



## **Dossier 32-33 Sexualities, Culture and Society in Muslim Contexts (Volume 32)**

*Anissa Hélie., Codou Bop, Raihana Nadra Alkaff, Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji, Urooj Arshad, Ana Ghoreishian, Aaron Louis Rosenberg, Sadia Ahmed, Amina Samiuddin, Homa Hoodfar, Fahima A. Hashim, Anissa Anissa Hélie, Rebecca Gould, Fauzia Viqar, Fatima Saeed*

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In both Muslim-majority countries and Muslim communities, the last decade has witnessed unprecedented organizing efforts by human rights defenders around sexual and reproductive rights issues. Yet, sexuality remains a highly contested terrain in all societies and, like elsewhere, activists from Muslim contexts are witnessing troubling developments. This includes the curtailing of sexual and reproductive rights through legislative processes; as well as an increased policing of sexuality through widespread targeting of individuals, or even of entire groups, whose personal circumstances, bodies, sexualities or gender appearance are deemed non-normative. Whether they are girls resisting marriage, divorced women, lesbian women, teenagers who have not undergone FGM in contexts where it is the norm, or heterosexual men considered ‘effeminate’, many face strict penalties – imposed by either non-state actors, or by state’ institutions and representatives. Sadly, the celebrated popular uprisings in the MENA region in 2011 have certainly not moved towards equality in the sexual realm. Sexuality remains at the core of how women – and others whose gender or sexual expression are stigmatized – are judged, and sanctioned. As feminist scholars have noted, in all cultures, women are the pivotal territories, markers, and reproducers of the narratives of nations and other collectivities. Over the past 3 decades, the Women Living Under Muslim Laws network (WLUML) has also noted that, while the control of women’s bodies – and the obsession with their sexual ‘purity’ – is not the prerogative of religious extremists, sexuality often constitutes the corner stone of a fundamentalist agenda. With the rise of fundamentalist politics, discourses claiming cultural and religious ‘authenticity’ are increasingly deployed to control sexuality, and at times to incite to violence. Yet, women in Muslim societies are at the forefront of organizing around issues of sexuality. This book offers a glimpse of the variety of sexuality-related issues which activists are engaging with. Authors address a range of themes – from the need to tackle cultural factors in HIV/AIDS prevention to strategies around ‘honour’ crimes; from bride kidnapping to drawing the links between female political leadership and dress codes; from women’s perceptions of abortion to the use of the internet as an advocacy tool for stigmatized sexualities; from organizing against rape in conflict to challenging inequalities affecting women in the reproductive health field; from the rise of institutionalized moral police corps to impotence as a legal ground in divorce settlements. Case studies offer insights from contexts as diverse as Senegal, Sudan, the East African coast, Zanzibar, Georgia, Pakistan, Iran, Indonesia, Jordan, Turkey and the USA. Comprised of in-depth contributions, along with short factual reports, this book explores how women, and some men, navigate the expectations and realities linked to sexuality and reproductive rights in their specific contexts. Contributors also highlight the many ways in which culture, religion, customs and sexual conduct intersect and they demonstrate that sexuality, far from being static, is the object of constant contestation and negotiation. On the question of culture – crucial because so often manipulated – Farida Shaheed, U.N. Special Rapporteur in the field of cultural rights, reminds us that “No society ever has a singular culture. Each society, and every community, has both a dominant culture and multiple subaltern cultures (...) Women rarely - if ever - define the dominant culture, because they do not have the economic, social or political power to do so”. Shaheed’s remark, of course, also applies to dominant sexual culture – and all contributors to this book are involved in

unpacking, critiquing, redefining and enriching mainstream understandings of the sexual culture that prevails in their communities.

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