

Sexuality and the Arab World

Interview by Helene Aecherli

The Egyptian-British-Canadian author and scientist Shereen El Feki breaks a taboo: She has written a book about sexuality in the Arab world.



Shereen El Feki, let's start with the obvious: Sex is as big an issue in the Arab world as it is in the West.

Shereen El Feki: Of course. If women or men are among themselves, they talk about sex all the time. However, men and women don't really talk about sex together, and sex isn't generally discussed in public, unless it's as a crisis, a scandal or a tragedy. There are, of course, exceptions - novelists who tackle sexual themes, websites which tackle taboos, and even TV sexologists (many of them women) who talk about sex, within marriage, in an Islamic context. For most people though, there is a deep-rooted collective uneasiness around the subject - what makes it difficult to shed light on the positive aspects of sex, as a source of well-being and empowerment. And it is just as difficult to have an informed and balanced public discussion about controversial subjects such as sexual discontent within marriage, female sexual desire, homosexuality or abortion in many parts of the Arab region.

How do you explain this collective uneasiness?

It's a mixture of self-censorship, that is pushed by conservative interpretations of religion, and in many places, a state-enforced morality. Across the Arab world, the only accepted framework for sex is marriage - the "citadel" which gives my book its title; everything else is forbidden or considered morally wrong. Of course, sex outside of marriage happens - people just keep it under wraps.

However, in revolutionary times like today, also sexual norms should be questioned.

Well, there are early signs of that. Women in Cairo, for example, no longer silently accept sexual violence, but feel emboldened to speak out and to protest. This is a remarkable step forward. Generally-speaking, though, political freedom isn't necessarily connected with more personal freedom in people's minds. When I asked some of the protesters in Tahrir Square whether they were also fighting for sexual freedom, they were horrified.

Why?

They said: Sexual liberation is not the freedom they were looking for. Sexual freedom, they insisted, is not a part of their traditions and their social norms.

How do you explain this attitude?

At the moment, there is a disconnect between the political and the personal. In the long-run, however, if we want to see freedom and justice, dignity and equality in political, economic and social life, we need to achieve these same goals in sexual life. How, for example, can we expect young people to be fully-

informed and engaged citizens if we don't give them the information and tools to lead healthy and happy sexual and reproductive lives, and trust them to use these resources wisely? Many people in the region, Muslim or Christian, want to live their lives within the borders of their faith. As a liberal Muslim I believe it is possible to lead a healthy, satisfying and pleasurable sexual life free of violence, coercion and discrimination within the parameters of Islam, but this requires a recognition there are alternative interpretations on a number of sexual issues to the conservative stance widely espoused today. And that awakening will take time.

In other words: There is no democracy without sexual rights and vice versa?

It's an interesting and longstanding question. In the 1930s, Wilhelm Reich - a famous German psychoanalyst - argued that the authoritarian state uses sex as a tool to control the individual, and that the father of the family is an agent, if you like, of the father of the nation - that is, the ruler or dictator. So the sexuality of young people is controlled, sex is only possible within marriage, abortion is outlawed, divorce is frowned upon and religion reinforces all these strictures - a situation not unlike today's Arab world. According to Reich, this creates a sexual subjugation of the masses. If you can control people's sexuality, you can control them at the core of their being, thereby weakening any tendencies they may have to rise up against the system. It may sound farfetched, but Reich's theory might - at least in part - explain, why Arab societies have tolerated lousy government for such a long time.

Some people say, that universal human rights, of which sexual self-determination is a part, are incompatible with the Sharia. What do you think about that?

Sexual rights are, in my opinion, achievable within an Islamic framework. Yes, Islam puts boundaries on many aspects of life, including the sexual. For those who want to stay within those borders, it is helpful to know the spectrum of options between halal and haram. Ultimately, for people to realize sexual rights within Islam, they need a political, economic and social system which recognizes and respects their individual rights, and allows them to think and act for themselves. We are a long way from that in the Arab world.

Islam was once as famous as criticised for its sensuality. Contrary to Christianity, Islam doesn't know the concept of celibacy and praises sexual desire. Has that been forgotten?

Unfortunately, yes. Even my father's generation didn't consider it as shameful to talk or write about sex as people do today. And long before the Christian West was open to the full spectrum of sexuality, the Arab world was far more at ease in its sexual skin. Just take a look at the

great works of Arabic erotic from the 9th to 16th centuries, many of which were written by religious scholars. These works are frank, informative and often very funny. For their authors, it was not seen as incompatible to be as knowledgeable about matters of the flesh as it was on the finer points of faith. Even the Prophet Muhammad talked about the importance of "preparing wives" for intercourse. Indeed, medieval Christian commentators regularly criticized the sensuality of Islam.

Why has this attitude towards sex changed so drastically?

According to historians, the winding down of Arab societies on sex is part of a wider intellectual decline, that accelerated with European occupation of much of the region in the 19th century. Since then (and especially after the defeat in the 1967 war with Israel), Arab societies have been on to the defensive, spurring the rise of Islamic fundamentalism

satellite TV, many people - especially young people - in the Arab world have a view on Western life, including its intimate affairs. Of course, it is not 20/20 vision. Nonetheless, in my conversations with men and women across the region, I found it striking how clear they were on what they admired about Western sexual culture, and what they felt they could do without. As a consequence, although the sexual landscape of the Arab region looks a lot like that of the West before the sexual revolution - with taboos around premarital sex, homosexuality, masturbation, abortion, for instance, and a culture of silence and censorship - this does not mean that we will be heading in the same direction as the West in the decades to come. I don't expect a sexual revolution in the Arab region; social change does not occur in our part of the world through dramatic breaks with the past.

Which liberties would be welcome?

kissing, it's straight to sex, then he sleeps or watches TV."

But where is the initiative of the women here?

On the whole, I found men quite conflicted on this point: Like men anywhere in the world, they want sexual excitement (which they increasingly see in Western porn movies), but on the other hand, many are shocked, when their wives try to provide some spark in the bedroom. They have ideas about what is appropriate female sexual behaviour, according to Islamic dictates, though if they read some of the great works of Arabic erotica from ages past, they would realize that there is a long tradition of female creativity in the bedroom. Today, however, matters are more constrained: I have a number of female friends who, on showing some initiative, were upbraided by their husbands. They said: "Where did you get that information from? Are you experienced?" So women find other ways to signal their sexual desire -

plishments? It's a dilemma. Many Arab women I have met are very clear about not wanting to have sexual relationships before marriage. I once asked a woman, who is divorced: «Do you think, it would have been better, had you known your husband before marriage?» - "I don't think so", she said. "Just look at Madonna and her many husbands. It doesn't make your marriage anymore stable, if you have sex before marriage."

However, considering the fact, that the age of marriage rises constantly as an increasing number of young people can't afford to marry, this attitude is quite unrealistic, isn't it?

If you look at Tunisia, for example, the average age of marriage has risen to over thirty for men and late twenties for women. There are a number of factors driving this, but economics plays a part. Social convention and Islamic dictates, put the financial burden of marriage on men. Add to that the rising cost of marriage through the growth of consumerism and the lack of jobs for young people - one of the major causes of the uprisings of 2011 and beyond - what's a young person to do? There are marriage funds in the wealthier Gulf states, for example, to help young people cope with financial obstacles to marriage, but there are other barriers that no amount of money will overcome. While there is a growing recognition of this dilemma, we are not yet at the state in the Arab region where societies will countenance any alternative to the citadel. So young people are taking matters into their own hands, for example, trying to satisfy their libidos and soothe their consciences by giving their relations some Islamic "cover" with an informal marriage, such as 'urfi, misyar or in the case of Shi'i Muslims, mut'a.

It's a socially legitimized affair?

Informal marriages are in the „grey zone“ of Islamic permissibility - there are many different forms, and depending on which religious scholar you ask, some will say they are haram and others will say halal. They also have differing legal status in different countries in the region. Generally speaking, they challenge social conventions, what makes them deeply problematic for the people involved. For most young people, informal marriages are not an alternative lifestyle choice; they are a temporary last resort.

In the book, you talk extensively about the rise in the age of marriage, but what about early marriage?

The average age of marriage has been rising for women in much of the Arab region over the past few decades. That's not to say that early marriage has gone away: According to a recent study by the United Nations Population Fund, for example, around a third of young women in Yemen are still wed before age 18, that's double the regional average. Poor, rural, uneducated



especially about women and sex.

Is this change of attitude also a means of opposition against the West?

Yes. Islamic conservatives often define Muslim attitudes towards sexuality as a form of resistance to Western sexual "depravity", conveniently forgetting that many of the phenomena they condemn - homosexuality and sex work, for example - were features of the Arab and Islamic world long before they were embraced by Western liberalism.

In how far does this reflex against the West also have an effect on the less conservative part of the populations?

Many of the women I spoke with long for what they see as "Western-style" companionship in marriage, including mutual respect and romance. Hence the popularity of the Turkish TV series Noor, whose central story - the marriage between a wealthy scion of a Turkish family and his poorer cousin from the countryside - captivated millions of female viewers across the Arab world looking for the same desire, friendship and compatibility in their own marriages. When it comes to sexual life, I found many women were disappointed with their husbands. One wife summed it up, "Five minutes, and it's only his pleasure. After

through lingerie, for example. Many husbands I have met would like to have a more fulfilling relationship - in and out of the bedroom - with their wives. But the communication gap between spouses makes this difficult to attain.

Do you feel, that sex before marriage has become an issue?

Yes. Just look at the widespread social concern around "unusa" (spinsters) or "informal" marriages such as 'urfi or misyar. Most people want to be inside the citadel - they want to get married, but what to do if you're a young person who can't afford to marry or a career woman who can't find a husband who values her accom-

Begging to Survive

By Maram Alabbasi

Taking a quick look around Yemen's capital city, it's clear that the amount of people begging on the streets has significantly increased in the past two years.

"Begging is my job," Akram Ahmed said.

The activity isn't limited to any one demographic; people young, old and in-between can be seen around Sana'a asking for spare change or a bite to eat. People with physical handicaps are particularly visible.

"We have no alternative to begging," said Om Mokhtar. "Even if we were to find employment, we would not be paid a full wage."

Many of Yemen's most marginalized are employed as street cleaners. Om Mokhtar explains that the working conditions are unfair and that the Muhamasheen make half the wages of 'white' Yemenis.

Many Yemenis were evacuated from their homes during the uprising that first started two years ago.

"They kicked us out of our homes. Now we live with seven other families in one house. We haven't been compensated, they compensated the whites only," Om Mokhtar said, referring to Yemenis not of Muhamasheen descent.

In addition to surviving the everyday grind, Om Mokhtar says her husband is ill with a



heart condition and needs YR 500 thousand for the surgery. She has 10 children, and with begging as her only source of income, has not been able to save any money for her husband's medical needs.

"How do I make that kind of money begging on the streets? How do I even feed my children?" Muhamasheen face discrimination in many parts of their lives, including their educational studies.

"My children attend public schools, where they are discriminated against because of their background. The administration is corrupt and children with families that have some money can buy the teachers off," Om Mokhtar said. "Poor children, whose parents can't afford

bribes, are wronged."

Ahmed, able-bodied, is told that he is young and strong, and should be working for a living instead of begging.

"I tell them to find me a job and I will work."

Ahmed used to be a street cleaner, but the city always made-up excuses to dock his pay, he said, sometimes up to half his wage.

With six younger brothers, Ahmed had to quit school at a young age and help care for his siblings after his father died. He was an undocumented worker in Saudi Arabia for year before being caught and deported back to Yemen.

He earned a good salary in Saudi Arabia, he says, SR 1000 per month working in restaurants.

Back in Yemen,

Ahmed purchased a motorcycle to supplement his income by operating it as a taxi, but it was stolen. The police were able to locate it, but refused to give it back to Ahmed.

"Their excuse was that I didn't have 'witnesses' to prove that it was mine."

Beggars are often arrested by security forces and only released by paying a bribe, Ahmed claims.

"If you have money, you can pay them off. If not, you'll spend a month or two in prison, easily."

A mother of three, Fatin says she does not consider herself a beggar; she sits on the sidewalk with her children but does not beg. If people offer her money, she takes it, she said.

Her husband is a street cleaner. Like other parents, she wants a better life for her children. Her daughter, a fourth grader, wants to be a doctor when she grows up.

"I can't say I'm very hopeful. It seems we'll always be on the streets, no matter what."

Fatin was born in Saudi Arabia. She left that country after the first gulf war when Saudi Arabia kicked out hundreds of thousands of Yemenis to punish Yemen for its vote against the war. After marrying, she and her husband were smuggled back into the country, but were later deported.

"I wish we could go back. We used to make a living wage, we had

work and didn't have to resort to begging."

Treatment from the public varies.

"I don't give them money because they'll grow complacent. They teach their children to beg, preventing the cycle of begging from ending," Shaima Ali said.

Mohammed Abdullah disagrees.

"No one chooses to beg, they're forced to do so by their poverty," he said.

The government has an obligation to take of its citizens, Abdullah believes.

"Our government should do something about this issue. For example, it should provide jobs and housing for the homeless."



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girls are most at risk, and the physical and psychological hazards of early marriage have an impact not just on their wellbeing, but on that of their children as well. Legal reform is desirable, but it is not enough. In Egypt, for example, a 2008 law raised the age of marriage for men and women to 18 - a law which has been bitterly opposed by religious conservatives, all the more so since their rise to political power after the 2011 uprisings. And early marriage continues in Egypt in the form of 'urfi unions, which give women and their children few formal rights should their marriages falter before they can be officially registered when the wife turns 18. Key to tackling early marriage is better education and economic prospects. But other, more intractable arguments which favour the practice, such as the desire to marry off girls early, lest they go off the rails and have sex before marriage, need to be challenged as well.

Is the dogma of virginity as

strong as ever?

Absolutely. Although Islam and Christianity enjoin men and women to remain chaste before marriage; the reality is that, in a patriarchy, boys will be boys and have sex before marriage, without too much trouble. But women, that's another story. Female virginity is not just a personal matter; it is a collective concern, bound up in the honour of the family, and in particular in the honour of the menfolk. It is a double standard, to be sure, but in my research, I found that few women, as yet, are willing to publicly challenge the primacy of female virginity or customs which reinforce it, like dukhla.

That means, the hymen serves as symbolic veil?

In a sense, yes. For many people, female virginity is defined as a piece of anatomy - an intact hymen - rather than a state of chastity. So long as the hymen is unbroken, people tend to turn a blind eye. At the end of the day, in sex as in much of life, what matters to most people is not

what you do, but what you're seen to be doing. This can have serious consequences. For example, young couples often avoid conventional sex before marriage, but sometimes practise anal sex instead to keep the hymen intact. However, they rarely use condoms. Risky sexual practices, fuelled by a lack of sexuality education and access to reproductive health services for young people, are opening the way to all sorts of problems, including the spread of HIV.

The burden of sexual control falls on women in the Arab world. How can that be modified?

Better education and economic prospects are key - for women, to be sure, but also for men. It is time to move beyond seeing men as simply pillars of the patriarchal problem, and to bring them in as part of the solution. What do men really want? We know so little about the needs and fears and desires of Arab men - in and out of the bedroom. What's urgently

needed is more research, and more community projects that actively engage men in changing attitudes, as are starting to emerge in Egypt, for example, around the issue of sexual violence. Legal reform on gender, sexual and reproductive rights is also vital, but as in the case of early marriage, it is important to keep in mind that changing a law doesn't automatically change a mindset. For example, there is a law in Egypt which criminalizes female genital mutilation, yet 80% of 15-17 year old girls are circumcised. The law won't make a difference until citizens feel that legislation comes from a government that serves the people, not the other way round.

You have been travelling to countries in the Arab world for five years to do research for your book. What is your personal conclusion?

I was surprised at the courage and creativity of so many women and men I met across the region in addressing sexual dilemmas,

be it finding a place for unwed mothers and their kids in society, or introducing sexuality education into schools, or protecting female sex workers from HIV. Contrary to popular perceptions of the Arab world, people are not hopeless or helpless when it comes to sex; they are trying to find solutions to their problems, whether it is through tough decisions in their own lives or in building community projects or in crafting national policies. Often such innovators are thinking long and hard about their faith, and in the case of Islam, looking back at a history which was once much more open in its interpretations on matters of the flesh than it is today.

Personally-speaking, my research has reconnected me with my Arab origins. This book has been a revelation to me. And I have a much better appreciation of my upbringing, especially of my father, who is a devout Muslim. He is a believer who asks hard questions of his faith, and these only serve to strengthen

his belief. And this is exactly what I hope my readers will do: Ask questions and find answers that make sense for our culture, and our time.

Shereen El Feki is a writer, broadcaster and academic who started her professional life with a doctorate in molecular immunology from the University of Cambridge. She has worked as Healthcare Correspondent for The Economist and as a programme presenter on Al Jazeera, as well as serving as vice-chair of the UN's Global Commission on HIV and the Law. Her research on HIV/AIDS in the Arab region triggered her interest to look more closely at sexual life in the Arab world. Shereen El Feki is half-Egyptian, half-Welsh. She grew up in Toronto and divides her time between London and Cairo.

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