of femininity that says that women must be shy in relation to sex.

Secondly, they establish a right to a negotiating position. Some women were able to provide religious authority for their agentic actions, e.g. Leli, Tia and Halimah, above, but there were also those (men) who cited Qur'anic texts to authorise male dominance in sexual relations. Sandra was unusual in wondering for years why she did not enjoy sex, and her misery fuelled a determination to do something about it. Behind this wondering must have been a sense or belief that sex should be a pleasure for a woman, and a sense of injustice: why should only men enjoy sex? Perhaps with Sandra we can say that she developed her right to negotiate sex from her sense of injustice. A couple of the agentic women mentioned that they are members of a new generation that does not believe that sex should be a taboo subject: Halimah (aged 31) said:

I am not a product of the older generation who were told that it's inappropriate to express desire openly and taught to be shy and passive. Maya (aged 41) also said:

I am no longer living in my mother's era. I was born in modern times and such 'taboo' issues have been left behind. We discuss what I want and what he wants [sexually]: there is time to give and to get.

Halimah and Maya are university-educated women who have a sense of a changing historical context. They establish their right to negotiate sex out of a sense that norms have changed since their mother's generation and insist upon a new discourse of openness about sex.

Thirdly, these agentic women operationalise their resistance by negotiating with their husbands. Sometimes this takes the form of body language – letting their partners know when they want to have sex – and sometimes verbal expression – letting their partners know when and how they want to have sex. Their exercise of agency in their sexual relationships with their husbands was “interactively negotiated” in daily life (Ortner, 2006, p. 151).

Fourthly, four women manage to have their husbands acknowledge their desire, arguing that the husband should not only care for his own satisfaction but also care for his wife's. They feel they deserve to experience pleasurable sex, and then the couple is able to achieve mutual satisfaction. These women are aiming to achieve pleasurable sex themselves.

It is important to note that the more agentic women were educated and had known their husbands for quite some time before marriage – in

⁷ Q. 2: 223 “your wives are as a tilth unto you (to cultivate); so approach your tilth when or how ye will. But do some good act for your souls beforehand; and fear Allah.”

⁸ The Hadith are the Prophet's sayings, and constitute one of the main sources of authority in Islam, second to the Qur'an. A *pesantren* is an Islamic boarding school.

a couple of cases as friends first. These two notes suggest that the broader historical context mentioned by Halimah and Maya is indeed playing a significant role in changing sexual relations in marriage. Increased education for women (and men) and the shift from arranged marriage to companionate, self-choice and romantic marriage should contribute to restructuring the gender and sexual relations in marital relationships (Jones, 2011).

Lest we become sanguine about the possibilities for change, we want to stress that the negotiation of power relations in marriage was not easy for these women. They needed courage and supportive conditions that enabled them to speak up. This negotiation process affected their personal feelings and sense of self-identity, as they risked the disapproval of their husbands, who might have rejected their overture, and in doing so threaten their sense of being a good woman. Recognition of women's desire should mean that the husband can accommodate women's self-expression, e.g. when women express that they want to have sex, they are free from being teased about their boldness (as experienced by Ina) or being rejected, experiencing embarrassment or denial (as experienced by Leli). Although Ina and Leli said that their husband did not mean to humiliate them for their attempts, these experiences made them reluctant to initiate sexual relations ever again. Thus, successful negotiation needs male participation to support change in sexual relations which recognises women's expression of sexual desire, as well as the need for mutuality and respect.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we presented the views of several women in Bandung who discuss and negotiate their preferences in their sexual relationships with their husbands. They resist the prescribed cultural norms and religious teachings of normative femininity, which repress women's sexual desire. They insist that they have sexual desires that should be attended to by their husbands.

It is important not to downplay the strength of the gendered power relations that instantiate male-centeredness in marital sexual relationships. Remember the women who try to avoid marital rape by sleeping with their children or wrapping themselves in towels when they go to bed. These examples show not only the tactics deployed by women to avoid having sex but also the strength of the dominant norms that say that men have the right to have sex with their wives regardless of their wives' consent or desire. The strength of this discourse is such that the women often felt guilty when avoiding sexual activity. Remember also the woman who is stiff like a banana tree trunk when her husband penetrates her. It is relevant to mention Kecia Ali's proposal of a just sexual relationship with two main concerns: 1) "meaningful consent" and 2) "mutuality" which will bring about a respectful sexual relationship between the partners (Ali, 2006, p. 151). Changes in sexual relations will not be possible unless men participate and support these changes.

In reality, there are only a few women who can exercise agency within the dominant discourse of normative gender ideology. Their negotiations with their husbands can be seen to follow what Kandiyoti called the "patriarchal bargain" (1988, p. 275). Bargaining with patriarchy means that women develop strategies to deal with male domination in different ways within different contexts, such that they optimise their "life options" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p.274). However, as she pointed out in her later article, this bargain has limitations because in many cases the normative discourse remains dominant (Kandiyoti, 1998). This is quite true for our study, where the "bargains" are negotiated within the private domain and leave the wider normative discourse unchanged.

Although replacing this dominant ideology is not easy, it does not mean that it is impossible. Women's consciousness and determination to resist unequal sexual relations can lead to their husbands acknowledging their sexual desire and eventually to mutual respect and sexual satisfaction. Heterosexual relationships are not always based on

domination/subordination, but can also offer the recognition and fulfillment of women's desires and pleasures. These agentic women speak up to their husbands against the prevailing gender ideology and patriarchal structure to gain control over their body and to confirm their existence in their marital relationship as a subject and not merely an object of male desire.

Common factors that helped women to develop their agency were university education; having known their husbands before marriage; having a long marriage; and being a similar age to their partners. Halimah and Maya (both university-educated, aged 31 and 41 respectively) expressed a sense of belonging to a new generation, different to their mothers' generation, but neither absolute age nor generation correlate with agency. Although only a few women had developed the capacity to exercise sexual agency, they are significant because they not only resist common beliefs concerning married women's sexuality but also privately demand equal recognition in their sexual relationships. In fact, they created their own sexual subjectivities, as human beings who deserve to experience sexual pleasure and make active decisions related to sexual choice in marital relationships. These few women exercise a muscular agency that displaces "hegemonic meaning to create space for subversive gender practices" (McNay, 2008, p. 167). It is important to present these few voices, in the hope that there will be a shift in belief and perception towards acknowledging women's sexual rights. This will facilitate women's ability to decide their preference in sexual activities, to control their bodies and to have their sexual desire and pleasure recognised.

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