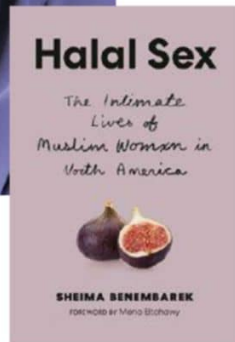


Sheima Benembarek



BOOK

# INSIDE STORY

Journalist Sheima Benembarek's new book, *Halal Sex*, explores Muslim women's sexuality through the lens of their doubts, thoughts, and hopes for a liberated future

I was born in Saudi Arabia to a deeply faithful woman. The intrinsic values of Islam – compassion, social justice, peace, and respect for all – have been the framework of my life. My mother taught me how to be a righteous human being. She taught me the fundamentals: No killing and no stealing, fasting during Ramadan, being kind to everyone, praying, and most importantly for a young woman, preserving the purity of your *awrah* – your intimate parts. Our virtue as women is our ultimate currency, she explained. In other words, I better have a hymen for my future husband.

Consensual sex outside of marriage between adults is unlawful in Islam and in most Muslim-majority countries. It's haram – a sin in the faith – and so punishable under different variations of each country's established Islamic law, sharia. Allah

forbids it, we've been told. But in time, I began to wonder about how we could even tell who was having sex and who wasn't among the unmarried. I quickly learned that you can only tell if a woman is not a virgin. According to Islamic society, the hymen – a membranous fold with no confirmed medical purpose – is the virginity indicator. And so, the culture of virginity is intricately woven into the social and political systems of the Muslim world. Our hymens, it seems, are not our own. They belong to our men.

Therefore, having an active and open sex life as a single Muslim woman in the Muslim world is treated as a crime. I grew up in Morocco knowing this. I heard about all the horror stories about what happens to the girls that did what they wanted to do with their bodies and were caught. But after I moved to Canada to pursue my university studies, I began to wonder what it was like for Muslim women in North America with all the "freedom" they have. Was virginity a big deal for them as well? What were they being told about their sexual health and agency?

The book that I spent the last five years working on, *Halal Sex: The Intimate Lives of Muslim Women in North America*, is a collection of intimate accounts that investigates these questions. It's not a journalistic study, it's a compilation of true stories of the sex lives of Muslim women in North America – immigrants from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and women born to such parents and raised in Canada and the US. What I found after speaking with dozens and dozens of Muslim women for years and traveling to spend time with the six in this book in their own cities, was that the secrecy we lived under was what was preventing us from living healthy and happy lives. While there are those who have found ways to have liberated sex lives, there are still many who feel alone, uninformed, and distressed as they try to reconcile their faith with their sexual desires. The Muslim women I interviewed have all expressed the need for a liberated sexuality, not always as a direct statement but at times through the hopes, thoughts, doubts, and questions they've shared with me.

With this project, I am not looking to provide a glimpse into the lives of these women, I am hoping to encourage an open conversation – one that does not often take place in public. Women's rights have moved to the forefront of social justice narratives, even within the Islamic faith itself. Muslim feminist scholars like Amina Wadud and Asma Lamrabet are pushing back against the patriarchy with progressive and groundbreaking interpretations of the Qur'an. They challenge the traditional views of the Muslim woman's place both in the social and political sphere through new ways of looking at scripture – the very tool that has been used against us. Allah, it seems, is not the source of oppression after all. For a long time, I lacked the language to make sense of all

of this as a system of oppression that can lead to gender-based suffering (being disowned by one's parents and cast out of the community). But I now know that the most prominent adversary of Islamic feminism is the Muslim patriarchy. Well, guess what, patriarchy? In Islam, you're highly encouraged to mind your own business and not fling judgment at others. Your sister's body is hers. Your mother's body is hers. Your wife's body is hers. And your daughter's body is hers. Period. Now, if only the rules in our countries would reflect that. *Penguin Canada*

"The secrecy we lived under was preventing us from living healthy and happy lives"