

Book shatters stereotypes on Muslim women, sex and love

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(RNS) If you think good Muslim women wait for marriage to have sex, think again.

"I'm an unmarried, Muslim non-virgin," declares Insiya Ansari, a writer in the San Francisco Bay Area. "I've said it aloud."

"And no, I wasn't married or engaged to be married, or even in an exclusive relationship," says Zahra Noorbakhsh, a comedian and the daughter of Iranian immigrants.

"'Ohhhh,' I think to myself, 'this is what sex is like for most people,'" writes Najva Sol, recalling her first sexual encounter with a woman, when she was 18, after several mostly ho-hum sexual encounters with men.

Those are some of the revelations in "Love InshAllah: The Secret Love Lives of American Muslim Women," a new collection of stories about flirting, dating, lust, sex, marriage, and divorce by a diverse array of 25 Muslim women.

In "Love InshAllah," released Jan. 24 by Soft Skull Press in Berkeley, Calif., the writers bare their most intimate emotions and sexual encounters, and unload brutally honest criticisms on parents, ex-boyfriends, and themselves.

Together, the stories paint a different picture of Muslim women -- with the same yearnings, dilemmas, joys and frustrations as non-Muslim women, while shattering stereotypes of Muslim women as oppressed chattel whose sexual lives are decided by men.

Such candor is not the norm in Muslim American communities, and the book's two editors, Ayesha Mattu and Nura Maznavi, said they were surprised that, after casting about for submissions on list-serves, blogs, and social media sites, they got around 200 entries.

"I felt like we hit a chord. I felt like women were ready to talk about these stories," said Mattu, 39, who recounts her own story about flirting with her future husband (a non-practicing Christian) in a Boston dive bar, moments after resolving to date only Muslim men.

"One of my greatest desires for this book is for it to break down the barriers between the generations, and to really be a tool for discussion within families," said Mattu.

Maznavi, a civil rights attorney who wears a hijab, said there "really hasn't been the space to discuss these issues publicly, and openly and honestly." Her own story is about resisting the temptation to give up her first kiss, at 25, to a chiseled Catholic fitness trainer from Sri Lanka.

"There's been a lot of fear in the community -- fear of judgment, fear of disapproval," she said, "and I think that has manifested itself in a lot of self censorship and people not feeling comfortable to talk about these issues, even with very, very close friends."

Dr. Laila Al-Marayati, a spokeswoman for the Muslim Women's League and an OB-GYN who teaches a sex education class at a Muslim middle school in Pasadena, Calif., agreed that Muslim families and communities don't pay enough attention to sexual education and relationships.

The results, she said, can include painful sex and dysfunctional relationships.

"There's not very much out there, and what is out there is very much this shame mentality -- if you do this or that, shame on you and God will punish you," said Al-Marayati. "That's not helpful."

The collection is the latest among a spate of books published in recent years, including "I Speak for Myself" and "Living Islam Out Loud," in which Muslim American women try to tell their own stories and create their own

images that challenge the stereotypes that are imported from more misogynistic societies like Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran and Saudi Arabia.

"There are still misconceptions about Muslim women, because Muslim women, their bodies, their lives, have been so caught up in political debate," Mattu said. "I feel like this is a way for people to connect with women who are revealing their full humanity."

The word "Inshallah" from the book's title is Arabic for "God willing," and alludes to the search for love, a theme any woman can relate to. Other stories delve into the fear that Muslim parents will be disappointed with a non-Muslim boyfriend, or the disappointment of anti-climactic sexual encounters, or the pain of divorce.

In one of the more heart-breaking stories, Leila Khan talks about losing her fiance because he condemned her faith.

While the book is full of sexually liberal women, it also has many conservative women, as well as surprising takes on institutions like arranged marriage and polygamy.

In the essay "Leap of Faith," Aisha Saeed, a high school English teacher in Florida, makes clear that while her parents searched out potential suitors and ultimately found the man she would marry, it was her decision to fall in love with him.

"I knew all I needed to," Saeed writes of accepting her husband's marriage proposal over the telephone, after only one meeting and several weeks of phone calls.

"The idea of sharing a husband had never bothered me," said Asiila Imani, a doula (pregnancy coach) who shares her Muslim husband with another wife. "I believed women should be confident enough in themselves that they wouldn't need to be the sole object of a man's affections."

For many of the women, one of the biggest hurdles was writing about such personal issues with the risk of angering parents who disapprove of their daughter's lives and don't appreciate being criticized in public.

"That's one of the reasons we included our stories," Mattu said. "We wanted the writers to know that weren't asking them to do something that we weren't willing to do ourselves."

Even though she's bared her heart once, Maznavi is not quite ready to bare it again, at least not yet. When asked if she's ever been intimate with her new fiance, she replied with a laugh.

"I've decided I'm going to save that story for the sequel."