



Subduing Women's Sexuality

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My first encounter with Pakistan in 1993 took my innocence. I discovered a culture pervaded with sexuality – sexuality in a very negative sense. Absolutely everything, from the most trivial day-to-day matters to the most earth-shaking issues, had to do with sex – at least where girls and women were concerned. The same fixation on sex has found its way to the West through immigration.

For example, the use of hijab, which is a key element of Islam's view of sex, has all but exploded in Norway during the last few decades. Earlier this year we had a big national debate about hijab. It's time to ask why Islam is so preoccupied with subduing women's sexuality. Women had a pretty high level of sexual freedom in the heathen, pre-Islamic society on the Arabian peninsula. A woman could have relationships with several men at once, she could divorce easily, and she could decide who would get to be



the father of her children. Above all, women and children were, socially and economically, part of the tribal society. A striking example of women's freedom prior to Islam is that Muhammad's first wife, Khadja, was a leading businesswoman in Mecca, and it was she who proposed to Muhammad, who was twenty years her junior. One could look far and wide in today's Mecca without finding such a free woman in today's Mecca. What happened?

In order to make Islam a reality, Muhammad introduced the idea of the family as a system. Through the institution of the family, a man would be able to realize personal financial success. But how to ensure that a man could know that his wife's children were his own progeny and therefore deserving of his inheritance? This is where Islam's strict law against extramarital sex comes in. Not to mention sexual segregation in public spaces. And the covering of women, because women were viewed as wielding a dangerous sexual power – as *fitna*, which is Arabic for social chaos, chaos in the sense that if the woman is not subjected to severe sexual control, she will tempt men to break Islam's harsh sexual prohibitions. So it is that women are given the primary responsibility for ensuring that this essential element of sharia law is obeyed. For the same reason, she is placed under the authority of men.

Islam doesn't attack sexuality in itself, but rather women's potential for exercising total power over men. In Islam, sexuality is seen to have three main positive aspects: the human sexual drive ensures reproduction; it produces intellectual energy; and the sexual act itself provides the man with a foretaste of what he will experience in paradise – the eternal orgasm. On earth, however, man's most important task is devotion to Allah. Therefore, love between man and wife is viewed as an enemy of Muslim society. Marital love can disturb the husband's attachment to Allah.

Imam Ghazali (1050-1111) is considered the greatest and most influential theoretician of Islam. Woman, according to Ghazali, is synonymous with the Satan. She is the hunter; man is the passive victim. By controlling women's sexuality and limiting it to marriage, society protects the male outsider from being lured into illicit sexual activity. Ghazali believed that a man has an absolute need to have his sexual needs met – and that if these needs are not satisfied, he is more likely to commit adultery. A wife can therefore *not* refuse to sleep with her husband. If she does, she will be punished on earth by her husband, who has the right to stop supporting her, and she will also be punished after death.

To counteract the possibility of real intimacy and affection between husband and wife, Ghazali prescribed religious formulas that the man is to recite during the sex act itself and when he achieves orgasm, the purpose being to reduce the act to its most elementary purpose – that is, reproduction. Why did Islam introduce polygamy for men and simple and fast divorce laws for men? Again, it's all about Islam's fundamental idea that the man's ability to abandon himself fully and entirely to Allah is weakened by a lack of sexual satisfaction.

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Polygamy and simple divorce laws make it possible for a man to fulfill this obligation to Allah – and prevent infidelity.

In the view of the Somali-born Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the notion of man as an almost notoriously sexual animal, a beast who will throw himself at any woman who is not “decently” covered in public, is essential to an understanding the stagnation of the Muslim world and of the immense problems with integrating Muslims in Europe. As Hirsi Ali points out, Islam places all sexual morality on the woman’s shoulders. From a very early age, she notes, girls are viewed with suspicion and learn that they are untrustworthy creatures who represent a potential danger to their extended families – for there is, in them, something that makes men lose their minds.

What consequences does Islam’s radical fixation on sex have for the West? Without a doubt, Islam’s sexual obsession represents a major obstacle to integration – and an impediment to the free participation of Muslim girls and women in our society. The control of their sexuality closes them in – and thus closes them out of key social arenas. The severe social control of females also prevents natural contact between the sexes across religious lines and within the religion itself – a situation which seeds the ground for forced marriage.

But there are more serious factors. At the age of 50, Muhammad became engaged to a six-year-old girl named Aisha, whom he married when she was nine. The idea was that she was, by that age, sexually mature. This explains why Ayatollah Khomeini set the minimum legal age at which girls could be married in Iran at 9 years old. If a girl is sexually mature, she possesses *fitna*. Little girls are also married off in the West, in accordance with Muhammad’s example.

The most extreme form of biological sexual control of women is genital mutilation. Many people claim that genital mutilation has nothing to do with Islam. This is untrue. Muhammad issued a blanket prohibition against eating pork. But he did not forbid genital mutilation. Instead he encouraged his followers not to perform the most radical form of mutilation, telling them in his *sunna* not to “overdo it.” Thus we have the practice known as “sunna circumcision.” Today, Muhammad’s statements continue to be cited in support of the tradition. According to the shafi school of Islamic law, which is followed by Somalis (among others), it is an obligation to “circumcise” girls. This rule, naturally, has consequences for Muslim girls throughout the Western world today.

Another dramatic result of the strict control of Muslim female sexuality in the West is the “dumping” of girls in their families’ countries of origin, either to prevent integration (the concern being that they may violate sharia’s sexual laws) or because they already have been integrated.

Islam’s obsession with sex must become a subject of debate in the West. If Muslim women and girls (and men) are not liberated from a view of sex based on religious law, integration into Western societies based on freedom and sexual equality will never become anything more than an illusion.

By Hege Storhaug

This piece first appeared, in Norwegian, in the newspaper Bergens Tidende, and has been translated into English by Bruce Bawer

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