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Understanding Sexual Pleasure and Health:
A Study of Urban Middle-Class Women's Narratives in New Delhi, India

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SIT Study Abroad
India: Public Health, Gender, and Community Action
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Abstract

The following study seeks to explore how urban-middle class women in Delhi understand, value, and access sexual pleasure. Simultaneously, it looks to understand the relationship between ideas of agency, power, and pleasure. This project was prompted by the lack of colloquial conversation happening on these subjects both globally, and in the communities familiar to the researcher. Although sex and pleasure, in both theory and practice, are extremely prominent in the lives of people around the world, discussion remains stigmatized. With these constraints in mind, this study investigates how a certain population of women became knowledgeable, and are still learning about pleasure, in India's capital city. Collection of data was done through nine qualitative, semi-structured interviews of working women between the ages of 25 and 46. This study seeks to contribute to existing literature by promoting safe spaces for normally illicit conversations between strangers, in hopes of increasing the visibility of women's sexual pleasure. Findings reveal that understandings of sexual pleasure among respondents are shaped by cultural and social factors such as books and family attitudes. Sexual pleasure is valued highly by participants, as well as their partners, and privilege and privacy allow access to sexual pleasure.

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Introduction

Objectives

There are three main objectives of this study, other than to answer the research question. The first objective is to add to the minimal body of literature on female sexual pleasure. As noted by authors of “Female condom acceptability in urban India: Examining the role of sexual pleasure,” “in spite of the numerous connections of sexual pleasure and satisfaction with health, there remains a dearth of research addressing women’s sexual pleasure” (Bowling et al., 2017). The positive relationship between sexual pleasure and good health among women of all ages has been proven by several studies, yet there continues to be stigma surrounding the subject. This is likely be due to myths or misunderstandings about female sexual pleasure, predominantly the idea that women do not have sex for pleasure (Bowling et al., 2017). Evidently, this is not the case. This research seeks to add to the growing number of studies on the subject of sexual pleasure, with special focus on an Indian context.

The second objective of this study was to create safe, non-judgmental spaces for women to talk about sexual pleasure and to promote such conversations among respondents in their communities. It is the hope that this study encouraged participants to continue having conversations related to sex and sexual pleasure with their friends, partners, and family members. All respondents expressed having felt comfortable during interviews. The researcher hopes that all respondents felt respected, valued, and trusted. In order to create a safe environment for each interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study to each participant, let the participant know that nothing said during the interview would be judged, and that the participant had the opportunity to end the interview at any time. This research seeks to promote conversations about

sex and sexual pleasure among its readers, and to aid in the de-stigmatization of such conversations.

The third objective of this study is to emphasize the importance of sexual pleasure in everyday life as it relates to well-being. The positive correlation between sexual satisfaction and general well-being among women has been made clear by research published in *International Society for Sexual Medicine*. Seeing as psychological well-being is a large component of one's health, this research seeks to promote increased attention towards sexual pleasure and satisfaction as an important factor in women's sexual and general health. Incorporating ideas of pleasure into general health research and education will help expand social understandings of sex and improve acquisition of health.

Research Question

The research question that this study seeks to answer is: how is sexual pleasure understood, valued, and accessed by urban middle-class women in New Delhi, India? The sub-questions involved are focused on agency, power, consent, and more. In addition to answering the main research question, the researcher seeks to know why the respondents understand, value, and access pleasure in the way that they do — what are the foundational factors that have shaped these understandings and practices? Wholistic conclusions are found by accounting for such causalities.

Summary of Findings

It was found that respondents' understandings of sexual pleasure as physical pleasure accompanied by emotional security and safety, among other definitions, are highly influenced by social and cultural ideas present in books, Bollywood, family attitudes, Western media, and the internet. Respondent's sexual pleasure is valued highly among themselves and their current partners. Participants' access to sexual pleasure is strongly dependent on their privilege and the sense of privacy that comes along with it. Women often felt powerful in areas of their life in which they had agency, most prominently their professional life or workplace. A sense of agency and power in one's sexual relationship was tied to more seamless acquisition of sexual pleasure and comfort discussing sex and sexual pleasure with partners. Participants' ability to identify, discuss, and analyze these subjects is dependent upon their access to education and feminist thought and communities.

Methodology

Setting

This study takes place in New Delhi, the capital city of India. Delhi is a city historically driven by mercantile capital and is the seat of political power. However, it is considered one of the most unsafe cities for women in India. According to the 2013 National Crime Records Bureau Report, "the incidence of reported rape has been increasing since 2009, and Delhi has the highest rate at 18.6 per 100,000 women compared to the national average of 5.7 per 100,000" (Edmunds & Gupta, 2016). Since this study discusses sex and women's sexual pleasure, these ideas of sexual safety, or lack thereof, should be taken into consideration. All but

two respondents live in South Delhi. South Delhi is a wealthier area of New Delhi, a cultural hub, and the home of several educational institutions.

Participants

Table 1. Respondent Characteristics

Respondent	Characteristics
Aditi	Age: 28 Gender: Female Sexual Orientation: Bisexual Occupation: Journalist Educational Status: Graduate Degree Relationship Status: Single
Babita	Age: 46 Gender: Female Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual Occupation: Social Activist Educational Status: Post-Graduate Degree Relationship Status: Married
Charmila	Age: 31 Gender: Female Sexual Orientation: Homosexual Occupation: Lawyer Educational Status: Post-Graduate Degree Relationship Status: Long-term Relationship
Dhriti	Age: 38 Gender: Female Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual Occupation: Preschool Director Educational Status: Post-Graduate Degree Relationship Status: Married
Eisha	Age: 32 Gender: Female Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual Occupation: Freelance Researcher Educational Status: Post-Graduate Degree Relationship Status: Long-term Relationship
Fatima	Age: 33 Gender: Female Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual Occupation: Journalist Educational Status: Post-Graduate Degree Relationship Status: Married

Geeta	Age: 25 Gender: Female Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual Occupation: Journalist Educational Status: Graduate Degree Relationship Status: Long-term Relationship
Hema	Age: 38 Gender: Female Sexual Orientation: Heterosexual Occupation: Freelance Sexual and Reproductive Health Consultant Educational Status: Post-Graduate Degree Relationship Status: Non-monogamous Long-term Relationship
Iniya	Age: 43 Gender: Female and/or Non-binary Sexual Orientation: Pansexual Occupation: Freelance Writer Educational Status: Post-Graduate Degree Relationship Status: Long-term Relationship

The above chart profiles the participants of this study. All names have been changed so as to preserve anonymity. Urban middle-class women will here be defined as: women who have received either a graduate or post-graduate degree, who are currently working professionals living in South Delhi, with the exception of two respondents who live in South and East Delhi. All nine participants are between the ages of 25 and 46, five of which are between 30 and 40 years old, two below 30, and two above 40. All participants identify as female, while Iniya is comfortable using both the terms “female” and “non-binary” (Iniya, 26 April 2019). All but three participants are heterosexual. Respondents that used the term “straight” during interviews are here labeled as heterosexual. Aditi referenced only having been physically intimate with male partners, but is still “figuring out” her sexual orientation, identifying with the term “bisexual” (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Charmila is the only respondent to identify as gay or lesbian, for which this research will use the term “homosexual.” Similarly, Iniya was the only respondent

to use the term “pansexual” for her sexual orientation (Iniya, 25 April 2019). Occupations of participants include: Journalist, Social Activist, Lawyer, Preschool Director, Freelance Researcher, Freelance Sexual and Reproductive Health Consultant, and Freelance Writer. All respondents have completed university and have received a graduate degree, and seven have received a post-graduate degree. Three participants are married to male partners, two are in long-term monogamous relationships with male partners, two are in long-term monogamous relationships with female partners, one is in a non-monogamous long-term relationship with a male partner, and one is single. This research will touch on both common and varying tropes among and between all respondents, but will also aim to acknowledge the individual voices of each woman.

Procedure

Interviews took place between April 15th and April 26th. All interviews were semi-structured, meaning that although questions were presented to the respondent, stories, memories, and side conversations were welcome. Interviews took place in English, so a translator was not required. The researcher asked each participant probing questions related to their previous responses so as to better understand the participant on an individual basis. Qualitative data was gathered by this method. Nine interviews were completed, seven of which took place in-person, while the remaining two were done over-the-phone. In-person interviews took place either at a cafe of the participant’s choosing, or at the home of the participant. Respondents were asked a set of six broad questions, each containing several sub-questions. All nine respondents were asked all prepared questions, in addition to any non-written questions that arose during conversation.

Interviews were recorded on the researcher's phone and transcribed the following day. After all interviews had been completed, transcriptions were compiled and coded by each broad question. This paper is structured in the same order in which the respondents were asked the six main questions of the study, subjects of which include: agency, power, sexual pleasure, orgasm, value, and access.

Review of Literature

The research previously done on subjects relating to sexual pleasure make clear three considerable relationships, the first of which is the relationship between sexual satisfaction and general well-being among women. An article published in *International Society for Sexual Medicine* found that “amongst women aged 20 to 65 years, those who consider themselves to be sexually satisfied have a higher overall well-being score and scores for ‘positive well-being’ and ‘vitality,’ compared with sexually dissatisfied women” (Davison et al., 2009). Seeing as the women involved in this research are between the ages of 25 and 46, this information is taken into consideration. It was found that “non-depressed women who were not satisfied had lower well-being than non-depressed women who were satisfied;” such findings by Davison and fellow authors enforce satisfaction as a worthy aspect of health and well-being for women of all ages.

The second relationship presented by available literature is the connection between relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. Dundon and Rellini’s piece on sexual function and satisfaction references the ties between sexual satisfaction and emotional and communication factors between partners. Additionally, the authors note that “women who believe in the endurance of their relationship are more [sexually] satisfied” (Dundon & Rellini, 2009). Having faith in the longevity of one’s relationship raises levels of satisfaction. Another source which discusses marital relationships in an Indian context points out similar ideas. The study found that “women were more likely to experience sexual pleasure when they experienced marital harmony” (George, 1998). Additionally, women’s perceptions of their husbands’ marital commitment as well as their husband’s level of respect for them and their children, increased

their sense of pleasure (George, 1998). A sense of satisfaction in one's relationship, meaning increased comfort and trust, helps women access and experience sexual pleasure.

The third and final relationship made obvious by past literature on sexual pleasure is that between body appreciation and sexual satisfaction. In Grower and Ward's article, they state that "women who reported greater body appreciation also reported greater condom use self-efficacy, sexual satisfaction, sexual assertiveness, and feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure, and lower levels of body self-consciousness during intimacy" (Grower & Ward, 2018). Not only does a higher sense of body appreciation increase levels of sexual satisfaction, it aids in a woman's ability to communicate with sexual partners, and promotes feelings of entitlement to equal amounts of pleasure. In this work body appreciation is defined as: "appreciation for what the body can do, what it represents, and how it looks, regardless of whether or not these looks align with culturally defined standards of beauty" (Grower & Ward, 2018). The authors also present an expansive definition of sexual agency: "a multidimensional construct that reflects the awareness of self as a sexual being; the ability to identify, negotiate, and communicate one's sexual needs; and the successful initiation of behaviors that allow for the satisfaction of these needs" (Grower & Ward, 2018). These definitions will be used as references in the current study on sexual pleasure among urban middle-class Indian women. The women who possess high levels of body appreciation, are doing so in spite of a "dominant cultural narrative" that promotes otherwise, i.e. self-objectification (Grower & Wald, 2018). This decision to appreciate one's body "may empower them to resist other dominant cultural narratives, such as those which diminish the importance of women's sexual pleasure" (Grower & Wald, 2018). Such cultural narratives, that

place little value on women's sexual pleasure are present in the communities in which this study's participants exist, making Grower and Ward's work extremely applicable.

It is on this literature that the current study builds. The relationships presented, between sexual satisfaction and well-being, relationship satisfaction and sexual satisfaction, and body appreciation and sexual agency and pleasure, will support claims made by both the respondents and the researcher. There is an absence of literature on the positive relationship between general sense of agency and sexual pleasure among women. However, many pieces focus on one of the two subjects individually, several of which are cited in this paper. This study seeks to bolster the literature connecting these two ideas.

Results

Chapter 1. What is Agency?

Agency is a word commonly used in academic literature, but what is its true meaning? Seeing as seeking out pleasure is an extremely intimate example of decision-making, agency as a general concept acts as a macro representation of the subjects of this study. According to Emme Edmunds and Ankit Gupta, authors of “Headline violence and silenced pleasure: contested framings of consensual sex, power and rape in Delhi, India 2011-2014,” agency is defined as:

the ability to define one’s goals and act upon them. Agency is about more than observable action; it also encompasses the meaning, motivation and purpose, which individuals bring to their activity ... It can take the form of bargaining and negotiation, deception and manipulation, subversion and resistance as well as more intangible, cognitive processes of reflection and analysis. It can be exercised by individuals as well as by collectivities. (Edmunds & Gupta 2016).

These authors establish agency as the *ability* to pursue one’s desires, and the actions, both physical and not, that are necessary to do so. In their work featured in the *Economic and Political Weekly*, authors Nripendra Mishra and Tulika Tripathi situate agency as the “essence of empowerment,” claiming that agency “encompasses the ability to formulate strategic choices, and to control resources and decisions that affect important life outcomes” (Mishra & Tripathi 2011). Agency is here seen as having *choice* over decisions that have long-term impact on the individual’s life. Both of these pieces look at agency with a feminist lens, the first focusing on violence against women in Delhi, the second describing autonomy, empowerment, and agency for women in an Indian context, integrating factors such as caste, wealth, and education. These

definitions are objective and clear-cut, but agency is experienced differently person-to-person. Lived agency is subjective in nature.

During interviews, all nine respondents were asked how they would define the term “agency.” Present in the majority of the respondents’ definition was the theme of choice. Babita claimed that agency is the ability “to choose, to make your own decisions,” while both Geeta and Iniya used similar language, noting that they felt as if they had agency if they were “free to make choices” (Babita, Geeta, & Iniya, 15-26 April 2019). An expansive definition was given by Hema, who felt that agency “consists of having control over your own body, over your own decisions, over your own life, combined with the kinds of informations and skills that you require to make decisions that are good for you” (Hema, 25 April 2019). The researcher finds it quite interesting however, that Hema chose to emphasize the body of the individual in her answer. It was clear that when participants were discussing agency, bodily choice was an ever-constant idea. Without being prompted about sexual agency, several respondents’ answers touched on ideas of choice and agency in a sexual encounter, as if the idea of choice was inextricably tied to sex. Fatima’s immediate response when asked how she defines agency was: “for me, agency is the ability to *say no* to sex” (Fatima, 23 April 2019). After Geeta’s introductory point about choice, she asked two rhetorical questions: “Firstly, are you getting into a consensual act? Is there agency given to you in the sexual act?” (Geeta, 23 April 2019). These and other respondents were unable to separate their ideas of agency from sex. The choice between saying yes and no, to a sexual partner, comes to mind with urgency in discussions of agency. It seems that the objective definitions featured earlier do not incorporate this reality.

These subjective definitions of agency hold sexual agency, the ability to say no, with extra weight.

Another thought-provoking definition was given by Eisha. She claimed that “agency is the ability to assert choice in a situation, even if you are the one who is powerless” (Eisha, 18 April 2019). To explain her point, Eisha retold an adaptation of the story of Draupadi, a Hindu epic in which a woman’s saree magically does not end, she could not be unclothed by the men who were attempting to assault her. The adaptation that Eisha touched on was written by Mahashweta Devi. It follows a version of Draupadi who has been raped by military leaders. When Draupadi is asked to put on her clothes and travel to the camp commander’s tent, she refuses. She practiced agency in a situation where she held no power. Eisha pronounced this example to be an “assertion of agency” (Eisha, 18 April 2019). The researcher interpreted Eisha’s definition as making a choice in a situation where one was initially denied any decision making-power, the ultimate employment of agency. The respondents’ subjective definitions build upon the earlier stated academic definitions of agency by emphasizing themes of decision-making, the body and sex, and assertion of self.

Public Agency

How does agency, now defined subjectively by respondents, manifest differently in different realms of one’s life? Participants were asked how they would define agency, or their sense of agency, in their public life, familial life, and sexual or romantic relationship(s). Public life was defined to be: school and university life, career life, and social community. Almost all respondents noted being financial independent, from parents and partners, as a large component

of their “public life” agency. Charmila said that making her own money in addition to choosing what she did with that money, increased her sense of “public life” agency (Charmila, 17 April 2019). Charmila’s comment is supported by research that states that a degree of empowerment, and therefore agency, rises “with a progression in wealth hierarchy (Mishra & Tripathi, 2011). A second common point among most respondents was the importance of career-path choice. Aditi claimed that being able to do the work that she wants increased her sense of professional agency, and on a similar note, Geeta referenced her choice to pursue journalism, rather than science (Aditi & Geeta, 15-23 April 2019). However significant career choice was to participants, several reflected on both cultural and familial pressure they felt, that at times may have inhibited their ability to choose. Hema noted that even after being provided with the tools and information she needed to make professional choices, her actions have “been constrained by what [her] parents thought of as a traditional career” (Hema, 25 April 2019). The same kind of pressure was felt by Iniya. She noted that often times “you do feel that you are making your own choices, but a lot of it is colored by the fact that there is a lot of pressure. Your family wants you to do something, you want to do something else, your peer group wants to do something else” (Iniya, 26 April 2019). This struggle seemed evident in all parts of public life, wanting to make a choice for oneself, while at the same time balancing doing so with what may be expected by others.

An important point related to professional agency was brought up by Eisha in her interview. She, like many other respondents, felt as if she’d always had a strong sense of agency in everything she’s done in regard to her career, but was clear to attribute some of her sense of choice to the privilege she has. She stated, “I’ve been lucky, I come from a place with a lot of privilege, so I was always able to make my own choices and assert them and get away with them

so to speak, to a very large extent” (Eisha, 18 April 2019). It is necessary to note that similar tropes of professional agency would likely not be as evident in other communities of women, Indian and not, that may not be employed in the formal workforce. Having grown up in a home with parents and family members who value and promote women’s choice, and have the financial capital that makes choice possible, played a large role in many of the respondents’ upbringing and academic and professional careers. A final idea that was widespread among participants’ understandings of “public life” agency was having their voice heard in academic and professional spaces. Aditi claimed that “being able to contribute, but also being able to vocally participate in decision-making in [her] workspace” increased her sense of agency in the workplace (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Other respondents echoed this sentiment, reflecting on work communities in which their word wasn’t valued, and situations where they couldn’t assert their agency. Eisha found those difficult experiences, however frustrating, important in helping her grow and assert her professional agency; she said, “for young women, it’s important to learn how to stand up for yourself and draw boundaries” (Eisha, 18 April 2019). From this, the researcher draws that agency in one’s career is not always given, but rather gained through growth. Agency in the public realm meant several things for participants in the study. Primarily, a sense of agency was attained through the ability to make academic and career choices despite external pressures, privileged circumstances and support from community members, and having one’s voice valued in the workplace.

Familial Agency

Next, the participants were asked about levels of agency in familial relationships. The most prominent theme that arose from this question was respondents gaining a sense of agency by withholding information from family members. Aditi emphasized that “for the longest time [her] sense of agency has come from not letting them [family] know too much, and not giving them information or not really engaging with extended family” (Aditi, 15 April 2019). The more she chose to withhold information about her personal life, the “less answerable” she was to them, the “less power” they held over her (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Both Fatima and Iniya shared this sentiment. Fatima reflected on how her extended family’s political views were in conflict with her own, and their disapproval of her life choices regarding career, marriage, and children (Fatima, 23 April 2019). Iniya claimed that keeping contact minimal with parents enhanced her sense of agency in her relationship with them (Iniya, 26 April 2019). The choice to withhold information or reduce contact was more prevalent in respondents’ relationships with extended family members than it was with nuclear family, such as parents or siblings. Close relationships with parents create a more complex dynamic of agency. Aditi mentioned her parents’s having “wanted their daughters to be independent women with strong minds,” but not having necessarily foreseen how their daughters’ lives might diverge from what they had envisioned as independence (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Aditi and her parents have been, and will continue to search for a balance between her “going after what [she] wants, and what they think is right” (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Having a close relationship with nuclear family members increased respondents’ ability to voice their wants, needs, and concerns, therefore instilling a higher sense of agency.

Ways in which respondents practice agency in their relationships with family include making choices against the wishes of family members and reducing dependence on family. Babita, among other participants, reflected on memories in which she stood up to opposing family members and acted against their requests. Babita and her in-laws did not agree on certain child-rearing practices. She stood her ground, “I told them clearly, which is very rare in Indian culture, that this is my child, and I would like to bring up this child the way that I want” (Babita, 16 April 2019). She practiced agency by making a decision she knew was hers to make, and standing up against interference. Touched on during discussion of “public-life” agency was economic independence. Charmila expanded on this point, “for me it was always important to be well-educated and financially independent, so that I don't have to fall back on my parents if they disown me. Making my own money, making my own financial choices was my independence” (Charmila, 17 April 2019). Her sexuality being a point of contention with her parents during her young adulthood and early working years, she was able to gain agency in her relationship with them by ensuring a lack of dependence and therefore personal freedom.

Related to her comment about “public life” agency, Eisha pointed out that her strong sense of agency in the family was likely connected to her “unconventional” parents (Eisha, 23 April 2019). Here she refers to the relatively non-traditional beliefs her parents hold. The lack of pressure in her family to get married allowed her to live her life in the manner she saw fit, without any aggressive interjection from her parents. She made clear that she hasn't had to deal with certain familial pressures that her friends have had to endure, regarding marriage and childbearing. She claimed this to possibly be a “lucky exception to the rule,” and is grateful to hold such a strong sense of agency in her family community. In family life, participants created

agency for themselves by withholding information from family members, making choices against the requests or values of their family, and ensuring financial stability in order to avoid dependence on parents. Agency in the family context is complex, especially when taking into consideration the importance of the family unit in Indian culture. Respondents were able to, by trial and error, find agency and choice in an often restricting space.

Relationship Agency

The final form of agency that participants discussed was agency in their sexual relationships. Two factors that were important in respondents' sense of agency in this context were the ability to say yes or no to sex and the ability to express to a partner their wants or desires. Both Babita and Charmila made clear that they practice their sense of agency by saying no to their partners when they aren't in the mood to have sex, or saying yes when they are. Almost all respondents referenced being able to openly discuss their wants with partners as part of their "sexual relationship" agency. Aditi noted that "being able to articulate what she wants strongly," without fear or shame is something that she is working towards having in future relationships. (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Dhriti claimed to have reached a point in her relationship with her husband where she felt free to openly share her desires, making sex even more pleasurable. A final practice that instilled agency in respondents was recognizing what they deserved in a sexual relationship, beautifully articulated by Eisha: "I'm not gonna be with anybody who makes me feel less than a goddess, it is just not welcome" (Eisha, 18 April 2019). Eisha, among other study participants had the confidence in her romantic and sexual relationship to pronounce what she wants and deserves, a clear representation of agency.

Agency manifests differently in various areas of the respondents' lives. Factors that were important in acquiring a strong sense of agency in the public areas of one's life were financial independence, career choice, and one's value in the workplace. Agency in the familial setting was tied to withholding information, seeking independence, and navigating close nuclear family relationships. Lastly, participants often felt that holding agency in sexual and romantic relationships was dependent on ability to say yes or no, ability to express one's sexual desires, and confidence in what one deserves from a partner. Agency is a complex term, the meaning of which changes as relationships shift and grow. A strong sense of agency, in all capacities, is a foundation upon which sexual pleasure stands.

Chapter 2. What is power?

Participants were asked to identify in which realms of their life they feel powerful, and in which realms they feel powerless. The majority of respondents said that they felt powerful in their career. Charmila noted that a strong sense of power comes from the fact that there are people working for her, depending on her for their salary and livelihood (Charmila, 17 April 2019). Both Fatima and Hema were confident in their skillset and ability to do their job well. Fatima referenced her ability to find great stories and communicate well with authority, while Hema touched on her strong skillset around “facilitation, running trainings and workshops, and meetings” all of which make her feel powerful in her work community (Fatima & Hema, 23-25 April 2019). The respondents’ reflections on their careers as a sense of power differed from their sense of agency in that when discussing power, they put emphasis on what qualities and activities they perceive themselves to be good at in the workplace. Rather than their ability to choose where they work or who they work with, which translates into agency, their ability to use their skills and contribute to larger organization goals facilitates power.

Another area of life in which respondents felt powerful was their living situation. Whether it was where they lived or who they lived with, having control over their housing gave them a sense of power. Aditi said that moving into a house by herself gave her a sense of ownership and control over her life, which made her feel powerful (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Iniya expanded on this point, when asked in what realms of her life she felt powerful, she quickly responded: “the way I live, where I live, and the person I live with. It’s a choice that not all women in any part of the world really get to decide very often, even in societies where it seems like there is gender equality, patriarchy is everywhere” (Iniya, 26 April 2019). Iniya’s choices to

not have children, not live close to her family members, and to be living with a partner who she is not married to, all make her feel powerful. Several words that were used quite often by respondents while discussing where they felt powerful were strength, control, and ownership. When comparing respondents' answers about agency to those touching on power, it seems that choice is the largest factor in feelings of agency, while action after choice is the largest factor in feelings of power. What participants *do* in the areas where they've chosen to exist, the actions they take in the professions they've chosen to pursue, or the ways in which they live in the spaces they've chosen to reside, makes them powerful.

Several respondents said that they feel powerless when they don't have control over external factors that may impact themselves or their peers. Babita and Geeta discussed lack of control as it related to the inability to change how people think about certain issues, or the inability to change social structures around them. Geeta said that she feels powerless in discussions with friends where marriage comes up. She reflected, "yes, maybe I do want to, maybe I don't, but in any case my mind has starting thinking about something earlier because I'm hearing so much about it. That's a powerless feeling, why am I so susceptible to these thoughts?" (Geeta, 23 April 2019). When control, both of others, and of one's own thoughts, is taken away, respondents felt powerless. Aditi echoed some of these points, "I think again it comes down to control. It is when I perceive a situation I don't have control over or where there is somebody else that has more power, especially in situations where I feel there is a powerful male person involved, authority figure" (Aditi, 15 April 2019). For Aditi, this lack of control is exacerbated when the figure in power is a man, whether a boss, a father or uncle, or landlord.

Aditi's example is a micro-version of the macro, broader, power imbalance between men and women that is felt around all of India, and the world.

Both Iniya and Charmila pointed to their relationship with parents as one in which they have at times felt powerless. What is interesting to note is that Iniya and Charmila are the two respondents currently in relationships with female partners. Both respondents referenced having had to stand up to parents in defense of their sexuality and the way in which they live.

Specifically, Charmila said that she "was powerless to convince [her] parents that this [her sexuality] is not a phase" (Charmila, 17 April 2019). Their relationship has since improved, but for a period of her life she was quite powerless with respect to her parents' lack of understanding.

Eisha noted sexual space to be a realm in which she, for a long time, felt powerless. After experiencing sexual abuse as a child, it took many years for Eisha to "find her way back to her body," and to heal, a journey that will continue for the rest of her life (Eisha, 23 April 2019).

However, she now has "all the ingredients and the right environment," and is feeling more comfortable in her sexuality than she ever has before (Eisha, 23 April 2019). Having lived through an abusive experience, all power is stripped away from the individual, but the strength Eisha has had in the years since, growing and healing, makes her powerful beyond words.

Power in the Bedroom

Participants were then asked in what ways they feel powerful and powerless in the bedroom, or in a sexual encounter. Themes related to feeling powerful in the bedroom were being comfortable with one's partner, satisfied in one's relationship, and feeling confident in one's body. Geeta thought positively of her relationship, and said that feeling comfortable with

her partner helped her feel like she could “do whatever [she] wants to in the bedroom,” increasing her sense of power (Geeta, 23 April 2019). This sense of comfort, and transitively power, made pleasure more accessible for Geeta. This sentiment is supported by research that “demonstrates that sexual satisfaction and relationship satisfaction vary together” (Dundon & Rellini, 2009). Geeta’s comfort and confidence in her relationship allowed her to feel powerful in the bedroom, able to enjoy herself. Several respondents brought up body confidence as an indicator for feeling powerful in the bedroom. This functioned both as how they view their own body, and how their partner looks at them, affirming that they are sexually attractive. Geeta nonchalantly responded to this question with “I think I’m attractive, that makes me feel powerful and strong” (Geeta, 23 April 2019). Her confidence was inspiring, it was easily observable how such a quality would translate to a sense of power in a sexual encounter. Hema said, “when I underdress, the way my partner looks at me makes me feel strong and powerful. The fact that I am sexually attractive to a sexual partner makes me feel powerful” (Hema, 25 April 2019). The manner in which Hema’s partner looks at her in the bedroom enhances her body confidence and her ability to enjoy herself in a sexual encounter. Both Geeta and Hema’s reflections are supported by research done by Grower and Ward at the University of Michigan. These authors claim that in their study “women who reported greater body appreciation also reported greater feelings of entitlement to sexual pleasure, and lower levels of body self-consciousness during intimacy” (Grower & Wald, 2018). A sense of power enables women to be more demanding of what they want and need in the bedroom to access pleasure. According to participants and further research, a sense of satisfaction with one’s partner and self-confidence are advantageous in feeling powerful in the bedroom or in a sexual encounter.

An additional factor that made respondents feel powerful in the bedroom was pleasing their partner, seeing them enjoy themselves. Both Babita and Iniya referenced this in discussion. Iniya eloquently said, “I suppose it does give you a sense of strength, when you feel like you are responsible for someone else’s pleasure” (Iniya, 26 April 2019). Both the act of pleasuring one’s partner, and the knowledge that they are satisfied, made respondents feel strong and powerful. The final idea that was brought to light when discussing power in the bedroom was the prioritization of the respondent’s pleasure by her partner. Eisha touched on this, saying “when my partner goes down on me, I feel powerful. It’s really about the man prioritizing my pleasure and it’s just about my pleasure in that moment. Him also getting pleasure out of giving me pleasure, I feel very empowered” (Eisha, 23 April 2019). Knowing the focus was on her, Eisha felt valued, and powerful.

When participants were asked in what ways they felt powerless in the bedroom, common responses focused on instances in which participants were not listened to by their partners, or when they were pressured into doing something. Both of these sentiments were emphasized by Aditi. She said, “I feel powerless if I’m not listened to, if whatever I’m expressing is being undermined or dismissed. I also would feel powerless if I’m being coerced into anything” (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Not feeling heard, or having one’s wants dismissed, reduces confidence and power in the bedroom. Both verbal and physical coercion take power away from the individual, inhibiting their ability to feel a sense of control, and their ability to access pleasure. Similar to earlier comments made about pleasuring a partner instilling a sense of power, the opposite was true as well, lack of partner orgasm resulting in powerlessness. Hema stated that “if and when I’m with a partner who is perhaps not orgasming, I feel less powerful. Even though, intellectually

I am aware that there could be many reasons for that and it doesn't necessarily have to do with me, still there is a lingering sense of not having delivered" (Hema, 25 April 2019). Not being heard, verbal and physical pressure, and lack of partner pleasure made participants feel powerless in the bedroom. Losing a sense of power, a sense of control, may make experiencing pleasure harder for the individual.

Power, like agency, is a complicated term. In this research, power functions in relation with agency. The two ideas tend to bend and flow together, respondents possessing both agency and power in many of the same areas of their life. Participants felt powerful most often in their professional life and their living situations, using words such as control, strength, and ownership to describe their sense of power. They felt powerless most often in environments where they felt a loss of control, while some felt powerless in their relationships with parents, or at times, in their sexual identities. Partner trust and body confidence led to feeling powerful in the bedroom, as well as pleasuring one's partner. Respondents pointed to dismissal or coercion from sexual partners as indicators for feeling powerless in a sexual encounter. Power functions as active variant of agency. Respondents felt powerful when they took actions in an environment of choice, and powerless, when actions are taken against their wellbeing.

Chapter 3. What is sexual pleasure?

As made clear by previous literature, sexual satisfaction, and therefore pleasure, is related to general well-being of women. To understand the importance of sexual pleasure, in this context in others, the idea must be defined. Simply defined, sexual pleasure consists of “those positively valued feelings induced by sexual stimuli,” however, this is not an all-encompassing definition (Abramson & Pinkerton, 1995). Like agency, sexual pleasure is a lived experience, understood subjectively by the individual. Iniya described this point in her interview, “what is pleasure for you, what is pleasure for your partner, and what is pleasure for you together, are three different things” (Iniya, 26 April 2019). Her journey of deciphering what pleasure meant for her versus what it meant for her partner has helped her find what is most enjoyable for her. Common ideas and instances that were brought up by respondents when they were asked to define sexual pleasure include: moments without worry, bodily pleasure accompanied by emotional safety and attachment, and verbal acknowledgment during intercourse. Aditi defined moments of sexual pleasure to be when “you are not worried about anything else and you get to enjoy it, and the focus is you in that moment” (Iniya, 15 April 2019). Aditi’s definition, echoed by other respondents, placed emphasis on relaxation and enjoyment of the moment. Both Babita and Eisha touched on emotional factors in their definitions of sexual pleasure. Babita explained, “for me, sexual pleasure is bodily pleasure, the way they touch or the way they caress, while at the same time feeling attached to the person emotionally” (Babita, 16 April 2019). Eisha spoke similarly, “sexual pleasure is sensory fulfillment in an emotionally and an intimately safe environment,” recognizing a safe space as a factor of sexual pleasure (Eisha, 23 April 2019). Another non-physical aspect of sexual pleasure was brought up by Geeta in her interview. She

said, “verbal acknowledgement of you, then leading to a physical act, would give me more sexual pleasure than immediately being physical” (Geeta, 23 April 2019). It is clear that sexual pleasure is multifaceted. Yes, it is “those positively valued feelings induced by sexual stimuli,” referenced by authors Abramson and Pinkerton, but these feelings, and the factors that stimulate them, are different for each individual. Broadly put by one participant, “it can be anything from masturbation to good sex in your bedroom, it’s all sexual pleasure” (Dhriti, 18 April 2019).

Constructions of Sexual Pleasure

How respondents, and all individuals, understand sexual pleasure is dependent on the cultural and social ideas that they are surrounded by. Hema put this well, “sexual pleasure is impacted by everything around us, socially, culturally, the ideas we grow up with, the kinds of sexuality we’ve been exposed to, the kinds of sexually explicit things we’ve consumed. It’s always evolving as well” (Hema, 25 April 2019). Hema’s point is supported by scholarly research. Such research notes that “sexual pleasure is a rather slippery creature, weighted down by considerable pop psychological baggage, and subject to cross-cultural and cross-historical variation. It is therefore subject to the cultural vagaries of permissibility and restriction that influence both the overt expression and subjective experience of sexual pleasure” (Abramson & Pinkerton, 1995). So, what are the influences that have impacted the understanding and expression of sexual pleasure among respondents of this study? Participants were asked how they learned about sex and sexual pleasure, and to touch on the factors that helped construct their understanding of sexual pleasure. Common responses included books, Bollywood, Western media, family, and the internet.

Almost half of the respondents mentioned Mills and Boon as a source of information on sex and sexual pleasure from their youth. Mills and Boon publishes Romance Fiction novels out of the UK, many of which are very popular in India. Aditi reflected on how the books portrayed sex and sexual pleasure to their young audience, “mostly the women were the object of pleasure and passive objects. The men were the ones who were chasing them or wooing them, or coxing them into situations, and the women just passively felt the pleasure, they never really acted on it” (Aditi, 15 April 2019). She noted that reading these books left her misinformed, lacking understanding of the steps between attraction and pleasure. Additionally, the narratives situated women as objects, never as the hero of the story, always the recipient of male-centered pleasure. Internalizing such a storyline at a young age morphed her understanding of pleasure. Iniya similarly said that dismantling the ideas that books such as these instill in young women’s minds is necessary to better understand one’s own sexual pleasure.

The following influence on understandings of sexual pleasure that was mentioned was Bollywood. Eisha and Charmila, among other respondents, emphasized the role of Bollywood in providing ideas about sex and sexual pleasure to young women. Eisha said, “what is portrayed is just a very male idea of pleasure, right, like a very traditional heteronormative idea of pleasure so it doesn’t really help anyone much” (Eisha, 23 April 2019). The narratives present in many Bollywood films, according to participants, portrayed similar ideas to those in Mills and Boon books: male-focused without much interest in female sexual pleasure. Charmila expanded on this point by emphasizing the absence of LGBT narratives in popular Bollywood movies. She said, “you just imagined that the man is the woman, and imagine the things that you are seeing to be in a non-heteronormative environment. There was no LGBT reference point” (Charmila, 17 April

2019). Charmila, and other non-heterosexual respondents, in their youth, were only provided with heteronormative ideas of sex and sexual pleasure, making understanding one's own wants and desires even more difficult. Several respondents also referenced having learned about sex and sexual pleasure from Western media such as television shows and magazines. Fatima discussed her admiration for the character Miranda in the series *Sex and the City*, "I just really liked the fact that she had complete control over her life" (Fatima, 23 April 2019). Watching shows such as *Sex and the City*, provided respondents with access to less restricted narratives, some with more focus on female sexual pleasure than was present in Bollywood films, although many storylines regarding sex were still male-centered. However, respondents' interactions with Western television and magazines such as *Cosmopolitan*, were starkly different than the interactions they had with families around the subjects of sex and sexual pleasure.

All participants that mentioned their families as an influence in their understanding of sex and sexual pleasure did so in a negative manner. Aditi said, "because I am from a very Orthodox Catholic family, that definitely played a big role in feeling a lot of guilt about sexual pleasure, and discovering your body when you go through puberty" (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Feeling of guilt around sex and pleasure also came up in discussion with Fatima. She said, "I used to sometimes go and say sorry to God if I thought about sex, because my family taught me that it was a bad thing to do" (Fatima, 23 April 2019). These teachings inhibited her from learning about her wants and desires, painting a negative attitude around sex and sexual pleasure. Hema echoed Aditi and Fatima's points, saying that the negative messaging she received from her family about these topics prevented her from understanding what she could "enjoy from [her] own

body” (Hema, 25 April 2019). Negative experiences with family greatly impacted respondents’ perceptions of sex and sexual pleasure, creating an understanding filled with guilt and confusion.

The final factor that was mentioned as an influence on respondents’ understanding of sex and sexual pleasure was the internet. Available on the internet were both feminist blogs and pornography. Aditi noted that after having grown up in a space that wasn’t sex-positive, she looked to feminist blogs online for honest, “un-sanitized” stories (Aditi, 15 April 2019). She said that these stories told by women all around the world in the comments section of blogs helped open up her understanding of pleasure, “I found that reading the blogs taught me that it [sexual pleasure] didn’t need to be like this *one* way, one kind of specific heterosexual experience of sexual pleasure, it could be all kinds” (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Through this avenue, Aditi was exposed to conversations about pleasure that were not available in mainstream media, which helped her better understand her own perception of sex and pleasure. Several participants identified pornography as a way in which they learned about sex and sexual pleasure. Pornography functioned both positively and negatively as an addition to respondents’ sex and pleasure information repertoire. The respondents that began watching pornography during their youth were quite confused as they hadn’t had any sort of healthy discussions about sex and sexual pleasure on which to base their understanding of pornography. However, those who began watching pornography later in their young adult lives had had the opportunity to seek out information on sex and sexual pleasure beforehand, using pornography as an addition to their personal understanding of the topics. As noted by Abraham and Pinkerton, sexual pleasure is a term malleable to the environment in which it is spoken. The respondents’ understandings of sex

and sexual pleasure depend almost entirely on the media that they are presented with, the books they read, the attitudes of their family, and what they seek out themselves.

Changing Understandings

Participants were asked how their understandings of sex and sexual pleasure have changed, if at all, as they've aged. Unanimously, regardless of age or profession, all respondents answered that as they have gotten older, their understanding of sexual pleasure has evolved greatly, changing for the better. Dhriti summarized this thought, she said, "I've gone from naive to expert" (Dhriti, 18 April 2019). All respondents may not label themselves as "experts," but all reflected on how their understandings of, and relationships to, sex and sexual pleasure have grown. A common sentiment was that as they've aged, they've become more comfortable in their body. Babita said, "I am more comfortable now with my own body, and once you are more comfortable with your own body, you are also able to ask for more. I feel that as I've grown older I've been able to experiment with different things that I was not doing earlier, so I feel that that has changed" (Babita, 16 April 2019). Babita's first point, about being able to ask for more, is supported by Grower and Ward's work studying body appreciation among women: "women who reported greater body appreciation also reported greater sexual assertiveness" (Grower & Ward, 2018). Comfort in and appreciation of one's own body leads to assertiveness in the bedroom, being able to voice wants and desires to a partner. Additionally, it is proven that "being open to a variety of new activities seemed to work well for women in claiming their own pleasure, which is consistent with literature on positive sexual aging" (Stahl, Gale, Lewis, & Kleiber, 2017). As Babita has aged, she's been able to experiment in the bedroom with her

partner, helping her find what is most pleasurable. Eisha similarly said that as she's aged, she's become more comfortable in her own skin, ending her statement with an excited: "it's only going to get better" (Eisha, 28 April 2019). Age has only aided in the respondents' understandings of sexual pleasure, sometimes creating positive feelings where there once stood shame or guilt.

Spaces for Discussion of Pleasure

Respondents were asked where and with whom they talk about sexual pleasure. A resounding response to this question was, "friends!" The majority of respondents mentioned talking to female friends about their sexual experiences, what works in the bedroom and what doesn't, and more. This sentiment is supported by research done in Delhi between 2011 and 2014, "most respondents [of said study] learned about women's pleasure and consensual sex from private conversations with friends" (Edmunds & Gupta, 2016). Conversations with friends, in Edmunds and Gupta's study, as well as in this research, functioned as a safe, hidden space, in which discussing sexual pleasure was allowed. Almost all respondents made clear that they do not talk with family about subjects relating to sex and sexual pleasure. The only exception to this statement was sisters being noted as confidants in two interviews. It is interesting to reflect on respondents' earlier answers regarding agency in the family space. It seems that since for many respondents, the family space was not one in which individuals had a strong sense of agency, there too lacks the comfort to discuss sensitive subjects such as sex and sexual pleasure.

More than half of the participants pointed out their partner, or past partners, as people with whom they talk about sexual pleasure. Eisha touched on telling her partner what she likes and what she doesn't (Eisha, 23 April 2019). This practice creates open communication and

enables her to better enjoy herself in the bedroom. Iniya expanded on this idea by saying that talking with her partner about sexual pleasure has helped her become more comfortable with the subject in general (Iniya, 26 April 2019). The only respondent who explicitly noted not speaking to her partner about pleasure was Fatima. She said, “I talk to him about what feels good and what doesn’t feel good in respect to past relationships. I don’t tell him what is wrong with ours,” and when asked if she thinks she’ll ever have conversations with him about their sex life, she replied, “no, it will make me very vulnerable I think. I’ll just lose the little power I have” (Fatima, 23 April 2019). When reviewing Fatima’s answers regarding agency, it is evident that her choice to not discuss current experiences of pleasure with her partner relate to her lower sense of agency in their relationship. Ability and eagerness to discuss sexual pleasure seems to directly relate to the sense of agency in one’s relationship, whether it be with friends, family, or partners.

Consent and Pleasure

Participants were asked what they believe the role of consent and verbal communication to be in their acquisition of pleasure. Unanimously, respondents noted that for them, consent is positively correlated with sexual pleasure. Aditi said that “if there isn’t consent, I would feel that I have stopped being an active participant in what’s going. Which then, puts me out of control in the situation, so not in control of the pleasure. So yeah, I think it does play a big part” (Aditi, 15 April 2019). Dhriti felt similarly, when asked about consent she said, “yeah, consent is very important, because that is how I know how powerful I am and that is how I know if my husband is willing to do what I want to” (Dhriti, 18 April 2019). The respondents’ points are supported by research published in the *Journal of Health Psychology*. The study found that consent is critical

for pleasure, increasing women's sense of power and sexual pleasure experienced (Bowling et al., 2017). Iniya mentioned that "verbalizing the physical feeling [she] is having, heightens [her] pleasure" (Iniya, 26 April 2019). Communicating out loud in the bedroom helps Iniya's partner know what she enjoys, as well as instills confidence in Iniya during sexual acts, increasing her sense of pleasure. Consent and verbal communication help women both discern what they find pleasurable, and convey their feelings to their partner. Consent helps foster a safe environment and relationship between partners, empowering women to access the pleasure that they deserve.

Chapter 4. What is orgasm?

The term “orgasm” is often spoken in conjunction with pleasure. Sometimes, the two words are even understood as synonyms. In their book, “With Pleasure,” authors Paul Abramson and Steven Pinkerton distinguish between two types of pleasure: “first, the pleasurable erotic feelings elicited by stimulation of the genitals or other erogenous zones (especially during intercourse), and second, the intense pleasure of orgasm. These two types of pleasure will be referred to here as fore-pleasure and orgasmic pleasure” (Abramson & Pinkerton, 1995).

According to these authors, orgasm and pleasure are related, but not the same. Respondents were asked how they define the term “orgasm.” Respondents tended to define “orgasm” as the culmination of pleasure during a sexual act. Geeta broadly explained, “it is the culmination point of a sexual act in which you experience intense pleasure. It is what you are striving to achieve, even though everything else feels good, that feels better” (Geeta, 23 April 2019). Many other study participants mirrored Geeta’s language, using “intense pleasure” as an all-encompassing proverb. Words that were used when defining “orgasm” include: palpitation, throbbing, peak, quivering, powerful, and more.

A second theme brought up among respondents was the need to value all pleasure without putting pressure on whether or not one experiences an orgasm. Babita said, “it doesn’t mean that if a sexual encounter doesn’t end with an orgasm, I’m not satisfied. If it doesn’t happen, it’s still alright as long as I can feel at the end of the act that the emotional attachment gets stronger, I think that is for me more important” (Babita, 16 April 2019). Eisha situated an orgasm as “part of the experience,” she said, “pleasure is so much broader than that, and it’s about so much more than that [orgasm]” (Eisha, 23 April 2019). Both participants’ attitudes are supported by research

which states that “letting go of the need to orgasm and enjoying other types of pleasure” can increase a woman’s sense of comfort and creativity in the bedroom, increasing sexual pleasure during intercourse (Stahl, Gale, Lewis, & Kleiber, 2017). “Orgasm,” instead of interchangeable with the term “pleasure,” functions rather as an aspect of pleasure. “Orgasm,” as defined by respondents, is the intense culmination of the earlier mentioned, “positively valued feelings induced by sexual stimuli” (Abramson & Pinkerton, 1995).

Chapter 5. What is the Value of Sexual Pleasure?

It is clear, based on discussions focusing on entitlement to sexual pleasure and ability to voice desires, that sexual pleasure is valued highly among respondents in their relationships and sexual encounters. What has yet be explored is the value of respondents' sexual pleasure to their partner(s). Respondents were asked: in their current and past relationships, whether or not their pleasure was valued equally with that of their partner. All respondents who are currently in a relationship said that their pleasure was valued equally with that of their partner. Babita explained that she knows her pleasure is valued equally because of actions taken by her partner: "the fact that they know that I like to be kissed on the back, or the nape of my neck, and ensuring that it's regularly done, whenever we have intercourse. Asking whether I like what he is doing. I think those are ways in which the consciousness or the awareness — am I pleasuring my partner, show value" (Babita, 16 April 2019). By remembering what Babita enjoys, and ensuring that those actions are taken during sex, her partner is placing equal value on her pleasure. Hema shared a similar sentiment, noting "well with my current long-term partner, when we are having sex, he will give me oral sex to have me come first and that gives me the indication that it's important to him. Also he says it, he literally says it. He enjoys doing it, he likes to see me come, he wants it. So also verbal communication" (Hema, 25 April 2019). The actions, both physical and verbal, that the partners of these respondents take in the bedroom, show that both participants' pleasure is valued equally by their partners.

Several participants did touch on past relationships and encounters in which their pleasure was not valued equality with that of their partner. Fatima reflected on a casual relationship she had before her marriage, "I remember that I would always give him a blowjob

because he would insist on it and he would never give me one. He would never never never give me one” (Fatima, 23 April 2019). The lack of reciprocation in this relationship was a clear indication for Fatima that to her partner, her pleasure was not valued as highly as his own.

The researcher was interested in seeing if there was a connection between sexual orientation of couples and value of sexual pleasure. All respondents that were in heterosexual relationships claimed that their pleasure was valued equally with that of their current partner. However, Geeta believed that her partner valuing her pleasure equally was a bit of an exception to the rule. She said, “I can’t say that I know exactly how it is for other people, but I know that it’s rare that a woman is given equal pleasure” (Geeta, 23 April 2019). She placed responsibility for this inequality of pleasure on larger, long-standing social structures: “it comes from the patriarchal structure, ‘you [woman] are here for my pleasure.’ I know that women in general have had a lower importance whether it’s in economic status or just decision-making power. I can imagine that in the bedroom, a woman has had to be subservient” (Geeta, 23 April 2019). Here, Geeta makes a connection between larger issues of inequality between men and women, and describes how they translate into the bedroom, resulting in women’s pleasure having less value than men’s. Her point is supported by a study done in Mumbai which observed negotiations and sexual relations within married couples. The authors state: “in the sexual power relations between a married couple, fulfillment of the man’s needs appeared to take precedence over the woman’s” (George, 1998). Seeing as this was a popular narrative in the Mumbai study, it is interesting to see that all heterosexual respondents did not believe that their sexual orientation played a large role in whether or not their sexual pleasure was valued equally. However, it may be the case that all heterosexual participants are in relationships with “decent

human beings,” to quote Hema, who recognize the value of a woman’s sexual pleasure (Hema, 25 April 2019).

Both respondents who are in non-heterosexual relationships said that their sexual orientation had a large role to play in the equal value of their sexual pleasure. Charmila brought up that, in her opinion, “when it’s a gay relationship, the expectation is that both of you are equal. Because society, so far, has not developed rules for gay relationships” (Charmila, 17 April 2019). She explained that because most, if not all, public narratives about sex and sexual pleasure are heteronormative (which place high value on male pleasure), there are less pre-conceived sexual structures into which a homosexual sexual relationship must fit. This has enabled her and her partner to value each other’s pleasure equally, seeing as they have not be told to do otherwise. Iniya also said that her sexual orientation played a role in the equal value of her sexual pleasure. She noted that “because we are both female, we both understand our bodies and responses better, to put it rudely, we work the same way” (Iniya, 26 April 2019). The non-heterosexual respondents seem to believe that their sexual orientation influences whether or not their pleasure is valued equally with that of their partner more so than heterosexual respondents do, in both structural and physical manners. This may be because the non-heterosexual respondents put more thought into the impact of their sexual orientation on different areas of their lives, because public narratives are not representative of their identities.

Chapter 6. How is Sexual Pleasure Accessed?

During the final portion of the interview, respondents were asked how they access pleasure. More specifically, what are the things present in their life, both tangible and not, that have allowed them the ability to access sexual pleasure. A factor mentioned by several respondents that has allowed them to access sexual pleasure over the course of their life is privilege, and tied to privilege, privacy. Iniya said, “I live a quite a privileged life compared to most other people, especially women in this country, which has enabled me to have an independent space, have an independent life where I’m not under any scrutiny or where my movements or relationships are policed” (Iniya, 26 April 2019). Iniya’s privilege has provided her with private space in which to learn about and access pleasure. Both Eisha and Geeta put this point bluntly: “the privacy of a room” in which to experience sexual pleasure without worries of intrusion (Eisha & Geeta, 18-23 April 2019). The claims of these respondents are supported by research done in Chennai and New Delhi during 2017. The study states that:

A commonly reported barrier for sexual pleasure was not having enough space with [one’s] partner. One study with low-income households identified factors (such as small living spaces without privacy) that were associated with unsatisfying sex and low frequencies of sexual encounters. The lack of physical space created stress for many of the participants due to the chance of being caught by a family member. Participants reported that these situations often put pressure on couples and hindered their sexual pleasure even during their brief encounters (Bowling et al., 2017).

Such worries about privacy were not an issue for respondents, with the exception of Geeta who is currently living with her parents. Privilege, and financial independence, has granted respondents privacy, space in which they may access sexual pleasure.

A second factor mentioned by respondents that enabled access to pleasure was knowledge of feminist literature and thought. Eisha noted that exposure to “feminism, feminist groups, and feminist solidarities” has helped her access pleasure. Similarly, Geeta claimed that education about feminist literature has reinforced that pleasure is something she deserves equally to the person she is intimate with (Geeta, 23 April 2019). Respondents were also asked how they seek out pleasure when they want it. The two prominent avenues mentioned were masturbation with pornography and or erotic literature, and verbal and nonverbal communication with partners. Not only is masturbation a “quick and easy way to get off without subsequent attachments,” it can also function as a way to “access fantasies and play them out with yourself, ones which your partner may not want” (Aditi & Eisha, 15-18 April 2019). According to respondents, masturbation can create a positive sexual relationship with oneself, increasing a sense of sexual pleasure, in both solo and partnered sex. The second way in which participants sought out pleasure was through communication with partner(s), both verbal and nonverbal. Fatima said, “I just message my husband, ‘I need comfort,’ that’s my line for him. I slide that to him and he understands” (Fatima, 23 April 2019). Several respondents also noted having nonverbal cues that they and their partners use to communicate with one another about wanting to have sex, looking at a partner in a certain way, or using a certain gesture. Among respondents, sexual pleasure is accessed in a myriad of ways, and is supported by foundations of privilege and privacy.

Conclusions

Summary of Results

This study finds that understandings of sexual pleasure among urban middle-class women in Delhi are complex, and are inextricably tied to ideas of agency, power, orgasm, value, and access. For the respondents of this research, agency is defined as the ability to assert choice, specifically as it relates to academic and career paths, partners, and one's own body. Agency was felt most prominently in the professional lives of the respondents, and less so in their relationships with family members. Most respondents held a strong sense of agency in their sexual and romantic relationship(s), promoted by the ability to voice wants and desires to partners. Participants understood power as the active arm of agency, often feeling powerful in the areas of their life where they hold agency. Feeling powerful in the bedroom was tied to ideas of comfort and confidence, and the ability to ensure one's partner's pleasure. Holding agency and power, regardless of the setting, amplified a woman's sense of strength, control, and confidence. Such qualities increased one's ability to access, demand, and enjoy sexual pleasure.

Perceptions of sexual pleasure among participants were strongly influenced by books, Bollywood, Western media, family, and the internet. Most of these factors painted negative and unrealistic portraits of sexual pleasure that respondents spent much of their early adult years correcting through further education and experience. In congruence with responses about agency, it was found that rather than with family, conversations about sex and sexual pleasure tend to happen with friends. Consent was unanimously seen as a positive indicator for acquisition of pleasure among participants.

Respondents situated the term "orgasm" in conversation with sexual pleasure. Both academic and subjective definitions correlate experiences of pleasure and orgasm with one

another, emphasizing the value of fore-pleasure so as to not put pressure on the experience of an orgasm. Participants' sexual pleasure was valued highly by the participants themselves, and by all current partners. This was clear to respondents because of actions consistently taken by their partners to ensure pleasure during intercourse, both verbally and by physical action. When reflecting on this data, it can not be said that sexual orientation necessarily plays a role in whether or not pleasure is valued equally between partners. However, it is true that heterosexual and non-heterosexual couples are existing in different sexual pleasure narratives, or lack thereof, portrayed by the public, that they either fit into or rebel against by placing equal value on pleasure for both partners. Access to pleasure for participants of this study is strongly dependent on privacy and access to information on pleasure. Privacy allows respondents the space to experience pleasure without worry, while a wealth of information helps individuals find what is most pleasurable for them.

The objectives of this study were to add to the minimal body of literature on female sexual pleasure, create and promote safe spaces for discussion of sex and sexual pleasure, and to emphasize the importance of sexual pleasure in everyday life. In accomplishing these objectives, the researcher met women with varying histories and perceptions of sex and sexual pleasure. Regardless of age, profession, sexual orientation etc., all respondents referenced moments in their life when the subjects of this research were deemed inappropriate, un-lady-like, or sinful. Why this is the case stems from historic practices that enforce patriarchal ideas, sexualizing women's bodies while at the same time desexualizing women, and punishing natural ideas of pleasure. It is the hope that the conversations had for the purpose of this research, and the data

that resulted, aid in the further destigmatization of women's sexual pleasure and open up dialogue on such a hidden, enticing subject.

Limitations

This study was characterized by several limitations involving time and sample size. In a time-span longer than the allotted four weeks, more interviews and research could have been conducted to expand on the findings of the study. Due to the constraints of time, the sample size is quite small. Although the nine interviews produced fruitful qualitative data, the size and niche demographics of the sample inhibit generalization of the findings. Additionally, the pool of participants were made available to the researcher through limited sources. This means that many of the respondents knew one another through work or friends, and likely share similar opinions on subjects related to sex and sexual pleasure. This feature may have skewed the results in one direction as opposed to a holistic representation of urban middle-class women in Delhi. However, the unique group of women provided an in-depth understanding of a certain group's perception of sexual pleasure, giving a voice to a community that may not have been heard in previous literature.

Recommendations for Further Study

Further studies could employ a more representative sample, possibly through random sampling. Doing so would widen the scope of data relating to sexual pleasure, revealing different perspectives based on various factors such as income bracket, caste, location, etc. A longer period of time would allow for more extensive interviews and reflection. Lastly, it would be

interesting to place this data in conversation with larger discourses on women's sexual and reproductive health in India nationally. Doing so would help understand issues related to sex education and media on a national scale. Additionally, it would incorporate ideas of pleasure into conversations that are normally centered solely on subjects such as mistreatment, assault, and rape. Lastly, situating these results in comparison with data on women's sexual pleasure globally would provide valuable information on differing cultural and national constructions of sex and sexual pleasure.

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Appendix A: Interview Protocol and Questions

The purpose of this project is to study how urban middle-class women in Delhi perceive and understand sexual pleasure.

In an endeavor to uphold the ethical standards of all SIT ISP proposals, this study has been reviewed and approved by a Local Review Board or SIT Institutional Review Board. If at any time, you feel that you are at risk or exposed to unreasonable harm, you may terminate and stop the interview.

- a. Privacy — all information you present in this interview may be recorded and safeguarded. If you do not want the information recorded, you need to let the interviewer know.
- b. Anonymity — all names in this study will be kept anonymous unless the participant chooses otherwise.
- c. Confidentiality — all names will remain confidential and fully protected by the interviewer. By responding yes, you give the interviewer full responsibility to uphold this contract and its contents.

I want you to know that I recognize the sensitivity of this subject and thank you for your willingness to meet and chat with me today. This conversation is a safe space, and nothing spoken will be judged. All names will be made anonymous before any work is shown to my advisor, Chris Kurian, or academic professors. Feel free to communicate any questions with me before, during, or after the interview!

Introductory Questions:

1. How old are you?
2. What is your job?
 - What does your job entail?
3. What is your level of education?
 - What did you study in school?
4. What label, if any, would you use to define your gender?
5. What label, if any, would you use to define your sexual orientation?
6. What is your current relationship status?
 - Could you please give me a brief summary of your romantic and sexual relationship history?
7. What was your first sexual encounter like?

8. For how many years have you been sexually active?

Main Questions:

1. How would you define the term “agency?”

- How would you define agency in your public life (school and university life/career/ social community)?
- How would you define agency in your familial life (nuclear and extended family)?
- How would you define agency in your private life (romantic and sexual relationships)?

2. In what realms of your life do you feel powerful and in what realms of your life do you feel powerless?

- In what ways do you feel powerful in the bedroom?
- In what ways do you feel powerless in the bedroom?

3. How would you define sexual pleasure?

- How did you learn about sex and sexual pleasure?
- Do you find yourself to be relatively comfortable talking about sexual pleasure? If so, why do you think this is? If not, why do you think this is?
- In what spaces, if any, do you talk about your sexual pleasure?
- What are the factors that have impacted your idea of sexual desire or pleasure?
- Do you believe that consent plays a role in acquisition of sexual pleasure for you? If so, in what ways?
- In what ways, if any, do you think that your age impacts your perception of sexual pleasure, and as you have aged, how has your understanding changed (if at all)?

4. How would you define the term “orgasm?”

- Has this always been the way you have defined “orgasm?”
- If there has been a shift in how you understand the term “orgasm,” how has your understanding changed over time?

5. In your sexual relationship(s), do you find that your pleasure is valued equally with that of your partner?

- If yes, in what ways? If no, in what ways is it not?
- What role do you think your sexual orientation plays in the value, or lack thereof, of your pleasure?

6. What are the factors that have mediated, or brought about, your access to sexual pleasure?

- How do you seek out pleasure when you are wanting it?