

Perceptions of communication and education about sexuality among Muslim immigrant girls in the US

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This research explored how Muslim immigrant girls' communication and education about sexuality was mediated through their mothers and school-based sexuality education (SBSE) classes. Thirty mothers and their 38 daughters living in Illinois participated in focus group discussions and individual semi-structured interviews that gauged girls' and mothers' perceptions regarding communication about sexuality and SBSE. Thematic analysis showed that little communication regarding sexuality happened between mothers and daughters, and that which did occur was confined primarily to the risks premarital sexual relationships posed to the social order. Furthermore, participants reported that although SBSE classes were informative, they perceived that these classes marginalized Muslim girls' experiences and decisions to abstain from premarital sex by primarily emphasizing prevention from sexually transmitted infections and diseases. Given these perceptions, some participants opted not to attend SBSE classes. This research contributes to enriching the knowledge base of sexuality educators and communities regarding the diverse challenges immigrant youths face in learning about their sexuality. Alternative ways to reach Muslim immigrant youths are discussed.

Introduction

For the past three decades, issues of sexuality education for adolescents have occupied the agendas of researchers and policy makers alike (Lieberman & Peck, 1973; Shapiro, 1981; Bruess & Greenberg, 1988; Bell, 1998). And although one in five children in the US live in an immigrant-headed household (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001), we know surprisingly little about the challenges these youths face in obtaining information about sexuality, including biological reproduction, sexual intercourse, and sexual pleasure. This is particularly so for young immigrant girls who, through their sexual behavior, bear the brunt of maintaining family honor and ethnic and religious integrity. Parental perceptions that knowledge about sexuality

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leads to promiscuous sexual activity create obstacles for young immigrant girls wanting to obtain information about reproductive health.

This paper draws on data collected as part of a study investigating how the interaction between Muslim immigrant mothers and their daughters shaped the daughters' agency in negotiating decisions about sexual conduct. It examines sexuality communication and education among Muslim immigrant girls in the US as mediated by their mothers and school-based sexuality education (SBSE) classes.

Exploring the link between these two channels of information is particularly interesting if not essential. Among Muslims, parents are a main source for teaching youths about sexuality and moral values regarding sexual conduct. Because education about sexuality is gender segregated, mothers teach their daughters, and fathers teach their sons (Ashraf, 1998; Mabud, 1998; Noibi, 1998). For Muslim immigrant families, in particular, educating activities at home are considered a necessity to counter the dominant information children receive at school, through their peers and the media (McGown, 1999). Because Muslim mothers are considered responsible for girls' sexual conduct, discussion of issues related to sexuality takes the form of moral interdiction and limits on outside influences, including SBSE programs.

Among religious Muslims, learning about sex in the school curriculum is viewed as part of a belief system that condones premarital sexuality rather than as a subject in the school curriculum (Ashraf, 1998; Mabud, 1998; Noibi, 1998). Although SBSE programs provide useful information regarding sexual health, skill-building and independent decision-making information pertaining to sexual conduct, they may be perceived as propagating information that contradicts what youths are taught at home. Giving youths the tools to have 'safe' premarital sex is contrary to Islam and Muslim code of behavior. Parents perceive that these classes particularly challenge transmission of Islamic values to young girls by teaching them to conceptualize decision-making regarding sexual conduct as a personal rather than a family matter. As a result, most Muslim immigrant parents object to their children participating in SBSE classes (McGown, 1999). Some mothers may favor sending girls to SBSE classes, but all feel particularly responsible for countering information that challenges the moral values learnt at home.

Because sexuality education for Muslim families is closely connected to heterosexual partnership and marriage, the study's assumption was that girls participating in this research were heterosexual and would eventually marry. Focus group and individual semi-structured interviews were used to explore two questions: (1) What is the content of communication regarding sexuality between mothers and daughters? and (2) What are the perceptions of mothers and daughters regarding school-based sexuality education classes?

Methods

Participants

Thirty mothers (mean age=43.17, SD=5.14) and their 38 daughters (mean

age=16.59, SD=2.07) were recruited through snowball sampling techniques and by frequently visiting the local mosques and Islamic centers in Illinois. Over 83% of the mothers had been in the US for more than 10 years. About 47% had received a college education and about 53% were homemakers. All mothers were married. Daughters were predominantly US born (76%) with the rest having migrated with their parents when they were very young (24%). One attended middle school and another was home schooled (6%), 71% attended high school (53% in local public high schools and 47% local private high schools), and 23% attended college. Praying was central to most mothers and daughters. Seventy-seven per cent of the mothers and 68% of the daughters prayed at least three times a day. More mothers than daughters wore *hijab* (veil) (63% vs. 32%). Both mothers and daughters engaged in other aspects of being Muslim including wearing modest clothing, reading the *Qur'an*, and participating in activities of Muslim community. In addition to extended family, schools, and individual reading and exploration, both mothers and daughters identified their parents as important sources of Muslim education.

Data collection strategies

Because it involves discussion of personal, intimate experiences, researching how individuals receive information about sexuality classifies as a sensitive topic. Surveys, focus groups, and individual interviews have been suggested as appropriate methods of research (e.g. Farquar, 1999; Lee, 1993; Renzetti & Lee, 1993). The main body of data for this paper is based on focus groups and semi-structured interviews. In addition to helping elicit sensitive and rich contextual information, these were considered as empowering strategies that allowed Muslim mothers and daughters to express and reflect upon their own personal perspectives. These two strategies complemented each other and enhanced comparability of data. For comparative purposes, the wording of questions was kept almost the same for both mothers and daughters.

Focus groups were used to gain research insights and increase understanding of group perspectives on communication and education about sexuality. They also served as a preliminary tool to help develop the semi-structured guide for the individual interviews that were conducted afterwards. During the semi-structured interviews, both mothers and daughters initially rated whether they talked openly to each other on a five point scale of '1=never' to '5=always'. Then they were probed whether they talked openly about sex and were asked to describe the contents of that reciprocal communication. To gauge their perceptions about SBSE classes, both mothers and daughters initially rated how often girls should attend SBSE classes on a five point scale of '1=never' to '5=always', and then were asked to elaborate on the answer.

Procedure

Prior to fieldwork, approval was received first from the Institutional Review Board at

the University of Illinois and then from the participants. Upon consent, mothers and daughters received a package including a consent form describing at length the study and soliciting participation, the demographic survey and a pre-paid researcher-addressed envelope.

Four group discussions with the mothers and six group discussions with the daughters were conducted separately in English. Up to five participants participated in each group. They were homogeneously grouped in terms of socio-economic status, age, marital status, place of residence, religiousness, country of origin and length of stay in the USA (especially for the mothers). Six group discussions were held at local Islamic centers. The rest were held in one of the key informants' homes. The discussions were tape-recorded and lasted between one and two hours.

The individual semi-structured interviews were also conducted separately with each of the mothers and daughters in English. For those few participants who were not fluent in English, at their request, a key informant who was fluent in Arabic and English attended the interview sessions. In a few other instances the mothers requested that their daughters be part of the interview process to translate for them in case they did not understand my questions in English. Twelve interviews were held at the Islamic center, another two were held in University of Illinois classrooms, and the rest were conducted in participants' homes. The individual semi-structured interviews were also tape-recorded and lasted between 45 and 90 minutes.

Theoretical saturation (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) guided the number of focus group discussions and individual interviews. Notwithstanding that participants for this project came from different countries and had varied socio-economic status, the criterion of religiousness provided a limit to the quantity of the group discussions and the individual interviews. Participants' perceptions of communication and education about sexuality were linked to practicing Islam and answers became repetitive after four group discussions with the mothers and six group discussions with the daughters. The same happened with the individual semi-structured interviews.

The recorded material was transcribed *verbatim*. The analysis focused on representing mothers' and daughters' perceptions through their accounts. Based on suggestions by Bogdan and Biklen (1998), two families of codes were used: (1) Perspectives held by participants: Codes were oriented toward ways of thinking that both mothers and daughters shared including Islamic rules and norms as well as some general points of view regarding sexuality; (2) Participants' ways of thinking about people and objects: Codes were oriented toward participants' understandings of communication with each other, as well as their perceptions of SBSE classes. All the text was coded in ETHNOGRAPH. Upon coding, I identified the themes that permeated the group discussions and the interviews. Given that different principles drive the analysis of the group discussions and individual interviews, the data analysis is described separately.

Groups rather than individuals are the unit of analysis for the group discussions (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990; Krueger, 1998). Because the principle of group discussions is that data are produced in interaction, data from individuals within a single group discussion session are not independent. Indeed, they are socially

Table 1. Responses of mothers and daughters to how often they talked openly to each other

Response	Mothers (%)	Daughters (%)
Never	0.0	2.6
Rarely	0.0	2.6
Sometimes	6.7	34.2
Most of the time	43.3	28.9
Always	50.0	31.6

produced in the group interaction (Wilkinson, 1998; Smithson, 2000). Wellings *et al.* (2000) caution that individuals in a group discussion are constantly involved in parallel operations; they express their own opinions and describe their own behaviors, but also censor them to render them acceptable to the perceived group norm. Following Hughes' and DuMont's (1993) suggestions, in this study I looked for convergence in emergent themes across a sample of group discussions rather than across participants within a group.

Perspectives of individual mothers and daughters were the focus of analysis in the interview material. The expectation for this part of the analysis was that both mothers and daughters would see communication and education about sexuality differently due to different immigration, age and education experiences.

Results

Mothers' and daughters' communication about sexuality

Table 1 describes how frequently mothers and daughters engaged in open talks with each other. While most mothers reported that they talked openly to their daughters 'most of the time' or 'always', a third of the daughters participating in the study reported that they did so only 'sometimes'. On probing, both mothers and daughters reported that they discussed issues including relationships with the opposite sex, virginity and dating. However few reported that they had engaged in discussions about sexuality as an individual's experience. Findings from the group and individual interviews are reported in the next two subsections.

Mothers' perceptions. Mothers agreed that it was their duty to provide the moral and emotional information regarding sex; however, few engaged in open, direct conversations with their daughters. These mothers reported that it was important to talk to their daughters about sex-related topics and to challenge any confusion associated with sex being a taboo subject. Their motivation to talk about their daughters' emerging sexuality with their daughters was particularly prompted by the mothers' own sexual socialization experiences. Mothers reported that their parents did not talk about sex because 'parents were afraid we might end up with a boyfriend or experiment.' These mothers talked about sex within the Islamic

framework and explained that sexual relationships should exist only within the boundaries of marital relationships. Within only those boundaries was sex ‘something enjoyable, to be indulged in’, and ‘a gift from Allah to enjoy your mate.’ Asked to describe how she talked about sex, one mother explained:

I am not delicate or sensitive. I simply tell them that there are certain things that we are all inclined to do. We are animals, if you want to look at it from the scientific form, and we have instinctively desires and urges to procreate and to experiment, and we are blessed that we have a mind and we have a religion and our religion tells us to control our mind and our urges and do things in a *halal* (allowed) way instead of a *haram* (forbidden) way, legal ways and not illegal ways.

This mode of direct communication contrasted with the tendency of most mothers participating in this study who reported that they did not engage in talks about sexuality with their daughters. Several reasons accounted for why mothers did not talk about sex. Some felt embarrassed to think that their daughters ‘know about sex.’ Others were aware they did not have the skills to deal with sexuality-related questions. The age difference and their position as mothers teaching moral values made a difference because ‘there is a matter of shame when you talk to your daughter.’ A more disconcerting finding, however, was that a few participating mothers held the view that daughters did not need that much information because that responsibility was left to their daughters’ husbands who ‘should know more about sex than she.’

Although mothers did not talk to their daughters about sex, they overwhelmingly indicated that they were available if their daughters had questions. Mothers did not think it was necessary to initiate the conversation. With all the discussions and books that the girls read, mothers were confident that girls ‘do come to know that virginity and sex is important.’ Furthermore, wearing modest clothing, including loose fitting pants and dresses, and being rarely too affectionate with their husbands in front of their children were ways to indirectly teach their daughters about sex.

Whether they opted for a direct or indirect mode of communication with their daughters, mothers reported that Muslim ethics of guarded sexual behavior guided conversations with their daughters. Mothers emphasized that the Islamic injunction to not engage in premarital sex was a blessing from God that protected daughters from contracting fatal diseases such as AIDS or being forced to leave school because of a pregnancy:

I have told them ... ‘More than me you have to be afraid of God. Things don’t go away, they are there, and then you have to live with the consequences of the actions. You will have to tell your husband and your wife eventually that you had this experience. How would you feel? A nice clean person stands in front of you, you have to tell them how dirty you are, that you did this act without the benefit of marriage and that makes you the lesser in that relationship.’

Apart from transmitting Islamic moral values to their daughters, mothers also talked to their daughters about menstruation and what that event meant for girls from the Islamic point of view. Mothers instructed their daughters how to use sanitary pads (but not tampons as they could break the hymen and compromise a girl’s virginity), and how to clean themselves for prayer when their period was over. Overwhelmingly,

mothers both neutralized and celebrated the event by treating periods as natural and by throwing a party for their daughters when they had their first menstruation. Mothers also reported that they had explained to their daughters that with the event of menstruation every single act counted and they were responsible before God for any inappropriate behavior including being in the company of unrelated men. Some mothers advised that it was now appropriate for their daughters to begin wearing *hijab*. Discussion of emotions relating to a maturing body was not reported.

Daughters' perceptions. Daughters reported that their mothers rarely talked about sex, and when they did, they focused on the threats premarital sexual relations posed to the social and moral order. Several girls mentioned that their mothers had given them the 'you're a Muslim girl, you should never be put in a position where you are going to feel like you have to do that' talk. One of the daughters, echoing the concern of many girls wanting their parents to be sexuality educators, pointed out:

Some parents are too scared to talk to their kids about sex. I don't think it is a big deal because you will find out. I would rather hear it from my parents than be like 'What happened? Why aren't my parents telling me? What's the big deal about it?'

Daughters talked about mothers' tendency to postpone talking about sex on account of their daughters' age. They were confident that their mothers would talk to them about sex 'when the time is right,' i.e. on the daughter's engagement, or right before marriage because that was the time 'when we need it.' A few older girls, however, expressed the concern that 'that might be a little too late' and that 'most of the girls are not nervous about the wedding ceremony, they are afraid of that first night with a man.'

Some daughters also believed that their mothers did not possess the information and the skills to talk about sex in a scientific way. They did not want their mothers to explain to them the 'fallopian tubes and all that system stuff.' The only biological event that daughters had managed to talk to their mothers about was menstruation. Exchange of information between mothers and daughters reflected the Islamic belief that while menstruation was something God ordained for women, it was considered impure. Girls were told that they were not allowed to pray or fast during this time.

Perceptions of school-based sexuality education

As shown in Table 2, more daughters than mothers were of the opinion that they should 'rarely' attend SBSE classes. In addition, more mothers than daughters agreed that daughters should 'always' attend these SBSE classes. Group discussions and individual interviews shed light on some of the reasons for these answers.

Mothers' perceptions. A common concern for mothers was that the dominant socio-cultural environment was very suggestive and conducive to unregulated and

Table 2. Responses of mothers and daughters to how often daughters should attend sexuality education classes

Response	Mothers (%)	Daughters (%)
Never	16.7	15.8
Rarely	3.3	28.9
Sometimes	36.7	23.7
Most of the time	13.3	21.1
Always	30.0	10.5

unrestricted sexual activity. In the mothers' words, 'unbridled sexuality' is so pervasive in the US that they 'can't even realize it,' 'the ads, kissing, hugging, whatever you call it, sex.' Given this socio-cultural environment, mothers often commented that their daughters should attend SBSE classes to obtain the 'correct information.' While they did not approve whole-heartedly of their daughters' participation in SBSE classes because they thought the family should provide the sexuality education, mothers were concerned that the alternative source of information could be their daughters' peers whose knowledge, in their opinion, was usually cloaked in misinformation and age-related curiosity:

I would rather them know that in a clinical manner than what they hear in the hallways. I personally would not like the school to play any role in sex education at all, but I know realistically that the people she is around are sexually active, some as early as the age of eight. I don't want her to be totally ignorant of what's going on, and unfortunately because of the society we live in she needs to be aware.

Some mothers agreed that SBSE classes provided important information, especially when this information was worded in a technical and scientific fashion. Mothers reported that sexuality education facilitated information that they otherwise would not have been able to give because they were never given such information and they did not have the proper knowledge and skills to discuss these issues. A mother recalled that 'even when I was having a baby, I didn't know what was happening to me, and my husband didn't know anything either.' Other mothers thought that it was useful that SBSE classes focused on the diseases that resulted from unprotected sex because 'if she know and if she learn in school, she will not do it.'

Despite the usefulness of SBSE classes, mothers perceived that some of the contents of the classes were problematic. Mothers perceived that these classes, by discussing dating and premarital sexual relations, encouraged a lifestyle that was un-Islamic. Pointing to this concern, some of the mothers did not consent to their daughters attending sexuality education classes.

She doesn't have to take a sex class. I didn't take any sex class and I am fine. So it is a natural thing, you catch up with the stuff ... I still remember one of my friends, her kids, in school they teach about sex in fifth grade and I heard that her daughter came and told her mom they showed something about banana and how to give oral sex and stuff. I don't want them to know all that ... Like the next thing they will say is 'OK, mom, I want to take a class where they can teach you different positions!' I don't want that.

Mothers also reported that the means through which sexuality information was shared was inappropriate. Mothers objected to the use of videos as didactic materials on account that showing these videos could lead to girls wanting to experiment with sex.

That mothers perceived SBSE classes to be pushing an un-Islamic lifestyle was a main motivator for mothers to counter the information that was given in these classes. A few mothers reported that they sat in the classes to ascertain that the material was 'decent.' They also engaged in additional conversations with their teenage daughters and countered material presented in SBSE classes with Islamic views on premarital sexuality.

Daughters' perceptions. Daughters echoed the mothers' concern that in the environment they live in 'whether you want it or not you get all the information about sex.' They learnt about sex in public school, on the street, through friends—both female and male—who carried condoms in their pockets and bragged that they were 'cool' because 'they are not virgin.' While the girls did not intend to engage in premarital sex, they agreed that SBSE classes provided them with information that they could use in the future. Rather than battle with the changes in their bodies, they learned to understand and interpret these changes. Furthermore, these classes taught girls how to deal with any consequences that came from surprise situations such as attacks from a sex offender.

A few girls reported that SBSE classes, by being informative, helped them challenge the value-laden information they received at home. Bringing a book home helped daughters facilitate a more open discussion with mothers who attempted to teach about sex and sexuality through scare tactics.

You get some good information in these classes. All my mother would tell me, she would tell me like myths ... hypothetical things, things that old ladies from generation to generation will tell her. Like 'Mom, that's not even true!' Like women born without a hymen ... I told my mom, 'The nurses came in and they showed us how to put on the condom.' And she was like, 'Why are they teaching you how to do that?' Like 'Because there's girls that are already doing that mom!' She doesn't realize.

Despite the usefulness of these classes, some girls, like their mothers, perceived that some of the contents of the classes were problematic. A few girls perceived that SBSE classes were not sensitive to the religious and cultural differences of students attending those classes. By concentrating on students who planned to be involved in sexual activities before graduating from high school, these classes marginalized the experiences of those students that did not intend to involve in such activities:

Maybe a sex education class should take into account that not everybody sitting there and watching the videos cares nothing about them. I think it was mostly geared towards Americans, maybe the Christian point of view, and not take into account some people don't like to talk about it and don't know much about it. The levels of experience are different. But it was a kind of shock when I first had it, 'cause my parents didn't tell me. Most of my peers knew almost everything ... They don't think it was a big deal and I did.

SBSE classes that discussed sexual relationships, also covered the consequences of

unprotected sexual intercourse. However, girls perceived that these classes focused more than was necessary on warnings about diseases, infections and teenage pregnancy. Since Muslim girls participating in this study did not intend to engage in premarital sex, they found the material not only irrelevant but also distasteful. Three girls in the study defined sex as 'sick' and 'disgusting' and more had decided to not take SBSE classes.

Some girls suggested that the SBSE classes would be more useful if they were taught in gender-segregated classes. These would allow both male and female students to ask questions and not feel embarrassed because the other sex was present. SBSE classes had to also be age appropriate. Invariably, daughters recalled that they felt uncomfortable when their classmates giggled at the information being presented in class.

In the end, it is important to point out yet another observation. Muslim immigrant mothers and daughters participating in the study were not against sexuality education in principle. A few girls considered learning about sex and sexuality as part of their duty of being Muslim women. Learning about sex within the framework of Islam was for them, first and foremost, a religious requirement. An 18-year-old girl expressed this succinctly when she commented that 'as a Muslim, I should not be ashamed to discuss sex, or marriage, or issues of menstruation or anything, because we have the religious obligation to know this.'

Discussion

While the findings discussed here are restricted only to the researched group of Muslim immigrant mothers and daughters, themes may be extrapolated for work with Muslim and non-Muslim immigrant youth and their parents. Discussion of the study results focuses on four areas: (a) communication about sexuality between mothers and daughters; (b) sensitizing SBSE programs to the diversity of US populations; (c) implications for cooperation between parents and schools; and (d) implications for involvement of the community in youth's sexuality education.

Communication about sexuality

Findings from this study indicated that mother–daughter communication about sexuality was limited. Not all mothers were comfortable to discuss sex and sexuality with their daughters. Several factors led to the mothers' discomfort including the mother's embarrassment, lack of knowledge, lack of parental models, acknowledgment that the relationship between mothers and daughters would be undermined if mothers talked about sexuality, and daughter's age. While there is no study that correlates absence of communication with sexual activity among Muslim girls, other research shows that sexually active minority girls report having spoken less frequently with their mothers about sexual matters than non-active girls (Pick & Palos, 1995).

Mothers who talked about sexuality framed the discussion in terms of the threats that came to the social order from premarital sex. Although these mothers recognized

that sexuality is an endowment from God, they emphasized virginity until marriage as very important and the key to successful new marital relationships. Other mothers taught about abstinence as a blessing to ensure that the girls were disease-free. Limiting conversation about sex to these topics is common with immigrant mothers in general. Espín's (1999) study of immigrant women's life narratives indicates that the messages mothers gave to their daughters were limited to moral interdiction regarding what was allowed and forbidden for girls. While mother-daughter communication included discussions of women's reproductive health, pregnancy and menstruation, discussions of heterosexual intercourse and male-female relationships was problematic. Immigrant mothers resented being uncomfortable with their sexuality and desired the opposite for their daughters. Yet these mothers were unable to accept their daughters' sexuality.

In this study, Muslim immigrant girls often confirmed their mothers' tendency to talk about premarital sexuality in terms of threats to the social order. Because communication was narrowly restricted to this topic of conversation, girls felt that this kind of communication did not help much with knowledge about sexuality. In fact, some of the girls shied away from talking to their mothers on the assumption that their mothers would worry that their daughters already engaged in a sexual relationship. This may explain why more daughters than mothers reported that they 'sometimes' talked openly to each other. Furthermore, these findings replicate conclusions from other research; immigrant and minority youth prefer not to ask their parents about sex because their parents will, rightly or wrongly, infer that the adolescents want to engage in sex (Ward & Taylor, 1994; Aarons & Jenkins, 2002).

These findings suggest that mothers provide limited information regarding sexuality to their daughters. Although Islam recognizes the important role of parents in educating their children about sexuality, restricting the education agenda to risks that come to the social order from premarital sex may fall short of being comprehensive. That the religious materials describe sexuality as a human endowment should be an encouragement for parents and children to engage in healthy conversations about sexuality and to avoid scare tactics and moralizing.

Sensitizing school-based sexuality education

A good majority of the girls that had or were currently attending SBSE classes agreed that these classes were informative, especially when focusing on the anatomy of the female body. Topics such as body changes associated with biological maturity and menstruation were well explained. In fact, obtaining this information facilitated communication about sexuality between mothers and daughters and helped girls frame sexuality education as necessary within a larger perspective of premarital teenage pregnancy. Some mothers agreed that these classes were helpful to the daughters, since they did not have the scientific knowledge or the skills to talk to their daughters about sexuality. In fact, they indicated that as long as the SBSE classes were restricted to providing technical information through books they did not object.

While the SBSE classes provided useful information, some mothers had withdrawn

their daughters from SBSE classes and some girls themselves did not express interest in attending these classes. Both mothers and daughters were dissatisfied with some of the contents and the way the classes were conducted. The majority of the girls that had attended SBSE classes perceived these classes to provide information in such a way that the choice to engage in sex was predetermined or assumed. As such, Muslim girls felt that these classes marginalized their experiences and decision to abstain from premarital sexual relationships. In fact, a few girls considered classes taught in this way a waste of time and energy. Mothers echoed these concerns and either prevented girls from attending these classes, or provided supplementary information within the Islamic framework to distance girls from experiences that these classes portrayed as normative for adolescents.

The other major dissatisfaction was that SBSE classes at times were a long series of warnings and diseases that came from unprotected sex. Muslim girls found unappealing such conceptualization of classes, and a few of them thought that they would engage in sex out of necessity to have babies only. Furthermore, both mothers and daughters agreed that most of this information was imparted at too early an age for girls. That some mothers and daughters disapproved of placing too much emphasis on unplanned pregnancies and sexually transmitted infections and diseases does not imply that SBSE classes should not cover these topics. The high rate of adolescent pregnancies and STDs (Piot & Islam, 1984; Henshaw, 2001) makes imparting such information necessary. Furthermore, even if a person only has one partner, that partner may have had other experiences and that makes knowing the signs of an STI or STD imperative. However, it is possible that because these classes may have overemphasized the risks that came from unprotected sexual intercourse, they may have failed to describe sexuality as an integral part of developmental experience.

The objections mentioned here are not unique to Muslim immigrant populations. Aarons and Jenkins (2002) reported that Latino and African-American youth preferred clinics to schools for sex education and related services because the latter did not fit the reality of youths' lives. Ward and Taylor (1994) found that immigrant and minority youths perceived that SBSE classes failed to incorporate the reality that emotions related to sexuality are framed by cultural values and beliefs, that instructors were insensitive to youths' experiences and made assumptions about these youths based upon cultural stereotypes. While these findings may be skewed because only the perceptions of immigrant youths are reported, they suggest that sex educators face a challenging task in accomplishing the goal of reaching the diverse youths of America.

Fostering collaboration between parents and schools

Findings indicated that mothers were open to schools helping with education about sexuality. Most had reviewed and signed permission slips required for girls' participation in SBSE classes. Few took the initiative to reach out to schools and review the materials presented in these classes. That overwhelmingly mothers perceived that SBSE classes challenged the values imparted at home may evidence

that mothers had a limited understanding of the contents and the manner in which information regarding sexuality was imparted in these classes.

To be sure, mothers play an active role in sexuality education and schools may help bridge the education experiences at home and school for immigrant youths. Sexuality educators may want to borrow from the experience of projects that address issues of achievement and English proficiency for immigrant youths. For example, Pecoraro and Magnuson (2001) suggest, among other strategies, that in order to better involve parents in school efforts to teach immigrant youths, schools need to build on what people already know from their experiences as parents and teachers in their home countries and create opportunities for parents to explore similarities and differences between new and native countries and to build bridges that will link the two experiences. Helping parents actively participate in the design of the sexuality education curricula as well as organizing classes for these parents may be two strategies for bringing parents closer to school and thus acquitting SBSE classes often perceived as challenging the transmission of family values.

Implications for involvement of the Muslim community

Muslim immigrant girls may have little knowledge about sexuality and may often be unprepared to deal with issues regarding sexuality and reproductive health. That girls may not be able to get information about sexuality through communication with mothers and/or sexuality education classes requires an exploration of other information venues. Two additional sources of information for Muslim girls and their parents could be registering/attending Islamic private schools and using resources offered by Islamic centers. Islamic schools shape their curricula within the parameters of Islam. Sexuality education is part of these curricula. A few girls in the study attended local private Islamic schools. They related that the classes were sex segregated and the curriculum was tailored to the students' ages. For example, actual explanations of intercourse within the framework of marriage were given to girls at the age of 17, the assumption being that these girls would soon marry. Although Islamic private schools address concerns of Muslim communities, only a fraction of Muslim families can afford to enroll their daughters in these schools.

Because most students attend public schools, the weight of supplementary sexuality education rests with the Islamic centers that overwhelmingly provide alternative education through Sunday schools. However, informal conversations with a few of the study's key informants suggested that no curriculum is in place to educate the young girls on issues of sexuality and marriage or to help parents discuss these issues. Islamic centers with such curricula have the potential to help both youth and their parents talk and learn about sexuality. Apart from brochures and booklets, these centers may help mothers become better sexuality educators by providing them with the information and skills necessary to talk not only about the technicalities but also the cognitive and affective dimensions of sexuality. Evaluation research on community efforts among other populations has shown that parent-training programs can significantly increase

parents' knowledge and frequency of communicating with their adolescent children (Benshoff & Alexander, 1993; Winnett *et al.*, 1993).

Islamic centers' efforts to serve Muslim youths have to be coupled with finding ways to attract these youths to their programs. About 40% of the girls participating in the study felt that they did not receive any information at the local Islamic center. Of the 50% who reported that they received information regarding women's duties and responsibilities at the Center, 30% were of the opinion that they received some instruction on how a woman dresses and behaves. Only 3% said they received information on spousal relationships. This is consistent with findings from other research that shows that one of the major complaints is that most Islamic centers just teach the *Qur'an*, but not about life or social values (Husain & O'Brien, 1999).

To attract more girls, Islamic centers may work with primarily non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that have gained experience from tackling issues of sexuality education. For example, Girls Incorporated, a nationally recognized NGO, has developed age-appropriate curricula (Preventing Adolescent Pregnancy) that help girls aged 9–18 and their parents deal with issues of learning about sexuality and making decisions accordingly. A three-year evaluation found that girls who had attended this program regularly were half as likely to have sex as girls who had participated less or not at all in the program. While not everything presented in this program has relevance for Muslim immigrant girls it should be borne in mind that these girls live in the US and are exposed to sexuality-related issues with the same intensity as their non-Muslim peers. Programs developed by Girls Incorporated can throw in relief concerns about how contemporary information about sexuality should be. Because such programs are well-versed in the challenges that US girls face regarding dealing with their own sexuality, they may be combined with Islamic tenets and be used to design curricula and didactic materials (brochures, videos) that provide supplementary information for young Muslim girls.

Future directions

While this study focused on Muslim immigrant girls and their mothers, research also needs to target how Muslim immigrant adolescent boys obtain information regarding sexuality. Research shows that Muslim adolescent males may be more sexually active than Muslim adolescent females (Kulwicki, 1989). Therefore, learning about sexuality is an imperative for better sexual and reproductive health for them, too. Moreover, although fathers are supposed to serve as conduits of information regarding sexuality, they may play this role minimally. Research with other populations has shown that this task is particularly daunting for fathers since talking about sexuality requires establishing an intimate bond and that challenges the principles of traditional masculinity (Kirkman *et al.*, 2001). These remarks warrant the importance of future studies in the field of understanding sexuality communication and education among immigrant male youths.

This research is not intended as a critique and/or evaluation of any particular sexuality education program. Its findings are based on perceptions of mothers and

daughters and should be interpreted cautiously and not serve to dismiss the usefulness of SBSE classes. Worldwide, these programs aim to prevent and/or lower teenage pregnancy, inform about and reduce the chances of infection with STDs including HIV/AIDS, teach about the relationships between the sexes, provide an ethical framework for the expression of sexuality, and provide examples of healthy lifestyles, including a discussion of marriage relationships (Reiss, 1993; Cash *et al.*, 2001; Kakavoulis, 2001; Shapiro, 2001). These programs address biological, socio-cultural, psychological and spiritual dimensions of sexuality (Haffner, 1993). Thus, it is imperative that the perceptions of educators and policy analysts should be taken into consideration (for an example, see Milton *et al.*, 2001).

Conclusion

This research explored Muslim immigrant girls' communication and education about sexuality as mediated by their mothers and SBSE classes. Findings indicated that although girls predominantly preferred to have their mothers as sexuality educators, communication was barred by mothers' embarrassment and lack of skills. This study recommends that mothers can carry out their role as sexuality educators successfully if they better educate themselves on the topic and become more comfortable with discussions of sexuality. The study also found that while SBSE classes were informative to girls, in participants' perceptions they marginalized Muslim immigrants girls' decisions and experiences to not engage in premarital sex by assuming that most adolescents engage in sex. This study's recommendation is that in order for SBSE programs to be effective they need to be characterized by cultural sensitivity to the diverse youth that need to obtain this information. Although SBSE may be attempting to address the various needs of immigrant youths, findings indicated that they have not yet adequately reached the Muslim community. Findings also showed that mothers and daughters were more open to sexuality education than indicated in the literature. Thus, further dialogue between schools and parents could be useful. Although surveying Islamic community efforts in educating young Muslim girls and their mothers was not part of this study, the limited sexuality-related knowledge girls received from communicating with their mothers and SBSE classes suggests that Islamic centers may be a potential venue through which girls and their mothers may obtain information about sexuality within the Islamic framework.

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