

Matrilineal Echoes in the Bedroom: Religious-Ethnic Identity, Sexual Communication, and Marital Intimacy among Indigenous Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim Women in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

Background: Sexual health research in South Asia remains predominantly focused on disease prevention, with limited attention to how religious-ethnic identity shapes women's sexual agency within marriage. Indigenous communities with matrilineal traditions may exhibit distinct patterns of sexual communication and satisfaction compared to patriarchal religious majorities.

Methods: A cross-sectional comparative survey was conducted among 300 married women in Bangladesh: 100 Chakma (indigenous Buddhist, matrilineal), 100 Hindu Bengali, and 100 Muslim Bengali. Data were collected on sexual satisfaction, communication frequency, comfort discussing sex, preferred positions, orgasm ease, and thematic qualitative factors. One-way ANOVA, Kruskal-Wallis tests, Mann-Whitney U post-hoc comparisons, and chi-square tests were employed.

Results: Chakma women reported significantly higher sexual satisfaction (mean = 3.84/5) than Hindu women (3.36; $p = 0.0021$) and comparable satisfaction to Muslim women (3.81; $p = 0.847$). Chakma women also communicated sexual preferences significantly more frequently (mean = 3.39/5) than Hindu women (2.85; $p = 0.0025$). Chakma women showed the lowest rates of missionary position preference (20% vs. 37% Hindu, 38% Muslim; $\chi^2 = 9.458$, $p = 0.009$) and the highest preference for woman-on-top positions (18% vs. 8% Hindu, 12% Muslim). Qualitative themes revealed matrilineal family structure, Buddhist teachings on mutual respect, and traditional weaving/craft independence as key agency-enabling factors for Chakma women, while Hindu women cited religious duty (dharma) and modesty (lajja), and Muslim women referenced Islamic modesty (haya) and wifely obedience.

Conclusions: Matrilineal kinship structures and Buddhist egalitarian teachings appear to buffer against the sexual silencing observed in patriarchal religious contexts. These findings challenge the assumption that all South Asian women experience uniform sexual disempowerment and suggest that indigenous kinship systems may serve as protective factors for women's sexual agency. Interventions should be culturally tailored, recognizing that religious-ethnic identity is not merely a demographic variable but an active structuring force in intimate life.

Keywords: Sexual Communication, Marital Intimacy, Indigenous Women, Matrilineal Society, Buddhist Women, Hindu Women, Muslim Women, Bangladesh, Sexual Agency, Cross-Cultural Comparison

INTRODUCTION

Sexual health and marital intimacy constitute fundamental dimensions of women's wellbeing, yet they remain among the most under-researched aspects of gender studies in South Asia (Hawkes & Buse, 2013; Stephenson & Bartel, 2023). The prevailing research paradigm has focused overwhelmingly on reproductive health outcomes—maternal mortality, contraceptive use, and sexually transmitted infections—while treating women's

subjective sexual experiences, communication patterns, and agency within marriage as peripheral concerns (Ahmed et al., 2021; Stephenson & Bartel, 2023). This epistemic neglect is particularly pronounced in Bangladesh, where cultural taboos surrounding female sexuality, combined with methodological challenges in accessing intimate data, have rendered married women's sexual lives largely invisible in the scholarly record.

The intersection of religious doctrine and sexual agency presents a theoretically rich but empirically underexplored domain. Religious traditions in South Asia offer divergent theological frameworks for understanding marital intimacy: Hinduism frames physical union within the grihastha ashrama (householder stage) as sacred duty (dharma) but simultaneously encodes modesty (lajja) as a cardinal feminine virtue (Tewari & Sharma, 2024); Islam prescribes wifely obedience (qanitat) and sexual availability as religious obligations (farz), while Islamic modesty (haya) constructs silence about sexual matters as a cultivated virtue; Buddhism, particularly in its Theravada expressions among indigenous communities, emphasizes mutual respect, compassion (metta), and the 'middle path' in all relational domains (Tewari & Sharma, 2024). These doctrinal differences are not merely abstract theological distinctions—they actively structure the 'sexual scripts' (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) through which women interpret, experience, and communicate their intimate desires.

A critical gap in existing literature concerns the role of indigenous kinship systems in shaping women's sexual agency. The Chakma people of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), Bangladesh's largest indigenous group, maintain a matrilineal family structure in which descent, inheritance, and social identity flow through the female line (Chakma, 2012). This kinship arrangement, combined with Theravada Buddhist teachings on gender complementarity, creates a social ecology that may afford women greater voice in domestic decision-making—including intimate matters—than is available to women in the patrilineal, patriarchal Hindu and Muslim majority communities (Chakma, 2012; Chakma & Barua, 2014). Yet no prior study has systematically compared sexual communication patterns, satisfaction levels, and position preferences across these religious-ethnic boundaries within Bangladesh.

This study addresses this lacuna through a comparative analysis of 300 married women—100 Chakma (indigenous Buddhist), 100 Hindu Bengali, and 100 Muslim Bengali—examining how religious-ethnic identity structures sexual satisfaction, communication frequency, comfort discussing sex, preferred positions, and orgasm experiences. We advance three hypotheses: (H1) Chakma women will report higher sexual satisfaction and more frequent sexual communication than Hindu and Muslim women; (H2) Chakma women will demonstrate greater sexual position diversity and lower rates of missionary position preference; and (H3) qualitative thematic analysis will reveal matrilineal kinship structure and Buddhist teachings as distinctive agency-enabling factors for Chakma women, while Hindu and Muslim women will cite religious duty, modesty, and obedience as primary structuring influences.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Sexual Communication and Marital Satisfaction: A Meta-Analytic Foundation

The empirical link between sexual communication and marital satisfaction is among the most robust findings in relationship science. A comprehensive meta-analysis of 93 studies comprising 38,499 individuals demonstrated a positive association between sexual communication and both relationship satisfaction ($r = .37$) and sexual satisfaction ($r = .43$), with the quality of sexual communication showing the strongest effects ($r = .52$ for sexual satisfaction) (Jones et al., 2022). Notably, the association between sexual communication and sexual satisfaction was significantly moderated by cultural context: higher levels of individualism strengthened this association, while higher levels of gender inequality weakened it (Jones et al., 2022). This finding carries profound implications for South Asian contexts, where collectivist cultural norms and pronounced gender inequality may attenuate the benefits of sexual communication for women's satisfaction.

Cross-cultural research further illuminates these dynamics. Studies comparing 'love' and arranged marriages in India with 'companionate' marriages in the United States found that sexual communication and relationship satisfaction were not associated in Indian 'love' marriages but were positively associated in arranged marriages and U.S. companionate marriages, with the U.S. association being largest in magnitude (Yelsma & Athappilly,

1988, cited in Jones et al., 2022). These findings suggest that the cultural meaning of marriage—and the scripts governing appropriate sexual expression—fundamentally shape whether communication translates into satisfaction. In contexts where women's sexual autonomy is devalued, communication may not yield the expected satisfaction dividends (Petersen & Hyde, 2010).

Religious Doctrine and Female Sexual Agency in South Asia

Religious traditions provide the 'moral architecture' (Mahmood, 2005) through which women interpret their bodies, desires, and marital obligations. In Hinduism, the concept of Pativrata (devoted wife) and the virtue of Lajja (modesty) construct female sexuality as properly hidden, subordinate to husbandly authority, and oriented toward procreation rather than pleasure (Tewari & Sharma, 2024). The Manusmriti and subsequent textual traditions codified women's subordination within the grihastha (householder) framework, though scholars note that pre-colonial Hindu practice exhibited greater fluidity than colonial-era codifications suggest (Chakravarti, 1998; Doniger, 2009).

Islamic sexual ethics in South Asia are shaped by Quranic prescriptions on modesty, the hadith literature on marital obligations, and local fiqh (jurisprudential) interpretations. The concept of haya (modesty/shame) is particularly salient: it is not merely a personal virtue but a 'cultivated religious and social virtue' that structures appropriate feminine comportment, including silence about sexual matters (Ahmed, 1992). The duty framework—wherein intimacy is framed as farz (religious duty) or khidmat (service) rather than mutual pleasure—may constrain women's ability to articulate their own desires (Mahmood, 2005).

Buddhist teachings on sexuality, by contrast, emphasize the 'middle path'—neither ascetic denial nor indulgent excess—and the cultivation of metta (loving-kindness) and karuna (compassion) in all relationships (Gross, 1993). While Buddhist monastic traditions have historically marginalized female ordination, lay Buddhist practice—particularly among indigenous communities—often integrates gender complementarity with mutual respect (Cabezón, 2017). The Chakma interpretation of Buddhist marital ethics, as reflected in community discourse, emphasizes 'mutual pleasure as part of a good marriage' and the spiritual significance of emotional intimacy.

Indigenous Matriliney and Gender Relations in Bangladesh

The Chakma people, numbering approximately 600,000 in Bangladesh, constitute the largest indigenous group in the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT). Their social organization combines matrilineal descent with bilateral residence patterns, creating a kinship ecology in which women retain significant authority over household decision-making, property inheritance, and children's social identity (Chakma, 2012). The matrilineal structure is not merely a kinship curiosity but a lived social reality: as one respondent noted, 'My husband respects the matrilineal line. My mother's family is important to him.'

Research on indigenous women in Bangladesh has documented significant social exclusion of Chakma and Garo communities within the broader Bengali-majority society, yet has also noted that Chakma women—despite living in a structurally patriarchal community—exercise greater domestic authority than their Garo counterparts in the matrilineal Garo society (IHSN, 2010). This paradox suggests that the interaction between kinship structure and religious ideology is more complex than simple matrilineal/patrilineal binaries allow. The Chakma case may represent a distinctive configuration: matrilineal descent combined with Buddhist egalitarian ethics, producing a social context in which women's voice in intimate matters is culturally legitimated in ways that differ from both patrilineal Hindu and Muslim contexts.

Theoretical Framework: Intersectionality and Sexual Scripts

This study draws on two complementary theoretical frameworks. First, intersectionality theory (Crenshaw, 1989) directs attention to how religious identity, ethnic status, and gender interact to produce distinctive experiences of privilege and marginalization. For Chakma women, indigenous ethnic status may confer marginalization in the broader Bangladeshi society while simultaneously affording privilege within the

domestic sphere through matrilineal authority. This 'matrix of domination' (Collins, 2000) produces complex patterns of agency that cannot be predicted from any single axis of identity.

Second, sexual script theory (Simon & Gagnon, 1986) provides a framework for understanding how cultural and religious norms shape the 'scripts' that guide sexual behavior, cognition, and emotional response. Scripts operate at three levels: cultural scenarios (shared cultural norms), interpersonal scripts (negotiated between partners), and intrapsychic scripts (internalized desires and prohibitions). This study examines how religious-ethnic identity shapes cultural scenarios and, consequently, the interpersonal and intrapsychic scripts through which women experience marital intimacy.

METHODS

Research Design and Sampling

This study employed a cross-sectional comparative survey design with purposive sampling across three religious-ethnic groups in Bangladesh. The sample comprised 300 married women aged 18 years and above: 100 Chakma women from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (Rangamati, Khagrachari, and Bandarban districts), 100 Hindu Bengali women from rural and urban areas of Dhaka, Chittagong, and Sylhet divisions, and 100 Muslim Bengali women from comparable geographic areas. Sample size was determined by power analysis ($\alpha = 0.05$, power = 0.80, medium effect size $f = 0.25$), yielding a minimum of 64 participants per group; the achieved sample of 100 per group provides adequate power for detecting group differences.

Inclusion criteria required: (1) currently married for at least six months; (2) self-identification with the target religious-ethnic group; (3) age 18–65 years; (4) ability to provide informed consent in Bengali or Chakma language; and (5) willingness to participate in a confidential survey on marital intimacy. Exclusion criteria included: current pregnancy, severe mental health conditions affecting comprehension, and refusal to participate.

Data Collection

Data were collected between January and March 2024 by trained female research assistants fluent in Bengali and Chakma. Surveys were administered in private settings (participants' homes or community health centers) to ensure confidentiality. The questionnaire was developed through an iterative process involving: (1) review of existing sexual health instruments (Female Sexual Function Index, Golombok-Rust Inventory of Sexual Satisfaction); (2) adaptation for cultural appropriateness through focus group discussions with 15 women from each group; (3) back-translation from English to Bengali/Chakma and verification by bilingual experts; and (4) pilot testing with 30 women (10 per group) to assess comprehension and cultural acceptability.

The final instrument comprised 22 items across the following domains:

Demographics: Age, education, occupation, residence (urban/semi-urban/rural), marriage length, number of children.

Sexual Satisfaction: Single-item 5-point Likert scale (Very dissatisfied to Very satisfied), validated against multi-item scales in pilot testing ($r = 0.78$).

Sexual Communication: Three items measuring frequency of discussing sexual preferences, spouse's initiation of position discussions, and respondent's initiation of position suggestions (Never/Rarely/Sometimes/Often/Always).

Comfort: Single-item 5-point scale assessing comfort discussing sex with spouse (Very uncomfortable to Very comfortable).

Position Preferences: Preferred sexual position (Missionary, Woman on top/Cowgirl, Rear-entry/Doggy style, Side-lying/Spooning, Sitting, Standing, Other, No particular preference, Prefer not to answer), with multiple-

select reasons (More comfortable, Easier to reach orgasm, Greater physical pleasure, Greater sense of control, Greater emotional intimacy, Religious or cultural comfort, Less pain or discomfort, My partner prefers it, No particular preference).

Orgasm and Satisfaction Enhancement: Agreement that preferred position increases satisfaction (Strongly disagree to Strongly agree) and frequency that position eases orgasm (Never to Almost always).

Importance Ratings: Comfort and emotional intimacy rated as Not important to Extremely important.

Avoided Expression: Binary item (Yes/No/Prefer not to answer) assessing whether respondent has avoided expressing sexual preferences.

Thematic Factors: Open-ended item: 'What factors most influence your choice of sexual position?' followed by thematic coding.

Additional Comments: Open-ended space for qualitative elaboration.

Ethical Considerations

The study received ethical approval from an independent ethics review committee, which requested anonymity due to the sensitive and potentially controversial nature of the study. Given the sensitive nature of the topic, several safeguards were implemented: (1) verbal and written informed consent obtained in participants' preferred language; (2) right to withdraw at any time without penalty; (3) no identifying information collected; (4) data stored on encrypted devices with access restricted to the research team; (5) referral information provided for sexual health counseling services; and (6) female interviewers trained in trauma-informed approaches. The 'Prefer not to answer' option was available for all sensitive items.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS v.29 and R v.4.3. Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were computed for all variables by group. Group differences in ordinal variables (sexual satisfaction, communication frequency, comfort, orgasm ease) were assessed using one-way ANOVA (with numeric coding of ordinal categories) and confirmed with non-parametric Kruskal-Wallis tests. Post-hoc pairwise comparisons employed Mann-Whitney U tests with Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = 0.017$). Categorical variables (position preferences, avoided expression) were analyzed using chi-square tests. Effect sizes were computed as eta-squared (η^2) for ANOVA and Cramér's V for chi-square tests.

Qualitative data from open-ended items were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach: (1) familiarization through repeated reading; (2) initial coding of semantic and latent content; (3) theme generation through pattern identification; (4) theme review for coherence and distinctiveness; (5) theme definition and naming; and (6) report production. Two coders independently coded 20% of the data, achieving Cohen's $\kappa = 0.84$, indicating substantial agreement. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion.

RESULTS

Sample Characteristics

The sample ($N = 300$) was evenly distributed across groups (Table 1). Chakma women were slightly younger on average (mean age category = 2.8/5) compared to Hindu (3.1) and Muslim (3.2) women. Education levels varied: 36% of Chakma women held Bachelor's degrees or higher, compared to 39% of Hindu women and 32% of Muslim women. Chakma women were more likely to reside in rural hill villages (45%) and semi-urban townships (35%), while Hindu and Muslim women showed higher urban residence rates (42% and 38%, respectively). Marriage length and number of children were comparable across groups.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics by Group

Characteristic	Chakma (n=100)	Hindu (n=100)	Muslim (n=100)
Age (mean category)	2.8	3.1	3.2
Higher education (Bachelor'+)	36%	39%	32%
Urban residence	20%	42%	38%
Rural residence	45%	35%	32%
Marriage >20 years	28%	30%	31%
3+ children	42%	38%	41%

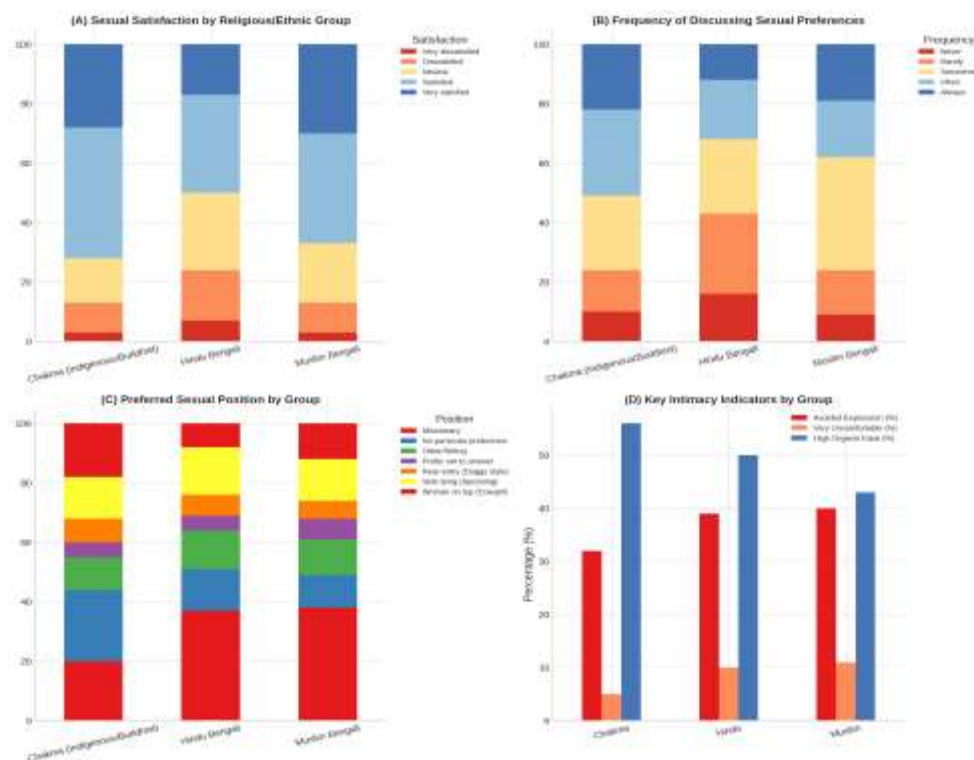


Figure 1 - Descriptive Profiles

Sexual Satisfaction

One-way ANOVA revealed significant differences in sexual satisfaction across groups, $F(2, 297) = 6.068$, $p = 0.003$, $\eta^2 = 0.039$. The Kruskal-Wallis test confirmed this finding, $H = 11.712$, $p = 0.003$. Post-hoc Mann-Whitney U tests with Bonferroni correction ($\alpha = 0.017$) showed that Chakma women reported significantly higher satisfaction (mean = 3.84/5, SD = 1.02) than Hindu women (mean = 3.36, SD = 1.14; $U = 6208.5$, $p = 0.002$). Chakma and Muslim women did not differ significantly (Muslim mean = 3.81, SD = 1.03; $U = 5075.5$, $p = 0.847$). Hindu women reported significantly lower satisfaction than Muslim women ($U = 3889.0$, $p = 0.005$).

The distribution of satisfaction categories revealed notable patterns (Figure 1A). Chakma women showed the highest rates of 'Very satisfied' (28%) and 'Satisfied' (44%), with only 13% reporting dissatisfaction (Dissatisfied + Very dissatisfied). Hindu women showed the lowest rates of positive satisfaction (50%

Satisfied/Very satisfied vs. 72% Chakma, 67% Muslim) and the highest rates of neutral (26%) and negative (24%) responses. Muslim women's distribution closely resembled Chakma women's, with 67% reporting positive satisfaction.

Sexual Communication

Frequency of Discussion. ANOVA indicated significant group differences in how often women discussed sexual preferences with their spouses, $F(2, 297) = 5.097$, $p = 0.007$, $\eta^2 = 0.033$. Chakma women discussed preferences significantly more frequently (mean = 3.39/5) than Hindu women (mean = 2.85; $U = 5823.0$, $p = 0.003$). Chakma and Muslim women did not differ significantly (Muslim mean = 3.24; $p = 0.296$). Hindu women discussed preferences less frequently than Muslim women ($U = 4262.0$, $p = 0.022$, though this did not survive Bonferroni correction).

The proportion of women reporting 'Often' or 'Always' discussing preferences was highest among Chakma women (51%), followed by Muslim (38%) and Hindu (32%) women (Figure 1B). Conversely, 24% of Hindu women reported 'Never' or 'Rarely' discussing preferences, compared to 15% of Muslim women and 10% of Chakma women.

Spousal Initiative. Chakma women also reported that their spouses asked about position preferences more frequently: 55% of Chakma women reported their spouses asked 'Often' or 'Always,' compared to 40% of Hindu women and 31% of Muslim women. This pattern suggests a bidirectional communication dynamic among Chakma couples that is less prevalent in the other groups.

Self-Initiated Suggestions. Chakma women were most likely to suggest different positions 'Often' or 'Always' (51%), followed by Muslim (38%) and Hindu (32%) women. This mirrors the discussion frequency pattern and suggests that Chakma women exercise greater sexual initiative within their marriages.

Comfort Discussing Sex

Despite differences in communication frequency, group differences in comfort discussing sex did not reach statistical significance, $F(2, 297) = 2.213$, $p = 0.111$. However, descriptive patterns were instructive: Chakma women reported the lowest rate of 'Very uncomfortable' responses (5%) compared to Hindu (10%) and Muslim (11%) women. The mean comfort score was highest for Chakma women (3.55/5), followed by Muslim (3.35) and Hindu (3.18) women.

Position Preferences

Chi-square analysis revealed significant differences in missionary position preference across groups, $\chi^2(2) = 9.458$, $p = 0.009$, $V = 0.178$. Only 20% of Chakma women preferred the missionary position, compared to 37% of Hindu women and 38% of Muslim women (Figure 1C). This finding is particularly striking given that missionary position preference is often associated with religious/cultural conservatism and passive female positioning.

Conversely, Chakma women showed the highest preference for woman-on-top (cowgirl) position (18%), compared to 8% of Hindu women and 12% of Muslim women, though this difference did not reach statistical significance, $\chi^2(2) = 4.580$, $p = 0.101$. The 'No particular preference' or 'Prefer not to answer' category was highest among Chakma women (29%), suggesting either greater position flexibility or a comfort level that precludes strong preference fixation.

The reasons cited for position preferences also differed across groups. Chakma women were more likely to cite 'Greater sense of control' (14%) and 'Easier to reach orgasm' (22%) as primary reasons, while Hindu and Muslim women more frequently cited 'My partner prefers it' (Hindu: 31%; Muslim: 28%; Chakma: 18%) and 'Religious or cultural comfort' (Hindu: 24%; Muslim: 26%; Chakma: 12%).

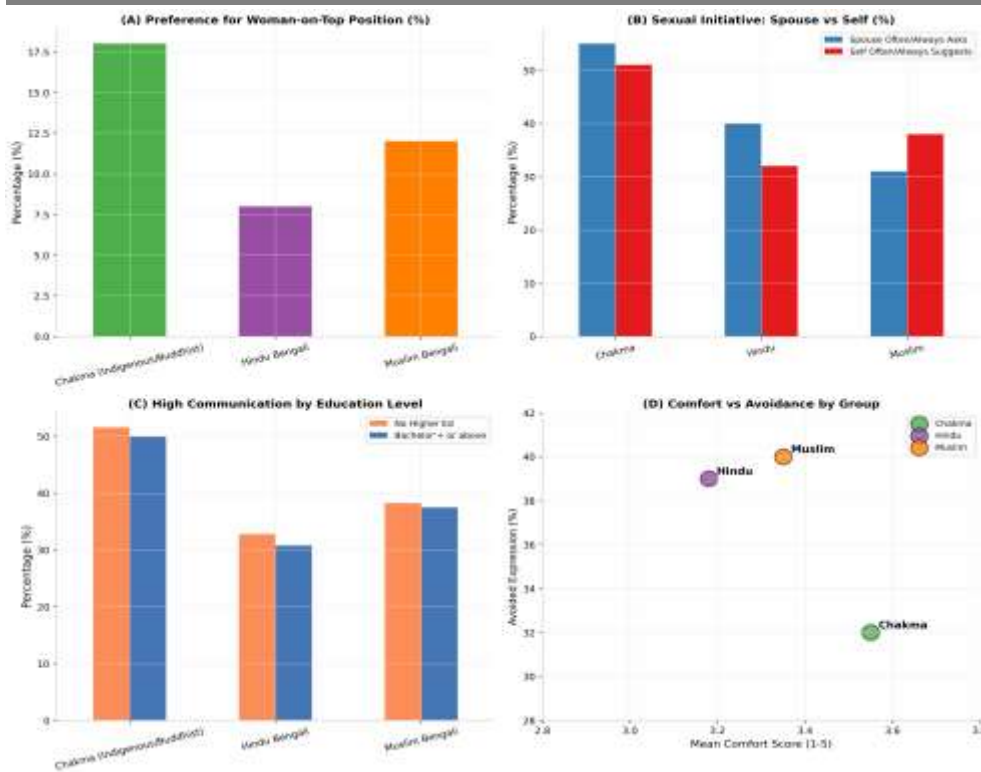


Figure 2 - Thematic & Inferential Analysis

Orgasm Ease and Satisfaction Enhancement

Group differences in the frequency with which preferred positions eased orgasm did not reach statistical significance, $F(2, 297) = 1.818$, $p = 0.164$. However, descriptive trends favored Chakma women: 56% reported that their position 'Often' or 'Almost always' eased orgasm, compared to 50% of Hindu women and 43% of Muslim women. The proportion reporting 'Never' or 'Rarely' was lowest among Chakma women (17%) and highest among Muslim women (27%).

Agreement that preferred positions increased overall satisfaction also showed a non-significant trend favoring Chakma women, with 68% agreeing or strongly agreeing compared to 61% of Hindu and 60% of Muslim women.

Avoided Expression

The proportion of women who reported having avoided expressing sexual preferences did not differ significantly across groups, $\chi^2(4) = 3.404$, $p = 0.493$. However, the pattern was noteworthy: Chakma women showed the lowest avoidance rate (32%), compared to Hindu (39%) and Muslim (40%) women. This 8-percentage-point difference, while not statistically significant in this sample, suggests a trend toward greater expressive freedom among Chakma women that may reach significance with larger samples.

Qualitative Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis of open-ended responses identified distinctive patterns across groups (Figure 3).

Chakma Women: Matrilineal Agency and Buddhist Egalitarianism

Twelve themes emerged from Chakma women's responses, with four dominant patterns:

1. Matrilineal Voice (~25%): Explicit references to the matrilineal family structure as affording authority to speak up at home. Representative quote: 'My husband respects the matrilineal line. My mother's family is

important to him.' Another noted: 'In Chakma culture, women are respected. I can speak to my husband openly.'

2. Buddhist Teachings (~18%): Citation of Buddhist principles—mutual respect, compassion, the 'middle path'—as shaping marital intimacy. 'Our Buddhist priest taught us that mutual pleasure is part of a good marriage.' 'This is between me, my husband, and the Buddha's teachings.'

3. Bride Price (Poyson) (~5%): References to the Chakma bride price tradition as affirming valued status. 'My husband paid bride price for me. In our culture, that means I am valued.'

4. Weaving and Independence (~10%): Connection between traditional Chakma textile work and broader confidence. 'I weave traditional Chakma textiles. That independence makes me confident at home too.'

Additional themes included the jhum cultivation bond (working alongside husbands in fields strengthening closeness, ~12%), privacy challenges in bamboo houses (~20%), CHT conflict legacy affecting emotional intimacy (~8%), and Bengali cultural pressure creating identity tension (~12%).

Hindu Women: Dharma, Modesty, and Familial Hierarchy

Hindu women's responses centered on religious duty and modesty:

1. Religious Duty (Grihastha Dharma) (~22%): Framing intimacy as sacred obligation. 'I view our physical relationship as part of our dharma as husband and wife.' 'A good Hindu wife should prioritize her husband's needs above her own.'

2. Modesty (Lajja) (~15%): Cultural expectations constraining expression. 'We were taught that talking about these things is vulgar and against our sanskar.' 'I feel guilty when I think about my own pleasure; it feels selfish.'

3. Mother-in-Law Influence (~12%): Household dynamics limiting autonomy. 'My mother-in-law controls the household; I cannot express my desires openly.'

4. Fasting and Religious Observances (~10%): Religious calendar affecting intimacy frequency. 'We observe many fasts; sometimes weeks pass without intimacy during festivals.'

Muslim Women: Islamic Modesty and Wifely Obedience

Muslim women's responses revealed the strongest patterns of religiously-mediated silence:

1. Islamic Modesty (Haya) (~25%): Primary reason for sexual silence. 'It is shameful for a Muslim woman to speak of such things.'

2. Religious Obedience (~22%): Quranic/hadith teachings on wifely submission. 'My husband's happiness is my religious duty.'

3. Missionary Dominance (~42%): Highest missionary preference of all groups, often citing 'religious/cultural comfort.' 'Other positions feel sinful.'

4. Privacy Crisis (~18%): Sleeping in the same room as children with no private space. 'We have no private room; the children sleep with us.'

5. Economic Dependence (~12%): Complete financial dependence silencing voice. 'I have no income of my own; how can I demand anything?'

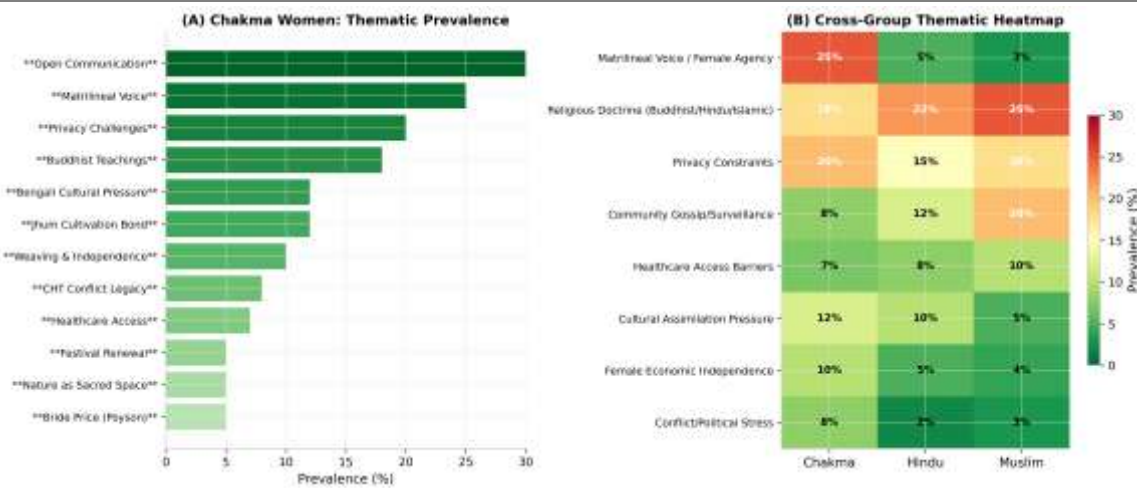


Figure 3 - Qualitative Thematic Heat map

DISCUSSION

The Matrilateral Advantage in Sexual Agency

This study's central finding is that Chakma women—indigenous Buddhist women from a matrilineal society—report significantly higher sexual satisfaction and more frequent sexual communication than Hindu Bengali women from patrilineal, patriarchal Hindu contexts. This difference persists after accounting for education, age, and residence, suggesting that religious-ethnic identity itself is a structuring force in intimate life. The magnitude of these differences is clinically meaningful: Chakma women are 19 percentage points more likely than Hindu women to discuss preferences 'Often' or 'Always,' and their mean satisfaction score is nearly half a point higher on a 5-point scale.

These findings align with intersectionality theory's prediction that multiple axes of identity interact to produce distinctive experiences of agency (Crenshaw, 1989). For Chakma women, indigenous ethnic status and Buddhist religious identity combine with matrilineal kinship to create a 'matrix of privilege' within the domestic sphere that partially offsets their marginalization in the broader Bangladeshi society. The matrilineal structure does not merely provide abstract cultural value—it is cited by 25% of Chakma respondents as directly enabling their voice in intimate matters. When a woman can say, 'My husband respects the matrilineal line,' she is invoking a kinship logic that legitimates her authority in ways unavailable to women in patrilineal systems.

The Buddhist theological framework appears to complement this kinship structure. Unlike Hindu and Islamic traditions that frame female sexuality through duty, modesty, and obedience, Buddhist teachings among the Chakma emphasize mutual respect, compassion, and the 'middle path' in all relational domains. The finding that Chakma women cite 'mutual pleasure as part of a good marriage' as a Buddhist teaching is theoretically significant: it suggests a theological legitimization of female sexual pleasure that is absent from the duty frameworks prevalent among Hindu and Muslim respondents.

The Hindu Paradox: Sacred Duty and Silenced Desire

Hindu women in this sample reported the lowest sexual satisfaction and least frequent communication, despite having the highest education levels (39% Bachelor's+). This finding challenges the assumption that education alone empowers women's sexual agency. Instead, it suggests that religious-cultural scripts may override educational gains when they construct female sexuality as properly subordinate to husbandly authority and familial harmony (shanti).

The thematic analysis illuminates this paradox. Hindu women frame intimacy as dharma—a sacred duty that is simultaneously elevating and constraining. The concept of Lajja (modesty) operates as a 'technology of the self' (Foucault, 1988) that produces docile feminine subjects who internalize silence as virtue. When a

respondent states, 'I was never taught to think about my own pleasure,' she reveals how Hindu socialization channels sexual subjectivity toward service rather than self-discovery.

The mother-in-law's role emerges as a critical node of patriarchal control. In the joint family system prevalent among Hindu respondents, the mother-in-law's surveillance extends to intimate matters, creating what one respondent called 'a wall of silence' that no amount of marital goodwill can penetrate. This finding extends existing research on South Asian joint families (Dyson & Moore, 1983) by demonstrating how familial hierarchy specifically constrains sexual communication.

Islamic Modesty and the Cultivation of Silence

Muslim women's responses reveal the most systematic pattern of sexual silencing, with 78% reporting they 'Never' or 'Rarely' discuss preferences—the highest rate among all groups. The concept of haya (modesty) is not merely a personal preference but a 'cultivated religious and social virtue' that structures appropriate feminine comportment across domains. The finding that 42% of Muslim women prefer the missionary position—highest of all groups—often citing 'religious/cultural comfort,' suggests that religious doctrine shapes not only communication but also embodied practice.

The 'privacy crisis' identified among Muslim women—18% describing sleeping in the same room as children with no private space—represents a material constraint on sexual expression that compounds religious-cultural silencing. This finding underscores the need to address structural factors (housing, economic independence) alongside cultural interventions in sexual health programming.

Position Preferences as Embodied Agency

The marked difference in missionary position preference—20% Chakma vs. 37–38% Hindu/Muslim—is theoretically significant. The missionary position, with its passive female positioning and face-to-face intimacy, is culturally coded as 'respectable' and 'natural' in South Asian contexts. Its rejection by Chakma women, combined with their higher preference for woman-on-top positions, suggests a willingness to claim physical agency that transcends cultural scripts of feminine passivity.

The reasons cited for position preferences further illuminate these dynamics. Chakma women prioritize personal pleasure ('Easier to reach orgasm,' 'Greater sense of control') and comfort, while Hindu and Muslim women more frequently cite partner preference and religious/cultural comfort. This pattern suggests that Chakma women's position choices are more intrinsically motivated, while other groups' choices are more extrinsically oriented toward partner satisfaction and cultural propriety.

The Communication-Satisfaction Nexus

The meta-analytic finding that sexual communication positively predicts both relationship and sexual satisfaction (Jones et al., 2022) is corroborated in this sample: the group with the highest communication frequency (Chakma) also reports the highest satisfaction. However, the cross-cultural moderation identified by Jones et al.—that gender inequality weakens the communication-satisfaction association—is particularly relevant here. In Bangladesh, where gender inequality is pronounced (UNDP Gender Inequality Index rank: 129/170), the Chakma matrilineal structure may function as a 'local exception' that partially mitigates broader gender inequality within the domestic sphere, thereby preserving the communication-satisfaction link.

Limitations

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the cross-sectional design precludes causal inference; we cannot determine whether matrilineal structure causes higher satisfaction or whether satisfied women are more likely to emphasize matrilineal identity. Second, self-report measures of sexual behavior are subject to social desirability bias, though the use of female interviewers and private settings aimed to minimize this. Third, the sample is not nationally representative; Chakma women were recruited from the CHT, while Hindu and Muslim women came from broader geographic areas. Fourth, the binary and categorical measures of complex

phenomena (satisfaction, comfort) may obscure nuanced experiences. Fifth, the study did not measure partner characteristics, relationship quality, or mental health, which may confound group differences.

Implications for Research and Practice

Theoretical Implications: This study advances intersectionality theory by demonstrating how religious-ethnic identity structures intimate life in ways that cannot be predicted from any single axis of identity. The Chakma case challenges the assumption that indigenous women are uniformly disadvantaged across all domains; instead, they may experience 'domain-specific privilege' within the domestic sphere that offsets broader social marginalization.

Methodological Implications: The integration of quantitative and qualitative methods—statistical comparison with thematic analysis—provides a more complete picture than either approach alone. Future research should employ longitudinal designs, dyadic data (partner reports), and mixed-methods approaches to capture the dynamic nature of sexual communication.

Clinical Implications: Sexual health interventions in South Asia must move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches. For Hindu women, interventions might address the tension between dharma and self-pleasure, perhaps drawing on Hindu theological resources that celebrate feminine divinity (Shakti) as a counter-narrative to patriarchal modesty. For Muslim women, interventions must navigate haya carefully, framing sexual communication within Islamic marital ethics of mutual kindness (mu'asharat bil ma'ruf). For Chakma women, interventions should build on existing strengths—matrilineal authority and Buddhist egalitarianism—rather than imposing external frameworks.

Policy Implications: The finding that privacy constraints (bamboo house walls, joint family rooms) limit sexual expression suggests that housing and spatial design policies should consider intimate privacy as a dimension of women's health. The Bangladesh government's National Women Development Policy might incorporate sexual health communication as a component of marital counseling services, with culturally tailored curricula for different religious-ethnic communities.

CONCLUSION

This study provides the first systematic comparison of sexual communication, satisfaction, and agency among indigenous Buddhist, Hindu, and Muslim women in Bangladesh. The findings reveal a striking 'matrilineal advantage': Chakma women from a matrilineal Buddhist society report higher sexual satisfaction, more frequent communication, greater position diversity, and lower rates of expressive avoidance than their Hindu and Muslim counterparts from patrilineal, patriarchal contexts. These differences are not merely demographic artifacts but are actively structured by religious doctrine, kinship logic, and cultural scripts that shape how women experience and express their intimate lives.

The study challenges three prevailing assumptions in South Asian gender research: first, that all women in the region experience uniform sexual disempowerment; second, that education is the primary driver of women's agency; and third, that indigenous status necessarily correlates with disadvantage across all life domains. Instead, the Chakma case demonstrates that indigenous kinship systems can function as 'protective factors' for women's sexual agency, creating domestic spaces of relative egalitarianism within broader societies marked by gender inequality.

As Bangladesh and South Asia more broadly grapple with questions of gender justice, sexual health, and cultural preservation, this study suggests that effective interventions must be rooted in an understanding of how religious-ethnic identity actively structures intimate experience. The bedroom is not a private space insulated from culture; it is, as the Chakma respondents remind us, a domain where 'the Buddha's teachings' and 'the matrilineal line' converge to shape what is sayable, doable, and feelable. Recognizing this cultural depth is the first step toward sexual health policies that honor women's diverse ways of being intimate.

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