ABSTRACT:

As a society influenced by both Orthodox Jewish and secular culture, woman's sexuality and perceptions of female body in the national-religious community are formed from the simultaneous prevalent discourse of both cultures. A national-religious woman is educated from early childhood to be modest and conceal her body and to preserve her virginity for the wedding night. The messages she receives about male sexuality emphasize the dominance of the male sexual drive. She is committed to halakhic practices centered around the female body and cultivates a perception regarding a woman's right to pleasure. With her marriage, the woman passes from the physical status of a 'disembodied body' to that of 'present corporeality', a transition that, according to previous studies, requires an intense examination of personal identity, the objective of which is to maintain a sense of cohesion among its changing components, both new and old.

Research of religious women's sexuality and bodies has developed over the past decade and today enables a broader perspective of the transition to marriage including the religious woman's grappling with the laws of family purity as well as examination of the identity-associated introspection required of women in conflicts associated with marital relations, fertility, halakha and sexuality. However, while researchers emphasized the identity aspect in the development of subjectivity, they devoted less attention to the physical – body component and its significance in the process. The lack of discussion about the body in this context, allows only a partial understanding of the subject's internal growth and development, and perpetuates the perception that views the female-sexual developmental process as primarily an emotional-psychological process. This approach serves to reaffirm the traditional dichotomous male/body and woman/emotion perception.

The current study seeks to amend this shortcoming, utilizing a research model that explores the process of establishing an 'embodied subjectivity'. This approach observes the different theories' marginal attitude vis-à-vis the body and seeks rather to elevate its centrality and relate to it as a significant component in the subject's consolidation process.

The study was based on data gathered by a qualitative research method, via semi-structured in-depth interviews. The study population included 38 national-religious women married for between 1-5 years and who were sampled using the 'snowball sampling' technique and with the purposive sampling method.

Analysis of the findings revealed that the interviewees contend with a conflictual point of convergence between the cultural-social demand and requirement with regards the religious woman's body, and the body itself, its characteristics and signals. The analysis of this convergence point focused on two central issues: the first, an examination of the conditions preserving the woman's place in the face of the demand made over her body; and the other, an examination of the resources that enable the woman to negotiate and/or object to this demand. Extracting the accompanying social process allowed enhanced characterization of the adjustment and formative processes of the religious-female sexual subjectivity while stressing the body's place in this process.

The analysis revealed that women experience the point of convergence between the material-sensory body and the social demand made on it as conflicted. Under certain conditions, and with the help of resources indicated in the interviews as significant, this convergence point allows attention to be diverted to the body, attention that leads to the development of sexual subjectivity. Under other conditions, and in the absence of these resources, attention is diverted to the social demand over the body that stresses the dominance of the male-sexual drive and the woman's body as an object.

This finding was extracted via analysis of four dimensions: the first dimension relates to the transition to marriage, a stage that begins in the pre-wedding period and continues until after the first full sexual encounter. During this period, the social demand vis-à-vis the woman's body is for complete commitment to the preponderance of penetration. The central strategy for contending with this demand is the creation of a protective 'elbow room' that allows the woman to maintain a certain degree of control and choice in the sexual domain. The 'elbow room' shrinks when there is a delay in 'completing the mission' and the couple fails to achieve penetration. In this dimension, the option of diverting attention to the body emerges as a significant element in creating the elbow room.

Analysis of the second dimension which deals with the halakhic regulation of the female body, revealed that women experience the encounter between their body and the practices of the laws of family purity as conflictual. This in turn leaves the woman no choice but to examine the elements of her identity and body and to adopt an active stance, generally from within the halakhic framework. This process is supported by diverting attention to the body as well as through external resources such as her partner, premarital counsellors, previous positive physical experiences and prior knowledge.

Analysis of the third dimension, which deals with the place which the woman makes for herself within the spousal domain, revealed three relationship patterns which create a varying degree of conflict and different possibilities for diverting attention to the body. The three patterns – heteronormative sexuality, relationship in conflict, and relationship in dialogue – enable an examination of the significance of the couple's changing position regarding dominance of male sexuality versus the centrality of the female body in establishing a woman’s sexual subjectivity.

Finally, analysis of the fourth dimension, which examines the place of the religious-female body in the sexual domain, identified three different determination processes from within its conflictual physical point of convergence. The first process involves no determination, thereby perpetuating the woman's state of conflict between the expectation of her to be present in the sexual arena and the pleasure-less or in-pain body. A second process occurs when the woman determines in favor of diverting attention to the social demand over her body. This is based on the perception of 'emotional sexuality' that claims that the development of a woman's sexuality relies on emotion rather than on the body. In a third process, the woman determines in favor of diverting attention to the body and its 'unsilencing' through resources such as her partner and social-establishment resources that perceive the centrality of women's sexuality.

The study's findings indicate the conflictual point of convergence between the body and the social demand thereof as a significant point in the formation of a 'body-anchored agency' as part of the developmental process of sexual subjectivity. The study indicates that the body constitutes an anchor of knowledge and power, and that the diverting of attention to it facilitates both internal-personal and intra-relationship negotiation and the placing of bodily knowledge at the center of daily routine. The possibility of diverting attention to the body emerges as a fundamental component in the process of a woman's 'becoming' as a sexual subject and is made possible by 'unsilencing' the body with resources such as her partner or establishment processes other than the prevalent hegemonic discourse regarding the female body. These findings rebuff the perception according to which the development of a female-sexual subjectivity is dependent on emotional-psychological processes and adds the physical - body element to the study of women's sexuality as a central layer, equal to identity-related processes during the developmental process of sexual subjectivity. Expanding knowledge and understanding of the body's significance in the process of resolving internal conflict will enable professional therapists and educators to generate social change with regard to the perception of the male-sexual inclination's dominance while also highlighting the centrality of the female body in processes of consolidating sexuality and familiarization with women's pleasure.