IS SEXUALITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION FEASIBLE IN IRANIAN SCHOOLS? AN IN-DEPTH EXAMINATION OF SELECTED STAKEHOLDERS' PERSPECTIVES AND THE VITAL ROLE OF VALUES IN SEXUALITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION.

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PhD Dissertation

November 2023

Declaration

I, Fatemeh Mafi, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signature: Fatemeh Mafi   Date: 27 November 2023

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my profound gratitude to Professor Michael Reiss for his invaluable contributions to my academic journey. Michael, as my supervisor, you proved to be a wise, knowledgeable, and precise guide, guiding my research and shaping my scholarly growth. Yet, my appreciation for you extends far beyond the realm of academia. During some of the most challenging periods of my personal life, you remained a consistent, reliable, and incredibly kind source of support. Thank you.

I extend my heartfelt appreciation to Dr Farid Panjwani, whose role as my supervisor transcended conventional expectations. Farid, I am profoundly grateful for challenging my preconceptions and helping me reconceptualise my understanding of religion. Your support and guidance have not only enriched my research but also expanded my worldview.

I would like to thank my incredible mother, Dr Mitra Kashani. Maman Mitra, your support has been the cornerstone of my journey. Each day, you touch lives with your healing hands, boundless courage, care, and kindness. Your encouragement, conveyed not only through words but also through your actions, has empowered me to challenge prevailing norms and stereotypes, step out of my comfort zone, and believe in the transformative impact one can have on the lives of others. Your tireless dedication to making a difference stands as an enduring inspiration, much like you

have been to me every single day. Thank you for being a steadfast source of strength, not only for me but also for my Delaram.

I extend my deepest appreciation to my interviewees, who, despite the challenging political climate in Iran and the inherent risks they were undertaking, courageously accepted to be a part of this research. Their willingness to generously share their insights and experiences has been pivotal in the development of this thesis.

And

I would like to thank my dearest friend, my husband, Dr Hamed Mazoochy. Hamed, your belief in my abilities and your continuous encouragement have been instrumental in my academic pursuits. Beyond that, you have shown me the true essence of resilience and determination. Your presence is a constant reminder that no matter the hurdles, we can keep moving forward, and giving up is never an option. Your sharp mind and invaluable insights, both in life and in caring for your patients, inspire me. Your love has not only been the foundation that supports me but has also enriched every dimension of my journey. Thanks for being my partner in every endeavour in life.

To Delaram,

My constant reminder of what truly matters in life.

Your presence, deep understanding, and kindness give me the momentum to go forward.

May this work inspire you to question, explore, and dare to challenge the status quo, just as you have inspired me with your boundless wonder, your commitment to seeking reasons, and your refusal to accept anything without a profound understanding of the "why".

As you grow, may you inherit the belief that every step forward is a step toward positive change. May you carry forth the torch of knowledge and empathy, striving for a society where essential conversations are held with precision and sensitivity.

And...

To all the young minds of Iran and elsewhere...

In a world where knowledge is key to progress, may you explore, question, seek understanding, and be the torchbearers of positive change.

Abstract

Although there are arguments in the existing literature in favour of school sexualities and relationships education (SRE) programmes in Iran, their practical implementation faces significant challenges. These challenges mainly seem to stem from a presumed lack of harmony between what is presented in SRE programmes commonly developed in and informed by Western values and the values esteemed by Iranians regarding sexualities and relationships. This thesis, therefore, investigates Iranians' values surrounding sexualities and relationships and assesses how feasible the notion of comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is in Iran.

In this research, views about SRE and the values related to sexualities and relationships in Iran are principally studied by collecting data through individual in-depth semi-structured interviews with parents, classroom teachers and headteachers in schools, with supplementary data coming from online large group discussions with younger individuals, documentary analysis, and observations. Critical realism, thematic analysis, and grounded theory were used for data analysis. Critical realism provided the overarching framework, while thematic analysis helped identify patterns. Grounded theory enhanced the coding process and revealed connections between codes. Critical realism's notion of Four-Planar Social Being was employed as a framework to explore values related to sexualities and relationships across different dimensions of human existence, i.e., students' bodies, their interpersonal relationships, social structures, and interviewees' inner being. Following this, an analysis was conducted to explore the most appropriate ways of delivering SRE as perceived by the interviewees.

After data analysis, it became possible to discuss how feasible the notion of SRE is in a way that recognises local views and respects values that are esteemed in Iran. It seems that while CSE, as advocated by UNESCO, might not be entirely applicable to Iranian schools, implementing SRE programmes that draw on some aspects of CSE but are also informed by local values might be achievable.

Impact Statement

The problem addressed at the heart of this research revolves around the implementation of Sexualities and Relationships Education (SRE) programmes in Iran, and in particular, barriers due to the cultural disparities existing between Western-informed SRE values and the deeply ingrained local values and views on sexualities and relationships, despite the growing acknowledgement of the need for SRE in Iran. To address this issue, this research explored the underlying views and values shaping Iranian perspectives on sexualities and relationships.

The findings of this study can offer valuable guidance to researchers around the world, particularly researchers in neighbouring countries who are dealing with similar challenges related to the mismatch between official SRE documents and their local values. This research can provide a foundation for understanding how to navigate and address these discrepancies effectively. Additionally, the impact of this research goes beyond academic circles. It holds particular significance within the context of Iranian schools, and right now, by providing actionable insights for developing SRE programmes. By unveiling the multi-faceted values across various dimensions of human existence in Iran and facilitating an exploration of practical approaches for delivering SRE content, this study can directly influence educators responsible for SRE delivery and parents seeking to engage in such discussions with their children. It also offers valuable insights for policymakers shaping the educational landscape in Iran.

This research matters because it strives to bridge the gap between theory and practice. By proposing a template for SRE programmes in Iran that aligns with local values and norms, this research can not only benefit educators, parents, and policymakers but, most importantly, it can benefit Iranian youth, who deserve an education that respects their cultural context while addressing important topics related to sexualities and relationships, which potentially leads to better-informed decisions, healthier relationships, improved mental well-being, and overall societal betterment. Additionally, the results can guide international organisations in

formulating SRE guidelines that are flexible in a way that enables them to be culturally sensitive and adaptable to various communities worldwide.

The research findings will be disseminated through academic channels to ensure accessibility to the research community. Furthermore, owing to the strong rapport established with the interviewees, the research results will be disseminated through additional targeted channels. Educational institutions and headteachers' organisations will receive these findings, as they play a pivotal role in shaping the educational landscape in Iran. While this research represents just one step in a broader journey, it is of value because it aims to enhance the well-being and prospects of Iranian youth while contributing to the global discourse on sexualities and relationships education. It recognises that while it may not have all the answers, it is a meaningful step forward in a journey toward more informed, culturally sensitive, and effective SRE programmes in Iran and beyond.

Glossary of Technical Terms

Term	Definition
Sexuality	Encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. (World Health Organization, 2006, p. 5)
Sexuality Socialisation	Sexuality socialization refers to the process of acquiring knowledge, norms, attitudes, cultural symbols and meanings, codes of conduct, and values about a wide range of topics concerning sex and sexuality. (Warner, Leskinen, & Leyva, 2020, p. 160)
Sexualities and Relationships Education	Any form of education concerned with sexualities and relationships
Comprehensive Sexuality Education	A form of Sexualities and Relationships Education, defined as "a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and

	sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives" (UNESCO et al., 2018a, p. 16).
Values	Values are principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour; enduring beliefs about what is worthwhile; ideals for which one strives; broad standards by which particular beliefs and actions are judged to be good, right, desirable or worthy of respect. (Halstead & Taylor, 2000, p. 3)
Adab	*Adab* is a Farsi term often translated as manners, yet it encompasses more than mere manners. As Kia states, *Adab* refers to the "proper form or conduct" (2014, p. 282).
Hayâ	*'Hayâ'* is a Farsi term roughly translated as modesty or embarrassment.

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1 INTRODUCTION

> Even in settings that are socially and culturally conservative, and where discussion of sexual matters has traditionally been taboo, it is possible to introduce sexuality education. (UNESCO, 2010, p. 42)

Possibly, the drive behind this endeavour can be linked to the sentence above. Within this chapter, I will explore the origins of this thesis, tracing its roots back to my early years. Starting with my school days, I will provide a background to the education system in Iran. Moving forward to my time as a medical student, I will explore how the healthcare system in Iran dealt with issues related to sexualities. Subsequently, my experience as a clinical sexologist comes into play, enabling me to address the challenges linked to gender dysphoria as an illustration of the intertwined, multi-layered aspects of sexualities within the Iranian context. These experiences ultimately served as the driving force behind my decision to undertake this research journey. Finally, I will elaborate on the measures I took to better prepare myself for effectively conducting this research.

1.1 AS A SCHOOL STUDENT

Reflecting on my twelve years of studying as a student in schools in Iran, the most prominent memory I have regarding sexualities and relationships education (SRE) is its striking absence. To this day, formal SRE remains visibly absent from the curriculum of Iranian K-12 schools. In a country where schools are predominantly segregated by gender, my experience mirrored that of countless others. I began my educational journey at the age of seven, commencing five years of primary school, called *Dabestân*. It was followed by three years in middle school known as *Râhnamâî*, which translates to 'guidance school' in English. Subsequently, I spent three years in high school, referred to as *Dabîrestân* in Iran, after which, upon successfully passing the national examinations, I was granted my high school diploma. It is worth noting that the structure of the Iranian education system has slightly changed since then, with a new

division into six years of primary education (ages six to twelve) followed by six years of high school (ages twelve to eighteen) for current students.

Primary education is mandatory in Iran, with options for free public schools and fee-based private institutions. Some private schools are notable for their supplementary religious education as part of their curriculum, commonly referred to as 'religious private schools', commonly with high tuition fees, competitive entry, and a long waiting list. Nevertheless, all schools and the entire educational agenda in Iran are claimed to be based on Islamic principles and guidelines. Other schools, such as *Nemûneh Mardomi* schools and *SAMPAD* schools, also known as *NODET* (the National Organization for Development of Exceptional Talents), are more affordable than private schools; however, they offer competitive entrance examinations. My primary education took place in one of the religious private schools, and the remainder of my schooling occurred at the girls-only *SAMPAD* School of Tehran. While both my schools were in Tehran, I had encountered two very distinct educational environments.

Iran maintains a centralised education system where educational objectives, policies, curricula, and learning materials, such as textbooks, are determined by the central government under the supervision of the Ministry of Education. This educational landscape poses significant challenges for local initiatives, as they find themselves tied to the approval and decision-making mechanisms dictated at the national level. Although my school curriculum was densely packed, with all subjects featuring final examinations, nowadays, some newer subjects, like *Thinking and Lifestyle*, have moved away from final examinations in favour of alternative assessment methods. During my time as a student, examinations were graded numerically on a scale of 0 to 20; however, the grading system for primary school students has since transitioned to qualitative assessments such as 'excellent', 'good', 'satisfactory', and 'needs further improvement', while high school students continue to receive numerical scores. Much like when I was a student, the subjects that are subject to quantitative assessment and examination take priority over those that are not examined.

Subjects examined in national examinations hold a prominent focus in most schools. Following the completion of the final year of high school, students undergo national

examinations required for the awarding of the high school diploma. However, what has been, and continues to be, of greater significance than final and national examinations is the university entrance examination, known as *Konkûr*. After obtaining the high school diploma, students devote an additional year called pre-university education to prepare for *Konkûr*. Parents choose schools for their children based on the schools' *Konkûr* results, underscoring that the subjects included in the *Konkûr*, such as biology, mathematics, and physics, to name a few, are the primary focal points for most educational institutions.

Looking back at my school years, concerning matters related to sexualities and relationships, formal SRE was noticeably absent; however, in its place, what was prevalent were discussions surrounding topics related to sexualities and relationships alongside an abundance of informal peer recommendations covering those issues. This situation was not merely due to the nature of adolescence when one often believes such discussions and peer recommendations hold all the answers. Instead, it was a reflection of the limited avenues available for obtaining answers to our numerous questions on these topics. I was among the fortunate few who had the opportunity to engage in such conversations with a trusted adult, as my mother, being a gynaecologist, was, to some extent, receptive to addressing inquiries on such matters. Albeit receiving carefully and medically worded responses, this allowed me to obtain the answers I sought. Unfortunately, most of my peers lacked such opportunities. With no formal SRE at school and parents who remained reserved on these matters, many of my peers were left to rely on peer consultations. Consequently, they navigated the complexities of sexualities and relationships unaided, often facing consequences without the support of their families. It was not the case that many of my peers were sexually active or openly discussing issues to do with sexualities most of the time; in fact, quite the opposite was true. However, for some of them, the attraction of the forbidden fruit often overcame their induced sense of guilt. In their vulnerable state as younger individuals, they lacked a support system, unsure of where to turn in times of need.

1.2 AS A MEDICAL STUDENT

I commenced my training as a medical student a few months after completing high school and successfully passing the *Konkûr* examination. In Iran, universities, with only a few exceptions, are generally not gender-segregated. Transitioning from twelve years of gender-segregated educational experience to a mixed-gender setting, particularly without receiving any formal education on relationships, undeniably left many students confused, leading to unintentional blurring of boundaries among students. In the initial months, the consequences of this abrupt shift were palpable. However, as medical students, our state of confusion, attitudes, and level of knowledge ceased to be matters that solely concerned us; they gradually began to affect our interactions with patients.

During my initial rotations in hospitals, I noticed that despite being theoretically instructed on the importance of inquiring about social and, particularly, sexual history, it appeared to be an unspoken rule to omit this crucial aspect in practice. The omission of discussions on patients' sexual lives was common among doctors, a practice I now recognise as not unique to Iran but rather a global phenomenon (Gopalan & Taneja, 2018; Pretorius, Mlambo, & Couper, 2022). One vivid memory that I have regarding this issue dates back to my early days as an intern. We had a patient with a painful, swollen knee, and I was considering the possibility of gonococcal arthritis. Among the questions I posed to the patient, I included a sexual history. My history taking was under the supervision of a senior doctor who later applauded my willingness to take a sexual history, noting that few students asked such questions despite listing similar differential diagnoses.

Another observation I made during my rotations as a medical intern in various hospital wards was that, while doctors often shied away from taking sexual histories, patients, when provided a confidential space, were not only willing to respond to these questions but also eager to ask more questions. They appreciated the opportunity to converse about their concerns related to their sexualities. It became evident to me that many adults struggled with a lack of knowledge concerning sexual and reproductive health, including issues like genital anatomy, which was impacting various aspects of their lives. Not only were psychosexual issues constituting the primary aetiology of some patients' present conditions, but one could also find deep-

seated marks of these issues in individuals referred to us with seemingly unrelated physical complaints.

1.3 As a Clinical Sexologist

After graduating from medical school, I pursued specialised courses in sexual health and began my practice as a clinical sexologist. However, my initial workplace, known as the 'Family Health Clinic', presented challenges, as its title, not chosen by me, often confused potential clients, particularly younger or unmarried individuals who felt it did not align with their concerns. Nevertheless, I have since noticed a growing number of clinics and individuals in Iran offering services under the banner of 'Sexual Health Clinics', which reflects a positive shift in recognising the importance of sexual health.

During my clinical practice, I increasingly realised the complex and multifaceted nature of sexualities. I recognised that these complexities emerge from the interplay of various factors, including biological, psychological, social, political, cultural, legal, and, notably, religious and spiritual values. Initially, I attributed the significance of religion to my experience living in a non-secular country like Iran. However, I later realised that the influence of religion on sexualities transcends geographical boundaries and holds a prominent place in shaping the beliefs and attitudes of many people worldwide. An example of the confluence of these factors in Iran is the case of gender dysphoria, which provides a view of how diverse elements, such as religion, legislation, and culture, collectively impact sexualities and are subject to change.

The prevailing assumption used to be that altering one's biological sex is not permissible in Islam. However, Maryam Khatoon PoorMolkara's courageous encounter with Ayatollah Khomeini in 1987 marked a turning point in Iran's history regarding gender dysphoria. Born as Fereydoon and in a male body, PoorMolkara, experiencing gender dysphoria, sought religious and legal authorisation for gender reaffirmation surgery. She had a Quran in her hands, wrapped with Iran's flag, with shoes tied around her neck, all symbols of asking for shelter in Islam and in this way, she managed to meet Ayatollah Khomeini, the religious and political leader of many

Iranians at the time. A meeting led to a pivotal *Fatwâ*, an authoritative decision on the point of Islamic law, allowing gender reaffirmation surgery to align one's biological sex with their desired gender identity. This landmark event, referred to as the '*Fatwâ* for Freedom' (Tait, 2005), significantly altered Iran's legal and official religious stance on gender reaffirmation procedures.

Despite this transformation, some scholars in Iran still argue against gender reaffirmation surgeries within an Islamic framework (Kalbasi-Isfahani & Deleer, 2016). Moreover, the verses of the Quran emphasising the creation of 'pairs' in various contexts, from fruits (Quran 13:3) to all things on Earth (Quran 51:49 and 36:36), have sparked considerable debate among Quran scholars regarding whether they specifically address the duality of sexes. Moreover, some verses explicitly mention the creation of male and female as pairs (Quran 92:3, 53:45, and 75:39). These verses have raised questions about their interpretation in relation to gender dysphoria. Consequently, these debates have contributed to the prevailing binary stance on gender identity.

Nevertheless, gender reaffirmation procedures are now fully recognised in Iran, both in terms of religion and of legislation. Tehran, once an unlikely hub for such surgeries, has become renowned for gender reaffirmation procedures (Bucar & Enke, 2011), which commonly surprises individuals who hold certain stereotypes about Iran based on its stance on other issues related to minorities or conservative sexual morality. However, while legal and religious aspects of post-transition life have improved significantly, social and cultural challenges persist. Sometimes, the prevailing sociocultural climate can be more impactful on individuals' lives than religious or legal restrictions (Javaheri, 2010). A few years ago, I attended a play in Tehran titled 'Pinkish Blue', which shed light on the challenges faced by individuals dealing with gender dysphoria in Iran. Importantly, the play highlighted that these difficulties were not primarily rooted in religious or legal concerns but were predominantly driven by a lack of social acceptance and other cultural issues. This experience prompts reflection on the extent to which daily practices related to issues of sexualities are influenced by a spectrum of values, encompassing but certainly not limited to religious values.

Within the context of sexualities in Iran, individuals grappling with gender dysphoria stand as a unique cohort, being more fortunate within the spectrum of sexual minorities as they have seen acknowledgement in both legal frameworks and religious discourse. While Iran has made some progress in supporting individuals with gender dysphoria, it has not shown the same willingness to acknowledge or protect the rights of other sexual minorities. Thus, it is important also to recognise the challenges faced by LGBTQ+ individuals not dealing with gender dysphoria, such as those with alternative sexual orientations, who remain officially unacknowledged, with expressions beyond heterosexuality and asexuality, subject to severe penalties and harsh social and legal repercussions, including death.

1.4 As a Doctoral student and a Psychosexual and Relationship Therapist

During my practice as a clinical sexologist, I observed that a significant portion of each session was devoted to sexual health education, particularly covering topics such as anatomy, physiology, and inquiries about what is considered normal or not. These experiences led me to repeatedly question why we, in Iran, lack an official SRE programme in schools. The common discourse at the time was that international SRE programmes did not align with Iranian values and views on sexualities (Ayatollah Khamenei, 2017, 2020), which sparked my interest and motivated me to pursue doctoral study, focusing on Iranians' views about sexualities and relationships, the importance of these for school SRE, with the hope of eventually aiding the development of an applicable SRE programme tailored to Iranian youth. Consequently, I applied for a PhD programme at UCL Institute of Education and was granted the opportunity to embark on this research journey.

My thesis centres on the critical argument that, in any country, the development and success of an SRE programme necessitates a thorough consideration of, and alignment with, the values held by stakeholders, including parents, young people, and the broader society, and the centrality of values in SRE. This perspective, although

increasingly recognised in various countries, as will be explored in Chapter 2, remains under-researched in the context of Iran. The significance of this research lies in the need to elucidate and understand the diverse values associated with SRE within the Iranian cultural context. Furthermore, it is crucial to explore alternative approaches to the implementation of SRE that could better resonate with the values of the Iranian population.

In addition to studying qualitative methodology and preparing myself for effective data gathering through a one-year course in counselling and psychotherapy, I undertook several measures to enhance my knowledge about sexualities and relationships to gain a mastery of this area. I completed multiple intensive courses and successfully passed the examination of the Multidisciplinary Joint Committee of Sexual Medicine, allowing me to be recognised as a Fellow of the European Committee of Sexual Medicine. Additionally, I pursued a course in psychosexual and relationship therapy, which required me to complete many hours of client work. During this period, as I had to be in Iran to collect data for my research, many of my clients were from Iran. This experience proved highly beneficial, offering me a different perspective on cultural values. While the therapeutic sessions themselves are not considered as data for this research, the insights I gained by being mindful of these values and striving to be a culturally-sensitive therapist certainly enhanced my ability to understand my doctoral interviewees better.

This research endeavour sought to contribute to a deeper understanding of the landscape of SRE within the Iranian context. The research aimed to explore and analyse the diverse values held by teachers, parents, young people, and society at large, and how these values influence the perception of SRE in Iran. Additionally, it intended to explore different ways of implementing SRE that resonate better with these values. The ultimate goal is to foster an environment where SRE is not only educationally effective but also culturally sensitive, empowering young Iranians with knowledge and skills essential for navigating their lives, especially when it comes to issues related to sexualities and relationships. In this pursuit, I hoped to have addressed the cultural sensitivities and explored the feasibility of introducing school-

based SRE in Iran, which could have a positive and lasting impact on the lives of Iranian youth.

The journey I have undertaken so far is merely one of numerous potential pathways. I acknowledge that this thesis may not have addressed every pivotal question that is necessary for the formulation of an effective, implementable SRE programme. Moreover, I certainly refrain from claiming to present all solutions. Nevertheless, the aim of this endeavour is to contribute meaningfully to the existing body of knowledge in the field of SRE in Iran, with a specific focus on the intricate interplay between SRE and values and views.

2 An Exploration through a Literature Review on Established Knowledge in Sexualities and Relationships Education

Initiated at an early stage, the literature review process served as a foundational element for constructing the research questions. As the research advanced and interview questions were being formulated before the data collection phase, the literature review continued to serve as a fundamental underpinning, informing the design and the content of interview questions and the approach taken to the interviews. This procedure persisted during the data-gathering phase when parallel data analysis led to the identification of new perspectives. This, in turn, prompted a renewed search within the literature for these new evolving insights. The literature review here starts from a broader global context of studies on SRE, subsequently narrowing its focus to a more specific examination of research on SRE in Iran, which is the context of this research.

Although it is not a systematic review of the literature, a comprehensive effort was made to gather relevant research materials for this study. UCL online library, PubMed, and Google Scholar were utilised as primary databases to search for articles pertaining to or associated with the study topic. The search strategy involved a combination of keywords and phrases, which included, but were not limited to, 'sexuality/ies', 'relationships', 'education', and all the various forms of SRE, as described later in this chapter. Additionally, terms such as 'socialisation', 'values', and other related concepts that will be discussed in detail in Chapter 4, including 'attitudes', were incorporated into the search strategy. Given the specific context of the study, keywords such as 'religion', 'Islam', and 'Iran' were included to capture articles relevant to the cultural and regional aspects of the research. To ensure a comprehensive scope, terms like 'health', 'sources', 'school-based', 'curricula', 'challenges', 'concerns', and 'successful' were also integrated into the search. The combination and rearrangement of these keywords were employed to retrieve a wide

array of scholarly works that would contribute to the depth and breadth of this literature review.

2.1 Conceptual Clarification of Sex, Gender, and Sexualities

The term 'sex' is commonly employed to describe the anatomical distinctions that exist between individuals, classifying them as male, female, or, in instances of ambiguity, intersex. On the other hand, the term 'gender' is widely used to refer to how society categorises and interprets sex. However, some scholars, including Butler, take an additional step in the sex-gender discourse, asserting that gender "also designate[s] the very apparatus of production whereby the sexes themselves are established" (1990, p. 10) and, in this way, gender shapes anatomical sex. In brief, the variations between different theories of sexualities lie in their position on the spectrum between biological essentialism and the recognition of gender as a purely social construct. It is often by this positioning that scholars declare how they conceptualise and define sexualities:

> The debates among historians of sexuality in the 1980s and 1990s pitted social constructionists against essentialists. Social constructionists were those who concluded from the historical evidence that persons in every historical society had unique ways of expressing sexuality and that the farther back in the past you looked, the more unfamiliar these behaviors and identities were. Essentialists were not really a defined group; rather, the term was used pejoratively for those who did not take these differences into account. (Kuefler, 2020, p. 51)

By positioning the definition in the middle of this spectrum, perhaps more adjacent to social constructionists, sexualities can be regarded as a multifaceted amalgamation of biological aspects and the social and cultural context in which they are encountered. Moreover, it is possible to view sex, gender, and sexualities as interconnected

components shaped collectively by cultural, biological, bodily, and societal influences (Alexeyeff & Turner, 2018). WHO defines sexuality as:

> … central aspect of being human throughout life encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of biological, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, legal, historical, religious and spiritual factors. (2006, p. 5)

Holmes argues that using the plural form, 'sexualities', instead of the singular 'sexuality', corrects the inaccurate assumption that all individuals "have one shared, universal sexuality determined primarily by reproductive biology, largely unchanging over time, and common to all cultures" (2016, p. 1). Thus, in order to encompass the diverse dimensions that sexualities entail, the endeavour is to use plural form throughout this thesis. However, sometimes, in particular phrases, such as sexuality socialisation, the singular term is used to be in harmony with the literature in this field.

2.2 SEXUAL IDENTITY FORMATION: SEXUALITY SOCIALISATION AND REVIEW OF LITERATURE ON SOURCES OF SEXUALITY SOCIALISATION

> Sexuality socialization refers to the process of acquiring knowledge, norms, attitudes, cultural symbols and meanings, codes of conduct, and values about a wide range of topics concerning sex and sexuality. (Warner et al., 2020, p. 160)

The approaches to the topic of sexuality socialisation again are about the philosophical divide between those endorsing essentialist perspectives, which emphasise evolution and genetics, and social constructionist perspectives, which emphasise the role of

social and cultural forces in shaping human sexualities. Nevertheless, many scholars challenge this dichotomy and adopt an integrated approach, arguing that neither viewpoint adequately explains the complexity of the process of sexuality socialisation. Moreover, those who endorse intersectionality theory maintain that sexuality "as a social structure and as an identity, has a mutually constitutive relationship with other structures/identities, such as race, class, and gender. In other words, like beads on a string, one's experience with one's sexual identity is not separable from other identities" (Warner et al., 2020, p. 164).

Research in this field commonly focuses on sources of sexuality socialisation, particularly parental and peer roles in individuals' comprehension of their sexualities. Parents are often seen as the primary sources of information for younger individuals, mothers in particular (Bleakley, Hennessy, Fishbein, & Jordan, 2009; Harris, Sutherland, & Hutchinson, 2013). However, research shows that parental influence starts to decrease during adolescence (Tolman & Mcclelland, 2011). Moreover, parents seem to shy away from discussions such as sexual pleasure or relationships outside of heterosexual, loving, and committed ones (Calzo & Ward, 2009; Fletcher et al., 2015). However, many parents see SRE as "primarily their responsibility, with school sex education as an important adjunct" (Dyson & Smith, 2011, p. 219).

Alongside parents, peers play a significant role in sexuality socialisation, serving as important sources of information for younger individuals and commonly providing a more permissive point of view than parents (Fletcher et al., 2015). Building upon the previous point, Bleakley et al. have also noticed the difference between how different sources of information are important in shaping younger individuals' beliefs about sex:

> Learning about sex from parents, grandparents, and religious leaders was associated with beliefs likely to delay sex; friends, cousins, and media were associated with beliefs that increase the likelihood of having sexual intercourse. (Bleakley et al., 2009, p. 37)

However, peer messages can be ambiguous and contain misperceptions, with gender playing a central role in how peer-based sexuality socialisation occurs (Warner et al., 2020). That being said, the significance of the role peers play in the process of sexuality

socialisation has led to many attempts at official peer-based SRE programmes, which will be explored shortly within this chapter.

Media are also considered significant influencers in sexuality socialisation, with numerous studies revealing that they rank among the top sources of sexual information for youth (Warner et al., 2020). For example, a review of the literature examining the effects of media on sexuality socialisation states:

> The findings provided consistent evidence that both laboratory exposure and regular, everyday exposure to this content are directly associated with a range of consequences, including higher levels of body dissatisfaction, greater self-objectification, greater support of sexist beliefs and of adversarial sexual beliefs, and greater tolerance of sexual violence toward women. (Ward, 2016, p. 560)

The above indicates the power of commercial and ideological interests behind media. The effects of digital media on younger individuals have also been studied by researchers. These studies have explored the positive impacts and opportunities that digital media provide as well as spotting the potential risks and adverse effects of digital media on children and adolescents, such as addiction, depression, anxiety, insomnia, body dysmorphic disorder, self-harm, and cyberbullying to name just some (Gioia, Rega, & Boursier, 2021; Guan & Subrahmanyam, 2009; Morrison & Gore, 2010). However, it has been pointed out that many studies on the excessive use of digital media and mental health problems, such as those listed above, might have cause-effect bias. Thus, it is suggested that high digital media use might only be a warning sign for concurrent mental health issues (Allam, 2010; Twenge, 2019).

Some studies have delineated a correlation between early adolescent exposure to sexually explicit media and involvement in high-risk sexual behaviours. For instance, a study on early exposure to sexual content in movies (O'Hara, Gibbons, Gerrard, Li, & Sargent, 2012) suggests that it can be a predictor of the age of sexual debut and potentially contribute to increased sexual risk-taking behaviours. Another study (Lin, Liu, & Yi, 2020) found that exposure to sexually explicit media predicted – which to avoid cause-effect bias, it should be reiterated, does not necessarily mean it caused –

early sexual debut, unsafe sex, and multiple sexual partners. Moreover, their study revealed that exposure to more media modalities increased the probability of engaging in high-risk sexual behaviours.

Apart from the interconnected influences of parents, peers, and media, other sources of sexuality socialisation include school, government, and personal belief systems. Sexuality socialisation within schools is either through unofficial interactions with peers or officially implemented SRE programmes, which is the focus of the majority of the literature on SRE, and its effectiveness, which is within the immediate scope of this chapter. Governments can also impact sexuality socialisation:

> Laws and policies have the ability to expand or restrict the sexual lives of constituents. They can directly and indirectly condone or chastise individuals' sexual behaviors, limit available healthcare options, and proscribe topics within educational materials. (Warner et al., 2020, p. 170)

Individuals' belief systems, including aspects of religion, culture, or other factors, can significantly influence the process of sexuality socialisation. Religious values and SRE, as well as the interplay of religion and culture and how religious belief systems not only vary among different religious groups but also how religious activities may hold diverse meanings and implications for individuals affiliating with the same religion, influenced by the specific cultural contexts in which they are situated, will be discussed later in this chapter and, in more detail, in Chapter 4. However, here, it can be briefly mentioned that in a systematic review of the literature exploring the interconnections between religiosity, spirituality, health attitudes, and health behaviours among adolescents, the majority of studies indicated favourable impacts of religiosity or spirituality measurements on both health attitudes and behaviours (Rew & Wong, 2006).

2.3 CHARTING THE LANDSCAPE: EXISTING INSIGHTS INTO SEXUALITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION

Before discussing what constitutes SRE, it is essential to mention that while in this thesis, the phrase 'sexualities and relationships education', abbreviated as SRE, is commonly employed, it is acknowledged that various phrases are used, such as 'sex education', 'sexual education', 'sexuality education', 'sexuality and relationships education', and 'relationships and sex education' (RSE) which are sometimes used interchangeably, or sometimes used particularly to emphasise differences. These various phrases, put next to one another, to some extent, exemplify a paradigm shift in how human sexualities and relevant education have been perceived and framed.

2.3.1 What Constitutes Sexualities and Relationships Education? The Objectives and Necessity of SRE Programmes

UNESCO maintains that SRE should be comprehensive and provides the following definition for what it labels as a 'comprehensive sexuality education':

> Comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) is a curriculum-based process of teaching and learning about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality. It aims to equip children and young people with knowledge, skills, attitudes and values that will empower them to: realize their health, well-being and dignity; develop respectful social and sexual relationships; consider how their choices affect their own well-being and that of others; and, understand and ensure the protection of their rights throughout their lives. (UNESCO et al., 2018a, p. 16)

On the same page as the above quotation, it is mentioned that UNESCO's recommended *international technical guidance on sexuality education* is founded on a human rights approach. To elaborate further, it is stated that CSE is founded on, and advocates for, an understanding of universal human rights, including the rights of younger individuals to health, education, information equality, and non-discrimination (UNESCO et al., 2018a), and involves raising awareness among young people about their rights and respecting and ensuring the rights of others, especially those whose

rights are violated. Vanwesenbeeck (2020) proposes that approaches to CSE can be broadly categorised into two groups: conventional health-based approaches and rights-based empowerment approaches. Although this categorisation might be seen as somewhat overgeneralised, it provides a clearer understanding of how this matter, its necessity, its objectives, and consequently its effectiveness is understood.

2.3.1.1   Conventional, Health-Based Approach

The necessity of SRE programmes can be observed through various lenses. One argument centres around the promotion of sexual health. Vanwesenbeeck (2020) identifies the primary objective of the conventional, health-based approach to SRE programmes to be the prevention of sexual risks and their possible negative consequences, such as infection with HIV and other STIs. The focus of this approach is mainly behavioural change, and the educational programmes are commonly designed to be needs-based and culturally appropriate:

> Conventional CSE distinguishes itself from AOUM [abstinence only until marriage] approaches in that it promotes all available strategies to sexual risk prevention. Next to abstinence, safe(r) sexual practices, particularly the use of condoms (and/or other forms of contraception) are encouraged. Conventional CSE may be more or less similar to so-called abstinence-plus programs that promote ABC (Abstinence, Be faithful, use a Condom) and/or DEF+ (Delay intercourse, Equal consent, Fewer partners, and testing). (Vanwesenbeeck, 2020, p. 3)

Similar to other aspects of health, sexual health plays a vital role in the overall well-being of individuals, and many hold it essential to preserve and enhance. Thus, SRE, even if limited to only providing knowledge about sexual and reproductive health, appears to be crucial. The World Health Organization (2006, p. 5) describes sexual health as "… a state of physical, emotional, mental and social well-being related to sexuality; it is not merely the absence of disease, dysfunction or infirmity". This definition is continued with the requirements of establishing sexual health, which are "… a positive and respectful approach to sexuality and sexual relationships, as well as

the possibility of having pleasurable and safe sexual experiences, free of coercion, discrimination and violence". However, perhaps the most significant element in this definition lies in its last sentence: "For sexual health to be attained and maintained, the sexual rights of all persons must be respected, protected and fulfilled". This sentence is important as it draws on sexual rights, another perspective supporting the necessity of SRE.

2.3.1.2   Rights-Based Empowerment Approach

One possible framework for evaluating the necessity of SRE programmes is that of human rights. Vanwesenbeeck refers to this approach as the rights-based empowerment approach and argues that this perspective better accommodates what he terms "young peoples' complex sexual and relational realities" (2020, p. 4). The rights-based approach, also known as holistic sex education by some (Setty & Dobson, 2023), necessitates accepting younger individuals as sexual beings with sexual desires. It implies recognising their sexual agency, subjectivity, and autonomy. It is an empowerment approach since it enables younger individuals to make informed decisions, develop positive attitudes towards their sexualities that seemed to be absent in health-based approaches (Hirst, 2013), and defend their rights and respect the rights of others.

The question is, do human rights, and in particular sexual rights, necessitate SRE? Addressing this matter, the *European Federation of Sexology (EFS) and the European Society of Sexual Medicine (ESSM) Syllabus of Clinical Sexology* states:

> … the various conceptualizations of sexual rights have many commonalities: the importance of providing comprehensive sexual education and universal access to quality sexual health services; the value of sexual intimacy and pleasure in consensual relationships; the need to reduce discrimination, stigma and violence toward sexual and gender minorities; and support for the formation and expression of diverse sexualities. (Lottes, 2013, p. 50)

The right to SRE is one of the commonalities found in almost every declaration of sexual rights, to the best of my knowledge. For instance, sexuality education was addressed in the first declaration of sexual rights of the World Association for Sexology in this way:

> 9. The right to information
>
> Everyone shall have access to scientifically accurate and understandable information related to sexuality, sexual health, and sexual rights through diverse sources. Such information should not be arbitrarily censored, withheld, or intentionally misrepresented.
>
> 10. The right to education and the right to comprehensive sexuality education
>
> Everyone has the right to education and comprehensive sexuality education. Comprehensive sexuality education must be age appropriate, scientifically accurate, culturally competent, and grounded in human rights, gender equality, and a positive approach to sexuality and pleasure.

Moreover, article 8 of the *Sexual Rights Declaration* by the *International Planned Parenthood Federation* is the 'right to education and information' which is then explained as: "All persons, without discrimination, have the right to education and information generally and to comprehensive sexuality education and information necessary and useful to exercise full citizenship and equality in the private, public and political domains" (2008, p. vii). 'Sexuality education' also holds the third position on the list of sexual rights outlined by the World Health Organization (2006, p. 5).

The primary objectives of UNESCO's *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* as a human rights-based approach to SRE is:

> … to equip children and young people with the knowledge, attitudes and skills that will empower them to realize their health, well-being and dignity; consider the well-being of others affected by their choices; understand and act upon their rights; and respect the rights of others by:

- Providing scientifically-accurate, incremental, age- and developmentally-appropriate, gender-sensitive, culturally relevant and transformative information about the cognitive, emotional, physical and social aspects of sexuality;

- providing young people with the opportunity to explore values, attitudes and social and cultural norms and rights impacting sexual and social relationships; and,

- promoting the acquisition of life skills. (2018a, p. 34)

In essence, according to this perspective, the main objective of a presumably successful SRE programme is to prepare younger individuals and enable them to adopt the ability to lead flourishing sexual lives while exercising their autonomy without jeopardising their own physical, psychological, and social well-being, as well as those of others. Through conducting in-depth interviews involving international experts in SRE, and subsequent analysis of the gathered data, Berglas et al. formulated the concept of rights-based SRE as the intersection of four elements:

an underlying principle that youth have sexual rights; an expansion of programmatic goals beyond reducing unintended pregnancy and STDs; a broadening of curricula content to include such issues as gender norms, sexual orientation, sexual expression and pleasure, violence, and individual rights and responsibilities in relationships; and a participatory teaching strategy that engages youth in critical thinking about their sexuality and sexual choices. (2014, p. 63)

2.3.2   EVALUATING SRE PROGRAMMES

The question of sexuality education's effectiveness is foundational in the literature because it is the premise upon which the legitimacy of school-based programs rest. (Allen, 2020, p. 227)

There is a wealth of evidence in evaluating the effectiveness of different SRE programmes, primarily focussed on assessing the extent to which they have accomplished their intended goals and objectives, conducted through a range of approaches, such as measuring knowledge acquisition, behavioural changes, and health-related outcome measures, depending on the approach taken towards designing and implementing SRE.

Some researchers have focused on SRE programmes' capacity for delivering information and have measured the consequent increase in the level of knowledge of younger individuals about their sexualities. For instance, the effectiveness of various SRE programmes in achieving this objective has been commonly evaluated through pre-test/post-test studies conducted shortly after the intervention (e.g., three months in the study by Benni et al., 2016) or over longer durations (e.g., two years in the research conducted by García-Vázquez et al., 2019).

The evaluation of changes in the level of knowledge of younger individuals following the implementation of SRE is often accompanied by the assessment of the alterations in their attitudes towards various sexual issues (e.g., Chi et al., 2015). Another example is Vanwesenbeeck et al.'s study, which elucidates the lessons learnt from a specific CSE programme, over a decade of implementation, by reviewing the related literature, which includes but is not limited to the programme's effectiveness in terms of "relevant knowledge gain (e.g. towards pregnancy), positive attitudes (e.g. towards condom use), self-efficacy (e.g. in condom use) and intentions (e.g. to delay first intercourse and to seek sexual health services)" (2016, p. 475).

The underlying logic of such research commonly revolves around the idea that acquiring the necessary information and subsequently increasing knowledge or changing attitudes of younger individuals will lead to behavioural changes; therefore, some researchers have incorporated behavioural changes as an additional element in their pre-test/post-test studies. UNESCO (2018a) categorises sexual behaviour and health as primary outcomes, while knowledge, attitudes, and other non-health/behavioural outcomes are considered secondary ones. While some studies confirm congruence between these outcomes (Rohrbach et al., 2015, 2019), some

others indicate that an increase in knowledge or change in attitude does not necessarily translate into changes in practice (Benni et al., 2016; Peskin et al., 2015; Thato, Jenkins, & Dusitsin, 2008).

The effectiveness of SRE programmes in shaping the sexual behaviours of younger individuals and promoting positive sexual health behaviours has been studied quite extensively. Researchers in this field commonly adopt a health-based approach to SRE and assess outcomes such as postponing the start of sexual intercourse (Markham et al., 2012; Mason-Jones, Flisher, & Mathews, 2013; Rohrbach et al., 2019; Tortolero et al., 2010), reducing the frequency of any forms of sexual intercourse (Mwale & Muula, 2019; Rohrbach et al., 2015; Thato et al., 2008), the number of sexual partners (Mwale & Muula, 2019), teenage pregnancy (D. Kirby, 2007), and HIV/STIs, and increasing the use of contraceptives, in particular condoms (Mason-Jones et al., 2013; Mwale & Muula, 2019; Rohrbach et al., 2015), and the use of related health services (Rohrbach et al., 2015).

While the studies and systematic reviews in the above paragraph demonstrate the effectiveness of SRE programmes in achieving those behavioural outcomes, certain systematic reviews of the literature demonstrate the ineffectiveness of specific school-based SRE programmes in achieving some of these goals; however, it is commonly mentioned that the quality of this evidence is deemed low or very low and the studies reviewed were at high risk of bias (Marseille et al., 2018; Mason-Jones et al., 2016; Mirzazadeh et al., 2018). Nevertheless, the same appears to be the case for some other systematic reviews which have upheld that SRE interventions are fruitful in changing behaviours (Haberland, 2015; Peterson, Donze, Allen, & Bonell, 2019). The same is true about a very recent systematic review of literature on school-based sex education interventions that concluded that SRE programmes seem to be effective in promoting positive sexual health behaviours, yet most of its evidence was labelled moderate or weak (Niland & Nearchou, 2023).

Some studies focus on comparing the effectiveness of different approaches to SRE. For example, some studies have conducted comparisons between CSE programmes and AOUM programmes, demonstrating that CSE programmes exhibit a more

pronounced effect concerning behavioural changes (Kirby, 2008). AOUM programmes alone do not seem to be as effective in this regard (Heels, 2019; Santelli et al., 2017). More recently, the comparison between conventional and rights-based approaches to SRE has been studied. Most commonly, changes in knowledge, attitude, and health-related behavioural changes are measured to prove the effectiveness of rights-based SRE programmes (Rohrbach et al., 2015). In comparison with a conventional SRE programme, a rights-based SRE programme showed statistically more significant improvements in younger individuals' knowledge, attitudes, communication, and self-efficacy (Constantine et al., 2015).

2.3.3   EDUCATIONAL SOURCES FOR THE PROVISION OF SRE

The implementation of SRE has also been subject to investigation. In this context, the relevant literature has been categorised according to the sources of education, namely parents, teachers, and peers.

2.3.3.1   Parents

While their role in sexuality socialisation is prominent, when it comes to SRE, parents may encounter some difficulties. For example, while some parents may feel knowledgeable and confident discussing sexualities-related issues with their children (Morawska, Walsh, Grabski, & Fletcher, 2015), some others do not share these feelings (Azira et al., 2020; Dyson & Smith, 2011). For the latter group, school-based SRE programmes offer relief from the perceived obligation of being the only educators of their children on matters of sexualities and relationships (Allen, 2020).

Apart from the possibility of their direct involvement in SRE delivery, parents' indirect role in, and their attitude towards, school-based SRE programmes is also important, as their approval and collaboration are paramount to programme success. Thus, parental concerns and their objections to school-based SRE programmes have been commonly voiced and responded to (Goldman, 2008).

2.3.3.2 Teachers and Professional Visitors

Allen (2020) asserts that teachers, in conjunction with programme pedagogy, are considered influential factors contributing to the success of SRE programmes and are also blamed for their failure. Considering that their level of reluctance or enthusiasm plays a significant role in maintaining programme fidelity, the attitudes of teachers toward the sexualities of younger individuals have been a subject of investigation (Preston, 2016; Smith & Harrison, 2013). Some studies establish a connection between teachers' levels of sexual knowledge and the effectiveness of an SRE programme (Allen, 2020, p. 231).

Research has also been conducted to explore the barriers and facilitators that can either hinder or enhance the educational capacity of teachers. For instance, using a social-ecological framework, Eisenberg (2012) conducted an assessment of various factors challenging and supporting SRE teachers, revealing that on an interpersonal level, interactions with parents exhibited both positive and negative aspects, and at the organisational level, while the presence of supportive school administrators was appreciated as a facilitator, their reluctance due to the fear of provoking disagreements within their community, alongside certain structural limitations such as time restrictions and financial resources, as well as the diversity of cultural values and practices among students, appeared to cause notable challenges. Findings from another study in this domain (Rose et al., 2018) identified barriers encountered by SRE teachers, encompassing challenges such as students' disruptive behaviour, inadequate time allocation, and the absence of dedicated classrooms; on the other hand, notable facilitating factors enhancing teacher comfort comprised opportunities for professional development and the establishment of clear ground rules.

To comprehend the shared components contributing to the effectiveness of SRE programmes, a systematic review of randomised controlled trials was conducted, examining successful interventions' approaches, dosages, intervention types, theoretical frameworks, facilitators' training, and intervention methodologies. The findings of this analysis identified essential components that should be integrated into the design of an effective SRE programme, encompassing "behavior change

theoretical models, the use of participatory methodology, be targeted at mixed-sex groups, facilitators' training, and at least ten hours [in total] of weekly intervention" (Torres-Cortés, Leiva, Canenguez, Olhaberry, & Méndez, 2023, p. 1).

In the absence of supportive factors, when teachers are either ill-equipped or unwilling to facilitate SRE classes, the engagement of visiting professionals serves as an alternative solution (McRee, Madsen, & Eisenberg, 2014). In a study conducted in the United Kingdom, it was revealed that younger individuals exhibited a preference for sexual health professionals as providers of SRE (Pound, Langford, & Campbell, 2016). This inclination was attributed to the perception that such professionals were less judgmental, offered more confidentiality, and diminished the likelihood of embarrassment as a result of their anonymity. Nonetheless, Sell et al. highlighted that studies involving external facilitators seemed to be primarily limited to pilot studies or one-off occurrences, often necessitating significant resources for execution (Sell et al., 2023, p. 69).

Goldstein (2020) observed that young individuals frequently express dissatisfaction with adults' emphasis on the biomedical dimensions of sexualities, such as contraception, instead of addressing other aspects that might hold greater significance for them. This issue could be one of the contributing factors to the rationale behind considering peer education as an alternative approach.

2.3.3.3   Peer Education

Peer education is a teaching method that involves individuals belonging to a specific target group imparting knowledge, skills, and resources to their peers. Here, peerness is considered based on proximity in age. However, the identification of target groups for peer education in SRE may not be solely based on sharing a similar age range but rather on other social or demographic factors, such as occupation. For instance, peer education programmes have been developed for commercial sex workers (for example, Ford et al., 2000; Morisky et al., 2006; Thomsen et al., 2006), transport workers (Laukamm-Josten et al., 2010), and miners (Williams et al., 2003), among others. Alternatively, target groups may be delineated based on shared high-risk

behaviours or experiences, such as drug injection and equipment sharing (Hammett et al., 2006).

Many of the studies mentioned above are included in a systematic review and meta-analysis of literature focused on the effectiveness of peer-led educational interventions for HIV prevention in developing countries (Medley, Kennedy, O'reilly, & Sweat, 2009). The findings indicate that such programmes appear to be significantly associated with an increase in levels of HIV knowledge, have led to a statistically significant reduction in equipment sharing, and have a statistically significant positive impact on condom use. However, a non-significant increase in STI infection following these interventions indicates that while they are effective in improving some outcomes, they may have no significant impact or even an adverse impact on other outcomes. The conclusion drawn was that "peer education programs in developing countries are moderately effective at improving behavioral outcomes, but show no significant impact on biological outcomes" (Medley et al., 2009, p. 181).

Some studies specifically focus on the effectiveness of school-based, peer-led educational programmes, which is better suited to this study. Goldstein (2020) has reviewed the literature on the effectiveness of peer-led education and has argued that it has been evaluated from two perspectives, with a greater focus on its impact on participants and a lesser emphasis on its impact on peer educators. The evaluation of the impacts of peer-led sex education interventions on participants has concentrated on two aspects, namely process evaluation and outcome evaluation. To evaluate outcomes, quantitative methods such as pre- and post-intervention questionnaires are commonly used to measure changes in participants' behaviour or knowledge over time, while qualitative methods are used to assess the effectiveness of these interventions in changing participants' knowledge and attitudes.

For example, a systematic review of studies on school-based peer education interventions designed to address students' health concluded that "improvement in health-related knowledge was most common with less evidence for positive health behaviour change"(Dodd et al., 2022, p. 1). Some studies have suggested that peer-led approaches are more beneficial than traditional SRE methods in certain aspects,

while others have produced uncertain findings. Notwithstanding the uncertain outcomes of these studies, it is commonly observed that students are more drawn to peer-led SRE programmes. For instance, in a school-based randomised trial involving over 8,000 students in the UK (JM Stephenson et al., 2004), a peer-led SRE programme (known as the RIPPLE study) was found to be slightly more effective than the traditional SRE in some ways, and students were more satisfied with peer-led SRE programme than those led by the teacher. A few years later, in another study in the UK, it was reported that peer-led SRE "may have led to slightly fewer live births among the young women in the study" (Judith Stephenson et al., 2008, p. 1590) compared to the conventional school SRE but did not impact the incidence of teenage abortions. Nonetheless, similar to the former study (JM Stephenson et al., 2004), students involved in this study (Judith Stephenson et al., 2008) expressed a preference for the peer-led SRE approach.

By drawing on some other articles, Goldstein (2020) writes that while peer educators are often seen as informal, friendly, and approachable, their perceived competence and knowledge may not be consistent, and, therefore, some students have voiced a preference for obtaining health and biological information from adult educators or healthcare professionals rather than relying on peer educators.

2.3.4 EXPLORING OVERLOOKED, UNADDRESSED OR LESS INCLUDED AREAS IN SEXUALITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION

The effectiveness of rights-based SRE programmes, which aim to empower younger individuals to have a more positive understanding of their sexualities, is best measured based on the extent to which this goal has been achieved and whether they have facilitated flourishing sexual lives, which includes promoted exercise of autonomy, among the participants or not. That being said, only a limited amount of literature has focused on and critically examined how the notion of sexualities in younger individuals is framed and addressed within various SRE programmes (Illes, 2012; Jones, 2011).

Another less focused area in SRE is how effective it can be in expanding younger individuals' understanding of gender, gender norms and gender-related power structures, perhaps because these are rather more recent objectives for SRE than health-related behavioural changes. That being said, a comprehensive review of school-based SRE programmes concluded that those programmes that address the issue of gender and power appear to be more effective, even resulting in health-related behavioural changes (Haberland, 2015). While these concepts might sound 'heavy' for some younger individuals, another systematic literature review concludes that:

> young children are, in fact, quite capable of understanding and discussing issues related to gender diversity, including gender expectations, gender nonconformity, and gender-based oppression. They also underscore that the development of such understanding requires instructional scaffolding over a period, and not just one session. (Goldfarb & Lieberman, 2021, p. 19)

In their systematic literature review of three decades of research on school-based CSE programmes, Goldfarb and Lieberman (2021) sought to identify evidence supporting the effectiveness of these programmes beyond their traditional focus on pregnancy and STI prevention. They revealed evidence of the effectiveness of approaches that adopted a broad perspective on sexual health and incorporated positive, affirming, and inclusive approaches to human sexualities, including "appreciation of sexual diversity, dating and intimate partner violence prevention, development of healthy relationships, prevention of child sex abuse, improved social/emotional learning, and increased media literacy" (2021, p. 1). However, Goldfarb and Lieberman also highlighted a common notable absence within curricular content and, therefore, outcome evaluations: pleasure and desire.

Indeed, it was Fine's pioneering work (1988) that exposed the absence of discourse of desire in SRE and hinted at its potential benefits. Lamb et al. (2013) argued that discussions around pleasurable sex within SRE programmes were often associated with negative, dangerous outcomes like unprotected sex, hasty decisions, regrets, and

health-related concerns, or they took a medicalised tone when discussed in sections about self-awareness. If not discussed in the context of female pleasure within CSE, Lamb et al. noted that while pleasure was portrayed positively in AOUM curricula, it was exclusively linked to marriage. They concluded that:

> … a discourse of desire is not missing, but that this discourse was often situated as part of a discourse on safe practice and there, continues to equate pleasure with danger. (Lamb et al., 2013, p. 305)

Some scholars have also noticed the exclusion of desire and pleasure from curricula (Lameiras-Fernández, Martínez-Román, Carrera-Fernández, & Rodríguez-Castro, 2021), provided a rationale for their inclusion (Fine & McClelland, 2006; Hirst, 2013; Mbarushimana, Goldstein, & Conco, 2023), and offered recommendations on how to incorporate them into existing curricula (Koepsel, 2016). Pleasure even serves as the foundation for what Allen refers to as a "false polarization" in which some research on SRE attempts to categorise opponents of pleasure's incorporation as "sex-negative and conservative" while proponents of pleasure are categorised as "sex-positive and progressive" (2020, p. 234). However, besides the differing interpretations of what constitutes pleasure and the recommendations for reconceptualising its potential within SRE and the exploration of 'ethical pleasure' (Allen & Carmody, 2012), pleasure represents merely one of several values that individuals may uphold, which impact their sexual experiences, and if the rationale behind categorising approaches to SRE into negative and positive ones is based on the presence or absence of values, the question is why pleasure should be singled out.

2.3.5   VALUES IN SRE

> Unless we can help young people to understand human values in relation to sexuality, people may increasingly attempt to measure sexual fulfilment in terms of quantifiable experiences rather than in terms of fundamental and mutual human enrichment. (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 203)

While there have been debates over whether SRE programmes should be in line with values of the place of implementation or whether it is possible to design an SRE programme that is not value-laden, the literature around values in SRE is scarce and generally, at the time SRE was commonly referred to as 'Sex Education' (Blake & Katrak, 2002; Flux, 1991; Halstead & Reiss, 2003; Hodge, 2002), reflects why there was more emphasis on the necessity of this issue. Having said that, and perhaps due to such literature, there is an observable trend nowadays towards increased incorporation of references to values and the significance of being value-sensitive when implementing SRE programmes. For instance, UNESCO's comprehensive sexuality education definition notably includes explicit reference to values (UNESCO et al., 2018a).

The notion of universal SRE is being criticised; for example, in a recent literature review, an analysis was conducted on a spectrum of CSE guidelines and academic sources addressing the subject of CSE and sexuality education. The conclusion drawn from this examination was that:

> … the notion of 'comprehensive' is a matter of degree, and that reaching consensus on a set of universal standards regarding what can be deemed as 'comprehensive' may neither be possible nor desirable. (Miedema, Le Mat, & Hague, 2020, p. 747)

What constitutes values and how they could be approached, analysed, and categorised, in general, and in particular in SRE, will be discussed in the introductory part of Chapter 4, yet here, it could be emphasised that when considered in an SRE programme, value-, cultural- and faith-sensitivity are commonly proven beneficial. Research has shown the effectiveness of culturally-sensitive SRE programmes (Thato et al., 2008), and the possibility of faith-sensitive SRE, even in areas of low religious observance, has been assessed and affirmed (Sell & Reiss, 2021).

While Sell and Reiss (2021) aptly observed that the intersection between religion and SRE is rarely explored positively, and, as Henry and Heyes indicate, it is "often framed antagonistically" (2022, p. 727), both these studies explored the possibility of

reimagining the dynamics between SRE and religion. They propose a shift from dialogue to conversation and advocating a change in perspective from "preserving what I am and what I say, think, or believe" to that of "being receptive to who the other is" (Henry & Heyes, 2022, p. 730), and by examining the possibility of incorporating faith-sensitivity (Sell & Reiss, 2021), yet accommodating concerns raised by some scholars who argue that religious-based removal from SRE deprive some younger individuals of their rights to SRE and "imperil children's access to a distinct package of educational goods" (Wareham, 2022, p. 707).

Within the existing literature, there exists a body of work that explores the concepts of 'Islamic views' and 'Islamic values', some of this literature being older (Blake & Katrak, 2002; Hodge, 2002; Noibi, 1993; Shaikh Abdul Mabud, 1998), and some more recent (Faidah et al., 2020), but all seeking to summarise the essence of Muslims' attitudes towards different sexualities-related issues. For example, Faidah et al. propose the notion of 'Islamic Value-based Sex Education' and argue that "the core of the discussion in Islamic literature about sexuality is centred on the main issues of *halal* and *haram*" (2020, p. 131). They then assert that the 'halal sex paradigm', which, they argue, is not just a matter of pleasure or lust, includes 'marital intercourse and heterosexual orientation', while any other practices or orientation fall under the category of 'haram' (forbidden).

Nevertheless, it is important to note that this mindset is not universally held among all Muslims. A study examining the influence of religious affiliation and religiosity on the development of attitudes toward cohabitation among young individuals with an immigrant background, including those adhering to the Muslim faith, observed that while greater degrees of religiosity were linked to increased opposition to such a lifestyle, there was no significant distinction between the attitudes of youths without religious affiliation and those individuals with religious affiliation with lower levels of religiosity (Kogan & Weißmann, 2019). Religion, religious values, and their intersection with SRE will be elaborated upon further in Chapter 4. The subsequent section of this chapter will review the literature concerning SRE that has been conducted in Iran.

2.4 A CRITICAL EXAMINATION OF RESEARCH ON SEXUALITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION IN IRAN: EXAMINING EXISTING KNOWLEDGE AND IDENTIFYING GAPS IN RESEARCH

It is important to assess Iran's present state of research dedicated to SRE in order to recognise any existing gaps. The literature in this domain predominantly coalesces around the necessity of this education, identifying sources used for obtaining relevant information and outlining challenges associated with the implementation of SRE. These aspects are elaborated upon in greater detail in the subsequent sections.

2.4.1 THE NECESSITY OF SRE IN IRAN

Various studies have underscored the necessity of SRE for younger individuals in Iran. These studies frequently support their argument by assessing the levels of knowledge concerning sexualities among younger individuals and occasionally adults, predominantly focusing on the biomedical dimensions of sexual health. For example, in a population-based study of 1385 male adolescents aged between 15 and 18 in Tehran, conducted using a self-administered questionnaire, significant proportions of respondents "held misconceptions regarding condoms, STIs, and reproductive physiology" (Mohammadi et al., 2006, p. 35). Using the data of the above cross-sectional survey of 1385 participants, in another study, sexual risk-taking behaviours – defined as inconsistent condom use and multiple sexual partnerships – of sexually active adolescent males between 15 and 18 years old were examined (Mohammad et al., 2007). Notably, an inadequate understanding of condom usage, coupled with other variables, contributed to inconsistent condom use. Similarly, these authors observed that insufficient awareness of reproductive health was one of the factors leading to engagement in multiple partnerships. They concluded that with these findings, the critical importance of targeted SRE interventions that address knowledge gaps in promoting safer sexual practices becomes apparent.

According to another study conducted on 4641 students from 52 high schools in Tehran, while the average knowledge level was moderately high, there were considerable misconceptions about the transmission routes of STIs (Tavoosi, Zaferani, Enzevaei, Tajik, & Ahmadinezhad, 2004), and the students in this study were willing to learn more about AIDS. In a quasi-experimental study undertaken in two high schools in Tehran, it was concluded that regular, effective, educative programmes are necessary in order to promote students' knowledge about friendships with the opposite sex (Sahebazzamani M, Safavi M, & Riazi SR, 2005).

In a cross-sectional study on high school students in northwest Iran, a questionnaire was used to evaluate their sexual knowledge (Ayyoub Malek, Shafiee-Kandjani, Safaiyan, & Abbasi-Shokoohi, 2012). The authors concluded that 12%, 47% and 42% of the students had low, average, and high sexual knowledge, respectively, with no significant difference between male and female students' general sexual knowledge. However, it is noteworthy that this study, alongside the commonly measured biomedical aspect of health, included religious rules and rituals related to sexual issues within its definition of sexual knowledge. The students in this study exhibited the highest level of knowledge regarding these religious aspects.

Additionally, some studies examine the necessity of SRE alongside delineating the educational needs in this context. Sometimes, this goal is fulfilled by giving participants a voice and exploring their viewpoints and lived experiences. For example, in pursuit of exploring the necessity for SRE for female students, a qualitative study engaged 318 participants from diverse backgrounds and expertise levels via focus groups involving adolescent girls and their mothers, as well as including semi-structured interviews with school counsellors, sociologists, healthcare providers, state and nongovernmental health programme directors, clergy members, and health policymakers in the four cities of Mashhad, Tehran, Shahroud, and Qom. From this exploration, six main reasons underlying the necessity for such educational programmes for adolescent girls emerged, namely, "a lack of adequate knowledge about SRH, easy access to inaccurate information sources, cultural and social changes, increasing risky sexual behaviours among adolescents, religion's emphasis on sex

training of children and adolescents, and the existence of cultural taboos" (2014, p. 107).

Giving voice to younger individuals, a qualitative study was carried out employing focus group discussions with 67 female adolescents aged between 12 and 19 in high schools in Sari (Shahhosseini & Hamzehgardeshi, 2014). The study focused on assessing their needs, and delineated four overarching themes: 'appropriate content', 'suitable method', 'informed sources', and 'age-appropriate education'. Regarding suitable content, three distinct categories were reported: 'general information of reproductive health', 'marriage and sexual health', and 'life skills'. As for preferred methods, participants indicated a preference for instruction by a same-sex educator, employing group discussions, and using engaging training programmes. In terms of information sources, participants highlighted family members, media, healthcare providers, school staff, and peer involvement as their preferred sources of information.

In a quantitative cross-sectional survey conducted in Iran, a comparison of perspectives was undertaken between 72 healthcare providers, including midwives, family health practitioners, and family physicians, and 402 female high school students aged between 15 and 18 years in northern Iran (Shahhosseini & Abedian, 2015). The study found that healthcare providers prioritised education regarding the 'prevention of sexual high-risk behaviour', while the most prominent demand among younger individuals was for education concerning 'appropriate behaviour with their future spouse'.

Highlighting statistics indicating that 24% of registered marriages in Iran involve girls under 19 years old, a recent qualitative study was conducted using in-depth, semi-structured individual interviews involving 36 participants, encompassing 11 women married when they were aged 10 to 21, two mothers of adolescent brides, and 23 healthcare providers and policymakers, to explore the reproductive and sexual needs of married adolescent girls. The outcomes mapped five main domains: "preparing for marriage, enhancing awareness and decision-making power on sexual and reproductive health issues, developing adolescent-friendly sexual and reproductive

services, providing tailored pregnancy and childbirth services, and preparing adolescents for motherhood" (Kohan, Allahverdizadeh, Farajzadegan, Ghojazadeh, & Boroumandfar, 2021, p. 1).

2.4.2 SOURCES OF INFORMATION REGARDING SEXUALITIES

Several articles have been published addressing younger individuals' sources of information about sexualities within the Iranian context. Given the prolonged absence of official school-based SRE programmes, it is unsurprising that the literature in this domain predominantly centres around media, parents, and peers.

2.4.2.1 Media

In a cross-sectional study conducted on 4641 students from 52 high schools in Tehran (Tavoosi et al., 2004), students mentioned television as their principal source of information regarding HIV/AIDS. Perhaps that is in line with a different study, in which participants suggested that the media, particularly state television, should undertake initiatives to challenge the societal taboo surrounding sexuality (Samadaee Gelehkolaee et al., 2021). In other research carried out in northwest Iran among 2600 high schoolers, self-administered questionnaires were used to study sources of sexual knowledge acquisition (A yyoub Malek, Abbasi Shokoohi, Faghihi, Bina, & Shafiee-Kandjani, 2010). The sources in order of importance were intimate friends and peers; pictures, magazines, and books; other audio-visual sources such as CDs, foreign movies, satellite programmes, the Internet; school training; physicians, clergy and counselling centres; family, including parents and siblings, and close family members. Finally, it was stated that there is a need for an organised educational curriculum to educate teenagers through, for instance, the provision of books or specific school credits regarding sexual and reproductive health.

In a more recent qualitative study (Abolfathi et al., 2022) conducted in Kermanshah, western Iran, data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions. The study engaged 36 adolescent girls between the ages of

12 and 18. The primary objective was to explore the opportunities and threats associated with the use of social media among Iranian adolescent girls. Notably, among the identified threats of using social media, the authors found an increase in risky sexual behaviours. In another qualitative research study aimed at exploring how children in Iran interact with media and their parental concerns, the researchers found that although parents were generally concerned about media content, their worries were more about cultural differences and violence rather than explicit sexual content:

> Although parents did not approve of sexual content in Iran, they did not mention it as often as they discussed their concerns about cultural clash and violence. The media which is available to children in Iran does not include explicit sexual content. Governmental media is strictly censored, and satellite TV is catered to the Iranian audience. (Kordrostami, Vijayalakshmi, & Laczniak, 2018, p. 829)

2.4.2.2   Parents

As mentioned earlier, parents have a prominent role in the process of sexuality socialisation of their children. Some studies have emphasised the role of Iranian parents in providing information regarding sexualities-related issues. For example, a cross-sectional quantitative survey involving 72 healthcare providers and 402 female high school students in Iran highlighted a consensus between healthcare providers and adolescents on the pivotal role of mothers as the 'most reliable' source of SRE for adolescents (Shahhosseini & Abedian, 2015). Many mothers seem to be aware of their pivotal position in this regard, as seen in a qualitative study conducted in 2012 in Gorgan, in which 24 mothers of 6- to 18-year-old adolescents were interviewed (Kalantary, Ghana, Sanagoo, & Jouybari, 2013), who generally believed that it was their responsibility to educate their children, especially their daughters, regarding puberty, menstruation, sexual activity, and religious and sociological issues connected to this subject.

The question is whether this process is via clear communications and mutual conversations in this regard or not. The mothers in the previous study (Kalantary et

al., 2013) mentioned that this educating process is not always perceptible and that, in most cases, due to cultural taboos and barriers, it is indirect. Another study investigated factors influencing sexual health conversations between mothers and their adolescent daughters in Iran, involving 363 female adolescents between 14 to 18, revealed that their communication is affected by factors like maternal education, the adolescent's field of study, overall mother-daughter communication, and emotional parent-child bonds (Harchegani, Dastoorpoor, Javadnoori, & Shiralinia, 2021).

That having been said, in a qualitative study using data from four focus group sessions involving 26 parents, it was observed that while parents considered close supervision to be vital, many of them felt ill-prepared to address their children's sexualities and lacked competence in engaging in effective parent-child interactions on this topic (Merghati-Khoei, Abolghasemi, & Smith, 2014). Moreover, interviewed mothers in a study by Kalantary et al. (2013) believed they did not have sufficient information in this field as they themselves had never received any formal SRE before.

The impact of the prolonged absence of SRE extends beyond just mothers; it affects the level of knowledge among many adults in Iran. For example, a cross-sectional study conducted in Shiraz, involving 276 men and 281 women (Khajehei et al., 2013), investigated sexual and reproductive health knowledge and attitudes among adults, revealing that even among adults, the general level of knowledge remained low, particularly in areas such as genital anatomy, STIs, and contraceptive use. Another study evaluated sexual and reproductive health knowledge among 755 Iranian men and women aged 15 to 49 in Tehran. The findings indicated that men and women demonstrated moderate levels of knowledge regarding sexual and reproductive health; however, "myths and misperceptions prevailed in different aspects of SRH [Sexual and Reproductive Health]" (Rahimi-Naghani et al., 2016, p. 1). Through multivariate analysis, they found that being female and being married significantly predicted higher levels of knowledge. On the other hand, youth emerged as a significant factor associated with lower levels of knowledge.

To address the concerns mentioned above, given the assumption that mothers play a significant role in imparting SRE to their children, numerous studies have concentrated on formulating SRE interventions specifically aimed at mothers in Iran. For example, in one study, a training SRE programme with an external facilitator proved effective in helping mothers become self-sufficient in teaching SRE to their children (Soleimani, Maasoumi, Haghani, & Noorzaie, 2021). In another study, an educational programme was formulated and implemented by Martin et al. (2018), specifically for mothers of preschool children in Tehran, which led to a noteworthy elevation in the average score of level of knowledge among mothers who had undergone the educational intervention, as compared to mothers who had not participated in the programme.

In another study (Ahari et al., 2022) involving 102 parents of male adolescents aged between 13 and 16 in Karaj, participants were split into intervention and control groups. The intervention group underwent a four-week educational programme. Assessments were conducted at baseline, one-week post-intervention, and three-month follow-up to evaluate various aspects of parent-adolescent communication, including general communication, sex-related topics, parental monitoring, sexual communication skills, self-efficacy, and responsiveness. Although no initial differences were observed, intervention parents exhibited improved general communication over time and significant enhancements in communication about sex-related topics, sexual communication skills, self-efficacy, and responsiveness to sexual communication compared to control group parents during each follow-up assessment.

In a recent qualitative study involving 27 parents of Iranian adolescent boys, an exploration of their strategies regarding the provision of SRE for their children was undertaken through semi-structured in-depth interviews and focused group discussions, which unveiled six distinctive approaches: "Extreme monitoring and restricting; abstinence as the main content of sexuality education; struggling to establish peace and achieve tolerance; criticizing the cultural taboos; hoping for spontaneous learning; and uncertainty and confusion" (Rouhparvar, Javadnoori, & Shahali, 2022, p. 1). What, from my perspective, is the most prominent finding of this study is the prevalent uncertainty and confusion among parents, which could potentially arise from the prolonged lack of SRE in Iran and the absence of open

discussions on the subject; yet, it perhaps implies the importance of encouraging parents to reflect and identify their values, which could lead to a certain degree of clarity, that could empower them to formulate explicit educational requests for their children, instead of hoping for spontaneous learning.

In another qualitative study, parental concerns were investigated through semi-structured and in-depth interviews involving 16 parents of male adolescents aged 12 to 18 (Babayanzad Ahari, Behboodi Moghadam, Azin, & Maasoumi, 2020). The identified parental concerns encompassed apprehensions about emotional and sexual risks, including fears of sexual harassment and worries regarding the emotional and sexual behaviours of their adolescents. Additionally, the study brought insights into the quality of parent-child relationships, deficient interpersonal ties within families, and challenges in discussing sexualities-related matters with children. The impact of media and cyberspace was also noted, revealing parents' concerns about increased exposure of adolescents to sexual stimuli and their own perceived technological lag and inability to keep up with their children in this field. Ultimately, the study highlighted the necessity for SRE not only for students but also for parents, teachers, instructors, and school authorities.

2.4.2.3 Peer Education

In a study on sexual and reproductive health knowledge among 755 Iranian men and women aged 15 to 49 in Tehran, friends were identified as the primary or secondary source of information concerning 'puberty and sex-related matters' (Rahimi-Naghani et al., 2016). It is important to reiterate that the absence of SRE in Iran's national curriculum has led to research on the effectiveness of SRE in Iran primarily focusing on the absence or sparse presence of such programmes or outcomes of typically one-off SRE programmes by external facilitators (for example, Gholizadegan Rayat et al., 2022; Hatami et al., 2015).

In a study conducted in Iran (Azizi, Amirian, & Amirian, 2008), the efficacy of three distinct educational approaches, namely peer education, visiting physicians, and pamphlet dissemination, on the knowledge of 1,500 female high school students

about HIV/AIDS was investigated. The findings indicate that the delivery of education by visiting medical practitioners shows higher efficacy in increasing students' knowledge concerning HIV/AIDS as compared to the other two methods. A recent study (Babapour, Elyasi, Hosseini-Tabaghdehi, Yazdani-Charati, & Shahhosseini, 2023) compared the efficacy of peer education and education provided by healthcare professionals in addressing premenstrual syndrome (PMS) management among high school female students in Iran. While the expected decrease in PMS scores was observed in both intervention groups as compared to the control group, the effect size of education delivered by healthcare professionals was found to be greater than that of education provided by peers.

A systematic review of the literature concerning the impact of school-based peer education on the health promotion of adolescents, focused only on Iranian students, evaluated the efficacy of this approach on the mental health and nutritional behaviours of the students as well as on the prevention of diseases and prevention of high-risk behaviours; it demonstrated that "in all categories, the results showed the equal or greater effect of peer education on knowledge, attitude, practice, self-efficacy and health behaviour of adolescents compared to other methods such as education by teacher, health personnel, lecture, pamphlet and booklet. Only effect of education by the physician was more than peer education" (Ghasemi et al., 2019, p. 9139). The last conclusion is derived from the study discussed earlier (Azizi et al., 2008) on the efficacy of three educational methods (peer education, physician-led instruction, and pamphlet dissemination) in improving students' knowledge of HIV/AIDS, in which visiting medical practitioners were found to be more effective than the other methods in enhancing students' HIV/AIDS knowledge.

2.4.2.4   An Official SRE Programme in Iran

Currently, there are mandatory premarital counselling and educational sessions in Iran, which include some degrees of SRE. Apart from being too late for those younger individuals in Iran who have had their sexual debut years before marriage, by being mainly focused on contraception and STIs, these programmes commonly lack other

aspects of SRE and sexual health, which are highly demanded by Iranian engaged couples (Khalesi, Simbar, & Azin, 2017).

Furthermore, these programmes do not appear to exhibit the desired level of effectiveness. A cohort study conducted in 2011 in Tehran (Pourmarzi, Rimaz, Merghati Khoii, Razi, & Shokoohi, 2013) indicated that the participants' expressed sexual and reproductive health educational needs six months after marriage did not demonstrate significant changes when compared to the period before these premarital educational and counselling sessions; in fact, there was even an increase observed. Nonetheless, a shift in the primary areas of interest was observed in this study, with 'healthy sexual relationships' and 'best physical, mental, and social conditions for pregnancy' emerging as the most frequently discussed topics before and after marriage, respectively.

Although the participants of the study conducted by Khajehei et al. (2013), mentioned earlier, must have already received premarital counselling and educational sessions, they exhibited a positive attitude towards the implementation of educational courses for adults. Implementation of these educational programmes has yielded promising outcomes. A controlled pre-test–post-test clinical trial conducted in Tehran, involving 60 women (Mahmodi & Valiee, 2016), reported that even post-marriage, subsequent to receiving mandatory premarital educational courses, participation in SRE programmes resulted in increased levels of sexual and marital satisfaction, which, in turn, had significantly enhanced the quality of life for these married women. It is evident that the deficiency in knowledge concerning sexualities, even in its narrow sense, which only encompasses sexual and reproductive health, extends beyond Iranian adolescents, who will assume parental roles in the future, and encompasses Iranian adults who are presently, in the absence of official school-based SRE programmes, playing an active role in educating the younger generation. This vicious cycle of inadequate knowledge will persist unless addressed through intervention. Albeit challenging, given potential obstacles to implementing SRE, educational interventions are imperative to break this cycle.

2.4.3   CHALLENGES IN IMPLEMENTING SCHOOL-BASED SRE

In recent years, barriers, difficulties, and problematic situations in educating adolescents in Iran regarding sexualities and relationships have been the primary concern of some researchers. For instance, a qualitative study conducted among 44 female adolescents in the Iranian cities of Mashhad and Ahvaz revealed their dissatisfaction with [the absence of] SRE in schools and identified barriers such as the neglect of SRE, silence surrounding the topic due to societal taboos, adolescents' induced fear of negative consequences linked to sexual relationships, the inadequate alignment of education with their needs, the presence of underqualified educators, and a deficiency of appropriate educational materials (Javadnoori et al., 2012).

Another qualitative study conducted within the cities of Mashhad and Ahvaz assessed sociocultural obstacles for SRE for female adolescents (Latifnejad Roudsari, Javadnoori, Hasanpour, Hazavehei, & Taghipour, 2013). This study encompassed a broad participant spectrum, including female adolescents aged 14-18, mothers, teachers, health and education authorities, healthcare providers, and clergymen. Within this context, the main sociocultural challenge confronting SRE implementation was identified as 'taboos surrounding sexuality'. Additional obstacles highlighted in this study included "denial of premarital sex, social concern about negative impacts of sexual education, perceived stigma and embarrassment, reluctance to discuss sexual issues in public, sexual discussion as a socio-cultural taboo, lack of advocacy and legal support, intergenerational gap, religious uncertainties, and imitating non-Islamic patterns of education" (Latifnejad Roudsari et al., 2013, p. 101).

Another qualitative study, based on semi-structured in-depth interviews with 20 adolescents and 25 adults, classified the barriers to providing SRE for adolescents into two primary domains of extra-personal barriers and intra-personal barriers (Askari, Mirzaiinajmabadi, Saeedy Rezvani, & Asgharinekah, 2020). The first category, namely extra-personal barriers, encompasses the absence of well-defined policies concerning SRE, shortcomings within families in addressing this topic adequately, societal obstacles that hinder open discourse, challenges posed by cultural diversity and heterogeneity in students, inadequacies within the schooling system itself, potential risks stemming from online platforms, and deficiencies within the overall educational framework. The second category, intra-personal barriers, involves the unrestrained

emotional state of adolescence, their tendencies towards rebellious behaviour, shortcomings in effectively communicating and receiving information, and the fear they feel about potential judgment from others.

In another study in two major Iranian cities, Tehran and Mashhad, 34 participants, comprising authorities from health organisations, healthcare providers, clergies, and adult men from the general population, were interviewed to identify the obstacles impeding SRE in Iran and by analysing data three overarching themes surfaced: individual barriers, sociocultural barriers, and structural barriers (Mirzaiinajmabadi, Karimi, & Ebadi, 2019). These themes were further detailed through seven subthemes: low perceived threat of STIs, reluctance to acquire knowledge, adherence to sociocultural taboos, inadequate family awareness and practices, barriers in policy formulation, challenges in execution, and deficiencies within the health system.

Samadaee Gelehkolaee et al. (2021) conducted in-depth semi-structured interviews with stakeholders from schools, the Education Department in Sari, and the Ministries of Health and Education in Tehran to gain insights into their perspectives and preferences for implementing SRE in Iran. The study yielded five themes. The first theme emphasises the role of various institutions, including family, educational establishments, and cultural and religious institutions. The second highlights the possible contributions of both national and international organisations. The third centres on the necessity of stakeholders' collaboration, which entails establishing a common definition of SRE, effecting changes in macro policies, and designing and evaluating context-based educational content rooted in values and beliefs. The fourth focuses on adolescent sexuality socialisation management and encompasses navigating societal expectations and conflicts surrounding sexual matters, addressing challenges and attributes of the Student Social Care System, addressing adolescent vulnerability and skill development, and comprehending the repercussions of sexual taboos. Lastly, the fifth theme highlights the need to enhance teachers' professional competence and involves selecting suitable educational content, adopting effective teaching approaches, and skills-based teaching.

2.4.4 ATTITUDES, VIEWS, AND VALUES

While there is existing literature discussing the influence of cultural, religious, and socioeconomic factors on Iranians' attitudes towards, their practice, and understanding of sexualities and SRE, only a limited number of studies touch upon the concept of 'values'. The available literature in this field predominantly revolves around the topic of premarital relationships. Premarital relationships and associated factors, such as attitudes towards premarital sex and virginity, have been a prominent research focus in Iran. This interest is evident in some quantitative studies, often of significant scale, that determined prevalence rates alongside exploring correlated issues. A recent systematic literature review conducted in Iran concluded that the overall prevalence of self-reported lifetime extra/premarital sexual activity was approximately 24%. This prevalence exhibited a gender discrepancy, being 33% among males and 14% among females. The review also noted varying rates of high-risk sexual behaviours, encompassing instances of unprotected sex, multiple sexual partners, sex in exchange for money, and early sexual initiation (before the age of 15).

Another population-based study involving 1385 male adolescents aged 15 to 18 in Tehran used a self-administered questionnaire and found that 28% of their sample reported engaging in sexual activity (Mohammadi et al., 2006). This sexual experience was correlated with "older age, access to satellite television, alcohol consumption, and permissive attitudes toward sex" (Mohammadi et al., 2006, p. 35). Moreover, a higher degree of permissiveness towards premarital sex was noted among respondents who were older, not enrolled in school, possessed work experience, had access to the Internet or satellite television, lived independently from their parents, or disclosed their consumption of alcohol, cigarettes, or drugs.

In a study involving 755 participants in Tehran focused on attitudes toward premarital dating and sexual encounters, it was found that the majority of participants were supportive of dating (Motamedi et al., 2016). Men expressed more favourable views on non-intercourse, tactile, and affectionate interactions between unmarried individuals compared to women. Men also exhibited more permissive attitudes toward premarital sexual intercourse compared to women. Regarding the importance of virginity before marriage, participants, regardless of their gender, considered it more important for women to remain virgins than for men.

Apart from being gendered, it appears that not all Iranians hold uniform attitudes towards premarital sexual relationships. In a study (Mokhtari, Shariat, Ardebili, & Shalbafan, 2020) encompassing 457 students aged 18 to 24 from various universities in Tehran, the investigation aimed to explore attitudes concerning marriage, family, and premarital sex, revealing substantial disparities between students studying different academic majors. For example, Art students demonstrated a more permissive stance towards premarital sex compared to their counterparts, and they held the belief that engaging in premarital sex would not adversely impact females' reputations. On the other hand, Medical Sciences students displayed the highest consensus regarding the negative influence of premarital sexual relationships on females' reputations and the possibility of men's inclination towards 'virgin girls'. In another study involving 1743 female college students in Tehran, the findings indicated that a substantial proportion of the youth in Tehran has diverged from 'traditional views' concerning premarital social engagement and romantic relationships; however, a predominant majority continues to adhere to 'traditional cultural and religious values' concerning abstaining from premarital sexual activities (Khalajabadi Farahani & Cleland, 2015)

However, even if Iranians did collectively uphold similar issues as important, they may not necessarily share an identical definition of what precisely encompasses those issues. For example, Mehrolhassani et al. (2020) posit that in Iran, women's virginity holds paramount importance, and entering marriage without virginity is heavily stigmatised, if not resulting in serious legal consequences. However, their study, involving interviews with Iranian adolescents aged 5 to 19, revealed that these participants did not consider non-penetrative physical interactions equal to the loss of virginity. Mehrolhassani et al. argue that abstaining from premarital sexual activity stands as a reliable policy for preventing STIs, with its efficacy being closely linked to the prevailing understanding of the concept of virginity; in their article, they requested Iranian policymakers to "take steps towards modifying the concept of virginity in the adolescents' value system and provide and implement educational programs on sexual health for adolescents" (2020, p. 1).

Conducted through 30 in-depth interviews with female college students in Tehran, a qualitative study explored the determinants influencing these students' decisions regarding premarital sexual engagement (Khalajabadi-Farahani, Månsson, & Cleland, 2018). The first category of the analysis focused on the meaning of marriage and marital motivations, encompassing reduced emphasis on virginity for marriage, prioritising sexual compatibility between partners, and estimating high marital prospects. The second category revolved around compliance with family values and expectations, where family values were reduced to discussions primarily centred on opposing premarital sex. Moreover, being liberal and being permissive were equated, suggesting that having liberal parents could contribute to premarital sex among young women. The third category pertained to perceived gender and social norms of premarital sex. The study revealed heavy stigma surrounding premarital sex in Iran, termed them as "conservative norms", asserting that they are distinct from perceived norms from peers in Iran. A gendered double standard concerning societal norms about tolerance for premarital relationships was also identified. The fourth category highlighted the importance of religiosity. This part of the analysis explored the concept of "temporary marriage" as a religious getaway to alleviate feelings of regret, sin, and guilt, which in this study were linked to religious views on sexual conduct. The final category addressed sexual knowledge and self-efficacy, revealing a positive relationship between the two.

In studies concerning SRE in Iran, discussions surrounding religious values frequently revolve around advocating abstinence from engaging in premarital sexual activities and rejecting any sexual behaviour outside of a heterosexual married relationship. For example, a study on Iranian college students examined the correlation between religiosity scores and various factors such as past sexual activity, attitudes, norms, and self-efficacy related to sexual abstinence. The findings of the study revealed that:

> Students who had a higher religious score were significantly more likely to have high self-efficacy in refusing sex, and their attitudes supported their abstinence. Additionally, these students were more likely never to have had a sexual relationship. (Shirazi & Morowatisharifabad, 2009, p. 29)

Merghati-Khoei et al. assert that despite the potential compatibility of Islamic morals with the "natural growth of sexuality as part of being human", a prevailing "culture of silence" is the predominant view in Iran concerning sexualities which is frequently justified through a religious lens (2014, p. 588).

A study by Khalaj et al. (2011) involved 1378 unmarried female college students in Tehran to identify factors associated with premarital intercourse. They reported that factors such as not residing with both parents and possessing more liberal family values were linked to engaging in such relationships. On the other hand, a closer parent-child relationship appeared to reduce the likelihood of premarital sex. This study stands out as one of the few research projects exploring values and SRE in Iran; although, by employing a quantitative measure for values, it might not capture all nuances of the subject. The study employed a spectrum to evaluate family values, ranging from very conservative to very liberal. Participants were positioned on this spectrum based on their responses to five questions encompassing factors such as parents' religiosity, modernity, and attitudes towards premarital heterosexual friendships, mixed-sex parties, and dating. Based on these premises, the authors of the study discussed that "the more liberal the family values, the greater the likelihood that a young woman had had a boyfriend or premarital sex" (p. 36).

In one recent Iranian study, it was confidently asserted that the *International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education* (UNESCO et al., 2018a) could be implemented in Iran, as "CSE is a comprehensive program that is consistent with the protests and religious beliefs and values and norms of the current Iranian society" (Shirbaigy, Esmaeili, Saeidipour, & Sarmadi, 2051, p. 4); notably, there was no explicit elaboration on what these values and norms might entail. Ironically, the conclusion of the study also acknowledges that discrepancies exist in certain instances between the norms and values upheld in Iran and those outlined in UNESCO's guidelines.

Finally, there has been a scarcity of studies that have explored perceptions of sexualities among younger individuals in Iran. A qualitative study involving data from four focus group sessions encompassing 26 parents in Tehran explored how these parents conceptualise childhood sexuality and their strategies for addressing it

(Merghati-Khoei et al., 2014). The findings showed that parents often perceived children's sexuality as an 'inactive energy' or 'untapped force' that remains dormant until triggered by events, often verbalizing this perspective by asserting the inherent 'innocence' of children. In this regard, Tabatabaie writes:

> the ideal Iranian/Muslim sexual subject is conceptualised as one who transitions asexually from birth to puberty, is educated on issues that concern puberty and its Islamic implications upon arriving at puberty and remains non-sexual afterwards until marriage — which ideally happens soon after attaining maturity. (Tabatabaie, 2015b, p. 212)

2.5 CONCLUSION

In the course of my review of relevant literature, in so far as I have been able to ascertain, it appears that there is a paucity of research that fully encapsulates the scope of my study, which centres on exploring values that could inform and shape the potential implementation of SRE in Iran and encompassing values-related perspectives that could shed light on effective strategies for SRE implementation. Moreover, there seems to be more place for exploring and uncovering the interplay of these values with practical aspects of sourcing and contextualising SRE implementation, which may contribute to refining strategies for the better execution of SRE programmes.

In the light of this literature review, two research questions were formulated. These questions, introduced at the beginning of Chapter 3, represent the core focus of my study and are intended to address research gaps, ultimately contributing to the facilitation of the implementation of official SRE in Iran.

3 METHODOLOGY

The methodology chapter is a pivotal segment of this research endeavour, unveiling the cautiously constructed framework that guided the exploration of themes in the complicated domain of SRE within Iran's educational landscape. This chapter presents the methodological journey undertaken, encompassing diverse techniques and theories, including critical realism, constructivist grounded theory, and thematic analysis. The integration of the 'Four-Planar Social Being' framework from critical realism enriches the research methodology, enabling a holistic comprehension of the complex layers shaping human sexualities. Rooted in a profound belief in the necessity of ethical considerations, the chapter narrates the steps taken to ensure participant comfort and confidentiality throughout the research process.

3.1 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES

Based on the identification of gaps in the existing literature and driven by my personal interests in this field, the objectives of this study were to address two primary research questions:

- What are the underpinning values that inform how sexualities and relationships education could be implemented in Iranian schools?
- How do parents and teachers perceive the best ways of delivering sexualities and relationships education to Iranian school students?

The findings derived from this research are presented and simultaneously discussed within two distinct chapters, each specifically structured to address one of the above research questions. Chapter 4 is dedicated to the exploration of the values that inform the potential frameworks for implementing SRE within Iranian schools. Subsequently, Chapter 5 focuses on discerning the perspectives of parents and teachers, including classroom teachers and headteachers, concerning optimal ways of delivering SRE to students in Iranian school settings.

3.2 OVERARCHING THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

The tradition for studying topics such as values or beliefs, where the nature of the phenomena under research requires probing beneath the surface, is to take a qualitative approach to the research since a quantitative approach, as Scott mentions, "has a tendency to reduce and therefore trivialise both what is complicated and what is perceived to be complicated by participants in a social setting" (2013, p. 21). While some academics attempt to incorporate principles from two or more theoretical frameworks, others maintain that achieving this is not straightforward, insisting that researchers must position their work within a singular framework of ontology, epistemology, and methodology. While this study, to a significant extent, aligns with the principles of critical realism, it should be acknowledged that other frameworks of thought have also influenced the data analysis in this thesis.

3.2.1 THE RELEVANCE OF CRITICAL REALISM TO MY RESEARCH

Numerous features of critical realism resonate strongly with my research. The initial feature centres around uncovering more profound layers of meaning, structures, processes, and mechanisms. A subsequent feature relates to its acknowledgement of epistemological relativism. The third feature is its emancipatory approach to research. Lastly, and perhaps of the greatest importance, is its recognition of the notion of absence.

3.2.1.1 Ontological Realism

The ontological conceptualisation in critical realism challenges empirical positivist realism and Kantian transcendental idealism, which influence interpretive and critical approaches. It rejects the notion that reality is solely composed of observable events and instead posits three domains: empirical, actual, and real. The empirical domain involves observable events, the actual domain encompasses events independent of

our experience, and the real domain comprises structures that possess causal powers level (Table 3-1).

Throughout this research, I sought to understand not just the surface-level observations but to comprehend the underlying structures, processes, and mechanisms shaping how SRE is approached within Iran. Given the multi-layered nature of events and the existence of unspoken aspects in Iran, critical realism emerges as a particularly fitting analytical framework for the contextual examination of this research.

	Domain of Real	Domain of Actual	Domain of Empirical
Mechanisms	✓		
Events	✓	✓	
Experiences	✓	✓	✓

Table 3-1 The ontological conceptualisation in critical realism (adapted from Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 2).

3.2.1.2   Epistemological Relativism

It might appear evident that certain facets of human sexualities possess an inherent objectivity; take, for instance, the anatomical and physiological attributes of genitalia. However, it is equally undeniable that a subjective dimension intertwines with it, giving rise to the rich diversity observed in sexual behaviours and attitudes across various cultural settings and in communities holding different value systems. In this context, approaching sexualities, similar to many other complex social phenomena, requires a stance that transcends the simplistic binaries of pure objectivity and radical relativism. This is where critical realism's perspective steps in, effectively reconciling this dichotomy by proposing 'ontological realism', 'epistemological relativism', and 'judgmental rationality' at the same time.

As Scott elucidates, "though the intransitive realm (ontology) is relatively enduring, its description or knowledge of it (the epistemic or transitive dimension) is relative to

ideologies (as extant bodies of thought) which exist in particular societies. These epistemologies or knowledge constructs though are still real" (2013, p. 36). Thus, when delving into the exploration of values related to SRE, it becomes imperative to not only grasp the objective underpinnings but also to apprehend the world as it is perceived and experienced by the participants within their distinct societal contexts. To achieve this, I sought to comprehend the subjective narratives and interpretations of the participants to grasp a better understanding of their context.

Moreover, throughout the course of this research, I maintained a constant mindfulness of the above foundational principles of critical realism's ontology. The recognition that the intransitive reality of the world exists independently of my transitive theories about it served as a guiding thread in my exploration. By acknowledging the existence of a reality that stands apart from my interpretations, I was reminded of the need to approach my research with a sense of humbleness and openness, allowing the underlying truths of the intransitive dimensions to shape and inform my understanding, even as I engaged in constructing transitive theories to make sense of those truths. This mindfulness deepened my appreciation of the complexity and depth inherent in the intransitive reality of the world and the layered nature of human sexualities.

3.2.1.3   Judgmental Rationality

Critical realism suggests that "actors shape their social worlds but, in turn, are constrained by social structures embedded in the fabric of social life" (Houston, 2014, p. 220). Critical realism asserts that through judgmental rationality, individuals can distinguish between different accounts of the same notion. An important aspect of critical realism that suits my research is its rejection of the notion of value-free science. Houston, in this regard, writes:

> Bhaskar sees a connection between the production of knowledge in society and human emancipation. Essentially, negative value judgements can be made on phenomena which can be shown, through reasoned argument or evidence, to be false, hegemonic or exploitative. There must

> be a presumption in favour of making the truth of the case known through what we have found in our research endeavours. (2014, p. 221)

Hence, while studying values in SRE and understanding and describing the current situation of Iran with regard to SRE, it was also valuable to take a critical approach to research and discuss which account might guide us towards an improved position.

3.2.1.4   Exploring Absence

Absence, often overlooked in research that prioritises presence and evidence, holds a crucial place in critical realism. In Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR), absence is addressed as "the simplest and most elemental concept of all" (Bhaskar, 2008, p. 239). In critical realism, absence is not just a void; it transcends mere emptiness and rather, it is a powerful force that wields a potent influence. Perhaps the aspiration to fill the gaps and create constructive transformation is a central tenet of critical realism. Absence comes before presence (Bhaskar, 2008), indicating that what is lacking often moulds what exists. Absence embodies deliberate endeavours for change, signifying purposeful action. It serves as a representation of problems that need to be addressed and improved.

Given the current absence of official school-based SRE programmes in Iran, this research was an endeavour to understand the factors contributing to this absence and to examine the repercussions of this absence on individuals and society as a whole; moreover, I was interested in seeing how people react to this absence. Absence can be negative, such as absence of health, absence of adequate knowledge regarding life skills or sexualities, and absence of recognition of younger individuals' sexualities or their autonomy, in which case, the aspiration is to facilitate transformative change that eliminates these absences. However, absence can also assume a positive aspect, for instance, as articulated by Alderson, "when learning involves the absenting and negating of ignorance and error; freedom involves absenting need and desire. Absence is the impetus for dynamic change, and it exists in catalysts for action such as need and want" (2013, p. 66).

3.2.2   USE OF OTHER THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

While critical realism has significantly informed my data analysis approach, it would be inaccurate to claim complete adherence to the perspectives and theories endorsed by those aligned with critical realism. In several instances, I have drawn upon other methods, schools of thought, and theories that better align with the requirements of this study. For example, in defining the concept of religion, Geertz's (1973) symbolic anthropology emerged as a more suitable fit. Likewise, Foucault's idea of docile bodies (1979) and its resonance with my fieldwork observations became prominent. Furthermore, critical theory and intersectionality sharpened my awareness throughout data gathering and analysis, enabling me to discern instances of discrimination or privilege shaped by the interplay of various social identities, such as gender and class. Thus, several bodies of theory have guided the conceptualisation of this thesis.

3.3   DATA GATHERING

The journey of data gathering was guided by various resources and methods. These included a study of Iran's written official educational documents, a series of one-to-one face-to-face interviews with headteachers, classroom teachers, and parents in Iran, as well as engaging in online large group discussions with younger Iranian individuals. The data were further enriched through keen observations and concurrent documentation of field notes.

3.3.1   WRITTEN OFFICIAL EDUCATIONAL DOCUMENTS

The use of written official educational documents served as a vital resource in this study. The objective of reviewing these documents was not to conduct an exhaustive analysis of the entirety of educational materials but rather to obtain an insight into the official educational objectives outlined by the government and the underlying prioritised values. In pursuit of this goal, particular attention was given to the

Fundamental Reform Document of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran (2011), which emerged as the most important resource.

In December 2011, the *Supreme Council of Cultural Revolution*, in conjunction with the Ministry of Education of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the *Supreme Council of Education*, published the *Fundamental Reform Document of Education in the Islamic Republic of Iran* (hereinafter referred to as FRDE). This document is meant to serve as a roadmap and guiding framework for achieving educational goals, and it represents the official stand of the Ministry of Education in terms of educational values. Indeed, should SRE exist or be implemented in Iranian schools, it would undoubtedly align with and operate within the fundamental values upheld by the entire educational system.

The FRDE commences with a quotation from Imam Khomeini, the prominent figure behind the 1979 revolution and the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, adapted from *Sahife-ye-noor* (Quotations are from the official English translation):

> I recommend all the officials and authorities to pave the ground for ethical, ideological, scientific and artistic promotion of the youth through all the possible means, and to accompany them until reaching the sublime values and innovations and to preserve the spirit of independence and self-reliance among them. (FRDE, 2011, p. 2)

This quotation highlights the importance of values as one of the primary educational objectives. Moreover, the first sentence of the text itself addresses the significance of values:

> Realisation of the lofty values and ideals of the Islamic Revolution requires all-round efforts in cultural, scientific, social and economic dimensions (FRDE, 2011, p. 6).

It is evident that the FRDE is value-laden and aims to actualise the values and ideals of the Islamic Revolution. The second chapter of this document is titled *Values Statement* and comprises 30 value-based statements. It is crucial to emphasise that this document is not merely a set of recommendations but a binding requirement.

Consequently, to ensure compliance with its contents, schools endeavour to realise and meet those standards and requirements. The obligatory nature of this document is apparent in the opening paragraph of the chapter on the values statement, which states the following:

> The value-based statements included in the values statement are "dos" and "don'ts", to which all the elements of the country's general formal education system are to be compatible with and all the policy-makers and officials within the ruling system have to abide by. (FRDE, 2011, p. 15)

Expanding upon the established theories within the field of values and SRE, the exploration of FRDE was undertaken through the application of a directed approach to content analysis. This involves commencing the analysis with a pre-existing theory or pertinent research insights, which serve as a foundational framework to guide the formulation of initial codes and subsequent interpretations (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005).

In addition to FRDE, an exploration of Iranian school textbooks was undertaken. However, this endeavour was not undertaken with the intention of conducting data analysis. Instead, its purpose was to gain a better familiarity with these educational resources. This familiarity, in turn, enabled me to pose targeted questions to educators, including teachers and headteachers, regarding the instructional methods employed in teaching SRE-related subjects and how these topics were perceived by the students. Thus, the examination of school textbooks facilitated a more informed line of questioning, enabling a better exploration of the interviewed school's approach to various educational matters.

3.3.2 INTERVIEWS WITH HEADTEACHERS, CLASSROOM TEACHERS AND PARENTS

3.3.2.1 General Structure of the Interviews

The interviews conducted with headteachers, classroom teachers, and parents followed an in-depth and one-on-one format. Interviews with school staff and some parents occurred within the school premises, often taking place in the headteacher's office or the teachers' lounge. For some parents, interviews were arranged in my office in Tehran. All interviews were conducted in Farsi. The initial interviews took place in person. Measures taken to ensure trustworthiness will be covered later in this chapter in the section on ethical considerations. In some instances, additional topics emerged during ongoing communications subsequent to each interview. These follow-up conversations were rarely in person and often conducted through 'phone calls or online communication platforms such as WhatsApp, Facetime, and Skype.

The length of the interviews varied considerably based on the level of engagement of the interviewees. In some cases, extra sessions were arranged, while in others, the sessions concluded as scheduled. Typically, interviews commenced with a series of introductory questions designed to establish rapport, followed by a more targeted and thorough exploration. Despite the absence of official SRE programmes in Iran, as expected, many interviewees possessed significant experiences relevant to SRE. Including the initial greetings and concluding discussions regarding potential introductions to other participants, most interviews extended beyond one hour in duration.

To explore participants' viewpoints on SRE, semi-structured interviews were employed. The use of a semi-structured interview format, guided by the interview guides (Appendices 3, 4, and 5), offered flexibility in terms of the sequencing and wording of questions. Adjustments were made based on the outcomes of concurrent analysis, ensuring optimal alignment with the interviewees' perspectives and the research questions at hand. As Turner aptly points out, "the researcher remains in the driver's seat with this type of interview approach, but flexibility takes precedence based on perceived prompts from the participants" (2010, pp. 755–756). This approach proved particularly suitable when participants approached a sensitive topic or broached fresh insights into the discussed matters.

When studying a sensitive subject, maintaining a tolerant stance is important. I anticipated a broad spectrum of responses that might also encompass silence or the absence of answers. As astutely noted by Mears, "there are messages and perhaps cultural significance in the silence of the unspoken word and in the cadence of memory. Silences and what appears to be forgotten or intentionally avoided can be as noteworthy as what is remembered and voiced" (2009, p. 117). Indeed, a common feature throughout the interviews was not within verbal communication; it encompassed instances of silence, prolonged pauses, uneasy laughter, cautious whispers, unfinished sentences, and shifts in tone that conveyed fear or authority.

3.3.2.2   Sampling Strategy

The sampling method employed for this study was 'snowball sampling', also recognised as 'network sampling' or the 'chain referral method'. This technique is extensively used in qualitative research, particularly when investigating sensitive subjects. In this non-probability sampling approach, "one subject gives the researcher the name of another subject, who in turn provides the name of a third, and so on. This is an especially useful technique when the researcher wants to contact people with unusual experiences or characteristics who are likely to know one another" (Vogt, 2005, p. 300). Perhaps my interviewees' 'unusual characteristic' might have been their courage to contribute to my study, an attribute that can be considered rather exceptional. Addressing the topic of SRE within an educational context could present challenges, causing many individuals to be reluctant to participate in this study. Typically, interviewees' initial agreement to participate stemmed from being introduced to my research and myself by a colleague or a trusted source, reflecting the pivotal role of referrals in the recruitment process.

The primary criticism directed at this sampling method pertains to the issue of representativeness, given that the chain referral process may inadvertently select participants with shared characteristics or similar value systems, leading to a substantial influence of the researcher's initial sample on the overall sampling process. This criticism holds a significant degree of validity in my research, where, despite

repeated efforts, I encountered challenges in securing interviews from public schools. Consequently, my sample predominantly consisted of individuals from semi-public and private schools. Additionally, considering the gender-based segregation of schools in Iran, participants were drawn from both girls- and boys-only schools. The majority of the sample was drawn from schools in Tehran, the capital and most populous city of Iran. While it could be argued that due to substantial inward migrations from various Iranian cities and rural areas, Tehran embodies diverse cultural representations, I acknowledge that the schools I had the opportunity to engage with do not comprehensively reflect the entirety of Iran. Nonetheless, I was able to include two participants from rural regions of Iran, which, although it added a degree of diversity to the sample, did not introduce any novel perspectives to the data.

3.3.2.3   Pilot Study and Adjustments to the Methodology

Before undertaking the full-scale study, a pilot study was conducted to assess the feasibility and effectiveness of the research. Insights gained from the pilot phase informed adjustments and enhancements and proved invaluable in shaping the research methodology, validating data collection instruments, and refining the study's overall design.

3.3.2.3.1 *Sampling and Participant Engagement*

The pilot study proved fruitful in understanding participant responses, interactions, and potential challenges in data-gathering, which contributed to optimising the participant engagement strategy for the subsequent stages of the study. Early interviews were particularly significant, considering the employed snowball sampling method. These interviews not only assisted in identifying potential participants but also facilitated the establishment of a network crucial for participant recruitment for the data collection phase. The pilot interviews featured two headteachers from religious private schools located in affluent neighbourhoods in northern Tehran.

Initially, I reached out to four schools to initiate the pilot phase for my study, with a primary focus on involving headteachers as the initial links to potential participants.

However, during my visit to Tehran, the schools faced multiple-day closures due to air pollution, leading to the cancellation of one interview. Additionally, another school repeatedly rescheduled our interview appointment, eventually causing me to return to London, as previously scheduled, without having had the opportunity to conduct the interview. Despite these challenges, I managed to successfully complete pilot interviews in two out of the four schools. The first interview occurred at a boys-only school and was followed by a second interview at a girls-only school. This 50 per cent success rate served as an early indicator for me to allocate more time to data collection than initially anticipated.

During the initial phases of formulating my methodology, I considered the possibility of including perspectives from younger individuals through focus group discussions and even quantitative surveys. However, during the pilot study, I learned that obtaining approval from the Ministry of Education for such data collection methods was highly unlikely for several reasons. Not only were practical challenges present, such as the need to allocate time and space within students' schedules, but the sensitivity of the researched topic exacerbated the difficulty. Additionally, studying in the United Kingdom intensified the complexities of obtaining permission from the Ministry of Education in Iran. However, I was hoping to secure consent directly from schools and parents. Following the pilot study, the feasibility of conducting interviews with students appeared even more remote, as headteachers maintained reservations about student discussions on this subject in a group setting. My aspiration then shifted to conducting individual interviews with students, but this, too, proved unfeasible in the long run.

3.3.2.3.2 *Methodological Testing*

The pilot study provided an opportunity to examine the practicality and appropriateness of the research methods, such as testing the interview protocols, data collection procedures, and observational techniques to ensure their alignment with the research objectives.

The initial phase of the data collection process involved introducing the research to potential participants verbally and through information sheets (Appendix 1) and acquiring both oral and written consent (Appendix 2). Despite prior introductions facilitated by my friends and relatives, who were familiar with the interviewees, and their reassurances regarding my sincere intentions, the interviewees still had some reservations about the research's objectives. I realised that conducting a thorough presentation of the research goals, along with addressing interviewees' concerns and alleviating any uncertainties they might have, was of paramount importance and should be recognised as requiring more time than initially anticipated. In particular, I emphasised the extent of confidentiality and ensured that potential participants were fully informed, enabling them to make autonomous decisions and participate in the research willingly.

Semi-structured interviews emerged as a fitting choice for the study. Participant feedback gathered during the pilot phase enabled me to improve interview questions. Adjustments were made to increase question clarity, relevance, and comprehensiveness. Moreover, data collection gadgets and applications were tested, as some did not work properly in Iran. An intriguing revelation from the pilot phase was that despite the absence of formal SRE programmes, both schools had some training strategies and educational plans regarding puberty, offering substantial content for discussion.

3.3.2.3.3 *Initial Data Analysis*

The data from the pilot study facilitated an initial exploration of potential codes and themes, effectively contributing to the formulation of a preliminary theory. This preliminary theory then guided the subsequent data collection and the resultant analysis during the main study.

In essence, the pilot study played a crucial role in refining the research approach. It provided valuable insights into participant engagement, challenges, and responses, which guided strategy optimisation for the main study and enriched the research methodology.

3.3.2.4 Challenges Faced During Data-Gathering

During the data-gathering phase, several challenges emerged that impacted the research process. Addressing these challenges required adaptability and resilience in research and constant adjustments to ensure the quality of the collected data.

3.3.2.4.1 *Unpredictable Time Requirements*

From very early on, it became evident that the time needed for data collection would exceed initial expectations. Frequent unscheduled school closures due to air pollution, weather conditions, societal, and other issues happened more often than expected, disrupting the planned data collection schedule. These unpredictable events often hindered the smooth progression of interviews, requiring a flexible approach to scheduling appointments.

3.3.2.4.2 *Recruitment Struggles*

The recruitment of interviewees to participate in the research posed substantial difficulties. Beyond the snowball sampling method, persuading teachers or headteachers to engage in this study proved impossible. Furthermore, some individuals who initially agreed to participate later withdrew their commitment, leading to unexpected cancellations, sometimes just before the scheduled data collection dates.

3.3.2.4.3 *Extended Interview Duration*

Interviews often extended beyond the anticipated time frame. Some participants enthusiastically engaged in extensive discussions, resulting in more extended interviews than initially planned. This occasionally necessitated follow-up meetings to ensure that all the key issues on the interview schedule were covered. While these extensive discussions extended the time required, they also yielded richer data.

3.3.2.4.4 *Barriers to Interviewing Younger Individuals*

Gaining access to younger individuals for interviews (i.e., school students) posed a significant challenge. Schools refused my access to students, and the sensitive nature of the research topic further complicated obtaining parental approval for participation. These obstacles restricted the inclusion of perspectives from younger individuals.

3.3.2.4.5 *Participant Reconsiderations*

A notable challenge emerged when some interviewees changed their minds after the initial interview. They requested the exclusion of their or their school's entire data from the study. Such second thoughts led to the loss of noticeable and valuable data points. However, despite the absence of direct data from these interactions in this thesis, their influence on shaping my perspective, particularly on practical implementation issues of SRE in Iranian schools, was significant, and I am deeply grateful for that.

3.3.2.5 Sample Size and the Table of Participants in One-To-One Interviews

Data saturation, as articulated by Fusch and Ness, "is reached when there is enough information to replicate the study when the ability to obtain additional new information has been attained, and when further coding is no longer feasible" (2015, p. 1408). In alignment with this perspective, Cohen et al. (2017, p. 599) aptly stress that since it is impossible to foresee when this point will be reached, determining sample size or representativeness is an ongoing aspect of the research process. Although the initial intention was to continue the recruitment process until reaching theoretical data saturation, the saturation point for both parents and school staff occurred much earlier than initially anticipated and well before the estimated range of 20-30 participants. Nevertheless, I opted to proceed until a total of 25 parent participants and 30 school staff participants had been included. This decision was underpinned by the intention to maximise the potential discovery of new themes. Additionally, I hoped that one of the interviewees might provide access to student

interviews. However, after conducting over 50 interviews, it became increasingly apparent that this was unlikely.

To uphold anonymity and ensure confidentiality, participants were assigned code names. For school staff, a system of labelling was employed, in which each school was represented by an alphabetical letter, followed by "T" for classroom teachers and "H" for headteachers. In instances where multiple classroom teachers or headteachers from the same school participated, numerical identifiers were added (Table 3-2).

	Code Names	Role	School's Description
1	AH	Headteacher	Girls-only school
2	AT1	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
3	AT2	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
4	BH	Headteacher	Boys-only school
5	BT1	Classroom Teacher	Boys-only school
6	CH	Headteacher	Boys-only school
7	CT1	Classroom Teacher	Boys-only school
8	DH	Headteacher	Boys-only school
9	DT1	Classroom Teacher	Boys-only school

10	ET1	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
11	FH1	Co-Headteacher	Girls-only school
12	FH2	Co-Headteacher	Girls-only school
13	FT1	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
14	GT1	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
15	GT2	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
16	GT3	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
17	HH	Headteacher	Girls-only school
18	HT1	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
19	IT1	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
20	JH	Headteacher	Girls-only school
21	KH	Headteacher	Girls-only school
22	LH	Headteacher	Boys-only school
23	LT1	Classroom Teacher	Boys-only school

24	MH	Headteacher	Girls-only school
25	MT1	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
26	MT2	Classroom Teacher	Girls-only school
27	NH	Headteacher	Boys-only school
28	OH	Headteacher	Boys-only school
29	OT1	Classroom Teacher	Boys-only school
30	PH	Headteacher	Girls-only school

Table 3-2 Code names and characteristics of interviewed headteachers and classroom teachers.

Interviews with parents were straightforwardly designated as "P", followed by a numerical identifier (Table 3-3).

	Name Codes	Description
1	P1	Mother of a 13-year-old boy and 15-year-old girl
2	P2	Mother of 15- and 19-year-old girls
3	P3	Mother of a 9-year-old girl
4	P4	Father of a 13-year-old girl
5	P5	Mother of a 9-year-old boy and an 11-year-old girl
6	P6	Father of a 16-year-old boy

7	P7	Mother of a 9-year-old girl and 11- and 16-year-old boys
8	P8	Mother of a 13-year-old girl and a 16-year-old girl
9	P9	Mother of a 13-year-old girl and an 18-year-old girl
10	P10	Mother of 6- and 11-year-old girls
11	P11	Mother of a 16-year-old boy
12	P12	Father of an 8-year-old girl and 14- and 18-year-old boys
13	P13	Mother of a 16-year-old girl
14	P14	Mother of an 8-year-old girl and a 12-year-old boy
15	P15	Mother of 9- , 12- and 16-year-old girls
16	P16	Father of a 16-year-old girl
17	P17	Mother of 8-, 13- and 16-year-old girls
18	P18	Mother of 9- and 11-year-old boys
19	P19	Mother of a 13-year-old boy
20	P20	Mother of 6- and 9-year-old girls
21	P21	Mother of a 15-year-old girl
22	P22	Mother of 7- and 8-year-old boys
23	P23	Father of an 11-year-old girl and a 15-year-old boy

| 24 | P24 | Father of a 12-year-old boy |
| 25 | P25 | Mother of a 13-year-old boy and a 15-year-old girl |

Table 3-3 Code names and characteristics of interviewed parents.

3.3.3 ONLINE LARGE GROUP DISCUSSIONS WITH YOUNGER INDIVIDUALS

Initially, my intention was to conduct one-to-one interviews or focus group discussions with younger individuals within schools, with each group comprising 4 to 5 students. Despite numerous efforts, obtaining consent and approval from headteachers and parents for these interviews proved unattainable. Alternative approaches, such as approaching younger individuals in public spaces like parks or coffee shops, which had been employed in some Iranian youth studies who faced the similar challenge (Mehrolhassani et al., 2020), were not aligned with the ethical framework I adhered to, thus precluding interviews in such settings, and conducting interviews in the initially intended manner was not feasible.

However, the launch of a new online social platform called Clubhouse and its subsequent popularity among Iranian younger individuals presented an opportunity to gain insights into their perspectives on SRE. Online large group discussions emerged as a suitable method for data collection, particularly at capturing a wide range of viewpoints and facilitating open conversations within a large and varied participant group, which resulted in a collection of data that reflected a spectrum of opinions, experiences, and insights.

The online environment offered participants a level of anonymity that could prompt more honest sharing, potentially uncovering perspectives that participants might be hesitant to express in traditional face-to-face settings. A comparison was drawn in a study focused on data quality between online and in-person focus group discussions on a sensitive topic (Woodyatt, Finneran, & Stephenson, 2016). Results from that study indicated that online discussions had larger word counts and shorter durations

and revealed an additional theme compared to in-person discussions. The study concluded that despite the format differences, the content of data derived from both types of focus group discussions remained notably consistent.

This approach facilitated the exploration of the perspectives of young Iranians across geographical boundaries. It was, however, imperative to carefully navigate ethical considerations. While I personally conducted and, often, moderated the sessions, my role during the online large group discussions shifted more toward active listening, with minimal intervention to guide conversations. Periodically, I reminded participants that the virtual rooms were established for the study's purposes and that the data derived from their discussions could be used, albeit anonymously. Given the challenge of securing collective consent for audio recording, these sessions were not captured in audio recordings; instead, my detailed notes during these sessions served as the primary source of documentation.

3.3.4   OBSERVATIONS

The process of observation played an important role in my research. As part of my data gathering, I visited various Iranian schools, many of which resembled the educational institutions I had attended during my own schooling years. This allowed me to immerse myself in a familiar environment while adopting a more attentive stance toward the details of the setting.

In the lead-up to conducting interviews with classroom teachers and headteachers, I commonly tried to arrive much earlier than the scheduled meeting time. This practice not only provided me with a chance to become more familiar with the settings but also facilitated an initial observation of the school environment. An interesting pattern emerged during these visits, which I was unaware of prior to the interviews: I was almost always accompanied from the entrance directly to the headteacher's office, where the interviews took place, and I was again accompanied to the exit after the interviews. The motivations behind this ritualistic approach – even in cases where I returned to schools for subsequent interviews and, therefore, was able to find my way

– and whether it stemmed from a gesture of respect or adherence to institutional rules or perhaps for security are still a question to me.

Given the somewhat constrained nature of these visits, I endeavoured to gather as much insight as possible from the limited chance of observations at hand. My focus encompassed a broad spectrum of elements, including the layout of the school grounds, architectural features, corridors, the presence and demeanour of teachers and students, and the overall atmosphere. Whenever feasible, I attempted to observe students during their breaks, although it was notable that, particularly in boys-only schools, I was commonly advised not to move around during break times.

The majority of schools I visited belonged to the category of renowned religious private schools. While all schools in Iran are said to be religious, these institutions set themselves apart through their dedicated religious programmes. Notably, differences in scale and physical infrastructure were evident when comparing these schools to semi-public counterparts. Private schools tended to be located in affluent neighbourhoods in northern Tehran, with the exception of one situated in a rural area in Kerman.

Observations extended into the interviews to capture interviewees' authentic expressions, behaviours, and their manner of interaction during the interviews, enhancing the depth of the data captured. This approach enabled me to document not only verbal interactions, which were audio recorded but also nuanced behavioural cues, providing a more holistic perspective. While the observations concerning the school setting were commonly documented shortly after each interview session, concurrent, real-time notes were made during the interviews themselves.

To record these observations, I relied on a digital note-taking application on an encrypted iPad. This approach ensured the confidentiality and security of the data collected. Further clarification regarding the details of my field notes is presented in Section 3.3.5. Despite the limitations, these observations contributed crucial insights that enriched the data underpinning my study.

3.3.5   FIELD NOTES

Field notes served as a crucial tool for documenting a wide range of research components, including observations, non-verbal communications, significant segments of in-person conversations, and details of online large group discussions. These notes were particularly invaluable in instances where audio recordings faced the potential risk of damage or loss. Additionally, they played a vital role in facilitating later analysis of the data collected during the fieldwork.

Permission for note-taking was obtained through either direct or indirect means. During the face-to-face interviews, interviewees had the chance to observe my note-taking activities, and no objections were raised regarding the documentation of their conversations. This tacit permission signified their acceptance of the note-taking process. At the onset of each online large group discussion and reiterated periodically throughout the session, a clear announcement was made to inform the participants that note-taking would be employed exclusively for the purposes of this research.

To document field notes, a digital note-taking application was employed on an encrypted iPad, guaranteeing security and confidentiality of the data. It should be emphasised that the field notes were originally written in Farsi, the original language of the interviews. To enhance the speed and efficiency of note-taking, a set of abbreviations was used, specifically tailored so they were only comprehensible to me. For example, abbreviations such as 'IM' were employed to denote 'important', or 'CR' represented 'concerning'. These abbreviations were discreetly used to mark noteworthy or concerning information, enabling subsequent recollection during the data analysis phase without introducing any negative implications during interviews or influencing the interviewees' responses. This approach was carefully employed to maintain a neutral stance throughout the data collection process, given that during face-to-face sessions, interviewees could commonly clearly observe my notes.

Field notes were taken either during or immediately following each interview session. In the case of online large group discussions involving younger participants, the field notes were regularly updated within a week or so to incorporate any additional

relevant information that emerged. As a result, these notes were organised based on content, prioritising meaningful connections rather than adhering strictly to a chronological sequence, leading to the use of a simplified month and year format for referencing these notes.

Consistent with the labelling system employed for interviews, field notes relating to individual interviews were assigned corresponding labels to ensure the preservation of confidentiality and anonymity. As for notes relating to online large group discussions, they were labelled according to the month and year in which they were recorded, enabling ease of reference and retrieval during subsequent analysis phases.

3.4   DATA ANALYSIS METHOD

The interview data were analysed informed by different data analysis techniques and theories by integrating critical realism, thematic analysis, and constructivist grounded theory. Critical realism was weaved into the data analysis process and worked as a framework for guiding my analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to extract patterns and themes from the collected data, drawing upon the steps of the systematic process outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). This methodological approach comprises a sequential set of steps to ensure a comprehensive exploration of the collected data:

1. Familiarising oneself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report.

I integrated techniques used in the grounded theory with thematic analysis similar to how Floersch et al. describe:

... (1) thematic analysis allows us to see patterns in our dataset; (2) grounded theory helps us see how the patterns relate and connect ... (2010, p. 408)

To enhance the coding process and extract the connections between the codes, I drew on principles of grounded theory, and its techniques of revealing the theory that is grounded in the data. Some of these techniques, widely accepted by grounded theorists (Floersch et al., 2010, pp. 410–411), which I applied in my analysis and will be elaborated upon shortly, include intensive interviewing, in-vivo/line-by-line coding, constant comparisons, focused coding, axial coding, and memo-writing.

3.4.1 FAMILIARISING ONESELF WITH THE DATA

The initial phase of the analysis involved familiarising myself with the data, i.e., immersing myself in the data, providing the foundation for subsequent analytical steps. As suggested by Braun and Clarke, this immersion "usually involves 'repeated reading' of the data, and reading the data in an active way, searching for meanings, patterns and so on" (2006, p. 87). Notably, this initial data analysis was conducted in tandem with ongoing data collection, which meant I could still remember the nuances of the interviews during the coding. Moreover, this approach enabled a dynamic interaction between the data collection and analysis. In this study, I employed the grounded theory technique of 'Intensive interviewing', which entailed "a few broad introductory questions ... followed by relevant probing and follow-up questions" (Hallberg, 2009, p. 143). This method facilitated a deeper immersion in the collected data. An English translation of a segment from the semi-structured interview conducted with one of the classroom teachers is included in Appendix 6.

3.4.2 GENERATING INITIAL CODES

As my familiarity with the data deepened, an initial set of ideas began to emerge, serving as the foundation for subsequent coding. The process of generating initial codes marked the second step, which was executed through a line-by-line coding

approach. It started with line-by-line coding, sometimes using "participants' telling terms as in-vivo codes" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 42). Figure 3-1 exemplifies the initial coding process. Appendix 6 illustrates a longer account of the initial coding process. It is important to re-emphasise that the entire data analysis was carried out in Farsi, the language of the interviews, and Figure 3-1, Figure 3-2, and Appendix 6 serve solely as an illustrative depiction of the initial coding steps.

- I think one of the most important issues is that we do not have such
  teachers' inadequate knowledge
  people. Someone who knows exactly what she is doing and is capable
  classroom management skills   *teachers' inadequate knowledge*
  of delivering that information and, is able to answer students'
  classroom management skills
  questions, and is able to manage the class, because students are not

  going to be silent in a class like that. She should be able to face those
  educators' skills (managing sensitive topics)
  questions and give appropriate answers immediately without causing

  any harm. Moreover, she should be knowledgeable regarding the
  topics   *topics*   *topics*
  biological aspects, religious aspects, legal aspects, etc. She should be

  well aware of all of these. I believe if we're going to have a separate
  separate class
  class dedicated to sex education, then we need to educate special

  teachers to deliver that course. However, I think we should also
  Creating an atmosphere (educating other teachers)
  educate other teachers, for example, mathematics teachers or physics

  teachers, so that they know some basics regarding such issues and how

  to handle related cases.

Figure 3-1 Illustration of the initial coding process. Grey-highlighted text corresponds to the identified initial codes, indicated by the underlined text. This visual representation captures the initial stage of coding in the research analysis.

Following the first two interviews, the transcription process was paused, and data familiarisation and coding were conducted through repeated listening to the audio recordings. Instances of code repetition were noted under that specific code category,

accompanied by the interviewee's code name and the precise time of the quotation on the recording file, allowing for future reference (for instance, BH − 1:14:23 indicated that this code was identified during the interview with BH at 1 hour, 14 minutes and 23 seconds from the beginning). Subsequently, focused coding was employed by "comparing data with data and then data with codes" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 42). For newly identified codes, distinct categories were generated.

3.4.3   SEARCHING FOR THEMES

In thematic analysis, the process of detecting patterns bears resemblance to grounded theory's constant comparison method. Constant comparison entails "each incident in the data is compared with other incidents for similarities and differences", which "allows the researcher to differentiate one category/theme from another and to identify properties and dimensions specific to that category/them" (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 73).

The synthesis of themes in this study evolved through a combination of axial coding, which delineates relationships between categories (Hallberg, 2009), constant comparison, and 'memo-writing'. The last of these involves the documentation of "ideas, assumed associations, and theoretical reflections related to each of the emerging categories" (Hallberg, 2009, p. 144). Additionally, extensive listening to the interviews allowed for the mapping of interrelations among codes, revealing their underlying relationships to develop "thematic maps" (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 89). Figure 3-2 presents a thematic map corresponding to the theme "Teachers", further expounded upon in Section 5.1.3.
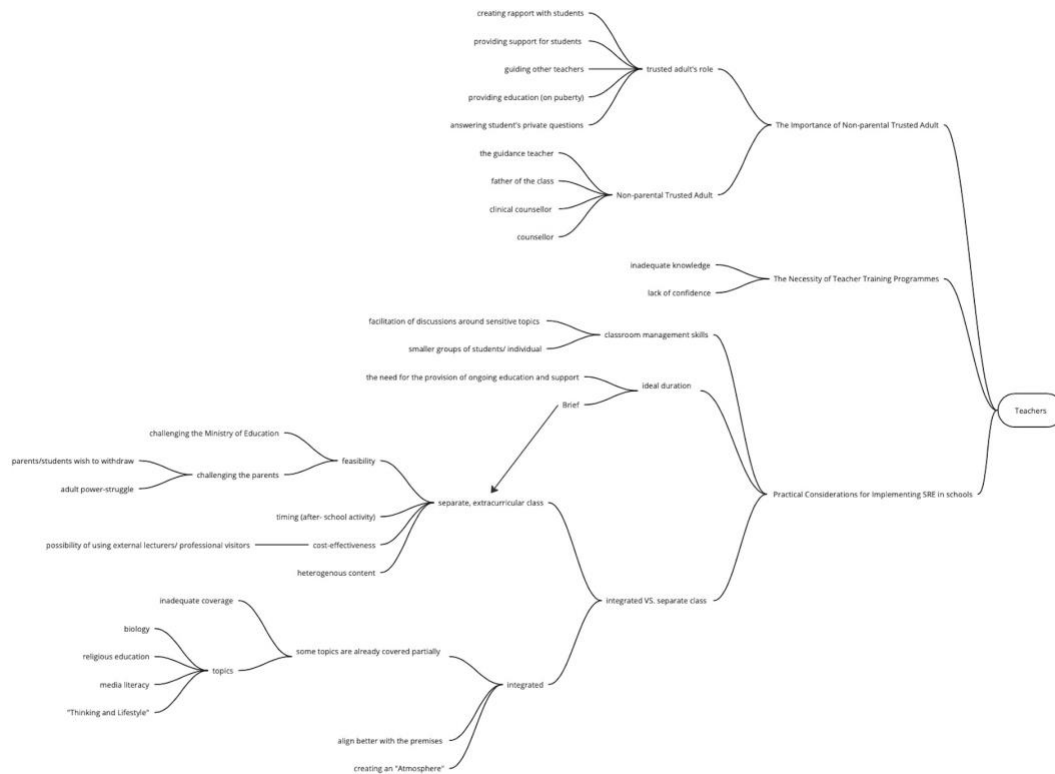
Figure 3-2 Thematic map, depicting the theme "Teachers", elaborated in Section 5.1.3.

Engaging with the audio files also offered a contextual background, recalling my recollections of both my and the interviewees' emotions and impressions during the interviews. The audio recordings also highlighted shared experiences beyond the spoken word – moments of silence, extended pauses, nervous bursts of laughter, tentative whispers, unfinished sentences, and shifts in tonality – collectively contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of participants' experiences.

It is important to acknowledge that the themes and sub-themes introduced in this study do not merely mirror their presence within the data. On occasion, their absence or limited occurrence emerged as a notable characteristic. This signifies that the process of identifying themes entailed a mix of deductive and inductive approaches. Figure 4-1 and Figure 5-1 visually present the identified themes and sub-themes.

3.4.3.1   Integration of Critical Realism in the Data Analysis Procedure

Critical realism was integrated into data analysis when exploring values in Chapter 4. It gave me a perspective, informing my coding and interpretation of emerging themes and helping me develop four parallel and related theoretical categories.

The concept of 'Four-Planar Social Being' (Bhaskar, 2008) offers a comprehensive lens through which the complicated interplay of values and human sexualities within its multifaceted dimensions could be perceived. This framework, proposed by Bhaskar (2008), involves the recognition of four distinct yet interconnected planes:

1. Material relations with nature in the physical reality of bodies and of the natural world.

2. Interpersonal subjective relationships between individuals and groups.

3. Broader social relations and inherited structures.

4. Inner being, the stratified personality, subjective agency, and ideas about the good life, the good society. (Alderson, 2013, p. 62)

These planes do not exist as isolated compartments but rather as interconnected dimensions of human existence, interweaving to establish dialectical relationships and providing a complete view of one's experiences. These four planes allow exploration of how one acts, connects with others, is influenced by society, and navigates one's inner thoughts. The four planes of social being provide a dynamic framework for researchers to understand human life from various angles. This approach enhanced my insight into values, actions, and dynamics within the context of my study.

In this study, the concept of a four-planar social being was adopted as a guiding framework for the process of thematic analysis to explore values inherent within the data. By using the lens of the four planes, I was able to explore the diverse dimensions of participants' experiences, interactions, and broader societal contexts. Thus, to extract values, analysis was conducted four separate times, each time focusing on one of the planes of social being. This approach allowed for an exploration of values across different dimensions of human existence. The four resulting sections within Chapter 4 present the findings corresponding to each plane. By employing the four-planar social

being framework in this study, I sought to elucidate how values manifest across various aspects of younger individuals' lives and are deeply interwoven with individuals' bodies, their relationships, the influence of societal structures, and their inner experiences.

3.4.4   FINAL STEPS

My application of grounded theory resonated more closely with Charmaz's 'Constructivist Grounded Theory' (2006) than with the "classic grounded theory" (Hallberg, 2009, p. 144). This alignment is because Constructivist Grounded Theory embraces a "relativist epistemology", which is in harmony with the assumptions of critical realism, takes a "reflexive stance", and recognises the existence of "multiple standpoints, roles, and realities" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 299). Additionally, my data analysis and research approach did not follow a strictly linear trajectory:

> Some of our best ideas may occur to us late in the process and may lure us back to the field to gain a deeper view. Quite often, we discover that our work suggests pursuing more than one analytic direction. (Charmaz, 2006, p. 10)

The Constructivist Grounded Theory approach recognises that research is not always a linear process and emphasises the role of interpretation and context in analysing qualitative data. Charmaz's approach encourages researchers to actively engage with the data, allowing for flexibility throughout the process of analysis.

I adhered to the remaining steps of thematic analysis as proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006), which include reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. In their more recent article, Braun and Clarke (2020) express concerns about the integration of thematic analysis with other approaches, such as grounded theory, suggesting that this integration sometimes occurs due to the conceptualisation of thematic analysis as a purely descriptive method:

> Interpretation is inherent to the (TA) analytic process, and there is nothing in the method of TA that renders it simply summative or descriptive. Interpretative depth lies in the skill of the analyst, not the method. (2020, p. 340)

That being said, I found grounded theory techniques, as mentioned earlier, to be extremely valuable in enhancing the steps proposed initially by Braun and Clarke in 2006 for describing and interpreting my data. Braun and Clarke also advocate that researchers adopt a 'reflexive thematic analysis' approach, urging them "to 'own their perspectives' (even if only very briefly), their personal and social standpoint and positioning" (2020, p. 345), which leads us to the following heading: reflexivity.

3.5 REFLEXIVITY

> Reflexivity is a set of continuous, collaborative, and multifaceted practices through which researchers self-consciously critique, appraise, and evaluate how their subjectivity and context influence the research processes. (Olmos-Vega, Stalmeijer, Varpio, & Kahlke, 2023, p. 242)

In the course of this research journey, I find it essential to reflect on my subjectivity, stance, how I influenced the research process from data collection to analysis, and how this research, in turn, influenced me.

Upon returning to Iran for my data collection, I had not anticipated being perceived as an outsider by the interviewees. The snowball sampling method bound me within a network of trust; however, it was not me whom the interviewees trusted at first, but the person who initially introduced me. I could not arrange a single interview outside the network of snowball sampling, even though I reached out to numerous schools via emails and phone calls. Given my affiliation with a university in the United Kingdom, I was perceived more as an outsider than an insider, intensifying potential participants' apprehensions about the potential consequences of engaging in interviews conducted by me. However, as will be explored in the section on ethical considerations, deliberate steps were taken to create an environment of assurance and a sense of

ease among participants. As mentioned above, most interviews exceeded an hour in duration, indicative of my ability to develop a rapport during the sessions and gain trust, thereby creating an atmosphere of conversing with an insider. Nonetheless, I remained conscious of interviewees' underlying hesitance and apprehension, acknowledging the potential impact of their fears on me as well. It would be untruthful to assert that the participants' fear did not impact me, that I had no concerns regarding the potential repercussions of broaching sensitive topics, or that it did not make me more cautious in writing.

An observable change in my appearance in some of these school settings involved conforming to the requested practice of wearing the *Chador*, a traditional long, commonly black scarf covering the body from head to foot, leaving only the face exposed. To many of the schools I interviewed, *Chador* held particular significance and was considered the most complete form of *Hijab*. Although many religious private girls-only schools required students, their mothers, and the staff to wear the *Chador* outside of the school setting, within the school premises, as was the case when I was a student, female students and school staff typically wore the *Maghnae*, a scarf that only covered the upper chest. However, as a visitor, I was requested to wear a *Chador* prior to my attendance, especially in boys-only schools. This was not the case for the interviews conducted within the semi-public girls-only schools, in which interplay between the approved dress code and actual practice revealed a display of diversity in cultural norms.

An additional challenge I encountered was that I was frequently introduced as the 'sexologist doctor who is conducting research', emphasising not only my role as a researcher but also my medical and psychosexual therapy background, attaching a certain weight to my identity. My background in medicine and psychosexual therapy undeniably influenced the perception of my role as a researcher. During interviews, references to my medical or psychosexual therapy practice were not uncommon from the interviewees, signifying their awareness of my professional identity when I was not wearing my researcher's hat. This situation brought both advantages and challenges. On the one hand, my years of therapeutic experience allowed me to establish rapport, ensure confidentiality, and engage in discussions about sensitive

subjects with ease. However, on the other hand, at times during interviews, I perceived that some participants presumed there was a 'correct answer' to my questions or sought my 'professional opinion' rather than sharing their personal perspectives. In response, I employed active listening techniques and encouraged participants to share their own viewpoints openly and assured them that I was there to learn their views.

Another beneficial aspect of my medical doctor title was related to religious norms, as there is a religious rule that considers doctors as *Mahram*, meaning individuals do not need to wear a *Hijab* in front of doctors and can discuss more intimate matters when seeking medical treatment. I speculate that this issue potentially facilitated open conversations about sensitive subjects during the interviews, particularly among male participants. This perception was formed when one of the male parent interviewees explicitly mentioned this aspect at the very beginning of the interview.

My clinical background, while valuable, also brought initial discomfort during the data analysis phase of my research. Qualitative research methodologies were unfamiliar territory for me, requiring more than just grasping the techniques of qualitative methodology. I needed time to understand how to explore values without preoccupation with the p-value. Reorienting my mindset from only listening to statistical significance to understanding the significance of underlying views took time. Adapting to qualitative research methodologies was a transformative process. It took me a while to come to terms with the idea that "knowledge constructs though are still real" (Scott, 2013, p. 36). It extended beyond methodological measures and required a shift in perspective.

I am mindful of the significant change in my perspective throughout this research. While my research trajectory may have deviated from its original research proposal, I embraced flexibility, remained open to new ideas, and anticipated unforeseen revelations. This doctoral journey has proven to be the most intellectually challenging voyage I have undertaken, one that reshaped me. My viewpoints underwent transformations, and, being me, I embraced these shifts, permitting them to unfold while I observed and absorbed valuable lessons. While starting confident in pursuing

answers to my research questions, I found myself uncovering more questions every step of the way. My certainty trembled as I realised the ever-evolving nature of knowledge, and I became more humble in assuming the extent of my understanding of reality as my engagement with the subject matter deepened through reading, learning, and contemplation. This personal transformation resonated beyond this research, altering how I engage with the world and gifting me a heightened sensitivity, greater inclusivity, and enhanced respect, particularly in my interactions with younger individuals.

3.6 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

> Educational research is far from a neat, clean, tidy, unproblematic and neutral process; it is shot through with actual and potential sensitivities. …
> This suggests that it is wise to be cautious and to regard all educational research as potentially sensitive. (Cohen et al., 2017, p. 243)

As Cohen et al. (2017) aptly point out, all educational research can be considered sensitive; however, within this spectrum, the realm of sexualities and relationships education is particularly delicate. With this in mind throughout the research process, ethical considerations were meticulously designed for each step of the study to align with the heightened sensitivity of this topic.

As previously discussed in the literature review chapter, numerous studies underscore a significant knowledge gap concerning issues related to SRE in Iran. Even if the focus is narrowed to a health-oriented perspective, a prevalent theme in much of the research in this domain in Iran, it becomes evident that despite the challenges involved, establishing effective SRE programmes that provide information, address related questions, and prevent potential issues is imperative. In this light, when writing the research proposal, it was considered that while this research may subject some participants to a degree of discomfort, the anticipated benefits of the research findings would outweigh any potential personal unease experienced by participants.

That being said, various measures were employed to ensure participants' comfort throughout this research, leaving them satisfied with their decision to participate.

It was crucial to ensure that the interview questions treated participants sensitively, particularly regarding religious beliefs and cultural norms, and that interviewees did not perceive these questions as offensive or judgmental. The questions were formulated to be clear and comprehensible, avoiding the use of jargon, and were designed not to lead the respondents. The overall interview atmosphere resembled an ongoing conversation, in which questions naturally followed from the previous answers provided, as opposed to a rigid structure where questions were posed, responses awaited, and then an entirely distinct line of questioning pursued.

My familiarity with Iranian culture, coupled with the fact that I had pursued education within educational institutions similar to those where my research participants were working, afforded me a significant degree of awareness, particularly concerning the nuances of addressing matters related to sexualities in the school setting. This encompassed adopting appropriate language and terminology when formulating questions and evaluating when to encourage interviewees to elaborate on their responses and when to allow silence to continue its presence. However, I remained cautious not to presume any pre-established familiarity. Instead, I adopted an approach centred around persistent efforts to genuinely comprehend the participants and their perspectives, involving targeted questions and attentive listening, accompanied by a foundational bedrock of respect for their unique experiences.

As mentioned in the preceding section, finding the right balance between using my medical background and being cautious about its potential influence on participants was a tough challenge. This was especially important because sometimes participants seemed hesitant to share their thoughts openly, fearing they might not be giving the 'right answers' to my questions. They would seek validation through my verbal responses or body language. To handle this, I mainly listened without showing my personal views, sometimes just nodding to show I was engaged. On occasions where participants inquired about relevant literature, I made a note of their questions and,

post-interview, provided a brief overview of the current literature for them within my professional capacity.

Participants were fully informed that they had complete control over their extent of engagement at every stage of this research. Prior to conducting the interviews, while I prioritised immediate, spontaneous responses, I accommodated requests for additional information or an interview schedule if desired; however, such instances were infrequent. All the interviews were personally conducted by me. At the start of each interview, I introduced the research to the participants, outlining its objectives and the rationale for their involvement in the interview process. I also provided a general overview of the interview session to set expectations. To ensure participants made informed decisions, I presented information in a rather detailed manner, enabling them to choose their participation in the research willingly. Obtaining written consent was a crucial step, although it posed challenges for several interviewees who preferred not to leave any identifiable records. Nonetheless, after navigating this process, the interviews would commence.

Participants were fully aware of their entitlement to withdraw from answering any question they found uncomfortable and even to terminate the interview if they wished. These aspects were communicated in advance to ensure, so far as possible, their ease throughout the interview process. I also respected their requests to stop recording, although this was rarely requested. As valuable insights often emerged outside the recording period, I asked for their permission to include such information.

To ensure the accuracy of direct quotations used in the thesis, ongoing communication subsequent to the interviews was maintained with the interviewees, and, if requested, I gave them the opportunity to see those transcribed parts of their interview that I was very likely to use in the final thesis, both in Farsi and, in a few instances, in English translation. During some interviews, particularly those with parents, interviewees expressed that such considerations were unnecessary. However, in the case of headteachers, there was a frequent demand to know the content of direct quotations, even though anonymity was assured.

Prioritising the safety and content of my participants held paramount importance. It was communicated to the interviewees that they had the option to alter their decision even after the initial interviews. Given the unforeseen shifts in Iran's political climate, certain interviewees requested the omission of their personal or school-related data from the study, which, as mentioned earlier, resulted in the loss of valuable data contributions. Interviewees who expressed interest in accessing the study's findings will receive a briefing regarding the results upon completion of the study.

I upheld participants' privacy rights, a commitment that resonates with my medical and psychosexual therapy backgrounds. I highly valued the trust interviewees placed in me and ensured a level of confidentiality comparable to that required in medical and psychosexual practice during the interview sessions. Anonymity was also a fundamental aspect that was diligently observed. All materials, including audio recordings, transcriptions, and field notes, were securely stored using code names on a password-protected iPad and hard drive. The utmost care was taken and will continue to be taken to ensure that any publishing of the research findings will be executed in a manner that upholds the confidentiality and anonymity of individual participants and their schools. The participants were assured that the audio recordings would be deleted after the data was extracted and the thesis was written.

Ethics approval for this research has been granted by the UCL Institute of Education (IOE Approval # reference No Z6364106/2018/04/82 social research).

4 WHAT ARE THE UNDERPINNING VALUES THAT INFORM HOW SEXUALITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION COULD BE IMPLEMENTED IN IRANIAN SCHOOLS?

Values influence speech, behaviour, and decision-making processes, and also get shaped by actions, consequences, and material conditions. They serve as the foundation that moulds, evaluates, and guides every decision, whether it involves assessing the merit of an idea or determining the appropriateness of a particular action in any given context. Before exploring some of the many definitions proposed for values, it helps to clarify that values may exhibit overlapping characteristics with several related concepts, have an impact on them, and be understood via them. These various constructs include 'Virtues', which encompass personal qualities and dispositions; 'Attitudes', which entail the formation of favourable or unfavourable evaluations towards an object; 'Traits', which commonly refer to relatively stable aspects of personality; 'Norms', which are context-dependent and situation-based guidelines; and 'Needs', which commonly connote biological influences and necessities.

> Generally any discussion on values will be a mixture of highlighting and explaining a range of beliefs, attitudes and opinions. (Blake & Katrak, 2002, p. 82)

The concept of values has given rise to numerous definitions and ongoing debates surrounding its meaning. For example, Kluckhohn proposes that "a value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group, of the desirable, which influences the selection from available modes, means, and ends of action" (Kluckhohn, 1951, p. 395). Thus, according to Kluckhohn, values extend beyond mere desires, instead encompassing those desires that individuals perceive as justified. Rokeach (1973) focuses less on the actions themselves and more on the role of values in giving meaning to actions. According to Rokeach, values can be defined as "enduring beliefs that a specific mode of conduct is personally or socially preferable

to an opposite or converse mode of conduct or end-state of existence" (Rokeach, 1973, p. 5).

Khajeh Nasir al-Din al-Tusi (1201 − 1274), a prominent Persian philosopher and scientist, is renowned for his intellectual contributions in field of ethics. In his notable work on philosophical ethics, titled *Akhlâq-i Nasīrī* (can be translated as *Nasirean Ethics*), he presents a comprehensive framework wherein he acknowledges a hierarchical structure of virtues. Within this framework, he identifies four primary virtues: *Hikmat* (wisdom), *Shojâat* (bravery), *Effat* (chastity and modesty), and *Edâlat* (justice). He suggests that the remaining virtues can be classified under one of these four overarching categories.

Axiology and the study of values have attracted the attention of numerous philosophers over the years, fuelled extensive debates and shaped discourse surrounding this concept. Hartwig (2007) provides a concise summary of two primary areas of emphasis within the field of values:

> First: the nature of value. How − and to what extent − are moral values intrinsic, or objective? Second: the scope of value judgement. To what extent are norms historically specific, and which, if any, transcend their mediation through particular social conjunctures? (Hartwig, 2007, p. 184)

In essence, Hartwig's first question revolves around the subjectivity or objectivity of values. This crucial question serves as a gateway to address his second question. Suppose we are to acknowledge the intrinsic value of a particular state of affairs, where its value is inherent and independent of any contextual factors. In that case, this intrinsic value should be universally recognised across all contexts and time, independent of any subjective influences. Moreover, recognising certain values as intrinsically good creates a classification and ranking of value judgments. Consequently, while the list of values that are esteemed in daily life may be extensive, intrinsic values hold a distinct priority over other values, which derive their value based on the extent of their contribution towards the realisation of those intrinsic values.

Beyond the discourse concerning the objectivity or subjectivity of values and the existence of intrinsic values, another significant debate focuses on the number of intrinsic values and whether there is only one intrinsic value or whether there are multiple values that can be considered intrinsically good. The philosophical stance on this matter can be classified into monism and pluralism. Monists support the existence of a single intrinsic value, while pluralists argue that multiple values can possess intrinsic goodness. Jeremy Bentham, in the opening lines of his work *An Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation*, writes:

> Nature has placed mankind under the governance of two sovereign masters, pain and pleasure. It is for them alone to point out what we ought to do, as well as to determine what we shall do. (Bentham, 1789, p. 1)

While Bentham, like numerous other hedonists, holds this account, William Frankena managed to compile a comprehensive list of intrinsic values by providing the following rough answer to the question "What sorts of things is it rational to desire for their own sakes?":

> Life, consciousness, and activity
>
> Health and strength
>
> Pleasures and satisfactions of all or certain kinds
>
> Happiness, beatitude, contentment, etc.
>
> Truth
>
> Knowledge and true opinion of various kinds, understanding, wisdom
>
> Beauty, harmony, proportion in objects contemplated
>
> Aesthetic experience
>
> Morally good dispositions or virtues
>
> Mutual affection, love, friendship, cooperation
>
> Just distribution of goods and evils
>
> Harmony and proportion in one's own life
>
> Power and experiences of achievement
>
> Self-expression
>
> Freedom

Peace, security

Adventure and novelty

Good reputation, honor, esteem, etc. (Frankena, 1973, pp. 87–88)

Robbins (2013) argues that the monist-pluralist debate is primarily concerned with the nature of the relations between values rather than the actual number of values present in a given society. He explains that values within a society, according to monists, function smoothly and harmoniously with one another, because at the very top of the hierarchy of values there is one intrinsic value and other values are positioned based on the extent of their contribution, and are basically reducible to that single fundamental intrinsic value; that could be 'pleasure', as hedonists hold to be the case, or happiness, for instance. Pluralists, on the other hand, assert that since more than one intrinsic value exists, a conflicting relationship between some of these values in any given society is possible. For example, Isaiah Berlin's value pluralism theory, challenges three assumptions: that there is a single ultimate value, that values do not conflict, and that conflicts can be neatly resolved. According to Berlin, genuine values are numerous, and they may – and often do – clash (Cherniss & Hardy, 2023).

That being said, Robbins aptly points out that:

> … monist and pluralist tendencies exist in the value relations of all societies and … the key analytic task thus becomes not determining whether a society is monist or pluralist, but rather documenting which kinds of configurations of monist and pluralist relations we tend to find in actually existing societies. (Robbins, 2013, p. 99)

In alignment with these thoughts, the objective of this chapter is not to focus on understanding whether the values in question are intrinsically valuable or not, or to draw a hierarchy of values, but to explore and document prominent values that seem to be informing decision-making in terms of sexualities, relationships and SRE, and understand the kinds of value dynamics that actually exist in the schools that are studied. In this writing, the following definition of values, suggested by Halstead and Taylor, is adopted:

> Values are principles and fundamental convictions which act as general guides to behaviour; enduring beliefs about what is worthwhile; ideals for which one strives; broad standards by which particular beliefs and actions are judged to be good, right, desirable or worthy of respect. (Halstead & Taylor, 2000, p. 3)

Halstead and Reiss, in their book on values in sex education, build upon the same understanding of values and present a range of values that encompass "love, fairness, equality, freedom, justice, happiness, security, peace of mind, truth" (2003, p. 5). Given this perspective, the collected data were analysed to extract and identify various values associated with SRE. To facilitate the analysis of the findings, it was advantageous to categorise the extracted values into clusters based on their shared characteristics. However, the question that arose was what the underlying basis or criteria for this categorisation of values could be. For example, Halstead and Reiss (2003) acknowledge that categorisations of values often rely on two foundations. Firstly, values may be categorised based on their originating ideologies, such as Islamic, Catholic, or liberal values. Secondly, values can be classified according to the different disciplines or domains of life to which they pertain, encompassing "political, economic, spiritual, moral, social, cultural, artistic, scientific, religious, environmental, or health-related values" (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 6).

While the previously mentioned approaches provide valuable frameworks, alternative methods exist for categorising values in the context of sexualities, relationships and SRE. For instance, when dealing with psychosexual and relationships difficulties, many practitioners adopt the biopsychosocial model in medicine, as proposed by George Engel (1977). This model offers a comprehensive perspective by examining any given issue from three distinct yet interconnected viewpoints: the biological, psychological, and social aspects. By considering these interrelated dimensions, a more holistic understanding of values concerning SRE can be attained.

Similar to the biopsychosocial model, critical realism, as discussed in Section 3.4.3.1, provides a profound and comprehensive analysis by examining social phenomena through the lens of Bhaskar's Four-Planar Social Being (Bhaskar, 2008). In this

research, values are categorised within these four planes (Figure 4-1); however, it is recognised that they are continuously shaping and reshaping and influencing and transforming one another.
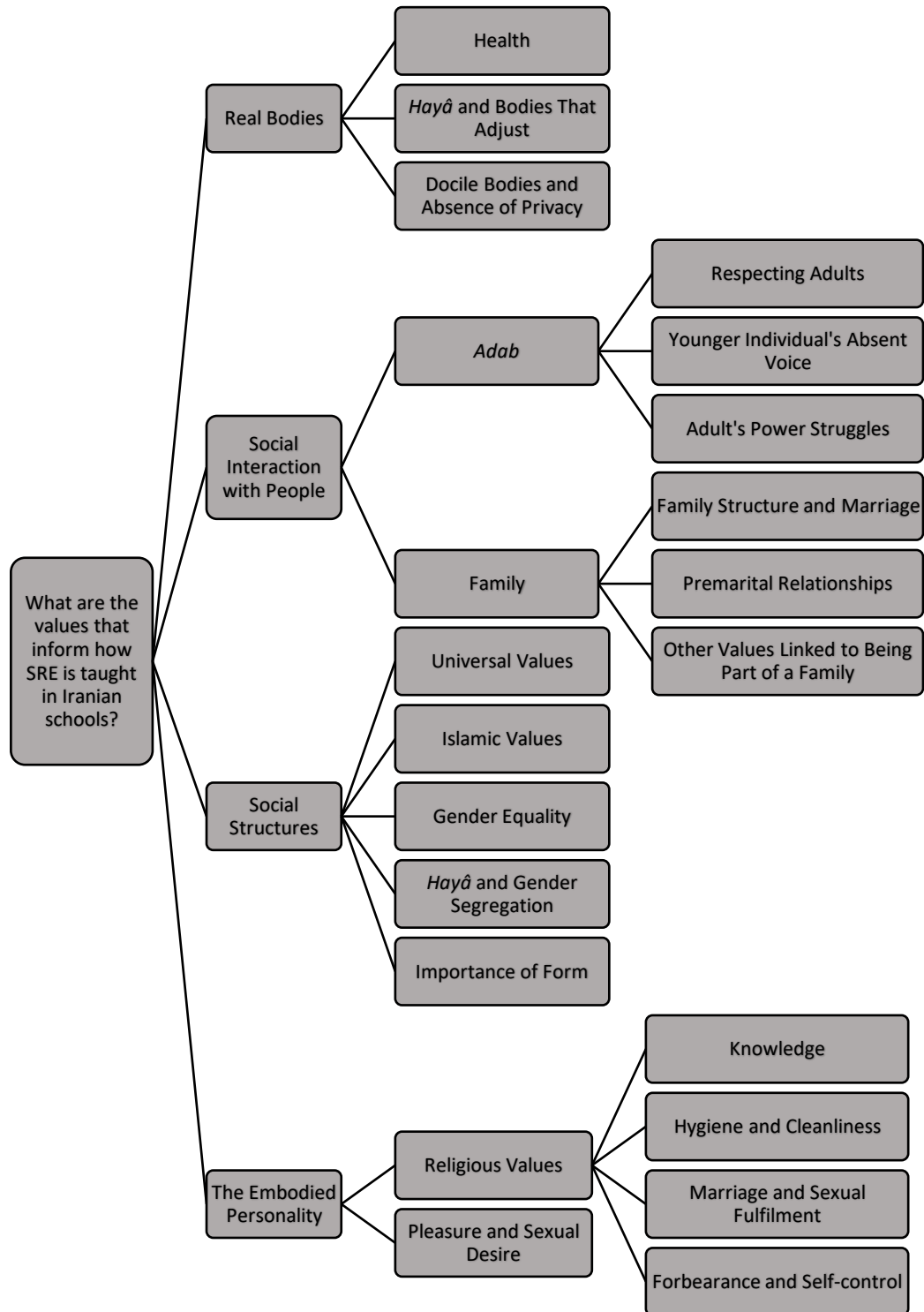
Figure 4-2 An outline of the themes (second level of branches) and the sub-themes (third level of branches) derived from the data, categorised within four distinct categories, corresponding to Bhaskar's conceptual framework of four-planar social being.

4.1 REAL BODIES

Social events occur simultaneously on different levels, and different aspects should be taken into account when studying a social phenomenon such as sexualities. Perhaps the most observable aspect that grabs the attention among these layers is the focus of the first section of this chapter, i.e., real bodies, or drawing on how Bhaskar labels it: "material transactions with nature" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 83), which focuses on bodies, particularly students' bodies, and how they are affected by the absence or sparse presence of SRE. In this chapter, the focus is on the physical characteristic of younger individuals and their environment and values that informed how younger individuals' bodies were addressed, dressed, covered, desired, appreciated, deprived, absented, protected, controlled, and surveilled, to name a few. By analysing the data from this perspective, the main themes that emerged were 'Health', '*Hayâ* and Bodies That Adjust', and 'Docile Bodies and Absence of Privacy'.

4.1.1   HEALTH

'Health' emerged as one of the prominent themes throughout the interviews, especially those with parents. Interviewees invariably valued health and well-being and sought to promote them in their children; however, a question arises as to why certain subjects, such as teenage pregnancy, did not appear notably among the concerns expressed by the interviewed headteachers, teachers, or parents, despite the high occurrence of codes related to 'health' and 'disease'. To address this question, it is essential to comprehend what seems to constitute the notion of health as perceived by the interviewees.

When health was discussed during the interviews, at least at first glance, it was used in a way that predominantly implied physical health, sometimes even with a narrow focus that excluded mental or social health. That being said, as was reiterated frequently during the interviews, it appears that the term 'health' was a signifier for a signified that extends beyond its medical interpretation. Among the interviewees,

there seemed to be a tendency to engage in discussions about health yet address values that extended beyond the realm of medical health itself, which prompts the question of why such a tendency persists. Perhaps it could be due to a prevailing inclination of students to medicalise or scientise every aspect of their education that interviewees assumed that the association of any value with recommendations of biomedical science unconsciously introduces the necessary executive motive for students:

> I used to tell my students that, for example, Prophet Mohammed or Imam Sadiq had recommended doing something, like eating something or avoiding something, and that seemed to be enough. But nowadays I have to say – even for the simple things – I have to say, according to scientists, or according to the newly published articles, we need to do this or that to stay healthy. (AT2 – teacher in a girls-only school)

The above quotation raises a thought-provoking point regarding the comparison between newly published articles and the teachings of Imams and Prophet Mohammad, which seemed to place science in a position similar to, or potentially surpassing, religion for some students. However, what should be considered here is that the teacher perceived the demand from the students to establish a connection between her teachings, even in seemingly trivial matters or, in her words, "the simple things", and the scientific medical evidence. Moreover, when it comes to human sexualities and sexual health, there is a prevalent misconception among many people, also present in some of the interviewees, that medically healthy and normal are synonymous. As a result, psychosexual therapists, including myself, frequently encounter questions about whether or not certain behaviours or thoughts are considered normal according to evidence-based medicine.

> What I really want for my daughter is to be happy. I want my daughter to be normal and healthy. So, when it comes to sexual behaviour, I expect her to have normal healthy behaviour. (P4 – father of a 13-year-old girl)

In the above quotation, the terms 'healthy' and 'normal' were used in the same manner and to some extent interchangeably. Foucault provides an explanation as to

why such a connection between biological sciences and the principles of normality exists in the context of human sexualities:

> Further, by presenting itself in a unitary fashion, as anatomy and lack, as function and latency, as instinct and meaning, it was able to mark the line of contact between a knowledge of human sexuality and the biological sciences of reproduction; thus, without really borrowing anything from these sciences, excepting a few doubtful analogies, the knowledge of sexuality gained through proximity a guarantee of quasi-scientificity; but by virtue of this same proximity, some of the contents of biology and physiology were able to serve as a principle of normality for human sexuality. (Foucault, 1978, pp. 154–155)

On the other hand, religious doctrines and cultural practices are still strongly influencing what is perceived as normal in terms of sexualities and relationships. Thus, what constitutes the notion of normal is an amalgam of biological sciences with culture and religion. When health is inaccurately employed to address normality, taking into account that normal is what defines abnormal, then abnormal becomes the opposite of health, that is, disease and pathology. Perhaps this may explain why, for instance, masturbation has been referred to as a disease during some interviews:

> We have had a few students, as far as I can remember, who had masturbation disease. We helped them to control it. (HH – headteacher of a girls-only school)

Masturbation was often condemned during the interviews, with some interviewees categorising it as a health-threatening 'disease' and others framing it as a medical problem requiring resolution. Later in this chapter, it will be discussed that the same was true about the awareness of sexual desire in younger individuals, often framed as a disease or a problem. In this context, masturbation referred to the mere act of self-pleasure rather than any form of obsessive-compulsive behaviour or medically recognised dysfunction or disorder. To some extent, many adult interviewees displayed what Egan and Hawkes describe as masturbation phobia, "a social and

historical phenomenon characterized by the scientific certainty that masturbation led inevitably to physical degeneration and mental derangement" (2010, p. 24).

Consequently, it was not uncommon for various recommendations to be proposed by the interviewees as a means of 'curing' this perceived disease or problem. These suggestions encompassed a wide range of approaches, from dietary modifications and avoiding spicy foods to engaging in practices such as cold showers, excessive exercise, and wearing loose clothing. Additionally, measures were taken to discourage children from moving during sleep and specifically to prevent them from sleeping on their stomachs, including maintaining low-temperature bedrooms and sleeping on stiff beds. Furthermore, anything that could potentially result in sexual stimulation or involve touching of the genitalia, such as poor hygiene and infections or even some religious rituals, was strongly emphasised to be dealt with promptly or, if possible, be eliminated or restricted as a precautionary measure:

> I do not want my students to learn about Estebrâ [a non-mandatory yet religiously advised ritual for men done after urination to clear the urethra]. I do not want them to start touching their genitalia and get sensitised this way. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

In the above example, it is evident that masturbation phobia is showing a more potent influence compared to religious recommendations, even within a school renowned for its religious teachings. Later in this chapter, a narration provided by one of the interviewees will be presented to illustrate how masturbation phobia also overshadows cultural norms and preferences. The story centres around a short-term marriage as a solution to prevent masturbation in a male student. Despite the cultural disapproval of short-term marriage, reflected in the interviewee's quotation itself, short-term marriage was in place as a means to prevent or remedy masturbation. Remarkably, the concern expressed by the interviewee regarding the suggestion of short-term marriages for teenagers was not primarily focused on potential teenage pregnancy, premature parenthood, or how this situation could affect the involved young individuals' psychological state. Instead, her primary concern seemed to be

preventing what she perceives as a sinful act, or in her own words: "God forbids, masturbation".

This perspective highlights how the fear and negative perception surrounding masturbation can often dominate other considerations, such as cultural and religious ones. However, for most interviewees, despite the way they articulated their concerns, it did not seem to be about deeming masturbation physically unhealthy or expressing genuine concerns about younger individuals' medical health in a tangible and observable sense. Egan and Hawkes discuss that the focus might be "the threat posed by the body for the moral health of the child" (2010, p. 27), hence the gender neutrality of the discourse of masturbation phobia. This viewpoint aligns more closely with how some interviewees expressed their concerns.

How ensuring physical health demands and justifies the process of making students' bodies a site of surveillance and how it is used in combination with the concept of normality to exercise control over younger individuals' bodies will be examined in later sections of this chapter. However, the main objective here was to clarify how the interviewees frequently employed the notions of health and disease. It is essential to take these perspectives into account before placing excessive emphasis and over-relying on the biological aspects of SRE when designing the curriculum.

Moreover, the phobia surrounding masturbation might also ensue from or lead to the fear of awakened sexual desire in younger individuals. It will be discussed later that this fear could stem from the concern that younger individuals with awakened sexual desire might not exhibit the expected levels of docility and obedience as determined and expected by adults and the apprehension that a masturbating child is someone with awakened sexual desire who possesses agency and autonomy to fulfil their desire, irrespective of their parents' stance on the matter.

Many scholars have extensively examined the concepts of autonomy and agency, and the definitions attributed to these terms can vary significantly. Therefore, since they are used in this writing, it becomes crucial to provide a clear standpoint of what is intended by autonomy and agency in this context. Drawing on Colburn's perspective, in this writing "autonomy consists in an individual deciding for herself what is valuable

and living her life in accordance with that decision" (2010, p. 2). To elucidate the meaning of agency in this writing, in the above definition of autonomy, the individual is the agent with the capacity to act. Agency, in essence, refers to the inherent capacity to act, and this capacity's conscious and deliberate exercise constitutes autonomy. This explanation makes it evident how agency and autonomy are closely intertwined with values.

Perhaps teenage pregnancy serves as another example of disobedience to adult authority. A pregnant teenager represents a student whose body is a signifier of noncompliance; thus, not only are pregnant teenagers physically removed from school, but their absence has effectively eliminated the possibility of recognition by the interviewees of the numerous physical, psychological, and social health implications. The topic of teenage pregnancy, and teenage parenthood, appeared so remote to many interviewees that they could not imagine it happening to their own children or students. This sparse presence of concerns surrounding teenage pregnancy during the interviews begs the question: How did this exclusion come about?

According to law in Iran, married students can continue their education in one of the following ways: They can register in the usual daytime schools and take the examinations like the others, without any attendance in any of the classes; alternatively, they may continue their education in regular schools on a daily basis by observing complete simplicity and refraining from discussing marriage issues with other students. Otherwise, they must leave their schools and study at night and adult schools. Thus, the only way a married girl can stay in her previous school is to hide her marriage, one of the most significant changes in her life, from everyone, including perhaps her best friends. Moreover, if asked, she has to deny being married and try to hide it in any way possible.

The subsequent sections of this chapter will deal with how prompting early marriage in combination with such policies might impact values related to interpersonal relationships. However, here the focus is on bodies. What is meant by observing complete simplicity and refraining from expressing marriage is not only verbal and

interpersonal but, more significantly, about non-verbal clues and bodily changes. An example of this can be found in the cultural context of Iran, where, traditionally, trimming eyebrows was considered a symbol of preparing for marriage. However, in contemporary times, girls no longer wait until marriage to groom their eyebrows, and the practice has lost its association with marriage in that sense. Despite this shift, the act of trimming eyebrows or any other gesture that suggests marriage is still prohibited for girls in schools. Later in this chapter, it will be discussed that in addition to being viewed as a symbol of marriage, certain measures like prohibiting students from trimming their eyebrows are aligned with a presumed form of protecting younger individuals, that is to make them appear less desirable by imposing restrictions on their physical appearance.

Since one eventually cannot conceal or deny a visibly pregnant body, it becomes nearly impossible for a pregnant teenager to continue their studies in regular daily schools. Thus, in a context like Iran, where sexual relationships outside of marriage are not accepted, and any topics related to marriage are meant to be concealed in schools, open discussions regarding sexual intercourse, sexually transmitted infections, and pregnancy are actively silenced within schools. Furthermore, if a student's body shows any signs of being sexually active in a non-concealable manner, they are physically removed from the school environment to uphold predefined norms and maintain a certain image of their students, which is that of sexless singleness.

This situation brings to mind Luttrell's (2003) insightful exploration of the politics of showing in relation to pregnant teenagers. In her book, Luttrell explored the topic of stigma and examined how young pregnant and mothering girls navigate and manage their stigmatised identities within a specific educational programme in the United States. She sheds light on the challenges these individuals faced and highlights how the visible signs of pregnancy often precipitated discomfort among teachers:

> In my observations at the PPPT [Piedmont Program for Pregnant Teens], I also sensed that the "showing," of pregnancy was what was most problematic in the school context. (Luttrell, 2003, p. 18)

It is as if the issue, whether considered problematic or not, is non-existent as long as it remains unexposed or unspoken. In contrast to teenage pregnancy, puberty was one of the topics mentioned in almost all interviews. Schools appeared to be comfortable providing education regarding puberty, and parents seemed to be content with schools addressing this issue. Even more, some parents expected and demanded that their children's schools provide comprehensive education on puberty. However, sometimes the education on puberty was reduced to only discussing the physiological changes of the body, such as what younger individuals should expect to happen biologically and religious responsibilities when one reaches puberty and the associated rituals. Later on, it will be explained how finding the most appropriate time to deliver education regarding those religious rituals was used as an excuse and allowed for the inspection and monitoring of bodies of younger individuals.

As seen in Chapter 2, there is a tendency among Iranian educators and researchers to prioritise the physiological aspects of sexual health when advocating for, and assessing the effectiveness of, SRE programmes. This reductionist approach fails to acknowledge the multifaceted nature of sexualities and its impact on various aspects of adolescents' lives. Consequently, it is not surprising that, as will be explained in the following chapter, healthcare providers are often called upon to deliver brief lectures on puberty, as their training typically emphasises physical signs and measurable experiences rather than complex psychosociological aspects. This bias may be further reinforced by assigning healthcare professionals, such as general practitioners, gynaecologists, midwives, or nurses, to provide SRE.

Such already reduced education on puberty is further limited by segregating it based on the student's sex, where boys only learn about male puberty and girls only learn about female puberty. However, to some teachers and parents, this approach seemed satisfactory or sufficient:

> I did not know about women's bleeding until I got married. And I did not
> need to know either. I had three sisters. They were very careful about
> hiding it. Now I know they must have faked praying rituals sometimes

when they were like that [on their periods], so I would not be curious. (OT1 – teacher in a boys-only school)

During the data-gathering period for this study, particularly in March and April 2019, a series of widespread flash flooding occurred in various parts of Iran. A list of essential items was created to aid those affected by the floods. Among the items on this list were sanitary pads for women. However, during this time, a lack of understanding among some men regarding menstruation became evident when some argued that sanitary pads should not be considered necessary and should be replaced by more essential items. They justified their objection by suggesting that women should not be 'lazy' and should simply go to the toilet whenever they experience menstrual bleeding. This example highlights one of the many challenges that can arise in the absence of knowledge about the bodies of individuals of different sexes. However, it will be further discussed that this lack of knowledge about the bodies of individuals of different sexes, which is exacerbated in a gender-segregated education system, appears to be part of a bigger picture that perpetuates an aura of ambiguity around the other sex to create fear and lead to demand for more gender-segregation.

While teaching the physical and religious aspects of puberty to a same-sex audience may seem convenient, it also appears to have its own challenges. One of these challenges is finding suitable Farsi words and vocabulary to teach or discuss genitalia in terms of basic anatomy. Nearly all of the interviewees acknowledged that they struggled to find appropriate terminology for these discussions:

> I call it [the female genitalia] 'that place'. I do not know what else to say. I do not want to be rude, nor do I want her [her daughter] to learn bad words. For example, when she was little and she took a shower, I would ask if she had washed 'that place' as well or not. (P3 – mother of a 9-year-old girl)

> I cannot remember having a conversation with any of the students which required me to name it [the genital region]. However, my daughter and I have created our own secret codes for it. (HT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

Within the context of present-day Iran, drawing from both personal experience and the data gathered for this research, it is evident that a significant amount of shame and taboo is associated with human genitalia. Thus, it was not surprising to discover that many parents had created their own alternative nicknames for different parts of the genitalia and made euphemistic terms to replace the proper anatomical terms. Moreover, HT1's choice of referring to the nicknames they used to talk about genitalia as secret codes conveyed the idea that not only were proper names avoided, but it was also expected for her daughter to preserve the secrecy of these codes and refrain from disclosing them to others. While it is important to teach younger individuals about privacy, it is crucial to differentiate between fostering a sense of privacy and making them feel uncomfortable discussing their own bodies. A genuinely effective SRE programme should strive to cultivate feelings of privacy and modesty without implying the need for shame.

Throughout the interviews, it was notable that the only parent who did not mention challenges in this regard was a medical doctor who used medical terminology when discussing genital anatomy. This observation reiterates the point that finding Farsi equivalents for words addressing genital anatomy, which are both comprehensible for younger individuals and avoid being overly clinical or impolite, poses a challenge. However, it is worth mentioning that many other interviewees were aware of the medical terminology associated with genital anatomy, yet they still preferred to use less formal terms, euphemisms or maintain silence when discussing the matter with their children.

The gap in the appropriate vocabulary for discussing genital anatomy can indeed be viewed as a complicating factor that perpetuates silence surrounding sexualities-related topics. Without the appropriate words to communicate about their bodies, younger individuals may find it challenging to talk openly about their health concerns, seek answers to their questions about their bodies, and engage in meaningful discussions with adults. Consequently, this lack of language and the resulting absence of open discussions on seemingly basic matters like genital anatomy can prevent younger individuals from fully understanding and embracing their physical selves, leading to a sense of deprivation or a loss of connection with their own bodies.

It is commonly assumed that sex, as a component of the physical body and biological characteristics of one, is relatively constant and easier to comprehend compared to the complex and socially influenced concept of gender, and the multifaceted nature of sexuality, which can be influenced by various factors. However, approaches to the concept of sex, as discussed in Chapter 2, range from considering it a pure subcategory of the biological sciences and describing it only by the terminology adopted from the realms of genetics, biochemistry and neuroscience to supposing that "the regulatory norms of "sex" work in a performative fashion to constitute the materiality of bodies and, more specifically, to materialise the body's sex …" (J. Butler, 2011, p. XII). However, the majority of people hold a perspective somewhere in between these extremes, recognising the influence of both biological realities and the social constructs and regulatory norms that surround the concept of sex.

To further elaborate on this point, it is essential to recognise that even if someone were confined to an inaccessible room since birth, they would still experience the physiological changes, emotions, feelings, and psychological shifts associated with puberty. However, such a restricted environment would presumably result in a limited vocabulary, if any, for the individual, impairing their ability to articulate and comprehend these changes, which in turn would result in the lack of a mindful acknowledgement of these changes, thus further diminishing their understanding and awareness of these changes altogether. When someone does not mindfully acknowledge a part of their body or a change in their body, it is as if that part does not exist or that change did not occur. This demonstrates how, by depriving individuals of appropriate education and information, they can be subjected to a form of mutilation, even without physical manipulation.

Lastly, it is imperative to reiterate that promoting health and well-being in the lives of younger individuals is significantly valued by the interviewees. Thus, even when considering health in its narrower sense, it can serve as a common ground for most, highlighting the necessity of implementing SRE programmes in order to establish health as one of their key objectives. However, it is crucial to acknowledge the existence of diverse interpretations of what is considered healthy, as well as the importance of language. In the absence of an appropriate vocabulary, it is possible

that certain topics with significant health-related implications will be rarely addressed, if not wholly disregarded, due to cultural norms around politeness and *Adab*. Therefore, navigating these cultural barriers and linguistic nuances is essential when designing and implementing effective SRE programmes.

4.1.2 *HAYÂ* AND BODIES THAT ADJUST

Two of the most recurring codes that emerged when analysing adults' concerns regarding students' bodies were 'Protecting' and 'Controlling'. These two codes often occurred together, with the latter commonly employed to ensure the former. *'Hayâ'*, roughly translated as modesty and embarrassment, held a significant place among the values associated with sexualities and relationships. Many interviewees believed that emphasising and enforcing *Hayâ* would help protect younger individuals by desexualising their appearance, behaviour, and any external manifestations of sexualities. Moreover, *Hayâ* was perceived as a value that could be easily monitored in younger individuals, at least in its observable sense. The theme '*Hayâ* and Bodies that Adjust' encompasses the aforementioned issues derived from the interviews.

While, as Al-Dien asserts, "the concept of natural modesty in Islam goes far beyond a specific Islamic dress code, but deals with the entire spectrum of Islamic behavior, attitude and etiquette" (2010, p. 397), when it comes to sexualities, it was not surprising that bodies, particularly female bodies, as astutely pointed out by Ringrose, were viewed as "the prime site of sexual regulation" (2013, p. 6). Ringrose believes this is why whether a female body "is clad in a bikini or a burqa it is a site of controversy and discipline from men and other women" (2013, p. 6). While echoing Ringrose's argument and confirming that during the analysis of the interviews, such regulations were mainly directed at female bodies, reflecting a gendered tendency, they sometimes applied to boys as well; however, this was primarily when the concerns of sexual misconduct was addressed.

During the interviews, as illustrated in the following quotation from BH, in the context of safeguarding and sexual harassment, boys were often referred to in a similar

manner to girls, with the same objectifying vocabulary and similar authoritarian instructions of conduct that is commonly fostered to address female bodies. It is either that this objectifying vocabulary is used for vulnerable people or that the victims of sexual harassment are being feminised. The former implies that women are consistently viewed as weak and vulnerable, leading to the use of such vocabulary towards them. The latter may explain why male survivors of sexual harassment not only experience trauma but also feel the anxiety of being excluded from the narrow definition of masculinity, given the argued precarious nature of manhood in some views (Vandello, Bosson, Cohen, Burnaford, & Weaver, 2008). Either way, using such language further perpetuates gender inequality and an unequal power dynamic in sexual encounters, which is far from promoting equal gender rights.

For many interviewees, the observance of *Hayâ* requires younger individuals to conform to specific standards of appearance. These standards encompass various measures, such as enforcing short haircuts for boys, prohibiting girls from grooming their eyebrows or removing facial hair, and mandating the wearing of dull-coloured uniforms for both genders, which are often ill-fitting and disproportionately large for girls, aiming to minimise any indication of their body shape. These measures were prevalent during my time as a student in schools in Iran and have continued to persist, as evident from observations during the interviews, which prompted me to inquire about the underlying rationale behind these established standards of appearance:

> We ask the students to cut their hair very short, almost bald, as you may have noticed. Some parents object that such short haircut makes their sons look ugly. We are well aware of this. We want them to look ugly. We do not want them to look desirable and become an object of sexual abuse. One of the most important objectives that we have in mind regarding sex education is preventing our students from becoming objects in sexual abuse. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

The standard presumption in society is that instructions about such matters as uniforms and hair length aim to reinforce simplicity or discipline and order. However, in the above quotation the headmaster of a well-known boys-only religious private

school presents a radically different perspective on this matter. This justification holds significance because, due to the school's popularity, high demand, and their long waiting list, it has emerged as a paradigmatic model for many other similar schools. Consequently, these other schools have begun to adopt and replicate its policies, perhaps even without a clear understanding of the underlying reasoning. Nevertheless, this reasoning can be subject to criticism from four standpoints.

To begin with, the first criticism pertains to the potential impact of such approaches on mental health of younger individuals. During puberty, when they encounter emotional challenges and may struggle to cope with rapid physical bodily changes, being compelled to appear undesirable or, as BH puts it, "ugly" raises concerns. What will be the consequences for these students, even once they have transitioned into adulthood, when their self-image is already distorted? How will their self-esteem, both in general and specifically their sexual self-esteem, be affected in the long run? Considering that research has demonstrated a significant correlation between self-esteem, self-perceived attractiveness, self-worth, and individuals' inclination towards cosmetic surgery (Ferraro, Rossano, & D'Andrea, 2005; Kalantar-Hormozi, Jamali, & Atari, 2016), one might question whether policies like those mentioned above, which purposefully aim to make younger individuals appear undesirable, could be contributing factors to the alarming and rising rates of aesthetic plastic surgery in Iran. Similar questions arise regarding the suggestion that the *Hijab*, a form of Islamic clothing commonly associated with *Hayâ*, can protect women from sexual harassment by simply concealing their beauty and making them less desirable. When the comprehensive philosophy of the *Hijab* is reduced to such simplistic assertions, it is not surprising that some argue that perhaps the practice of the Islamic dress code in Iran has contributed to the widespread popularity of rhinoplasty, making it the most prevalent plastic procedure in the country (Kalantar Motamedi, Ebrahimi, Shams, & Nejadsarvari, 2016).

The aftermath of such interventions, which instil inappropriate ideas of self and negative body image in younger individuals' minds, may give rise to biased justifications that accept the risks of unnecessary elective surgical procedures in pursuit of 'being beautiful' (Babadi, Fereidooni-Moghadam, Dashtbozorgi, &

Cheraghian, 2018). The desire for beauty is neither uncommon nor limited to Iranian youth. However, the concern here is that when a sense of unattractiveness is inculcated during childhood and adolescence, it triggers the belief that their natural physical appearances are so far from being perceived as beautiful that significant changes, even through surgery, are necessary, despite the associated difficulties and risks. There is indeed an old Persian saying that translates as 'kill me and make me beautiful', which is used sarcastically to exaggerate the extreme measures taken in the pursuit of beauty. It appears that by accepting the potential risks of unnecessary surgical procedures under general anaesthesia, including the risk of death, this proverb is no longer an exaggeration. In a study in Iran, some individuals even go as far as considering such surgeries "a blessing from God" (Mozaffari Nina et al., 2019, p. 72). The lingering question that remains unanswered is what precisely provokes such enthusiasm for these interventions. Is it possible that individuals' internalised negative sense of self contributes to this phenomenon?

Secondly, another critique of the approach mentioned above pertains to whether making younger individuals look undesirable truly serves to protect them from sexual harassment and abuse. Can interventions such as shaving boys' hair effectively contribute to reducing incidents of sexual harassment? Mary Simmerling provides a valuable response to such somewhat simplistic perspectives on the prevention of sexual harassment:

> ... if only it were so simple
> if only we could
> end rape
> by simply changing clothes ... (Simmerling, 2005)

Her poem, *What I Was Wearing*, has served as inspiration for an art exhibition titled *What Were You Wearing?* This survivor art installation was initially displayed at the University of Arkansas in 2014. The exhibition featured replicas of the outfits worn during the sexual assaults, as described by student survivors. What stunned the audience was the ordinariness of these outfits. Such exhibitions aim to challenge the repetition of statements and questions directed at survivors based on unfounded

myths that only reinforce self-blame and guilt in survivors of sexual harassment. Instead, the focus should shift towards identifying the genuine risk factors that increase the likelihood of someone becoming a victim or perpetrator. The same reasoning should be applied to those who advocate designing dull-coloured and disproportionately large school uniforms for girls, using similar logic, or those who attribute a woman's lack of *Hijab* as the reason she becomes a victim of sexual harassment. Rather than placing blame on the victims, it is crucial to examine the factors that contribute to the development and formation of the pathological behaviours of perpetrators.

The third critique of the approach mentioned above revolves around considering sexual harassment a mere consequence of high levels of sexual desire, thus connecting it to the desirability of the victims. Many argue that sexual harassment is more closely associated with anger, violence, and power dynamics than sexual desire. For instance, sexual violence, rather than uncontrollably increased sexual desire, is presumed to be a consequence of a "dehumanised perception of female bodies" (Awasthi, 2017, p. 1).

The last, but certainly not the least, point concerns the vocabulary used by BH in describing sexual encounters. Using terms such as 'object' and 'subject', where the object represents the subordinate recipient of penetration and the subject represents the active dominant person who penetrates, has roots in and reinforces a heteronormative and patriarchal vocabulary, perpetuating inequality within sexual relationships. The term 'object' is frequently associated with women, implying that they are expected to adopt a passive, hesitant, obedient, and submissive role, like an object. However, while in this case BH was mainly concerned about possible sexual interactions between two males, the same vocabulary was used. This object-subject dichotomy, along with the active-passive polarisation and objectification of females in sexual encounters, is not grounded in biological differences between sexes but is deeply rooted in constructed gender norms and standards of femininity and masculinity. These norms sometimes dehumanise women and anyone in the receptive position, reducing their body to a passive object.

Objectification of women not only accentuates gender inequality but also negatively affects women's mental health. As a result of female objectification, women start to dissociate from themselves and view their bodies as outside observers, which McKinley and Hyde (1996) called body surveillance. Moreover, women learn to "internalise an observer's perspective as a primary view of their physical selves" (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, p. 173). This is followed by constant self-monitoring and feelings of shame if one cannot keep up with the standards of femininity, one of which is females' appearance. McKinley (1995) developed the objectified body consciousness scales, which measured three components: body surveillance, body shame, and appearance control beliefs. Through her research, McKinley found a correlation between objectified body consciousness and eating disorders. While agreeing about eating disorders, Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) added to the list of mental health consequences of this phenomenon. They identified higher rates of sexual dysfunction and depression, among other unfavourable outcomes, as additional outcomes linked to objectification.

Slater and Tiggemann (2002) tested the objectification theory in adolescent girls and concluded that it was applicable there too. Later, Jongenelisa, Byrnea and Pettigrew (2014) found that self-objectification is experienced by young children as well. Dehumanising and objectifying younger individuals' bodies effectively strips them of their agency, reducing them to a malleable material that can be easily 'Controlled' and 'Protected'. These non-autonomous objects that can be easily manipulated, disciplined, and sculptured are what Michel Foucault (1979) refers to as 'docile bodies'.

According to Foucault, docile bodies can be "subjected, used, transformed, and improved" (1979, p. 136) to a state that not only they "may do what one wishes, but so that they may operate as one wishes, with the techniques, the speed and efficiency that one determines" (1979, p. 138). However, aside from the process of objectification, how are these docile bodies produced? Foucault argues that "hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments, and their combination" (1979, p. 170) play pivotal roles in the creation of such bodies. Earlier in this chapter, the misapprehension of what constitutes normal by some of the interviewees was

examined. Normalising judgment as a method of disciplinary control in creating docile bodies happens when students are consistently evaluated and compared against those constructed standards of normality. The problem arises when instead of respecting alternative forms of normality, anything that is not in line with the accepted constructed standards of normality is categorised as abnormal. This classification into normal and abnormal provides adults with additional justification to intervene and impose adjustments on younger individuals in order to restore conformity to the established norms. The concept of hierarchical observation will be discussed shortly.

While Hayâ holds significant cultural value in Iran, it is imperative to approach younger individuals' physical expressions in a manner that avoids objectification or causing harm to their body positivity. It is essential to create a delicate balance between preserving cultural values and ensuring that younger individuals are not reduced to objects with low self-esteem, subjected to total control and actively work towards creating environments that uphold younger individuals' autonomy and individuality and promote a healthy sense of self while still respecting cultural values.

4.1.3 DOCILE BODIES AND ABSENCE OF PRIVACY

In Chapter 2 it was discussed that one of the primary objectives of an SRE programme, similar to any educational programme, could be encouraging younger individuals' flourishing and development by nurturing their apparent and hidden qualities and abilities and enabling them to reach their full potential. Within the context of SRE, this translates to understanding one's potential as a sexual being and recognising what it means to develop it. In achieving this goal, it seems crucial for students to comprehend fundamental concepts such as sex and biological health, gender, and sexualities and practise responsible, autonomous, and active decision-making skills. This approach stands in complete contrast to the notion of creating passive and docile students who possess minimal knowledge about sexuality-related issues and who may be too reserved or, as some interviewees put it, too polite to express their needs, emotions, and questions related to sexuality, and thereby lack the assertiveness needed to feel

entitled to make decisions regarding their own sexualities. The latter can arise when a polite and well-behaved child is depicted as obedient:

> This generation is different. When I was the same age as my son, I listened to my father. I had to obey my father, and even now, I occasionally seek his opinion and listen to him. My son is a good boy; he listens to what I say. But they are at an age where they think they know it all. This generation thinks they have all the answers on their smartphones and the internet. (P6 – father of a 16-year-old boy)

'Listening to someone' in Farsi does not simply suggest the act of hearing what they say; it also signifies and implies obedience. Apart from the problematic interpersonal consequences that arise from such expectations being placed on younger individuals, which will be addressed in the subsequent section of this chapter, creating an obedient and compliant student necessitates strict control and regulation. At the very least, reaching this purpose requires making younger individuals more observable. Moreover, as younger individuals are often treated as non-agentic beings rather than autonomous individuals, schools and parents feel entitled to constantly inspect and monitor them in an endeavour to modify and improve them, which is, of course, according to adults' own ethical frameworks and worldviews.

> The exercise of discipline presupposes a mechanism that coerces by means of observation; an apparatus, in which the techniques that make it possible to see induce effects of power, and in which, conversely, the means of coercion make those on whom they are applied clearly visible. (Foucault, 1979, p. 185)

Foucault (1979) introduces the concept of 'hierarchical observation' as a mechanism for control and discipline. He explains how certain architectural designs, such as those found in École Militaire and Jeremy Bentham's theoretical design and concept of the Panopticon, operate to facilitate this form of control. His description of the presence of windows in the corridor walls of each room in École Militaire strikes a resemblance to the design of corridors in many schools in Iran, including my own school and many of the schools I visited during the data gathering process for this research. These

schools have small windows installed on the doors of each classroom, allowing the headteacher or assistant principal to check the classrooms periodically. Although students are aware that they are not under constant observation, the possibility of being observed is often sufficient to encourage them to maintain silence and abide by the rules at all times. It is the state of "permanent visibility that assures the automatic function of power" (Foucault, 1979, p. 215). In the uncertainty of being observed, students behave as if they are constantly under surveillance, and the process of controlling becomes self-regulatory.

While hierarchical observation often involves making younger individuals more visible, it is not always in a manner that they are consciously aware of being observed in a certain way. For instance, certain private schools have swimming pools where students are required to participate in mandatory swimming sessions each week. Female students are well aware that at least one aspect of their bodies is being monitored during these swimming sessions. They are required to inform the teacher if they are on their menstrual cycles, as this prevents them from participating in swimming activities. A similar practice sometimes applies to the registration of prayer rooms, where girls who are menstruating are not permitted to attend and must report their condition, particularly in schools where praying room attendance is compulsory. What some male students may not realise is that during these sessions, when they are in their swimming suits, which provide the maximum level of physical visibility within the school setting, their external secondary sexual characteristics are being monitored. This monitoring is conducted with the intention of gathering information and clues related to the timing of their puberty:

> We need to find out when our students reach puberty so that we can teach
> them relevant issues like religious rituals. It is easier for girls because, you
> know, it is either reaching puberty or becoming nine years old. It is fifteen
> years for boys. Many girls become nine years old before having their
> [pause – menstruation?]. But it is different for boys. We need to become
> aware of the earliest changes that are due to puberty. We do it covertly
> during swimming classes. (BH – headteacher of a boy-only school)

This approach not only violates younger individuals' privacy and disregards their right to consent to being observed in a certain manner but also raises doubts about its effectiveness in achieving its intended purpose. The Tanner scale of physical development, developed by Tanner (1955), a British paediatrician, is a commonly used method in medical practice, particularly related to secondary sexual characteristics, for assessing and describing the physical changes that occur during puberty. Instead of covertly checking each student's body during the swimming session, a more effective approach could be to teach students about the Tanner scale of physical development and the signs of puberty-related changes in their bodies.

During adolescence, young individuals undergo multiple transitions, including puberty and shifts in social networks and expectations, which coincide with changes in the sense of self characterised by a decreased perception of physical attractiveness and increased body image concerns, particularly among girls (Cousineau et al., 2010). This issue was also mentioned repeatedly during the interviews, for example:

> Bodily changes during puberty are so much that some students hesitate
> to attend swimming sessions as soon as they start noticing any changes.
> (JH – headteacher of a girls-only school)

Comments such as this indicate that younger individuals are not only capable of recognising these bodily changes within themselves but are also highly attentive and cautious about them. Teaching the Tanner scale of physical development would enable them to reflect on whether they have observed such changes in their bodies, understand the reasons behind these bodily changes, and be prepared for them. By employing this method, younger individuals' need for privacy is respected, their capacity to consent is acknowledged, and their bodily integrity is maintained.

The observation and measurement of younger individuals' bodies in order to evaluate physical clues related to secondary sexual characteristics are justified by schools on the basis of creating age-appropriate educational plans about puberty. While it is important to tailor educational content to students' cognitive and developmental stages, relying solely on such roughly constructed physical markers may overlook individual mental differences among students of the same age and physique. Many

parent interviewees, as will be discussed in Chapter 5, maintained that the biological maturity in their children often precedes psychosocial maturity. Irrespective of their physical, physiological, and hormonal similarities or differences, it is essential to recognise that while one 13-year-old may possess considerable knowledge regarding sexual intercourse or romantic relationships, another 13-year-old may have little to no understanding of such matters. Therefore, attempting to identify a specific physical indicator as the sole basis for teaching about the complex bio-psycho-social aspects of sexualities and relationships, or even just puberty, oversimplifies and, in many cases, proves to be misguided.

The question is how far adults are allowed to surveil, manipulate, control, and change younger individuals' bodies and adjust them according to their own ethical frameworks and standards of normality, sometimes in the name of, and perhaps even in line with, guidance and benevolence. It is also important to acknowledge the degree of influence adults can exert over younger individuals' bodies, which is on a spectrum from minimal changes in their appearance, such as clothing choices, hairstyling, and not trimming eyebrows, to more significant alterations in their bodies. Indeed, adults have the capacity to modify younger individuals' bodies not only through physical interference but also through non-physical means. As previously mentioned, the use of inadequate or insufficient language when discussing different parts of the genitalia can result in a form of word poverty. This linguistic deficiency can lead to a deprivation of knowledge and understanding about certain aspects of their bodies, effectively denying younger individuals access to the full scope of their bodily experiences. In this way, adults can impact younger individuals' bodies by restricting their awareness and comprehension of their physical selves without physically removing or altering anything.

4.2 SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH PEOPLE

This section of this chapter focuses on the second of the four interacting planes in Bhaskar's four-planar social being model, that is, "social interactions between people" (Bhaskar, 2016, p. 83). It is an endeavour to explore those values held by the

interviewees that are, or could be, illustrated through the existing, or the desired, standards of interpersonal relations, communications, and social interactions. Two themes that have emerged from data analysis are explored: 'Adab' and 'Values Surrounding Family'. At the heart of this exploration lies the esteemed value of Adab, which involves the profound significance of respecting adults. However, as this exploration continues, it sheds light on the potential misapprehensions of these esteemed values, which could result in disregarding younger individuals and their voices and generating power struggles among adults seeking authority over younger individuals. The theme 'Values surrounding family' encompass various values pertaining to family structure, marriage, the value of Hayâ, premarital relationships, and other values closely linked to being a part of a family. The aim of this section is therefore to gain a deep insight into the details of interpersonal relationships and extract some of the values deemed by the interviewees.

4.2.1 *ADAB*

Many interviewees, especially parents, placed significant emphasis on the concept of 'Adab' when discussing their expectations of younger individuals' behaviour, making it one of the themes in this research. younger individuals were required to exhibit Adab in their behaviour, particularly when interacting with adults.

> Parents are worried that children will forget about Adab and start talking about sexual issues carelessly in front of them if they start any conversation regarding sexual matters with their children. (GT3 – teacher in a girls-only school)

Adab, a Farsi term often translated as manners, encompasses more than mere manners. Adab, as Kia states, refers to the "proper form or conduct" (2014, p. 282), and when the word is applied to social interactions, i.e., social Adab, it is more than "just proper social conduct, but also the attitudes and sensibilities behind these idealized forms of behavior" (2014, p. 282). Hence, what social Adab conveys is not just knowing the appropriate gestures, deeds and expressions but also possessing

moral qualities and virtues and a profound comprehension of esteemed values and, to some extent, the justifications behind them.

Showing *Adab* is not merely an inherent personal characteristic but rather a skill that necessitates education and deliberate practice in order to attain mastery of the social *Adab* norms. Thus, for parents and schools in this research, one of the leading educational goals seemed to be developing social *Adab* in younger individuals. According to the interviewees, one of the most prominent expressions of social *Adab* appears to be the observance of a fundamental value: respecting adults.

4.2.1.1 Respecting Adults

Respecting adults, particularly parents, stands as a paramount value in Iran, stemming from both religious and cultural foundations. For example, the significance of respecting parents is greatly emphasised in the Quran. Similarly, respecting teachers holds comparable importance, both in cultural and religious contexts. However, this begs the question of what constitutes respect and respectful behaviour. Throughout the interviews, different attitudes and forms of behaviour were recognised as respecting elders, often transmitted to students through narratives exemplifying virtuous conduct. Young individuals were expected to adhere to these examples to demonstrate their embodiment of *Adab*.

Sung and Kim (2003) explored ways in which younger Koreans demonstrated respect towards the elderly, identifying 14 distinct forms of elder respect. Sung (2004) later compared young Korean adults in East Asia to their counterparts in the United States, suggesting that both groups shared the value of elder respect. However, Sung noticed that "the extent to which elders are respected and the kinds of forms they typically practice" (2004, p. 226) varies depending on the cultural context. Thus, certain forms of respecting adults are more commonly exercised in one culture while some other forms might be absent, and the extent they are practised might differ greatly in different settings. In line with Sung's research findings, it is worth noting that while respecting adults is also evidently valued in Iran – indeed, several forms of respect discussed in Sung's study are, to some degree, present in Iranian culture – differences

arise when considering the practical manifestation of these forms of respect. Some of the forms of respecting adults that were particularly mentioned in the interviews conducted for this study included presentational, linguistic, salutatory, consulting, and acquiescent respect.

Sun and Kim employed the phrase "Presentational Respect" (2003, p. 287) to demonstrate how younger individuals are expected to respect elders by holding courteous appearances, dressing simply and neatly, and maintaining a polite posture in their presence. When expressing her expectations regarding her daughter's behaviour, a mother of a sixteen-year-old girl stated:

> Girls should dress respectfully [*Mohtaramâneh*], even before their fathers.
> Not just girls, but it is more important for girls. They become mothers one
> day. (P13 – mother of a 16-year-old girl)

Here, dressing respectfully implied modest dressing; however, it is possible that P13 preferred using this term to emphasise how dressing appropriately, according to her standards, is a means of demonstrating respect. Furthermore, this quotation makes it worth re-emphasising, as previously highlighted in this chapter, that demanding regulations on dressing and appearances tend predominantly to target females.

Sun and Kim describe "Linguistic Respect" (2003, p. 286) as another form of respect that conveys a sense of reverence when talking to elders and using courteous language while addressing elders. Speaking politely and respectfully goes beyond simply using phrases like 'please' and 'thank you'. Linguistic respect includes choosing certain formal words over other more casual ones and employing plural forms of pronouns and verbs, even when addressing a single person, among other aspects. However, it is noteworthy that in the context of sexuality, younger individuals are expected to show respect by avoiding explicit discussions on the topic or even verbalising any SRE-related issues in the presence of an adult. Consequently, it is not just the manner in which SRE-related issues are conversed but the complete absence of such conversations that are regarded as respectful behaviour. This form of respecting adults also encompasses body language, which Sun and Kim refer to as "Salutatory Respect" (2003, p. 287). Thus, if, by any chance, a conversation regarding

SRE-related matters were to arise, younger individuals are expected either to leave the room or, if that is not possible, to behave as if they are entirely unaware of the subject matter:

> My children are *Moaddab* [they have *Adab*]. Even if they know it [sexualities-related issues], they do not talk about these issues in front of us. They know the boundaries. They respect their parents. They understand the rules. (P14 – mother of a 12-year-old boy and an 8-year-old girl)

> I think my younger daughter is too young to know these things [sexualities-related issues], but my elder might know [Pause] I am not sure [Pause] Maybe she is careful not to express anything in front of us. (P10 – mother of an 11-year-old girl and a 6-year-old girl)

This expectation of the absence of conversations regarding SRE-related issues may also stem from the challenges faced by parents, teachers, and younger individuals in finding suitable Farsi terminology, perhaps respectful enough and not too complicated for a younger individual to discuss genitalia and sexualities in the presence of an adult, as elaborated upon earlier in this chapter. Moreover, this emphasis on silence regarding SRE-related issues is not limited to younger individuals refraining from discussing these matters only in the presence of adults. As will be explored later, younger individuals are also expected to avoid such conversations among themselves, raising doubts and making it highly questionable whether this demand for silence on these subjects is solely due to linguistical respect for adults:

> When we teach students about religious rituals after wet dreams and changes in puberty, we insist that they are not allowed to speak about it with other students and their friends. (DH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

Having discussed these forms of respecting adults, what interviewees most commonly meant by being respectful to adults was being obedient. Sun and Kim distinguish the form of respect that is shown by just seeking advice and enquiring about elders'

opinions on different matters, using the phrase "Consulting Respect" (2003, p. 287), from "Acquiescent Respect" (2003, p. 287), that is showing respect by complying with elders' words. However, it seemed in the interviews that adult interviewees in my research did not feel appreciated and respected unless their instructions were followed and obeyed. Thus, in practical terms, merely seeking advice and not obeying it was not considered respectful behaviour.

Furthermore, it is notable that some interviewees used the terms 'obey' and 'respect' interchangeably. For instance, later in this chapter, a young boy's challenge is narrated, who was taken every week to a village near Tehran to meet his temporarily wedded wife, as arranged by his parents. This secretive short-term marriage was intended to deter him from engaging in masturbation. When the boy's opinion was asked on this whole process, the answer was that he 'respected' his parents and their decision. In this context, respect meant obeying and not questioning his parents' decisions. It appears that what is expected to be respected is the complete authority of adults over younger individuals.

Echoing most interviewees, Kagan (2018) identifies the nature of respect in obedience and maintains that conforming to elders' standards is a way of respecting them. However, the insistence on absolute obedience in the name of respecting elders entails constraining younger individuals' opportunity to exercise autonomy. That being said, in the realm of biomedical ethics, the concept of respecting others often evokes the idea of respecting their autonomy. For example, Lysaught (2004) believes that in writing the principles of biomedical ethics, Beauchamp and Childress (1979) have established a "rhetorical association between respect and autonomy" and even "reduced the meaning of respect for persons to respect for autonomy" (Lysaught, 2004, p. 675). Respect for autonomy is considered "the preeminent principle of contemporary bioethics" (Beach, Duggan, Cassel, & Geller, 2007, p. 692). However, even in the biomedical setting, it seems that the respect for the autonomy of younger individuals is frequently disregarded (Brierley & Larcher, 2016).

The concept of agency is possibly one of the most critical issues within childhood studies. Listing it among key concepts of childhood studies, James et al. define agency

as "the capacity of individuals to act independently" (2008, p. 3). The exploration of children's agency has its roots in the 1970s, as highlighted by James (2009) when scholars like Hardman emphasised that children "may have an autonomous world, independent to some extent of the worlds of adults" (1973, p. 513). Hardman further proposed that children's thoughts and their social behaviour might become comprehensible to adults if they are not interpreted in adult terms and solely through adult perspectives, meaning that childhood should not be considered as a gradual climb towards adulthood, as an endpoint, and should not be interpreted accordingly, as it used to be:

> ... making sense of childhood through adulthood, interpreting everything children do, or have done to them, in terms of how this will affect their journey towards adulthood, or in terms of what it tells us about how far a given child has travelled. (Lee, 2001, p. 8)

The shift that began to appear in the perception of childhood led to the recognition of children as "social actors" (James, 2009, p. 34). The idea was to transform the conceptualisation of childhood from that of children being an adult in the making and human becoming, becoming as contradictory to the notion of being, to that of the being child. The being child represents a child who is recognised as a social actor and is able and allowed to actively participate in constructing their own life.

Predictably, these two perceptions of childhood result in different outcomes when it comes to adult-child relationships, such as the parent-child relationship and the teacher-student relationship. In terms of parenting, Gopnik (2016) uses the metaphors of the carpenter type of parents and the gardener type of parents to show the difference between these two approaches to childhood. While the former decides and attempts to produce a certain type of child, just the way a carpenter looks at a piece of timber and decides the outcome and continues carving it to reach the goal, the latter is like a gardener, creating a safe and encouraging environment and letting the child flourish and grow at their own pace.

Thus, when younger individuals exhibit respect towards adults in the manner mentioned earlier, it often results in adults disregarding younger individuals'

autonomy, which may be viewed as a simple misunderstanding of the true essence of respect; however, it is plausible to consider that the expectation for younger individuals to be compliant and obedient originates from deeply ingrained carpenter-type viewpoints about childhood within society and the principles that inspire child-adult relationships. Moreover, it is crucial not to overlook the significance of child-rearing practices, as they offer valuable insights into a society's perception of what it truly means to be human. These practices not only shape the principles and values surrounding the child-adult relationship but also have a profound impact on how respect, autonomy, and obedience are understood and practised within that society. Although topics such as Gillick competence and age of consent will be discussed later in this chapter, here, the focus is not to find the most appropriate cut-off-point that demarcates childhood and adulthood, if there is any, or even to attempt to define childhood, but first to understand how adults' perspectives towards childhood and their understandings of their values might subsequently result in certain behaviours and interpersonal relations that have a direct impact on children.

4.2.1.2   Younger Individuals' Absent Voice

Ageism, coined by Robert Butler in 1969, describes the "prejudice by one age group toward other age groups" (R. N. Butler, 1969, p. 243) and is usually used to draw attention to the limitations that this issue creates for the elderly population. However, people at the other end of the age continuum could also be targeted by discrimination based only on age. Several times during my research, it became apparent that younger individuals are sometimes silenced, oppressed, and deprived of their rights, such as decision-making, simply because of being young. While ageism, when it targets the older population, is widely criticised, and often measures are considered to minimise it and mitigate its effects, the prejudice against the younger population is often overlooked or even justified as a form of benevolence. Therefore, it is not surprising that "although stronger social norm against age discrimination reduce age discrimination suffered by older people it does not inhibit discrimination against younger people" (Bratt, Abrams, & Swift, 2020, p. 1029).

This discriminatory point of view that deprives younger individuals of practising their autonomy contributes to the formation of a hierarchical structure in the family or school setting determined by age. However, it is important to acknowledge that hierarchy within the family units or schools in Iran is not solely based on age but can also be influenced by gender. For example, the traditional Iranian family unit is often patriarchal, and "the mother's authority and power are more subtle and indirect" (Janan, 2013, p. 12). This is another example of how interpersonal relationship regulations within family settings in Iran are gendered.

With the exception of one interview conducted with a former student who returned to school, this time as a teacher and an educational counsellor, a prevailing assumption among the adult interviewees in this research was that younger individuals could not be trusted to make decisions. This presumption manifested in various ways, ultimately leading to the absence of any attempts to ensure younger individuals' voices are heard. This absence of efforts to ensure younger individuals' participation was particularly evident in this research, and it posed challenges for the process of interviewing students, as outlined in the methodology chapter and will be further discussed in this chapter.

> Nobody is saying, nor have they said, that this is straightforward, nor even that it has been achieved (whatever that might mean), but across the major social institutions of family, school … it is impossible now when talking about children not also to talk about their stake in the decision-making process … (Oswell, 2012, p. 4)

In complete contrast to what Oswell (2012) wrote, in this research, children seemed deprived of their share in the decision-making process. Instead of prioritising the development of younger individuals' decision-making skills, the focus was mainly on two concerns: how to make sure adults are involved as soon as possible to intervene and to make decisions on behalf of younger individuals; and how to minimise the available choices to the extent that younger individuals are left with no decisions to make. The former concern was so great that sometimes in order to accommodate it, fundamental values such as keeping confidences were at stake:

We want our students to be blabbermouths. [laughs] We do not want them to murmur secrets or have private conversations. We do not want them to feel there is anything that they can keep hidden from us. We want them to report everything, and they do. (BH – headteacher in a boys-only school)

Going back to the concepts of the Becoming and Being child, in terms of education, the Becoming child is an incomplete human, regarded by some Enlightenment thinkers as a "tabula rasa", that is, a "blank slate on which the ideas of its parents and the society are inscribed" (Baader, 2016, p. 140), and so, as a docile recipient, requires adult professionals to make decisions, fabricate a curriculum and deliver an educational agenda. On the other hand, only the agentic Being child is entitled to direct their educational programme, and teachers are merely creating an encouraging environment for this to happen. Thus, the Being child's development should not be determined by adults, but again it is up to the child to find the momentum within themselves to flourish and grow. Notably, Rousseau, as an Enlightenment thinker but thinking somewhat differently from the dominant mindset of that era, wrote:

In the first place do not forget that it is rarely your business to suggest what he ought to learn; it is for him to want to learn, to seek and to find it. (Rousseau, 1993, p. 142)

The attempt to reduce available choices and make decisions on behalf of younger individuals was prominently observed during the data gathering for this study when younger individuals' involvement and their voice in any decision-making processes regarding SRE were excluded by adults. younger individuals' opinions and their participation and input were neither appreciated nor acknowledged as valuable resources that could inform and enrich the decision-making process. Whether the decision involved selecting the content of the educational programmes or the optimal timing and pedagogy, the prevailing assumption was that adults could figure out what was in the best interest of younger individuals.

The examples mentioned earlier clearly reflect on what premises adult-child relationships are founded in these schools. Moreover, equally important is that the

assumption that adults are the decision-makers and younger individuals should be obedient creates some degrees of rivalry between adults in terms of who has more authority and who should be the ultimate decision-maker.

4.2.1.3   Adults' Power Struggles

When discussing SRE during the interviews, a recurrent code that emerged in analysing adult-adult interactions was the power struggle over the ultimate decision maker and whether it should be parents or the school. For example, when the headteacher of a well-known girls-only private school (AH) was asked for permission to interview her students, she narrated a story which was a good representation of the kind of wrangling adults have over this issue:

- There were a team of researchers, like you, a few years ago who asked our permission to see if our students had depression and measure students' severity of depression if they had any, and we accepted. They used the Beck Depression Inventory for that. Have you heard about it?

- Yes, as a matter of fact, I have. It is widely used in studies on depression.

- Well, yes, in the last question, I think it was the last one, they asked whether students had noticed any recent changes in their interest in sex. Soon after that, we started receiving calls from parents complaining that we had exposed their children to inappropriate subjects.

- Only because of that one question?

- Yes, they said their daughters did not know about sexual desire and that we had inserted such thoughts in their minds. So, we informed the research team that they were no longer allowed to interview our students.

- Can I ask you if you knew about that last question or if you were surprised when you received the calls?

- We had agreed to their study on depression.

- How old were they, the students who were interviewed?

- 16, some 17. We knew that the students knew everything by that age, and I know that questionnaire was not inappropriate, but parents believed they knew their children better and that they were sure their daughters were clueless about sexual feelings before the interviews, and they were very worried about us exposing their children to sexual material.

- Did you try to explain your point of view to parents?

- Well, the whole situation annoyed parents so much, and we received so many complaints from them that, as I said, we stopped that research. I am afraid that is why I cannot permit your interviews with our students.

In addition to addressing the evidently observable power struggle between school staff and parents in the above narration, it is worth reiterating that commonly a recognisable discourse of fear surrounding the awakening of younger individuals' sexual desires emerged during the interviews. This fear, which will be discussed later in this chapter, and similar concerns were among the many reasons for the unavailability of focus groups with students. While the previous narrative highlighted respecting and prioritising parents' wishes, that was not always the case. Comments such as 'parents should abide by our rules, or they can take their children to another school' have also been said numerous times during the interviews with the school staff, especially with headteachers of schools with lengthy waiting lists.

I do not want my students to learn about Estebrâ [a non-mandatory yet religiously advised ritual for men done after urination to clear the urethra]. I do not want them to start touching their genitalia and get sensitised this

way. We ask parents not to teach it to their children. If they say they have to teach it, then we suggest choosing another school for their sons. They either trust our methods or not. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

The first part of this quotation was discussed earlier. However, here, the attention shifts from the previously discussed topic of masturbation phobia to the issue of power dynamics that extend beyond younger individuals and affect their parents as well. In this quotation, BH clearly demonstrates a willingness to override parental authority and assert control over decision-making processes that should also involve both students and their parents. However, it is also worth mentioning that the above quotation serves as an example of how certain religious rituals are sometimes modified or omitted to accommodate other values that are, paradoxically, presumed to have religious origins. In this case, masturbation is perceived to be against religious instructions; however, the preventative measures used to avert it led to prohibiting another religious ritual, i.e., *Estebrâ*. This ban aims to prevent accidental stimulation of erogenous areas of the genitals, which could, in turn, potentially lead to the unintentional discovery of self-pleasure and subsequent intentional masturbation.

As evident from the two preceding quotations, the demand for stricter restrictions on students can come from both parents and schools. When it comes to implementing SRE, it is possible to observe a lack of alignment between parents and schools. Each party believes that they have the right to be the final decision-maker, leading to power struggles and conflicts:

> Usually, it is parents who follow the school's rules, not vice versa. (JH – headteacher of a girls-only school)

> In theory, I should be informed about everything my children learn in school, and it should be me who decides whether I approve of it or not. In practice, I have to trust the school as I have agreed with their general principles. (P17 – mother of three girls)

Regarding the power struggles between schools and parents, many teachers and headteachers themselves were parents, thus speaking from both positions and feeling

more entitled to be the ultimate decision-makers. Comments such as 'not only for my students, but I would say that to my own child as well' were frequently repeated during interviews with school staff. In private religious school settings, where there is generally a high degree of consonance between parents and school staff, power struggles seldom flare up. However, during the interviews conducted for this research, instances of actual conflict did emerge, revealing that power imbalances can occur even in these settings. The carpenter-type assumption is that whichever side gains dominance in the decision-making process has the ability to shape younger individuals and modify the behaviour of the other party, as demonstrated in examples from the interviews, when parents successfully made the school halt a research process that they already agreed to, or when the school enforced the restriction of teaching a particular religious ritual to the students against the wishes of some parents. The question at hand is: Where is the voice of younger individuals in this power struggle over decision-making?

> It appears to me that when it comes to SRE, the focus is not on preparing and empowering students to make informed choices or assessing their decision-making capabilities but instead on limiting their agency as much as possible to avoid the need for decision-making. In other words, the prevailing assumption is that the best practice is to ensure students have no options available or even imaginable(!) to them until they leave school and possibly enter marriage as soon as possible. (Translated field notes – April 2019)

4.2.2 VALUES SURROUNDING FAMILY

4.2.2.1 Values Surrounding Family Structure and Marriage

In the data gathered for this research, values surrounding family structure were mainly those in line with the so-called traditional family setting, either nuclear or extended. Halstead and Reiss define a traditional nuclear family as "a heterosexual, legally married couple plus their dependent children" (2003, p. 110). While Halstead and

Reiss (2003) discuss how other, more inclusive, definitions of the family can help to recognise the reality of the diversity of family forms, and despite their focus being on another cultural context, it appeared that in the settings of participants of my study, that was mainly private religious schools, even if diversity was tolerated, which was often not the case due to strict entrance interviews, it was not publicised or celebrated. However, the tendency to disregard diversity is not exclusive to these schools, and, to a great extent, it reflects how diversity in family structure is currently acknowledged in Iran.

The gateway to a traditional family structure is marriage. The concept of marriage emerged as a significant factor in relation to traditional family values. Marriage was a frequent code, mentioned several times while discussing different topics during interviews. According to many interviewees, marriage seemed to be the only valid pathway to accommodate sexual desire; however, in accordance with the above definition of a traditional family, a legally registered and religiously approved contract of a long-term monogamous heterosexual relationship was the only form of marriage valued. For instance, the interviewees' perspectives on religiously authorised legalised yet short-term relationships, also called short-term marriage, were contradictory to their attitudes towards long-term marriage.

Cohabitation, also known as the 'white marriage' by some, simply means two people living together. While it might last as long as a lifetime, in Iran, there are no legal rights for partners nor obligations to have the relationship religiously blessed. On the other hand, short-term marriage is similar to long-term marriage in terms of the partners' rights and obligations being accepted by legal and religious authorities; what differs is that there is an already determined end date. While it is understandable that people might find cohabitation against their religious values or be concerned about partners' deprivation of the legal rights of married couples, short-term marriage accommodates both concerns. However, short-term marriage was perceived as a misdemeanour and a temporary solution to subside sexual desire in those younger individuals already in trouble. For instance, the headteacher of a rather prestigious girls-only private religious school in Tehran said:

Some children seriously need guidance because they have too much sexual desire and needs. We never had this problem in our school. However, I once met a headteacher of another school - It was a public school in the south of Tehran - that was trying to deal with this problem in some of their students, and I suggested short-term marriage then. I mean, now that they are doing it anyway, at least they do not sin. (AH – headteacher of a girls-only school)

Another narration regarding short-term marriage as a potential solution for masturbation or heightened sexual desire was shared by one of the teachers, who was also a mother to two girls and a boy, during an interview:

- Let me tell you something. In one of the boys-only Islamic schools [pause], I do not want to name any names [pause], one of the fathers [pause], I am trying to say that they [parents, perhaps] usually do not accept it [short-term marriage]. Although Islam says it is OK, our culture is against it. Similar to the idea of multiple partners for men, this is also not accepted. But let me tell you that they [the government, perhaps] are advertising a new culture of accepting to become the second wife or accepting the second wife of your husband … [talks for more than five minutes regarding polygamy being accepted for men in Islam yet not culturally approved in Iran]

- Very interesting, but you were telling me a story about one of the fathers in one of the all-boy Islamic schools. Can you remember that?

- Oh, yes. One of the fathers in one of the all-boy Islamic schools said that when his son was about 16 or 17, he had lots of sexual needs. The father himself said that he took his son to another city, actually a small rural place, a village outside of Tehran. [Pause] They were a wealthy family, not a low-level family, you know! [Pause. Raising eyebrows and perhaps expecting me to become surprised] He [the

father] said that my son asked me, "Father, how can I resolve my sexual needs? Now that I cannot masturbate, what should I do". So, his father took him to a village, and he [the father] said that he himself found a girl there for his son to become Sigheh [Islamic term for short-term married] for a while. So, sometimes, parents agree to it [short-term marriage] so that it does not end up in, God forbids, masturbation. But in general, Iranian culture is against short-term marriage.

- I assume you know the family. What about the boy? Was he happy with this arrangement?

- He respected his parents and their decision.

- What about the girl from the village who was in that relationship?

- [Pause] I do not know. (AT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

These two narrations highlight three points which shed light on the cultural, socioeconomic, and psychological factors influencing the perception and acceptance of short-term marriage. Firstly, there is a clear distinction in the value placed on short-term marriage compared to long-term marriage. Short-term marriage is viewed as a temporary solution, a stopgap, and lacks the same level of societal approval as long-term marriage. By comparing it to another culturally unaccepted yet religiously permissible tradition, that is, polygamy for men, AT1 was trying to portray how short-term marriage is not accepted culturally yet permitted religiously.

Secondly, there seems to be a perception that short-term marriage is typically associated with lower socioeconomic classes. In the first quotation, by mentioning that students were from a "public school in the south of Tehran", it was perhaps implied that short-term marriage as a solution is only appropriate for lower socioeconomic classes. In the second quotation, the emphasis was that although "they were a wealthy family, not a low-level family", quoting her exact words, they had to

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put up with short-term marriage to avoid what the interviewee perceived as a worse outcome – masturbation.

The third point revolves around the denial of sexual desires in younger individuals. Since the only valid way to accommodate sexual desire is assumed to be marriage, and given that younger individuals are not yet ready for commitments of such a long-term relationship, and considering that the idea of short-term marriage carries so many negative connotations, there seems to be a tendency among the interviewees to completely deny or suppress sexual desire in younger individuals. The tendency towards complete denial of sexual desire in younger individuals becomes more evident when they are talking about their own children or students at their own school. A good example is when AH said "We never had this problem in our school". However, later in the interview, she narrated many examples from her own students that proved otherwise.

Returning to the point that long-term marriage, as defined earlier, was valued greatly, early marriage was thus desired by parents, especially for girls. "Parents should prepare their children to be ready for marriage as soon as possible", said P2, one of the interviewees who is a mother to two girls, one still studying in school. She was pleased with her daughters' school for prompting early marriage:

> Someone called us once and asked if they could come for Khâstegâri [a traditional ceremony to meet with the family of the potential bride]. We asked who had introduced us, and they said your daughter's school. We found out that they [school] have a notebook in which they have the names of all the students, their phone numbers, a summary of their characteristics, like age, field of study in university, physical characteristics, and a bit about their family. They started introducing nice young boys as soon as my elder daughter finished school. (P2 – mother of 15-year-old and 19-year-old girls)

However, when asked, P2 was not sure how soon is soon enough to get married and not too soon. This uncertainty could partly stem from the fact that there is no definitive legal stance on the minimum age of sexual consent in Iran and no legal

minimum age limits for marriage. However, the marriage contract between a girl before the age of 14 and a boy before the age of 16 is subject to the legal guardian's expressed consent and upon the judgment of the competent court. Although, according to the latest surveys of the Statistical Center of Iran, the mean age at first marriage is far from these numbers, for example, in 2016, it was 27.8 for men and 23.4 for women in urban areas and 26.5 for men and 22 for women in rural areas, the possibility of child marriage under the current legal system is concerning child activists, who are demanding an increase in the legally accepted marriage age cut-offs. However, given that child marriages are mostly customary in some destitute rural districts of Iran, which are kept so deprived and distant from modern technologies and educational resources that their life is not much different from that of a century ago, it is valid to wonder if in such deprived societies, issues such as children's or even adult women's consent, either about whether to get married or not or whom to marry, are given any significance and whether interventions such as changing the legal age of consent would be effective in elevating the quality of life for younger individuals in those areas.

Another noteworthy aspect concerning early marriage is that, during the interviews conducted for this research, when the issue of early long-term marriage was proposed, it was predominantly directed towards girls. In contrast, boys were often advised to exercise *Taghwâ* or self-restraint or, if desperate, engage in short-term marriages. Apart from being gendered, the irony of this approach is that while the idea of early marriage is encouraged, especially for girls, and there are no legal restrictions to it, current policies in Iran, as mentioned earlier in this chapter, result in the expulsion of married students from schools. From then on, should the student wish to continue their education, it should only be in separate educational facilities meant for adults. However, some schools show some levels of lenience in practice:

> So far, only two of our students had a sexual problem and were involved in sexual relationships. Both cases ended in marriage. Although it was against the law, we let them continue their studies in our school. But we told them that "as soon as we found out that anyone else from the school

knows about your marital status, we have to expel you", and they agreed

to keep it secret. (AH – headteacher of a girls-only school)

Thus, even in situations of leniency, as mentioned above, the terms are that the marriage should be kept secret, and students are not allowed to mention it to their friends. Should any of their friends and classmates become aware of their marital status, the married student would be expelled. So, the decision to be made by the more fortunate married students, who are fortunate in the sense that they are at least given another option, apart from immediate expulsion, is between being forced to leave the school and all their friends or keeping an important part of their life hidden from their friends and even being dishonest about it if necessary. One wonders how decisions as such affect school students' relationships with their peers and whether it is in line with other values that they are meant to learn, such as honesty and sincerity.

Given that in Iran, sexual relationships outside marriage are forbidden, the marriageable age also reflects the age when one can legally consent to a sexual relationship. When the age of gaining the capacity to give sexual consent in Iran is discussed, it is usually linked with the concept of marriage. Age of consent is different in different countries and is not the focus of this writing; however, it is worth mentioning that the process of reaching the capacity to consent does not occur at a single point in time, but is a gradual process, which, given its differences in different people, should be explored, and discovered individually. For instance, in the United Kingdom, younger individuals under the age of sixteen are assessed individually to establish whether they are Gillick competent, i.e., they can give informed consent about medical matters independently of their parents or not. This individual assessment of younger individuals is perhaps one way of acknowledging the variability in the age of reaching the capacity to consent.

What is of significance is that while many younger individuals in Iran might be capable of rational decision-making, reaching their own conclusions, giving informed consent, and understanding the consequences of their decisions, they are often not allowed to do so solely due to their age. It is also important to emphasise that discussing the limits of younger individuals' agency and their competency or incompetency to provide

informed consent to sexual relationships is not meant to downplay or trivialise the serious consequences of child marriage, teenage pregnancy, and parenthood. Moreover, it is of utmost importance to prioritise the prevention of child abuse and the protection of vulnerable younger individuals while also respecting their wishes and their agency. The missing and critical aspect often overlooked is the voice of younger individuals, their right to informed consent, and their entitlement to agency.

4.2.2.2   Premarital Relationships

While, as was stated earlier, nowadays in Iran, the mean age at first marriage is near 25, not very long ago, it was considerably lower. The older generation, even in Tehran, can remember some of their female friends and family members, and sometimes even themselves, who got married at the age of 13 or not much older, if not younger. Although it is a valid argument that the context in which the older generation lived was significantly different, and modern life necessitates younger individuals achieving certain educational and personal milestones before considering marriage, it is important to recognise that not long ago, younger individuals were expected to marry much earlier than they do today. Additionally, nowadays, younger individuals tend to reach puberty at a younger age compared to the past (Biro, Greenspan, & Galvez, 2012). As a result, the gap between puberty and marriage, which was once only a few years, has now expanded to typically a decade or more. Another study conducted in Iran (Joodaki, Nedjat, Dastjerdi, & Larijani, 2020) highlighted this issue of a considerable time gap between sexual maturation and marriage, where "common sense among Iranians, the religion of Islam, and some Abrahamic religions recommends self-restraint (abstinence) in this period" (2020, p. 19); however, participants in their study argued that it is not rational to expect individuals to practice abstinence for decades after sexual maturation. My field notes following an interview with the headteacher of one of the final schools referred to for data collection read as follows:

> Similar to many other interviews, once again, sex before marriage is
> framed as a problem that needs to be avoided or resolved, even when it

does not involve others and takes the form of self-pleasure. The majority of educational objectives and preventative measures aim to address this issue, either by suppressing sexual desire or by mentally occupying or physically exhausting students to prevent them from encountering this perceived problem. (Translated field notes – written after the interview with OH)

Virginity at the time of first marriage is highly valued by many individuals in Iran, and the practice of medical virginity testing is still performed for various reasons (Robatjazi et al., 2016). Although virginity was seldom explicitly mentioned during the interviews, the notion of abstaining from sexual intercourse before marriage was frequently discussed in various contexts and appeared to be highly valued by many interviewees. This finding aligns with existing literature that has also highlighted the significance of maintaining virginity before marriage by many in Iran:

Premarital sexuality in Iran is unacceptable to such a great extent that many parents and schools, even when aware of the risks associated with poor sexual health knowledge, may choose not to approach sex education, since to do so may be to acknowledge premarital sexuality and, supposedly, lead to premarital sex. (Tabatabaie, 2015b, p. 204)

This issue, however, appears to be influenced by gender. According to a study conducted by Motamedi et al. (2016) on preserving virginity before marriage, 43% of the males felt it was important for a female to be a virgin. In contrast, only 26% felt it was important for males to remain a virgin; moreover, more females (61%) supported the importance of a female's virginity compared with the importance of males' virginity (48%).

During online large group discussions that I held with younger individuals, most of them, regardless of gender, expressed being in romantic relationships but had not yet engaged in sexual intercourse. Similar findings were observed by Khalajabadi and Cleland (2015) among young people in Tehran, where a significant proportion appeared to have diverged from traditional norms in terms of premarital social interaction and romantic friendships; however, the majority still adhered to traditional

cultural and religious values regarding abstinence before marriage. That being said, research findings indicate that despite societal norms, legal restrictions, and religious prohibitions, a considerable number of females engage in sexual activity before marriage, and the proportion of young men who engaged in sexual activity before marriage is higher (Khalajabadi-Farahani, 2015), reiterating that there is a double standard based on gender when it comes to premarital sexual activity.

4.2.2.3   Other Values Linked to Being Part of a Family

Halstead and Reiss (2003) aptly point out that the value of family life is not exclusively associated with a specific family structure but rather with the benefits and advantages derived from living and maintaining appropriate intimate relationships with others. Within the family, one can encounter a wide range of human experiences. Although these experiences and the values attributed to them may differ significantly based on sociocultural, religious, and other familial characteristics, Halstead and Reiss (2003) identify four clusters of values that are relevant to sexual development and appear to be inherent in the concept of family life. Before proceeding to the next section of this chapter, these four clusters of values are briefly reviewed in the context of the data gathered for this research. These clusters are:

> … the values associated with having a positive self-concept, the values linked to living with others, the values linked to the emotional dimension of close relationships and the values linked to an understanding of sexual roles, parenthood and gender issues. (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 117)

While echoing that these four clusters and many of the values mentioned under each of them are upheld by the interviewees, particularly parents, it is crucial to acknowledge that there are instances of inconsistency when it comes to the practical application of these values in the context of sexualities and relationships and SRE in Iran. For instance, the first cluster comprises values associated with the dignified development of identity and fostering a positive self-concept. While many parents strive to encourage feelings of self-importance and self-worth in their children by dedicating time and attention, when it comes to SRE or related topics, by shying away

from discussing them or hesitating to include younger individuals in decision-making processes, they communicate a conflicting impression. Similarly, while parents make an effort to encourage their children to feel deserving of love and respect, contradictory signals are sent when they conform to restrictive standards of appearance, designed to deliberately make their children less desirable.

The second cluster encompasses values related to living with others, such as "loyalty, trust, sharing, reliability, commitment, legal and moral obligations, and mutual support and care" (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, pp. 113–114). Learning such values from one's family becomes even more important when circumstances sometimes arise where younger individuals are expected to demonstrate behaviours that contradict these values in society or within the school environment, as will be further explored in the upcoming section of this chapter focusing on values dictated by given social structures. Earlier in this chapter, it was discussed how keeping confidence was at stake when a headteacher was worried that private conversations among students and keeping any secrets could potentially lead to discussions about sexual matters, potentially resulting in sexual behaviour. What is alarming is that, for example, instead of facilitating younger individuals to develop the ability to distinguish between harmful secrets that should be disclosed to a trusted adult and safe secrets that can be kept to respect friendship, younger individuals are encouraged not to withhold any secrets whatsoever.

Moreover, while values such as honesty, trust, reliability, support, and promise-keeping are considered vital in maintaining healthy friendships, adults' excessive demands placed on younger individuals to control various aspects of their lives and make decisions on their behalf, as discussed earlier, have significant implications for their interpersonal relationships, particularly with their peers. They may be forced to break confidence, become dishonest, and hesitate to share emotions and concerns with their peers, all in an effort to avoid potential disapproval from adults. This situation leaves younger individuals feeling incapable of seeking support from their peers, which can affect their personal experience of friendship, being intimate with others, and feeling safe in a relationship, all of which are fundamental to SRE. However, as will be explored in the next chapter, it is noteworthy that younger

individuals value discussions pertaining to SRE-related topics and, despite the pressures from adults, they continue to prioritise and maintain these conversations.

The third cluster of values pertains to those addressing the emotional dimension of close relationships, aiming to promote an understanding of suitable expressions of feelings in various contexts and facilitating the learning of ways to express love and affection. However, achieving these goals can be challenging if schools advocate obedience to instructions such as the following:

> We strongly advise mothers to refrain from engaging in even subtle coquetry with fathers in front of their children and to avoid even the slightest hint of romantic gestures. (DH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

DH presented the above quotation as one of the strategies implemented by their school to delay the onset of puberty in students. Later in the interview, he mentioned that they also encourage parents to discourage what he referred to as "the culture of kissing and being kissed" and to refrain from kissing their sons for any reason. Perhaps the term 'culture' is accurately employed by DH in the context of the above quotation, as kissing and hugging one's children are widely practised in Iran, and likely in numerous other cultures worldwide, as significant expressions of parental love and affection, thus becoming integral components of cultural practices. By eliminating these gestures of compassion and excluding any form of affectionate expression within the family setting, it raises the question of where younger individuals should acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to learn the appropriate ways of expressing emotions, which is crucial for them to develop the ability to set and maintain personal boundaries and to respect the boundaries of others.

Finally, the fourth cluster includes values related to understanding the cycle of life. This includes comprehending significant life transitions such as birth, marriage, and death and diverse models of parenthood and child-rearing practices. Additionally, this cluster of values involves recognising and understanding different gender roles within the context of family dynamics. It includes assessing the degree of gender equality or inequality present and critically examining the power structures that influence

decision-making and resource allocation within the family unit. However, it is crucial to recognise the diversity of family experiences and the potential variations in the transmission of values related to the cycle of life. While it is true that there are many positive values that younger individuals in Iran can learn from their families regarding the cycle of life, such as respecting elders, it is important to acknowledge that this may not always be the case. For example, as highlighted earlier in this chapter, the prevailing culturally approved form of the family is rooted in a traditional, religiously sanctioned, and legally authorised long-term heterosexual marriage. Younger individuals might internalise this worldview, leading to the disapproval or devaluation of alternative forms of marriage or family structures. Consequently, values such as equality and tolerance of diversity might intentionally be neglected or discouraged in practice, especially concerning family dynamics, gender roles, and marriage, where discriminations based on gender and age are sometimes prominent.

Another instance of such values, as previously indicated, is that the traditional Iranian family structure tends to exhibit patriarchal tendencies, with the authority and power of mothers being expressed in more subtle and indirect ways (Janan, 2013). In light of this observation, it becomes essential to make active efforts to transform these established patterns of power dynamics and gender roles within the family unit. However, it should be noted that these traditional gender roles and power structures within the family may be undergoing changes in certain urban areas of Iran, such as Tehran. A recent study conducted on married women in Tehran (Bakhshipour, Aghajani Mersa, Kaldi, & Hosseini, 2019) revealed that fully 46% of contemporary families exhibit a symmetrical power distribution, whereas the remaining 54% of families still demonstrate an asymmetrical patriarchal power distribution. The researchers further observed that as women's social class improves, accompanied by increased ownership of valuable resources such as education, employment, property, and income, as well as enhanced access to life opportunities, the power distribution within the family tends to become more symmetrical. These findings suggest a gradual shift in power dynamics from traditional gender-based power imbalances in Iranian families, which aligns with my understanding of the perspectives held by younger individuals during the online large group discussions.

Interestingly, boys, alongside girls, emphasise the importance of gender equality. However, girls tend to express more frustration when discussing the restrictions that they face due to their gender. (Translated field notes – April 2021)

4.3 SOCIAL STRUCTURES

… sexuality is so embedded in the social that it cannot be understood in isolation. It is through understanding societies that we can understand the meanings of sexualities, just as in understanding sexualities we begin to understand societies more effectively. (Jeffrey, Weeks, Holland, Waites, & Sharpe, 2003, p. 242)

In the preceding section of this chapter, the analysis focused on interpersonal relationships to uncover values related to sexualities. The third plane of Bhaskar's notion of a four-planar social being and the concept of the social cube (Bhaskar, 2008) encompass broader social relations and inherited structures. The scope of this chapter extends beyond individual interactions and engages with the broader framework of values in Iran, as well as the perceptions of these values held by the interviewees.

4.3.1 ON STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

There exists a spectrum of opinion on structure and agency, and scholars, including critical realists, find themselves not necessarily in the same position on this spectrum. At one end, Methodological Individualists, influenced by Marx Weber, perceive society as "nothing but the unintended consequence of intentional and meaningful human behaviour" (Hartwig, 2007, p. 468). Conversely, at the other end, there is an emphasis on the significance of social structures, and human agency is regarded as a by-product of these societal structures. Both extremes can be criticised for assuming a form of a reduction and presenting either social structure, in the former, or human agency, in the latter, as a mere epiphenomenon.

Moving forward, many scholars agreed with Giddens' stratification model and his idea of the 'duality of structure', which implies that "structure is both medium and outcome of the reproduction practices" (Giddens, 1979, p. 5). Bhaskar also positions himself between the extremes and puts agency and structure in a relation of continuous dialectic by introducing a 'transformational model of social activity (TMSA)' (Bhaskar, 2008). In essence, Bhaskar's TMSA model proposes that "it is only through the activities of social agents that social structures are kept in being (reproduced), but individual or collective agency may also modify or transform social structures" (Benton, 2001, p. 132). Thus, any social action has the potential to result in the reproduction or transformation of social structures, whether conscious or unintended. While some scholars may find Bhaskar's initial stance on the TMSA model very closely posited to Giddens's structuration theory, others appreciate that in the TMSA model, human agency and social structure are being ontologically separated.

As far as understanding the relationship between structure and agency is concerned, in this writing, the 'morphogenetic approach' advanced by Margaret Archer (1995) is adopted for the purpose of data analysis. Archer suggests that the only way to overcome what she calls the problem of structure and agency in social theory and to link structure and agency without "sinking one into the other" is by "examining the interplay between them over time" (Archer, 1995, p. 65). 'Analytical dualism' is the term used to indicate that structure and agency are analytically separable and temporally sequenced.

> The morphogenetic premise that structure and agency operate over different time periods is founded upon two simple propositions: that structure necessarily pre-dates the action(s) which transform it; and that structural elaboration necessarily post-dates those actions. (Hartwig, 2007, p. 319)

Archer (1995) distinguishes three analytical phases for every morphogenetic cycle, a 'given structure', 'social interaction', and 'structural elaboration or modification', and this cycle keeps repeating over time. In other words, since each anterior social action is structurally conditioned, while human agency is a necessary condition for a

structural change, it is not a sufficient condition for it. By recognising the temporal dimension, it becomes clear how structure and agency interact with and shape one another. Thus, to achieve a desired structural modification, it is imperative to have an understanding of the given structure. The primary focus of this section of this chapter is the values emphasised by the 'given structures' in Iran's current educational system. Through an examination of official governmental documents such as school textbooks and the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) in the Islamic Republic of Iran, it becomes feasible to determine some the values promoted within these sources. Furthermore, incorporating the viewpoints of interviewees allows for a comprehensive understanding of their perspectives on these values.

4.3.2   UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES?

Halstead and Reiss (2003, p. 26) posit that certain values in the realm of sexualities can be considered universal principles shared by most individuals and grounded in core liberal values. They further propose that the core liberal values encompass freedom, rationality, and equality. Rasmussen writes:

> Notions of sexual freedom, rationality, modern individualism, and - autonomy are, to my mind, intrinsic to the project of progressive sexuality education. (2016, p. 126)

Building upon these premises, the exploration of values within the FRDE commenced by examining these values along with their associated concepts.

In the context of SRE, freedom could be defined as the promotion of autonomy among younger individuals, allowing them to exercise control over their lives and bodies and make mature, independent choices regarding sexual behaviour, values, and attitudes (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 63). The term '*Âzâdi*' (freedom) is not explicitly used in the FRDE; however, its derivatives, such as *Âzâdâneh* and *Âzâdmanesh* (both translated as liberal in the English version), are mentioned on a few occasions. However, it appears that the manner in which these terms are utilised does not fully align with the definition provided. For example, the term 'liberal' is employed as part of one of the

objectives of the FDRE, which involves educating individuals who, among other qualities, adhere to "the religious ritual and ethical principles in a conscious, liberal, brave, and devoted manner" (FRDE, 2011, p. 29).

The term 'autonomy' does not appear in the FRDE. However, the term 'decision' is mentioned a few times, primarily in relation to schools or higher-level policy and decision-making institutions at the macro level. This top-down policy-making in education and the hierarchical approach of the government in Iran, in which decisions are only made by higher-level authorities and then implemented by schools, was mentioned several times during the interviews, particularly by headteachers, as a restricting factor in SRE implementation:

> We have to get permission for everything, especially for extracurricular activities. They need a detailed agenda; who is the teacher; where it will take place. It is not like this that we decide something is good or it is necessary, and then we execute it immediately. (FH1 – co-headteacher of a girls-only school)

Indeed, mentioning the term 'decision' in the FRDE, directed towards students, occurs only once. It focuses not on the process of decision-making itself but instead on how their identity is shaped when their pre-existing decisions, rooted in a foundation of trust in faith, are translated into action:

> The internal insight and tendency will facilitate the development of trust (faith), evolution of determination (decision leading to action) within him, and through frequent practice, the action will gradually form the identity. (FRDE, 2011, p. 11)

The term 'choice' was also employed, albeit only once, and as a part of the phrase 'right choice' appearing immediately after the word 'continence', within one of the strategies proposed for "deepening the culture of Islamic nurturing and manners and strengthening the belief and commitment to the values of the Islamic Revolution". The strategy reads as follows:

> Deepening of the students' divine virtue, continence, right choice and
> their continuous exaltation by taking advantage of the holy days and
> religious festive opportunities; holding awareness-raising and joyful
> ceremonies during festivities and demises, active participation of students
> at religious ceremonies, gatherings and places as well as their fondness for
> prayer and worship. (FRDE, 2011, pp. 32–33)

Lukes (2005) explains that one form of practising power is by the exclusion of known alternative possibilities and narrowing choices. Here, in the context of this document, it seems that there is an emphasis on a singular 'right choice' aligned with 'continence' and self-control, which is further reinforced through religious practices. The notion of self-control frequently arose when younger individuals' sexual desire was discussed with the interviewees, as many headteachers perceive an expectation from both the government and parents to ensure that students finish school without engaging in sexual activities. As will be discussed later in this chapter, achieving this expectation, according to some interviewees, could be accomplished by suppressing sexual desires and promoting self-control among younger individuals, until they finish school and then, as discussed earlier in this chapter, get married as soon as possible.

Governmental activities in the field of sexual health are also mainly focusing on sexual relationships within marriage. For example, many public healthcare providers in Iran concentrate primarily on reproductive health services (Shirpak et al., 2007), and official SRE programmes, as reviewed in Chapter 2, are exclusively for individuals who are about to get married. The absence of a health system that encourages young individuals with active premarital sexual life to seek health-related services in Iran was also noticed and raised by some of the younger individuals during the online large group discussions.

Another issue that was noticeable during online large group discussions was that while romantic relationships were highly valued among the participants, abstaining from sexual activity during adolescence and even refraining from premarital intercourse altogether seemed to be the choice of the majority of them. Having said that, even if it was highly likely that students make the same decision and opt for the option desired

by the school, schools seemed to lack the willingness to consider students' choices. To avoid the slightest chance of undesirable decision-making by students, schools either impose their own decisions or argue that they are obliged to transfer decision-making power to higher-level policy- and decision-making officials.

> I am still uncertain, and the interviewees seem to share this lack of clarity regarding the extent of freedom schools have in their practices. While they confidently assert that they do not teach certain topics in their school textbooks or that they organise extracurricular programmes on menstruation, and they even invite me for some extracurricular sessions, without mentioning any requirements of checking with the Ministry of Education, then a few minutes later, they argue that their hands are tied, and they must fully comply with the rules of the Ministry of Education when it comes to married students for example, or SRE. (Translated field notes – September 2019)

Instead of promoting responsible decision-making skills among students, a combination of the discourse of fear and disciplinary punishment measures are employed to enforce compliance with predetermined agendas and ensure the fulfilment of decisions already made:

> If they [younger individuals] have premarital sex, I mean in those years that they are going to school, because they should not have sex outside of marriage, and cannot even go to school if they are married, then they might even face serious legal consequences. (P23 – father of a 15-year-old boy and an 11-year-old girl)

Apart from the disapproval of sex outside of marriage, statements like the one quoted above extend the discourse of fear and punishment beyond the confines of schools and point to larger social structures and governmental regulations. Thus, it is clear that for younger individuals, abstinence until marriage is one of the mandated values imposed by the government, transforming it from a matter of personal choice grounded in personal values to an obligation with potentially serious repercussions, such as expulsion from school, for non-compliant individuals.

The next core liberal value, rationality, is encouraged through the promotion of critical thinking, moral reasoning, rational decision-making, and awareness of the consequences of one's decisions, all of which play significant roles in SRE (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, pp. 64–65). While the term 'rationality' is not directly mentioned in the FRDE, the document does include a value related to rationality. One of the values emphasised in the value statement chapter of the FRDE is raising, promoting, and deepening various forms of wisdom across different domains of education. Moreover, although the specific phrase 'critical thinking' is not explicitly mentioned in the FRDE, the document does suggest the need for critical interactions when encountering different cultures, where it promotes the preservation of Islamic-Iranian culture through a "conscious assessment and critical interaction with other cultures" (FRDE, 2011, p. 18), guided by an Islamic norm system.

In light of the above-mentioned point on interactions with other cultures, it is important to explore the third core liberal value, namely equality, respect for diversity, and tolerance of different worldviews. While the term 'equality' is not explicitly used in the FRDE, justice is referenced multiple times. For instance, within the chapter on value statements, justice is outlined as one of the foundational elements of ethical perfection, and the document advocates the cultivation of a justice-seeking attitude. However, despite the frequent mention of justice, it is notable that within the FRDE, certain minority groups, including legally recognised religious minorities and numerous others whose religions are not currently acknowledged in Iran, appear to be marginalised or overlooked.

One of the operational objectives and strategies outlined in the FRDE is the "provision and development of equal learning opportunities both for male and female students in various areas of the country that take into account their characteristics and differences" (FRDE, 2011, p. 36). This section highlights the significance of educational programmes being flexible and attentive to the needs of younger individuals in marginalised areas such as deprived, rural, suburban, nomadic, and bilingual communities, as well as students with special needs and those residing in border regions. Furthermore, under the designated strategy for this operational objective, the document suggests the design and development of curricula that are based on the

gendered needs and gender roles of the students. However, despite these considerations, it is worth noting that the explicit mention of 'gender equality' is noticeably absent in this document, despite its importance as one of the fundamental principles in educational contexts. That being said, within the FRDE, there is a mention of diversifying educational services and pedagogical opportunities to align with the specific requirements of communities and the needs and interests of students while promoting the development of their talents. In this context, the document addresses puberty, and one of the proposed strategies involves observing students' gender-specific needs and considering their puberty requirements when developing school curricula, methodologies, developmental plans, and programmes. It also emphasises the importance of paying adequate attention to the mental and psychological situation of students during this transitional phase and providing the necessary religious and ethical counselling and training. These instances encompass the extent to which puberty is discussed within the document.

During the interviews, school textbooks were only mentioned sporadically, with most references highlighting their inadequate coverage of puberty and biological aspects of human reproduction. Although school textbooks might not explicitly address values related to sexuality, particularly in a separate SRE textbook, they frequently touch upon values in a broader context. For instance, in the ninth-grade social science book for Iranian students, on page 116, there is a dedicated section on values. The concept of value is defined as considering a particular state of affairs to be desirable and positive, followed by a list of examples, which includes:

1. Respecting adults
2. Willingness for martyrdom
3. Religiosity and religious lifestyle
4. *Infâq* (donation)
5. Work and effort
6. Being a reader
7. Humble living
8. Having proficiency and skill
9. Avoiding smoking

10. *Isâr* (sacrifice)

11. Avoiding luxurious lifestyle

12. Honesty

13. Helping the oppressed

14. Being a member of a scientific association.

The value of respecting adults is given primacy in the list, signifying its importance in Iran, as discussed earlier in this chapter. However, it is notable that none of the previously discussed universal principles are mentioned in this list. The subsequent section of the above-mentioned textbook emphasises that most or all people in a society regard religious, humane, and social values as good. It further states that for Muslims, religious beliefs serve as the criteria for evaluating norms and values, accepting only those that align with Islam's doctrinal principles. Consequently, the passage concludes that acts deemed good, such as *Sadaghe* and *Infâq* (almsgiving), are considered valuable by Muslims only because they are believed to be pleasing to God and are performed as acts of obedience to God's commands.

There are more instances of explicit discussions on values in school textbooks. In the eighth-grade textbook of *Thinking and Lifestyle*, on page 165, it is mentioned that certain things possess inherent values which are universally recognised and deemed significant by people worldwide and are commonly referred to as 'universal values', which encompass happiness, love for God, *Adab* and respect, the beauties of creation, knowledge, human rights, peace and tranquillity, philanthropy, justice, freedom, defending one's country, cooperation, and collaboration in good deeds, and serving others. Notably, among these values, freedom, rationality, and equality are directly or indirectly represented, as evidenced by the direct inclusion of freedom and indirect inclusion of the remaining two concepts through similar notions, such as knowledge in the case of rationality and justice in the case of equality. In addition to the above values, the textbook discusses other types of values, namely personal values, material values, moral values, and religious values, with an emphasis that religious values are given greater preference over other values in the world. That being said, perhaps the following provides a thorough depiction of the characteristics of values in Iranian textbooks:

Discussing the world from a religious perspective and perceiving and encountering social phenomena and individual issues from the Shi'ite-Islamic viewpoint are perhaps the most important characteristics of Iranian textbooks. (Paivandi, 2013, p. 88)

4.3.3   ISLAMIC VALUES?

Contemporary post-1979 Islamic Republic of Iran tries to promote Iranian-Islamic identity as one of the core elements in Iranian modern identity. Iranian-Islamic identity highlights Iranian ethos but more focus is dedicated to the role of Islam, especially Shia Islam, in the identity formation of people. (Rezaei, Abe, & Farhang, 2021, p. 402)

Most of the values discussed above under the title of universal liberal values appear to be more complementary rather than contradictory to the values discussed in textbooks and the FRDE document. What is most observable in these official documents is the absence or sparse presence of emphasis on liberal values, especially the way they are translated in the context of SRE, rather than a sharp opposition. The foundation of these documents in terms of values is rooted in religious values and "the idea of accountability to God" (Halstead & Reiss, 2003, p. 27). Consequently, younger individuals are taught the importance of obedience to religious rules concerning every aspect of their lives, including sexual behaviour.

When the Islamic norm system is defined in the FRDE, it is emphasised that Islam comprises a hierarchy of values that are applicable to all aspects of life:

The Islamic norm system is comprised of the rudiments and values based on or compatible with the original Mohammadian Islam (Prophet-condoned reading of Islam), including a hierarchy of values, applicable to all aspects of life; since Islam addresses all social, individual, worldly, hereafter world, material and spiritual dimensions of life (negating secularism); although some of these dimensions have been discussed in general and some others have been discussed in details. (FRDE, 2011, p. 10)

According to the FRDE, the ultimate goal of the education system is to assist students in reaching and maintaining *Hayate Tayyebah*, defined as the "ideal Islamic life" (FRDE, 2011, p. 6). In this context, Islamic society is portrayed as the manifestation of the social aspect of *Hayate Tayyebah*, where relationships are grounded in "humanitarian, ethical values, affection/love and obedience to God" (2011b, p. 12). The realisation of *Hayate Tayyebah* is presented as the ultimate aspiration in life. Further in the FRDE, while defining *Hayate Tayyebah*, the ultimate value of life is stated to be drawing near to God, and submission to God is declared as the foundational direction towards the achievement of *Hayate Tayyebah*, which is defined as:

> An ideal condition for all dimensions and stages of human life, based on Islamic norm system (foundations and values accepted by the divine religion of Islam), realization of which shall lead to the ultimate goal of life, i.e. to draw near to God. Such a life requires a conscious and optional relationship with the reality of creation (Almighty God) and intensification of such relationship at all individual and social dimensions, based on Islamic norm system. Thus, one of the major characteristics of Hayate Tayyebah is to emphasize the ultimate values of life (Drawing near to Allah) and its relevant norm system i.e. the values and principles accepted by Islam. Since, considering the necessity of the submission to Almighty God, as the sole creator of the world and human being, this norm system defines the basic direction towards achievement of Hayate Tayyebah at all the relevant stages and dimensions. Hence, the optional and conscious selection of divine norm system and adaptation of all dimensions of life with this system (virtue) is the distinction between Hayate Tayyebah and the prevalent secular life, the zenith of the former is achieved in Mahdavi society, discussed earlier in the introduction section of this document. (FRDE, 2011, p. 13)

In the above quotation, there is repeated emphasis that the ultimate goal of life and the ultimate value of life is drawing near to God, highlighting the prominence of religious values in FRDE. Therefore, if SRE is to be implemented in schools in Iran, it should align with these religious values to ultimately lead individuals towards drawing near to God. Sell and Reiss (2021) have aptly observed a scarcity of literature positively

exploring the intersection of religion and RSE, with much of the existing literature framed within a discourse of conflict. Nonetheless, Halstead and Reiss (2006) highlight two primary reasons why it is essential to consider religious views and values in SRE:

> First, because a not inconsiderable number of people have them; second, because if we wish to live together in a pluralist society, we should understand at least something of what it is that motivates others. Such understanding is both intrinsically respectful and instrumentally useful. (Halstead & Reiss, 2006, p. 104)

The situation in Iran is somewhat different, as the official religion is Islam, specifically the Twelver Ja'fari school, which makes considering religious views and values in SRE more of a mandate than a recommendation. The Twelver Ja'fari school falls under the category of Shi'a, one of the many schools of Islam and is practised by most of the population in Iran. As a result, the influence of Shi'a traditions permeates various aspects of life. Thus, apart from many people in Iran who identify as Shi'a and practise it willingly, others, such as non-practising Shi'as, followers of other religions, including other Islamic schools and various religious minorities that are acknowledged in Iran's constitution, such as Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians, other religious minorities, and people who do not follow any specific religion at all, are living in a country where, from simple daily routines to complex value judgments of many people around them, knowingly or else, they are influenced and informed by Shi'a's traditions, and Shi'a's shari'ah (religious law) forms the basis for government policies, national decision-makings and legislation.

However, as will be discussed later in this chapter, even among those willingly practising Shi'a Islam, there is a diversity of interpretations and practices of religious values. Different individuals may hold varying understandings of what it means to draw near to God or may prioritise values differently. The government's promotion of what they call 'Islamic values' is often based on an essentialist interpretation of Islam, which may not necessarily align with the perspectives of all individuals in the society.

4.3.4 GENDER EQUALITY

When speaking of religious values during the interviews, it was observed that some interviewees expressed a distinction between their personal interpretations of Islam, often called the 'real Islam', and the expectations placed upon them by the government in the name of Islam:

> I do not understand these school uniforms with Black Maghnae [a type of scarf]. Real Islam never says to wear black or grey. Wearing black is actually Makrooh [a behaviour that is not a sin yet advised not to do it] in Islam. (P13 – mother of a 16-year-old girl)

That being said, there were some interviewees, as well as some younger individuals during the online large group discussions, who found their beliefs to be mostly aligned with the government's understanding of Islamic law. Moreover, during the online large group discussions, some younger individuals from non-religious backgrounds mentioned that their exposure to Islamic teachings was limited to what they learned in school and from official school textbooks. Thus, they held the perception that the Iranian government represented Islam, and, therefore, the values they witnessed in current Iran were presumed to be authentic Islamic values. This latter group may be astonished to discover how Fatima Mernissi (1985) portrays the possibility of a significantly different society, one that is completely dissimilar to their current experience yet still reflects an authentic Muslim society:

> One wonders if a desegregated society, where formerly secluded women have equal rights not only economically but sexually, would be an authentic Muslim society. (Mernissi, 1985, p. 9)

Building on how Mernissi describes an authentic Muslim society, it could be argued that some Muslims value gender equality. Moreover, there is a noticeable increase in the production of scholarly works that advocate gender equality within Islam, which plays a crucial role in the emergence of novel Islamic hermeneutics, shaping new perspectives and interpretations of Islamic teachings that emphasise gender equality (Duderija, 2020). Islamic women's rights activists are seeking ways to confront what they perceive as deeply embedded textual misogyny within secondary Islamic literature such as *tafsir*, *Fiqh*, and *Hadith*, and to accomplish this, they employ some

textual analysis techniques to examine the Quran, aiming to restore women's dignity and reclaim the Quran's potential for liberation (Haniffa, 2016).

Building upon the discussion, earlier in this chapter, gender inequality in interpersonal relationships was explored, specifically within the context of gender roles and parental roles, another side of the issue is discussed here, that is whether governmental policies as reflected in the FRDE and school textbooks uphold gender equality or, conversely, contribute to gender inequality, gender-based segregation, and the seclusion of certain parts of society based on their gender. Starting the search with the FRDE, it is noteworthy that regarding gender, the distinct issue that grabs attention is not so much inequality but rather the emphasis on the difference between genders. In the FRDE, the term 'gender' is mentioned four times, with three instances highlighting differences in some manner:

> Educational and developmental equity at quantitative, general and compulsory aspects and qualitative equity by observing and respecting individual, gender, cultural and geographical differences. (FRDE, 2011, p. 18)

> Further attention to individual differences among students, especially gender, urban and rural differences. (FRDE, 2011, p. 31)

> Strategy 14-2: Adaptation of physical, educational and pedagogical spaces to the students' specific needs and gender differences with an emphasis on institutionalization of the religious culture, modesty, dress code and observing the Islamic decrees on intimacy at schools. (FRDE, 2011, p. 45)

Later, it will be discussed how exclusively focusing on gender differences and implementing gender-based segregation policies can perpetuate a vicious cycle of fear and further demands for increased gender-based isolation. It is also important to highlight a notable concern regarding gender equality, or rather the lack thereof, in Iranian textbooks that has emerged as a significant issue and has received attention from scholars. For example, in a study by Ansary and Babaii (2003), Iranian school textbooks were analysed quantitatively to measure sex visibility and the presentation

of female/male topics, as well as qualitatively to assess sex-linked job possibilities, sex-based activity types, stereotyped gender roles, firstness, and the presence of masculine generic conceptions. The study concluded that the textbooks under analysis portrayed women in an unfair manner, perpetuating an unjust and biased representation of women.

Another study on school materials conducted by Bahman and Rahimi (2010) exposed a significant bias in the representation of women and men within the textbooks, as men were consistently given greater emphasis in terms of names, nouns, pronouns, and adjectives used to describe them, resulting in a notable gender imbalance. This disparity was evident in the frequent mention of male-attributed terms before female ones and in the overrepresentation of male characters in reading passages, ultimately leading to the marginalisation and near invisibility of women throughout the textbooks. A comprehensive content analysis conducted on 35 teaching and grammar textbooks for Farsi, Arabic, and English in Iran demonstrated the "persistent dominance of male gender" representation throughout these textbooks (Foroutan, 2012, p. 771).

Another content analysis study conducted on two commonly used English as a Foreign Language textbooks in Iranian high schools revealed significant disparities in the representation of gender (Amini & Birjandi, 2012). The findings indicated an overall overrepresentation of male characters, both in terms of linguistic references and visual depictions, with respect to "frequency and order of occurrence, occupation, stereotypical activities, and the linguistic manifestation of masculine generic referents" (2012, p. 139). Furthermore, the study highlighted the marginalisation of women and their portrayal in traditional roles, while men were consistently overrepresented. Moreover, Amini and Birjandi observed that when both genders were mentioned together, men were mentioned first, and there were indications of gender-linked job possibilities and the inclusion of stereotypical gender-related activities within the textbooks.

A recent content analysis of Iran's school textbooks demonstrates a pattern of 'gender bias' rather than 'gender fairness', particularly noticeable at the higher educational

grades (Foroutan, 2018). Foroutan (2018) argues that this observation contradicts the socio-demographic advancements in women's status witnessed in recent years, highlighting the necessity for a comprehensive revision of educational resources to address this issue within the school system.

Thus, it appears that gender equality has not been sufficiently addressed in Iranian textbooks and the FRDE. Moreover, research studies have uncovered biases and unfair depictions of women in educational materials in Iran, highlighting the need for comprehensive revisions to promote gender fairness. Additionally, the FRDE primarily focuses on gender differences rather than gender equality, which could potentially perpetuate unequal gender dynamics and limit opportunities based on gender. One could argue that this situation may reflect prevailing societal attitudes toward gender issues and why *Hayâ*, a highly regarded value in Iran, often becomes associated with or necessitates gender segregation in various ways.

4.3.5   *HAYÂ* AND GENDER SEGREGATION

One operational objective within the FRDE is the "promotion and deepening of a culture of *Hayâ* (modesty), virtue and *Hijab* (Islamic dress code)" (FRDE, 2011, p. 34). As previously mentioned, *Hayâ* was highly emphasised and valued by all interviewees, albeit portrayed differently, and sometimes even contrasting descriptions were provided to explain what encompasses modesty. While Halstead and Reiss aptly highlight the significant point that "modesty affects not only dress but also one's attitude to all sexual matters" (2003, p. 103), it is commonly observed that when describing modesty, interviewees often focused primarily on one's appearance and way of dressing as examples of demonstrating modesty. The impact of this narrow understanding of modesty on younger individuals' bodies and appearance was discussed earlier in the section on bodies. Here, another aspect is examined: the potential loss of significance of modesty as a personal value due to its reduction to mere appearance enforced by legal measures.

Hijab, for some, is a representative of *Hayâ*. However, even among those who hold this belief, there are varying definitions of what *Hijab* entails. While *Hijab* is commonly associated with women's attire and a specific type of clothing designed for women, some argue that men should also adhere to a certain standard of dress, which they also refer to as *Hijab*:

> Our boys have *Hijab*. *Hijab* in the way they dress. *Hijab* and *Hayâ* in their eyes. *Hayâ* in their behaviour. (OH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

However, in present-day Iran, when men adhere to a dress code that seems to have gone beyond personal preference, it is generally, in some ways, still a matter of personal choice. For instance, as discussed earlier, certain well-known boys-only schools in Iran have uniforms and established principles regarding appearance that may exceed the typical dress code expected from boys in schools in Iran. Parents consider these requirements before deciding whether to enrol their children in those schools and recognise in advance that failure to adhere to these standards may result in students being asked to leave that particular school. On the other hand, when girls wear *Hijab* in school or elsewhere, it is about abiding by a compulsory governmental requirement that is also strictly monitored by the authorities, and its disobedience is punishable by law.

Mernissi (1985) compares Western societies, grounded on Western philosophies and Christianity, to Islamic societies in which veiling, *Hijab* and gender-based segregation exist, and argues that the difference between these societies is not, as George Murdock (1965) claims, the difference between their mechanisms of internalisation of sexual prohibition, but how they perceive female sexuality – active or passive. She claims that in Muslim societies and societies in which veiling, segregation, seclusion, and surveillance of women exist, female sexualities are perceived as active and dangerous. In these societies, Mernissi suggests, female sexualities are perceived as a dominant irresistible source of power, and that to prevent social chaos, known as "*Fitna*" (Mernissi, 1985, p. 31), this power should be contained and controlled. Thus, to do so, veiling and all closely related institutions of gender segregation become necessary. On the other hand, Mernissi supposes that in European societies in which

there are no mandatory *Hijab*, seclusion or coercion of women's behaviour, female sexualities are considered passive. Mernissi compares Freud's theories on female sexualities with that of Imam Ghazali to back up her theory and comes to this conclusion:

> The irony is that Muslim and European theories come to the same conclusion: Women are destructive to the social order – for Imam Ghazali because they are active, for Freud because they are not. (Mernissi, 1985, pp. 30–31)

The point is that both Murdock and Mernissi are right in detecting that people differ in how they have internalised sexual prohibitions and perceive female sexuality. However, my impression, formed during the data gathering for this research, is that people with such different opinions can be found in any given society, western or Islamic. To start with, despite what Murdock supposes, one's internalisation of sexual prohibition does not necessarily lead to the elimination of external precautions such as seclusion, veiling and *Hijab*. For example, during the interviews, many parents confidently believed that their children had already internalised the value of modesty, and choices such as premarital chastity were their children's personal preferences. While sometimes this might indeed be the case, the constant surveillance, separating girls and boys, and demanding mandatory *Hijab*, in many instances, remains the same.

Somewhat different from Mernissi's theory on how female sexualities are perceived as actively dangerous in Muslim societies, in this study, many interviewees maintained that girls are socially, emotionally and, in particular, physically more vulnerable, and passive victims when it comes to romantic relationships, premarital sexual activity, or even sexual activity after marriage. Here is one such comments, coming from a father of a teenage girl, who was emphasising the necessity of SRE in schools, however, only if it promotes abstinence until marriage:

> - Girls need more attention. Girls are softer, kinder, more emotional.
>   They are simpler. I am not saying they are not clever; they are very
>   clever. AA [his daughter's name] is indeed very clever. It is just that
>   they might lose hold of their heart more easily. Then you, yourself,

know better how it ends, how it can damage them. I mean, you are a doctor who works with these girls, I assume.

- Which girls?

- These young girls who have made wrong emotional decisions and are now having diseases, or are running away out of shame, or committing suicide. (P16 – father of a 16-year-old girl)

That being said, there exists an old Persian saying that says that girls and boys, or men and women, are like cotton and fire. However, when asked, people have different opinions on which gender is vulnerable and passive, cotton, and which is the active, obliterating, seductive fire. For example, in the dialogue above, one might assume that when P16 uses the word softer to describe girls, he would probably find them more similar to cotton than fire. On the other hand, for many, it is the women's power of seduction which makes them the fire-like power in this duo.

Nevertheless, regardless of their answer to the who-is-the-fire question, people who hold this saying to be true all agree on one thing, that the companionship of cotton and fire is dangerous, and it should be avoided. Otherwise, one will inevitably burn and destroy the other. This perspective resonates with another *Hadith* that emphasises the potential dangers of the interaction between a man and a woman, stating, "A man is not alone with a woman, but the third of them is *Ash-Shaitan* [referring to Satan]" (Jami` At-Tirmidhi, English Translation (Vol. 4, Book 7, Hadith 2165)).

In addition to the discomfort and marginalising effect that such binary and cotton-and-fire mindsets on gender, along with the policies that segregate people based on their gender, have on gender non-conforming and transgender individuals, they could have broader implications. While it is reasonable to assume that mandatory *Hijab* and gender segregation predominantly impact women, it is crucial not to underestimate the broader implications on society as a whole. The more that younger individuals are kept separated from each other based on their genders, the more unrealistic and distorted their views of the other gender become. This lack of awareness,

unfamiliarity, and unrealistic imaginings, in turn, perpetuates the vicious cycle of seeing people of different genders as either dangerously active or troublingly passive. Consequently, fuelled by such fears, an increasing demand for further gender-based segregation policies emerge, which serves to exacerbate the existing issue.

It is worth noting that in cases where *Hayâ* was not used to refer to the physical appearance of students, it often indicated a deliberate avoidance of any interactions with individuals of the other gender:

> They say our graduates are shy and reserved when interacting with girls. They shy away from talking to girls. We are proud of this. We want our students to have *Hayâ*. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

Therefore, even in situations where there is no physical segregation, there remains a value placed on unmarried young individuals avoiding interactions with members of the opposite gender. Gender segregation and veiling have a long history in Iran (Najmabadi, 2005) and are not recent phenomena. However, as these practices become more externally imposed, they lose their significance and deviate from being seen as a personal value of modesty, which is ideally a conscious choice made by individuals who can shape their own framework of values.

4.3.6 IMPORTANCE OF FORM

In current Iran, in the pursuit of forming an ideal Islamic subject, significant emphasis has been placed on how things look, "the outer layer of society, the surface or *zaher*" (Naeimi & Kjaran, 2022, p. 243), rather than exploring the inner aspects of one's being, to an extent that maintaining the form seems to be a value per se. This emphasis on appearance and observable behaviours may originate from the pragmatic feasibility of overseeing such aspects, with an assumption that the outward expression and form always aligns with the inner essence. However, as discussed earlier in this chapter, even if younger individuals are aware of issues related to sexualities, they are expected to behave as if they are unaware. This suggests an understanding that one's behaviour may not necessarily reflect one's true feelings or level of knowledge on the matter.

Perhaps there is a hope that by upholding the outward form, the underlying content will eventually align.

Regarding religious mandates, for example, while the essence of religion often revolves around the concept of informed personal choice in obedience, the emphasis seems to lean more towards the outward expression and form rather than the actual belief in content. This goes as far as demanding the portrayal of religious rituals even in the absolute absence of any genuine understanding of what they stand for and symbolise or even when there is a plausible contrast between those rituals and an individual's personal belief system. As a result, some students, teachers, and parents may find themselves engaging in rehearsing and performing daily routines simply to conform, fit in, and create an impression that they not only comprehend the expected values but also embody them in their day-to-day lives.

> What I desire for my daughter is different from what her school demands and encourages. Actually, one of the difficulties of sending children to such schools [her daughter was studying in a well-known private religious school] is perhaps that you need to teach them that some of the stuff that is taught and requested in school is incorrect, you know, incorrect according to what we believe in. Yet, they need to act as if they accept those. So, on the one hand, we talk about how her father and I aspire for her to be, and on the other hand, I need to teach her what to say and what not to say if someone in the school asks her a question about those things. She needs to learn that there are certain things that we do at home which are not wrong or inappropriate, but no one in the school should know about them. And, you know, on top of that, I need to teach her not to lie! [Laughs for a few seconds] (P3 – mother of a 9-year-old girl)

The above quotation is what a well-educated young mother of a 9-year-old girl said while explaining how she desired her daughter to be, that is not to internalise traditional female gender roles in contexts of family and society and how what she wants for her daughter is sometimes contradictory to what her school is promoting. However, P3 admits that her daughter may need to conform, at least in appearance,

to the school's teachings and to act as if she accepts that, even if she genuinely does not, which would require reciting lines and learning what to say and being mindful about what not to say, essentially putting on a performance each day at school. The school, in this context, becomes a stage for a theatrical performance where students play their roles, some flawlessly and others not, with some lacking belief in or understanding of the moral behind the performance. However, the smooth continuation of the show appears to be the primary concern, while the internal understanding of its message may not be a significant consideration.

What this brings to mind is Goffman's (Goffman, 1956) dramaturgical approach to social establishments, in which establishments are viewed as stages, human interactions are viewed as performances, and all are analysed from the point of impression management. In any given social establishment, people take different social roles. For any social role, there are some desired goals and expectations shaped by the audience and the environment, such as values, mores, and norms of that establishment. To keep that role, an effort should go into presenting a convincing 'front' to the audience. Goffman defines front as "that part of the individual's performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance" (1956, p. 13). To hold a persuasive front, on the one hand, it is necessary to keep up with the expected duties of that role, and, on the other hand, a variety of communicative sources should be used consistently to convey one's appropriateness of behaviour and harmony with that role:

> While in the presence of others, the individual typically infuses his activity with signs which dramatically highlight and portray confirmatory facts which might otherwise remain unapparent or obscure. (Goffman, 1956, p. 19)

Goffman calls this process the 'Dramatic Realisation'. Moreover, when in front of the audience, performers attempt to offer their observers an idealised version of the front, even if it means getting further from the genuine essence of the performer and how they are when not before an observer, or, in Goffman's terms, their behaviour when 'backstage'. Idealisation, Goffman asserts, is quite common.

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Looking at schools, at first glance, students seem to be the main performers, who are being instructed, trained, and persuaded by parents backstage, that is, at home, to act as demanded on stage, that is, the school, as the case is for P3's daughter. Otherwise, parents fear the students are threatened, punished, or expelled. Moreover, it is not just about how to behave on stage but also how to convey by words and actions that life backstage is also in complete congruence with the performance. They are to perform so flawlessly that the audience can no longer say it is a performance and conclude that it is how the students genuinely are. The audience, being the school staff, also has its own role in educating and influencing students to perform as desired. That being said, from a broader perspective, while training and judging their little student performers at the same time, teachers and headteachers themselves are all performing, in one way or another, to fit their role in the school. The latter is necessary for a bigger performance, in which the school as a unit is on the stage, performing and being witnessed, judged, and measured by the standards of the Ministry of Education, such as those values upheld by FRDE.

It is not unexpected that a school or the Ministry of Education requires the students and school staff to adhere to its code of conduct and abide by its rules and regulations. The question is to what extent those requirements are inclusive so that they do not stigmatise many students unnecessarily, forcing them into "discreditable" (Goffman, 1968, p. 42) groups. It is important to point out that while some might fail to realise it, this process of dramatic realisation, especially if it involves idealisation, that is the tendency to play up those aspects of their life that are in line with the front that they are presenting, requires considerable effort. The more dissimilar one's personal value systems are to those of the government, the harder it becomes to present a persuasive front. When the amount of effort needed to preserve an acceptable front increase, it takes away from one's ability to deliver and keep up with the expected duties of that role. Thus, too much emphasis on presenting a particular, meticulously defined, and non-inclusive front could sometimes interfere with other important values, such as self-respect and honesty, and it might also affect students' school performance. The following are some of the comments made by younger individuals during the online large group discussions held by me regarding issues such as

mandatory *Hijab*, restrictive codes of conduct, limitations on openly expressing their romantic or sexual relationships, and how societal norms demanded them to present an image that might not truly reflect their genuine selves:

- I feel invisible. I feel my body should be invisible. I am deprived of my body.

- I am not allowed to be who I am. I think I am living someone else's life.

- When my teachers praise me for being a good girl, I feel like a lying imposter because they do not know about my relationship.

- Their reluctant imitation of *Hijab* is an insult to someone like me who personally believes in *Hijab*.

- Instead of enjoying my relationship, all my effort is directed towards hiding and covering it up.

(Translated field notes – quotations from different participants, during different sessions)

What the distress experienced by some students, as observed through narrations such as that of P3 and above comments, brings to mind is the psychological discomfort that arises from incongruence between one's actions and beliefs, conflicting sets of beliefs or values, or dissonance between an individual's self-perception and the external realities they encounter. Such conflicts and lack of congruity give rise to psychological distress, known as 'cognitive dissonance' (Festinger, 1957). In such instances, individuals often attempt to adjust their self-perceptions to better align with external reality or modify the external reality to resemble their self-perceptions. Thus, they may strive to alter their beliefs or values, adapt their behaviours, downplay the significance of the issue, or employ justifications for their actions, all in an attempt to alleviate, eradicate, or deny the experienced distress. To put it in philosophical terms, it seems that in the current atmosphere in Iran, some students are experiencing alienation.

> Alienation is thus, inter alia, a profoundly sociohistorical concept, signifying a disjunction [...], not between a fixed inner real self and one's actual self, but between what one has become (essentially is and is tending to become) and what one socially is obliged to be or thwarted from becoming. (Hartwig, 2007, p. 32)

Hartwig continues by explaining that alienation is a detachment from anything fundamentally vital to one's well-being, resembling "a rift or gash in four-planar social being" (2007, p. 32). Thus, in addition to individual dimensions, such as the conflicting adherence to contrasting sets of values or engaging in behaviours that contradict one's values (one example could be valuing religious principles while not practising abstinence until marriage or not practising *Hijab*), and interpersonal dimensions (for example, valuing the guidance of elders but feeling hindered by societal norms and standards of *Adab* in complete obedience), it is important to recognise alienation at a broader societal level. This recognition implies acknowledging how social structures and institutions, including the Ministry of Education and other educational establishments like schools, can generate and perpetuate systemic alienation by imposing restrictive norms and values that limit individuals' opportunities for holistic development and hinder their ability to flourish in accordance with their intended aspirations.

That being said, addressing the issue of alienation and striving for de-alienation requires a dual effort. On the one hand, individuals who experience alienation must actively engage in the task of reclaiming their agency, reconnecting with their authentic selves, and fostering genuine and meaningful connections with others, among other vital steps, which seems far-fetched given how younger individuals' autonomy is dealt with in current Iran. On the other hand, and concurrently, the alienators, whether they manifest as individuals or as systemic structures that perpetuate alienation, need to engage in self-reflection, undergo a transformation, and change their behaviour or existing systems that contribute to the perpetuation of alienation. While it appeared imperative to discuss these issues here, within the context of social structures, alienation and flourishing primarily pertain to the fourth dimension of the four-planar social being, which encompasses the inner being,

subjective agency, and the embodied personality. The next section of this chapter will specifically delve into the concept of inner being, examining some other related aspects in greater detail.

4.4   THE EMBODIED PERSONALITY

The last of the four dialectically interdependent planes which constitute social life is the stratification of the embodied personality, that is, "the domain of an agent's own subjectivity" (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 645). From all the various views and values that influence and shape one's subjective and personal perspective on sexualities, this section of this chapter mainly focuses on two themes, emerged from the data: 'Religious Values' and 'Pleasure and Sexual Desire'.

4.4.1   RELIGIOUS VALUES

Many interviewees in this study attributed some or most of their values concerning sexualities and relationships to their religion. Sell and Reiss (2021) argue that not only is it practical for SRE to be attuned to religious considerations, even in settings where religious observance is low, but also that incorporating faith sensitivity into SRE aligns with the broader objective of promoting student-sensitive SRE. However, a crucial question that arises is: what exactly constitutes religion? For example, when discussing the religion of Iranians in the literature, it is generally referred to as Islam, or sometimes, in particular, it is Shi'a's perspective on Islam that is discussed. That being said, when it comes to values attributed to religion, some points need to be taken into account to prevent oversimplifying generalisations about religious societies such as Iran and the values and beliefs held by individuals in these societies.

To begin with, it is crucial to acknowledge the internal diversity within the Muslim community. While focusing on a specific school of Islam may increase similarities and commonalities among its followers, even within the Twelver Ja'fari school, the most prevalent tradition in Iran, individual interpretations and understandings of its values

can vary significantly. Each follower may have their own distinctive understanding of these values, which can differ to varying degrees from the accounts of other followers within the same school. Moreover, even within a predominantly Islamic society, the determinative effect of Islamic values in day-to-day lives differs among those who identify themselves as believers. As aptly pointed out by Panjwani, "many among those who call themselves Muslims do not share religion as a predominant identity-attribute for themselves" (2017, p. 596).

Among Muslims, Islamic values hold varying degrees of significance as some individuals consider them to be the essence of their being and the cornerstone of their identity, while others have a different perspective. Some Muslims adhere to a belief in understanding religious literature verbatim and practising accordingly. For these people, strict adherence to the original teachings of Islam without any alterations or modifications and upholding them as they have been transmitted to us is considered a fundamental aspect of their faith. Increasingly though, perhaps with the growing reliance on scientific methodologies, there are many Muslims who strive to remain faithful to the teachings of the Quran but interpret certain aspects of it in a less literal and more hermeneutic manner, which consequently results in a broader range of perspectives and more diversity in comprehensions of religious views on SRE-related values.

The subsequent question that arises pertains to the means through which religious perspectives on SRE-related values can be accessed. While some Muslims may perceive that Islamic values can be acquired solely from the Quran, others might also consider the *Hadith*, which encompasses the words, actions, and tacit affirmations of the Prophet Muhammad and the Imams. Both of these approaches share the fundamental objective of identifying these values within Islamic literature. Additionally, some Muslims may add to these two sources and propose that the answer can be found in the virtues exemplified by good Muslims, such as the virtues of benevolence, truthfulness, and respect for others. Some others may contemplate whether a more effective approach would involve examining the practices and actions of good Muslims. They might argue that given that values guide one's decision-making and work as a framework for the conduct of individuals and societies, one might look

at practices and behaviours as a proxy measure for values; thus, Muslims' religious values are lived out in the lives of good Muslims. For instance, they may assert that a good Muslim has a degree of generosity, is hospitable, honest, and has respect for others, among many others. Even if it is believed that the answer can be found in virtues, it is necessary to provide practical demonstrations of these virtues in terms of behaviour. For instance, when teaching young people about SRE, one might commence with general virtues; however, their practical implications should subsequently be clarified and exemplified. An equally practical approach would be to commence with specific practicalities, allowing for the gradual clarification of the underlying principles and the rationale behind all those various rules and regulations for behaviour.

A significant challenge arising in this argument is the following question: What defines a 'good Muslim'? For some individuals, the answer to this question is clear. For instance, they may maintain that a 'good Muslim' is someone who strictly adheres to the original teachings of the Quran, *Hadith*, and Islamic writings. There is a myriad of studies on essentialism, which refers to such inclinations to presume that a phenomenon or an idea possesses a fixed set of characteristics, often reflecting those observed in its original state, that define its essence (Biesta, Panjwani, & Revell, 2020). In this view, Islam, or any religion, is regarded as a culture-free, primordial phenomenon. For example, Noibi (1993) draws attention to the different Islamic and cultural practices in different settings, emphasising that "Islamic practices are quite distinct from cultural customs in that those of Islam are constant, steadfast, unchangeable whilst ethnic practices vary from country to country" (1993, p. 41). However, it can be questioned whether 'Islamic practices' and even the related jurisprudence itself have always been 'constant', 'steadfast' and 'unchangeable' throughout history or not.

To start with, it should be noted that various schools of Islam may differ in terms of their practices and sources of jurisprudence. Noibi's perspective is rooted in the presupposition that Islamic sources for practical and moral guidance are limited to the Quran and authenticated *Hadith* (1993, p. 41). While not contradictory, his premise does not fully encompass the perspective of Shi'a Islam on this matter. Shi'a

jurisprudence recognises four sources (Motahari, 1980), namely the Quran, authenticated *Hadith*, consensus, and reasoning by authorised clergies. These additional sources are also considered authentic references, especially in situations involving new conditions or changes in previous circumstances. A qualified clergy, vested with authority, may issue a new *Fatwâ*, an authoritative decision on the point of Islamic law based on all four of these resources. Such a ruling has the potential to alter previous practices of Islam, as exemplified by the case of gender reaffirmation surgeries in Iran (Alipour, 2017). Thus, although not a frequent occurrence, the existence and possibility of such *Fatwâ*s, leading to changes in the practice of Islam, contradict Noibi's perspective and demonstrate that what are considered to be Islamic practices, in some instances, can indeed evolve and are not necessarily constant and steadfast.

Furthermore, while there may exist a core set of religious teachings that may have remained relatively constant over time, the practices of those teachings do exhibit variations across different periods and regions. Consider the traditions surrounding appropriate attire, for instance. While the principle of modesty may remain consistent in Islam, the precise working out of that and the specific manifestation of modest dress differs among Islamic countries today, and even within a particular country, such as Iran, they have varied over time. The question, therefore, revolves around identifying the factors that account for these variations in religious practices and understanding how, if at all possible, one can distinguish religious values from cultural values, leading to diverse expressions of religion across various cultural contexts.

> The history of Muslims, as well as their societies today, is an ongoing fusion of horizons, of, on the one side, the range of sacred text and the entire textual, and broadly religo-cultural tradition around them which includes the languages, commentaries, history of ideas, socio-political-intellectual context and, on the other side, the diversity of people, the readers, the believers and their context which includes their background, intellectual and emotional makeup, socio-economic contexts, and historically affected conciseness. The continued fusions leads to the making of meaning in which both sides engage and shape each other and form the basis of

resulting diversity in scriptural interpretations, theological orientations, political positions, moral persuasions and artistic appropriations. (Panjwani & Revell, 2018, pp. 272–273)

Panjwani and Revell (2018) suggest a hermeneutical approach to religion. Hermeneutics revolves around the notion of interpretation and encompasses a diverse array of subjects, with a particular emphasis on textual interpretation, especially concerning religious scriptures. The hermeneutical approach recognises the profound impact of cultural contexts on the interpretative process and acknowledges the interpretive aspects of people's religious lives, which entails a continual process of meaning creation within and through their respective religious traditions. Thus, in agreement with this perspective, Geertz's cultural emphasis on the definition of religion appears to be the most suitable for this writing, in which he proposes that religion is:

[1] a system of symbols which acts to [2] establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by [3] formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and [4] clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that [5] the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic. (Geertz, 1973, p. 90)

Most interviewees expressed difficulty delineating between their religious values and those inherited from cultural traditions. As discussed earlier, throughout the interviews, there were numerous references to the concept of the 'real Islam' or genuine Islamic values and views on sexualities and relationships. These references became particularly prevalent when interviewees aimed to emphasise the distinctions between their personal understanding of Islam and the official version imposed by the government or the school. It is also essential to mention that it was acknowledged that some interviewees tend to attribute their personal beliefs, value judgements and understandings to religion, knowing that there is not any religious reference for their claims. A probable explanation, considering religion's authority in a non-secular country, where normative statements mostly come from religious perspectives, and religion and ethics are sometimes used interchangeably, is to give supremacy to their

idea or belief. Paalanen (2013) makes the same point, albeit regarding the use of 'ethical-sounding rhetorics' in debates:

> Ethical arguments are the heavy weaponry of value discussions because they hold the power to pass duties on people. That is why ethical-sounding arguments are frequently used, even if the discussion is really not about ethics, but personal values, opinions or lifestyle choices. (2013, p. 150)

Some religious viewpoints in Iran not only hold power to pass duties on people at an ethical level but also, sometimes, become legally mandatory, given that Iran's legal system and legislation process is strongly linked to religious laws. Thus, in this research, when interviewees attributed a sexual value to Islam, they were sometimes implying a mandate rather than a piece of advice.

Considering the diversity of interpretations and the influence of culture, the primary focus of this section is not to extract or represent definitive Islamic values and views, even if that was possible. Instead, this section aims to examine what interviewees, as Muslims, personally attributed to their religion and to gain an insider's perspective on their religious values. The sub-themes explored in this section include 'knowledge', 'hygiene and cleanliness', 'marriage and sexual fulfilment', and 'forbearance and self-control'.

4.4.1.1   Knowledge

Many interviewees highlighted the significance of acquiring knowledge, underscoring Islam's profound emphasis on this. Common religious *Hadiths*, such as 'acquiring knowledge from the cradle to the grave' or 'seeking knowledge even if one has to go to China', were frequently cited, particularly by teachers and headteachers, to reiterate Islam's stress on gaining knowledge in general, arguing that gaining knowledge regarding sexualities should be approached similarly. These *Hadiths* served as a reminder that gaining knowledge should be a continuous, lifelong, active, and integral part of a Muslim's life.

Even if we want to make sure they [students] will not do it [sexual activity], it is better to help them understand why we do not want them to do it than leaving them to figure it out themselves. I always tell my students' parents that in Islam, there is always an emphasis on gaining knowledge. In the other world, they might ask you why you did not pursue learning, but they will never ask why did you know something. I think if the timing is right, it is better for them to know. (FT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

Indeed, the appropriate timing appeared to be the primary challenge because for many interviewees, the proper timing for SRE seemed to be just before marriage. The above quotation effectively exemplifies how some interviewees emphasised the significance of gaining knowledge in Islam. Moreover, it portrays how some interviewees framed knowledge acquisition as a religious duty for younger individuals, consequently placing adults, parents in the above quotation, in the position of facilitating this duty for their children, rather than imposing restrictions on it. The emphasis on valuing knowledge in Islam has substantial potential for successfully implementing SRE programmes in Iran.

4.4.1.2   Hygiene and Cleanliness

Among the various aspects attributed to religious traditions, the interviewees frequently reiterated rituals concerning hygiene and cleanliness. Shaikh (1998) identifies several topics that he proposes should be emphasised in teaching SRE in a Muslim school setting, with sexual hygiene and cleanliness occupying the foremost position on the list. This importance placed on cleanliness also aligns with Hodge's findings (Hodge, 2002), where ceremonial washings were identified as one of the significant beliefs and values upheld by Muslims in his study.

At some point, we had to have a conversation with him because we wanted him to know that he needed to perform Ghusl [a religious washing ritual that is mandatory after several things, including sexual intercourse and wet dreams] before his morning prayers. Even though I think he had already been taught about it at school, we noticed that he was trying to

hide it [wet dreams] instead of taking a shower in the morning, for whatever reason. His father decided to talk to him so that his shyness in front of us did not result in incorrect morning prayers. (P11 – mother of a 16-year-old boy)

As will be discussed in the next chapter, P11 also mentioned that her son often avoids discussing SRE-related issues with his parents. Instead, he occasionally chooses to confide in his youngest aunt, considering her a trusted adult for such matters. However, due to their religious concerns, both P11 and her husband had decided to break this pattern of non-communication at least once and had initiated conversations with their son about topics like wet dreams.

Schools, particularly religious schools, are expected to cover religious washing rituals, many of which are associated with puberty and sexual matters, such as wet dreams. These teachings usually take place during Religious Education classes or, in some cases, are conducted individually. As discussed in this chapter, several examples illustrate that students' bodies are surveilled to identify any signs of secondary sexual characteristics, helping determine the appropriate timing for these teachings. Furthermore, it was observed that schools take great care in controlling the interactions between students after delivering such teachings to ensure that discussions that are considered inappropriate are avoided. However, it is essential to recognise that these discussions and teaching materials hold significant potential for the implementation of SRE programmes or for prompting more conversations about SRE-related issues within families in Iran.

4.4.1.3   Marriage and Sexual Fulfilment

Almost all interviewees, at some point, emphasised that sexual relationships are not disapproved of or condemned in Islam. This perspective aligns with the results of another study where 63% of Muslim respondents strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'My religion is positive towards sexuality' (Yip & Page, 2016). During the interviews, the concept of lifelong celibacy was not cherished or promoted among the participants.

According to Islam, we have a responsibility towards different parts of our bodies, and this includes our sexual organs. If you read Imam Sajjad's Risalat al-Huquq, you will see that our private parts, like other parts of our bodies, have rights, and in the afterlife, they will testify against us if we ignore them or do not use them properly. (AH – headteacher of a girls-only school)

While AH referred to Imam Sajjad's *Risalat al-Huquq*, also known as Imam Zayn al-Âbidin's *Treatise on Rights*, to support her belief that lifelong celibacy is not approved in Islam, when referring to this text, it primarily focuses on the right of one's private part to be protected from fornication and kept from being looked upon. Another example of interviewees expressing their perception of Islam as sex-positive is:

The Prophet had many wives himself. The reward of good deeds in this world is sexual pleasure in the heaven. So, sexual relationships are not considered bad in Islam; it is only that it should be between husband and wife. (P16 – father of a 16-year-old girl)

During the interview, P16 reiterated several times that the appropriate setting for sexual relationships is within the marriage. Numerous interviewees echoed this response, emphasising that sexual intimacy is ideally reserved for married couples and that sexual desires are best channelled into the marriage. This perspective was often attributed to religious teachings, as any sexual relationship outside the marital setting would be considered *Haram* (sin). These views are consistent with the findings of the study conducted by Yip and Page (2016), where 83% of Muslim participants strongly agreed or agreed with the statement, 'Ideally, sex should take place only within the context of marriage'.

Hence, according to the perspectives of the interviewees, addressing the awakened sexual desires of an individual can be achieved either through early marriage, an idea cherished by some like P2 as mentioned earlier, particularly for girls, or through practising *Taghwâ*, which in the context of sexual relationships implies sexual forbearance. The prevailing expectation is that until marriage, individuals should lead a sexless life. In their study on religious and sexual identities, Yip and Page discovered

that "Muslim participants were most likely to view virginity until marriage with importance" (2016, p. 57), further affirming the significance placed on maintaining sexual abstinence until marriage by most Muslims.

However, while sexual relationships before marriage were not approved, sexual relationships within the framework of marriage appeared to have no restrictions. Sanjakdar (2021) elaborates on this matter, stating that while procreation is an important goal for a Muslim couple, it is not the sole aim and companionship and enjoyment of one's spouse are also valued. Fulfilling each other's sexual needs within the context of marriage was deemed significant by the interviewees:

> Not just because God wants them [younger individuals] to, but if they wait to get married, they will realise that the true pleasure will be there, away from the anxiety. If they have relationships before marriage, they will not enjoy it as much as when their only relationship has ever been with their husband. (P17 – mother of three girls)

P17's statement is one of those instances where pleasure was explicitly mentioned, however, only in the context of a sexual relationship within marriage. Moreover, some interviewees, including P17, emphasised the importance of sexual satisfaction, and premarital abstinence, in upholding the institution of the family. Thus, the significance was not only due to pleasing God but also because it was perceived as a necessity for a stable and enduring family, another notion that is commonly valued by Muslims (Hodge, 2002, p. 8).

> It is important for children to have privacy and to understand the notion of privacy. The Quran says that even from a very early age, young children should seek permission before entering their parents' rooms. This is especially during three specific times of the day when parents might be engaged in sexual activity: before morning prayer, and during the midday if they have a nap together, and at night. Even there is a *Hadith* that says how angels are not permitted to enter a room where a man and his wife are having sexual intercourse because they are allowed to do whatever

they want, and everything is permissible and free from any sins. (AH –
headteacher of a girls-only school)

While a married couple is encouraged and ensured the privacy and freedom to fulfil
their sexual desires, in the case of singleness, sexual desire should be dealt with
differently, with forbearance and self-control. Drawing on his other study in Iran,
Tabatabaie (2015a) writes:

… the ideal young Muslim is predominantly conceptualised as one who
transitions asexually from birth to puberty and remains non-sexual after
puberty until marriage – which ideally happens soon after attaining
maturity. (2015a, p. 280)

4.4.1.4   Forbearance and Self-Control

Hodge writes that "the concept of lifelong singleness is foreign to Islam" (2002, p. 8).
While it may not entirely align with the perspectives of my interviewees, they certainly
did not praise the idea of lifelong singleness, as discussed earlier. Moreover, while it
might not have been celebrated, sexual activity and romantic relationships outside of
marriage were undoubtedly not endorsed by the interviewees and, at best, were only
tolerated. Many interviewees, particularly parents, were inclined to deny their
children's sexual desires, let alone acknowledge any sexual activity or romantic
involvements. For those who did not deny the possibility of sexual arousal in young
individuals, forbearance, self-control, and *Taghwâ* (which can roughly be translated as
fear of God or being mindful of God's presence) were the solutions proposed to
address these desires appropriately. Thus, the prevailing perspective was to
encourage abstinence before marriage and preserve sexual relationships solely within
the confines of marriage, as this approach was seen as being in line with what they
understood of Islamic teachings and values.

I know they [younger individuals] feel such temptations [sexual
temptations], but that is precisely why it is important for them to practise
strengthening their self-control while they are young. More important

than having or not having a sexual relationship before marriage, it is about having control over one's Nafs-E-Ammâreh. It helps them to build up a strong character that later in life when they are married and face other temptations, helps them to control those feelings and needs better. (DH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

The term 'Nafs-E-Ammâreh' can be translated as the 'commanding or evil-commanding self', and it is sometimes compared to the Freudian concept of id (Kalbi & Basharat Tahira, 2020). The ideal aim is for a Muslim to resist the urges of the Nafs-E-Ammâreh and gain a level of self-control that prevents its temptations from leading to sinful actions. Thus, self-control and forbearance were commonly emphasised by the interviewees, often with reference to religious teachings. That said, younger or single individuals were not simply advised to have Taghwâ or be conscious of God's presence and practice self-control. Several measures were put in place to facilitate this process, and one such measure is Hayâ.

Hayâ, in this context, is regarded as a protective factor that effectively reduce likelihood of temptation and encourages modest behaviour. The value of Hayâ has already been discussed in this chapter. While almost all interviewees, at some point, mentioned Hayâ as a cherished value, some specifically linked its significance to their religious teachings:

> When we ask them [students] to, for example, keep their gaze low, or for example, not to chat and laugh with their [female] cousins, or when we make sure they do not look at indecent pictures on the internet or do not wear tight clothes or shorts, it is because we want them to build Hayâ; not us, God wants them to have Hayâ. We only guide them on how to preserve Hayâ. (OH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

In the above quotation, OH suggests several measures, ranging from gender segregation to monitoring the attire of younger individuals and controlling their internet access, all aimed at preserving and promoting Hayâ in them. Given that Hayâ is believed to lead to easier forbearance and self-control in younger individuals, it seems like every possible step is taken to ensure that the young individuals, in Ashraf's

terms, rise "above all 'temptations' through the exercise of moral constraint over physical passions" (1998, p. 61) and do not surrender to sexual desire.

4.4.2 PLEASURE AND SEXUAL DESIRE

During the interviews, participants were asked to describe what they considered to be a good girl or boy, particularly concerning sexual behaviour, to shed light on the values that influenced them the most. Some parents mentioned happiness in their descriptions. For instance, a quotation from P4, the father of a 13-year-old girl, was previously shared in this chapter to demonstrate how 'normal' and 'healthy' were used interchangeably in his response. He expressed that his main desire for his daughter is to be happy. Similar views were echoed by several other parents who also desired and described a happy individual. However, while happiness and enjoying life were mentioned on many occasions, the prevailing premises were the absence of sexual desire, or any form of its expression such as sexual pleasure, and the strong presence of self-control.

The absence of sexual desire and pleasure was not observed when interviewees discussed younger individuals' future as potentially married adults. The interviewees were asked to describe the kind of individuals they would like their children to become when they eventually begin to develop relationships themselves, assuming they have received an effective imaginary SRE programme that has gone well. While self-control was still mentioned, it primarily addressed the value of commitment and avoiding variety seeking outside the marital framework rather than suppressing the entirety of sexual desire. Additionally, sexual pleasure was mentioned a few times to value its achievement or appreciate providing it for their married partners. It seemed as if the younger individuals were presumed to be happily enjoying a sexless premarital life until they reach the gateway to sexual desire fulfilment, marriage.

Given that, as discussed earlier, there are prohibitions against premarital sex and short-term marriage, along with the issue of masturbation phobia, it was not unexpected that there was fear and denial surrounding the perception of sexual desire

in younger individuals, because if it was acknowledged, there were no acceptable ways to accommodate it within the prevailing normative values and standards of good behaviour according to adult interviewees. Sexual desire was generally not considered a positive perception in younger individuals, and adults attempted to keep their children oblivious to these feelings and impulses for as long as possible and suppress or benumb it in those who, for whatever reason, had already experienced a provoked sexual desire. Many interviewees called sexual desire a 'dormant bear' or a 'latent dragon' to visualise why it is better not to trigger anything that might disrupt the presumed inactive and suppressed state of sexual desire in younger individuals.

While many scholars have explored the absence of discourse on sexual desire in education for female students (Fine, 1988; Fine & McClelland, 2006; Welles, 2005), the interviewees in my study emphasised the importance of not awakening what they assumed to be the dormant sexual desire in all young individuals, irrespective of their gender. However, as discussed earlier, the management of sexual desire in younger individuals seems to be to some extent gendered, with the emphasis being more on early marriages for girls and more on self-control for boys. The underlying assumption here was that younger individuals generally do not experience sexual desires unless mistakenly triggered by external interventions, SRE being one of them, leading to its awakening. However, somewhat paradoxically, younger individuals, who were assumed to lack any sexual sensations or active sexual desire, were portrayed by some of the interviewees as compulsive hyper-sexuals if they were granted any chance of exercising autonomy in matters related to sexual behaviour:

> They [students] have not seen water yet; otherwise, they are skilled swimmers. (DT1 – teacher in a boys-only school)

The Iranian proverb used by DT1 conveys that the students' lack of what is presumed to be sexual misbehaviour, or perhaps any sexual activity, can only be attributed to the strict restrictions placed upon them. The underlying implication is that if these restrictions were not in place, not only would the students be aware of their sexual desire, but they would also engage in fulfilling them. This simultaneous dual perspective not only reflects the conflicting mindset surrounding the subject of sexual

desire in younger individuals, but also reveals how this concept is perceived differently, depending on the context, to enable adults to ensure control mechanisms are in place.

The interviewees' fear of younger individuals' sexual desire partly stems from the concern that by acknowledging this desire in younger individuals, they might become sexually active earlier than otherwise would have been the case:

> I remember, once, a few years ago, my younger daughter told me that her sister and her friend were talking about men and women kissing and stuff like this on the phone. It was as if a bucket of ice water was poured on me. On the one hand, I did not want to talk about it with the elder one because I did not want her to know that I know she talks about these things, so she does not think that because I know, and I have said nothing, so it is OK if she does it. On the other hand, I was worried that the little one would get precocious puberty if they kept thinking that she did not understand and continued talking about these things before her. (P9 – mother of an 18-year-old girl and a 13-year-old girl)

The underlying assumption is that younger individuals do not develop sexual desire unless it is awakened. Considering that puberty often signals the emergence of sexual desire, P9, much like many others, expressed concerns about exposure to discussions related to sexualities and relationships potentially triggering an earlier onset of puberty and the subsequent awakening of sexual desire. The interviewees expressed greater concern over a younger individual's premature exposure to sexual content compared to a younger individual facing a sexualities-related challenge without adequate preparation. Moreover, the assumption appeared to be that as soon as younger individuals recognise their sexual desire and it is officially acknowledged by adults, there has to some sort of restricting intervention in place, otherwise the younger individuals are likely to act on it. Thus, to prevent this, an active process of external desexualisation is implemented in some instances. Desexualisation is defined as "the process by which sexuality is extracted from an identity (or presentation of self), interaction, setting, or discourse" (Giuffre & Caviness, 2016). This concept

appears to align with how the issue of sexualities of younger individuals was dealt with, particularly in some of the schools where the interviews were conducted.

> We mainly focus on prevention. We want our students to contract it [sexual desire?] as late as possible, hit puberty as late as possible, get provoked as little as possible, and go through it as quickly as possible. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

The quotation above is another example of the usage of medical terminology, to describe the presence of sexual desire in younger individuals, portraying it as a disease or a problem that requires intervention. Moreover, it illustrates how there is an active endeavour to intervene in order to delay puberty and students' awareness of their sexual desires, aiming to minimise the period during which sexual desire is sensed by the younger individuals yet remains, or is expected to remain, unaddressed. Sometimes, the fear evoked by the presumed awakening of sexual desire in younger individuals, and the appeal to suppress their sexualities, appeared to be so overwhelming that it overshadowed various aspects of their lives, ranging from sports to homework assignments:

> We try to keep them [the students] so occupied that they cannot even think about it [sexual desire?], and we ensure that they are so tired that they fall asleep as soon as they go to bed. We make them tired by engaging them in sports sessions and lengthy physical activities. We keep them busy with homework and extra-curricular activities. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

The above quotation provides insight into how the sexual desire of younger individuals is sometimes dealt with in educational settings in Iran and the prevailing mindset that seeks to suppress and control sexual desires in younger individuals through physical and mental exhaustion. Some interviewees suggested a similar strategy when explaining how to deal with masturbation in younger individuals. They proposed tiring younger individuals' bodies and occupying their minds to numb all feelings, including sexual desire.

In her influential article on the missing discourse of desire, Michelle Fine expressed concern that the absence of a discourse of desire is one of the factors that could "retard the development of sexual subjectivity and responsibility in students" (1988, p. 49), leading to an earlier sexual debut. The paradoxical twist is that the majority of the strategies mentioned above are designed to keep younger individuals in a state of unawareness and emotional numbness regarding their sexual desires, with the intention of deferring their sexual debut. The question here is to what extent the sexual subjectivity of younger individuals is acknowledged in current Iran. Tabatabaie writes that in Iran, premarital sexualities are widely perceived:

> (1) to be an expression of adolescence autonomy which undermines parental, school and wider sociocultural control; (2) to threaten the purity and Islamic identity of unmarried young people; (3) to lead to serious legal problems associated with premarital sex; (4) to be a source of personal and familial dishonour and shame; and (5) to lead to later problematic marital relationships. (Tabatabaie, 2015b, p. 213)

What Tabatabaie observed aligns with the findings of this research. The fear surrounding the recognition of sexual desire in younger individuals extends beyond mere concerns for safeguarding their physical and mental health and well-being, in its medical sense, as discussed earlier. It also extends beyond the adults' concerns about religion's stance on the issue of premarital sexual activity. It extends further to reflect their views about sexuality, sexual desire, and sexual subjectivity in younger individuals and, more broadly, the question of agency and autonomy of younger individuals.

Perhaps the fear of younger individuals' sexual desire revolves around whether they are ready and prepared to go through that phase of their lives, between becoming aware of their sexual desires and marriage, in accordance with the expectations of their elders, which involves being a sexless single, whether they will conform to the established rules and respect the values, and whether they will understand how concepts such as virginity before marriage have been framed by adults, or if they will challenge and change these paradigms. The fear of sexual desire, in my opinion, is the fear of noncompliance. Rather than offering younger individuals the opportunity to

make informed choices and promoting their development as knowledgeable and responsible decision-makers with agency and understanding, almost all the strategies are designed to diminish their autonomy, impose restrictions, and maintain control over their sexual desires and behaviours. The question at hand is, why is there an assumption that, when given the freedom to make choices, younger individuals will opt for different choices than those made by adults?

During the online large group discussions, there were many instances of younger individuals who were mindful of their sexual desire and claimed that they independently and autonomously chose not to engage in sexual relationships due to their religious values or any other personal reasons, such as health-related issues. They asserted that despite being in romantic relationships, they had made a conscious decision not to engage in sexual intercourse. As Saba Mahmood aptly writes:

> agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms. (2005, p. 15)

Moreover, in some instances, the autonomous decision may hold such profound personal significance that it motivates younger individuals not only to adhere to their beliefs but also to confront the dominant cultural norms, in case the context changes and if they found it different or in conflict with their own personal beliefs. In the research conducted by Yip and Page, they found that some religious participants viewed their choice to practice sexual abstinence as "an agentic act in resisting dominant cultural norms" (2016, p. 111).

However, perhaps by delaying the perception of sexual desire in younger individuals, the hope is that if given more time, even if they did not internalise certain values and decided not to conform to externally imposed normative values and codes of conduct, by minimising the period between the perception of sexual desire and marriage, at least the potential visibility of the consequences of their disobedience could be avoided. This approach seems to imply that any issues, whether considered problematic or not, could be perceived as non-existent as long as they remained unexposed or unspoken, as observed in the case of pregnant teenagers whose bodies,

among other things, was perhaps a signifier of noncompliance, which led to their exclusion from school.

As a result, various restrictions are imposed on younger individuals, from their bodies, encompassing aspects such as their haircuts and clothing choices, as well as where they are allowed to be and where they are being absented, to their interpersonal relationships that are restricted by gender segregation, as well as certain restrictive definitions of highly deemed values such as *Adab*, and respecting elders. These restrictions span from governmental legal mandates to obligatory religious instructions, all of which contribute to ultimately severely curtailing the autonomy of younger individuals, in an attempt to ensure that they do not experience or surrender to sexual desire, or, if they do, that they do not openly tell anyone. Finally, this absence of discourse on sexual pleasure among young individuals and adults' fear regarding acknowledging sexual desire in them could be significant factors contributing to why, despite adults' prohibition on discussions about sexualities and relationships among younger individuals, as will be discussed in the next chapter, these conversations are highly valued and actively pursued by young people, despite the difficulties they commonly encounter.

4.5 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON KEY FINDINGS PERTAINING TO RESEARCH QUESTION 1

This chapter addressed Research Question 1: 'What are the underpinning values that inform how sexualities and relationships education could be implemented in Iranian schools?'. The data were examined through four interconnected lenses: encompassing bodies, interpersonal relationships, broader social structures, and inner being. It is important to note that the themes and sub-themes discussed do not solely mirror their prevalence within the data. At times, their absence or limited occurrence emerged as a prominent characteristic, as exemplified by the case of pleasure.

4.5.1 REAL BODIES

In the initial section of this chapter, the primary emphasis was directed towards the physical attributes of students and the underlying values influencing how younger individuals' bodies were treated, restricted, and clad, and their presence and absence, among other aspects. Through an examination of the data from this particular perspective, the themes that surfaced encompassed 'Health', '*Hayâ* and Bodies That Adjust, 'Docile Bodies and the Absence of Privacy'.

4.5.1.1   Health

The theme of 'Health' prominently emerged in the interviews, particularly in discussions with parents. However, notwithstanding the manner in which interviewees employed it, the term 'health' appeared to signify more than its conventional medical connotation, and interviewees frequently linked health discussions with values extending beyond medical contexts. It was discussed that this inclination might stem from students' tendency to associate more value with scientific evidence, which leads adult interviewees to persist in associating their values with biomedical science, encouraging students' compliance.

4.5.1.2   *Hayâ* and Bodies that Adjust

It was discussed that younger individuals' bodies were subject to interventions in order to establish and preserve the value of *Hayâ*. These interventions, affecting all younger individuals but in some instances more pronounced in female bodies, appeared to aim at making their appearance less desirable in order to protect them from sexual misconduct. It was emphasised that while *Hayâ* is valued in Iran, it is essential to create a balance between respecting values and maintaining children's autonomy and self-esteem and avoid interventions that lead to the creation of what Foucault (1979) called docile bodies, which are individuals subjected to control, shaping, and discipline.

4.5.1.3   Docile Bodies and Absence of Privacy

It was noticed that instead of encouraging younger individuals' flourishing, developing their understandings of their sexualities, and promoting responsible decision-making skills, the prevailing approach was to create passive, obedient students who are tightly monitored so that adults can make the best decisions on their behalf. Monitoring and regulations commonly started from students' bodies and required students to be obedient, to the extent that docility in younger individuals appeared as a value. Students, females more than males, were expected to show complete compliance when it came to dress code and appearance policies, which were usually very restricting. To ensure students' obedience, students' bodies became subject to strict control and surveillance with or without students' awareness, which adversely affected students' rights to privacy.

4.5.2 SOCIAL INTERACTION WITH PEOPLE

Data analysis in this section primarily centred around interpersonal relationships and desired standards of social interactions to explore associated values. The key themes in this plane revolved around '*Adab*' and 'Values Surrounding Family'.

4.5.2.1 *Adab*

It was discussed how the value of *Adab* plays a significant role in shaping younger individuals' behaviour and interactions with adults. The emphasis on *Adab* involves more than mere social etiquette; it encompasses moral qualities, virtues, and an understanding of values. Parents and schools aim to develop social *Adab* in children, with a focus on respecting adults being a paramount value and a manifestation of *Adab*. It was also noted that different forms of respectful behaviour, including presentational, linguistic, salutatory, consulting, and acquiescent respect, are present in Iranian culture. In the context of SRE, presentational respect translates to dressing modestly; linguistic respect involves avoiding explicit discussions on the topic; and salutatory respect was expected from younger individuals by behaving as if they are entirely unaware of such subjects. While consulting was valued, the key aspect of respecting adults seemed to be acquiescence and obedience.

Younger individuals' involvement and input in decision-making processes, particularly regarding SRE, were often excluded, leading to a power struggle between parents and schools or among various adult stakeholders to determine who should make decisions on behalf of younger individuals. Their voice appeared largely absent in this power struggle, and their agency was limited in the name of respect for adults. This lack of recognition of younger individuals' autonomy raised questions about the true essence of respect and the impact of these dynamics on younger individuals' development and understanding of their rights.

4.5.2.2   Values Surrounding Family

Various aspects of family values and their impact on SRE in Iran were explored. The predominant emphasis on traditional family structures was observed, with religiously sanctioned, long-term heterosexual marriage being considered as the gateway to them. Other family structures were not recognised, which could reflect the participants' personal value frameworks or governmental restrictions. Moreover, unlike long-term marriages, short-term marriages were not valued.

The value of early marriage, particularly for girls, was emphasised by parents, as preserving abstinence until marriage was deemed a value. There was a gendered aspect to these values, with girls being more often recommended to get married as soon as possible and boys being advised on self-restraint and short-term marriages, the latter only if desperate. Thus, the double standard was evident, as boys' premarital sexual activity was more tolerated than that of girls. This double standard has already been noticed in the literature in Iran (Motamedi et al., 2016).

Drawing on Halstead and Reiss (2003), four clusters of values that were not tied to a specific family structure but to the benefits derived from maintaining intimate relationships within it were explored. While interviewees upheld many of the values linked with positive self-concept, living with others, emotional aspects of close relationships, and cycle of life that were listed by Halstead and Reiss (2003, pp. 112–114), applying them within the context of sexualities, relationships, and SRE in Iran appeared to present challenges.

4.5.3 SOCIAL STRUCTURES

The central objective of this section was to explore the values accentuated by the 'given structures' (Archer, 1995) within Iran's current educational system, which involved going through official governmental materials such as school textbooks and the Fundamental Reform Document of Education (FRDE) in the Islamic Republic of Iran, which enabled the identification of the presence or absence of some of the values within these resources. The themes deliberated upon within this context encompass 'Universal Principles', 'Islamic Values', 'Gender Equality', '*Hayâ* and Gender Segregation', and the 'Importance of Form'.

4.5.3.1 Universal Principles

Halstead and Reiss (2003) argue that certain values in the realm of sexualities are grounded in core liberal principles such as freedom, rationality, and equality. The alignment between core liberal values, the FRDE, and some school textbooks was explored. It was concluded that while the FRDE partially resonates with suggested universal principles, its expression remains implicit or insufficient. For example, the term *'Âzâdi'* (freedom) was not explicitly used in the FRDE, but related terms were mentioned; however, they did not fully align with the concept of promoting autonomy. While school textbooks in Iran do not discuss values related to sexualities, they touch on broader values, often religious in nature. For example, respect for adults was highly valued in the textbooks, and Islamic principles were proposed as criteria for evaluating values.

4.5.3.2 Islamic Values

The FRDE's root in religious values was discussed. The FRDE defines life's ultimate goal and value as drawing closer to God, and defines the role of education as helping students achieve the 'ideal Islamic life' through a conscious adherence to Islamic norms. However, although, given that Shia Islam is the official religion in Iran, considering religious views and values in educational content, including any potential

SRE, is more of a mandate than a recommendation, the diversity within the Iranians and even within those who affiliate with Shia Islam leads to differing interpretations of Islamic values. The government's promotion of 'Islamic values' is based on a particular Islamic interpretation that may not align with the perspectives of all individuals in the society, raising the need to recognise diverse perspectives.

4.5.3.3   Gender Equality

It was underscored that gender equality was not sufficiently addressed in Iranian school textbooks and the FRDE. Studies reveal significant gender bias in textbooks (Ansary & Babaii, 2003; Bahman & Rahimi, 2010; Foroutan, 2012), necessitating revisions to promote fairness, and the FRDE emphasises gender differences rather than promoting equality, which could perpetuate unequal gender dynamics prevailing in Iran.

4.5.3.4   *Hayâ* and Gender Segregation

The value of *Hayâ* once again emerged, as one of the objectives of the FRDE is to promote a culture of *Hayâ* and the Islamic dress code, i.e., *Hijab*. Drawing on Mernissi (1985), it was discussed that different perceptions of female sexualities could lead to practices like veiling and gender segregation. Even when not physically segregated, younger individuals were encouraged to avoid interactions with the opposite sex in order to show *Hayâ*. It was also noted that while these values might be willingly embraced by many younger individuals, their external imposition may erode their personal significance, reducing them to obligatory rules to follow rather than choices stemming from personal values.

4.5.3.5   Importance of Form

A strong focus on outward appearances and behaviours was noted, overweighing individuals' personal beliefs and values to the point that upholding the outward form per se seemed to be regarded as a value. It was discussed that this emphasis on form

over content could be due to the pragmatic ease of oversight or assumptions that the outer expression always aligns with the inner essence, which appeared not always to be the case. This approach may ignite conflict between individuals' inner values and external performances. Maintaining an acceptable 'front' (Goffman, 1956) requires significant effort, especially when personal values diverge from government requirements, which may result in psychological distress, cognitive dissonance, and alienation as individuals navigate conflicting belief systems.

4.5.4   THE EMBODIED PERSONALITY

Amidst the myriad of values that impact and mould an individual's subjective and personal stance on sexualities, the final section of this chapter was predominantly directed at two themes that had surfaced from the data: 'Religious Values' and 'Pleasure and Sexual Desire'.

4.5.4.1   Religious Values

Intending to comprehend how interviewees, as Muslims, perceived and attributed values to their religion, four sub-themes emerged: 'knowledge', highlighting the duty to seek knowledge about sexualities; 'hygiene and cleanliness', underscored via an emphasis on religious washing rituals; 'marriage and sexual fulfilment', stressing the importance of sexual relationships within marriage; and 'forbearance and self-control', advocating abstinence before marriage and self-discipline.

4.5.4.2   Pleasure and Sexual Desire

During interviews, participants were asked to describe what they considered a good girl or boy to be in terms of sexual behaviour, revealing the values that influenced them. While happiness was mentioned, the dominant premises were the absence of sexual desire, or any form of its expression, such as sexual pleasure, alongside a strong presence of self-control. However, these perspectives changed when discussing the future of these individuals in married relationships, assuming they have received a

successful SRE programme. Thus, the views on sexual desire and pleasure differed based on context: for future married adults, desire and pleasure were idealised, whereas in younger individuals, it was frowned upon. To some extent, this finding aligns with the conclusions drawn by Lamb et al. (2013), where they observed that when pleasure was not connected to negative perceptions of danger or was not medicalised, it occasionally received positive representation within AOUM curricula, albeit only within the context of marriage.

Finally, why sexual desire was treated as a latent or dormant element to be suppressed was explored. Among the interviewees, there was a prevalent fear of arousing sexual desire in younger individuals, prompting the implementation of tactics such as physical exhaustion through sports and excessive mental engagement to repress it. The paradox revealed about these strategies, which intend to postpone sexual debut, lies in their potential to hinder the development of sexual subjectivity and responsibility, which in turn hasten sexual debut (Fine, 1988). The conclusion drawn was that the absence of discourse on sexual desire, coupled with fear of youth non-compliance, shapes the manner in which the sexual subjectivity of youth is perceived by adults, who appeared to be focused on exerting control over younger individuals' sexual desires, imposing limitations, and maintaining authority in these realms. The overarching approach seemed to involve minimising the period between the emergence of sexual desire and marriage to avoid potential consequences of younger individuals' potential non-compliance.

5 How Do Parents and Teachers Perceive the Best Ways of Delivering Sexualities and Relationships Education to Iranian School Students?

The second question this research seeks to answer is what stakeholders, such as parents and teachers, perceive to be the most effective approaches to delivering sexualities and relationships education to Iranian school students, considering the absence of a universally applicable one-size-fits-all model. As discussed in Chapter 2, the process of sexualities socialisation, in which one acquires norms, attitudes, and knowledge, and internalises values about sexualities and relationships, is lifelong, multidimensional, and affected by various formal and informal sources, which include but are not limited to family, peers, teachers, society, media and one's own personal belief system. The above question, however, is more concerned with the implementation of official SRE programmes, which are often school-based. That being said, while in this chapter the main focus remains on school students, settings outside the classroom are also considered. Moreover, it is not overlooked that in the prolonged absence of official SRE in Iran, many adults are potentially, in one way or another, in need of at least some aspects of SRE themselves.

One way of answering this question is by identifying the most suitable source and medium for providing SRE and determining the proper context for delivering educational information and having conversations about sensitive issues. In other words, the answer to the above question should consider the continuity, accessibility, and lifelong nature of SRE, as well as the required flexibility for the specific times when a conversation about sexualities and relationships should take place to ensure students are supported, aware of what to expect, and informed before making any decisions.

In this chapter, interviewees' views on suitable sources of SRE are discussed alongside their opinions about the proper setting for SRE. Regarding the source, five themes of 'Family', 'Teachers', 'Professional Visitors', 'Peers' and 'Media' are discussed

separately by reflecting on the positive and on the negative aspects of using each as the primary source or as a facilitator for SRE. Many factors were deemed necessary by interviewees in constructing an appropriate opportunity for SRE; here, three themes are discussed: 'The Location', 'The Timing', and 'The Number of Individuals Present' to receive SRE. The issues addressed in this chapter, by drawing on the related literature alongside the data gathered for this study, can facilitate decision-making in the area of SRE pedagogy, accelerate the implementation of applicable SRE programmes, and help policymakers by suggesting practical considerations such as resource allocation.

5.1 ABOUT THE SOURCES

During the data analysis, the interviewees identified or suggested different sources for SRE, which were classified into five themes: 'Family', 'Teachers', 'Professional Visitors', 'Peers', and 'Media' (Figure 5-1). Here, the source of SRE refers to anyone or anything in charge of introducing the various topics of SRE to the students, which encompasses all the different channels through which students might receive information and education about sexualities and relationships. Before delving into these categories and discussing them in detail, I will briefly highlight some of the reasons why the source of SRE matters.
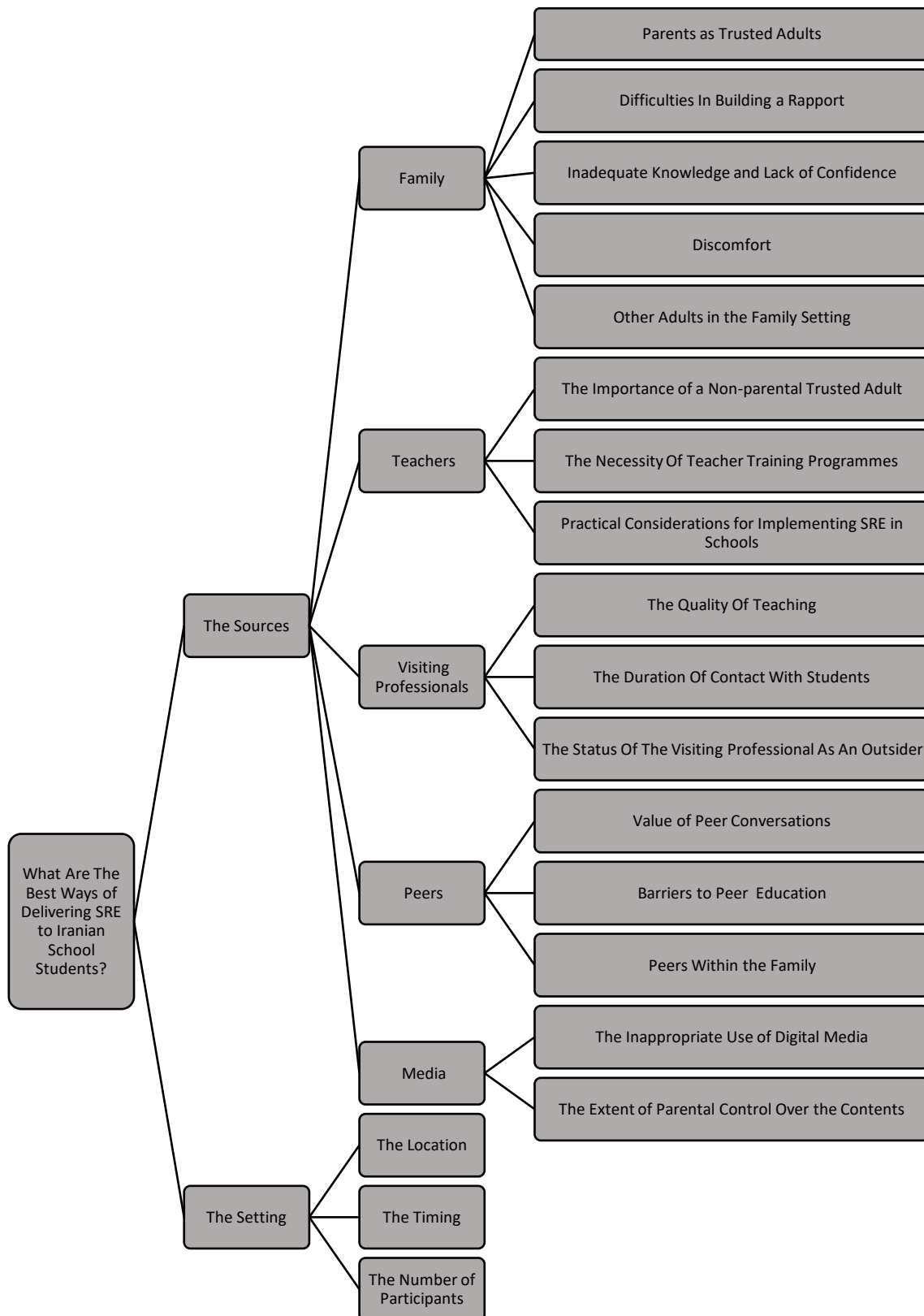
Figure 5-1 An overview of the themes (second level of branches) and sub-themes (third level of branches) derived from interviewees identifying or suggesting different 'sources' and 'settings' for the implementation of an SRE programme in Iran.

5.1.1   WHY DOES THE SOURCE MATTER?

Firstly, the credibility of the source of SRE held significant importance, in particular for younger individuals. The credibility of the source of SRE is of great significance because the source can potentially provide unreliable or incorrect information. Parents, schools, and other educators discussed here may have different perspectives and approaches when teaching about sexualities and relationships. However, a shared concern, especially when discussing bio-physiological aspects of sexualities, is the need for a reliable educational content provider to ensure younger individuals receive accurate information.

For instance, as I will discuss later in this chapter, in the absence of an official SRE programme in the educational curriculum of schools in Iran, although parents commonly believed their children were too young for any form of SRE, nevertheless, they still sought reliable resources such as books, which they could evaluate and potentially use later, that is, when their children are perceived to be ready for SRE. Additionally, as highlighted later in this chapter, students also value the educator's credibility, with some considering the level of formal education in a relevant field to SRE as a determining factor of the credibility of the information source.

While it is essential to ensure that the provider can be trusted in order to guarantee that individuals have access to correct and reliable data on sexuality, some interviewees aptly look at the whole process of SRE as a human experience which is greater than receiving information and affects children in more ways than just increasing their knowledge. This makes the role of the source of SRE more than a simple deliverer of information. Many interviewees looked at SRE as an opportunity to develop, maintain and expand a kind of relationship that affects children's beliefs, their framework of value, their decision-making, and their behaviour, and expressed a clear understanding that the source of SRE goes beyond ensuring individuals receive age-appropriate, accurate, and reliable information in that different sources of SRE have varying effects on recipients' beliefs and, consequently, their decision-making, and behaviour. This expectation from the source of SRE is in line with the findings of

some literature in this field. For example, in a study on 459 teenagers (Bleakley et al., 2009, p. 37), it was reported that different sources for sexual information were associated with different underlying beliefs about sexualities, sexual behaviours and outcome expectancies.

5.1.2   FAMILY

The term 'trusted adult' is commonly used when it comes to discussions on younger individuals' safety and resilience. It is essential for the trusted adult to provide a safe and comfortable environment for younger individuals to discuss any questions and concerns that they may have. It is crucial to ensure that children feel comfortable discussing sensitive topics and that their personal beliefs and values are respected. SRE is better to be delivered by someone who is capable of creating a safe space for children to share their thoughts and experiences, offering support in times of need, and providing accurate information and suitable answers to the questions raised. In this way, children can feel comfortable and secure in understanding and learning about their sexualities which will empower them to make informed decisions. Hence, individuals responsible for delivering SRE should possess essential qualities that define a trusted adult, including being trustworthy, generous with their time, accessible, approachable, attentive, authentic, available, and protective, to name a few (Pringle et al., 2019). These qualities are crucial prerequisites for anyone involved in delivering SRE.

Given that, as discussed in Chapter 4, preserving and empowering the family institution is strongly valued by the interviewees, when it comes to the need for mutual trust and strong emotional bonds between children and adults, it was not unexpected to observe that often the hope is that they are made within the family setting, and further strengthen the family institution. In this section of this chapter, family as the source of SRE is explored under five sub-themes of 'Parents as Trusted Adults', 'Difficulties in Building a Rapport', 'Inadequate Knowledge and Lack of Confidence', 'Discomfort', and 'Other Adults in the Family Setting'.

5.1.2.1   Parents as Trusted Adults

Sexual socialisation is aptly considered a lifelong process that starts long before starting school and does not finish by the time students leave school, and the family institution is usually the first institution to contribute to this purpose. Additionally, I will later discuss that there seems to be a tendency towards individualised SRE, which is generally more feasible if SRE occurs within the family setting. Family is commonly regarded as a safe space, and it was frequently suggested by the interviewees as the main support system for students, especially when facing sexualities- or relationship-related challenges. While children might choose any adult within or outside of the family setting to play the role of the trusted adult, many interviewees preferred parents to take up this role:

> We encourage children to tell everything to their parents. Not just these things [referring to sexualities- or relationship-related issues], but also educational issues and, honestly, everything! I think when things like this happen, most children are more comfortable talking about it with their mothers rather than a teacher. (FT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

Many parents are willing and capable of creating a kind of connection with their children that naturally makes them the trusted adult. Research (Ashton et al., 2021) has indicated that individuals who have either one parent or both as sources of adult support exhibit significantly higher levels of resilience when compared to those who lack parental support. Furthermore, it was indicated in the same study that when a parent was not reported as a source of personal adult support, there was no significant difference in resilience levels compared to individuals without any adult support, which underscores the crucial role of parental support. Thus, although, as discussed in Chapter 4, there can be a noticeable power struggle between schools and parents over gaining the authority of decision-making about the timing and the content of SRE, both parties agree that parents are the first choice to deliver SRE. Yet, as I will discuss, parents are seldom the principal source of SRE delivery.

5.1.2.2   Difficulties in Building a Rapport

In this study, many interviewees pointed out that mothers are more commonly seen in the role of a trusted adult in comparison to fathers. As some interviewees say, mothers seem to be more active in the delivery of SRE and more at ease in creating a rapport and the kind of relationship that facilitates children to talk about sexualities- and relationship-related issues:

> Usually, mothers are better at doing it [talking to their children about puberty]. They are closer to their children. Sometimes because they have more time with their children. But I think mothers are generally more patient and are better ears for their children, anyway. (FH2 – co-headteacher of a girls-only school)

This finding is in line with the results of other studies. For example, Bleakley et al. found that adolescents "tended to rely much more heavily on their mothers than their fathers for sexual information" (2009, p. 45). However, while in their study, this finding seems to depend on the student's gender, being particularly the case for daughters, in my research, it appears that when there is a need for such dialogues, mothers are more often the go-to parent for both girls and boys. For example, the following is how a headteacher of a boys-only school describes their students' relationships with their parents:

> We encourage fathers, especially from the fourth grade onwards, to try to get closer to their children. We ask mothers to gently step aside and let fathers enter and take charge of their children's educational and other issues so that, little by little, they become capable of talking about these sorts of things with their fathers. But in practice, it does not happen. In practice, fathers do not enter the arena, and mothers are more informed about all these issues. When we want to talk about puberty etc., we have a meeting with all the fathers and let them know of our plan; that is, we believe it is time to talk to your children regarding this issue [puberty], and this is the way it must be said; for example, this much should be said, not

more, and you should make sure they do not talk about it with their peers after that, and things like this. This is the time when we ask fathers, are you willing to have this talk, or do you want us to do so? Some fathers who have already become more approachable to their children take the lead and do it themselves, but we ensure they understand precisely what needs to be said. But, usually, most of the fathers ask us to do it. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

There were a few more times during the interview that BH, as a head teacher at a boys-only school, mentioned that he would prefer involving fathers as much as possible and certainly more than mothers, especially when it is time for talking about puberty and related religious rituals, yet, despite his efforts, mothers seem to hold their position as the more approachable parent for communications regarding sexuality and relationship-related issues. This finding aligns with the results of another study, in which male students reported that mothers are more likely to communicate about sexual topics than fathers (Harris et al., 2013). However, BH found it more culturally and morally appropriate for boys to approach their same-gender parents when they have questions related to sexualities and relationships. He insisted on this view to the point that, although he acknowledged that many students have a closer relationship with their mothers, when it came to talking about puberty, he proposed only two options, whether fathers would have the talk or the school would do it. However, NH, another headteacher in a boys-only school, had a different approach:

Many fathers find themselves incapable of doing so, either in terms of building a proper connection or they feel it will lead to reducing *Hayâ* that is expected from children in their presence. (NH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

After acknowledging that he is aware of the challenges that fathers face, NH still prefers parents to be the ones who talk to children about puberty, regardless of which parent they choose:

It is different if they have such conversations with their parents. The very thing that they can talk about these things with their mothers shows how close they are. (NH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

In a study on parental influence on adolescents' risky sexual behaviour (Harris et al., 2013), it was found that parent-child sexual communication was correlated with parent-child closeness, which in turn has a significant correlation with adolescents' self-efficacy about condom use and inverse associations with their high-risk sexual behaviours. Thus, it is more than information that should be delivered. The relationship and the closeness that is a prerequisite for such conversations and, in turn, will reinforce intimacy and mutual trust can affect children in more ways than just increasing their knowledge.

While parents could be considered the most appropriate source of SRE for their children, apart from challenges in building a rapport, some other barriers can make this difficult. One of the barriers is that parents have very different views on SRE, and some perceive SRE as unnecessary or too early for their children when this is not actually the case. Additionally, limited knowledge and a lack of confidence in their knowledge in this area may make it difficult for parents to engage in SRE-related conversations. Finally, some parents may simply feel uncomfortable discussing topics related to sex with their children, making it difficult for them to provide appropriate SRE. These findings seem to be common when it comes to parental communication with their children regarding SRE and are not confined to parents in Iran. For example, in a study in the United States, barriers to parents' communication with adolescents about sex were "limited sexual health knowledge, believing adolescents are not ready to discuss sex, discomfort discussing sex, and demographic factors" (Malacane & Beckmeyer, 2016, p. 27).

5.1.2.3   Inadequate Knowledge and Lack of Confidence

The necessity of SRE was discussed in Chapter 2. While most interviewees believed that SRE is necessary at some point in life, in the prolonged absence of formal discussions on SRE supported by officially accredited educational bodies, they had

different perceptions of what constitutes SRE and the most appropriate time to discuss different topics within it. Therefore, it is important to help some adults to obtain a more realistic perspective of younger individuals' sexualities. While this barrier is not confined to parents, as discussed in previous chapters, it was observed that younger individuals' sexuality, sexual behaviour, and romantic relationships are more commonly denied by their parents than by their teachers. In an interview with the mother of a 12-year-old boy and an 8-year-old girl, I noticed that she commonly mentioned her son when she talked about considering SRE. When asked whether this was related to her children's genders, she said that her daughter is "far too young for these things". Apart from considering her child too young for SRE, she shared another concern with many parents that I interviewed, namely, lack of knowledge about SRE:

> It is not that I do not want to talk about these things with my son. I mean, I try to keep myself informed about it. But I am worried that I might say something inaccurately, and then he might read something different on the internet, and then he loses his trust in me. (P14 – mother of a 12-year-old boy and an 8-year-old girl)

One way in which the prolonged absence of SRE can create a barrier for parents to become the main source of SRE for their children is by affecting their level of knowledge as well as their confidence in the information they already have on such topics. Many times, during the data collection for this research, as well as during psychosexual therapy sessions with my clients, it has come to my attention that many adults are themselves affected by the absence of official SRE and are in need of information about some aspects of SRE. What this implies for SRE and the most fitting source for it is that, first, it is better to have a broader scope when considering the target audience for SRE programmes, and, secondly, by providing SRE to the students, barriers such as this might be less of a concern for the future parents. This concern is not just shared between parents in Iran. For example, parents in a study in Australia (Dyson & Smith, 2011) had three main concerns, one of which was their knowledge and comfort about sexuality. This issue could also lead us to another barrier that parents in my study are facing, which is feeling uncomfortable about having discussions around SRE with their children.

5.1.2.4   Discomfort

Parents identified many reasons why some found SRE-related discussions with their own children uncomfortable. Communicational challenges such as embarrassment, inexperience and cultural expectations are among the most commonly repeated:

> I try to make sure my children can talk with me. I always listen. I try to listen and help. I am much more skilled now compared to when I was dealing with the first one [referring to her eldest daughter, who is 16 years old]. I was clueless at that time! [laughs]. But now I have learnt a trick or two to ease the conversation. (P17 – mother of three girls)

A recent study in Iran discusses how many parents have challenges with "their lack of communication skills in general and about sexuality issues in particular" (Babayanzad Ahari et al., 2020, p. 4). However, communication challenges that parents commonly brought up during the interviews in my research are primarily concerned with parents' discomfort rather than their ability to create a rapport or their fitness to perceive their children's verbal and non-verbal clues in the conversation.

> I know my children better than anybody else. I can read from a tiny twitch in the corner of their mouth how they feel or what they want. I can guess from a slight change in their behaviour that they are sad, worried, or excited. They say 'F', and I am already in 'Farahzad'! (P8 – Mother of two teenage girls)

The last sentence is an Iranian proverb used to show someone's mastery of a subject. While P8 was trying to explain her close relationship with her two teenage girls, what I noticed was that the examples that she used, rather than depicting direct open conversations, all indicate indirect communications. This finding could be in line with the finding of another study which describes how even parents who considered themselves open to having conversations around SRE with their children are likely to "communicate such messages in a tacit manner through innuendo and intimation" (Hyde et al., 2013, p. 3438).

Not all parents shy away from SRE-related discussions with their children due to embarrassment; some find such conversations inappropriate based on cultural standards of parent-child relationship and *Adab*. As discussed in Chapter 4, for many, avoiding conversations about sexualities-related issues in the presence of an older member of the family is considered to be a way of respecting them and showing *Adab*. Thus, cultural expectations also fuel the discomfort of such conversations between parents and their children.

5.1.2.5   Other Adults in the Family Setting

It seems that while in situations like the above, in which parents tend to abide by such a way of understanding cultural expectations, sometimes other adult members of the family, such as aunts or uncles who are younger than the child's parents, take the role of the trusted adult:

> Parent: My son sometimes talks about these things with my younger sister, his youngest aunt. I think he wants a female opinion. It is good for him to speak about private matters to an older person and get guidance.

> FM: Why not you?

> Parent: I think he is more comfortable having such conversations with his aunt. I do not want to break the respect between us. And I am sure my sister is not directing him toward bad decisions or keeping me in the dark if something serious is happening in his life.

> FM: Is he aware that your sister keeps you informed about their conversations?

> *Parent: I think he knows. But I pretend as if I am not aware. (P11 – mother of a 16-year-old boy)*

Upholding the role of the trusted adult by other adult members of the family seems to be appealing, especially to those families in which not talking about sexuality-related issues is expected from youngers as a manifestation of respect for their

parents. The reason for finding this approach appealing could be that parents get to maintain what they recognise as respectful behaviour and keep their control over the process by proxy, something that, as will be discussed later in this chapter, they are not sure they will get from school-based SRE.

As children grow older, it is often observed that they seek out a trusted adult figure beyond the confines of their family environment, whether within the school setting or in the broader society. Moreover, it is commonly suggested that children benefit from cultivating a network of trusted adults rather than relying solely on one individual, which brings us to the next part of this chapter, regular teachers and school staff.

5.1.3 TEACHERS

Because the education system has a significant role to play in shaping the attitudes, values, and behaviours of young people towards sexualities and relationships, advocates of SRE think of schools as an appropriate site for implementing SRE programmes. In this section, three sub-themes that have emerged from interviews are discussed, shedding light on school-based SRE programmes (Figures 5-1). These sub-themes highlight 'The Importance of a Non-parental Trusted Adult', 'The Necessity of Teacher Training Programmes', and 'Practical Considerations for Implementing SRE in Schools', including the optimal duration of the SRE programme, the possibility of integrating SRE into current schoolbooks and the existing subjects in the curriculum, and the delicate issue of respecting a student's wishes to withdraw.

5.1.3.1 The Importance of a Non-parental Trusted Adult

Parents and other adults in the family setting are usually chosen as the trusted adult by the children in an informal, naturally occurring way. Some students might find a trusted adult in the school setting in the same fashion. These non-parental trusted adults, also sometimes known as "very important non-parental adults" (Ahrens et al., 2011; Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002), hold significant potential for a positive impact on adolescents. However, not all individuals have the privilege of naturally

developing such meaningful connections, and even if they do, it is advisable that children develop a support network comprising multiple trusted adults to guarantee access to assistance, regardless of location, which could be a protective measure against abuse. In addition, the provision of adult support from individuals other than parents has demonstrated favourable outcomes for children, particularly for those with a single parent (Ashton et al., 2021). Thus, it seems sensible to assign a formal mentor to all students in the school setting. Some of the schools included in my research had already implemented this role under different names:

> We have someone called the guidance teacher, sometimes referred to as the father of the class. This guidance teacher is someone who children like, also they refer to him, also he is knowledgeable, also he is informed about children and their situation. No other teacher is allowed to get close to children regarding these issues [issues related to sexualities or relationships]. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

> Yes, we added a clinical counsellor ourselves. Because there was a high demand for it and therefore, we asked a lady to work in the school as a clinical counsellor, and students refer to her if they have any problems. But I am sure that officially there is no such thing as a clinical counsellor for second intermediate grades because the Ministry of Education has removed this role. This lady that we have [the clinical counsellor] does the clinical work that is needed. Sometimes she talks to parents if it is required. Sometimes she just talks with children. (GT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

> In our school, we have a guidance teacher who plays a role similar to that of a counsellor in other schools. They dedicate considerable time to building relationships with children, getting to know them, and encouraging them to share any concerns they may have. Also, we have a nurturing team consisting of psychologists. They are also available for children to talk to when needed. (DH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

The principal duty of these trusted adults is to create rapport with students, which results in their trust and encourages them to voice their concerns and feel safe to ask questions. Though their role is not confined to SRE-related issues and may encompass providing support in other academic or non-academic challenges that students may encounter during their studies, it appears that these adults are already grappling with a significant number of SRE-related issues. Thus, it is impotent for these formally assigned trusted adults to be familiar with SRE and how to address the different problems around sexualities and relationships and, most importantly, child safeguarding issues.

Nevertheless, there are instances when the formally designated non-parental trusted adult may differ from the person the student naturally gravitates towards. Although it would be ideal to provide comprehensive training for all teachers on addressing SRE-related issues, until such measures are implemented, the officially designated trusted adult can provide direct or indirect support. For instance, during the interviews, some respondents were asked about their protocols for handling cases where students disclose experiencing sexual misconduct to a teacher. In schools where an officially designated trusted adult was in place, it appeared to be their responsibility to deal with such situations.

> Usually, students find a teacher they are more comfortable with, and they talk to that particular teacher, or they talk to their friends. But we try to inform the students that perhaps, for example, your math teacher is not necessarily an expert in dealing with such issues, and her behaviour and her reaction to your situation might lead to more harm. We expect teachers to either persuade the students themselves to refer to the clinical counsellor or that teachers themselves refer to the clinical counsellor to get advice on how to deal with the situation without mentioning the name of the students. (GT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

In order to support students who are facing challenging situations, as GT1 suggested, an officially designated trusted adult can provide either direct support, by encouraging the student to discuss their concerns and facilitating this process,

or indirect support, by guiding a naturally chosen trusted adult on how to address the situation appropriately. In either scenario, it is essential to have straightforward child safeguarding protocols in place. For example, while it is necessary to assure students of confidentiality as much as possible, it is important to communicate that there are protocols in place that all teachers and school staff must abide by, which means that in certain circumstances, teachers and school staff must break confidentiality. This approach ensures that children receive proper support, prioritises student safety, and maintains professional boundaries between teachers and students. Many schools in this research lacked a clear child safeguarding protocol and tended to handle cases on a case-by-case basis, resulting in many teachers reporting feeling uncertain about how to address child safeguarding issues.

In some schools in this research, where there was no officially designated trusted adult, the headteacher appeared to be responsible for addressing SRE-related issues on a case-by-case basis, which is evident in the following quotation:

> The mathematics teacher [who has been approached by a student about sexual misconduct] should inform the headteacher. It really depends on the student and the situation. Sometimes, the headmaster decides to involve the parents, which is usually the case; other times, he chooses to deal with it without informing the parents. Ultimately, it is his call. I personally know of at least one case where the decision was not to involve the parents, but it was not about abuse. It was about being in a relationship with a girl. (LT1 – teacher in a boys-only school)

It is apparent that not all schools have an officially designated trusted adult who handles the personal issues that students may face. Furthermore, among the schools that have such a role, with the exception of one instance in which a guidance teacher was employed to educate students on puberty and related matters, the designated trusted adult is primarily used to respond to incidents that had already occurred, provide assistance, and answer queries, rather than for preventive education to prepare students for potential forthcoming issues.

5.1.3.2   The Necessity of Teacher Training Programmes

During research interviews, parents frequently expressed concerns about their lack of knowledge regarding issues related to SRE, often believing that teachers are more knowledgeable about these topics and have more access to appropriate educational resources. On the other hand, the teachers I spoke with did not sound confident and emphasised the importance of receiving some form of teacher training to implement SRE effectively in schools. Supporting their position, Rose et al. (2018) noted that educators in their study found the professional development provided by the school a facilitating factor and helpful in increasing their comfort in the classroom. Moreover, a systematic review of successful SRE programmes (Torres-Cortés et al., 2023) revealed that the majority of interventions provided training to their facilitators, typically ranging from two days to two weeks in duration. Thus, while parents may perceive teachers as more knowledgeable about SRE, it is crucial for teachers to receive training to implement SRE programmes in schools successfully.

> I think one of the most important issues is that we do not have such people [SRE educators]. Someone who knows exactly what she is doing and is capable of delivering that information and is able to answer students' questions, and is able to manage the class, because students are not going to be silent in a class like that. She should be able to face those questions and give appropriate answers immediately without causing any harm. Moreover, she should be knowledgeable regarding the biological aspects, religious aspects, legal aspects, etc. She should be well aware of all of these. I believe if we're going to have a separate class dedicated to sex education, then we need to educate special teachers to deliver that course. However, I think we should also educate other teachers, for example, mathematics teachers or physics teachers, so that they know some basics regarding such issues and how to handle related cases. (GT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

In addition to highlighting the significance of teachers' training in the above quotation, GT1, a teacher, an academic counsellor, and the deputy head of research in a girls-

only school, mentioned more issues about practical considerations for implementing SRE in school.

5.1.3.3   Practical Considerations for Implementing SRE in Schools

GT1 raised three more crucial points regarding teachers as sexualities and relationships educators, which echoes the views of many other interviewees. Firstly, GT1 emphasises that, as discussed earlier, in order to ensure that children receive the appropriate support, all teachers and school staff, regardless of their role, should receive guidance on how to handle situations where children choose to consult them and seek their advice about SRE-related issues.

Secondly, GT1 highlights the critical role of effective classroom management skills in delivering SRE to a group of students. The skilful facilitation of discussions around sensitive and controversial topics is essential. This emphasis aligns with findings from a study on key factors that influence comfort in delivering and receiving SRE, which identify classroom management challenges as a significant barrier to comfort when teaching sexual health lessons (Rose et al., 2018). This concern is also one of the main reasons why many interviewees express concern about delivering SRE to a group of children and prefer individualised delivery.

Another noteworthy point arising from the comments of GT1 regarding the attributes and characteristics of an appropriate SRE deliverer concerns a commonly discussed topic among interviewees regarding the optimal approach to delivering SRE, that is, whether SRE should be taught as a standalone class by a separate dedicated teacher, and with its own textbook, or if it should be integrated into existing subjects and the broader school curriculum. Addressing this question requires grappling with another question simultaneously: what should be the ideal duration of an SRE programme?

The decision about how to structure SRE education will depend on a range of factors and usually poses several considerations, one of which is ensuring that SRE is given the necessary time and attention. There is no definitive answer to the question of how long an SRE programme for students should last. Some researchers advocate a single,

intensive course or workshop, while others may recommend incorporating SRE into multiple subjects over the course of several years. According to a systematic review of randomised trials that examined shared components of successful SRE interventions for adolescents worldwide, there is considerable variation in the number of intervention sessions, the total hours devoted to the intervention, and their frequency among these successful programmes (Torres-Cortés et al., 2023).

It seems that in the absence of SRE in Iran's national curriculum, studies on SRE in Iran have only been able to focus on interventions that involve external facilitators teaching students or parents for a brief period of time. It is also noteworthy that the majority of interviewees in my study seem to assume that the establishment of an SRE programme in schools could be achieved by introducing a relatively brief supplementary class dedicated to issues surrounding sexualities and relationships, which would not require any alterations to the existing curriculum or its educational content. Many teachers and headteachers interviewed in my study acknowledged that SRE is an indispensable subject currently absent from the curriculum; however, their assumption seems to be that such programmes are better to be offered as an after-school activity.

In the current context of schools in Iran, the advantages of introducing a short supplementary class for SRE involve practical considerations such as feasibility, timing, and cost-effectiveness. For instance, many interviewees expressed the concern that SRE programmes, due to their controversial nature, could result in challenging the Ministry of Education or parents, as mentioned in Chapter 4, which could consequently harm the reputation of their school or have other adverse consequences. In this situation, implementing an after-school programme that leaves the rest of the curriculum untouched can be more swiftly accomplished and involves fewer bureaucratic obstacles. Moreover, employing a temporary lecturer who specialises in this area has numerous benefits, which will be elaborated on in the next section of this chapter, which examines the role of professional visitors in SRE, alongside some of the criticisms of this source for SRE. Here the question is whether such SRE programmes can allocate adequate time to address the topic effectively:

I am not an education expert, but I have concerns about how my daughter can learn everything about sex in just a few hours. They discussed getting periods in my daughter's biology and religious education classes and even brought in a gynaecologist to talk to them about it when she was around nine. With all that, still, my daughter was not ready for it. For example, they did not mention that periods could be painful, or perhaps she did not hear it, or maybe she had forgotten about it because she was not prepared when she got her first period two years later. I think she needs to learn more about it now that her skin is affected by puberty. I do not believe they can cover all of these things in just a few hours. Can they? (P5 – mother of an 11-year-old girl and a 9-year-old boy)

Considering that puberty and related religious rituals are among the most frequently covered aspects of SRE in some schools in Iran, there is much to learn from such attempts to address this topic comprehensively. The quotation above highlights a crucial point to consider. Specific SRE topics, including those related to puberty, should be introduced at an appropriate time that aligns with the students' developmental milestones and emotional and psychological maturity levels. While it is desirable to have periodic talks and prepare children in advance, the provision of an ongoing open discussion is also necessary. This approach ensures that children receive the required support promptly when facing challenges. Thus, sometimes, the question is not about the number of hours allocated to the teaching process but rather the availability of ongoing support and access to individuals who can address students' concerns and respond to their inquiries in a timely manner.

Although many interviewees directly acknowledged the importance of having a trusted adult, for example, the father of the class, or clinical counsellor, to provide guidance and support to students, some indirectly acknowledged this by narrating examples of when students approached teachers for advice regarding SRE-related issues. As mentioned earlier, using a trusted adult as the SRE educator is preferable, whether at home or school. Nevertheless, given the absence of this role in many schools, the question remains whether SRE should be taught as an independent course or integrated into the existing school curriculum.

To start with, it is worth noting that if all the topics recommended for inclusion in an SRE programme were grouped as a single subject, the resulting course would be highly diverse, heterogenous, and disparate in terms of the nature of the topics covered. Teaching such a subject would be an art, as it would involve jumping, for instance, from biology to media literacy, while making the transitions between subjects sound legato. Given the broad range of topics involved, some interviewees suggested that it would be more effective to integrate SRE into other subjects that align more closely with the underlying principles and premises of each particular topic. By doing so, students would already have a solid foundation in the concepts relevant to each specific area of SRE and would already be in tune with some of the related principles and premises, making it easier for them to learn the material.

Moreover, some interviewees stated that SRE could not be added to the current curriculum as a standalone subject without considering adjustments to the rest of the curriculum and school policies. Instead, SRE requires collaboration between teachers and school staff as well as broader changes in school policies. For instance, the headteacher of a boys-only school explained how his students are trained to avoid interacting with girls in the following quotation and how no one jokes about it or indirectly approves it. The rationales behind such strategies were discussed in Chapter 4. However, the point being made here is that many interviewees, including OH, believe that in order to encourage a specific attitudinal or behavioural change, the entire school "atmosphere" needs to be in synchrony:

> We make sure to create a certain atmosphere in our school that helps shape the character of our students. This is very important during those crucial years. All our teachers, staff, and even parents are aligned with this goal, and we take every opportunity to reinforce it in every classroom. It is important for us to maintain a consistent approach and not contradict ourselves within the school. We want to avoid confusing the students or sending them mixed messages, so everything needs to be coherent and in line with our goal. (OH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

Developing various skills and characteristics, such as self-respect, respect for others, critical thinking, logical reasoning, and responsible decision-making, is crucial for students and should be emphasised throughout their education. Encouraging such characteristics and the development of these skills in students should be incorporated into the broader policies of schools, and schools should use every opportunity to achieve this purpose. Goldfarb and Lieberman (2021) noted in their review of three decades of research on comprehensive sex education that many of the positive outcomes and promising approaches to creating inclusive and affirming school environments were observed in subjects such as social studies, English, physical education, mathematics, music, and art, rather than in traditional health or sex education classes. Many of the educational objectives in SRE could be covered under a more general format; however, they take on a different and more practical significance when discussed in the context of sexualities and relationships, and it is useful to consider both general capacities and capacities specifically related to SRE, which allows for a comprehensive understanding of the subject matter while addressing the unique aspects of sexualities and relationships. By adopting this approach, it is imperative that any SRE programme, even an extra-curricular after-school class, aligns seamlessly with the school's policies and objectives, necessitating an in-depth, long-term collaboration and mutual understanding between the person who teaches this class and the school officials.

While examining the challenges in delivering SRE, Rose et al. (2018) reported that the lack of a dedicated or permanent classroom space specifically assigned for teaching health education was identified by teachers as a significant barrier. Nonetheless, in my study, some interviewees recommended integrating SRE into other subjects in the curriculum instead of a standalone course, in addition to commonly suggesting SRE in the form of a short course facilitated by external visiting professionals.

It should also be noted that some of the topics recommended to be covered in an SRE programme are already incorporated to a certain extent in some subjects of the current curriculum. For instance, various biological aspects of SRE, such as anatomy and physiology, bodily changes during puberty, the reproductive system, assisted reproductive technology, and topics on menstruation and puberty, are already part of

the biology syllabus. While they necessitate a distinct framing, narrative, and emphasis when discussed in the context of SRE, integrating the learning of these aspects within a biology class, alongside other biological topics, seems logical and creates a more coherent learning experience. Another example is the religious aspects of sexuality, including views, values, and rituals, which are currently the most frequently addressed aspect of SRE in Iran. These topics are usually covered in religious education classes, making it more sensible to teach them in this context. Some interviewees mentioned instances where students raised SRE-related questions during class discussions, even if these were not explicitly covered in the textbook. For example:

> We can have some general educational programmes. For example, we have a course called 'Media Literacy' in which, although nothing is mentioned directly in the textbook, that class has the potential to cover some of these issues, especially when some related discussions are raised during the class, and our teachers do that even now. For example, last year, some of the students decided to work on a topic which was related to sexuality, and they had a discussion about it inside the classroom. (GT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

While it is true that specific SRE topics are already integrated into the current curriculum, there is still room for improvement, as outlined in Chapter 4. It is currently evident that some of the core topics within SRE are missing from the schoolbooks used in Iran. It is also worth noting that some of the topics are only included in the curriculum for students studying empirical sciences, whereas it is crucial to ensure that all students receive the necessary education in SRE, regardless of their area of study. Furthermore, many relevant issues, such as media literacy, are not presented in a way that encourages discussions about sexualities and relationships, nor do they facilitate practical application in the context of students' sexual lives and relationships. Without revisions to the current schoolbooks, relying on them for SRE appears inadequate. Additionally, although some of the desired topics for an SRE programme have already been integrated with other subjects in the national curriculum and are part of broader school policies, it is important to note that combining SRE with compulsory elements of the curriculum removes children's and their parents' wishes to withdraw:

> To be honest, I think the only way we could have sexual education in schools is if it becomes a compulsory part of the national curriculum. In this way, headteachers, teachers, and, most importantly, parents will have to abide by it. Otherwise, no school dares to touch this subject. Parents will oppose, no doubt. (GT3 – teacher in two girls-only schools)

This quotation is another manifestation of the power struggle that can arise between parents and schools, discussed in Chapter 4, and portrays the potential conflict between parents and schools regarding the implementation of SRE, which can result in one party attempting to impose their will on the other. GT3's emphasis on parents' objections and the necessity of mandatory SRE assumes that parents oppose SRE in schools, which is not necessarily the case. Moreover, even if some parents object, it raises the question of whether forcing them to send their children to a class they disagree with is sensible, especially considering that some parents, whom I interviewed, expressed concerns about their ability to control the information their children receive when the school is responsible for SRE, as discussed in Chapter 4:

> In the West [usually means Europe and the USA], they teach children how to have sex instead of how not to have sex. I know that my daughter's school are very careful about these issues. If you want the truth, that is one of the main reasons I send my daughter there. I enjoy it when I see how they understand our red lines; otherwise, I would not send my daughter there. (P16 – father of a 16-year-old girl)

Given current policies, the introduction of statutory SRE as part of the national curriculum in Iran appears unlikely. However, even if such a programme were implemented, students should be able to withdraw if they or their parents desire. It is essential to communicate the nature and purpose of the SRE programme to parents, highlighting the benefits of this education and any potential negative consequences of withdrawal for their child. Covering some of the more sensitive topics in a discrete subject delivered in a separate class may be beneficial to provide students and parents with more options regarding when and how they are willing to learn about them.

After participating in the interview, some headteachers expressed their interest in having me visit their school once or twice a year to deliver SRE lectures to their students. Predictably, all the invites came from girls-only schools. At the boys-only schools, headteachers sometimes asked me if I knew a male colleague who could do so. Although, based on their interviews, their expectations for the content of the lectures leaned more towards promoting abstinence-only until marriage rather than a comprehensive SRE programme, their awareness of the need for having such programmes and their understanding of the necessity of meeting those needs, were heart-warming. This highlights the need for professional visitors, which will be discussed in the next section.

5.1.4 PROFESSIONAL VISITORS

Throughout the course of the interviews, participants commonly mentioned the use of outside facilitators and visiting professionals as a means of providing SRE. The suggested professionals came from a diverse range of backgrounds, encompassing trained SRE facilitators, healthcare providers, psychosexual therapists, and, most commonly, physicians, including gynaecologists and general practitioners. During the analysis of the interviews, three sub-themes emerged regarding the potential role of external visiting professionals in SRE (Figure 5-1). These were 'The Quality of Teaching', 'The Duration of Contact with Students', and 'The Status of The Visiting Professional as an Outsider'. Notably, all three sub-themes were mentioned both as drawbacks and as positive points, depending on the participant's perspective. It is important to reiterate that the absence of SRE in Iran's national curriculum, and, consequently, the lack of dedicated SRE teachers for extended periods, has led to research on the effectiveness of SRE in Iran primarily focusing on interventions facilitated by external facilitators (for example, Gholizadegan Rayat et al., 2022; Hatami et al., 2015).

5.1.4.1 The Quality of Teaching

Regarding the quality of teaching, some aspects can be considered: class management skills, the quality of educational content, and pedagogy. During interviews with teachers and headteachers, the first aspect was more frequently mentioned, whereas the importance of the other aspects was also highlighted by parents and was repeatedly emphasised by students during online large group discussions.

As seen in the preceding section of this chapter, managing an SRE class can be seen as a possible obstacle to teaching SRE. While some external facilitators might be experienced in dealing with such matters, such as specialist sexualities and relationships educators whose main job is facilitating SRE classes in various schools, which at this moment seems to be absent, or unofficially sparsely present in Iran, other external visitors, such as medical specialists, might not be prepared for managing classroom challenges or equipped with skills in delivering sensitive topics for a young audience, as their main field of expertise is not school education:

> We invite a physician to have a session on menstruation and respond to students' questions, but we always ensure that one of our own teachers is present during the session. We always have someone in the class. The main reason is that we want to have a precise understanding of the information being presented to the students, so we ask the teacher to submit a report after the session. But also, in our experience, it is beneficial to have someone who can calm the class. (PH – headteacher of a girls-only school)

PH highlighted that while medical doctors may possess expertise in their field, they may not necessarily be skilled in managing a classroom full of teenagers. The school which PH leads acknowledges this matter, and while, by inviting a physician to address students' questions about menstruation, they demonstrate a commitment to providing accurate information, they also have one of their regular teachers present during the session to help maintain order in the classroom, ensuring a conducive learning environment and balancing the expertise of external professionals with the classroom management skills of their regular teachers. By reviewing multiple articles, Jan de Vries et al. (2009) notes that teachers tend to place more emphasis on

maintaining control over the classroom and minimising disruptions, as compared to external facilitators, and some teachers express discontent regarding the notion of surrendering their classroom control to individuals from outside the school. However, as discussed earlier, regular teachers themselves might find it a challenge to manage such sessions.

A positive aspect of inviting an external professional visitor for the delivery of SRE in terms of pedagogy could be the potential for introducing a new teaching style and expanding students' learning experiences. While it was not mentioned during the interviews, external facilitators can offer fresh perspectives, introduce different angles to the discussions, and enhance the educational experience. They may potentially bring alternative teaching methods that can expand the current approach. However, it is worth noting that interviewees invariably told me that, currently, the teaching techniques employed by external professionals who teach menstruation in schools tend to align with the traditional teacher-centred method, and the use of more innovative and student-centred approaches appears limited.

Regarding the quality of educational content, some interviewees suggested that engaging visiting professionals for SRE classes would provide access to expert and specialised knowledge. However, the majority of the topics covered in SRE classes do not require specialist knowledge, and the current knowledge gap that some teachers might have regarding SRE-related issues could be addressed through teacher training programmes, which were less commonly focused on by the interviewees. For instance, it is unnecessary to have a medical doctor or psychosexual therapist to discuss topics such as genital anatomy or menstruation cycles, as is the case in some schools, including the one where PH is the headteacher and the one attended by P5's daughter. The question that arises is why interviewees continue to demand the involvement of such specialists. One possible explanation proposed by a teacher in an all-girls school is the following:

> It is one thing when they [students] hear it from us; it is a totally different level of influence when they hear it from an expert. (FT1 − teacher in a girls-only school)

One possible explanation for why the impact of educational programmes on students might be more significant when delivered by an external facilitator labelled as an expert is that some students consider the level of formal education in the relevant field as a determinant of the credibility of information sources, as observed during my online large group discussions with students and supported by some of the literature on youth perspectives on SRE:

> There is a great emphasis on the level of education. Also, they [younger individuals] use terms like 'specialist', 'experts', and 'professionals' to describe who they are demanding as an SRE teacher, and they do not seem to consider their regular teachers as one. (Translated field notes – April 2021)

> The perceived credibility of the information source was also important for these young people. For some respondents, credibility of the information source was determined by formal education. (Kimmel et al., 2013, p. 9)

5.1.4.2   The Duration of Contact with Students

Another frequently mentioned issue with external facilitators is the limited duration of their engagement with students. The involvement of external facilitators often results in short-term, episodic interventions. Sell et al. noted this trend in their review, where "studies involving outside facilitators appeared to be pilot or one-off projects, or required substantial resources" (K. Sell et al., 2023, p. 69). The brevity of contact between visiting professionals and students could be considered a challenge, particularly regarding establishing rapport, providing long-term support, and the potential disharmony between the external facilitator and the school's policies. However, some interviewees highlighted the advantages of this approach, including its practicality, rapid accessibility, and potential cultural appropriateness.

The short duration of interactions between outside facilitators and students does not provide lasting support. Episodic interventions, such as one-off talks or short-term programmes in response to a crisis, often lack prior preparation, rapport building, or

opportunities for further reflection or follow-up questions. That being said, the difference between, for example, a school biology teacher and an external lecturer is negligible if the topic is only mentioned once, with no room for continued engagement. As previously noted by P5, external visitors and regular teachers were involved in educating her daughter about menstruation. Nevertheless, the absence of ongoing support and guidance leaves students, such as P5's daughter, feeling abandoned during times of need.

As discussed in the previous section of this chapter, some interviewees, such as OH, believe in creating a particular atmosphere in their school that helps shape the character of their students. They argue that in order to encourage specific attitudinal or behavioural changes, the entire school atmosphere needs to be in alignment. Consequently, if SRE sessions are to be implemented, they should be in coherence with the school's policies and objectives. This approach requires a comprehensive, long-term collaboration and mutual understanding between the external facilitator and the school officials. Otherwise, students may receive mixed messages, leading to further confusion instead of finding answers to their questions.

Although interviewees discussed the possibility of adding SRE as a new subject to the national curriculum or dedicating a regular class to SRE, such decisions are beyond the authority of individual schools. Therefore, for many schools, the only practical option in the absence of any changes to the national curriculum is a brief extracurricular SRE programme. Moreover, in the absence of any national teachers' training programmes for SRE, external facilitators who seem to be fit for delivering SRE due to their field of expertise are likely to be considered by schools to be the most feasible and least costly choice for providing such programmes.

Nevertheless, some interviewees acknowledged that although employing external facilitators may appear more feasible in the short term, teacher training programmes are more cost-effective and less time-consuming in the long term. For instance, at the end of one of the interviews, when I was invited to conduct a session for parents, particularly mothers, the headteacher said:

It would be great if you could conduct a session with our students' mothers. It would be even better if you could conduct several sessions with some of our teachers, enabling them to lead such sessions in your absence. (FH1 – co-headteacher of a girls-only school)

Here, an additional noteworthy aspect pertains to the demand for educational sessions focused on parents, which was also a common request made by interviewees, including FH1. As highlighted in the preceding sections, some parents appear to lack confidence when it comes to matters concerning SRE. As a result, it appears that numerous schools are grappling with parental demands for instruction on this subject and are attempting to address it. In certain instances, some interviewees advocated parental SRE programmes as a more pragmatic alternative approach to providing SRE for students:

We have had some educational programmes for parents, and I can remember that a few times, we invited lecturers who talked about sexuality-related issues to the parents. I think it is more practical to have that sort of education for parents, rather than students. (GT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

Several studies have focused on designing SRE interventions that target mothers in Iran. For example, an external facilitator trained mothers to become self-sufficient in teaching SRE to their children (Soleimani et al., 2021) or improving their knowledge and attitudes towards the subject (Martin et al., 2018). Thus, educational sessions facilitated by external professionals may effectively address parental demands in Iran.

Another point to consider is that some may perceive brief SRE sessions provided by external professional visitors as more culturally appropriate. While recognising the significance of offering ongoing support to students, some interviewees expressed the view that it would be more fitting for students to receive SRE from an external facilitator with restricted availability. In their opinion, this would help maintain the traditional position of teachers in the classroom:

We want our students to understand that they should not engage in conversations of a personal nature with their teachers. Teachers hold a certain position of respect in our culture, and it is important to maintain that respect. Therefore, we discourage any teasing, joking, or comments with sexual references in the presence of our teachers. I believe that if this boundary is crossed during such classes [potential SRE sessions], it may lead to further misbehaviour and disrespect towards teachers from the students. (CH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

As discussed in Chapter 4, mentioning sexuality-related topics in the presence of an adult is considered disrespectful behaviour and far from *Adab*. Furthermore, the expectations from an individual who holds the role of a teacher, the type of relationship that is anticipated between them and the students, and the boundaries that are expected to be established between them and the students, might restrict teachers from discussing SRE-related topics or allowing students to ask questions in comfort without violating those expectations. Many teachers may struggle to deal with the conflicts they encounter between teaching SRE, and the expectations placed upon them in their everyday school lives. However, an external visitor does not encounter such long-term expectations and will not have long-term interaction with students. Given that external visitors are viewed as 'outsiders', they are relieved of many of the expectations that are placed on teachers, which leads us to the third sub-theme.

5.1.4.3   The Status of The Visiting Professional as an Outsider

The third sub-theme to be addressed in this section of this chapter is the status of the visiting professional as an outsider, which will be explored from two aspects: being unfamiliar to students; and the possibility of accentuating students' perception of adults as being out-of-touch.

One crucial aspect of perceiving external facilitators as outsiders is that students might regard them as neutral and capable of creating an impartial and unbiased environment. While teachers have the advantage of understanding their students'

individual histories and backgrounds, which can be invaluable in addressing sensitive topics, answering their questions, and providing support, this familiarity may lead to prejudices and preconceived assumptions. Students may perceive certain teachers as having biases in favour of or against particular students or decisions:

> While some students express valid concerns about the confidentiality of SRE sessions, others may worry about potential repercussions if they disclose personal information to their teachers. These concerns may be related to how their teachers may react to the information during the session, as well as how it may influence the teacher's future behaviour towards the student. (Translated field notes – May 2021)

In a study in the United Kingdom, young individuals favoured having sexual health professionals deliver SRE due to the belief that they are less likely to pass judgment, have the capability to offer greater confidentiality, and reduce the potential for embarrassment as a result of their anonymity (Pound et al., 2016). These unfamiliar outsiders are not typically seen as having preconceived notions, and because students know they are unlikely to meet them again, this can contribute to open space for discussion and learning.

The potential positive aspect of this unfamiliarity, therefore, lies in the opportunity it presents for open and unrestricted discussions. However, it is important to acknowledge the potential downside, which involves the risk of the person in this position exploiting their power. When a stranger, labelled as an expert, appears for the first time, and engages in discussions on otherwise taboo topics such as sexualities and relationships, it creates ample space for students to project their own thoughts and feelings onto that person. Hence, it is crucial for visiting professionals to possess an understanding of the psychological phenomena known as erotic transference, which involves the transfer of sexual emotions and expectations onto another individual, and projection, another psychological process, which works as a defence mechanism where one attributes their thoughts, feelings, or impulses to someone else. These phenomena tend to intensify when interacting with individuals of whom nothing is known about their background and personal circumstances, which is the

case with most visiting professionals. This situation raises potential concerns regarding the safeguarding of students.

Another prevalent perception among students is that when it comes to issues related to sexualities and relationships, adults, particularly their teachers, are out of touch, implying that they may either be unable to empathise with and comprehend the perspectives of students on such issues or may be ill-equipped to discuss such matters. This matter is in addition to when students find it culturally inappropriate to bring up such issues in front of adults:

> It seems like they [younger individuals] have abandoned any expectation of having a productive and in-depth conversation with their parents or teachers regarding their personal concerns and dilemmas. Instead, they have developed a mindset that favours seeking emotional support and a second opinion from their peers. Perhaps that is why their expectations from school-based SRE are often limited to obtaining factual information, mainly on the biomedical aspects of sexualities, in a timely manner. (Translated field notes – April 2021)

The students may perceive conversations about sexualities and relationships with adults as unproductive in addressing their needs and concerns, and this perception may be compounded by the presence of an outsider adult, which further emphasises the sense of disconnection between students and the adult world. Goldstein (2020) has noted that young people often criticise adults for prioritising the biomedical aspects of sexuality, such as contraception and reproduction, over other facets that may be of greater interest to them. As a result, there is a widespread perception of adults being out of touch with younger individuals, which, in Goldstein's opinion, has resulted in an increasing preference for SRE interventions led by peers or youth. While I agree that peers and peer-led interventions may be better equipped to address this barrier, my proposition is that teachers are not necessarily perceived to be out of touch solely because of their focus on teaching the biomedical aspects of SRE. Instead, it is because they are perceived to be out of touch in other areas of sexualities that

students only expect them to provide the bare minimum of SRE, which could be the less controversial aspects, such as scientific biomedical facts on the subject matter.

In the following quotation, JH, a headteacher of a girls-only school, mentions several pivotal aspects that highlight some of the issues explored in interviews concerning the role of external facilitators in SRE. JH's quotation not only offers valuable insights but also serves to summarise some of the sub-themes deliberated upon in this section. Here, JH is explaining the approach taken by her school, where a medical doctor is invited to educate students on topics related to puberty, with a particular focus on menstruation:

> A specialist, an older lady, usually, with a bigger age gap, so children are more polite and bashful in front of her, addresses this issue [puberty] but only an overview and without getting into the details. The students who have already experienced it are already aware. Those who knew about it but were shy to ask would learn, and those who were clueless stayed the same. Because she is not a teacher or the school's counsellor, or the school's nurse, and she is just a visitor for one day, students do not create any connections or relationships with her. It is just enough for the school to feel that they have said something in this regard. Then we have a dialogue with the mothers. We tell them that your children know this much about this issue, but you need to tell them in more detail, and then they usually talk about it with their children. However, usually, students do not get to know what it [menstruation] is before it happens to them. (JH – headteacher of a girls-only school)

To start with, in terms of teaching quality, JH posits that the age gap and unfamiliarity with the visiting professional may lead to students being more respectful and reserved, potentially facilitating class management. However, an important question arises: does this environment truly create an encouraging atmosphere for students to ask questions and seek clarification when needed? Moreover, when it comes to the quality of educational content, JH employs the term 'specialist', perhaps to imply that they are providing the most competent educator available. However, it is noteworthy

that, in this school, the specialist's role appears to be restricted to offering a general overview of menstruation, presented in a somewhat vague manner!

Regarding the duration of contact with students, JH highlights that due to the brief nature of the external facilitator's visit, there is limited opportunity for extended discussions, potential unwanted interactions, or unintended consequences. JH notes that this brevity brings conversations on such topics to an early end and reduces the likelihood of ongoing discussions among students, a concern voiced by multiple interviewees. This raises the question of whom students should turn to if they wish to reflect on the topics covered and have further questions. Who will establish a connection and provide long-term support to students?

JH later suggests that mothers should fulfil this role, but it raises the question of whether mothers are adequately prepared and confident enough to take on these responsibilities. Suppose the ultimate responsibility lies with mothers to ensure their daughters are well-informed about menstruation. Would it not be more effective to directly provide clear and comprehensive explanations to mothers rather than loosely addressing the topic with students? This leads us to the crucial role professional visitors can play in educating teachers and parents. This approach would better prepare mothers for the task at hand, equipping them with the necessary knowledge and confidence to address the topic with their daughters in a thorough and supportive manner.

Finally, JH emphasises that the external facilitator's presence is limited to being a visitor for just one day. Students in the school do not develop significant connections with this external professional, which may lead to the perception that when it comes to matters concerning sexualities and relationships, adults, even those discussing relevant topics, appear emotionally and physically unavailable, thus seeming out of touch.

The final point about external facilitators is that they do not necessarily have to be adult professionals but can be peer educators. This leads us to the subsequent section, which explores peer education in SRE. However, before proceeding to the next section, it is beneficial to reiterate that according to the studies conducted in Iran, as

discussed in Chapter 2, in comparison with peer education, visiting medical practitioners showed higher efficacy in SRE (Azizi et al., 2008; Babapour et al., 2023). In the following section of this chapter, I will explore why peer education programmes of this nature may not fully realise their potential efficacy.

5.1.5 PEERS

School-based, peer-led SRE programmes could be suggested as a means of promoting SRE among young individuals. However, during interviews conducted for this research, it became evident that the idea of such programmes was consistently rejected by the interviewees. This section of this chapter aims to understand and explore the underlying reasons and potential factors contributing to interviewees' resistance or limited acceptance of peer education. While school-based, peer-led programmes faced opposition, some parents acknowledged the potential benefits of peer education within the family setting, particularly through older siblings providing SRE, support and guidance to their younger counterparts. Three main sub-themes discussed here are 'Value of Peer Conversations', 'Barriers to Peer Education', and 'Peers Within the Family'.

5.1.5.1 Value of Peer Conversations

Building on the literature on peer education, discussed in Chapter 2, it can be concluded that peer-led SRE approaches are not inherently superior or inferior to adult-led programmes in terms of changing young people's behaviours. That being said, while quantitative outcome evaluations tend to show the limited efficacy of peer-led interventions in terms of behaviour change, both quantitative and qualitative process evaluations indicate that peer-led SRE interventions are valuable for participants in other ways. For instance, peer-led interventions may be more enjoyable, more effective at changing norms around sex, and create a more comfortable environment for communication with peer leaders than adult-led programmes (Goldstein, 2020).

My impression, formed during the online large group discussions, is that students prioritise opportunities to have conversations with their peers regarding SRE-related issues over and above statistical outcome measures. Many students placed a high value on such conversations, irrespective of whether such discussions result in significant changes in their behaviour:

> It seems like they [younger individuals] do not give each other any authoritative power or intellectual superiority. On the contrary, they often seem to find themselves the wisest ones! They are not aiming to learn something from each other. Yet they value discussions about such matters [with their peers]. They look for an honest second opinion rather than advice and count on each other for emotional support. They seem to seek empathy from their peers and share their experiences more than they do with their parents. (Translated field notes – May 2021)

5.1.5.2   Barriers to Peer Education

Students' reluctance to learn from one another may be attributed to the hierarchical structure existing in Iran, where age, position, and at times gender confers authority in the education system and other domains. This means it is unlikely that students will acknowledge individuals of the same age and educational level as having teaching capacities. Goldstein, drawing on literature in which students had concerns around confidentiality, found that students did not perceive their peer educators as competent or knowledgeable but found them more embarrassed or found the experiment more embarrassing; Goldstein suggests that "any intervention must be understood in relation to the power and relationship dynamics already at play within any given school or community context" (Goldstein, 2020, p. 13).

The hierarchical structure prevalent in the Iranian education system could provide another reason interviewees might not find peer-led education suitable for Iranian students at this time; that is, it hinders the degree to which students can actively participate in their learning process. To put it in Shiner's (1999) words, it is essential to consider the nature of peer involvement in the educational process and determine

where students' involvement is situated on the spectrum between 'peer development' and 'peer delivery'. There are varying levels of responsibility that students can undertake in peer education programmes, ranging from delivering a pre-developed curriculum to actively participating in decision-making, planning, and curriculum design.

A systematic review of 15 studies on peer educational interventions by Sun et al. (2016) ranked young people's participation levels into four categories: no responsibility, low responsibility, medium responsibility, and high responsibility. High responsibility was defined as situations in which the level of participation was either that young people initiated and directed their participation or that they initiated and shared decisions with adults. This meta-analysis revealed that interventions classified as having high levels of peer participation reported improvements in sexuality-related attitudes, whereas little to no improvement was observed in interventions with medium and low participation levels.

The reasons mentioned above may explain why peer education was sometimes not as successful as other educational methods, as seen in the PMS education study (Babapour et al., 2023) mentioned in Chapter 2. Apart from whether students could acknowledge one of their peers as an educator or not, it could be argued that the intervention method used in the peer education cohort could be more aptly described as peer-delivered rather than peer-directed or peer-developed. The curriculum was pre-designed, and decisions were already made by adults, with both groups receiving similar pre-prepared audio and video files, as well as identical educational pamphlets. The content of the training sessions in the intervention groups was identical, with the only difference being the delivery method: the peer education cohort received training from peers, while a visiting healthcare provider instructed the other group. While incorporating the upper levels of the ladder of youth participation (Hart, 1992) may lead to more fruitful peer education programmes, as discussed in Chapter 4, students' voices are often absent from decision-making processes related to their learning and educational pathways.

That being said, in my perspective, perhaps the primary obstacle to the implementation of peer education SRE programmes in Iran stems from the societal disapproval surrounding discussions of these subjects among young individuals, which in turn leads to the prevailing reluctance by adults to support or encourage conversations between peers that touch upon these topics. This brings us to a crucial point and, in my view, the key factor contributing to the consistent disapproval of peer education SRE programmes during the interviews: the deep-seated fear associated with possible perception and acknowledgement of sexual desire in younger individuals that might be triggered by peer conversations concerning sexualities and relationships among students. The following quotation is one of the responses provided to my question regarding the practicality of peer education for SRE in their school:

> I say we do not want them [their students] to dare to even whisper [used the term 'Pech Pech' in Farsi, which means secretly talking about something] about these things; you say we ask them to do it out loud?! [laughed] (DH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

While students may value discussions surrounding SRE with their peers and are keen to have more conversations with them or to seek support from their peers without fear of judgement, adults in my study were commonly not pleased with the occurrence of such interactions between younger people. As will be discussed later in this chapter, adults' concerns regarding such interactions are not necessarily related to the quality or accuracy of information being shared by peers, which could potentially be age-inappropriate or scientifically incorrect. Rather, their main concern is that such conversations may provoke sexual desire. That is one of the main reasons why there is a tendency towards providing SRE and delivering information individually rather than in a classroom setting or in groups.

5.1.5.3   Peers Within the Family

Despite the opposition of many interviewees towards peer discussions regarding sexuality-related issues, it is noteworthy that many parents recognised the potential benefits of having an older sibling or young adult family member act as a peer

educator. Some parents reported that they found the support and guidance provided by an elder sibling to be very beneficial when it came to discussing puberty and related issues with their children:

> We had a hard time with the first one [her elder son]. My husband had a chat with him, and his school provided a lot of assistance and gave us some advice, which was helpful. When it was near the second one's puberty, we felt more equipped to handle the situation, but he asked all of his questions from A [name of the elder brother], my elder son. When my husband wanted to have a chat with him, he said A [name of the elder brother] has already told me everything. (P7 – mother of two boys (16 and 11 years old) and a 9-year-old girl)

Thus, when it comes to societal disapproval of peer education, there seems to be an exemption: siblings. This suggests that there may be a potential role for peer education within the context of familial relationships, where peers can provide support and guidance to their younger siblings.

That being said, despite parents and school staff attempting to minimise peer interactions on the subjects of sexualities and relationships among younger individuals, these conversations hold significant value for the younger generation and find their way into their communication with peers, whether within the family setting or not. My field notes, written after an online large group discussion with younger individuals, contains the following observation:

> They seize every opportunity to discuss SRE-related issues with their peers, especially in situations that provide some degree of privacy from adults. Some even mentioned that they engage in these discussions while playing online video games, alongside discussing their game strategies! (Translated field notes – June 2021)

However, similar to the resistance expressed towards peer education by the interviewees, web-based peer education interventions are also likely to face opposition. Furthermore, when it comes to using media for the purpose of SRE, the

interviewees expressed more concerns than enthusiasm. This leads us to the next section of this chapter, which explores media as a source of SRE.

5.1.6 MEDIA

Although media are among the top sources of sexuality socialisation for youth (Warner et al., 2020), the question was whether parents and teachers could trust media as educational means for SRE. While media encompass various forms, when discussing media in this context, they could refer to printed media, such as books and journals, and digital media, such as movies, the internet, social media, and broadcast media, like national television. According to the findings of this study, younger individuals appear to be comfortably inclined toward using media, especially digital media, to seek answers to their questions. However, parents and teachers express some concerns about incorporating digital media into their educational role.

Before analysing interviewees' views on using media as educational resources, it is important to mention that, as discussed earlier in this chapter, one of the most desired aspects in the process of educating children about sexualities and relationships is to enable the trusted adult(s) to strengthen the rapport with the children and establish a more robust support system alongside the process of SRE. It is of utmost importance to ensure that the medium used for providing SRE does not isolate the children, leaving them unsure of whom they can talk with, trust, and seek guidance from when needed, or imply in any way that they are not welcome to ask questions and discuss such matters, especially with a trusted adult. Thus, media such as books, educational videos, television, digital games, and online resources, while potentially extremely helpful in the process of delivering educational content, are better not used as the sole means of education or as a complete substitute for one-to-one conversations between children and their trusted adult(s). That being said, based on the online large group discussions with younger individuals, it seems that, for many children, spending numerous hours searching and being engaged with media, particularly digital media, is preferable to having a few minutes of conversation with an adult.

In a study in the United Kingdom, it was found that some children preferred media as sources of information regarding love, sex and relationships on the grounds that these were "often more informative, less embarrassing to use and more attuned to their needs and concerns – and, in some respects, more morally neutral" (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004, p. 238). Although my interviewees live in a completely different context from children in the above study in terms of time and location, they seem to share at least the first two reasons why they preferred digital media. Moreover, as discussed earlier in this chapter, the sub-themes of 'Discomfort' and 'Inadequate Knowledge and Lack of Confidence' commonly arose when discussing parents' role in SRE. These sub-themes also emerged when adult interviewees attempted to recall their own childhood experiences of receiving SRE from their parents:

> I never received any sort of education about these things [sexualities and relationships] in school myself. Not even about menstruation. I still remember I was crying the first time I got my period. I was shocked, and my mother tried to calm me down. I was clueless about what was happening to me. I was uncomfortable talking about it with my mother, but she managed to calm me down. I mean, she could not explain why this was happening, of course, as she did not know it herself, only that it was normal and happens to everyone. I think the ideal for me, being a bit shy, was to read a book where I could learn about it sooner or at least when it happened. When I was going to get married, I had another difficult conversation with my mother. Very vague. I was just listening, and I remember being uncomfortable and embarrassed. I already knew it, of course, at that age, but my mom thought she needed to have the conversation with me anyway. I wish my mom could just hand me a book.
> (P5 – mother of an 11-year-old girl and a 9-year-old boy)

In the above quotation, not only was the experience of discomfort and embarrassment while receiving inadequate information mentioned, but also a specific form of media, namely books, was suggested as the preferred method for facilitating the delivery of SRE. While adults seem to trust books as the medium of choice for assisting SRE, using other media, especially digital media, to gain knowledge or establish values regarding

sexualities and relationships is more perceived as concerning by the adult interviewees rather than reassuring. The concerns expressed by adult interviewees regarding the use of media as a resource for SRE could be summarised in two sub-themes: 'The Inappropriate Use of Digital Media' and 'The Extent of Parental Control Over the Contents'.

5.1.6.1   The Inappropriate Use of Digital Media

The following quotation is taken from an interview with a parent, sharing her perspective on the use of online resources and digital media for the purpose of SRE:

> I want to keep my daughter's smartphone out of her hands as much as possible. Not just her phone, I mean the whole social media and internet. I am not going to encourage her to use it more! Every time she picks up her phone, I feel like she is being morally vacuumed by it. (P21 – mother of a 15-year-old girl)

An aspect seemingly overlooked by P21 is that how media influence younger individuals greatly depends on how media are used. It has been argued that "the media do not have an autonomous ability either to sexually corrupt children or to sexually liberate them" (Buckingham & Bragg, 2004, p. 241). Although complete endorsement of this stance might be challenging, it can be asserted that increasing the media literacy of younger individuals could prove more fruitful in decreasing the extent of their susceptibility to media impact, as opposed to the frequently ineffective endeavours of entirely eliminating, or severely restricting younger individuals' media exposure.

Many interviewees consider that the non-educational use of digital media will outweigh the educational benefit. For instance, many interviewees asserted that some types of media, such as television, are more suitable for entertainment than education. Thus, while some of the interviewees echoed the participants in another study undertaken in Iran, which suggested that "the state television, should take measures to break the taboo around sexuality" (Samadaee Gelehkolaee et al., 2021,

p. 9), and although national television seems to be accommodating interviewees' other concerns regarding digital media, none of the interviewees in this study envisaged any educational role for television. Most interviewees recognised that certain types of digital media, particularly the internet, can be equally if not more valuable as academic resources compared to books and educational journals. However, they expressed reluctance in encouraging their children or students to use digital media as an educational resource, particularly when it comes to sensitive topics like sexualities and relationships.

5.1.6.2   The Extent of Parental Control Over the Contents

The most recurring concern of the adult interviewees about the media, especially digital media, was the extent to which they, as parents, lack control over the content their children receive. Many interviewees mentioned that children are more vulnerable to the influence of media, and less skilled in interpreting the data, which could threaten their mental health and leave them 'confused', 'scared', or 'traumatised', especially in an incidence of undesired exposure to any sexual content. While children's vulnerability and mental health are commonly mentioned, the concern, whether consciously acknowledged or not, seems to be something else, that is, the fear of arousing sexual desire in children.

P14 was one of the parents who expressed reservations regarding her competence to undertake the responsibility of SRE for her children. She voiced her concern about the potential mistakes she might make, fearing that it could damage her son's trust in her if he seeks information online and finds out about that mistake. I found it an opportunity to discuss the concept of an online platform for SRE and asked P14 for her thoughts. Her response was as follows:

> I think it is a good idea. Many parents would probably appreciate having a resource to help them with these conversations with their children.

However, when she was asked about the possibility of using a platform that directly addresses younger individuals, P14 was not as fond of the idea as before:

> I am not sure. If I tell him to go to the internet whenever he has a question, how can I make sure he does not suddenly end up in inappropriate places [websites]? Then, he might find something unrelated to his question and unrelated to his age and get confused; or discover new things to do with himself [masturbation?], or face topics that are too soon for him and start looking for them in himself.

While concerns regarding the impact of digital media on children's mental health could be reasonable, as mentioned in Chapter 2, when it comes to SRE, the interviewees' concerns primarily revolve around the potential consequences of children inadvertently being exposed to sexually explicit or age-inappropriate content rather than the mental health difficulties, such as addiction, depression, anxiety, and insomnia to name just some. The discourse of fear of sexual awakening in children becomes evident once again when interviewees discuss the need for regulating media to protect children. Indeed, as mentioned in Chapter 2, certain studies have identified a correlation between exposure to sexually explicit media during early adolescence and engagement in high-risk sexual behaviours or early sexual debut (Lin et al., 2020; O'Hara et al., 2012).

When digital media is the topic of discussion, most adult interviewees express concerns about younger individuals' involuntarily exposure to inappropriate content, and very few mention concerns about children actively seeking out age-inappropriate sexual content. For instance, adult interviewees seemed less worried about the ease of access to information on digital media and more concerned about inappropriate pop-up advertisements or search engine suggestions leading to inappropriate websites. This raises a few points, including the tendency to overlook children's agency, as well as the assumption held by many interviewees that children have a dormant sexual desire that will stay harmless and inactive if not mistakenly awakened by external triggers.

It goes without saying that providing young individuals with prior training in media literacy and critical thinking would be immensely valuable in dealing with media, considering their widespread use of media. However, interviewees' suggestions in addressing their digital media-related concerns did not seem to prioritise building rapport, encouraging self-regulation, critical thinking or promoting media literacy in children. Instead, their suggestions revolve around censorship and optimising parental control. While parental control is undoubtedly essential, especially for younger children, the interviewees displayed limited trust in the ability of younger individuals to think critically and resist undue influence. However, it may be that today's teenagers may possess more knowledge and skills than they are given credit for. In my field notes, I made the following observation:

> Most of them [younger individuals] clearly show varying degrees of media literacy, critical thinking skills, and the ability to self-regulate as an audience. They exhibit competence in interpreting media, recognising the sexual aspects of the content they encounter, understanding its context, discerning between fiction and reality, and recognising when certain content is inappropriate for their age. (Translated field notes – June 2021)

Another issue that emerged when analysing adults' concerns about media use, particularly digital social media, was the effect of media on younger individuals' interpersonal relationships and the amount of parental control over that. In the study of Buckingham and Bragg on young people in the UK, it was observed that many of them "used the media as a pretext for discussion with peers or parents" (2004, p. 238). This suggests that social media can serve as a platform for peer conversations and ignite discussions on various topics. However, as discussed earlier, conversations about sexualities and relationships among peers are often heavily discouraged in Iran. Consequently, social media is perceived as more of a threat when it comes to SRE.

> As I told you, we have a thorough plan in our school for teaching about menstruation, so our girls are fully aware of it in advance, but we do not talk about sexual intercourse. My own daughter is too young to know about sex at this age, but I think I will hand her a book when she is a bit

older. She can ask me questions afterwards if she wants to. She is a bookworm. Are there any good books? Even in English! She goes to English class twice a week. She can read English books easily. (HT1 – preschool teacher and mother of a 10-year-old girl)

The above example highlights the frequent suggestion of using books as a valuable educational resource for SRE. While numerous books are available on these topics, both in Farsi and in translation, many interviewees, particularly parents, often asked for recommendations on 'good books about these things' during or after the interview sessions. In the absence of official bodies specialised in this field that could accredit, recommend, and hopefully produce educational content, it may be hard to decide which books and publications to trust. However, the request for English books was not as common, possibly due to concerns shared by most interviewees about the cultural appropriateness of the content.

One of the primary reasons why interviewees prefer books as a resource for SRE could be the level of control they offer. Unlike some other forms of media, books allow parents to have complete awareness and control over the content their children are exposed to. There are no concerns about unexpected or involuntary exposure to inappropriate sexual content.

Similar to HT1's perspective, many parents envisioned themselves as the ones who handpick the books for their children. Perhaps this gave them a sense of being in control, informed about and involved in their children's SRE, or perhaps, given that, as discussed earlier, some parents require SRE themselves or are not sure about the appropriate method of raising different topics, by using books, they can rely on a structured and trusted resource to get information alongside guiding their discussions with their children. In that case, hopefully, they can also suggest that the door is open for conversations regarding the topics brought up in the book, which would ensure that this method is only considered as a facilitating mechanism for discussing sensitive topics, which encourages a more open and supportive environment for discussing sexualities and relationships within the family and it will not perpetuate the assumption that some issues are unspoken or too controversial to be articulated.

5.2 ABOUT THE SETTING

In the context of SRE, interview conversations on the appropriate setting could be categorised into three main themes: The Location, The Timing, and The Number Of Participants. Among these, the most prevalent emphasis among interviewees was on the number of students present during an SRE session. Concerns were primarily focused on the age-appropriateness of the timing for delivering various educational objectives, while the location of the sessions received comparatively less attention.

5.2.1 THE LOCATION

During the interviews, when it came to the optimal location for the implementation of an SRE programme, the primary focus was on the source or facilitator of SRE in that location rather than the physical attributes of a specific location. For instance, the term 'home' often carried the implication of a preference for family involvement. However, this association was less pronounced in the case of schools, where the facilitator could be a regular teacher or a visiting professional. Moreover, sometimes the emphasis was more on the responsibility rather than the location itself, suggesting that when proposing SRE should be provided in schools or at home, it implied that schools or parents, respectively, should assume that responsibility for themselves, as discussed in more depth in Chapter 4.

It is clear from the literature that the majority of SRE interventions are implemented within school settings. For instance, a systematic review aimed at providing an overview of programmes focused on developing and sustaining skills for healthy intimate relationships among 11- to 18-year-olds highlighted that most of the programmes primarily utilised classroom-based instruction as their principal approach (Janssens, Blake, Allwood, Ewing, & Barlow, 2020). Janssens et al. (2020) further note that while evidence for effective programmes leans towards population interventions and schools are a logical venue for universal programmes, it is noteworthy that these programmes are predominantly designed for implementation in schools, with few

targeting alternative learning environments. My observation agrees with this. While SRE can take place outside traditional classroom settings, such as in health centres where premarital SRE programmes are currently conducted in Iran for adult individuals planning to marry, the interviews revealed a preference for bringing external professionals into schools rather than running SRE programmes in out-of-school settings. However, it is important to note that this research primarily focused on school students, as highlighted in the opening section of this chapter. Exploring settings beyond the classroom was attempted, but the main emphasis remained on students, not out-of-school children. Given the sample characteristics, it was expected that schools would be seen as a logical choice for implementing SRE programmes.

In addition, it is worth noting that during online large group discussions, younger individuals emphasised the importance of having a safe, open, and comfortable learning environment to explore sexualities and reflect upon their values, particularly when discussing sensitive topics. They commonly expressed a desire for such an environment regardless of the specific setting. However, based on my field notes, it is evident that the predominant depiction of an SRE programme for them was within a school setting.

> When they [younger individuals] are imagining and describing an SRE programme, in their minds, it is usually happening in a school setting. (Translated field notes – April 2021)

5.2.2   THE TIMING

One of the prevalent concerns expressed by adult interviewees regarding SRE is the timing of information delivery. Many parents I interviewed expressed concerns that SRE programmes might introduce their children to sensitive topics prematurely, potentially exposing them to issues they may not have encountered otherwise. As discussed in Chapter 4, interviewees considered a child being exposed to sexual content prematurely to be more concerning than a child facing a sexuality-related predicament without being adequately prepared to handle it.

That being said, despite the concerns raised, it is evident that most interviewees are convinced that if any SRE programmes are implemented, one of the fundamental considerations would be ensuring age-appropriateness. However, their concern is that children of the same age, who are studying at the same level at school, can be at different stages of physical, psychological, social, and sexual development. This variation should be taken into account when designing and delivering SRE. Throughout the interviews, parents, in particular, frequently expressed the view that their children were not yet ready for SRE, either in its entirety or specific parts of it. Commonly, parents emphasised that although their children might appear ready for SRE, based on their age and physical appearance, they might not be mentally prepared to engage with the content:

> He is tall and big-boned; he looks older than his age, but only I know that he is still truly like a child. (P19 – mother of a 14-year-old boy)

Continuing her description of her teenage son, P19 used the Persian phrase "*aslan tu in bâgh hâ nist*", which roughly translates to being utterly oblivious to any SRE-related topics. Such statements could partly be attributed to parents' denial or underestimation of their children's sexual activity. It is noteworthy that Iranian parents are not alone in this issue, as parents worldwide share similar apprehensions. For instance, in the United States, one of the barriers to parents' communication with adolescents about sex is the belief that adolescents are not ready to discuss such matters (Malacane & Beckmeyer, 2016). On the other hand, a qualitative synthesis conducted by Pound et al. (2017) indicates that young people often feel that SRE is delivered too late.

However, the underestimation of younger individuals' preparedness for being taught SRE could be influenced by cultural factors. Being unaware or uninformed about sexual issues is sometimes considered a virtue for younger individuals. An example illustrating this perspective is provided by DH, a headteacher of a boys-only school, who discusses how some students remain clueless about sexual matters even after studying the reproductive system content in the 8th-grade biology schoolbook:

Towards the end of their 8th grade, some information about reproduction is covered in their biology books, and students learn a little bit more that way. However, sometimes when I talk to some of our 8th graders, it is interesting that even after going through those topics in their books, some of our 8th graders still remain clueless about these issues. This is especially true for students in our school, because they stay so impeccable and they maintain a sense of innocence, and also their parents are very cautious when it comes to discussing these matters, so they are very distant with these issues. (DH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

DH is not alone in using terms such as 'impeccable' and 'innocent' to describe students who lack knowledge about SRE-related subjects. Many other interviewees share this perspective. UNESCO (2018a) highlights the importance of considering the perceived age-appropriateness of specific learning objectives, which can significantly vary within and across regions, countries, and communities when developing SRE curricula, materials, and programmes. In the latest edition of the International Technical Guidance on Sexuality Education (UNESCO et al., 2018a), it is advised to tailor learning objectives to reflect the actual circumstances of the learners; however, it is emphasised to ensure the timing is grounded in reliable available data and evidence, rather than being influenced by personal discomfort or the perceived resistance to engaging in discussions about sexuality with younger individuals.

That being said, the concern expressed by the interviewees regarding the age-appropriateness of SRE programmes could stem from the recognition of individual variations in reaching developmental milestones, even within similar social and cultural backgrounds. This raises an important question: If an SRE programme is designed to be delivered in a classroom or any large group setting, how can it effectively account for the individual differences between students? Furthermore, whose needs, level of preparedness, and maturity should dictate the pace of delivery? This is one of the reasons that many interviewees expressed a preference for individual delivery of SRE programmes so that what is taught can take into account the unique characteristics and circumstances of each student.

5.2.3   THE NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS

The tendency towards individualised SRE is commonly brought up during the interviews, and it is especially emphasised by headteachers and parents. The following quotation is from an interview with BH, the headteacher of a boys-only school:

> One of our guiding principles is to engage in private conversations with our students regarding these topics [puberty and related religious rituals]. We refrain from discussing these matters during regular class sessions. Even if there are only two children present, we do not broach these subjects in a group setting. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

When asked about the reasons behind his emphasis on individual delivery of such sensitive issues, he recounted a narrative he had heard directly from a teacher in another school. This teacher was responsible for teaching religious education classes to fifth-grade students. During one class, he had to discuss religious rituals related to puberty, such as *Tahârat*, *Nijasât*, and *Ghosl* (religious rituals related to puberty), in front of the entire class. One student had found this topic as an opportunity to initiate discussions about other sexual topics with his classmates. He had used some of the phrases taught in that class to engage in conversations about sexual issues. Based on the reactions of his classmates, he continued these discussions with some of them. By sheer coincidence, the same religious education teacher had overheard the student talking to another student about these issues. The teacher had promptly reported the incident to the headteacher, and they, as described by BH, "took control of the situation". The school intervened by speaking with the student and his father, ensuring that he ceased his "inappropriate behaviour". BH concluded the story by stating:

> No one knows what could have happened if they did not find it out soon. Getting such information simultaneously opens a window of opportunity for students to discuss such issues without shame. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

The next question to ask BH could be about the potential consequences if these conversations were to continue among students, and to explore the reasons behind the prevalent fear surrounding such conversations. However, considering that many of the topics mentioned are already included in official school textbooks, I focused on BH's distinct approach to addressing these matters differently in the next question. BH's response to this question is as follows:

> First of all, we do not talk about these at that level (fifth grade). Secondly, we do not talk about these during the class. That would definitely trigger the dialogue about such issues between students. Thirdly, we talk privately to each one of the children, only when they reach the point when it is time to talk about these issues. It is not the same for different students. (BH – headteacher of a boys-only school)

BH outlined several approaches to handling these topics differently, acknowledging that each student's timeline for these discussions may differ. Later, BH presented a different approach to addressing these topics by designating the "Father of the class" as the responsible individual for delivering SRE-related issues, particularly about puberty, to the students on an individual basis. Additionally, the Father of the class is also responsible for handling any other SRE-related incidents that may arise and require attention or intervention.

Undoubtedly, individualised SRE offers numerous advantages, including a more in-depth personalised educational experience that addresses students' specific needs and interests. It creates a safe environment for students to ask questions, explore their feelings, and receive tailored information. However, implementing individualised SRE can be costly and time-consuming. Moreover, without sufficient resources, there is a risk of inadequate coverage of topics, or an imbalanced level of information and support provided to each student.

Private schools, like the one led by BH, may possess certain advantages, such as financial resources and greater control over their curriculum and class schedules, enabling them to provide individualised SRE. For instance, some private schools have the financial means to employ additional dedicated staff members for this purpose,

and they have greater control over the subjects included in their curriculum as well as the allocation of time dedicated to each subject. These privileges are often not easily accessible, if not unattainable, in many public schools. Moreover, it should be noted that not all private schools have equal access to resources. However, even among schools with similar resource accessibility as BH's institution, some alternative plans were proposed by the interviewees:

> It depends on the subject. Some subjects, such as menstruation, can be taught in a classroom setting unless some of the students have particular difficulties or specific questions. In such cases, individual tutoring may be more suitable. (KH – headteacher of a girls-only school)

> When it comes to certain issues, group instruction can be effective. However, if students have additional questions or concerns, it is better to seek individual guidance. The best approach varies depending on the topic and the circumstances. (AT1 – teacher in a girls-only school)

While KH and AT1 recommended delivering certain topics to the entire class, they emphasised the importance of addressing any additional questions or personal concerns on an individual basis. This approach is sometimes adopted in girls-only schools when educating students about menstruation. In such schools, there may be a dedicated session for all students together, and then, if thought necessary, students can be referred to a designated person, such as a counsellor, teacher, headteacher, or any individual responsible for handling SRE-related matters, if such a role exists. GT2, a teacher in a girls-only school, was one of the interviewees who provided another suggestion regarding the number of students present, which is delivering SRE in what she called small groups:

> The optimal method, in my opinion, is to have small groups of students in the same age range, consisting of around 10 to 15 individuals. Neither individually, so the student feels fearful, knowing that others in their age group share similar experiences and emotions, and they do not feel ashamed of sharing; nor in large groups, because large groups may hinder active participation, as students might engage in casual conversations and

laughter rather than listening, learning, or asking questions. Therefore, delivering such content in small groups is a better approach. (GT2 – teacher in a girls-only school)

Delivering SRE in small groups is also suggested in the literature. For example, in a review undertaken to present an overview of programmes designed to enhance the development and maintenance of healthy intimate relationship skills among young people, it was observed that certain effective programme activities entailed dividing the participants into smaller groups of approximately four to five young people (Janssens et al., 2020). However, none of the examined programmes in that review explicitly outlined a prescribed group size for the overall programme. In a qualitative synthesis conducted by Pound et al. (2016), aimed at exploring the perspectives and experiences of young students regarding school-based SRE, it was revealed that the participants expressed a desire for SRE to be delivered within a safe and confidential environment, fostering an atmosphere where they could freely engage without the fear of being singled out, and a preference was expressed by some participants for small group instruction or smaller class sizes, as they believed such settings facilitated better control and management.

To conclude, there appears to be a trend towards reducing the number of students present during SRE sessions, as indicated by the quotations mentioned above, primarily driven by two reasons. The first is to enhance the learning experience for students by facilitating class management and fostering a safe environment for asking questions and sharing concerns. The second is to minimise the likelihood of further discussions among students concerning SRE-related topics. It is worth highlighting this latter reason as a final point of this chapter.

Adults' concerns regarding such interactions do not primarily stem from concerns about the quality or accuracy of information shared by peers, which may be age-inappropriate or scientifically incorrect. Instead, their main apprehensions revolve around the potential arousal of sexual desire and the risk of sexual misconduct. Interviewees commonly implied in different ways that when children engage in conversations about such matters with their peers, it not only awakens latent sexual

desire but also exposes them to peer pressure for an early sexual debut. However, to address these concerns, adults attempt to minimise such discussions between peers rather than embracing SRE to provide their children with the tools for responsible decision-making.

5.3 CONCLUDING REMARKS ON KEY FINDINGS PERTAINING TO RESEARCH QUESTION 2

This chapter was designed with the objective of addressing the optimal approaches for delivering SRE to Iranian school students, according to the perspectives provided by the interviewees. The chapter placed primary emphasis on the execution of official SRE programmes, which are typically incorporated into school environments; however, it also recognised the importance of contexts extending beyond the classroom. In pursuit of addressing the research question, the chapter was structured into two sections. First, it aimed to identify the most appropriate source for delivering SRE; second, it explored suitable settings for imparting educational content and fostering discussions of topics of a sensitive nature.

5.3.1 THE SOURCE

Initially, interviewees' perspectives regarding appropriate sources for SRE were examined. Five themes were identified, namely 'Family', 'Teachers', 'Professional Visitors', 'Peers', and 'Media', and the positive and negative aspects associated with each as potential primary sources or facilitators of SRE were analysed.

5.3.1.1 Family

Parental involvement was found to be crucial in the provision of SRE and in upholding the role of the trusted adult. However, parents encounter several obstacles that hinder their involvement, including challenges in building a rapport with their children when discussing issues to do with sexualities and relationships, inadequate knowledge

about some aspects of SRE due to a lack of prior exposure to open discussions on the topic, resulting in a lack of confidence in effectively delivering SRE, and discomfort when addressing these issues with their children. Nonetheless, parents were perceived to play a pivotal role in SRE by supporting and empowering school-based SRE programmes, if not by actively participating in SRE themselves.

The role of parents, particularly mothers, in the sexuality socialisation of children in Iran has already been highlighted by some studies (Harchegani et al., 2021; Shahhosseini & Abedian, 2015). It has also been previously noticed that they lack clear and effective communication skills (Babayanzad Ahari et al., 2020; Kalantary et al., 2013) and have inadequate knowledge in this regard (Khajehei et al., 2013; Merghati-Khoei et al., 2014; Rahimi-Naghani et al., 2016). An aspect noticed in this research, which appears not to be discussed in existing literature, pertains to the utilisation of non-parental trusted adults within the family setting who uphold similar values to parents for the purpose of SRE. This practice arises from cultural and pragmatic considerations. This approach facilitates a scenario where parents maintain control and can play an active role in shaping their children's understanding of SRE while adhering to the cultural norms of *Adab*.

5.3.1.2   Teachers

Regarding school-based SRE programmes delivered by teachers, it was noted that the presence of a non-parental trusted adult within the school serves multiple purposes. These include providing support and ensuring the safety of students, as well as offering a potential role for delivering SRE. This finding and its potential role in the implementation of SRE appears to be an aspect that has not been explored adequately in the existing literature on SRE in Iran. The importance of teacher training programmes was emphasised by the interviewees as a means to enhance teachers' comfort and competence in addressing SRE-related topics in the classroom. The issue of unqualified educators as a barrier to implementing school-based SRE has been noticed in previous research in Iran (Javadnoori et al., 2012). The interviewees also noticed that the implementation of school-based SRE requires careful consideration

of practical aspects, such as determining the optimal duration of SRE to allow for sufficient time and attention, deciding whether SRE should be taught as a standalone subject or integrated into the existing school curriculum, and acknowledging students' wishes to withdraw from SRE if desired, which played a notable role in shaping the recommendations outlined below in Section 6.3.

5.3.1.3   Visiting Professionals

The discussions on the role of external facilitators and visiting professionals as potential providers of SRE highlighted that the interviewees assumed that the quality of teaching could be a potential concern in terms of class management skills. However, external facilitators could bring fresh perspectives and alternative teaching methods to enhance the educational experience and improve the quality of educational content by providing access to expert knowledge. While the limited duration of engagement with students makes such programmes practical and, according to some interviewees, more culturally appropriate, they may lack long-term support and rapport building. In case they are not aligned with the school's policies and objectives, they might confuse students by sending mixed messages. Finally, the external visitors' positions as outsiders could present them as neutral and capable of creating an unbiased environment. However, it might also accentuate younger individuals' perceptions of adults as out-of-touch and increase the risk of students projecting their thoughts and feelings onto them. The interviewees also highlighted external facilitators' role in training parents and teachers.

5.3.1.4   Peers

In Chapter 4, it was discussed that the conversations with peers about SRE-related issues tended to be valued by younger individuals who sought empathy and emotional support from their peers. However, students' acceptance of peers as educators was hindered by the hierarchical structure of the education system and cultural dynamics in Iran, concerns regarding confidentiality, societal disapproval, and adults' opposition to younger individuals' conversations about issues related to sexualities and romantic

relationships among themselves. This latter finding aligned with another study conducted in Iran in which parents demonstrated a tendency to control, limit, and monitor their children's relationships with peers (Rouhparvar et al., 2022). Moreover, previous literature on SRE in Iran indicated that compared to peer education, visiting medical practitioners demonstrated greater efficacy in delivering SRE and were favoured to a greater extent (Azizi et al., 2008; Babapour et al., 2023). However, while school-based, peer-led SRE programmes encountered limited acceptance and failed to gain favour among interviewees, the potential benefits of peer education within the family setting, particularly through older siblings providing SRE support, were acknowledged by some parents in my study.

5.3.1.5   Media

Although media are one of the main sources of sexuality socialisation in Iran (Ayyoub Malek et al., 2012; Tavoosi et al., 2004), and while younger individuals in this study also expressed comfort in using media, particularly digital media, for seeking information about sexualities- and relationships-related topics, parents and teachers expressed concerns about incorporating media into the educational process. Some parents preferred books as a medium for SRE, as they provide parents with greater control over the content of SRE and could potentially facilitate meaningful discussions with their children. Concerns were raised regarding the non-educational use of digital media, given a lack of parental control and its potential impact on children's interpersonal relationships. Adult interviewees expressed worries about children's vulnerability to media influence, particularly in relation to exposure to sexually explicit or inappropriate content. Furthermore, concerns were raised about the potential adverse effects of media, especially digital media, on children's mental health.

5.3.2   THE SETTING

In the second section of this chapter, the primary focus was determining the characteristics of a suitable setting for SRE sessions in Iran. The discussions primarily

revolved around three themes: the location of sessions, their timing, and the number of participants.

When considering the location, the emphasis was more on the facilitator of SRE rather than the physical environment itself. It was found preferable to implement SRE programmes within school settings, such as by bringing external professionals into schools rather than conducting SRE sessions outside of the school. The timing of delivering different topics (in terms of students' ages) emerged as a significant concern among the interviewees, particularly parents. The importance of recognising individual variations in development was discussed. It was observed that some parents tended to underestimate their children's readiness for SRE.

The discussions also touched upon the number of participants in SRE sessions. Adult interviewees expressed a preference for individualised SRE, which would allow for personalised education and create a safe space for students to ask questions and explore their feelings. Concerns about the number of participants in SRE sessions stemmed from the desire to create a safe learning environment, facilitate class management, and minimise the likelihood of further discussions among students on SRE-related topics. While some private schools had the resources and curriculum control to provide individualised SRE, it was acknowledged that this approach could be costly and time-consuming. As an alternative, suggestions were made to address certain topics in large group settings while offering individual guidance for additional questions or concerns. Small groups of students were proposed as a better approach to create a balance between individual delivery and large group settings.

6 DISCUSSION

This chapter synthesises the research journey undertaken. The ultimate aim of this study has been to explore the possibility of SRE within the context of Iranian schools, and this final chapter brings together the threads of my investigation into this matter. This chapter, therefore, synthesises the insights presented in Chapters 4 and 5, each dedicated to addressing one of the two research questions that guided this exploration. Chapter 4 revealed some of the foundational values that shape the contours of SRE implementation in Iranian schools. Chapter 5 unfolded the perspectives of parents and teachers (and, to a lesser extent, students) regarding the optimal delivery of SRE to students in Iranian schools. With the groundwork laid by the preceding chapters, it is possible to discuss the realm of application. How can these insights be translated into implementable programmes? Thus, gradually, in this chapter, the focus shifts towards the pragmatic aspects of introducing SRE in Iranian schools, alongside a contemplation of potential SRE content, carefully considering the values that have emerged while ensuring that such a programme of RSE would resonate with the key stakeholders, such as parents, teachers, and the students themselves. This research endeavour, however, is not without its boundaries and in the final part of this chapter, I acknowledge the limitations in my study, paving the way for future research.

6.1 IMPLICATIONS OF THIS RESEARCH IN IMPLEMENTING A SEXUALITIES AND RELATIONSHIPS EDUCATION PROGRAMME IN IRAN

When introducing SRE to schools in Iran, a strategic approach can facilitate the successful implementation of programmes that benefit students and respect local sensitivities. Both school and home environments hold potential for effective SRE, provided they create a safe space for younger individuals to acquire knowledge, ask questions, receive support, engage in critical thinking, and make informed decisions.

Building upon the insights gained from this research, I propose that the structure of SRE programmes in Iran involve initiating SRE with whole-class educational sessions focused on less sensitive topics, followed by small group discussions conducted to address more sensitive aspects. These sessions would be followed by ongoing support and education provided by trusted adults, including parents or official trusted adults, addressing personalised implications and individual concerns. In this section, I will continue to elaborate on the proposed structure and then proceed to identify the content that is more sensitive in the next section.

6.1.1 LIAISON BETWEEN STAKEHOLDERS PRE-IMPLEMENTATION AND IN THE SUBSEQUENT STAGES

As revealed in this research, there exists a disparity in perspectives regarding the implementation of SRE among parents and schools. Consequently, for the successful implementation of SRE in Iran, collaboration and transparent communication among stakeholders – encompassing but not limited to schools, parents, and students – is of paramount importance. The subsequent recommendations are proposed to facilitate this process.

6.1.1.1 Engaging Parental Understanding, Involvement and Support

Potentially, the most facilitative factor in the implementation of SRE could be launching pre-implementation awareness meetings to inform parents about age-appropriate and culturally-sensitive content of the proposed school SRE programme, organising discussions with them to emphasise the importance of SRE and its potential

benefits, as well as highlighting the possibility and the consequences of withdrawal from SRE. Moreover, exploring and addressing parental concerns, commencing from the pre-implementation phase, and persisting throughout the programme via informative sessions, workshops, and transparent and effective communication channels serve as an assurance of SRE's ongoing viability. Thus, schools should actively and openly communicate with parents about SRE content and be open to meeting concerned parents.

6.1.1.2   Involving Students

Though it may differ from prevailing practices in the schools I interviewed, integrating student perspectives and preferences for enhancing SRE content and delivery methods, as well as including them in decision-making processes regarding SRE content and delivery, holds value. Executing a student-centric approach involves placing students at the forefront of SRE planning, engaging them in conversations about topics, scheduling, and delivery modalities via consistent invitation of their feedback. Collaborating with students to establish relevant and engaging educational programmes is likely to be beneficial. Moreover, this approach mandates the creation of secure spaces and the designation of official trusted adults to facilitate discussions on matters of sexualities and relationships for the students.

6.1.2   PROPOSED STRUCTURE FOR SRE IN IRAN

A key step in introducing SRE to Iranian schools involves commencing with less sensitive topics. It may appear that numerous less sensitive SRE topics could be seamlessly integrated into existing curricula, such as that of biology and religious education, to enhance the learning experience. As will be further discussed in Section 6.4, some of these topics have already been integrated into schoolbooks in Iran. However, the experience with sensitive elements of SRE that have already been incorporated into Iranian textbooks has yielded less than desirable outcomes. These sensitive topics often result in omission or insufficient coverage, discouraging the inclusion of additional, more sensitive SRE content in textbooks. Nevertheless, a

balanced approach can be adopted by integrating broader perspectives into established subjects while simultaneously providing standalone follow-up sessions to thoroughly explore their implications in the context of sexualities and relationships.

For instance, certain religious-related aspects of SRE, given their significance, are already indirectly addressed within religious education classrooms, which have proven effective in enhancing knowledge about these matters (Ayyoub Malek et al., 2012). In these classes, teachers present perspectives that align with prevailing religio-cultural norms and values. I propose that such teachings could be complemented effectively by SRE through brief follow-up educational sessions conducted within small group settings. This approach would facilitate more comprehensive and explicit guidance, providing educational opportunities to address various aspects of SRE.

Incorporating small group discussions for specific SRE topics encourages active engagement and establishes an environment where students feel comfortable expressing their opinions and raising questions. Moreover, this approach aligns with addressing the concerns expressed by interviewees, such as minimising the number of students present and reducing classroom management issues, thereby creating a conducive atmosphere for SRE delivery. Furthermore, this format enables the effective coverage of less sensitive aspects of SRE over several years before introducing more sensitive topics. Such an approach could foster parental trust in SRE, alleviating their concerns regarding their children's participation in the SRE programme and preparing them for addressing more sensitive topics in the future.

In the current context of Iranian schools, external facilitators often play a crucial role in conducting extracurricular, brief SRE sessions, usually in large group settings, stemming primarily from the challenges faced by teachers. Collaborating with external professionals to deliver informative lectures can enhance the educational experience and yield positive outcomes. As evident in this research, this approach may also be perceived as more culturally appropriate, given the prevailing dynamics between teachers and students in Iranian schools. However, when engaging external facilitators, it is imperative to ensure they possess effective classroom management skills, particularly critical when involving biomedical professionals in presenting

sensitive content to a large group of young learners. Many of these concerns can be addressed effectively if these sessions are conducted in small groups.

However, it is essential to acknowledge the limitations of short-term interventions conducted by external facilitators. Moreover, it is important to reiterate that SRE topics do not necessarily demand the expertise of biomedical specialists for effective delivery; well-trained teachers can handle these topics adequately, which would ensure consistency, long-term engagement, and the establishment of rapport with students, addressing concerns related to short visits by external professionals and increasing the sustainability and impact of SRE implementation. Therefore, it is advisable to complement the visits of external facilitators with ongoing educational sessions led by permanent teachers, ideally, the official trusted adults. This approach ensures consistent support and facilitates follow-up discussions for students over an extended period.

6.1.3   ONGOING INDIVIDUALISED SUPPORT BY THE TRUSTED ADULTS

6.1.3.1   Parents

A pivotal factor in ensuring continuous individualised support could be acknowledging the role of parents as the most common primary choice of trusted adult for younger individuals, and encouraging them to engage in open conversations with their children about sexualities and relationships. A coordinated approach between schools and parents could be developed to decide on who covers specific SRE topics first; however, the successful implementation of such collaborations requires the establishment of mechanisms to ensure that meaningful conversations about SRE between parents and their children take place and prove to be effective. As observed in this research, this approach might conflict with behavioural norms in certain families, including those that perceive such discussions as contrary to the values of *Adab* and *Hayâ*. Recognising the vital significance of such conversations, especially concerning the safety of

children, it remains crucial to promote this approach and encourage parents themselves to take the lead whenever feasible.

An avenue that holds promise in this regard, as evident in previous literature on SRE in Iran (Ahari et al., 2022; Martin et al., 2018; Soleimani et al., 2021), involves offering workshops or crafting educational materials tailored for parents to enhance their understanding of various aspects of SRE. This approach can boost parental confidence in directly engaging with their children on these issues while also indirectly supporting schools in the process. Developing online platforms that provide accurate SRE information and resources for parents, accompanied by guidelines on effective media utilisation for educating their children, can be fruitful. Involving experts in child psychology, education, and media studies to offer insights and guidance could even encourage parents to reconsider media as an educational tool – an approach that adult participants in this study expressed reservations about. The emphasis on online media is because these platforms may address common parental concerns and provide access to reliable content that might not otherwise be easily accessible.

However, complete reliance on this approach is not advised, considering that many families in Iran might still encounter difficulties in engaging in such conversations. Moreover, it should be noted that while parents may be in the best position to tailor SRE for their children, they often underestimate their children's sexual development and readiness for various objectives in SRE. Thus, although parents continue to play a crucial role in individualised SRE provision, the value of school-based, non-parental trusted adults becomes more prominent.

6.1.3.2 Non-parental official trusted adults

As discussed in Chapter 5, it is necessary to encourage students to build a support network comprising multiple trusted adults, both within and outside the family. This network can provide diverse perspectives and assistance, ensuring access to help regardless of location. While younger individuals may seek guidance from various trusted adults beyond their parents, such as different teachers or other family members, I propose that introducing a formal mentoring role for every student and

assigning these mentors as non-parental trusted adults within the school environment could serve multiple purposes and prove beneficial in actively upholding the educational duty of SRE and creating a support system in times of need. In this study, schools that had such a defined role seemed to be better prepared for both aspects mentioned, although the educational potential was less utilised in those schools.

Using designated official trusted adults for SRE could facilitate something close to an individualised approach to SRE, considering students' unique needs, circumstances, and questions. These trusted adult figures can be trained teachers or specialised counsellors who lead and conduct the brief SRE sessions proposed in Section 6.3.2, create rapport, address SRE-related concerns, and establish ways for students to seek ongoing support and timely guidance. They should be able to offer private and confidential sessions for students who may have specific questions or concerns and create a safe space where students can discuss their inquiries without fear of judgment. Additionally, they can guide other teachers when they are faced with an SRE-related inquiry from a student and are ill-prepared to deal with it. Most importantly, these trusted adult figures should be more alert to signs of sexual misconduct since, as Halstead and Reiss aptly write, "one important aim of sex education is for teachers and other adults in the school to be capable of detecting and responding to child abuse including sexual abuse" (2003, p. 175).

Providing ongoing professional development opportunities and teacher training programmes on SRE is crucial to equip teachers with accurate information, effective communication skills, and strategies to handle students' sensitive SRE-related discussions. Although it is desirable for all teachers and school staff, regardless of their roles, to receive guidance on how to handle SRE-related issues, this could be expensive and time-consuming, given that many teachers in this study felt unprepared for such issues, and the issue of unqualified educators as a barrier to the implementation of school-based SRE has been noticed in previous research in Iran (Javadnoori et al., 2012). Having a few well-prepared teachers who can guide other teachers in such instances could be more feasible. If a designated trusted adult is in place, they could uphold this role. Another issue is ensuring that teachers, including the officially designated trusted adults, have access to accurate and age-appropriate educational

resources on SRE. These resources, which could potentially be online media, can support their teaching and help answer students' questions.

6.1.4   ONGOING CONCURRENT NECESSARY MEASURES

6.1.4.1   Feedback and Adaptation

Another crucial consideration is the ongoing review and revision of SRE sessions, guided by feedback from parents and trusted adults. While some parents opt to place full trust in the school's proficiency in delivering this subject, others seek absolute authority over the SRE content offered to their children. An effective strategy to navigate complexities stemming from diverse parental preferences concerning SRE is by actively engaging the students, for example, by collecting feedback and using this feedback to identify areas for improvement.

6.1.4.2   Cultivating a Supportive Environment and Implementing Safeguarding Protocols

Creating a school atmosphere that aligns with SRE objectives and supports positive character development is imperative. In this regard, official trusted adults can assume a pivotal role by ensuring the congruence of SRE with broader school policies and aims, and encouraging a consistent and supportive environment. Moreover, official trusted adults can take on the responsibility of formulating well-defined child safeguarding protocols that address situations where students disclose experiences of sexual misconduct or abuse, ensuring that all teachers are well-informed about these protocols and understand the importance of prioritising student safety. In this case, SRE benefits students and educates teachers and other adults. As Halstead and Reiss state:

> Sex education may also attempt to prevent children from experiencing abuse. Here sex education entails teachers and other adults in school being educated to detect and react appropriately to evidence of abuse,

including sexual abuse. In addition, it is possible that good quality school sex education might lead to it being less likely that those who have received such education will go on to abuse others. (2003, p. 151)

6.1.4.3   Peers and Relatives

As highlighted in Chapter 4, implementing school-based peer-led interventions might not be a sensible choice within the current educational setting in Iran. However, instead of imposing strict restrictions or intensive monitoring, it is worth recognising the significance of peer discussions concerning SRE topics. Educating parents and teachers about the advantages of such dialogues and addressing any apprehension regarding potential adverse consequences is likely to be of value. However, simultaneously, it is important to plan educational steps and ensure the efficacy of measures taken to equip students with the skills to ensure their safety and help them resist inappropriate peer pressure.

Older siblings and other family members can play a constructive role in offering peer-like support and guidance on SRE matters. While this study identified instances of conversations with siblings and other relatives within the family context, it remains imperative to ensure that these individuals are capable of assuming the role of a trusted confidant without posing any risks to the younger individuals. Given the challenge of guaranteeing this in all families, relying on or actively encouraging these methods is not advisable.

6.1.4.4   Media

Apart from books, digital media, particularly digital media, were not well-received among the interviewees. However, it is important to consider that most data were collected before and during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that digital media became more commonly used during this period for educational purposes and parents began exploring various resources to meet their children's educational needs, it is possible that the interviewees' perspectives have evolved since then. To address concerns related to media usage, promoting a balanced approach

that combines media resources with in-person conversations with trusted adults may be effective. This approach can provide young individuals with accessible and accurate information while ensuring parents remain actively involved and supportive in their children's learning journey.

In the absence of official school-based SRE, developing online media resources that offer accurate and comprehensive information, thoughtfully designed to align with local sensitivities on SRE topics and presented in age-appropriate formats, could prove beneficial in the long term. However, at the moment, these resources may not be readily trusted by adults. Instead, a more immediate and effective strategy might involve creating online content for parents and educators, organising workshops to help parents navigate online media resources effectively, encouraging parents to engage with their children's media use actively, and providing guidance on accessing appropriate content. Collaboration with educators to design resources that align with educational goals and values while effectively engaging students is another valuable avenue to explore.

6.2 Implications of This Research in Guiding Content Selection for Sexualities and Relationships Education Programmes in Iran

It is essential to acknowledge that the cultural and ethnic diversity within Iran makes it impractical to develop a single applicable SRE programme for all students. However, it is feasible to propose key concepts and topics that could serve as a foundation for locally designed SRE programmes, particularly implementable in the context of the schools represented by the interviewees in this study.

6.2.1 UNESCO's Suggested Guideline As a Framework

As explored in more detail in Section 2.3.1.2 of the Literature Review, an empowerment-oriented perspective in SRE is rooted in a rights-based framework. This viewpoint contends that human rights, particularly sexual rights, underscore the imperative for SRE. Embracing this approach involves acknowledging younger individuals as sexual beings with sexual desires, and recognising their sexual agency, subjectivity, and autonomy. By adopting this perspective, SRE aims to equip young individuals with the knowledge and capacity to make informed decisions, foster positive attitudes toward their sexualities, and empower them to advocate for their own rights while respecting the rights of others.

Here, it is important to refrain from redundant efforts, as there exists a wealth of pre-established key concepts, topics and learning objectives. Thus, as a reference, UNESCO's (2018b) suggested guidelines will be employed to develop a framework. The rationale for adopting UNESCO's guidelines lies in their claim to encompass a comprehensive range of material crucial for all learners while acknowledging the potential challenges within diverse social and cultural contexts (2018a, p. 16). UNESCO places a significant emphasis on providing young people with equitable access to CSE and asserts that its guideline aligns with the commitment to uphold the right of young individuals to achieve the highest standard of health, promoting safe, responsible, and respectful sexual choices that are free from coercion and violence. Furthermore, the guidelines underscore the right of young people to access essential information for effective self-care (2018a, p. 16). Therefore, by employing these guidelines as a framework to introduce and propose key concepts and topics, it becomes possible to provide a preliminary estimation of the feasibility of younger individuals' rights, such as their rights to information, education, and CSE, within the current context of Iran.

6.2.2 WHAT IS MEANT BY SENSITIVE TOPICS

The possibility of translating topics proposed by UNESCO (2018b) into practical implementation, the extent to which they could be covered within the current educational setting in Iran, and the topics that may prove to be more sensitive based on the findings of this research, will be assessed here. Nonetheless, before discussing

the guideline and identifying sensitive topics, it should be emphasised that, as Lowe and Jones (2015) point out:

> Almost any topic can become sensitive if emotional responses are raised, if there are competing explanations about events, if there are political differences about what should happen next or challenges about how issues could be resolved. (2015, p. 2)

That said, Lowe and Jones (2015) underscore that present-day students are consistently faced with a spectrum of complex decisions spanning diverse issues, underlining the need for affording them the chance to cultivate the essential skills for comprehending an 'increasingly complex world' and engage critically with sensitive subjects. Such exposure, Lowe and Jones (2015) argue, enables students to develop the skills necessary to grasp and navigate the nuances of societal problems; therefore, despite the apparent complexity of the world, insulating students from sensitive issues is counterproductive.

Reiss (2019) explores the origins of the term 'sensitive' and writes:

> The word 'sensitive' has several cognate meanings; it derives from the mediaeval Latin sensitivus, which itself comes from the classical Latin sentire, meaning 'to feel'. We can talk, for example, about our eyes being sensitive to light in a way that has no evaluative connotations, simply being a description of empirical reality. However, the meaning that I am concerned with is specifically to do with the effects on a person's emotional feelings rather than on their various receptors (eyes, ears, proprioceptors and so on). (2019, p. 356)

Furthermore, Reiss discusses the possibility that the sensitivity of an issue offers insights not only into the subject matter but also into the individuals involved. He advocates a transition in the discourse, shifting the focus from 'controversy' to 'sensitivity' and subsequently redirecting attention from 'epistemology' to 'pedagogy'. One critical point raised by Reiss (2019), which could be very helpful in the context of implementing SRE, where often varying value judgments and standards of normality

come into play, is the distinction between teaching something and teaching about it and that it is possible to "be sensitive towards someone in respects of an issue without implying that one shares the same perspective (or world view) as the person to whom one is being respectful and considerate" (2019, p. 361).

In light of the above, in the following assessment, the focus is on the sensitivity of these topics, which should be designed to be delivered in a sensitive manner and incremental order, respecting the age and developmental stages of the students. Following the proposed structure outlined in Section 6.3, dealing with a sensitive topic in the context of SRE in Iran could simply entail pre-implementation discussions and collaboration with parents to determine who will introduce these topics first and arranging small group settings led by official trusted adults for delivery. UNESCO's guidelines present eight key concepts, each of which will be discussed separately.

6.2.3   KEY CONCEPT 1: RELATIONSHIPS

UNESCO outlines four topics within this key concept: 'Families', 'Friendship, Love and Romantic Relationships', 'Tolerance, Inclusion and Respect', and 'Long-term Commitments and Parenting' (2018a, pp. 37–44). A considerable number of the suggested learning objectives within this category are feasible for Iran, aligning closely with the values held by interviewees in this study.

6.2.3.1   Families

Family holds a significant place of importance within the cultural fabric of Iran. Many of the objectives delineated by UNESCO (2018a, pp. 38–39) with regard to families are attainable, particularly those pertaining to the role of family members in imparting values to their children and where the family's essential role in providing mutual care and support is underscored. For instance, the prevalent emphasis on respecting elders not only serves as a prominent societal value but also could potentially serve as a gateway to addressing broader family-related educational objectives; it is also possible to emphasise what it means to be responsible as grown-ups in the family, how to deal

with conflicts within the family, particularly during adolescence, and how respect, love, security, equality, cooperation, stability, and mutual care in a family strengthen its function as a support system.

Concurrently, it should also be feasible to talk about the existence of various types of committed and stable family structures, including two-parent, single-parent, nuclear, or extended families, without triggering any sensitivities. Nevertheless, as outlined in Chapter 4 in the context of family values, these family structures are framed around a core of heterosexual marriage at some point, which implies that it should also be an option to examine how diverse issues like health, death, and divorce could impact the structure of a family.

Conversations concerning the needs, roles, and responsibilities of different family members could also be addressed. However, this might present difficulties, particularly when highlighting gender inequalities. While, as previously discussed in Chapter 4, school textbooks in Iran portray the roles of family members in a manner that preserves the prevailing gender inequalities within the family structure, younger individuals appear to be more inclined to negate the absence of gender equality and value equality and fairness within this context.

6.2.3.2 Friendship, Love and Romantic Relationships

The concept of respectful friendships, built upon "trust, sharing, respect, empathy and solidarity" (UNESCO, 2018, p. 40), regardless of disability or health status, could be smoothly imparted to Iranian school students. The significance of friendship, its impact on individuals' self-perception, and the mutual influence of friends are already commonly emphasised in schools in Iran. Conversations surrounding love also take place in school settings; however, this is only when addressing affection for parents, religious figures, and God. Drawing from personal school experiences, instances where love was expressed in poems within textbooks, were promptly contextualised as directed toward God, irrespective of the poet's genuine viewpoint.

The more sensitive topics under this heading involve friendships with individuals of different genders, love within an erotic context, and romantic relationships. However, this sensitivity should not hinder younger individuals from discriminating between healthy and unhealthy romantic relationships, appropriate and inappropriate physical contact, and, ultimately, healthy and unhealthy sexual relationships, which are paramount for children's safety. Furthermore, it is essential for younger individuals to grasp the distinction between suitable expressions of affection and unsuitable ones. But how can this understanding be achieved if only non-erotic, aromantic relationships are displayed and discussed? Limiting the discussion to such relationships might inadvertently lead to embarrassment and confusion due to unintended inappropriate expressions of friendship, if not leading to seriously unsafe situations.

Moreover, if these topics remain unaddressed, their prevailing religious viewpoint will also remain absent, which contrasts with the treatment of many other religious recommendations. For instance, while encouraging students to fast during Ramadan, the sensation of hunger and the satisfaction derived from addressing it is neither disregarded nor denied. Indeed, discussions on healthy and unhealthy eating are included and even, given the situation, discussed more than before. The idea of postponing the immediate pleasure of eating for a greater purpose is commonly broached. This same approach could be applied to premarital erotic or sexual relationships. Instead of maintaining silence on these matters, they could be introduced alongside religious perspectives. Thus, although sensitive, these subjects can potentially be covered.

6.2.3.3 Tolerance, Inclusion and Respect

The majority of the learning objectives within this category (UNESCO, 2018, p. 42) are attainable within the context of Iranian schools. Emphasising the significance of showing respect to others, even when differences exist, nurturing self-respect, seeking and granting permission, and discouraging stigmatisation, bullying, and discrimination are concepts that align with the principles of *Adab,* and some are already included in school textbooks, as evidence, for example, by the inclusion of

discussions on respecting others in the 8ᵗʰ-grade *Thinking and lifestyle* textbook (for students aged 13-17). While the discourse of respect emphasises Islamic hegemony, often marginalising those of different religious affiliations or non-religious backgrounds, the promotion of inclusivity, and non-discrimination, and embracing diversity is not regarded as a challenging topic in Iranian educational settings.

However, there are two crucial issues that, in my assessment, are exceedingly sensitive in the current educational setting. The first pertains to non-binary sexual identities and the second concerns sexual orientations beyond heterosexuality. UNESCO maintains its guidelines encompass "the full range of topics that are important for all learners to know, including those that may be challenging in some social and cultural contexts" (2018a, p. 16). It further states, "Providing young people with equal access to CSE respects their right to the highest attainable standard of health, including safe, responsible and respectful sexual choices free of coercion and violence, as well as their right to access the information that young people need for effective self-care" (2018a, p. 16).

While agreeing with these UNESCO statements, it is equally important to acknowledge that in the current Iranian context, engaging in homosexual conduct is subject to severe legal penalties, including death. A Farsi proverb states, "Raising a large stone is an indication of not throwing it", illustrating that attempting a task that is too ambitious may indicate that it will not be accomplished and suggesting that setting overly high goals might result in failure. While it would be desirable if these issues were clearly discussed, and perhaps they could be alongside introducing the prevailing understanding of religion's stance in these regards, at the moment, including any discussions about these issues would be akin to the large stone in the above proverb, and could prove counterproductive.

However, by emphasising the significance of respecting others, there exists the potential for students to cultivate an intrinsic capacity for honouring diversity in gender identities and sexual orientations. Moreover, over time, as societal attitudes evolve, topics that are so sensitive that they cannot be broached now may gradually become less so. Nevertheless, drawing from my experience as a researcher, lecturer,

and student within Iranian schools, I believe that in the present climate, these subjects are so controversial that their inclusion in SRE appears like pursuing an unattainable goal. Maintaining a realistic perspective is crucial.

6.2.3.4   Long-term Commitments and Parenting

As evident from Chapter 4, the participants in this study held a highly positive regard for long-term religiously and legally sanctioned marriage, and it should be feasible to go through the responsibilities, long-term commitments, benefits, and challenges associated with this choice and cover almost all the objectives outlined by UNESCO (2018a, pp. 43–44) without invoking any undue sensitivities.

While issues concerning child, early, and forced marriages might evoke sensitivity in some regions of Iran, their inclusion is unlikely to raise concerns within the school context of this study's participants. However, it is worth noting that the problem of early parenthood appeared to be disregarded by some study participants, who perceived it as too remote a concern to prove genuinely troubling for them, which suggests that greater emphasis on this topic may be warranted.

6.2.4   KEY CONCEPT 2: VALUES, RIGHTS, CULTURE AND SEXUALITY

Topics covered under this heading are 'Values and Sexuality', 'Human Rights and Sexuality', and 'Culture, Society and Sexuality' (2018a, pp. 45–48). Some objectives proposed under this key concept are perhaps among the most discussed aspects of SRE in the current school settings in Iran.

6.2.4.1   Values and Sexuality

As outlined in Chapter 4, explicit discourse on values and sexualities is not a typical feature, but other aspects, such as what constitutes values, their diverse forms, how they are imparted, and their significance, are already mentioned within Iranian school textbooks. Particularly, religious values tend to be prominently highlighted and given

a dominant status compared to other values. Alongside these educational materials, discussions on how these values influence behaviours and decision-making in the context of sexualities and relationships could take place during small group discussions facilitated by official trusted adults. These encompass numerous values discussed in Chapter 4, including but not limited to *Hayâ*, *Adab*, and values associated with marriage and family.

One topic that holds the potential for sensitivity yet is inherently crucial is the final key idea within this category, which reads: "As children grow up, they develop their own values which may differ from their parents/guardians" (UNESCO, 2018, p. 46). Considering the findings represented in Chapter 4, where parental expectations often require absolute obedience from their children as a manifestation of respect, it can indeed pose a challenge for many adults to actively endorse or even tolerate the possibility that younger individuals might deem a distinct set of values, particularly concerning those values attributed to religion, to be more appropriate. This leads to a core question: To what extent, given the prevailing adult-child dynamic, including adults' perceptions of childhood and even premarital sexualities, are students genuinely encouraged to think about their personal values? Furthermore, if such reflection does occur, how much space exists for younger individuals to express these individual values and subsequently adopt sexual behaviours that align with them?

6.2.4.2   Human Rights and Sexuality

While the issue of human rights is not particularly sensitive and can be addressed smoothly in educational settings, its implications within the realm of sexualities and relationships could be regarded as more sensitive. As explored in Chapter 4, several interviewees highlighted knowledge acquisition as a religious value, which aligns with children's right to education. This alignment can be used as common ground to emphasise the necessity of SRE itself.

However, the crucial question posed in the preceding section remains relevant here: To what degree do students receive authentic encouragement to explore their personal values within the existing dynamics between adults and children? To what

extent does the consideration of children's rights, including freedom of expression, thought, belief, and religion, play a role in the current educational atmosphere? Given the existing approach toward childhood sexualities and children's agency, it prompts the question of how strongly these rights are actually nurtured.

Hierarchical observation (Foucault, 1979), which involves making children more observable to ensure control and discipline, could be detected in some schools' architectural designs or practices, like monitoring students' physical development during mandatory swimming sessions, which raises concerns about students' privacy and their informed consent. Considering the value placed on the docility and obedience of children by some interviewees to the extent that it restricts privacy, it is worth contemplating to what degree the promotion of the right to privacy can be anticipated in these settings.

6.2.4.3   Culture, Society and Sexuality

The key concepts presented under this heading encompass some of the most prevalent aspects of SRE routinely addressed within Iranian schools, with religious teachings being particularly emphasised. For example, the interviewees in this study highlighted the significance of religious rituals related to hygiene and cleanliness, particularly emphasising practices such as religious ceremonial washings. This finding aligns with previous research, where these practices were highlighted as essential values within some Muslim communities (Hodge, 2002; Shaikh Abdul Mabud, 1998). Moreover, among all the aspects of issues related to students' sexualities, ceremonial washings are most commonly covered in school. This is in line with the findings of a study on sexual knowledge among high school students in north-western Iran (Ayyoub Malek et al., 2012), where they observed that students were aware of related religious rituals more than any other aspect of SRE.

It should be possible to introduce discussions regarding how these information sources influence one's perception of sexualities and consequently shape notions of acceptable and unacceptable sexual or non-sexual behaviour. As highlighted earlier, denying younger individuals' sexualities would prevent a detailed examination of the

present understanding of religion's standpoint. Conversely, if only a single interpretation of religious stance is presented, how can it facilitate younger individuals to develop their own perspectives? This dilemma extends beyond sensitivity; it centres on the manner in which adults approach childhood and their autonomy.

6.2.5 KEY CONCEPT 3: UNDERSTANDING GENDER

To understand gender, UNESCO suggests three topics to be covered: 'The Social Construction of Gender and Gender Norms', 'Gender Equality, Stereotypes and Bias', and 'Gender-based Violence' (2018a, pp. 49–52).

6.2.5.1 The Social Construction of Gender and Gender Norms

In theory, while acknowledging its sensitive nature, the distinction between sex and gender could be introduced within the school curriculum, considering that gender reaffirmation surgery is legally permitted and religiously sanctioned in Iran. However, as expounded in Chapter 1, religious endorsement still adheres to the binary viewpoint. Consequently, while the inclusion of the discussion of gender dysphoria, despite its sensitivity, into SRE programmes remains plausible, nonetheless, the implementation of gender identity diversity within the SRE programmes in current Iran is highly improbable, as elaborated in Section 6.4.1.3. In an ideal scenario, it should be feasible to address transphobia and the detrimental consequences it involves. However, much like other discussions within this domain, this topic remains highly sensitive.

6.2.5.2 Gender Equality, Stereotypes and Bias

As explored in Section 6.3.1.1, it appears that younger individuals demonstrate a greater readiness to question the absence of gender equality, in contrast to what is commonly presented in their school textbooks, as discussed in Chapter 4. Thus, it holds significance to motivate students to develop a heightened awareness of gender roles and norms, along with the process of their formation, and to recognise their

potential for challenging inequality and transformation toward greater equality. Considering the argument provided in Chapter 4, where it was highlighted that the cotton-and-fire mentality, apart from reflecting the binary mindset of gender roles, accentuates gender segregation's perceived necessity and that policies enforcing segregation based on gender fuel unrealistic views of dangers associated with individuals of other genders and gender biases, leading to increased demand for further segregation policies and perpetuating a vicious cycle, it is indeed appropriate to prompt students to acknowledge such biases, and break the cycle by adopting a critical view towards these biases, existing inequities, and stereotypes within society, and understand how these factors influence individuals' lives. Although this matter is not hard to advocate for, it necessitates a paradigm shift in how adults shape the viewpoint of younger individuals toward individuals of differing genders. It prompts consideration of whether adults opt to persist with framing this perspective through the lens of apprehension and polarised cotton-and-fire viewpoints or if they choose to undergo a transformative paradigm shift.

6.2.5.3   Gender-based Violence

The subject of gender-based violence, which encompasses the principle that all individuals are of equal value, and acknowledges the presence of inequalities and power disparities, could be regarded as an indispensable inclusion, primarily due to its close connection with ensuring younger individuals' safety. Within this context, perhaps one of the pivotal roles of official trusted adults is to explain and clarify their supportive function and emphasise how they can be approached if students or someone they know require assistance with regard to violence.

6.2.6   KEY CONCEPT 4: VIOLENCE AND STAYING SAFE

Three topics are suggested by UNESCO under this key concept: 'Violence', 'Consent, Privacy and Bodily Integrity', and 'Safe use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)' (2018a, pp. 53–57).

6.2.6.1   Violence

When discussing the theme of 'Hayâ and Bodies That Adjust', it was noted that certain measures were taken by the interviewees to reduce the risk of children falling victim to sexual abuse, with Hayâ being one of these measures. In this context, these measures primarily revolved around the idea of making younger individuals appear less sexually desirable. As discussed in Chapter 4, criticisms of such approaches include their negative impact on the mental health of younger individuals, their ineffectiveness in preventing sexual misconduct, and the background misconception that harassment is driven by increased sexual desire. However, while such approaches may not be effective in achieving their intended goals, they highlight that adults are concerned about issues of violence and the safety of younger individuals.

Topics such as bullying and how to assertively say no are already included in school textbooks. Discussing the wrongness of violent behaviour and the importance of not tolerating it should not raise any sensitivity. Likewise, introducing support and providing information on where to seek help in case of encountering such issues could be part of the curriculum without any objections. However, perhaps addressing the wrongness of violence within romantic partnerships could be reframed and explored in the context of married relationships to raise fewer concerns. As mentioned earlier, ensuring that students are aware of the available support when they experience or witness an unsafe situation is crucial and underscores why, apart from parents, it is essential to have a designated non-parental trusted adult available to all younger individuals.

6.2.6.2   Consent, Privacy and Bodily Integrity

As discussed in Chapter 4, concerns about the bodily integrity of younger individuals were raised by the interviewees. I have also become increasingly aware of nurseries and preschool centres, which often have children aged 5 to 8, providing instructions on private parts, safe and unsafe touch, body boundaries, seeking adults' support, and, less commonly, the issue of consent. The latter is less emphasised because consent

implies decision-making, which will be discussed shortly when promoting decision-making in younger individuals is reviewed under Key Concept 5.

However, it appeared that the concern was less about protecting the body itself and more about preserving what a body that has not experienced sexual intercourse signifies in terms of virginity and associated socially constructed normalising judgments. Preserving the bodily integrity of younger individuals was sometimes used as a reason to shield students from encounters with sexualities-related issues, including any education that might remotely trigger sexual desire in students. Moreover, the protection of students' bodily integrity was used to justify many recommendations that resulted in strict control and monitoring of students, the denial of their agency, the violation of their privacy, and sometimes the use of dehumanising and objectifying terminology when addressing students' bodies, as seen in Chapter 4. Ironically, such actions disrespect younger individuals' bodily integrity and indicate that instead of being considered sensitive for students, the inclusion of these topics in SRE requires a shift in adults' perspectives toward the notion of childhood.

6.2.6.3   Safe Use of Information and Communication Technologies

Considering the findings presented in Chapter 5, where many adults displayed more apprehension than trust toward media, especially online platforms, the effort to educate students about maintaining online safety should not prove to be a too difficult. Topics related to online safety, media literacy, and addressing cyberbullying have already been incorporated into certain school textbooks, such as the *Thinking and Lifestyle* textbook for 7th-grade male students (aged 12-15). Since the smooth integration of discussions about online safety and media literacy into the curriculum has proven feasible, there is potential to expand these discussions to include principles of secure online relationships. However, due to the prevailing reluctance among parents to acknowledge the extent of their children's involvement in sexual activities, including the use of sexually explicit media, broaching conversations about these types of media and their potentially harmful impacts could possibly generate controversy.

6.2.7   KEY CONCEPT 5: SKILLS FOR HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

While in this research, the interviewees tried to associate the term 'health' with physical well-being, even when it signified broader issues beyond biomedical health, UNESCO outlines five somewhat different topics to be included under this key concept (2018a, pp. 58–63). These topics encompass 'Norms and Peer Influence on Sexual Behaviour', 'Decision-making', 'Communication, Refusal and Negotiation Skills', 'Media Literacy and Sexuality', and 'Finding Help and Support'.

6.2.7.1   Norms and Peer Influence on Sexual Behaviour

As noted in Chapter 5, in the current context of schools in Iran, discussions on friendships and peer influence often focus more on negative influences and inappropriate peer pressure than on potential positive and productive influences, which might require a reframing. However, although the adult interviewees' conversations were mainly surrounding how to minimise peer interactions, encouraging and promoting assertiveness, rational, responsible decision-making and learning communication, refusal and negotiation skills should prove thought-provoking to adults who are concerned with the potential negative peer influence because these could help students to be ready and self-reliant in the face of negative peer pressure, and in the face of pressure received from media and social norms, such as stereotypical gender norms, as discussed earlier. Some of these topics are currently included in the school textbooks, such as the textbook of *Thinking and Lifestyle* for 8th grade students (aged 13-17), and have not led to complaints. However, similar to previous topics, their implications for sexualities and relationships are better presented sensitively.

6.2.7.2   Decision-making

To promote responsible decision-making regarding issues related to sexualities and relationships among young individuals, it is essential to acknowledge their autonomy and provide them with a comprehensive understanding of both the positive and

negative consequences of sexual relationships. As discussed in Chapter 4, there were instances where students' autonomy and their right to make decisions were overlooked, often in an attempt to emphasise respect for elders. However, even in that scenario, one could argue that promoting responsible decision-making in adolescents can lead to more meaningful and intentional respect for elders.

In Chapter 4, it became evident that younger individuals were often expected to manifest obedience without fully understanding why certain restrictions were in place. Instead of encouraging active, rational decision-making, the prevalent approach was focused on teaching them how to say no to various situations. However, a more constructive approach acknowledges the right of younger individuals to be helped to make decisions for themselves. By acknowledging younger individuals' right to make decisions, it is better understood that, gradually, what younger individuals do should be more a matter of what they have decided to do rather than what they are permitted to do. This shift in mindset can replace the fear-driven approach, which implies that providing SRE acts as a green light for sexual activity, potentially leading to adverse consequences. Instead, an empowerment mindset suggests that by ensuring younger individuals are well-informed about the rationale behind adults' concerns and the consequences of their decisions, they become capable of making informed choices based on genuine understanding. As Reiss aptly writes:

> … sex education is more effective when students are given the opportunity to explore what is good and what is right, rather than simply being told. (2022, p. 693)

While a fear-based discourse tends to focus more on the negative consequences of sexual activity, an empowerment mindset can introduce discussions about pleasure alongside the rationale for delaying such experiences, including but not limited to religious stance on the issue. Many interviewees, as seen in Chapter 4, emphasised the value of knowledge in Islam, often framing knowledge acquisition as a religious obligation. Some interviewees argued that seeking knowledge about sexualities should be approached similarly. An empowerment mindset aligns better with the

value of knowledge, as perceived by many interviewees and attributed to their understanding of Islam.

Another crucial topic that could be introduced into SRE in Iran, especially as students age, is education about the legal aspects of sexual relationships. Given the tight governmental monitoring of sexualities- and relationships-related issues and the severe penalties for certain acts, it becomes relevant, despite its sensitivity, to educate students about the laws on sexual relationships and the legal implications of their decisions. While, given the current state of laws in Iran, this may still fall under a fear-based discourse, it is closely linked to the safety and responsibility of younger individuals.

6.2.7.3   Communication, Refusal and Negotiation Skills

The learning objectives outlined by UNESCO in this category (2018a, p. 61) are generally not problematic, and several are already integrated into existing school textbooks. For instance, the *Thinking and Lifestyle* textbook designed for 7th-grade male students (aged 12-15) already includes content that aligns with these objectives. However, when addressing their implications within the context of sexualities and relationships, they can be approached as sensitive topics and discussed within the more secure environment of small group settings.

6.2.7.4   Media Literacy and Sexuality

Similar to the previous topic, while media and media literacy are commonly discussed and are even included in school textbooks such as the school textbook of *Thinking and Lifestyle* for 7th-grade male students (aged 12-15), their implications for sexualities and romantic relationships are commonly left unexamined. Discussions on media literacy could commonly be followed by small group discussions led by the official trusted adult to encompass issues such as media's influence on sexualities, gender, sexual self-perception, sexual self-esteem, and how the media can portray unrealistic images about sexualities and relationships, and how those could be challenged.

6.2.7.5 Finding Help and Support

So far, it has been discussed that it is crucial to empower students to differentiate between healthy, consensual, and respectful interactions and unhealthy and unsafe ones. Furthermore, students should possess the knowledge and confidence to decline sexual invitations assertively and, most importantly, given their age, to know how to seek assistance when required. As previously discussed, the involvement of trusted adults, both parental and non-parental, in offering support and introducing additional avenues of assistance is vital. These discussions related to the safety of younger individuals are not considered controversial; in fact, they are essential and demanded by various stakeholders.

6.2.8 KEY CONCEPT 6: THE HUMAN BODY AND DEVELOPMENT

UNESCO recommends several topics for educating students about the human body and development, including 'Sexual and Reproductive Anatomy and Physiology', 'Reproduction', 'Puberty', and 'Body Image' (2018a, pp. 64–68). Many of these topics can be discussed without generating controversy.

6.2.8.1 Sexual and Reproductive Anatomy and Physiology

The majority of key ideas proposed under the headings of sexual and reproductive anatomy and physiology are already included in the biology textbook for 11th-grade students (aged 16-20) who are studying the field of experimental sciences. These topics have not generated objections, suggesting that they could also be included for all the students in the same age group.

As discussed in Chapter 4, language plays a role in the silence surrounding sexualities-related matters. Many interviewees struggled to find suitable Farsi vocabulary for discussing genital anatomy, potentially hindering open dialogues in this regard. Instead, nicknames and euphemisms were commonly used, reinforcing the notion that certain aspects of the body should remain hidden and unspoken. In line with these

findings, it is notable that biology textbooks also exclude explicit pictures of external genitalia and only depict internal reproductive organs (Figures 6-1 and 6-2). The external genital anatomy appears to be a sensitive issue in the current setting and may be best delivered in an individualised or small group setting. However, while instructing children on privacy and valuing *Hayâ* is important, it is crucial to distinguish between nurturing a sense of privacy and *Hayâ* and inducing discomfort when younger individuals are addressing their bodies.
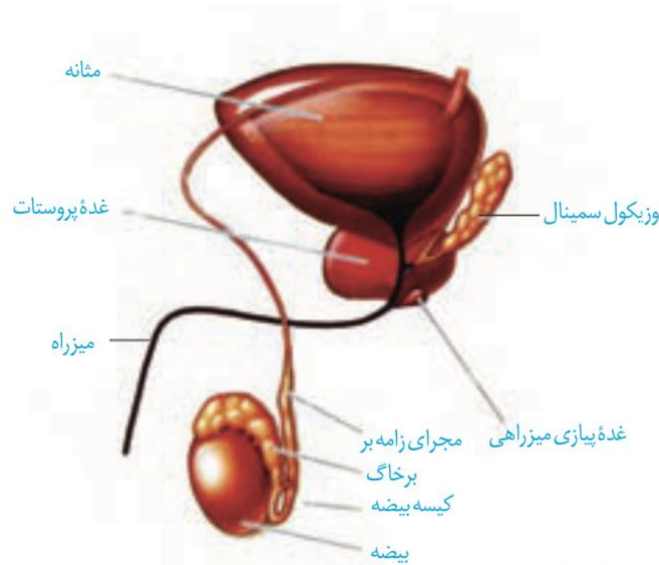

Figure 6-1 Adapted from the biology textbook for 11th-grade students in Iran (p. 98). The caption reads: "Male reproductive organs (bladder is not part of it)".
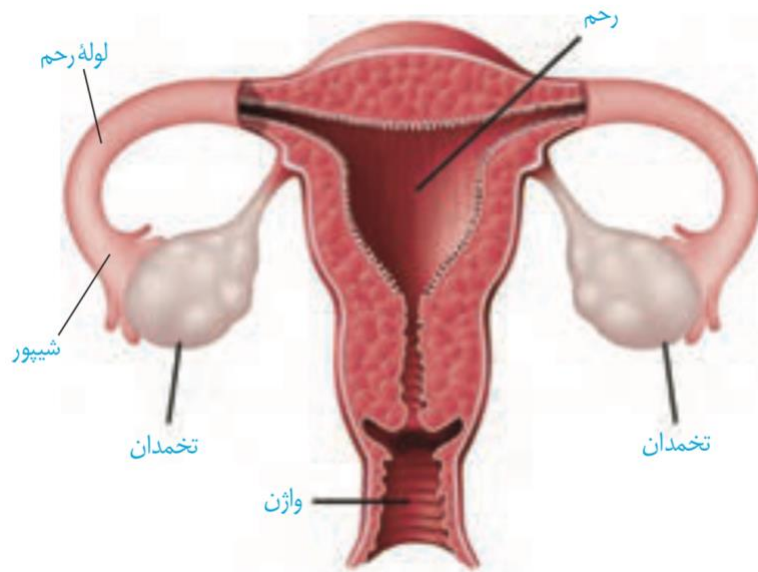

Figure 6-2 Adapted from the biology textbook for 11th-grade students in Iran (p. 102). The caption reads: "female reproductive organs".

6.2.8.2 Reproduction

Biophysiological aspects of human reproduction are currently included in some educational materials without raising any undue sensitivities. For instance, the biology textbook for 8th-grade students (aged 13-17) briefly explains that pregnancy begins when an egg and sperm unite. Later, in the biology textbook for 11th-grade students (aged 16-20), more detailed biological aspects of reproduction are explained, although this is primarily intended for students studying in the field of experimental sciences. In this textbook, assisted reproduction techniques like IUI (Intrauterine Insemination) and IVF (In Vitro Fertilization) are also discussed. However, these discussions do not delve into more controversial issues, such as the methods used to obtain sperm for IVF when the father-to-be lacks functional sperm.

6.2.8.3 Puberty

Puberty is commonly discussed in detail in schools in Iran. As detailed in Chapter 4, schools and parents were generally comfortable with the education surrounding puberty. However, this education often predominantly focuses on physiological changes, religious obligations, and associated washing rituals. While puberty is discussed in the school textbook of *Thinking and Lifestyle* for 7th-grade female students (aged 12-15), as discussed in Chapter 5, many individuals I interviewed in girls-only schools took additional steps by inviting external professionals for brief lectures. Furthermore, more detailed information about the biological aspects of menstruation is already included in the biology textbook for 11th-grade students (aged 16-20) studying in the field of experimental sciences. While menstruation and puberty in girls are discussed in detail, there is no mention of wet dreams in the school textbook of *Thinking and Lifestyle* for 8th-grade male students (aged 13-17). However, it is worth noting that this topic could be addressed following the same protocol suggested for more sensitive topics, given its association with religious washing rituals. Teaching about religious rituals associated with puberty provides a suitable foundation to address other issues related to puberty. It is important to acknowledge that gender-

segregated education can further limit puberty education, keeping younger individuals unaware of the puberty experiences of the opposite sex.

6.2.8.4   Body Image

The learning objectives under this heading do not indicate sensitivity. The impact of individuals' feelings about their bodies on their health, self-image, and behaviour is addressed in the curriculum. For example, eating disorders such as anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and body dysmorphic disorder are already included in the textbook of *Health and Hygiene* for 12th-grade students (aged 17-20). However, implications in terms of sexual self-image could be added and addressed in a small group setting. As discussed in Chapter 4, the concept of *Hayâ* in appearance was highly valued and monitored not only among students but also among the school staff, parents, and anyone who entered the school, including myself as a researcher. However, at times, the line between encouraging *Hayâ* in appearance and pressuring students to look undesirable or unpleasant became blurred. This blurriness could negatively affect students' body image, their sense of self, and their understanding of being worthy of love or the possibility of being the object of desire, which can haunt them during their sensitive puberty years or even later in adulthood. These issues, such as body image, are more about how the body is addressed, clothed, and treated rather than just a matter of being talked about.

6.2.9   KEY CONCEPT 7: SEXUALITY AND SEXUAL BEHAVIOUR

UNESCO's suggested topics for the key concept of Sexuality and Sexual Behaviour include 'Sex, Sexuality and the Sexual Life Cycle' and 'Sexual Behaviour and Sexual Response' (2018a, pp. 69–72). All the learning objectives within this category can be regarded as sensitive.

6.2.9.1   Sex, Sexuality and the Sexual Life Cycle

The learning objectives presented under this heading are closely associated with the concept of pleasure. In this study, participants' shifting perspectives on sexual pleasure were detected, and explored in Chapter 4, where initially, participants emphasised self-control and the absence of sexual desire and pleasure as ideal for younger individuals, but this perspective changed dramatically in discussions about future married individuals who had received successful SRE. The fear of arousing sexual desire and pursuing sexual pleasure in younger individuals led to strategies like physical exhaustion and extreme mental engagement to suppress it.

Furthermore, as observed in Chapter 4, some interviewees equated 'medically healthy' with 'normal'. By inaccurately using the term 'health' to describe normality, some interviewees associated their understanding of abnormality with disease or pathology. Consequently, masturbation was referred to as a disease by some interviewees, indicating a prevalent masturbation phobia among them. Various measures were proposed to 'cure' masturbation, ranging from dietary modifications to preventive behaviours. It is worth noting that the dietary and lifestyle recommendations suggested by interviewees in this study can also be found in the 8th-grade *Thinking and Lifestyle* textbook for students aged 13-17 as general recommendations to adhere to during puberty, without directly mentioning their assumed link with increasing sexual desire.

However, even if the attitude towards sexual desire and pleasure remains unchanged, it should still be possible to acknowledge and educate younger individuals, as well as adults, that "sexual feelings, fantasies, and desires are natural and occur throughout life although people do not always choose to act on those feelings" (UNESCO, 2018, p. 70) for many reasons, such as their religious values, as discussed earlier about eating and Ramadan.

6.2.9.2   Sexual Behaviour and Sexual Response

Educating younger individuals about the sexual response cycle is of great value, especially when they start noticing their responses to sexual stimuli. However, it is worth reiterating that while, as seen in Chapter 4, some interviewees recommended

omitting any expressions of emotion, including kissing and hugging between parents and their children, to reduce the chance of triggering sexual desire, the presence of such behaviour could better exemplify that the same act that could be appropriate between two people might be extremely inappropriate in another setting and that the appropriateness of an action depends on the context and the relationship between individuals.

Other important points to consider about most of the learning objectives and key ideas in this category have already been addressed. These include issues such as the importance of making informed decisions about sexual behaviour, staying safe, understanding pleasure, and promoting health and well-being. The importance of educating younger individuals about good and bad touch was also mentioned. Risk-reduction strategies regarding preventing unintended pregnancy and STIs will be discussed under the following key concept.

6.2.10   KEY CONCEPT 8: SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Within the scope of the last key concept, UNESCO suggests three topics: 'Pregnancy and Pregnancy Prevention', 'HIV and AIDS Stigma, Care, Treatment and Support', and 'Understanding, Recognising and Reducing the Risk of STIs, including HIV' (2018a, pp. 73–80).

6.2.10.1   Pregnancy and Pregnancy Prevention

While the topic of pregnancy finds a place in the school textbook of *Health and Hygiene* for 12th-grade students (aged 17-20), encompassing some detailed pre-pregnancy recommendations such as the consumption of folic acid, it notably lacks any reference to contraceptives and their pivotal role in prevention unintended pregnancies. Pregnancy is also addressed earlier in the biology textbook for 11th-grade students (aged 16-20) who study experimental sciences. This discussion encompasses issues such as morning sickness, screening tests, and even childbirth procedures, including induction. Nevertheless, the subject of contraception remains noticeably

unaddressed. This omission aligns with the observed denial identified in this study regarding the possibility of early parenthood, its damaging effects, and the significance of preventive measures.

This absence of discourse concerning pregnancy prevention assumes greater significance when considering the context discussed in Chapter 4, where pregnant teenagers are visibly absent in schools, and the topic of teenage pregnancy is notably absent from discussions. This absence is attributed to a prevailing environment where sexual relationships outside of marriage are deemed illegal, and married students are no longer welcome to pursue their studies in the school setting. In an attempt to conceal any evidence of sexual activity among younger individuals within the school environment, even if they are married, pregnant teenagers are physically excluded from the educational system. This exclusion seems to suggest that the problematic nature of teenage pregnancy is judged irrelevant as long as it remains hidden or unspoken.

Moreover, the absence of discourse on contraception may also be indicative of broader governmental policies. As a medical psychosexual therapist, I have become increasingly aware of the increasing challenges many clients face in accessing safe contraceptive methods. The same impact of governmental policies on SRE, particularly concerning pregnancy education, is evident in the biology textbook for 11th-grade students (aged 16-20). While the textbook addresses topics such as miscarriage and its various aetiologies, it strikingly refrains from mentioning abortion – a reflection of prevailing governmental policies on this matter. Consequently, the issue surrounding pregnancy prevention and its incorporation into SRE in Iran is not solely a matter of sensitivity. Rather, it is indicative of a broader sense of denial or deliberate omission driven by governmental reproductive policies.

6.2.10.2   HIV and AIDS Stigma, Care, Treatment and Support

Nearly all of the learning objectives and key ideas recommended under this topic are already integrated into the school textbook on *Health and Hygiene* designed for 12th-grade students (aged 17-20). None of these topics is regarded as unduly sensitive;

however, if discussed within a small group setting, they possess the potential to establish a solid foundation for addressing less-spoken, more sensitive issues, such as other STIs.

6.2.10.3   Understanding, Recognising and Reducing the Risk of STIs, including HIV

The biology textbook designed for 11th-grade students (aged 16-20) pursuing the field of experimental sciences lists STIs and their associated symptoms. However, beyond indicating that these infections are transmitted through sexual intercourse, there is a noticeable absence of information regarding preventive measures, apart from abstinence or available treatment options. While the textbook on *Health and Hygiene* for 12th-grade students (aged 17-20) provides a detailed account of HIV testing, including the concept of the window period, STIs are addressed with no mention of such critical issues.

Thus, discussions around HIV within the current educational textbooks, if undertaken in a small group setting, offer an opportunity not only to delve into HIV in greater detail, including topics such as PrEP (pre-exposure prophylaxis) and PEP (post-exposure prophylaxis), which are currently absent in the textbooks, but also to serve as a valuable platform for discussing other STIs.

6.3   CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the implications drawn from this research for guiding content selection in SRE programmes in Iran highlight a crucial need for comprehensive and sensitive approaches. While addressing topics related to sexual health, such as pregnancy prevention and pleasure, may appear daunting, given the cultural and governmental constraints, it is imperative to recognise that these discussions while being sensitive, necessitate a profound paradigm shift in attitudes toward childhood agency. Rather than perpetuating a culture of silence and denial, embracing childhood agency and autonomy becomes paramount.

By imparting comprehensive and accurate information to young individuals and engaging them in open, informed conversations, it becomes possible to empower them to make responsible decisions aligned with their values and well-being regarding their sexualities and relationships. While challenges are significant, they also represent an opportunity for educational reform in Iran, emphasising the importance of nurturing a generation that is well-equipped to navigate the complexities of sexual and relational health in a rapidly changing world.

6.4 LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

In the course of this research, I remained mindful of the constraints imposed by my theoretical framework, as well as the extent of my research, which predominantly concentrated on conventional school-based settings for SRE. In acknowledging the following limitations, I wish to highlight the complexity of encompassing all dimensions of diversity within a singular research endeavour. The aim of this research, though, was to offer insights within the boundaries of the available data while also recognising the multi-dimensional nature of the discourse surrounding SRE in Iran.

6.4.1 LANGUAGE TRANSLATION AND CULTURAL NUANCES

A limitation arose from the translation of interviews from Farsi into English, the language used for analysis and reporting. Despite efforts to ensure accuracy, nuances, connotations, and cultural depths may not have fully transferred during translation. However, in response to this challenge, a proactive approach was adopted. Instead of translating every term and potentially losing its meaning, another strategy was employed that involved keeping the original term while also providing a detailed explanation of its various aspects; take *Adab,* for instance. This approach aimed to capture the essence of participants' expressions while bridging the gap between languages and cultures. Nevertheless, the inherent complexity of preserving the full spectrum of cultural and religious meanings remains a limitation in this study.

6.4.2   LIMITATIONS OF QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The application of qualitative methods in this research, while accompanied by some limitations, notably in terms of sampling, offered substantial advantages that shifted the balance towards its strengths. In-depth interviews and exploration of participants' perspectives and values addressed a significant gap in the literature on SRE in Iran, which either relies on large-scale quantitative studies or on studies that often overlook values. Moreover, given the sensitivity of the subject of SRE and the necessity of cultivating rapport and developing mutual trust, employing individually tailored interviews conducted by myself proved to be of great value. Conducting individually tailored interviews, showing interest in what interviewees had to add in their responses to the designed questions and not being afraid of lengthy conversations gave me the chance to get a lot more information than expected, and helped create a good rapport and a kind of relationship that enabled interviewees to participate in this study with a peace of mind, despite finding the topic very sensitive. That being said, although such data-gathering methods enrich the data, they inevitably constrain the number of individuals from whom data can be gathered.

6.4.3   REPRESENTATIVENESS OF SAMPLE

The employment of snowball sampling in this study might have led to a relatively homogenous group of interviewees sharing similar perspectives and worldviews. It could be assumed that the interviewees who accepted to participate in this study might have been more open to the idea of having an SRE programme or at least might have been more willing to talk about it. Moreover, their referrals might have connected me to colleagues and parents with comparable inclinations, inadvertently excluding opposing viewpoints. Although most refusals were due to scheduling conflicts or concerns about the approval of the Ministry of Education rather than outright disagreement with talking about SRE, the study's sample might still have unintentionally favoured more open attitudes toward this sensitive topic. While this could limit generalisability, it does not devalue the broader insights extracted from the

findings. Although the majority of interviews occurred within Tehran and predominantly in private religious schools, data were gathered from one rural school. However, while this diverse school setting aimed to enrich perspectives, it did not yield new themes beyond those already discussed during interviews with Tehran-based school staff. Moreover, despite its potential impact on generalisability, the focused private religious school interviews contribute valuable insights due to their affiliation with religious practices – a factor frequently highlighted as a barrier to SRE proposals. Thus, the sample's specific attributes serve both as strengths and limitations to the broader conclusions drawn from the study.

6.4.4 LIMITED REPRESENTATION OF YOUNGER INDIVIDUALS' VOICES

As shown in some previous studies, the Ministry of Education in Iran typically restricts research concerning SRE-related matters to within school premises (Mehrolhassani et al., 2020). Despite my persistent efforts, headteachers and parents declined permission to interview students directly, preventing me from capturing their insights the way I initially intended, and the sparse presence of their voices is a significant limitation. While endeavours to interview students within school settings proved unfruitful, online platforms facilitated large group discussions, providing an alternative, albeit less structured, approach to understanding their perspectives. During the online large group discussions, many participants opted to obscure their true identities, which facilitated an environment encouraging unreserved conversations, albeit concurrently blocking me from understanding their contextual underpinnings and educational background. The absence of direct structured engagement with younger participants highlights a limitation in representing the authentic experiences and perceptions of younger individuals in this study, as their voices and viewpoints were intended to play a central role. Despite this limitation, the insights gained from adults' perspectives and value systems remain valuable in shaping the foundation for a locally appropriate SRE programme.

6.4.5 LIMITATIONS IN ADDRESSING DIVERSITY IN SRE DISCOURSES

6.4.5.1 Non-Conforming Gender Identities and Sexual Orientation Minorities

An important dimension absent from this study is the discourse around non-conforming gender identities and sexual orientation minorities. This omission is not reflective of my personal stance but rather underscores the socio-cultural context of Iran's schooling system, which often denies visibility to these marginalised groups. Iran's gender-segregated education system inherently reflects binary categorisations, thus silencing the experiences of intersex, non-binary, and transgender individuals. The rigidity of binary norms poses challenges to students that diverge from established standards. The hope is that this awareness leads to challenging and reshaping conventional notions of normal and abnormal, offering an appreciation of the richness of diverse experiences. An example of such evolving perceptions, particularly in the Iranian context, is left-handedness. Historically, left-handedness bore a social stigma in Iran, indicating an abnormal trait. Over time, societal awareness has increased, leading to a better comprehension of the difficulties left-handed individuals face. Consequently, society has progressed towards acknowledging and embracing the diversity within handedness, which serves to highlight the significance of recognising and appreciating a spectrum of bodily experiences that transcend traditional parameters of normalcy. The inclusion of these alternative normals challenges the rigid binary frameworks of normal and abnormal.

6.4.5.2 SRE for Students with Special Educational Needs and Intellectual Disabilities

Another limitation is the absence of discussions on SRE for students with special educational needs and intellectual disabilities. Despite the increased vulnerability of these students to sexual violence, unwanted pregnancies, and sexual health issues (Alriksson-Schmidt, Armour, & Thibadeau, 2010; Schaafsma, Kok, Stoffelen, & Curfs,

2014; Treacy, Taylor, & Abernathy, 2017), their unique challenges are not addressed within this study. The segregation of these students into specialised schools and facilities in Iran leads to their exclusion from mainstream educational settings, which is mirrored in the scope of this study.

6.4.5.3 SRE for Out-of-School Children

Furthermore, a missing aspect in this study is the consideration of SRE for out-of-school children. These children, who do not attend formal educational institutions, represent a distinct demographic that necessitates tailored approaches to SRE. Unfortunately, due to the focus being mainly on school settings, this segment of the population remains unexplored within the confines of this study.

6.5 SUGGESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE RESEARCH

6.5.1 CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND VALUES IN DIFFERENT REGIONS OF IRAN

To gain deeper insights into the influence of cultural diversity on values and views regarding SRE in Iran, future research could be conducted, examining regional variations in cultural values and norms. This research could explore how specific cultural values and beliefs prevalent in different areas of the country shape perceptions of SRE. By delving into local nuances, researchers can provide a more comprehensive understanding of the intersection between culture and SRE.

6.5.2 EMPOWERING YOUNGER INDIVIDUALS' VOICES IN SRE DISCOURSES

A crucial avenue for future research involves amplifying younger individuals' voices in the discourse surrounding SRE. This research should employ creative and participatory

methods that enable students to express their thoughts, concerns, and suggestions regarding SRE within a supportive environment. By giving voice to students and understanding their values, perspectives, and educational needs, researchers can inform more student-centred SRE programmes and policies.

6.5.3   IMPLEMENTATION AND EVALUATION OF CULTURALLY SENSITIVE SRE PROGRAMMES

To address the need for culturally sensitive SRE programmes in Iran, future research should collaborate with progressive schools to implement and assess such programmes based on the proposed structure and content drawn from the findings of this research. Such research could involve developing tailored curricula that align with cultural values and preferences. The subsequent rigorous evaluation, informed by student, teacher, and parent feedback, would allow for continuous improvement of these programmes. Starting from the early years, this research can expand its scope to later years of education and assess the effectiveness of culturally sensitive SRE throughout a student's academic journey.

6.5.4   TEACHER TRAINING FOR INCLUSIVE SRE

Future research could focus on creating teacher training programmes that specifically aim to enhance educators' skills and confidence in delivering culturally sensitive and inclusive SRE. The effectiveness of these training programmes could be evaluated to assess their impact on teachers' abilities to address diverse student needs effectively.

6.5.5   PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT AND SRE

Research exploring strategies for involving parents in SRE discussions is essential, investigating how parental perspectives on SRE align with or differ from school-based approaches, and seeking ways to foster constructive partnerships between schools

and families. This research can contribute to more collaborative and effective approaches to SRE that involve all stakeholders.

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8 APPENDICES

8.1 APPENDIX 1 – THE INFORMATION SHEET (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

You are invited to participate in a research project for a PhD thesis on sexuality education. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

The objectives of this research are to understand the layers of social, cultural, religious and personal values and beliefs which define the line between an achievable, effective sexuality education and an unfeasible, inefficient one and explore how applicable the notion of sexuality education is to Iranian schools. The hope is to gain some understanding about participants' value systems regarding sexuality and sexuality education, and to explore their views on the most appropriate ways of delivering sexuality education.

Whilst there are no immediate benefits for those people participating in the project, it is hoped that this work will inform policymakers and headteachers who wish to promote students' health and well-being by delivering a sexuality education which is in line with Iranians' value systems.

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Should you choose to participate, you will receive an information sheet for your reference and will be kindly requested to sign a consent form. It is important to note that you have the option to withdraw from the study at any time within two weeks following the interview without the need to provide a specific reason. Beyond that initial two-week period, I kindly request that any withdrawal requests be accompanied by a substantial reason. In the event you

decide to withdraw, I will also inquire about your preferences regarding the data you have contributed up to that point.

In order to explore your perspectives on sexuality education, individual interviews are planned. The duration of the interviews might vary greatly depending on your participation; however, they are estimated to take between 30 to 60 minutes of your time. The audio recordings of your interview will be used only for analysis. No one outside the project will be allowed access to it.

You can provide your consent for the use of your data in this project by completing the consent form that has been provided to you.

If you are interested in the study's findings, you can have a copy of the study's results when published.

You will be given a copy of this information sheet and a signed consent form to keep. Thank you for reading this information sheet and considering participating in this research study.

8.2   APPENDIX 2 – CONSENT FORM (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

Please complete this form after you have read the Information Sheet and/or listened to an explanation about the research. I confirm that I understand that by ticking/initialling each box below, I am consenting to this element of the study.

Name of participant   Date   Signature

		Please tick here
1	I confirm that I have read and understood the Information Sheet for the above study and/or listened to an explanation about the research. I have had an opportunity to consider the information and what will be expected of me. I have also had the opportunity to ask questions that have been answered to my satisfaction, and I would like to participate in an individual interview.	
2	I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time. I understand that I will be able to withdraw my data without giving a reason up to two weeks after the interview, after which my withdrawal requests should be accompanied by a substantial reason. I understand that if I decide to withdraw, any data I have provided up to that point will be deleted unless I agree otherwise.	
3	I consent to the processing of my personal information for the purposes explained to me. I understand that such information will be handled in accordance with all applicable data protection legislation.	

4	I understand that all personal information will remain confidential and that all efforts will be made to ensure I cannot be identified. I understand that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases, I may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.	
5	I understand the consequences of participating and the support that will be available to me should I become distressed during the course of the research.	
6	I understand that the information I have submitted will be published as a report, and I wish to receive a copy.	Yes/No
7	I consent to my interview being audio recorded and understand that the recordings will be stored using password-protected software and will be used for specific research purposes. To note: If you do not want your participation audio recorded, you can still participate in the study.	
8	I voluntarily agree to take part in this study.	

Researcher: Fatemeh Mafi   Date   Signature

8.3 Appendix 3 – Interview Guide With Parents (English Translation)

Introduction

- Hello, I am Dr Fatemeh Mafi. You are being invited to take part in a research project for a PhD thesis regarding school Sexuality Education. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully (handing across the information sheet). Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.
- Shall we start now?
- May I audio record this interview? (Turning on the recorder)
- A few warming-up questions (asking the number and gender of children).

Questions about values:

- When you want to describe a good girl/boy to your child/children, especially with regard to sexual behaviour, what comes to your mind?
- Imagine your child/children are provided with a sexuality education programme; if the education provided has gone well, when it comes eventually to your child/children beginning to develop relationships themselves, what sort of people would you like them to be?

Let's talk about sexuality education!

- What do you think sexuality education is?
- Do you think it is necessary?
- Do you think your child/children are mature enough to receive sexuality education, and if they are, which topics can it cover?
- Who do you think is responsible for delivering sexuality education?

- About the contents of the sexuality education programme, who do you think should be the decision maker?

Education regarding puberty:

- Did your child/children have any sort of education regarding puberty/menstruation in their school?
- Who is in charge of teaching about puberty/menstruation?
- Do they also cover the religious rituals regarding puberty/menstruation during that course? If not, who does?
- How do you feel about that education?
- Is it practical to deliver sexuality education regarding other issues with the same format that education regarding menstruation/puberty is provided?

Practical questions about delivery:

- Which characteristics do you think a sexuality educator should have? What sort of academic background do you think they should have?
- Do we have an appropriate vocabulary for sexuality-related issues in the Farsi language that is not rude and is not filled with jargon as well?
- Do you think it is practical to educate parents and ask them to educate their child/children themselves?
  - Do you talk about such issues with your child/children?
  - To whom does/do your child/children talk about such issues?
- Do you remember any experience of providing sexuality education to your child/children by you or others?
- What is your idea on using online media (or any media) for sexuality education?

Closing questions

- Thank you very much! I do not have any more questions. Is there anything that you would like to add?
- Thank you very much for your time. The interview has now come to an end.

- Can you refer me to anyone you believe might be willing to participate in my research?

8.4 APPENDIX 4 – INTERVIEW GUIDE WITH CLASSROOM TEACHERS (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

Introduction

- Hello, I am Dr Fatemeh Mafi. You are being invited to take part in a research project for a PhD thesis regarding school Sexuality Education. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully (handing across the information sheet). Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

- Shall we start now?

- May I audio record this interview? (Turning on the recorder)

- A few warming-up questions.

- May I ask you what is your job title in the school?

- With what age of children do you usually work?

- What kind of school(s) do you work in, or have you ever worked in?

Let's talk about sexuality education!

- What do you think sexuality education is?

- Do you think it is necessary?

- You are working with students from X to Y years old. Do you think it is practical to have a sexuality education programme for these students? Do you think they are mature enough to receive sexuality education, and if they are, which topics can it cover?

- Who do you think is responsible for delivering sexuality education?

- About the contents of the sexuality education programme, who do you think should be the decision maker?

- Do you have any form of sexuality education in your school?
    - o If yes:

- For which class?

- Who teaches? (Person in charge/sexuality educator)

- Can I know more about the contents and settings of this course?

- Goals / desired outcomes

- Content

- Religious considerations

- Cultural consideration

- Vocabulary of use

- Do you face any difficulties or problems?

- Are there any assessment protocols?

- What are the achievements of this programme?

- If no:

  - Why not?

  - Do you think one day there will be sexuality education in this school?

  - What should happen so that your school can provide a sexuality education?

  - Which topics do you think it should cover?

  - Imagine your school provides a sexuality education programme. What sort of information should it deliver so that you say the education programme has gone well?

  - Imagine that you start a sexuality education programme in your school; how do you think parents would react to that?

    - Have you ever had a conversation with the parents and asked their opinion on whether it is good or not to provide a sexuality education programme in the school setting?

    - What would you do if parents became concerned? What sort of strategies can a school have to address parental concerns?

Education regarding puberty:

- Do you have any sort of education regarding puberty/menstruation in your school?
- Who is in charge of teaching about puberty/menstruation?
- Do they also cover the religious rituals regarding puberty/menstruation during that course? If not, who does?
- Did parents have any problems with that education?
- Is it practical to deliver sexuality education regarding other issues with the same format that education regarding menstruation/puberty is provided?

Practical questions about delivery:

- Which characteristics do you think a sexuality educator should have? What sort of academic background do you think they should have?
- Do we have an appropriate vocabulary for sexuality-related issues in the Farsi language that is not rude and is not filled with jargon as well?
- Do you think sexuality education should be delivered individually or in the format of a class or to a group of students?
- Do you think it is practical to educate parents and ask them to educate their child/children themselves?
    - Do you think parents will actually have a conversation about sexuality education with their children?
- What is your idea on using online media (or any media) for sexuality education?

Questions about values:

- When you want to describe a good girl/boy to your students, especially with regard to sexual behaviour, what comes to your mind?
- Imagine your school provides a sexuality education programme; if the education your school has provided has gone well, when it comes eventually to your students beginning to develop relationships themselves, what sort of people would you like them to be?

- Imagine that as a teacher, you are asked to design a sexuality education programme; what values do you consider the most important ones that should govern the educational programme?

Safeguarding children:

- When a student has a problem regarding sexual subjects, to whom should they refer?
  - If a student goes to the maths teacher (you), for example, and lets them know that they have a problem, or for instance, they are being sexually abused, what do you expect that teacher to do (what would you do)?
- Does the school have a certain protocol to deal with sexual abuse?
  - Are parents informed?
  - Who decides whether it is necessary to inform the family or not?

Closing questions

- Thank you very much! I do not have any more questions. Is there anything that you would like to add?
- Thank you very much for your time. The interview has now come to an end.
- Can you refer me to anyone you believe might be willing to participate in my research?

8.5 APPENDIX 5 – INTERVIEW GUIDE WITH HEADTEACHERS (ENGLISH TRANSLATION)

Introduction

- Hello, I am Dr Fatemeh Mafi. You are being invited to take part in a research project for a PhD thesis regarding school Sexuality Education. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what participation will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully (handing across the information sheet). Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

- Shall we start now?

- May I audio record this interview? (Turning on the recorder)

- A few warming-up questions.

- What age of children do you usually have in your school?

- What kind of school(s) do you work in, or have you ever worked in?

Let's talk about sexuality education!

- What do you think sexuality education is?

- Do you think it is necessary?

- You are working with students from X to Y years old. Do you think it is practical to have a sexuality education programme for these students? Do you think they are mature enough to receive sexuality education, and if they are, which topics can it cover?

- Who do you think is responsible for delivering sexuality education?

- About the contents of the sexuality education programme, who do you think should be the decision maker?

- Do you have any form of sexuality education in your school?
  - o If yes:
    - ▪ For which class?

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- Who teaches? (Person in charge/sexuality educator)
- Can I know more about the contents and settings of this course?
- Goals / desired outcomes
- Content
- Religious considerations
- Cultural consideration
- Vocabulary of use
- Do you face any difficulties or problems?
- Are there any assessment protocols?
- What are the achievements of this programme?

    o If no:
    - Why not?
    - Do you think one day there will be sexuality education in this school?
    - What should happen so that your school can provide a sexuality education?
    - Which topics do you think it should cover?
    - Imagine your school provides a sexuality education programme. What sort of information should it deliver so that you say the education programme has gone well?
    - Imagine that you start a sexuality education programme in your school; how do you think parents would react to that?
        • Have you ever had a conversation with the parents and asked their opinion on whether it is good or not to provide a sexuality education programme in the school setting?
        • What would you do if parents became concerned? What sort of strategies can a school have to address parental concerns?

Education regarding puberty:

- Do you have any sort of education regarding puberty/menstruation in your school?

- Who is in charge of teaching about puberty/menstruation?

- Do they also cover the religious rituals regarding puberty/menstruation during that course? If not, who does?

- Did parents have any problems with that education?

- Is it practical to deliver sexuality education regarding other issues with the same format that education regarding menstruation/puberty is provided?

Practical questions about delivery:

- Which characteristics do you think a sexuality educator should have? What sort of academic background do you think they should have?

- Do we have an appropriate vocabulary for sexuality-related issues in the Farsi language that is not rude and is not filled with jargon as well?

- Do you think sexuality education should be delivered individually or in the format of a class or to a group of students?

- Do you think it is practical to educate parents and ask them to educate their child/children themselves?
  - Do you think parents will actually have a conversation about sexuality education with their children?

- What is your idea on using online media (or any media) for sexuality education?

Questions about values:

- When you want to describe a good girl/boy to your students, especially with regard to sexual behaviour, what comes to your mind?

- Imagine your school provides a sexuality education programme; if the education your school has provided has gone well, when it comes eventually to your students beginning to develop relationships themselves, what sort of people would you like them to be?

- Imagine that as the headteacher, you are asked to design a sexuality education programme; what values do you consider the most important ones that should govern the educational programme?

Safeguarding children:

- When a student has a problem regarding sexual subjects, to whom should they refer?
  - If a student goes to the maths teacher, for example, and lets them know that they have a problem, or for instance, they are being sexually abused, what do you expect that teacher to do?
- Does the school have a certain protocol to deal with sexual abuse?
  - Are parents informed?
  - Who decides whether it is necessary to inform the family or not?

Closing questions

- Thank you very much! I do not have any more questions. Is there anything that you would like to add?
- Thank you very much for your time. The interview has now come to an end.
- Can you refer me to anyone you believe might be willing to participate in my research?
- Is it possible for me to recruit student participants from your school?
  - If yes:
    - How can I recruit participants from your school?
    - Can I, myself, conduct interviews alone or should a teacher/third party accompany me?
    - Which class/ age group?
  - If no:
    - May I know why not?

8.6 Appendix 6 – An English Translation of a Segment From The Semi-Structured Interview Conducted With One of The Classroom Teachers And Initial Codes

- You are working with students from 12 to 18 years old; do you think it is practical to have a sexuality education programme for these students?

  - I think now the atmosphere is not really that way; I mean the way that you can have one-by-one dialogues with the students or have a class regarding sexuality-related issues. However, we can have some general educational programmes; for example, we have a course called "Media Literacy" in which, although nothing is mentioned directly in the textbook, that class has the potential to cover some of these issues, especially when some related discussions are raised during the class, and our teachers do that even now. For example, last year, some students decided to work on an issue related to sexuality and discussed it during class. However, right after the class, the teacher informed the headteacher of this incident and let her know that they had had this sort of discussion in the classroom. Apart from that, we have had some educational programmes for parents, and I can remember that a few times, we invited lecturers to talk to the parents about sexuality-related issues. I think it is more practical to have that sort of education for parents rather than students.

- So, do you think it is more practical to educate parents and ask them to educate their children themselves?

  - Yes.

- What percentage of parents, do you think, will actually have this conversation with their children? Shall I ask you what your estimation is?

- I think it needs time. I mean, imagine that during all the years that your child goes to school, they educate you regarding sexual matters. You might find at least one or two topics that align with your values *aligning with values* framework, and you will act according to them.

- Imagine that you start a sexuality education programme in your school; how do you think parents would react to that?

    - For parents?

- No, for students.

    - Probably different reactions. *parents enthusiasm for school-based SRE* Some might get really happy, but I think most of them will feel *parental concerns (the timing - too early)* as if you have opened a file in their children's mind that they assume is not open yet, or they might become concerned *parental concerns (content)* about the contents of this class or who *parental concerns (educator)* the teacher is going to be. They might become very concerned about the details.

- So, what would you do if they become concerned? What sort of strategies can a school have to address those concerns?

    - *liaison between parents and school* We probably need to have a meeting with parents beforehand and make sure they are informed.

- About the contents of the sexuality education programme, who do you think should be the decision maker? Parents, teachers, stud...

    - So, school is working in a certain country and under certain rules and regulations. Regarding every issue, we have some official documents *adult power struggle (governmental authorities)* from the government, and if we want to act legally, we must abide by them.

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> - So, to be clear, do you think it is the government who should decide about the content of schools' sexuality education programmes...
>   - Yes.
> - And the government should introduce a textbook or a reference...
>   - Yes, yes, of course!

- And parents and students and teachers should abide by that?

  - Yes. I mean, even for our summer courses, we have to get permission from the Ministry of Education, and we give them a list of all the courses that we are going to provide and the names of the teachers. If we do not get that permission, we cannot have that course.

- So, I see, apparently, now the process is this way, but what I wanted to know is, ideally, according to you, who should make decisions about the contents of schools' sexuality education programmes?

  - I think currently, and in our Society, this process works the best; I mean when you tell parents that the Ministry of Education has forced us to have this course. However, maybe in some particular schools, for example, in some private schools, you might be able to do some stuff outside of this governmental framework, which might be effective. But generally speaking, I think this process is better.

- Let me ask you about another practical issue: do we have an appropriate vocabulary for sexuality-related issues in Farsi that is not rude and is not filled with jargon?

  - Yes, I believe it is going to be complicated and challenging, but it is possible to design a programme with an appropriate vocabulary.

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- What about the SRE educator? Which characteristics do you think an SRE educator should have? For example, what sort of academic background do you think they should have?

  - I think one of the most important issues is that we do not have such
  teachers' inadequate knowledge
  people. Someone who knows exactly what she is doing and is capable
  classroom management skills   *teachers' inadequate knowledge*
  of delivering that information and, is able to answer students'
  classroom management skills
  questions, and is able to manage the class, because students are not going to be silent in a class like that. She should be able to face those
  educators' skills (managing sensitive topics)
  questions and give appropriate answers immediately without causing any harm. Moreover, she should be knowledgeable regarding the
  topics   *topics*   *topics*
  biological aspects, religious aspects, legal aspects, etc. She should be well aware of all of these. I believe if we're going to have a separate
  separate class
  class dedicated to sex education, then we need to educate special teachers to deliver that course. However, I think we should also
  Creating an atmosphere (educating other teachers)
  educate other teachers, for example, mathematics teachers or physics teachers, so that they know some basics regarding such issues and how to handle related cases.

- Do you have any sort of education regarding menstruation in your school?

  - Yes, we do have a very
  education regarding puberty (comprehensive)
  comprehensive education regarding
  education regarding puberty (timing)
  menstruation indeed. Interestingly, for very young children, classes 5 or 6, which means they are only around 11 years old.

- Who is in charge of teaching about menstruation?

  - They have a book called
  topics
  "Thinking and Research" in Dabestan. We teach regarding menstruation during this course. However, I should

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mention that the teacher who is teaching that course is a psychologist [professionals]

herself.

- Does she also cover the religious rituals regarding menstruation during that course?

    - To some extent. I am not sure whether they also received this sort of information in their religion studies class or not.

- Is menstruation mentioned in the textbook for that course?

    - No, nothing is written in the book. But since that course provides an [creating an atmosphere] atmosphere of discussion, we use that atmosphere and talk to them about menstruation. She is mainly talking about menstruation from a health-related perspective [professionals (health-related perspective)] and how this is a normal phenomenon, and it shows that you are perfectly healthy. Because sometimes, students are frightened when they first experience mensuration, and I believe [education regarding puberty (timing - too late)] the best time for that education is actually Dabestan before they experience it for the first time.

[education regarding puberty (parental approval)]
- Did parents have any problems with that education in Dabestan?

    - No, no problem at all.

- Do you think it is practical to deliver sexuality education regarding other issues with the same format that education regarding menstruation is provided?

    - Well, I think it is possible. It should be gradually and for higher [timing] grades. However, I think, just like menstruation, information regarding [timing] sexuality-related issues should be delivered to children before they [timing] actually face it for the first time. I think their first time would be around 18 years old.

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- Do you think sexuality education should be delivered individually or in the format of a class or to a group of students?

    the number of participants (whole class)
  - It depends on the content; some parts can be delivered in the class. But
    the number of participants (individualised)
    sometimes, we need to educate children individually regarding specific issues. For example, the student that I mentioned earlier, who was involved in sexual relationships with multiple partners, for her, it was
    the number of participants (individualised)
    better to have an individual session and to address her issues individually because we were really worried about her health and well-being in the first place.

- Are you worried that children might talk about sexuality-related issues with each other in the school setting?

    peer conversation
  - Well, they do talk about these things with each other. I mean, we
    peer conversation
    cannot deny that they do. They definitely speak to their friends about these issues. A lot more than what we used to when we were teenagers.

- Do you try to reduce talks like that somehow?

    reduce peer discussion
  - Yes, especially when they have a problem, we ask them not to discuss
    protecting
    such issues with their friends. We want to make sure that they do not harm other students.

- Last question: imagine your school provides a sexuality education programme. If the education your school has provided has gone well, when it comes eventually to your students beginning to develop relationships themselves, what sort of people would you like them to be?

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- First of all, I like to see that, that child behaves in a way that does not [protecting] harm herself or others. Secondly, that she is behaving according to her [aligning with values] own framework of values. Because I think we can use these two rules for all types of human beings regardless of their perspective to life.

- Thank you very much! I do not have any more questions. Is there anything that you would like to add?

  - I think, maybe now, if we want to do something with a practical outcome, I think in our current stage in Iran, we should start by [educating parents] educating parents.

- So, we cannot just hope that parents will educate their children; you think we need to provide education for parents first. Am I right?

  - Yeah, I believe parents need education in this regard. However, we [educating parents] have some parents who are medical doctors or psychologists, and they are well informed already, but generally speaking, parents need [educating parents] education in this regard.

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