

NEGOTIATING SEXUAL RIGHTS AMONG WOMEN IN THE PURDAH SYSTEM OF SOKOTO METROPOLIS: A QUALITATIVE ACCOUNT

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Abstract

Women in purdah (WIP) are part of the unheard voices in the global movement for Sexual health and rights because they operate within the limits of religious and cultural prescriptions. Purdah is practiced within the context of Islamic religion. This study examines negotiation of sexual rights among WIP in Sokoto metropolis. The study involved 24 in-depth interviews: 16 WIP and 8 male partners with different age and education categories. Data were analysed using content analysis and ethnographic summary. The study found that sexual rights of women are bounded within socio-cultural limits. Even though certain rights are stipulated by religion, the reality is often different. WIP should be shy from initiating or discussing sexual rights and health with their partners, even though it is religious to do so. Rape within marriage is a common phenomenon in the study area. Most women also resort to aphrodisiac to get sexual satisfaction. Factors concerning women empowerment could however influence negotiation of rights.

Keywords: Women, Purdah, Sexual rights, Islamic religion, Sokoto

Introduction

Negotiating sexual rights¹ is a great challenge to women in purdah² (WIP)

because of prevailing imbalance in gender relations which ensures their minimal

¹ Sexual rights as conceived here is within heterosexual marriage and thus include reproductive rights. These are rights that are derived from the fundamental human rights already existing in the human rights document or constitution of various countries. Such rights include the right to sexual integrity, privacy, freedom of reproductive choices, safety and pleasure free from all form of coercion or violence.

² The literal meaning of purdah is a curtain, but the term is used to designate the practice of secluding women from contact with men outside of the immediate family. This may be accomplished through virtual seclusion in separate quarters in the home, veiling in public, and the provision of segregated public facilities (Papanek, 1973; White, 1977). The practice restricts women's activities and movement; hence they are mostly full-time housewives. The practice is meant to ensure sexual modesty among the women.

appearance in the public sphere through the purdah system. WIP are part of the unheard voices in the era of global movement for Sexual health³ and rights. WHO (2006) conceived SR as embracing certain human rights that are already recognized in national laws, international human rights documents and other consensus documents. SR include right to pleasurable and safe sexual experience free from coercion, discrimination and violence and information to do so.

Generally, ensuring sexual health and rights of women in marriage has been a major challenge in sexuality studies. This is partly because sexual activity for the woman is viewed as more of an obligation than a choice (Tiemoko, 2007) and also because power is invested in these relations (Bhana, 2007). For the women who operate within the limits of religious and cultural prescriptions and proscriptions, negotiating SR becomes challenging and most times problematic. Purdah is practiced within the context of Islamic religion. Even though Islam stipulates some rights of women in marriage, certain socio-cultural contexts greatly influence those rights. Yusuf (2007) observed that there is prevailing practice of substituting or mixing Islamic precepts with cultural values which has affected women's rights as granted by the Islamic legal system. Negotiation for sexual rights is ensued in the process of interaction which might be in dyadic, triadic or small group relations

(within the context of polygynous marriage which is a common practice in the study area). For most WIP in polygynous marriage, they do not only negotiate SR with their husbands, but also with co-wives.

In negotiating for sexual health and rights within marriage, female sexuality is often placed under the husband's control, with women often seen as sexual objects without the right to deny sex and other sexual activities (Bhana, 2007). More often than not, these prescriptions are not usually in favour of women, hence negotiating safer sex within marriage is difficult. Women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS within marriage and the inability to negotiate sex produces unequal gender relations and questions access to sexual rights within marriage (Bhana, 2007). Aniekwu (2002) specifically observed that substantial number of women is infected with HIV/AIDS by their partners.

In northern Nigeria where Islam is the dominant religion, some women are secluded from the public sphere. They are in purdah, and are meant for private sphere. Women in purdah (WIP) are part of the silence voices in the era of HIV/AIDS and global recognition and agitation for SR. The challenge of ensuring SR is a reality among all ethno-religious groups. Yusuf (2007) explained that Islam gives rights (including sexual rights) to women and men, although the reality is usually different. For the WIP who face some forms of restriction, the challenge is enormous. Many WIP have restricted movement; hence they have limited or no access to sexual health services (Yusuf, 2007). Furthermore, most WIP have to compete with co-wives in negotiation for their SR and health. It is evident that there are problems regarding sexual rights in the Sokoto metropolis. NDHS shows about 47.7% and 43.9% of women and men

³Sexual health is a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being in relation to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity. Sexual health requires a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence (WHO, 2006).

(respectively) in north-west region agreed that husband has the right to beat his wife if she refuses sex while only 35.2% agreed that a woman could refuse sex if she is tired (NPC and ORC Macro, 2004). It has also been observed that women's vulnerability to HIV/AIDS is as a result of lack of knowledge and access to information, economic dependence, and inability to negotiate sexual rights (Aniekwu, 2002). In a situation where sexual rights are not guaranteed, it could lead to adverse implication for the prevalence of HIV/AIDS.

Sexuality is a life-long issue and encompasses all aspects of life. One of the foci points in the era of sexuality is right-based agenda. Since the CEDAW convention, there have been tremendous movement towards ensuring the sexual rights of women. So also the ICPD (1994) also projected the discourse on sexual rights as part of the fundamental human rights in all countries. Hence, ensuring sexual rights is part of the human rights framework. Unfortunately, some groups are still deprived of their sexual rights. A positive step in achieving sexual rights of the population is to assess the status, possibilities and constraints to the sexual rights of the population. Especially for the silent voices like the WIP, it is significant to project their condition and initiate program development and implementation for the group. It is within this context that this study examines negotiation of SR among WIP in Sokoto metropolis.

Methodology

This is a survey research which utilized qualitative techniques in data generation. It involved the use of in-depth interview. The analysis of qualitative data was carried out

using content analysis and ethnographic technique.

The study was conducted in Sokoto metropolis. Sokoto metropolis refers to the present day main capital of Sokoto state which comprises of three Local Government Areas namely Wammako, Sokoto North and Sokoto South. The city is known in history as the seat of the caliphate established as a result of the Islamic jihad led by Sheikh Usmanu Ibn Fodiyo. The jihad led to the establishment of an Islamic state. Substantial number of Muslims in the metropolis put their wives in purdah as full-time house wives. This implies that most women are not seen in the public sphere. This ensures economic dependence on male partners. Islam plays important role in family affairs in the study area. Despite the gradual infiltration of urbanism/modernism, this has not completely eroded certain basic values such as the purdah system.

The WIP constitute substantial number of women in Sokoto metropolis. They are usually full-time house-wives and majority are in polygynous union. Putting women in purdah is believed to be an Islamic prescription which most community members adhere to. The sample included women and men in heterosexual marriage. Women in purdah were selected through purposive sampling method for the qualitative data gathering. It involved identification of major areas and household selection. In all 16 in-depth interviews were conducted among WIP and 8 in-depth interviews among male partners of WIP.

In all, 24 respondents were interviewed. This brought out adequate understanding of sexual rights among WIP. It is thus necessary to gather data from both the women and their partners. Tables 1 and 2 show the categories of respondents for the IDI.

Table 1: Categories of Women in IDI

No of IDI	Education Category	Age Category
4	Non-Literate women in purdah	10-35
4	Non-Literate women in purdah	35 and above
4	Literate women in purdah	10-35
4	Literate women in purdah	35 and above

Table 2: Categories of Male Partners of WIP

No of IDI	Education Category	Age Category
2	Non-literate men	20-35
2	Non-literate men	35 and above
2	Literate men	20-35
2	Literate men	35 and above

In gathering the data, female research assistants were trained to conduct interview for the WIP. Oral informed consent was obtained from the women and their partners. The qualitative data generated through IDI were analysed with the use of content analysis and ethnographic summary. This brought out the thematic views through critical evaluation and verbatim quotations. Data reduction involved series of stages. Transcription was verbatim. All notes taken and background information obtained during the qualitative survey were incorporated into the transcriptions. Codes and sub-codes were developed from the objectives of the study data presentation is in prose style and chart.

Results

Nature and Types of SR of WIP

The context of SR of women in general has attracted lots of attention over the years. Apart from being part of the basic human rights, the challenge of HIV/AIDS also stimulate interests in SR. For WIP, their condition affects their types and nature of SR. Being a pure qualitative study, various questions were asked to ascertain the nature and types for SIR of WIP.

Because all the respondents are Hausas and Muslims, issues regarding sexuality were explained with references to culture and religion but within personal experiences or realities. There is gross difficulty in demarcating between what is cultural or religious. Regardless of their conditions, the entire WIP interviewed reported that they have sexual rights within their homes. A majority of them explained that SR are provided in Islamic religion. WIP observed that:

I have certain sexual rights at home. The religion that we practice provides 'dos and don'ts'. It gives certain privilege to us as women. I can boldly say that I have sexual rights.

On the contrary an educated WIP, observed that:

The rights you are asking for are embedded in religion. But ideal religious prescription is one thing, the practical reality is another. Most women in the north do not enjoy SR as stipulated in the religion.

The discourse is that even though certain rights or privileges are set out by the religion

as idea, the reality is often different. More so, most exploitation or violation of rights are coloured with religion. A male partner to a WIP observed that:

Certainly there are rights, but most illiterates do not know. In reality SR of women is limited for instance, religion commands that you need to seek your wife's consent before intercourse. In reality, when the man enter his wife's room and say 'bismillah hajia', the woman has no choice than to give consent whether she is willing or not. Really I don't think this is peculiar to our culture. This is what is obtainable in majority of the families.

The preceding statement stipulates that when the man is ready consent seems automatic from the wife. Most women are not in the position to make unilateral decision on their SR. A literate man related that culture gives more power to men than women but also limit the exercise of the power. He observed that:

It is recommended that you should not enter your wife like a farm and man should follow his wife into her room for intimate sexual affairs and not the other way round. This means they also enjoy the comfort of their rooms. This is part of the rights they possess.

Sexual rights are numerous. There are various specific issues on rights that emerged during the study. Generally, respondents agreed that it is recommended that partners should discuss sexual issues but there is still culture of silence. Couples don't like talking about sexual intimacy. Especially on the side of the women, it is practically difficult to start or contribute verbally to a discussion on sex with the husband. Although such discussion is islamically recommended as it could enable couple to understand themselves and deepen intimacy,

in reality, it is often difficult. A non-literate man submitted that:

It is recommended that when you take a new wife especially 2nd or 3rd or 4th, you are expected to stay with her for seven days (without rotating yourself among the wives). This is to discuss with the new wife and understand her. But such understanding is usually not in verbal discussion because she will be shy to talk about sexual issues.

The foregoing stipulates that there is usually limited verbal discussion among couples regarding sexuality. WIP were asked whether there are circumstances when they can deny their partners sex. Generally, the women respondents averred that it is not generally permitted for a woman to do such unless on two occasions during menstruation and serious sickness. A non-literate woman opined that:

One can say no to the partner when one is menstruating or very sick. Apart from these instances, it is not right. Even one doesn't feel like, one has to satisfy her husband. Religion greatly forbids women to do otherwise.

Most of the respondents stressed on the seriousness of the sickness. This signifies not just fatigue or weakness for the body, such sickness must be visible/observable. Respondents agreed that in a polygynous union, the woman can't even afford to deny her partner as she may only have few days in a month to be with her husband. Men generally complained that women could deny them sex intentionally. In such situation, husband might need to engage in forced sex. The submission led to the examination of rape in marriage. Men generally agreed that a man could force his wife on bed. Respondents generally agreed that rape cannot be examined in marriage. Men asserted that especially in the first night,

when most women are usually young and virgin, they might be very shy. In such instance, man can use force to ensure sexual compliance. In the study area, there is normalization of rape in marriage. Some of the educated respondents however observed that constant rape within marriage could lead to divorce. A woman observed that:

When a man rapes his wife too often, it could signify that the man is “harija” (a nymphomaniac). It is better for the women to step aside if she can’t withstand it. It is also possible for a woman to be ‘hariji’ (nymphomaniac) too.

A particular question was asked during the qualitative study on discussion of sex and whether a woman could request sex from the husband. Even among the educated, it seemed like a taboo. It is generally regarded as a man’s duty to ask for and make visible sexual moves. An educated woman submitted that:

‘Kunya’ [shyness] is well entrenched in typical Hausa culture. A woman who asks her husband for sex is assumed to be corrupt. That is why it is virtually difficult for a woman to initiate or embrace discussion on sexuality with her husband.

An educated man also made similar submission:

This is my twelfth year of marriage. My wife has never openly asked me for sex. When she wants it, she must keep it herself until I approach her. It is not cultural for a good wife to do so. This form of shyness signifies high moral standard within the home. That is what we call “kunya” in Hausa culture. Please note that my wife is educated. She bagged a Bachelor degree four years ago. My explanation is not about the non-literates alone.

Generally, respondents agreed that men are usually in control of sexual matters. Considering this issue, respondents were asked whether a woman could initiate condom use especially when she perceives risk of STD including HIV from the husband. Respondents overwhelmingly reported that it is extremely difficult for a woman to initiate condom use within marriage. Most of the respondents observed that such request may lead to divorce. A man submitted that:

Rubber! [condom] from my wife? It is not possible. A wife cannot think about it with her husband. I don’t think you can find such situation in our area.

The preceding statement signifies that when the women perceive risk of STD including HIV, they might not be able to implement preventive measure such as condom use. This is one of the reasons why women have higher risk of HIV than men. There is virtually very limited access to condom among the WIP because there have restricted movement and do not have total control of their sexuality. It is also be very difficult for a woman to initiate the use of contraceptive. WIP reported that most of their partners rely on the use of traditional methods especially *coitus interruptus* as a contraceptive method. It was reported especially among the non-literate that same partners may resort to traditional methods such as ‘charm ring’ in order to prevent pregnancy.

Furthermore, none of the respondents reported that their partners do beat them or they do beat their partners but some of the respondents however said that some men do beat their wives. It is possible for the women to concede such negative information but they generally revealed that

wife battery is still prevalent. In a 'baa siga' compound where non-relatives are not permitted to access, such cases of wife battery might be difficult to detect in the communities. Respondents agreed that a woman has the right to seek divorce based on maltreatment. Some of the critical grounds on which a woman could seek divorce include inadequate provision of basic needs (such as food and clothing) molestation and lack of sexual gratification. Respondents however averred that the families would have to intervene, if consensus is not reached, than case could be filed in the court of law.

It is evident that WIP enjoy limited SR within marriage, the patriarchal nature of the society still accrue more power to the male partner. The culture of silent or shyness ('kunya') is still a major setback to the negotiation of women's SR in the community. Even though the trend seems to be general, certain facts may enhance negotiation of SR among some women than others. The next section examines some of the factors.

Factors Affecting Negotiation for SR

Certain categories of WIP have relatively more power to negotiate SR than others. Factors that could affect negotiation of SR were examined. Age differences between the couples were an important factor mentioned by the WIP. It was generally reported that most of the child-wives (those under 18) do not really have adequate knowledge about sexuality. They mostly rely on the knowledge of their partners. An educated partner of a WIP observed that:

If a man of 40 years old marries a lady of 16 years old, you should know that it will be difficult for there to be negotiation between them. The small girl will have to be

100% dependent on the partner who could even be his father's age mate.

The educated woman who claimed that there is less than 4 years difference with her husband claimed that they do have adequate interaction. It is as if the wider the age gap, the lower the opportunities for adequate interaction on sexuality and other household issues.

Most of the WIP interviewed were full-time housewives. This doesn't mean all of them was not working. Apart from household chores, some of them also engage in trading and vocational activities within the home. Most of the WIP sell ware which ranges from clothing to jewelries (especially to other women) while some were engaged in tailoring and other home-based self-employment. Independent source of income was examined as an influencing factor. Some of the WIP claimed that economic independence of women does not influence their sexual right. Especially among the non-literates, it was generally submitted that economic dependence is constant as the man is supposed to be the breadwinner. Even where WIP get personal fund, it is usually meant for personal use and might not directly contribute to household economy. Among the educated, the situation was similar. But the literates however stressed on the need for women to have independent source of income. A literate WIP observed that:

Whether you earn income or not, the man is supposed to provide all your needs. So you reserve your own money for personal use. It is still the same thing. The man is usually in control of sexuality whether you contribute money or not. The problem is that if he is loosing part of the control, you are heading for a divorce.

Most importantly education was very vital. An educated woman observed that:

I know my rights. In fact, I don't need to negotiate for them. It is my right to have access to my husband and to complain, if such access is not adequate. I also have the right to complain, if he wants to violate any of my rights.

Mostly those who are educated claimed there could be rape in marriage. They also claimed they have certain rights within marriage. Education plays a lot of roles in shaping disposition towards sexual rights. Most of the men who are literate also claim there is rape in marriage. But most of the non-literate claimed that once a marriage has been conceived, the female body has been willed to her partner who should play ultimate role in its functioning. A non-literate man observed that 'she is my wife and I have all rights over her. I married her, I paid her bride-price and satisfied other conditions'. There is commodification of female body (which has been paid for) in the name of bride-price. Most people do not view the payment of bride-price as a symbolic cultural value but apparent payment for a good.

All the respondents admitted that accessibility to a male partner and certain related rights are restricted in a polygynous union. The male partner is usually rotated among the two, three or four wives (as the case may be). A non-literate WIP observed that:

We are three (3 wives). We agree to rotate him (male partner) in 2 days each. If he stays with one for 2 days, he has to stay with the 2nd and 3rd for 2 days each meaning that I can only have sexual access to him after every 4 days.

The preceding statement signifies the practice of rotational husband within marriage. The men's views were also similar, in the context of polygyny, negotiation of sexual rights is complex because apart from the husband, co-wives are also involved. For instance, infidelity or infection of one member may affect every member of the polygynous union.

Strategies in Negotiating SR

Women generally employ different strategies to negotiate or enhance their sexual rights within the home. Negotiating for sexual rights is central and continuous in a marital union since sexual activities are central in the life-span of the union. Even though marriage gives to a partner the right to the sexual body of the other partner, there is still need to situate such right(s) or infraction on rights within bounded limits. This is because there is possibility of infraction on such rights, and more importantly such sexual infractions are prevalent. In the study, women were generally asked about the strategies they do employ in order to negotiate for SR within marriage.

Few of the educated women mentioned flirting within the home. Flirting is particularly used to get sexual attention. An educated WIP deserved that:

You do a lot of things when you need your man. You might not need to talk. You could dress almost naked; expose certain areas, clean so well with good perfume. You can generally seduce within the home but most women do not know.

On the contrary, among the non-literate women, sexual attention is a periodized activity which one might not do anything about. Most of them explained that each

wife already knows when the man would meet her (especially in a polygynous union), so there is virtually nothing you can do other than during one's stipulated time. They however explained that you can also dress well, cook good food and be generally nice to get maximum satisfaction during your turn. Cooking good food is common to both literate and non-literate women. The literate WIP generally cited that 'the way to a man's heart is his stomach'.

Most women also resort to charm/traditional medicine or aphrodisiac (both traditional and modern) to get sexual satisfaction. This is a strategy that is common in the study area. Among the women, it was reported that they use different aphrodisiac usually referred to as 'kayan mata' to get more sexual satisfaction and attention. It was explained that there are many types for different purposes. Some are meant to be robbed on the private part to make sex very satisfying and sweet on part of the male partner, some can make the

partner to last long and non-stop for several hours. A non-literate woman observed that:

Elderly women do come to sell 'kayan mata' to us. It is good to enhance sexual performance and satisfaction. If other wives use, and you don't, the husband may abandon you due to non-performance and lack of satisfaction. There is nothing bad in it.

Especially in a polygynous home where (for instance) two days each is allocated to each wife, it was reported that male partners do use aphrodisiac to enhance their performance. The man cannot really complain of fatigue in any of the wife's turn since each of the wife's may be (sexually) famished for days before her turn. Women also reported that wife too has to match up by using *kayan mata*.

From the foregoing discussion, a framework is developed to collate some of the issues affecting negotiation of SR.

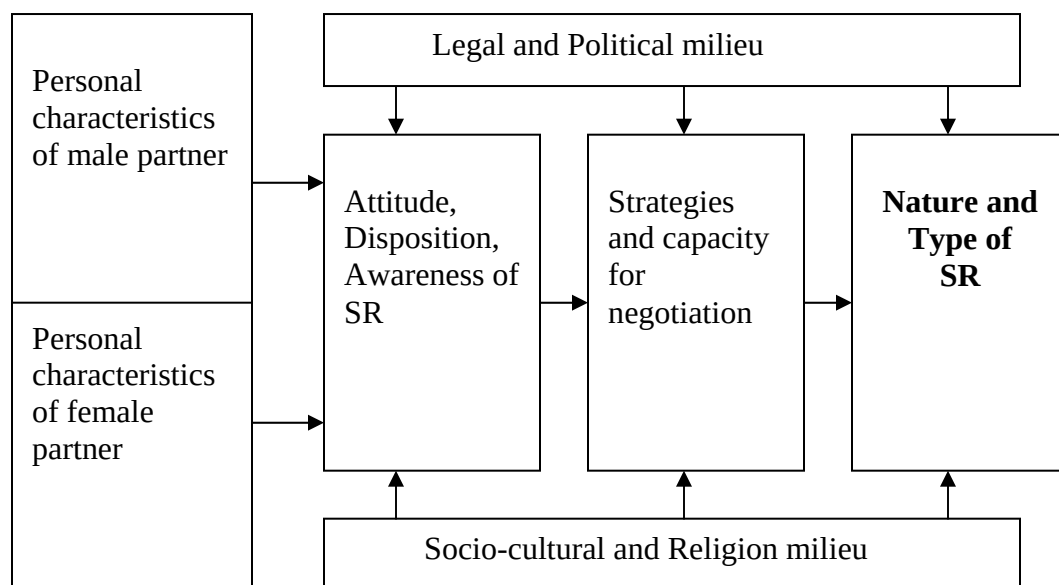


Figure 1: Context of Sexual Rights

Source: Primary data.

Figure 1 presents a concise summary of the issues involved in the negotiation of sexual rights as portrayed in this study. It is a framework which shows the factors that determine negotiation of sexual rights and consequently the amount of sexual rights of individuals. The personal characteristics are very vital. Such characteristics include education, age, level of income and other demographic variables. Such variables influence disposition, attitude and awareness of SR. Invariable the attitude also explains the strategies and capacity for negotiation of sexual rights within any context which will impliedly affect the nature and types of SR enjoy by the individual. Within a broader context of all the issues identified are the socio-cultural and religious and socio-legal and political milieus. These milieus serve as the background on which other issues emerged.

Discussion of Findings

The sexual rights of women are bounded by certain socio-cultural context. Such rights can be expressed, understood and negotiated within that context. Certain religious prescriptions, expectations and prescriptions shape the level of rights of women within marriage. This is why the study examined SR of WIP. Although religious might place certain obligations and stipulate some rights, the realities might be different. On the nature and type of SR of WIP, majority of the respondents explained such rights within religious and cultural milieus. This is why WIP and their partners reported that women generally have SR and such rights are provided for by religion and culture. Even though certain rights are stipulated by religion the reality is often different. Smith (2002) observed that women do not always have the power to

make decisions about when and how they are going to have sex. The study revealed that women don't only have the power as culture restricts them from initiating or discussing sexual issues with their partners, even though it is religious to do so. This is why Smith (2002) further stated that cultural belief about how active a woman should be in sexual relations can influence how a woman feels about her sexuality.

This study revealed that culturally a woman should be shy and should not initiate sex with her partner. Paulson (2000) observed that most women are trapped in this cultural restriction. He reported (for instance) that it is not generally proper for a Bolivian woman to initiate sex with her partner, meanwhile most male partners engage in extramarital relations with girlfriends who initiate sex. Most women still need to know that sex is central in marital union and they need to be active participants in order to maintain the centrality of their marital relationships.

Rape, especially on the first night seemed a common phenomenon in the study area. Most men assume it is normal because the woman might be shy to even remove her dress. Many other studies have reported rape within marriage (Heise, 1995). First sexual act is usually very traumatic for the child-brides, and in an arranged marriage, force is usually used in sexual initiation on the first night (Heise, 1995). Taleb (2007) observed that it is allowed for husband to have sexual intercourse with his wife any time he wishes, but with her consent. Due to patriarchy, lifelong consent is automatically assumed once a woman enters a marital relationship.

The 'kulle' (purdah system) is still in practice but there are a lot of controversies regarding it. Studies (Yusuf, 2007, Adamu et

al, 2005) claimed that the practice of 'kulle' purdah which totally confines women to their home and prevent them from going out has no basis in shariah, as it is a cultural practice rather Islamic. It was reported that many factors usually influence SR of women within marriage. Most of these factors relate with empowerment of women. Education, personal source of income, age difference (between the couple) culture and religion all affect negotiation of SR of WIP. Despite this challenges, women employ varying strategies in order to negotiate SR with their partners.

Conclusion

It can be observed that there are still enormous challenges regarding sexual rights of women in purdah system. Within such challenging context, there is a serious need to enhance the capacity of women within the household. There is the need to bridge the inequality gap between the sexes. Cultural reorientation and education are also vital tools that could enhance desired change.

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