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“You Don’t Want to Be One of Those stories” Gossip and Shame as Instruments of Social Control in Small Communities

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ABSTRACT

Small, tight-knit communities often have the image of being places that are full of gossip and where everybody knows each other’s business. This closeness can be claustrophobic for individuals who might not want to live by the accepted social norms of the community. Gossip and rumours can be used to keep such individuals in their place by enforcing social norms through social control. Shaming is crucial to this form of social control, where certain behaviour is punished and shamed through the spread of gossip. Shaming is gendered and is used more harshly against women than against men, particularly in regard to women’s behaviour in public and their sexual activity. This paper examines how gossip and shame are a part of gendered social control in small villages/towns in Iceland, and how it affects young women’s lives. The discussion here is based on interviews about gossip with young Icelandic women who either live in or come from small fishing villages. The main themes that were constructed from the analysis were the social control of women through shaming, reputation, and slut-shaming. The analysis shows that slut-shaming and the fear of shame control women’s behaviour and sexual activities.

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Introduction

Icelandic coastal villages fit the description of what studies often refer to as a rural idyll: a space of peace, a place where you can raise children in a safe environment and live close to nature (Grimsrud & Bätevik, 2016; Munkejord, 2006). But at the same time, the smallness and closeness of such communities create space for gossip when everybody knows each other’s business (Haugen & Villa, 2006; Pedersen & Gram, 2018). This closeness can be constraining and claustrophobic for some individuals, especially young people (Glendinning et al., 2003; Stockdale, 2002). Young women may experience this as especially intrusive because they are at greater risk of being shamed for their sexual activities (Armstrong et al., 2014; Bryndísar-Karlsdóttir, 2015; Guðjónsdóttir & Pétursdóttir, 2018; Papp et al., 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013).

The closeness of the communities doesn’t just offer a space for gossip but also the social control that follows. The classical form of social control refers to the “capacity of a social group to regulate itself” (Janowitz, 1975, p. 82) and the way members of a society “attempt to assure the norm-conforming behaviour of others” (Chriss, 2013, p. 52). Feminist scholars have directed their theories of social control of women towards patriarchal societies, where women’s bodies and expression of sexuality are regulated by social norms (McKinnon, 1987; Ramazanoglu & Holland,

2002; Smuts, 1995) and towards better research on the double standards and social control of sexualities and gender relations (Crawford & Popp, 2003).

There is thus cause to examine the connection between gossip and shaming when analysing social control and control over women's behaviour. This article highlights these processes by addressing two main questions. Firstly, how are gossip and shame used as instruments of social control over young women in small communities? Secondly, how are gossip and slut-shaming used to maintain and negatively impact young women's reputation as a part of social control? The data collected for this article is a part of a larger research project on the lives of young women in small communities in Iceland where social control, gossip, and migration are examined.

After laying out the theoretical underpinnings, we describe the context of the study and the qualitative methods applied. Based on the analysis of interviews with young women concerning gossip, the results presented here focus on three themes that were constructed from the analysis of gendered social control: first, fear of public exposure and feeling of shame, second, "just being the good girl" or avoiding loss of reputation; and third, "it's talked about much more if it is a woman", gossiping about women's sex lives or the experiences of slut-shaming.

Gossip and Social Control

Gossip is not just a negative practice engaged in by people who entertain themselves by belittling others; it is a complex and heterogeneous practice regarding content, form, and function (Lyons & Hughes, 2015; Rosnow & Foster, 2005). The most common understanding of gossip is that it is an informal, evaluative conversation about a member of the discussants' social environment who is not present (Merry, 1984; Wert & Salovey, 2004) or the expression of unverified news about others' personal affairs (Crescimbene et al., 2012; Litman & Pezzo, 2005). Peters and Kashima (2007, 2015) and Lind et al. (2007) discuss three dimensions of gossip, where gossip acts as a communication form in a social triad: a speaker/gossiper, a social target, and an audience.

Gossip can be important for belonging to a group or strengthening it (Chua & Uy, 2014; Lyons & Hughes, 2015). Listening to the gossip of peers can be a step towards normalization in a social group where people learn from hearing about the consequences of not behaving "correctly." Sanctions are imposed on those who do not abide by the community's unwritten social laws, but the effectiveness of these sanctions may vary, according to the social status of the individuals being punished and how much they have to lose if they are exposed (Goode, 2019). Victims of malicious gossip and shaming may respond with avoidance behaviour or flight as coping methods. A flight response might involve leaving their social space, whereas a fight response means that the people who are talked about confront the source of the gossip (Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006; Gilbert, 2003; Lewis, 1971; Tangney, 1996; Wu et al., 2018).

The social laws of a community are a part of informal social control—mechanisms and practices in everyday life that generate group pressure to conform (Chriss, 2013). Feminist researchers have pointed out that within patriarchal societies, many given social norms and behaviours are used solely to control women (Crawford & Popp, 2003; Fischer, 2018; McKinnon, 1987; Smuts, 1995). This informal social control can then make for an enormous group pressure on women to behave according to the given norms in patriarchal society.

Tight-knit communities, such as small, rural villages, often function as a single social group where "everybody knows everything" about everyone else. In villages like this, norm-violators—those who do not follow the informal moral rules of society—may face punishment, exposure, or even exclusion (Black, 1984; Giardini & Conte, 2012). Foucault (1978) claimed that social contact and conversation could not exist without the use and transmission of power. In his view, power is not something someone has; it is something done to others, an action that affects the actions of others. Gossip can thus work as a subversive form of power. Giardini and Conte (2012) examined social control as society's way of regulating itself; those who defy social norms must be identified and subsequently avoided or punished. Similarly, Robinson (2016) sees gossip as a means

of bidirectional social control. In the context of this study, we look at gossip as an effective form of power that not only forms and enforces social norms but also condemns and shames the wrongdoer, threatening similar shame for others who violate the norm in question.

Gendered Shame and the Self

Goffman (1967), writing about embarrassment, claimed that the fear of shame and the constant anticipation of it are powerful means of social control. Shame can result from public exposure of one's failings or fragility (Gehm & Scherer, 1988), an exposure that is likely to be executed in a social space through the flow of gossip. Shame is also closely associated with the self and self-image. A damaged self-image or a damaged social-image can explain the self-defensive motivation to hide and avoid others better than the shaming itself (Gausel & Leach, 2011). Shame that threatens the self and one's self-image has also been found to activate a "restore or repair-motion," where people try to make amends and attempt to rebuild their social image (Gausel et al, 2012; I. Hooge et al., 2010).

In patriarchal societies, women experience gendered shame imposed by oppressive structures (Beauvoir, 1949; Fischer, 2018). Conforming to standards of beauty and the feminine body is demanding, but shame is also deeply ingrained in femininity (Shabot & Korem, 2018). According to Bartky (1990) women occupy a position of oppression and subordination within patriarchal society, resulting in diminished status and a sense of inadequacy to meet societies standards (Bartky, 1990). Women who struggle to meet the standards of society may experience "chronic shame" as they are "already shame-prone" (Dolezal, 2015, p. 109)

Even though the benchmark for shame has now been lowered in western societies (Scheff, 2000), women still face extensive shaming for their sexual activities (Armstrong et al., 2014; Fjær et al., 2015; Ringrose et al., 2013). In modern media culture, stereotypes of women have shifted. No longer simply passive or responsive, they are now seen as also experiencing desire and focusing on pleasure (Farvid et al., 2016). It is interesting to consider this new perception of women as beings with desires in view of the sexual double standard that still prevails, where the acceptable number of sexual partners is still higher for men than it is for women (Armstrong, 2014; Papp, 2015). These double standards are often described as the Madonna-whore complex (Farvid et al., 2016), which is a battle between being too "loose" or being too much of a moralizer (Fjær et al., 2015). With the #metoo revolution spreading through the Western world, there has, however, been a change in the discussion of victim-blaming and slut-shaming towards women (Gill & Orgad, 2018; Mendes et al., 2018; Þorbergsdóttir, 2018).

Women in the western world encounter many different stereotypes regarding their body image and behaviour (Ellemers, 2018; Haines et al., 2016) that often lead to shaming, but mom-shaming is also a part of the agenda. There are extensive demands regarding what women need to do to be a good mother (Leonard & Kelly, 2021; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003) or an attached mother (Badinter, 2012; Símonardóttir, 2016). In heterosexual families, fathers have become more involved than ever before as caregivers, but stereotypes still exist of mothers as the main caregivers and fathers as the breadwinners (Little & Austin, 1996; Símonardóttir, 2016). Motherhood is, however, still seen as culturally mandatory and morally imperative, where modern media frames it as "joyful, wonderful, and the way to achieve happiness" (Auðardóttir & Rudólfssdóttir, 2022, p. 20). And those who dare to express different opinions about motherhood often face condemning remarks and shaming (Mustosmäki & Sihto, 2021).

Context of the Study: Icelandic Coastal Communities

Gender equality in Iceland ranks highest in the world (World Economic Forum, 2022). However, it is not a paradise for gender equality, and there are several areas of the economic, political, and social landscape where inequalities persist. Although labour-force participation is high in Iceland, responsibility for housework and childcare remains largely in women's hands (Gíslason &

Simonardóttir, 2018; Hjálmsdóttir & Einarsdóttir, 2019; Pétursdóttir, 2009; Thorsdóttir, 2012). Rural areas like those where the study took place are characterized even more by a “traditional” gender division in the labour market and at home, and there are also demands that women engage in community volunteer work (Gíslason & Ólafsson, 2005; Gunnarsdóttir, 2009; Karlsson, 2013; Sigursteinsdóttir & Rafnsdóttir, 2009; Skaptadóttir, 2000).

Iceland is a sparsely populated country with merely 376 thousand inhabitants (Statistic Iceland, 2020). More than half the population lives in the capital area, but about one-fourth live in smaller coastal towns and villages. Fisheries play or have played a central role in many of the small villages in the study, but many have also experienced growing tourism. Whereas the economic aspects associated with Iceland’s fishing communities have attracted research (Korkorch & Benediktsson, 2018), contemporary gendered aspects of fishing-community life remain largely under-researched. Earlier studies by Rafnsdóttir and Skaptadóttir (1997), Skaptadóttir (2000), and Karlsdóttir (2009) on women’s lives in fishing communities showed a relatively traditional gendered division of labour. Despite decades of growing gender equality in Iceland, gendered stereotyping is still strong in the fishing industry, where people in traditionally male jobs, such as fishermen, enjoy more respect than those who take traditionally female jobs in fish processing (Rafnsdóttir, 2017).

Many of these small towns have faced challenges in population development in recent decades. A survey by Bjarnason et al. (2019) showed that the migration-intentions of women and men are similar in small coastal communities, and, although other factors were higher on the list, about 21% of all participants, men and women, mentioned gossip as an important reason behind potential migration. Jóhannesdóttir et al. (2021) found a statistically significant relationship between plans to leave small communities and perceptions of gossip about love-life. Being the subject of gossip doubled the likelihood of both men and women feeling like they needed to leave. Those studies did not present deeper analyses of the content of gossip, but they clearly depicted its effect on the lives of people in small communities.

Methods

The data analysed for this paper was collected between 2019–2021 from 18 coastal villages around Iceland that had 100 to 500 inhabitants. Interviews were conducted with 24 women who voluntarily participated, ranging in age from 25 to 45 years old. The participants were recruited using the snow-ball method (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019), and the only requirements for participation were being a woman between the age range of 25–45 and being a resident or former resident of one of these villages. Additionally, the first author searched for participants using local Facebook pages, as well as in radio interviews about her doctoral study. The age range of the women involved was chosen to reach both young single women and young women with partners. Studies have shown that this age range is most likely to be impacted by the closeness of these small communities and the resulting social control and gossip (Glendinning et al., 2003; Pedersen & Gram, 2018; Stockdale, 2002).

Semi-structured qualitative interviews in the form of conversations with open questions (Crang & Cook, 2007) allowed the women to talk about their own experiences, past and present, and their views of gossiping and shaming in their villages. All the women participating were or had been in heterosexual relationships. The women were asked about their personal lives and their lives in the village. They were asked to describe how they had experienced verbal gossip between people in the village, and about the effects of gossip on their lives, their behaviour, or their decisions. They were also asked to talk about the reasons for gossip, compare men’s and women’s gossip, and discuss name-calling. The interviews were approximately one hour long and were recorded. They were then transcribed, and participants were given pseudonyms. Due to the small size of the populations in the villages concerned, the names of these communities are not disclosed in the presentation of the results. Analysing the interviews, the authors used a feminist approach in order to “understand the realities of gendered lives” (Ramazanoglu & Holland, 2002, p. 163), supported by a feminist

phenomenological approach that recognizes women's lived experience and perceptions (Simms & Stawarska, 2013; Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Themes of behaviour and morals within a culture can be derived from participants' stories in qualitative interviews (Saldaña, 2016). The analysis began with a thorough reading. Then the interviews were coded, first with initial coding and then pattern coding (Saldaña, 2016). The most significant codes were identified, and they were used to analyse the data further, looking for similarities and differences in the data (Flick, 2006). Dedoose coding software was applied to help code the interviews and the analysis. The first author then developed the main themes based on these codes. Three themes that were constructed from this analysis of women's experiences of gossiping are discussed in this article: first, fear of public exposure and feeling of shame, second, "just being the good girl" or avoiding loss of reputation; and third, "it's talked about much more if it is a woman", gossiping about women's sex lives or the experiences of slut-shaming.

The first author who conducted the interviews is a woman in the same age range as the women interviewed for this study, and, like them, lives in a small village. Thus, she is very aware of possible ethical issues, as people know each other in such small villages. This is why the study was conducted in many villages, and we do not mention in the article which part of Iceland the discussion of the data comes from. The second author has conducted various studies in small rural villages in Iceland. Following ethical methods of qualitative research given by Icelandic Universities (Siðfræði Rannsóknna, 2022), information about the research project was given to the participants, the use of the data was explained, and the participants signed an informed consent. They were promised anonymity, and therefore in our analysis we attempted to hide their identity, only referring to their age, civil status (in a relationship/single), and if they spent their childhood years in the community (local) or had moved into it in their adult years (not local). The participants were encouraged to contact the researchers if they experienced any emotional distress or harm resulting to the interviews.

Results

The young women who participated all described the closeness between people in their small communities and how common gossip exists in their societies. Many of them claimed they didn't listen to gossip, but later in the interview, they spoke about all kinds of events and stories connected to gossip. They used different types of coping strategies: some tried to ignore gossip, others objected to it or asked people not to gossip, and then there were those the results tell us more about—those who left their social space or town in order to avoid gossip and shame.

According to the participants, the villages in the study all seem to have a strong heterosexual "marital culture", and there are few single people in the participants' age group in these communities. That leaves the question of whether being married or co-habiting in these villages gives people access to a certain norm, where being a part of a couple is the norm.

Three main themes of social control that were constructed from the analysis of the interviews further highlight the interconnected aspects affecting women's lives raised in this article: shame, reputation, and slut-shaming.

Fear of Public Exposure and a Feeling of Shame

Shame is dependent on public exposure (Gehm & Scherer, 1988), which often leads to avoidance behaviour to escape being shamed, or to a woman hiding actions and behaviour from others. Drinking behaviour is often the source of gossip, according to the women who took part in the study. One of them, who did something she was ashamed of while drunk in a public place in the village talked about how she isolated herself after this event. She said,

There was an incident once – something did happen, and I was working in the local store at the time, and it was really hard, the whole town knew . . . I went home one day, but then I just toughed it out, and I simply withdrew for a while, I went to work and then straight home . . . it wouldn't have mattered if I'd lived in Reykjavík, then nobody would have known. (woman, in a relationship, local)

Shame was the main issue for her, as she felt exposed in her small community, which motivated her to hide. She then described the typical self-image repair-effort (I. Hooge et al., 2010), which included going into an alcohol rehabilitation program.

Mom-shaming also featured in women's descriptions of gossip in their villages. Some expressed annoyance at the gossip about their home and household, and a young mother said she had tried hard to keep a clean house because “ . . . there is talk about homes not being tidy, or even dirty”, and she said, “I just try to do everything I can, so people won't [talk about her]”. She associated motherhood with having a clean home, trying to meet the demands that she felt were made in order to be a good mother (Leonard & Kelly, 2021; Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003). There were other and diverse experiences of mom-shaming in the interviews. Two of the women, in different regions, both mothers of young children and both primary school teachers, had similar experiences with parents reporting them to the child protection services. Both believed this was motivated by revenge because the school had been forced to contact the authorities over these parents' own problematic behaviour. Both cases against the schoolteachers were dropped after a brief investigation, but gossip about the child protection services “looking” into these two women's homes will continue to circulate. These are merely two examples of how the social triad (Lind et al., 2007; Peters & Kashima, 2007) makes gossip work as a triangular power: a force involving a gossiper, a social target, and an audience. It is clearly a power done to others like Foucault (1978) maintained, where the social target is the one affected by it. Whether it is done simply to belittle school employees through mom-shaming or to take revenge, the triangle works in such a small community. Stories stick, negatively impact a person's reputation, and live on in local gossip. Here, gossip channels are used to make a child-protection service the speaker, the mothers the social target, and the town the audience.

“Just Being the Good Girl”, Avoiding Loss of Reputation

In the small communities in this study, strong family and friendship relations are common, with the same kin groups passing on stories from one generation to the next. A woman in one of the communities in the study described her shame after having an affair with a married man soon after moving to this village. She felt local inhabitants had turned their backs on her and that after the affair ended, she had to earn their trust again, which she said took more than two years. In her words:

They saw me steering clear, making amends, obviously feeling remorse, and, like I said, just being a good girl and trying to not show, you know, that I'm someone who should be disrespected or something. I'm a great person, but you know, this happened, I did have an affair with that guy . . . and everyone knew about it'. (woman, single, not local)

She illustrates a clear example of a repair strategy (Gausel et al., 2012; I. Hooge et al., 2010): she tries her best to restore her image in the community and shows that she was a “good girl”. In this case, the woman experienced society clearly punishing her as the wrongdoer (Robinson, 2016). But according to her, the man involved, a local resident with a family in the village, was not punished by judgemental gossiping, even though he was married.

The fishermen in these towns are usually respected individuals (Rafnsdóttir, 2017; Skaptadóttir & Rafnsdóttir, 2000). But fishermen's wives in these small villages felt they were under very close scrutiny when their husbands were at sea. One of them, a 25-year-old woman, described her attempts to have an active social life and some fun when her husband was away. She said, “. . . it is as if I can't leave the house without him, there is always talk if I do”. She also explained that this

often resulted in her being lonely at home while he was away at sea. In almost the same words, another woman living in another village said: “fishermen’s wives—it’s almost as if they mustn’t leave the house if their guy is not on shore; if they do, they are definitely up to no good . . .”.

Young people partying and having fun is nothing new, but when this happens in a small community, it can leave a mark that follows a person for the rest of his or her life. Sometimes name-calling is part of this, and the name given sticks with the person for decades. Some of the women aged 35–45 who participated in the study talked about this and how they had thought a lot about their actions when they were young and single. One of them, who had moved away for a few years for her education and then moved back, said, “I was lucky that I never hooked up with anyone local, which was really good for me when I returned home”. One participant said that after her wild, younger years, she felt that local people had tended to see her as a loser. She later moved away from her home village to another similar community and said, “I felt when I moved that I had been given another chance”.

Given the existence of kin-groups in such small villages, it can be difficult to dissociate yourself from the actions and reputations of your relatives. Another participant, who now lives in a regional centre, said she will never move back to the village where she grew up because of accusations about her family that were the source of malicious gossip. She described moving away as follows:

... it gave me a certain opportunity to start over, to just be me, not a person from that family and this that happened ... or didn’t happen ... to start again, without this label on my back. (woman, in a relationship, local)

The extended family can work like an umbrella and shield a family member, making social interaction a likely coping method against gossip and shaming (I. E. Hooge et al., 2018). But the two women mentioned above both felt that moving away was the only way to escape the past and the stained reputation, clearly demonstrating how gossip and shame can lead to a desire to hide or escape (Breugelmans & Poortinga, 2006; Gilbert, 2003; Lewis, 1971; Tanglely, 1996).

‘It’s Talked About Much More if It is a Woman, Slut-Shaming Gossip’

Many of the participants showed clear signs of being affected by social control when describing avoidance behaviour concerning their sexual activities, especially in their late teenage years and while single, which some of them still are. One example of this was a single mother who said, “you will never see me holding hands with anyone here in the street,” referring to gossip that could spread and her fear that this gossip could reach the ears of her children. Another woman, now married, said about the past, “Better done where nobody sees you—and I did my share of stupid things, but never in [home region],” expressing her relief that she did not have a locally-known, negative reputation from her younger years. Some of the participants said they avoided being seen on the street with men other than their spouse in order to prevent gossip. Thus, many of the participants in the study in the age range 35–45 indicated that when they were younger and single, partying away from their hometown was often preferred because, as one of the women said, “you don’t want to be one of those stories”.

As researchers have pointed out, a higher number of sexual partners is usually more acceptable for men than for women (Armstrong, 2014; Farvid et al., 2016; Papp, 2015). Most of the participants in the study agreed with this view. They claimed that the image of a man who sleeps around being a stud still exists today, but that a woman is seen as a slut for doing the same. Some of the participants used the term slut-shaming when talking about this. Many remembered stories about other women who had lived in their village and had been the victims of slut-shaming.

Name-calling used to be common in Icelandic villages, but most participants said that this is not as common today as it used to be. However, many of the women remembered slutty names that had been given to and stuck to women who had been sexually active, but they could give only one example of name-calling like this for a man. More than one participant mentioned the word

Almannagjá, the name of a scenic site in Iceland, as a name-calling given to a woman: *almanna* (in the sense of “for everyone”) and *gjá* (cleft/crack). Shaming names like this live on in the social space of a village through storytelling and gossip, and a person’s reputation can be passed on from one generation to the next.

Women face harsher judgement than men when they have an affair, whether they are married or not. As one woman said,

It’s talked about much more if it is a woman, like it is more serious. You know, it’s more of a habit for men . . . people think it’s not as newsworthy if it is the man who is cheating – she is maybe a mother, you know, it’s somehow just . . . (woman, in a relationship, not local)

This highlights the double standard and the Madonna-whore complex that women encounter (Farvid et al., 2016). The view that it is worse for a woman to cheat if she is a mother than it is for a man who is a father reflects the view that motherhood is a more virtuous state than fatherhood.

When asked about the subjects of gossip, most participants mentioned cheating on a partner as one of the contentious topics. The phrase *hjónadjöfull* (couples’ devil) came up a few times in the discussion of unfaithfulness, and it only applied to women. One of the women commenting on this said,

A [married] man cheats with a single woman; then that single woman is suddenly the couple’s devil [hjónadjöfull] even though she is not the one in a marriage. It is not the man that is the couple’s devil in his own marriage. (woman, in a relationship, not local)

This gendered use of the phrase “couples devil” is quite illustrative, laying the responsibility for the possible ruin of a marriage entirely at the single woman’s shoulders—not on the married man, freeing him from the shame of gossip related to cheating.

Three of the participants in the study had moved away from a village due to nasty gossip about their sex-lives. Two of them, who were born and raised in the village concerned, later moved back. One of them, who had moved away as a teenager, said;

I was accused of sleeping with my friend’s boyfriend at [a very young age] . . . there was absolutely nothing to it, but it set me apart from everyone else . . . and I simply fled, got myself out of there. (woman, in a relationship, local)

She said she moved away to avoid social stigmatization, but came back when her classmates, the ones who had gossiped about her, left town to go to school elsewhere. One of the participants, describing a friend who had had an active sexual life as a young woman and then moved away said,

I don’t think she can come back without being closely watched by everyone, all of them waiting for her to put a foot wrong again. (woman, in a relationship, local)

Endemic to Icelandic culture are stories of fishermen who sail into port and look for fun with women while their boat is being unloaded; then they sail away again. A lot of words in the Icelandic language and popular songs refer to heroes of the sea (Skaptadóttir, 2000). But women in small fishing communities do not have a heroine image. They are called sluts when they engage in similar behaviour. Even though the wild party culture that was such a big part of life for fishing industry workers in small ports has more or less ceased, there are still villages where boats come in with seamen eager for a good time. One of the participants in the study talked about this, saying,

I don’t think any of the girls that I remember being talked about in connection with the coast guard ship live here today . . . if a girl has the reputation of going on board at some point and maybe sleeping with someone, then she can go nowhere near the ship without people saying she is sleeping with a seaman whether he is married or not. (woman, in a relationship, local)

Again, the fact that these men are often married does not seem to be the main issue when it comes to local gossip. The focus is typically on the girls and women who have a reputation for sexual activity with sailors; they are shamed through malicious gossip and given a reputation that will persist in their social space for years to come.

Discussion

The analysis of the interviews with the young Icelandic women who took part in this study demonstrates how effective gossip is when it comes to the social control of young women. Addressing our first question, how gossip and shame are used as instruments of social control over young women, the results depict avoidance behaviour, where young women change their behaviour or even change the course of their lives because of gossip and shame. They expressed that they feel shame—or fear being shamed—and some do indeed move to a different location to avoid it. Gossip is a powerful instrument for promoting shame, leaving us to question whether one could thrive without the other.

Addressing our second question, how gossip and slut-shaming are used to maintain and negatively impact young women's reputation as a part of social control, we demonstrate how young women are often strongly affected by gossip and slut-shaming, resulting in a negatively impacted reputation. Slut-shaming and the fear of shame control women's behaviour and sexual activities. Some stay and try to repair their reputations. Having done something that is perceived as shameful, they try to be “good girls”, as one participant clearly explained. The gossip commonly lives on in stories that are hurtful to women's reputations, often without the victims having a chance to defend themselves. And the stories will reach the ears of young girls taking their first steps into adulthood, enforcing them into the same socially acceptable norms and behaviour, in order to avoid gendered shame and slut-shaming.

The participants in this study live in small, close-knit communities. These results give us better understanding of the complex relationship between gossip and shame, and how gendered shaming is towards women. Further research on gossip could show if other tight social spaces show similar power formations and shaming, and maybe lead us to challenge this power. Despite major improvements in gender equality in Iceland, there is still gendered slut-shaming in small communities. Gendered social control of gossip and shaming has negative effects on the wellbeing and happiness of women who live in a small community where everybody knows their name.

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