

**Morality
and
Sexuality:
Discourses
and
Practices**

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Morality and Sexuality: Discourses and Practices

Summary

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The aim of this study was to examine the key perceptions of morality in Armenian society today, their effect on behavior, from both individual and societal points of view, and reciprocities with the issue of sexuality.

The *main objectives* of the study based on this aim are as follows:

- Examine the basic discourses, perceptions, and notions of people about morality.
- Examine individual and societal behavior, moral norms and practices that regulate coexistence.
- Examine the relationship between moral perceptions, norms, and sexuality.
- Examine the relationships between groups with different perceptions and practices of morality and sexuality, as well as practices that enable coexistence or conflict formation between them.

Methodology: The research was carried out using qualitative methods, consisting of 33 individual and 12 expert interviews as well as 2 focus groups and participatory observations. Interviews were conducted in Yerevan, the medium-sized city of Gyumri, and the four small towns of Armavir, Artik, Sisian and Ijevan. Interviews were also conducted in three rural locations.

Main perceptions, discourses, and practices regarding morality and sexuality: One of the main research questions was what people mean by “morality” and the different interpretations that exist

around this issue. An analysis of the qualitative material recorded allows us to say that Armenian society is very varied in terms of perceptions of morality, and is currently undergoing changes.

According to the recorded materials, one can distinguish three major groups based on the perceptions of morality:

1. Perceptions of morality based on sexuality.
2. Morality based on human attributes.
3. Transient and mixed perceptions.

The first group of perceptions particularly targets a woman's right to make independent choices in her sexual life. The only permissible way for a woman to explore her own sexuality is to marry. Male sexual behavior was not the focus of similar attention, although it was also rarely and occasionally moralized. It is noteworthy that in the moral discourse of female sexuality, human attributes and qualities are not considered to play a role in shaping an individual's moral character.

Perceptions of morality in the second group are fundamentally different from the first. Here, the sexual behavior of an individual is considered to be an issue limited to his or her private life and personal space, and intruding here is considered unacceptable. The attributes that shape a person's moral character are the ones that promote positive attitudes, friendliness, happiness and wellbeing among other people and society. Such attributes include honesty, justice, kindness, and other positive qualities.

The perceptions of the third group are generally transitional or intermediate in nature, between the first and the second. They often emphasize the limitations of a woman's sex life but, in some cases, allow for justifications and exceptions.

When it comes to moral perceptions and commentaries, it is more common to associate it with female sexual behavior. This notion is so deeply rooted that often the word "morality" is fully equated with interpretations on restricting and labeling female sexual behavior.

According to widespread perceptions, moral behavior by girls does not just consist of maintaining virginity before marriage, but also not engaging in any kind of sexually attractive behavior in public spaces that may suggest attempts by the girl to seduce the men in her surroundings. That is to say, in this discourse, morality is linked to the complete denial of a woman's sexuality and is limited solely to her reproductive function of becoming a mother.

As the literature shows, particularly in environments characterized by conservative views of society, moralizing and controlling female behavior becomes an important factor also in shaping a man's character and status. That is why sexual behavior by a particular woman is considered to be of interest to her immediate relatives, extended family and sometimes even the neighborhood and community to which she belongs. For this reason, any pre-marital sexual relations or behavior emphasizing female sexuality could lead to the dishonor of her male relatives and family. Another important factor is the reasoning related to the honor of the given woman's future husband, according

to which only the husband of a woman that has kept herself “pure” before marriage can enter male society with pride and dignity.

The moralization of female sexual behavior is a particularly widespread and criticized phenomenon in closed group settings, i.e. mostly in extended family or neighborhood settings. In work or professional environments, although this can sometimes be the subject of discussion or gossip, it does not play a decisive role in the person’s future career.

Based on the research data, the following basic ideas and narratives can be identified regarding a woman’s morality and sexuality:

1. *The girl must be a virgin before marriage.*
2. *Sexual life for girls at the age of around thirty may be justified if they have a permanent partner, rather than irregular and diverse sexual relations.*
3. *It is unacceptable for a girl to lose her virginity “by chance”, but this may not be considered immoral.*
4. *Girls who lead irregular and diverse sexual lives are considered immoral.*
5. *Women and girls offering paid sexual services are considered immoral.*
6. *The sexual life of a woman and of human beings in general is part of their right to a private life, and it is wrong to regard one as moral or immoral on this basis.*
7. *A woman’s body belongs to her, it does not belong to a man, and a woman is free to make decisions on its use by herself.*

Unlike a woman, a man is much less often labeled as “immoral”. Male sex life and behavior are also, in very rare cases, subjected to criticism or reprobation. Moreover, boys who have sexual relations with a larger number of girls are considered to be the object of their peers’ envy. According to the material recorded, this approach is particularly prevalent in conservative segments, where one’s sexual adventures constitute a topic one can boast about among one’s friends. There are several key explanations to the question of why male sexual behavior is fundamentally different from that of women to such a degree:

1. *Not only should men lose their virginity before marriage, on the contrary they are encouraged to gain sexual experience.*
2. *Nature (or, in some interpretations, God), has created men this way – they need sex more than women do.*
3. *This is how it has been since ancient times – men have always had greater independence.*
4. *Men live in the outside world, women are meant to be indoors.*

The narratives on female sexuality described above can be categorized based on conservative, humanist, and feminist discourses. The first five narratives, which mainly concern the moralization of female sexuality, can be considered part of the conservative discourse, while the sixth one is humanist, and the last one is from feminist discourse. As we can see, the narratives that make up conservative speech are more broadly split than the last two. All the topics of conservative discourses revolve around the question of moralizing female sexuality. Accordingly, *morality* is defined primarily as a

set of social norms that assesses and regulates female behavior. The core content of that morality is the idea that a woman should have only one sexual partner in her lifetime, who should be her legally recognized husband. Accordingly, the key standards of morality are the virginity of the woman before marriage and being faithful to her husband during marriage. Any other situation calls the morality of a given woman into question. The same logic also defines the “immoral”. Women who lead irregular and diverse sex lives, or offer paid sexual services are considered immoral. However, it is interesting that while previously any sexual relations outside wedlock were perceived as immoral, the conservative discourse is changing at present and some tolerant approaches have emerged. This refers to the second and third narratives described above, which have a forgiving approach to a girl who may have lost her virginity as a result of being in love, and to women who have a sexual partner after the age of thirty. In both cases, the label of “immoral” is not used, even though such behavior is not considered welcome. In both cases, it is stated that society will not openly criticize men who marry such women, and will generally try to avoid discussing the woman’s moral character.

These presented conservative notions also suggest that male sexuality is perceived and interpreted largely in the framework of the narrative of inequality between men and women. Moral perceptions are aimed at preserving that inequality and viewing it as a cultural characteristic and a “national value”. That is to say, according to national conservative interpretation of male dominance over women, the objectification of female sexuality almost to the point of its denial, to the extent that female sexuality is considered to exist exclusively for the fulfilment of male sexuality, and the deeply rooted norms to define it as a moral issue are considered a “national value” and are not subject to change, because any attempt to change it can be moralized and interpreted as “perversion”.

According to research data, one of the key changes in the last ten years is the increase in the number of supporters of humanist discourse in the moralization of female sexual behavior. The reason for this change is the growing number of supporters of human-centered and humanist ideas who place importance on the elimination of inequalities and discrimination, respect for free self-actualization, freedom of personal life and the right to be happy. It should be noted that the section of society that does not moralize sexuality, particularly the sexuality of women, whose moral perceptions are mainly related to the human capacity for doing good and other socially positive qualities, consists of individuals that are more independent in all respects. They have their own areas of activity, are self-actualizing by living up to their capabilities and abilities rather than at the expense of others, and are creative and involved in the formation of public good. The representatives of this group have no tendencies for destructive behavior, illegal activities, violations of public order, or corruption. They are also usually in a continuous process of personal and professional growth, are economically active and participate in the processes of forming public good.

As for the feminist discourse, it is new to our society to a certain extent. Although the feminist discourse itself is not homogeneous, the study did not address its internal ramifications because they are primarily relevant within the circle of those discourse holders themselves, while to the broader public it is best known as a single discourse.

The practices of morality and sexuality are largely in line with these discourses. In conservative segments, they are aimed at moralizing female sexuality and making it serve male sexuality. There is a deep-rooted prohibition not just of a woman's engagement in pre-marital sex but also any behavior that emphasizes female sexuality. To this end, many different ways of controlling and restricting a woman's sexual behavior are used. Their scope ranges from psychological to physical barriers and forms of violence. The accepted moral norms can label a woman and provoke actions against labelled women to such an extent that it can lead to deep depression, fears, and other severe psychological stress. In these environments, human lives are disrupted as a result of external pressure, barriers and control over the sexual life of women. Many people experience profound tragedies, suffer psychological disorders, and lose the desire to be happy in life, resigned to many other inhuman emotional, psychological, and even physical deprivations.

The reciprocity of the discourses and practices of morality and sexuality with issues of social cohesion and development. The influence of authorities with criminal origins is quite strong in conservative environments such as street life and other types of closed groups of coexistence. As a result, the influence of criminal norms and concepts is quite strong when it comes to the norms of street life, the formation of hierarchies in the masculine world, the practices of male control over female sexual behavior and, in general, the formation of the norms moralizing female sexuality. The criminalization of moral concepts and norms in street settings has a particularly negative impact on the behavior of boys in early adolescence, as well as their moral perceptions and understanding of the relationships between the sexes. In a deeply conservative environment or one that socially supports it, the perceptions of morality, fundamental discourses and practices are based not on positive human attributes and good practices, but on irrational and destructive notions. ***In such environments, the highest status is given to men with the most destructive impact on the public good, those from criminal backgrounds, or those guided by similar concepts.*** This is one of the most serious issues facing society.

The perceptions and norms of morality in conservative environments are not only largely incompatible with universal human perceptions in the world today, but they also often contradict such universal values as humanism, freedom, creativity, equality, justice, development, innovation and so on. Freedom is considered a particularly condemnable value in conservative moral perceptions. The idea of freedom, which is one of the most profound ideas ever to stir humanity—and which consists of the underlying concept of discovering, developing and realizing one's creative abilities and lead to public good—is distorted, skewed and degraded into a focus solely on female sexual freedom, which is considered value that is unacceptable from the moral point of view.

Another problem arising from the conservative discourses and practices of morality and sexuality is related to the “nationalization” of morality. In particular, ultra-conservative groups try to present their perceptions and practices as “national” or “traditional”, which is considered to be the correct and only acceptable position. As a result, they develop an intolerant and hostile attitude towards those that have a different approach. Through labels, threats, hate speech, violence, and

coercion, they try to neutralize those that do not fit into the “national” concept that they imagine. Such extremism and the “monopolization” of national ideas have lately exacerbated intolerance towards the novel and innovative.

In spite of all this, profound transformations have taken place in different groups of society. Particularly among the youth and the middle-aged, those whose morality is linked to human creativity and constructive activities aimed at the formation of public good—rather than any discrimination against that individual’s sex life—are becoming increasingly influential. For them, morality is defined as a collection of positive human qualities such as being honest, doing no harm to others, doing good, helping, trusting, not interfering with others’ personal lives, not stealing, not resorting to violence, not cheating, being compassionate, kind, and so on. We conventionally call this group *the bearers of humanist or civil morality*. Unfortunately, those who take this approach do not constitute a majority in society, but one can say that they are not a marginalized at present, but are rather an influential minority. The representatives of this group are mainly distinguished by higher-than-average educational and professional qualifications, constructive public activity, civic engagement, striving not to remain indifferent and participate in the discussion and resolution of issues of public concern, affecting the transformation of the environment and public opinion in general. It is important to note that, after the “Velvet Revolution”, the representatives of this group of humanist morality have been largely involved in overthrowing the political hegemony of the previous rulers, built on the principles of authoritarian morality, and are currently in various institutions of political power, which may have a positive effect on this issue.

As mentioned above, women that live independently, outside the control of their immediate or extended families and representatives of their neighborhood or community, are subjected by the conservative segment to various kinds of labeling, estrangement, and sometimes violence and various kinds of pressure. Despite this, interference into the private life of any individual is considered morally unacceptable for the representatives of humanist groups. From the point of view of this segment of society, the moral norms and practices established on the basis of female sexuality taboos contradict aspects of societal development and progress, as they limit the possibility of free self-actualization. Moreover, when morality is reduced to the behavioral norms and practices stemming from female sexuality taboos, it ignores such fundamental and universal standards of morality as those when it is viewed as the norm for the formation and maintenance of public good. According to the latter, morality is based on such important human qualities as honesty, justice, creativity, the willingness to help others and compromise, mutual trust, not stealing, not cheating, and other positive qualities. Consequently, a moral person is not considered to be someone who conforms with certain norms of sex life, but rather someone that bears the positive attributes mentioned above and demonstrates the resulting behavioral practices. Under the pressure of these conservative segments, perceptions of morality have been distorted and skewed among us to the point that a woman who is honest, kind, and possesses many positive human qualities may be considered immoral if she does not abide by the taboos and accepted restrictions regarding her sex life. And a person who is a thief or a criminal can be described within certain street life groups as “respectful”, “dignified” and using other positive characteristics. As a result of the same conservative morality, young men that are the most antisocial,

malicious, aggressive, destructive, and malevolent are considered to have the most exemplary behavior and highest status among their peers. They are the ones who are considered to be judges of female sexual behavior and the guardians of moral standards. They also monitor the attitude of young boys towards girls and force all young boys to label girls with the wrong standards that they set. This research suggests that the ones most often labeled are the most educated, independent, creative, positive women that do not comply with the norms and standards set by conservative groups, and are then labeled as immoral and marginalized. The groups of young boys mentioned above, living within the accepted notions of criminal norms and dominated by the young men stated earlier, are also subjected to violence and oppression if they respect girls that have been labelled as immoral by conservatives. These boys can be subjected to pressure and humiliation. Based on the research data, one can say with certainty that these young boys that are subjected to pressure are more promising when it comes to shaping public good – they are well-behaved, constructive and positive individuals. Meanwhile, the guardians of morality have come to consist of individuals that are violent, ignorant, often with a criminal background, antisocial, and have made no contribution to public good, except having a negative and destructive impact on it.

Thus, moral standards are supervised by groups that are the most immoral in terms of human attributes and the formation of public good. It is noteworthy that the leaders of these dominant groups in the world of conservative men and the satellites surrounding them live a more unscrupulous and immoral life. It turns out that the conservative part of our society has ended up in a mirrored world of its own creation, where the most destructive forces are constantly reproducing their power, adapting their current perceptions and practices of morality to the task of preserving their supremacy.

Based on the research results and in conclusion, I would like to emphasize once again that one of the main causes of the problematic situation in society is the pervasive perceptions that underpin morality which, rather than focus on the positive and creative human attributes and the discourses and practices aimed at developing public good and a collaborative atmosphere, instead feature sexualized perceptions of morality protected by guardian angels under the rule of the criminalized youth, and the young and middle-aged men that live according to the perceptions they spread.

In this respect, this issue goes beyond the narrow framework of morality and sexuality and becomes a phenomenon that impedes future progress in society, inhibits freedom of self-expression among the constructive forces and, in general, subjects the productive societal potential for international integration and competitiveness to destruction. In such a situation, this problem needs to be seriously considered and resolved at the level of state action and policymaking.