

Solo sex: Masturbation in a sample of Egyptian women

Original Article

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ABSTRACT

Background: Masturbation has been stigmatized over the years. Research work in many countries indicates that men significantly more likely than women to report having ever masturbated and associations between masturbation and various sociodemographic factors were identified.

Objective: This study was carried out intending to provide information about the frequency of masturbation in a sample of Egyptian women and the views of women about it.

Patients and Methods: This cross-sectional observational study included 286 women who filled a self-report questionnaire covering four domains: epidemiology, sexual activity, assessment of masturbation practice, and probing of the religious attitudes of the participants towards masturbation.

Results: Among our participants, 53.5% admitted practicing masturbation. The most common frequency of masturbation was once per week (44.2%). Masturbation was considered a substitute for absence of husband or his unwillingness to have sex by 44.2% of participants. Masturbation was considered 'haram' (prohibited) by 39.2% of participants and 77.5% said it caused them to feel guilty. The commonest age group practicing masturbation was 20–29 years and the most common educational level for masturbators was women with a university degree (24.5%). Married women admitted to having masturbated more than virgins (32.9 vs. 10.1%).

Conclusion: Masturbation is a relatively common practice among this sample of Egyptian women. Most women considered masturbation 'haram' and felt guilty about it. The most common age for practicing masturbation was between 20 and 29 years and the most common educational level for masturbators was a university degree and married women were the most common group to admit masturbation.

Key Words: Egypt, masturbation, women.

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INTRODUCTION

If prostitution is the world's oldest profession, then surely masturbation is the world's oldest avocation^[1]. The word 'masturbate' is a derivative from Latin routes manus meaning (hand) and stuprare (to defile). Accordingly, even the origins of the term itself suggest self-abuse. Masturbation occurs among subhuman primates in many species even when ample opportunity to copulate with receptive partners exists^[2].

If prostitution is the world's oldest profession, then surely masturbation is the world's oldest avocation^[1]. The word 'masturbate' is a derivative from Latin routes manus meaning (hand) and stuprare (to defile). Accordingly, even the origins of the term itself suggest self-abuse. Masturbation occurs among subhuman primates in many species even when ample opportunity to copulate with receptive partners exists^[2].

Masturbation tends to begin early in life. Nechay *et al.*^[9] described 31 cases of masturbation in children aged from 5 months to 8 years, who were misdiagnosed as epilepsy. Even a case of in-utero masturbation was reported by Fernández and Cajal^[10]. More than three quarters of women start masturbation between 10 and 19 years of age^[11,12].

Studies done in various countries dealing with sex differences in masturbation showed that women tend to report engaging in masturbation less frequently than do men^[12–16].

Women masturbate for a variety of reasons. The main reasons are to seek sexual pleasure (65.4%), to cope with stress (31.9%), to help falling asleep (20.0%), when having no more sexual activity with the partner (13.3%) and when the partner is unavailable (8.6%)^[12].

Information about masturbation in general, and in

women in particular, is almost nonexistent in the research work done in Egypt. The current study aims to assess the frequency of masturbation and views of women toward it as this can help to plan programs to give women a balanced view that can help release a lot of tension women are facing in this era where the age of marriage keeps rising and the number of virgins and divorced women is soaring.

PATIENTS AND METHODS

This observational cross-sectional study was carried out after approval from the Dermatology and Andrology Department and Medical Ethics Committee, Faculty of Medicine, Benha University in March 2015. It started in April 2015 and ended in April 2016 in the outpatient clinic of Benha University Hospital, and in the private practice of the authors.

Women included in the study were between 15 and 60 years of age and they should be at least literate to be able to answer the questionnaire by themselves. Women who were virgins, married, divorced women, and widows were all allowed to participate in the study. Women with a history of health problems or with psychiatric conditions that interfere with the sexual function were excluded.

The participants were informed about the nature of the study before giving the consent to participate.

Tool:

The tool used in this study was a self-report questionnaire designed by the investigators and aided by questions in the work of Carvalheira and Leal^[12]. It was written in a simple language to make sure that it is understood by all

participants regardless of their level of education.

The questionnaire was given to the participants in an open envelope and after filling it the participant sealed the envelope and put it in a box containing other sealed envelopes to secure anonymity.

The questions used covered 17 items in two domains:

(1) Epidemiological data: age, educational level, residence, and marital status.

(2) Assessment of different aspects of masturbation practice like its presence, frequency, lubrication during it, fantasies used, etc. The effects of masturbation on sexuality and feeling guilty about it was also assessed.

Statistical analysis:

Software (SPSS, version 20.0 for Windows; SPSS Inc., Chicago, Illinois, USA) was used for the univariate, bivariate, and stratified analyses of the data. Qualitative variables were analyzed by constructing contingency tables with χ^2 -test or Fisher's exact test, when the conditions for the former were not met. Differences were considered significant at $p \leq 0.05$.

RESULTS

The distributed questionnaires were 330. There were 286 usable questionnaires with a rejection rate of 13.3%.

Demographic data indicate that the most common age group was 20–29 years (29.4%). Other data show that those who have a university degree were 42%; housewives constituted 54.9% of the sample, and 63.3% were married (Table 1).

Table 1: Demographic characteristics of the studied group*.

Demographic characteristics		n	%
		286	
Age (years)	20-29	84	29.4
	30-39	73	25.5
	40-49	80	28.0
	50-59	32	11.2
	≥60	17	5.9
Education	Can only read & write	78	27.3
	Finished secondary school	88	30.8
	Has a university degree	120	42.0
Occupation	Housewife	157	54.9
	Working	119	41.6
	Student	10	3.5
Marital status	Not married yet	48	16.8
	Married	181	63.3
	Divorced	33	11.5
	Widow	24	8.4

* n=286

Of the participants, those practicing masturbation were 53.5% and the most common frequency of masturbation was once per week (44.2%). Masturbation was considered a substitute for absence of husband or his unwillingness to have sex by 44.2% of women. Divorced women were the most common category that considers masturbation as

substitute for having sex with a husband (60%).

Sexual fantasies were the most common stimulant to practice masturbation (45.8%) and the most common type of fantasies was imagining romantic and emotional scenes (59.4%) (Table 2).

Table 2: Masturbation practices.

Masturbation practices (n=286)		n	%
Do you practice masturbation (n=286)	Yes	153	53.5
	Never not even once	63	22.0
	I don't know what is masturbation	70	24.5
	Once/day	17	14.2
	Once/week	53	44.2
Frequency of masturbation	Several times/week	23	19.2
	Once/month or less	16	13.3
	Missing data	11	9.1
Is masturbation a substitute for absence or unwillingness of husband to have sex?	Agree	53	44.2
	Disagree	10	8.3
	Fairly	41	34.2
	I don't know	16	13.3
Marital status of women agreeing that masturbation can be a substitute	Not married yet	7	36.8
	Married	36	46.7
	Divorced	9	60.0
	Widow	1	11.1
Lubrication during masturbation	Always	58	48.3
	More than half the times	26	21.7
	Less than half the times	13	10.8
	Half the times	14	11.7
	Never	6	5.0
	Missing data	3	2.5
	Pornography on the net	17	14.2
Stimulant to practice masturbation	TV drama and clips	13	10.8
	Sexual fantasies	55	45.8
	Romantic fantasies	31	25.8
	Missing data	4	3.4
	I imagine something sexual happens to me from my husband	98	34.3
Types of sexual fantasies during *masturbation	I imagine doing something sexual for my husband	24	8.4
	I imagine romantic & emotional scenes	170	59.4
	Missing data	53	18.5

Concerning masturbation effects, 51.7% said that it had no effect on sexual routine with husband, and 37.5% said that it fairly weakens sexual enjoyment. About masturbation status in Islam, 39.2%

said that it is 'haram' (prohibited) and 77.5% said it caused them to feel guilty. Most masturbators (74.2%) tried to stop practicing it and 44.2% succeeded (Table 3).

Table 3: Frequency distribution of masturbators regarding the effects of masturbation.

Masturbation effects	n	%	
Masturbation affects sexual routine with your husband (n 153)	Yes	46	30.06
	No	79	51.63
	Missing data	28	18.30
Masturbation affects sexual routine with your husband (n 153)	Yes	32	20.93
	No	34	22.22
	Fairly	57	37.25
	I don't know	30	19.61
Masturbation is "haram" in Islam	Yes	60	39.22
	No	16	10.46
	Fairly	50	32.68
	I don't know	27	17.65
Masturbation causes me to feel guilty	Yes	119	77.78
	No	29	18.95
	Missing data	5	3.27
Masturbation causes me to feel guilty	Yes	113	73.86
	No	31	20.26
	Missing data	9	5.88
I Succeeded to stop masturbation	Yes	67	43.79
	No	79	51.63
	Missing data	7	4.58

Table 4 indicates that the most common age for practicing masturbation in women was the age group of 20–29 years (17.8%). Housewives were

the most common category for masturbation (52.8%) and married women were the most common group to admit masturbation (73.6%).

Table 4: Relation between masturbation practice and demographic characteristics of the studied group (n=286).

Demographic characteristics	Yes (n=153)		Never not even once (n=63)		I don't know what is masturbation (n=70)		χ^2	p value	
	n	%	n	%	n	%			
Age (years)	20-29	51	17.8	17	27.0	16	22.9	FET	0.01 (S)
	30-39	42	14.7	19	30.2	12	17.1		
	40-49	44	15.4	16	25.4	20	28.6		
	50-59	11	3.8	7	11.1	14	20.0		
	>60	5	1.7	4	6.3	8	11.4		
Education level	Read and write	34	12.7	13	20.6	31	44.3	30.93	<0.001 (HS)
	Secondary school	49	17.1	23	36.5	16	22.9		
	University degree	70	24.5	27	42.9	23	32.9		
Occupation	House wife	74	25.9	35	55.6	48	68.5	30.93	<0.001 (HS)
	Working	73	25.5	26	41.3	20	28.6		
	Student	6	2.1	2	3.1	2	2.9		
Marital status	Not married yet	29	10.1	10	15.9	9	12.9	FET	<0.001 (HS)
	Married	94	32.9	44	69.8	43	61.4		
	Divorced	22	7.7	5	7.9	6	8.6		
	Widow	8	2.8	4	6.3	12	17.1		

DISCUSSION

A famous quote on the internet goes like this: 'The world will be a better place if men admitted that they cry and women admitted they masturbate'. Actually this quote reflects the difficulty facing research in the field of female masturbation. The high rejection rate faced by the workers in this study may reflect the sensitivity of the participant, in fact some of the women rejected angrily

while many of those accepting were very shy while filling the questionnaire.

The percentage we obtained for women reporting masturbators (53.5%) may be lower than the actual percentage; the 20% of women denying this practice may be shy to admit it even if their identities were kept anonymous. Also, those who did not know the meaning of masturbation (24.5%) may be already masturbating but are unaware of the meaning of the word.

A number of studies on masturbation among women have been conducted in some countries. In the USA, the National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior^[16] showed that 42% of women reported having masturbated during the previous year. In Britain, the National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles indicated that 71.2% of women had masturbated at some point in their lives, and 36.8% in the 4 previous weeks^[15]. In the French National Sexual Behavior Survey, the percentages of women reporting masturbation in the age groups of 18–19 and 20–24 years were 34 and 38%, respectively^[17]. The authors of the French study came to the conclusion that the practice of masturbation was underreported by women. This underreporting is possibly associated with the social values that consider female sexuality as necessarily connected to an emotional involvement. Furthermore, a Croatian study with 410 young women (between the ages of 18 and 25 years) revealed that 40% of participants reported that they never masturbated; of those who reported masturbation, 23% reported masturbating a few times per year or less frequently^[18]. In urban China 13% of women reported any masturbation in the preceding year^[19] while in an Australian study^[20], 35% of women had masturbated in the past year. A Finnish survey in 1992 reported that 77% of women had ever masturbated^[21] and a Swedish study in 1996 found that 80% of women had ever masturbated^[22]. Among Portuguese women, 91% indicated that they had masturbated at some point in their lives^[12].

In the current study, 44.2% of participants found that masturbation was considered a substitute for absence of husband or his unwillingness to have sex. There has been a debate about this idea. Some researchers believe that masturbation represents a compensation for ‘real’ sex that is missing for some reason^[23]. The authors of the current study incline toward this view because partnered sex (other than marriage) is harshly condemned in our society and because most participants in our study adopting this view were divorcees. Also, the study of Herbenick *et al.*^[24] showed that masturbation was reported by more than half of women who were in a noncohabitating relationship compared with 12.2% of married women. This issue is further clarified in the work of Das *et al.*^[19], who found that absence of a stable partner of women for periods over a week during the year was correlated with more masturbation.

On the other hand, some researchers (e.g. Pinkerton *et al.*^[1]) considered masturbation as a behavior that is part of a wide repertoire of acts aimed at sexual expression and satisfaction, irrespective of the partnership status. Married women in our study masturbated more than virgins. An empirical explanation was that women who experience orgasm from both penile vaginal intercourse (PVI) and masturbation would be more satisfied with PVI especially if they were deprived from PVI or suffered the condition in which the husband would ejaculate prematurely and leave the wife unsatisfied so she would masturbate as compensation and to avoid symptoms of

pelvic congestion. Research indicates that the increase in prolactin level following orgasm is involved in a feedback loop that serves to decrease arousal through inhibitory central dopaminergic and probably peripheral processes. The magnitude of postorgasmic prolactin increase is thus a neurohormonal index of sexual satiety. Using data from three studies of men and women engaging in masturbation or PVI to orgasm in the laboratory. Brody and Krüger^[26] reported that the magnitude of prolactin increase following PVI is 400% greater than that following masturbation in both sexes. The results are interpreted as an indication of intercourse being more physiologically satisfying than masturbation.

Romantic and emotional scenes were the most common type of sexual fantasies reported by our participants (59.4%). The Zurbriggen and Yost^[27] study reported that men’s sexual fantasies were more sexually explicit than women’s and also women’s sexual fantasies were more emotional and romantic than men’s. Similar findings were reported by Gil^[28] and Birnbaum^[29].

Negative attitudes toward masturbation were common among our participants as 77.5% said it caused them to feel guilty. Egyptians still hold strong religious feelings and the view that Islam prohibits any extramarital sexual act is widely accepted. Several researchers have pointed out that masturbation still remains stigmatized, frequently leading to feelings of guilt and shame^[12, 30-33]. Aneja *et al.*^[33] presented a case series, in which three cases of masturbatory guilt were associated with manifestations of severe psychopathology.

In the current study, participants aged 20–29 years were the commonest age group to report masturbation (17.8%) and married women masturbated more than virgins (73.6 vs. 10.1%). Richters *et al.*^[21] observed that masturbation was commonest in the 20–29 years age group of women. Also, the 2010 National Survey of Sexual Health and Behavior found that the cohort with the highest overall rates of masturbation was the 25–29-year-old women. In this age, single women masturbated less than women with a partner^[25]. On the other hand, in the study of Clifford^[34], some women reported that an increase in coital frequency stimulated an increase in their general sexual awareness and hence led to increased frequency of masturbation. Also, Pinkerton *et al.*^[1] found a trend associating greater intercourse frequency with greater frequency of masturbation.

Our results show that admitting masturbation was directly proportional to the level of education as almost one quarter of masturbators had a university degree. A similar result was obtained by Gerressu *et al.*^[16], where 49.9% of masturbating women had a university degree. Also, Kontula and Haavio-Mannila^[24] compared masturbation habits in Finland, Sweden, Estonia, and Russia and found that women with the lowest level of education masturbated less than those with middle and high levels of education. The latter authors think this association has been attributed

to greater access to information and to sex education, which may help reduce fears and guilt and increase willingness to report masturbation.

Limitations

Due to the conservative nature of the Egyptian society, there were constraints on the nature of questions we could ask on this taboo participant. Sexual orientation, age of first masturbation, and methods used are just a few examples. Also, excluding illiterate women from the study excluded a broad sector of Egyptian women.

CONCLUSION

Masturbation is a relatively common practice among this sample of Egyptian women (53.5%). Most of the participants said that it is 'haram', it caused them to feel guilty and most of them tried to stop practicing it. The most common age for practicing masturbation was between 20 and 29 years and the most common educational level for masturbators was a university degree. Married women were the most common group to admit masturbation.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflicts of interest.

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