

# SEX & THE CITADEL

## BY SHEREEN EL FEKI

If you really want to know a people, start by looking inside their bedrooms.

How Shereen El Feki wound up between the sheets of the Middle East – so to speak – starts with September 11. Canadian-born, but half-Egyptian, the post 9/11 climate was a catalyst to explore her Arabic heritage for the first time. Her background as the vice-chair of the UN Global Commission on HIV/AIDS meant she looked through the lens of what she knew – sex. After five years of research her book is finally here and it is staggering. In Shereen's own words: "Welcome to the modern Middle East, where, two millennia on, virgin births are still a fact of life."

**What is the general attitude towards sex in the Arab region?** There are a lot of sexual taboos in the Arab world, against premarital sex, masturbation, homosexuality, unwed motherhood and abortion. Since the Arab Spring a lot is up for grabs, but it doesn't naturally follow that people asking questions about politics are also going to ask questions about sex. I was in Tahrir Square talking to protesters and I met a young activist who was camping out and I asked him, 'Could the fight for political freedom ever translate into personal and in particular sexual life?' His answer was 'No, no, no, no, not in 100 years. No one will accept that, this is not the freedom we are aiming for. The political revolution will need a social revolution but not a sexual one.'

**Would you get a different answer if you asked a woman that?**

In fact, I did, and her answer was more optimistic, but women are often just as conservative as men. In the book I talk about female circumcision, which is highly prevalent in Egypt; 90 per cent of women who have been married, under the age of 50, have been circumcised. I'm raising this point because the people who decide to circumcise girls are not fathers, they are mothers and grandmothers. One of the main reasons they do this is because they believe the clitoris is really the sexual dynamo and if you don't curb this then girls will have sex before marriage and wander during marriage, and both those things are marriage killers. Women don't do it to be cruel to their daughters, they do it

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because they love them and want to give them the best chances in life, but their decisions are based on faulty information.

**What's the best chance for change?** Sexual education is a big problem in the Arab region. It's hard to generalise but in Egypt it's a lesson on reproductive anatomy and some rather hit-and-miss information on STDs. Teachers are extremely embarrassed to teach it and will generally send girls out of the class. I had an acquaintance who, at the time, was a commerce student at one of the top universities in the country, and she asked me 'Shereen, I'm engaged to be married, could I become pregnant if my fiancé stands in front of the air conditioner?' After a bit of probing, I discovered the only class on reproductive biology she received was about plants so she had somehow confused sperm with pollen. This is a highly educated person, so you can imagine what's happening to the rest. Lots of young people are on the internet, looking for information, but as you know, it's a mixed bag. If you Google 'masturbation' in Arabic, for example, you'll find some sites which explain it is a natural part of sexual life, and others which tell you you're going to Hell, but before you get there, you'll be blind, impotent, diseased and deformed.

**Will the book be published in Arabic?** It's currently being considered by Arabic publishers. An interesting test of the new world we're stumbling towards is whether it can pass censorship. It's not *Fifty Shades of Sand*. It is a serious book I'm hopeful will serve as a foundation for people who want to start asking questions about the way things are in sexual life in the Arab world. ↗

Sex and the Citadel is out now, [sexandthecitadel.com](http://sexandthecitadel.com).