



AN ETHNOGRAPHIC STUDY OF INFIDELITY AMONG MARRIED WOMEN IN TAMALE, GHANA: MOTIVATIONS, SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS, AND GENDERED CONSEQUENCES.

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Cite this article:

J. I., Abudu, E., Nyamekye, A. K., Damwah, S. W., Mahama (2026), An Ethnographic Study of Infidelity among Married Women in Tamale, Ghana: Motivations, Social Perceptions, and Gendered Consequences. African Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities Research 9(1), 93-104. DOI: 10.52589/AJSSHR-EZTQUDNS

Manuscript History

Received: 28 Sep 2025

Accepted: 1 Oct 2025

Published: 12 Feb 2026

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ABSTRACT: *This ethnographic research investigates female infidelity among married women in Tamale, Northern Ghana, their reasons, daily lives, and gendered repercussions they encounter. Within a patriarchal and religiously conservative society, the research employs participant observation and qualitative interviews in order to unravel how women navigate extra-marital affairs within contexts of moral judgment and socio-economic marginalization. Research also indicates that adultery is not the direct result of immorality but a reaction to emotional abandonment, economic insecurity, and sexual inadequacy. These women engage in such extramarital sex as coping strategies, claims to respectability, and acts of resistance, but strategically utilize respectability in their performance in an effort to eschew censure. Despite risks of stigmatization, dispossession, and violence, the respondents exercise agency through concealment, negotiation, and emotional rationality. The study problematizes dominant narratives that pathologize women's infidelity and instead highlights its root in structural inequality and constrained choice. It contributes to African feminist scholarship and gender studies by taking into account women's voices and locating their intimacy choices.*

KEYWORDS: Female Infidelity, Ethnography, Gendered Agency, Patriarchy.



INTRODUCTION

Marital adultery is a controversial and emotionally charged topic throughout cultures, religious groups, and socio-economic circumstances. It compromises the anticipated standards of commitment, loyalty, and trust that form the pillar for marriage relationships and has a tendency to provoke psychological and relational as well as legal repercussions. In African settings, adultery is most likely explained in moralistic, religious, or biomedical frameworks, usually emphasizing men's offenses and their involvement in such phenomena as marital dissolution, disease spread, and conflicts of inheritance. Although considerable research has explored male adultery and its social effects, a serious gap still exists regarding how adultery is practiced among married women, particularly from women themselves.

Marital adultery turns over dominant gender ideologies and subverts expectations of women's chastity, obedience, and self-control. Most African societies expect women to maintain family moral standards, and fidelity is at the core of respectable womanhood. When women violate these, social sanctions tend to be much more punitive than they are for men. But there is female infidelity and it is constructed by particular structural, affective, and cultural forces. Surprisingly, though, relatively little has been written on the topic in a woman-centered approach, especially in northern Ghanaian conservative contexts.

Tamale presents a rich context in which such research might be pursued. As a rapidly expanding urban town with a mostly Muslim Dagomba populace as well as Christian and local religious traditions, Tamale foretells intersecting patterns of patriarchal authority, religious regulation, and changing gender expectations. The women must uphold household stability and sexual fidelity while engaging in battles against emotional abandonment, economic poverty, and the social impacts of male out-migration (Awumbila & Ardayfio-Schandorf, 2008; Yaro et al., 2021). In this conflict, adultery can function not as an act of resistance, but as survival, emotional validation, or passive resistance (Owen, 2021; Tenkorang, 2019).

Nonetheless, the literature silences these women's voices. Quantitative research operationalizes infidelity as a measure of marital stability or public health risk, whereas qualitative accounts emphasize male behavior or institutional impact (Amankwaa, 2020; Takyi & Gyimah, 2007; Mensch et al., 2020). Few researchers have given consideration to the voices of adulterous women, especially where gendered, religious, and moral expectations are ingrained strongly socially, e.g., in Tamale (Apusigah, 2009; Oduro et al., 2021).

This research bridges that empirical and conceptual gap in its ethnographic fieldwork-based analysis involving married women in Tamale with a history of extramarital relationships. Based on participant observation, informal interviews, and prolonged cultural immersion, it examines the reasons, adaptation, and social negotiations of female infidelity. It does not pathologize or moralize but situates infidelity as a behavior within a field of overall structural disadvantage, emotional abandonment, and constrained choices (Freed & Loboguerrero, 2023; Silberschmidt, 2001).

In situating these meetings within African feminist scholarship, gender studies, and the anthropology of morality, this research provides a reconstruction of female infidelity as a morally negotiated, situational practice. It makes scholarly literature and policy debate contributions by providing a voice for women whose sex lives trouble, subvert, and sometimes reaffirm expectations placed upon them (Cornwall, 2002; Mahmood, 2005).



The study objectives were:

1. To narrate and examine the lived experiences and self-concepts of married women in Tamale involved in extramarital relationships;
2. To analyze the various motivations that underlie married women's choices about infidelity in Tamale; and
3. To explore how married women in Tamale manage the social standing, stigma, and possible consequences of adultery within patriarchal limits.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The research draws on African feminist theory, and it looks at matters within a culturally responsive and contextually informed explanatory framework for women's experiences, agency, and resistance within African patriarchal societies. African feminism, as opposed to Western feminist intellectual discourse, is dedicated to the interconnection of culture, religion, colonial heritage, and economic insecurity in constructing gender relationships across the continent. It acknowledges that African women's lives are typically characterized by a number of complex forms of survival, negotiation, and resistance (Amadiume, 1987; Mama, 1995).

In the Context of Tamale, where religion, morality, and traditional definitions powerfully control women's sexuality and marital status, African feminist theory facilitates a reconstruction of female infidelity as not deviance but as a strategic and emotionally committed response to structural inequality. This entails reactions to emotional neglect, economic instability, and cultural double standards that justify male adultery but stigmatize women for the same offense. Rather than stereotypically portraying women as victimized or bad girls, the model underscores their limited but active agency, what scholars have referred to as agency within culturally prescribed limits.

African feminist theory therefore also indicates how women obey and subvert dominant moral norms. So, whereas they enact piety and modesty in the public domain, certain women construct clandestine lives in which they are able to reclaim dignity and emotional engagement. This double movement of conforming in the public and subverting dominant moral norms in the private domain is what Saba Mahmood (2005) has termed "moral agency", acts that are not necessarily oppositional but deeply embedded within women's moral and affective reasonings.

The theory perspective therefore offers the analytical toolkit for understanding why women have extramarital affairs in a context that appears morally confining. It also resists making too many general claims about female sexuality and instead puts at center stage the local, site-specific manner in which African women make sense, exercise control, and pursue well-being within—and sometimes outside, marriage. It is a guiding lens for interpreting the ethnographic research findings presented here, one that foregrounds married women's lives and voices in Tamale.



In deploying African feminist theory, the research also adds to more nuanced knowledge of gendered agency in African marriage arrangements as well as to overall debates regarding sexual ethics, moral subjectivity, and structural justice.

Empirical Literature Review

Women's marital infidelity in Tamale, Ghana, is a site of intense moral distress, social control, and negotiated agency. Traditional accounts, most culpably those based on biomedical paradigms or moralizing narratives, tend to disregard the strongly contextual, earthed worlds underpinning women's participation in extramarital relationships. A reading of empirical sub-Saharan African and Ghanaian accounts reveals that infidelity has to be conceived not only as a moral offense but as an act inscribed in hierarchical gendered orders, socio-economic inadequacy, emotional marginalization, and the multilateral moral economies of everyday life.

Throughout African society, there have been accounts of persistent asymmetries in society's perception of and reaction to female and male infidelity. While male sexual transgression is normalized or rationalized, created as a type of masculinity or legitimated by bride-price exchange, female adultery is broadly conceived as a serious offense against social order. In Ghana, this is culturally scripted. Men can have various sexual partners formally in the form of polygyny or informally in the form of unexpressed permissiveness, while their women are forced to obey strict codes of chastity at the risk of public censure or individual violence. Freed and Loboguerrero (2023) note that within African and Latin American societies, the revelation of female adultery is a catalyst for severe community disapproval, leading frequently to long-term material penalty to the accused woman. These two standards establish a moral terrain on which women have to walk the thin wire of silence, surveillance, and shame in order to preserve their dignity and survival.

The literature also shows that women are not just passive recipients of patriarchal domination. Rather, they negotiate, resist, and redefine their roles in marriage in subtle yet strategic manners. Empirical research by Oppong and Abu (2018) in Northern Ghana demonstrates how women assert agency through mundane strategies of negotiation, emotional labor, and domestic management. In the same vein, Agyemang et al. (2022) discover that peri-urban Accra wives frequently use silence, withdrawal of emotions, or conditional cooperation to make their mark on conjugal life. The strategies work best when women are neglected, abandoned, or economically withdrawn by their husbands. In such circumstances, adultery can emerge not so much as transgressions but as calculated behavior, ways of affirming personhood, means of being able to access resources, or ways of capturing renewed emotional attention within marriages that no longer respond to their needs. The "structured agency" (Giddens, 1984) concept exactly grasps such conduct: women are not completely autonomous, yet in restriction, they make decisions.

Women's infidelity is mostly motivated by emotional deprivation and sexual discontent. Though infidelity may be possible, women are increasingly blaming extramarital relationships as a reaction to loneliness, abandonment, or non-satisfaction in emotional relationships. According to one Nigerian study conducted by Oladele (2019), some working poor women sought other lovers for attention, talk, and emotional fulfillment, needs never met within their marriages. In Tanzania, Silberschmidt (2001) found the same. Women whose husbands had out-migrated to work or were emotionally unavailable were likely to look elsewhere for companionship. In Tamale, the intersection of male out-migration, polygynous marital



arrangements, and suppression of female sexuality culturally creates a distinct pattern of pressures. Women are not always intimate in rebellion, but rather as a way of existential rehabilitation, a way of salvaging emotional visibility in places that have rendered them invisible.

The moral and religious stigma of adultery is particularly heavy in religiously conservative societies such as Tamale. There, women are not only faced by domestic sentiments and emotional acquiescence but also by the religious doctrine of punishment and public censure. The study by Adomako Ampofo and Boateng (2011) has shown how Ghanaian women purposefully project images of piety, modesty, and moral motherhood to avoid moral censure. In such arenas, the public self of a woman is protective armor; in acting religious virtue and filial obedience, she guards herself from accusation while stifling her hidden sins. Such regulative performance is highly coded social speech, one that covers over both fear and control. Osei-Tutu et al. (2020) term such regulation tactics "soft discipline" and gossip, innuendo, and silence as surveillance and sanction mechanisms. Women, in turn, build complex systems of concealment, scheduling assignations with lovers during ordinary chores, employing reliable intermediaries, or forming alliances with inconspicuous local residents. These are not just covert acts; they are intentional assertions of having stayed alive.

The punishments for women's adultery, when they are uncovered, are severe and out of proportion to the punishments levied against men. Women face banishment, stripping, being deprived of all their property, or physical assault, frequently in the service of moral cleansing. Apusigah (2009) and Abdulai (2010) both record cases in Northern Ghana where women suspected of adultery have lost rights to marital property, contact with children, or even their standing in society. The Ghana Demographic and Health Survey (GDHS) still reports high rates of intimate partner violence, with most women reporting accusations of infidelity, real or imagined, as the reason for beatings or sexual assault. This penal regime traces its roots to patriarchal reasoning that women's bodies are the deposits of family honor and need to be kept under the control of men. Yet even when there is a genuine threat, some women do report their extramarital intercourse as acts of empowerment. Otu (2020) imagines these acts as "faithful disobedience," acts of affective truth within the marriages that are emotional wastelands. Even by disobeying, women desire dignity.

What one sees throughout the literature is that for women, in particular, adultery is not a deviant behavior, it is a relational, contextual, and deeply moral negotiation. But even with these findings, few studies center the women's voices. The literature remains largely weighted toward male voices, survey inference, or public health concerns such as the spread of HIV. There is limited empirical research that captures women's own subjective lived experiences of practicing the freedom to have extramarital relationships, particularly in Northern Ghana. This lack of knowledge undermines our knowledge about women's agency, resilience, and ethical competence.



METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Ethnographic Orientation

The study took a well-documented ethnographic trajectory to examine the intricate, intimate, and sometimes stigmatized activity of infidelity among married women in Tamale, Northern Ghana. Ethnography was discovered to best capture the deeply embedded meanings, motivations, and negotiations that drive women's extramarital relationships. Compared to systematic interviews or official questionnaires, which may elicit superficial or censored answers when exploring sensitive issues, ethnography yields prolonged exposure and graduated trust development, thereby allowing access to informants' everyday lives more honestly and extensively (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2011; Madden, 2017).

This methodological option enabled the researcher to see for herself the social worlds, domestic settings, marketplaces, religious congregations, where women perform, veil, or rationalize their conduct. It enabled the researcher also to witness low-profile inconsistencies between professed moral rules and daily actions, a key feature of developing an understanding of infidelity in a strongly surveilled but increasingly urbanizing cultural setting like Tamale (Emerson et al., 2011).

Access Strategies and Trust-Building

Access to the intimate, affectively charged, and morally nuanced lives of married women who had had extramarital sex needed to be gained via a multi-step, culturally sanctioned process. Access was initially brokered through pre-existing, legitimate community structures, namely a women's microfinance cooperative and an honor-belonging public health NGO operating in the areas of maternal and reproductive health. These sites provided the researcher with a valid and socially approved excuse for being in the field over an extended period (Asselin, 2003).

Gatekeepers of the community were respected at the center of the strategy. Rapport was created with senior female players-Magajias (female elders), leaders of mosque women, Christian fellowship matriarchs, and notable market queens- through constant informal interactions. The research topic was initially imagined very broadly in terms of "marital wellbeing and issues" rather than specifically regarding infidelity in order to avoid suspicion and resistance. Confidentiality, discretion, and the possible social salience of the research (especially in informing better support services for women) were emphasized time and again (Sixsmith et al., 2003).

Participant Recruitment and Sampling Strategy

Participants were married women living in Tamale who had self-reported experiencing at least one extramarital encounter throughout their ongoing marriage. Purposive snowball sampling method was utilized, specifically adapted for consideration of the sensitive issue and for the purpose of developing maximum variation (Padgett, 2016).

Sampling started with 3–4 initial participants (so-called "seeds") engaged by known gatekeepers and NGO staff from various neighbourhoods (e.g., Zogbeli, Lamashegu, Sabonjida) and socio-economic categories (trader, teacher, seamstress). These seeds were then requested to refer to women they knew who would be willing to talk about "the problems women face in marriage." At every level of referral, the researcher made an effort to gain



diversity among participants' age (25–45 years), ethnicity (Dagomba, Mamprusi, Gonja, migrant groups), religion (Muslim, Christian, syncretic), income level, length of marriage, and employment or migration status of the husband. This variation was important in maintaining the notion that infidelity wasn't something that was to be tackled in its own right but instead a complex, context-based issue.

Data Collection Procedures

Data were gathered over 12 months through a range of ethnographic methods: participant observation, informal in-depth interviews, and unstructured interviews. Observations were carried out in semi-public and public places like markets, public gatherings, and women's group meetings, while interviews were typically done in the private residences of participants or at participant-designated neutral sites. In order to minimize power disparities and promote openness, the researcher often used an active, nonscripted approach to communication instead of using a structurally scripted interview.

Data were recorded in the form of written field notes, audio recordings (with permission), and reflexive memos written after each interview. The multi-textured methodology enabled the recording of both what was said and what wasn't said, silences, hesitations, euphemisms, and contradictions.

Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The researcher entered the field as a Northern Ghanaian man with formal educational training, rather than as a full insider within the research communities. This positionality entailed both advantages and constraints. On the one hand, it facilitated cultural familiarity and partial linguistic in-/outsider status; on the other, it required heightened reflexivity regarding gendered power relations, especially when discussing personal issues with women. These challenges were managed through sustained cultural sensitivity, openness, and continuous consultation with a local female cultural advisor, who assisted in interpreting participants' feedback and in establishing appropriate ethical boundaries (Awumbila, 2006; Finlay, 2002).

A reflexive journal was kept during the study to document the emotional response, assumptions, and developing knowledge of the cultural context of the researcher. Misunderstandings, cringe points, and ethical issues were documented and subsequently discussed with supervisors and advisors. The researcher did not aim to judge but to comprehend women's inner sense of reason and lived experience of their choices, even when they went against prevailing moral discourses.

Ethical Considerations

Due to the delicacy of the issue, ethical standards were kept in strict compliance. Consent was gained from all the participants with guarantees of anonymity, confidentiality, and the freedom to withdraw at any time. Pseudonyms were employed throughout, and distinguishing details regarding the participants were changed in order to safeguard them. Interviews took place at a convenient time and location for the women, and no material incentives in monetary form were provided to determine voluntarism.



FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This ethnographic research explored the hidden agendas, social consciousness, and aftermath of infidelity among married Ghanaian women in Tamale, Northern Ghana. The outcomes are a dismissal of everyday discourses that characterize female infidelity as simple moral deficiency. Rather, they expose it as strategic negotiation—embodied action to gendered taboos, emotional exclusion, and socio-economic lack. The stories of the women bore witness to deliberate actions of agency in a fantastically monitored and patriarchal social order.

Infidelity as Organized Agency and Survival Strategy

Infidelity as a survival strategy and a means of acquiring agency, rather than a measure of desire or rebellion, motivated most of the women. Unfulfilled emotional or sexual needs, and not necessarily desire, drove them. Economic insecurity was ever-present. Outside affairs were a means of acquiring resources for food, child education, and medical care, needs usually left unattended by absent or economically incapable husbands. A respondent observed, “My husband left for Kumasi two years ago. Since then, not even ten cedis has come from him. How do I feed my children? This other man helps me when things are hard. Without him, I don’t know what I would do.” This accords with Anarfi and Awusabo-Asare (2003), whose findings were that transactional sex in West Africa tends to be an adaptation to survival and not a sinful indulgence.

Besides economics, sexual frustration was the major, though less frequently quoted, motive. Suppression of women's desire on the basis of Islamic conservatism and Dagomba customary law is such that sexually frustrated women in wedlock have come to endure it in silence. In this research, women passively resisted similar silencing through having intercourse and intimacy outside their marriages. This is in line with Silberschmidt's (2011) argument that African women are resisting cultural oppression and asserting sexual agency. Neglect was also an emotional dimension that heightened these conditions; “I live with a man who doesn’t talk to me unless he wants food or sex. Sometimes I feel like I’m invisible in my own house. The man I see outside? He listens to me. He makes me feel like a woman again.” Marriages in which wives and husbands claimed no companionship, conversation, or emotional support were terms adopted by respondents. Infidelity then turned into an adaptive strategy—a means to regain dignity, gain attention, or merely be human again. Such data supports that extramarital activity, while socially downgraded, is perhaps a case of structured agency, where individuals make limited choices in constraining social circumstances (Giddens, 1984; Cornwall, 2002).

Respectability and Social Surveillance

Women in Tamale live in a regime of stringent moral oversight under which community standing, religious semblance, and family duty are maintained in a condition of constant monitoring. In order to remain concealed, women who practice adultery produce grand performances of respectability, presenting themselves in public as orthodox Muslims, obedient wives, and virtuous mothers. A respondent said, “Here, everyone is looking at you—your neighbors, your co-wives, even your family. So you have to behave decently in public. You cover decently, you pray, and you pretend everything is all right in the house. That way no one will ask questions about what you are doing when you are inside.” Such performances protect them from suspicion and validate their social status. This is also consistent with the work of Adomako Ampofo and Boateng (2011), whereby Ghanaian women tend to play what they term “respectability politics” in a bid to be exempted from patriarchal discipline.



Local gossip, or fahi, is a strong discipline. It is not only used as a moral carrier of judgment but also as a coded surveillance language. *"In this town, people don't stare you down. They just yap in corners, talk in proverbs, or let innuendos seep in. If they say so, you know they're warning you. That's why if you are going to do something, you do it far out-maybe on market day or when you're going to the mill. And not by yourself alone. Sometimes I go with my friend so it doesn't look suspicious"*- A respondent observed. Such implicit social signals are used by women to calibrate risk and alter their conduct accordingly. This underlines Osei-Tutu et al. (2020) point that gossip within Ghanaian societies is a "soft discipline" procedure that reinforces social boundaries but permits clandestine violations. Women in this research used spatial strategies, such as meeting lovers in distant markets or organizing meetings in the period of routine chores, to escape surveillance. Sometimes, they form defensive coalitions with members of the community women or with opinion leaders in their locality, an illustration of how socially powerful capital is in controlling deviant behavior (Bourdieu, 1986). It also reveals that adultery is far from being a spontaneous or careless action but an overwhelmingly scripted action supported by a highly evolved consciousness of communal perception.

Asymmetrical Consequences and Gendered Punishment

The consequences of cheating are inherently asymmetrical. When men cheat, they are sanitized or justified under the table, while women who do so are severely socially and materially punished. Respondents who got caught or were accused of cheating blamed being kicked out of the house and having access to agricultural land taken away from them, as well as being denied custody of their children. These patriarchal judgments echo the deeply patriarchal logic inherent in Dagbon kinship and inheritance systems, under which women's safety is bound up with sexual obedience and subordination.

This is in agreement with Silberschmidt (2001), which noted that male adultery is perceived as a show of masculinity in most African societies, but female adultery is perceived as moral corruption. Apart from that, women in this study reported incidents of marital rape, forced confession, and religious punishment, i.e., accusations of witchcraft. These are instances of a wider patriarchal backlash, reaction to women claiming agency in what has previously been male territory (Abdulai, 2010). These types of consequences are not only retributive but are meant to strengthen moral hierarchies and discourage future deviance.

Infidelity as Gendered Resistance and Affirmation of Self

In spite of the material and social risks, some women reported to researchers that they felt empowered, liberated, and emotionally fulfilled in their adulterous relations. Adultery was a resistance strategy, a claim to self in a life in which they had been made invisible to such women. This aspect is in consonance with Cornwall (2002) argument that women's day-to-day bargaining for power is commonly micro-resistance and not overt rebellion.

Women in this study testified that the affairs, at times, afforded emotional redemption, attention, or economic independence. In such cases, the marital extramarital behavior was not the result of deviance but a desire to get what marriage had denied them: intimacy, pleasure, and affirmation. One reported, *"I didn't go looking for another man because I'm a bad woman. I just felt like I wanted to be treated like a human being. My husband won't speak to me; don't touch me gently. The man out there, he hears me. He tells me I'm important. That was something that I wasn't getting in my marriage."* The acts, thus, albeit morally stigmatized,



were gendered scripts of survival and autonomy that undermined dogmatic moral polarization that was upheld in hegemonic discourse (Mahmood, 2005).

These accounts also describe the breakdown of the marriage institution in Tamale to provide for women's full sexual and emotional needs and the lack of safe spaces for women to voice dissatisfaction or redress. Otu (2020) remarks, as is typical, that women's resistances are expressed through bodily practices that break and reinforce existing norms, "faithful disobedience."

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the motivations, social perceptions, and consequences of infidelity among married women in Tamale, using an ethnographic approach to illuminate the lived experiences behind what is often treated as a taboo subject. The research challenges dominant moralistic and patriarchal interpretations of female infidelity, offering instead a nuanced understanding of it as a context-specific practice rooted in structured agency, socio-economic deprivation, emotional marginalization, and gendered power asymmetries.

The findings reveal that women's extramarital engagements are not impulsive acts of moral failing but calculated responses to unmet needs such as economic, emotional, sexual, and psychological. Within a socio-cultural environment marked by patriarchal expectations, polygynous marital structures, and religious conservatism, women navigate infidelity as a means of survival, fulfillment, and resistance. The study further demonstrates how women actively manage their reputations through performances of modesty, piety, and motherhood to avoid communal suspicion, while simultaneously engaging in transgressive practices that afford them emotional agency and material support.

However, these acts come with severe gendered consequences. Women face moral condemnation, social exclusion, economic dispossession, and even violence when discovered or accused of infidelity, in stark contrast to the normalized permissiveness extended to male transgressions. Yet, even within these constraints, women exhibit remarkable ingenuity, using infidelity not only as a coping mechanism but also as a form of self-affirmation and quiet resistance to a marital system that often silences and marginalizes them.

Ultimately, this study contributes to a growing body of African feminist and anthropological scholarship that urges scholars and policymakers alike to reframe conversations about female sexuality, agency, and morality. It advocates for a shift from punitive interventions to empathetic, contextually sensitive approaches that address the structural conditions under which women negotiate their intimate lives. Infidelity, in this context, is not merely a deviation from social norms, it is a window into the everyday struggles, desires, and dignities of women whose voices too often go unheard.



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