

A Qualitative Study of Sexual Separation in Married Women

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ABSTRACT

Objective: Proper sexual functioning is among the factors affecting marital satisfaction. A satisfactory sexual relationship plays a crucial role in individuals' sexual satisfaction, increased life satisfaction, and, consequently, family stability. The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of women dealing with sexual separation.

Methods: To this end, a qualitative research approach was employed using a descriptive phenomenological method. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with thirteen married women who reported having experienced sexual separation for more than a year and were living with their husbands at the time of the interview. Data analysis was conducted using Colaizzi's method.

Findings: Ultimately, two main themes emerged: the nature of sexual separation and the reasons for sexual separation. The nature of sexual separation was divided into two sub-themes: lackluster relationship and wrong path. The reasons for sexual separation were coded into six sub-themes: personal injuries, emotional divorce, emotional wounds, beyond tolerance, unilateral pleasures, and backgrounds.

Conclusion: According to the research findings, it can be inferred that sexual separation has different culturally dependent meanings. However, what stands out more prominently in the categories derived from this study is the reduction in frequency and duration of sexual relations and the lack of sexual desire and enthusiasm towards the spouse. Additionally, the factors causing sexual separation are an intertwined set of various reasons, with the most influential being emotional wounds and emotional divorce. The findings of this study indicate that some cases of sexual separation lead to sexual divorce.

Keywords: Sexual separation, sexual satisfaction, marital satisfaction, sexual divorce.

1. Introduction

The most intimate relationship individuals enter is marriage (Hurlbert et al., 1993). Marriage forms the basis of family formation, while divorce represents its

opposite, leading to family disintegration. Divorce results in individual, familial, and social collapse (Momeni & Azadifard, 2015). Identifying factors that influence the formation of a successful marital relationship can provide

researchers with accurate information about the harm and health of couples' relationships (Darini et al., 2013).

Sexual satisfaction is one of the most important dimensions of a successful marriage and marital satisfaction (Carcedo et al., 2014). It is one of the most critical factors affecting the quality and stability of the couple's relationship (Sprecher et al., 2004). Sexual satisfaction is considered one of the most important aspects of happiness and success in marriage.

Sexual problems and conflicts are always among the top causes of marital conflicts and divorce. In Iran, annual statistics on the causes of marital conflicts and divorce consistently highlight sexual problems as a significant factor (Damiris & Allen, 2023; Tetik & Yalçinkaya Alkar, 2023). In a study by Bolhari et al. (2012), 88% of a sample requesting divorce cited sexual problems as one of the causes (Bolhari et al., 2012). Numerous studies show a strong relationship between sexual satisfaction and marital satisfaction (Byers & Demmons, 1999; Call et al., 1995; Christopher & Sprecher, 2000; Dehghani Champiri & Dehghani, 2023). Byers (1999) examined the causal relationship between sexual relations and marital satisfaction, concluding that there is a reciprocal relationship between marital satisfaction and sexual satisfaction. Findings indicate that the quality of the sexual relationship affects the overall quality of the marital relationship. Sexual relations, by influencing the thoughts and feelings of couples, can directly or indirectly affect their relationships in broad dimensions. In other words, couples who are compatible and satisfied with their sexual relationship can easily overlook many life mismatches (Byers & Demmons, 1999).

In an interview-based study, participants identified sexual issues as the fourth cause of divorce. They cited different temperaments, cold relationships, lack of knowledge and satisfaction of the partner's sexual needs, premarital relationships, variety-seeking, extramarital relationships, sexual disorders, lack of sexual intimacy, and lack of aspects such as healthy sexual relations, meeting sexual needs, sexual attraction, sexual maturity of spouses, effective marital relations, awareness of the partner's sexual needs, and sexual intimacy as factors causing couples to drift apart and lack cohesion in their lives (Alavi et al., 2018).

According to statistics from the Civil Registration Organization, the number of registered divorces in 2018 was 175,604 cases, while the number of registered marriages in the same year was 608,416 cases. This means that approximately one out of every 3.5 marriages ended in

divorce, indicating an increase in the divorce rate compared to previous years. The prevalence rate of sexual problems among divorce applicants is not reported, and naturally, appropriate services to reduce the divorce rate through proper sexual relationship education and counseling are not provided (Dehghani Champiri & Dehghani, 2023; Heydarian et al., 2022; Moteshafie et al., 2023; Nakhaee et al., 2020).

One of the first signs of the onset of emotional divorce can be a significant reduction in marital relations between couples. In such situations, the husband and wife are emotionally parallel but do not have intimate relations with each other, gradually leading to a decrease in their love and affection (Tetik & Yalçinkaya Alkar, 2023).

Studies indicate a higher prevalence of sexual dysfunction in women compared to men. Therefore, the greater vulnerability of women's sexual quality of life compared to men is expected (Timm & Keiley, 2011). The high prevalence of disorders in women's sexual cycle, including sexual desire, sexual arousal, and orgasm, indicates that sexual problems are a widespread health issue among women (Heydarian et al., 2022). However, due to modesty and cultural issues in Iranian society, women generally do not easily discuss their sexual problems and issues. Therefore, if the sexual desires of a husband and wife differ, undoubtedly, they will face problems in their sexual relationship and, consequently, in other aspects of their shared life, as a good sexual relationship is the driving force of a marital life and causes significant changes and transformations. The greater the mental and physical barriers to sexual satisfaction, the more disillusioned women become (Moteshafie et al., 2023). Considering the above points and the importance of a satisfactory sexual relationship between couples, and given the lack of domestic research on couples' sexual issues and sexual separation, and considering the cultural and social conditions of society, there is a need to research sexual issues among couples, including sexual separation and divorce. This study, taking into account these points, investigates the lived experience of sexual separation among married women in Isfahan.

2. Methods

2.1. Study design and Participant

The present study is applied in terms of its objective and qualitative in terms of its method, employing a phenomenological approach. Phenomenology focuses on individuals' lived experiences of their surrounding

phenomena and their unique perspectives. Given the nature of the study, a descriptive phenomenological method was employed. According to Husserl, this method aims to deeply understand and describe individuals' direct experiences of the phenomenon under study, without imposing subjective judgments. Descriptive phenomenologists believe that each lived experience has characteristics that, when mental filters are removed, are common among all who have experienced it (Giorgi, 2010).

The study population consisted of all married women in Isfahan during the spring and summer of 2020 who had experienced sexual separation from their husbands and did not suffer from sexual disorders or deviations. For the purposes of this study, sexual separation was defined as a situation where women had sexual relations with their husbands less than once a month, or 12 times a year, based on reviewed research on sexual separation. Participants were selected for interviews based on this criterion.

The sample included 13 married women from Isfahan who had experienced sexual separation for over a year and whose experiences were not related to the spread of COVID-19. Data saturation was achieved when no new information emerged during the final three interviews.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which provided flexibility and depth in exploring the participants' experiences. The semi-structured format allowed for open-ended questions, enabling participants to express their perspectives in detail. The interviews were designed to elicit rich, detailed descriptions of participants' experiences with sexual separation, including their perceptions, emotions, and the impact on their relationships. The interviews continued until saturation was reached, ensuring comprehensive coverage of the phenomenon.

2.3. Data Analysis

The data analysis process in phenomenology involves a deep interaction between the researcher and the interview texts. Colaizzi's seven-step method was employed for this analysis. This method involves:

Familiarization with the data: Reading and re-reading the interview transcripts to gain a deep understanding of the content.

Identifying significant statements: Extracting statements from the interviews that are directly related to the phenomenon of sexual separation.

Formulating meanings: Developing meanings from the significant statements, reflecting the participants' lived experiences.

Organizing themes: Grouping the formulated meanings into themes that capture the essence of the participants' experiences.

Integrating findings: Relating the themes to the broader context of the study and to existing literature.

Describing the phenomenon: Providing a detailed description of the phenomenon based on the themes and findings.

Validation: Ensuring the accuracy and credibility of the findings through feedback from participants and cross-checking with existing research.

3. Findings and Results

In the first stage of coding, 53 open codes were identified from 940 important and relevant sentences. In the second stage, categorization, the following were identified: four categories regarding the nature of sexual separation, namely: decreased frequency, extinguished passion, first experiences, and bitter end; and seventeen categories regarding the reasons for sexual separation, including: psychological issues of the man, specific issues, misconducts, defective beliefs, one-way road, stone wall, physical separation, inappropriate interactions, hidden wounds, excessive demands, imbalance, sexual selfishness, lack of pleasure experience, artificial relationship, dark past, family role, and difficult conditions. Finally, two sub-themes were identified regarding the nature of sexual separation under the titles: lackluster relationship and wrong path, and six sub-themes regarding the reasons for sexual separation under the titles: individual injuries, emotional divorce, emotional wounds, beyond tolerance, one-sided pleasures, and backgrounds. The results of the research are detailed below.

Table 1

Summary of Qualitative Analysis

Main Theme	Open Code	Category	Sub-theme
1. The Nature of Sexual Separation	Decreased number of interactions	Decreased frequency	Lackluster relationship
	Complete cessation		
	Decreased duration of interactions		
	Avoidance of spouse	Extinguished passion	
	Hatred towards interactions with spouse		
	Lack of sexual desire		
	Dissatisfaction with lack of any sexual interaction during the engagement	First experiences	Wrong path
	Dissatisfaction with complete sexual interaction during the engagement		
	Lack of desire for interaction on the wedding night		
	Replacing spouse with other activities	Bitter end	
2. Reasons for Sexual Separation	Moral deviations		
	Panic	Psychological issues of the man	Individual injuries
	Depression		
	Obsession		
	Anxiety and stress		
	Addiction	Specific issues	
	Infidelity		
	Premature ejaculation		
	Lack of confidentiality	Misconducts	
	Aggressiveness		
	Incorrect beliefs about the opposite sex	Defective beliefs	
	Incorrect sexual beliefs		
	Weak sexual self-concept of the man		
	Lack of time spent with spouse	One-way road	Emotional divorce
	Lack of support and help		
	One-sided sacrifice		
	Emotional neglect	Stone wall	
	Lack of interest in spouse		
	Woman's perception of spouse's emotional attention		
	Lack of physical contact	Physical separation	
	Sleeping separately		
	Behavior in sexual relationship	Inappropriate interactions	Emotional wounds
	Behavior after sexual relationship		
	Lack of emotional-psychological satisfaction	Hidden wounds	
	Woman's humiliation in the relationship		
	Lack of attention to woman's appearance		
	Dissatisfaction with frequency of interaction	Excessive demands	Beyond tolerance
	Dissatisfaction with duration of interaction		
	Unconventional sexual expectations	Imbalance	
	Differences in sexual desire		
	Distressing relationship	Sexual selfishness	One-sided pleasures
	Sexual neglect		
	Lack of orgasm experience	Lack of pleasure experience	
	Lack of sexual satisfaction		
	Lack of foreplay	Artificial relationship	
	Loveless relationship		
	Previous sexual relationships	Dark past	Backgrounds
	Previous sexual abuse		
	Sexual fantasies before marriage		
	Type of marriage	Family role	
	Interference of spouse's family		
	Insecurity in bedroom	Difficult conditions	
	Pregnancy and childbirth		

3.1. *The Nature of Sexual Separation*

Based on the descriptions of participants regarding their sexual experiences with their spouses, the theme of the nature of sexual separation emerged. This theme includes two sub-themes titled lackluster relationship and wrong path, which are further elaborated below.

The first sub-theme, lackluster and dimmed sexual relationship, was brought up by the participants in relation to the nature of sexual separation. This sub-theme itself comprises two categories: decreased frequency and extinguished passion.

The sub-theme wrong path shows the trajectory of the sexual relationship of couples from the first experiences to a bitter end.

3.2. *Reasons for Sexual Separation*

The reasons for sexual separation as articulated by the participants in response to the researcher's questions were formulated into the theme reasons for sexual separation. This theme comprises six sub-themes: individual injuries, emotional divorce, emotional wounds, beyond tolerance, one-sided pleasures, and backgrounds, which will be detailed further.

Individual injuries, the first sub-theme, was raised in relation to the reasons for sexual separation. This sub-theme comprises four categories: psychological issues, specific issues, misconducts, and defective beliefs.

Emotional divorce is a term frequently heard these days; couples living under one roof but with unstable and weak emotional bonds, compelled to live together. The sub-theme emotional divorce includes three categories: one-way road, stone wall, and physical separation.

Emotional wounds include two categories: inappropriate interactions and hidden wounds.

Beyond tolerance includes two categories: excessive demands and imbalance.

The fifth sub-theme in the reasons for sexual separation is one-sided pleasures. Relationships that are enjoyable for only one partner and distressing for the other. One-sided pleasures include three categories: sexual selfishness, lack of pleasure experience, and artificial relationship.

The final sub-theme in the reasons for sexual separation is backgrounds, which includes three categories: dark past, family role, and difficult conditions.

4. **Discussion and Conclusion**

The aim of this study was to conduct a qualitative study of sexual separation in married women. According to the participants in this study, the nature of sexual separation is summarized in two sub-themes: lackluster relationship and wrong path, and the reasons for this phenomenon fall into six sub-themes: individual injuries, emotional divorce, emotional wounds, beyond tolerance, one-sided pleasures, and backgrounds.

The first sub-theme obtained regarding the nature of sexual separation is "lackluster relationship," which includes two categories: decreased frequency and extinguished passion, with codes such as decreased number of interactions, complete cessation of interaction, decreased duration of interaction, avoidance of spouse, hatred towards interactions with spouse, and lack of sexual desire. What is evident in the definition and nature of sexual separation, and the first meaning that comes to mind, is decreased frequency. The number of sexual interactions between couples significantly decreases or completely ceases. Although the reduction in duration is not a specific sign of sexual separation, women who experienced sexual separation complained about the decreased duration of interaction. This decrease may be due to sexual problems such as premature ejaculation, addiction issues, lack of desire to have sexual interactions with the spouse, emotional problems, infidelity, or other reasons that need to be investigated in each case. Bloom (2003) found in a study that a sexless marriage is one in which couples have sexual interactions less than ten times a year (Bloom, 2003).

The second sub-theme of the nature of sexual separation is "wrong path," which includes two categories: first experiences and bitter end, with codes such as dissatisfaction with the lack of any sexual interaction during the engagement period, dissatisfaction with complete sexual interaction during the engagement period, lack of desire for interaction on the wedding night, replacing spouse with other activities, and moral deviations. In Iranian culture, the engagement period is a time when the boy and girl are legally and religiously considered husband and wife but do not live under one roof. In custom, this period is called the period of recognition; on the other hand, it is a difficult period for the boy and girl because they can easily be alone together but societal and family restrictions do not allow them to have sexual interactions. However, the present study shows that

neither complete sexual interaction nor the lack of any interaction during the engagement period is favorable for women. This requires an agreement between the man and woman, and the boundaries of this relationship need to be defined. Most women believed that the lack of interaction in the days following the engagement was a major factor in misunderstandings and dissatisfaction in their relationships with their husbands. Askari et al. (2012) in a study conducted in Egypt found that masturbation and pornography were more common among men and among individuals with higher education. Additionally, the frequency of masturbation and pornography was higher among married men with a marriage duration of 10 to 20 years and among married women with a marriage duration of less than 10 years (Askari et al., 2012).

The second theme, reasons for sexual separation, includes six sub-themes. The first sub-theme is individual injuries, which comprises four categories: psychological issues of the man, specific issues, misconducts, and defective beliefs. The codes include: panic, depression, obsession, stress and anxiety, addiction, infidelity, premature ejaculation, lack of confidentiality, aggressiveness, incorrect sexual beliefs, incorrect beliefs about the opposite sex, and weak sexual self-concept of the man. What was seen in this study was the coexistence of some psychological problems such as depression, stress and anxiety, panic, and obsession with sexual problems such as lack of sexual desire in men. The causal relationship needs further research, but what is evident from the studies is the reciprocal relationship between them.

Infidelity in this study was both a cause and a consequence of sexual separation. Engaging in extramarital relationships led to emotional divorce and consequently sexual separation, and on the other hand, emotional divorce and sexual separation led some women towards extramarital relationships.

Addiction, rightly called a home-wrecking scourge, negatively affects the emotional relationship of couples, destroys intimacy between them, and leads to emotional divorce, which was the major cause of sexual separation according to the participants in this study. On the other hand, addiction negatively impacts sexual desire and accelerates the occurrence of sexual separation.

Sexual problems and disorders play a major role in sexual dissatisfaction and marital dissatisfaction. Among the most common sexual dysfunctions in men is premature ejaculation, which negatively affects women's sexual satisfaction and leads to their sexual dissatisfaction.

One of the issues that enriches the emotional relationship of couples is attentive and affectionate behavior. Misconduct severely damages the emotional relationship and accelerates emotional divorce. Toxic beliefs poison the relationship and result in emotional and sexual coldness.

The second sub-theme in the reasons for sexual separation is emotional divorce, which includes three categories: one-way road, stone wall, and physical separation. The codes include: lack of time spent with spouse, lack of support and help, one-sided sacrifice, emotional neglect, lack of interest in spouse, woman's perception of spouse's emotional attention, lack of physical contact, and sleeping separately. The major complaint of women was men's neglect and lack of interest, not spending time with them, and not helping with various household and life issues. Forced marriage is also an important factor in creating cold and unstable marital relationships. Alitabar et al. (2013) found that the reasons for emotional divorce include: infidelity, lack of understanding, bad behavior and disrespect, unmet expectations, sexual problems, effects of technology, neglect and critical problems, sense of superiority, addiction, and childlessness of spouse (Hurlbert et al., 1993). Nakhaee et al. (2020) found that men with university education experience higher marital satisfaction and less emotional divorce (Nakhaee et al., 2020).

The third sub-theme is emotional wounds, which includes two categories: inappropriate interactions and hidden wounds. The codes include: behavior in sexual relationship, behavior after sexual relationship, lack of emotional-psychological satisfaction, woman's humiliation in the relationship, and lack of attention to woman's appearance. Repetition of inappropriate behaviors in sexual relationships or after them gradually affects the desire and enthusiasm of couples and makes them indifferent towards their spouse and the relationship. The behavior of couples towards each other forms the basis of their emotional relationship. Emotional-psychological satisfaction in the relationship is as important as, if not more important than, experiencing orgasm for women. Men's attention to the appearance and physique of their spouses and compliments are among the important needs of women that can strengthen their emotional bond and increase their sexual satisfaction.

The fourth sub-theme, beyond tolerance, includes two categories: excessive demands and imbalance. The codes include: dissatisfaction with the frequency of interaction, dissatisfaction with the duration of interaction, unconventional sexual expectations, and differences in sexual desire. Incompatibility in the level of sexual desire is

an important cause of sexual dissatisfaction in couples and, in the long term, leads to dissatisfaction or sexual separation of couples. Another factor is unusual sexual expectations, which put the spouse under psychological pressure and again, gradually lead to dissatisfaction or sexual separation.

The fifth sub-theme, one-sided pleasures, includes three categories: sexual selfishness, lack of pleasure experience, and artificial relationship. The codes include: distressing relationship, sexual neglect, lack of orgasm experience, lack of sexual satisfaction, lack of foreplay, and loveless relationship. The inability to experience the peak of sexual pleasure was difficult for women, but even harder was the lack of foreplay and distressing relationships. Relationships that make women feel like a tool for satisfying men's sexual desires (Heydarian et al., 2022). The participant women unanimously considered foreplay as a sign of men's attention and affection, and the ideal sexual relationship for them was one with foreplay and afterplay.

The sixth sub-theme, backgrounds, includes three categories: dark past, family role, and difficult conditions. The codes include: previous sexual relationships, previous sexual abuse, sexual fantasies before marriage, type of marriage, interference of spouse's family, insecurity in bedroom, and pregnancy. Previous sexual relationships or abuse affect the sexual relationship of couples and shape their sexual fantasies and beliefs. Early maladaptive schemas are associated with sexual satisfaction in both men and women (Damiris & Allen, 2023). The feeling of security in a sexual relationship is very important for women. Women cannot enjoy the sexual relationship and achieve sexual satisfaction unless they feel secure and calm. Family interference in the life of couples, if not handled wisely and shrewdly by the spouses, will negatively affect their emotional relationship and damage the marital bond.

In this study, the author found that sexual separation does not exist without emotional problems. Another issue that can be noted in this study is the duration of sexual separation. According to foreign studies, this time is between one to three or four months, but what was obtained from the data of this study were separations lasting more than one year and up to nearly ten years. The author concluded that in Iranian culture, we are faced with two issues: the issue of sexual separation, which refers to the lack of sexual relationship between husband and wife that may last from one month to one year, but after that, the couples resume their sexual relationship and then another separation follows. However, in the case of spouses who have not had a sexual relationship for more than one year, we are faced with the issue of sexual

divorce. As the data showed, couples had progressed without the slightest sexual relationship for up to ten years.

5. Suggestions and Limitations

Since the present study was conducted qualitatively and with a limited number of women experiencing sexual separation, the findings are not generalizable to all women with sexual experience. Based on the results, it is suggested that family counselors and therapists use the findings of this study in developing effective intervention programs for the prevention and treatment of the harms of sexual separation. It is also recommended to provide counseling and therapeutic services to couples dealing with the phenomenon of sexual separation and to educate couples on marital skills and relationship management.

Authors' Contributions

All authors have contributed significantly to the research process and the development of the manuscript.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

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Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants. The first

important ethical issue in this study was obtaining the consent of the sample women. Since it is not appropriate for the researcher to have another goal in mind but tell the participants something else, the second important ethical consideration was obtaining the participants' informed consent; for this purpose, each participant was given a brief explanation about the subject and objectives of the research. The third ethical consideration was maintaining privacy and anonymity; participants were assured that their privacy would be preserved. For this purpose, they were assured that their names and personal information, as well as the recorded voices, would not be published. It should be noted that the present study received ethical code IR.UI.REC.1399.068 from the Ethics Committee of the University of Isfahan.

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