

Let's talk about sex in... the Arab world



Given the social taboos, Shereen El Feki thought she might struggle to encourage women across the region to speak candidly about their sex lives. She was wrong.

Text: Shereen El Feki / Graeme Green

Sex in the Arab world is the opposite of sport. This is what a gynaecologist in Egypt told me. Everyone talks about football but hardly anyone plays it; whereas everyone is having sex but no-one wants to talk about it.

I spent five years travelling across the Arab region talking about sex, including Morocco, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Lebanon. My problem was not getting people to talk about sex, but getting them to stop. People were very eager to ask questions and to speak openly about their experiences. I think that was because I come from a background

of public health – I'm an immunologist – and also I'm half-Egyptian and a Muslim, but I look Western. Often women don't speak openly because they're afraid of being judged and they thought, with me coming from the West, they could speak with no judgement.

The problem in the Arab region is the gap between appearance and reality. It's not that people aren't doing what people are doing all over the world. It's that they feel reluctant to speak openly about it. Between 30 and 60 per cent of young men will say they've had sexual relations before marriage, but upwards of 80 per cent of young women say they haven't. Which begs the question: who are all these young men having sex with?

The reality is there's recourse to sex workers – it's a booming

business in the Arab region. But also people don't want to admit to sex before marriage because women are expected to be virgins on their wedding night. It's a double standard.

Virginity is defined as a piece of anatomy, an intact hymen, so many young people are engaging in alternative forms of sex: anal sex, oral sex or 'superficial relations'. I met a woman in Morocco who had had a one-night stand. They had superficial relations and the man had ejaculated on her legs. When she went to a doctor, she had absolutely no idea she was pregnant. The thing she kept saying to me, which was her point of pride, was: 'I am still a virgin.' Even though she was pregnant.

The problem is that virginity is defined in this quite superficial way. It leads young people into deeply unhealthy behaviours. An NGO in Morocco was trying to encourage HIV prevention by offering young female sex workers condoms, but they said, 'We don't need condoms. No way are we going to become pregnant. We only have oral or anal sex because we want to get married.' So, in the name of an intact hymen, they were opening themselves to HIV.

Many people are under the impression that there is no HIV in the Arab world, but it is one of only two regions where HIV infections are still on the rise. Taboos around sex are a huge obstacle to rising to the challenge of the epidemic.

There is also the issue of same-sex relations in the Arab world. Of course, these are alive and well. Roughly two to three per cent of the population engages in same-sex activity. That's on a par with global averages. But it's a question of being

able to acknowledge it to yourself, to your family, let alone the wider community.

I talk about a scenic route to democracy – it's a long road, full of detours, emergency stops and bumps along the way. But you do see movement. In 2007, no woman would speak out about sexual harassment or being raped. Fast forward to 2014, and you find women in Egypt speaking out about their experiences.

We've gone through a dark period in the Arab region since the 1950s, a closing down on politics, economic thought, cultural thought. Sex is one part of that. A lot of arguments have been hijacked by Islamic conservatives. People have become incredibly conservative, not just Muslim but also Christian and Jewish conservatives. They wrap sex up in religion and use it as a tool of control. This creates a whole climate where everything is haram (forbidden), ayb (shameful).

We have a long history as Arabs of being very open on sexual matters within the context of Islam. My biggest hope is that we can reclaim the spirit of our ancestors, for whom sex was not just a problem but also a pleasure. And it was not just a pleasure for men, but also for women. If we can reclaim that spirit, a lot of the battle will have been won. That will set us on a good path to deal with many other issues in the generation to come.

Journalist, author and immunologist Shereen El Feki talked to Graeme Green.

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Think about the text

What explanation is given in the article when it comes to the rise of HIV in the Arab world?

In what sense does the author consider religious conservatism to be a barrier to sexual and cultural freedom? What are your thoughts about her argument?