Abstract
The notion of sexuality in the Muslim context is characterized by silences and invisibilities; discussion of sexuality is not encouraged and practices such as homosexuality and/or premarital sex are not acknowledged. Sexuality is a potentially explosive sphere and a contested domain where social and ideological conflicts are played out. Demographic, socio-economic, and political changes have brought about the appearance of “new” forms of marriage and the emergence of noncommercial premarital sex, resulting in a new geography of sex and sexuality. The domain of sexuality is becoming increasingly contested, especially when factoring in the hegemonic Islamic discourse, which prohibits premarital sex and conceptualizes individuals’ transition from birth to adolescence to marriage as asexual. This chapter examines the discrepancy between conventional expectations that sexuality be postponed until marriage and the lived realities of the emerging youth culture and education that is attuned to global trends but rooted in local sensitivities. Although youth are busy negotiating new terrains of sexuality, public policy’s stance towards young people’s sexuality in the Muslim world is still characterized by silence and denial. This is evidenced by the lack of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education, which would empower young people in relation to sexuality.

Keywords
Sex • Sexuality • Muslim • Youth • Islamic education • Islam • Egypt

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Introduction

Many of the countries in the Muslim world are experiencing a youth bulge produced by improvements in infant mortality and delayed fertility declines (Singerman 2007). In the Middle East, 60% of the population is under the age of 25; nearly one in five people is between the ages of 15 and 24, and in Egypt half the population is under the age of 25 (Geel 2012; Singerman 2007). At the same time, this demographic transition coupled with greater participation of women in the labor force and education, changing gender norms, globalization, and the financial costs of marriage has resulted in delayed marriage (Singerman 2007). In 1970, 65% of Egyptian women aged 20–24 were married by age twenty, while in 1995 this proportion dropped to 41% (ibid.). Similarly, in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the percentage of women aged 15–19 who were married in 1975 was 57%, dropping to 19% in 1987 and to 8% by 1995 (ibid.). Early and universal marriage established the link between sexuality and marriage; however, as more men and women delay marriage, the institution of marriage is changing and new marriage substitutes and sexual norms are emerging (Dialmy 2005; Singerman 2007). This trend of delayed marriage – among other reasons – is attributed to the higher level of literacy among women and contribution of women in the public realm more than ever, which in turn has affected the sexual behavior of women across the Muslim world.

Attempts to collect empirical data on sexual behavior and attitudes are many times confronted with methodological problems associated with studies of sexuality, due to the sensitive nature of the topic (Al-Shdayfat and Green 2012; Obermeyer 2000). Based on existing statistics and estimates based on the prevalence of illegal abortions, hymen reconstructions, and sexually transmitted infections (STIs), it is widely established that the prevalence of premarital sex in Muslim societies is rising (Bennett 2007; Dialmy 2005; Singerman 2007; Utomo and Mcdonald 2008). In
contemporary Indonesia, it is estimated that the prevalence of premarital sex is as high as 42% (Bennett 2007). Other indicators of premarital sex are the rise of HIV and other STIs as well as teenage unplanned pregnancy rates – which in Egypt stand between 4% and 7% among 15–19 year olds (Bennett 2007; Farrag and Hayter 2014). As sexual and reproductive health education (SRH) is controversial in most if not all Muslim countries, young people are not equipped with the necessary knowledge and skills to safely negotiate sexual relationships. Only limited aspects of SRH education are covered in Egyptian public schools and may be skipped because educators are unprepared or embarrassed (Geel 2012).

This chapter will focus on the demographic, socio-economic, and political changes that have resulted in a new geography of sex and sexuality. It will illustrate the ways in which the domain of sexuality is contested leading to feelings of ambivalence, as a result of the widening gap between young people’s lived experiences and societal expectations. Drawing examples from various countries in the Muslim world, the chapter will examine the contradictory impact of modernization, nationalist ideologies, and the rise of the religious right in redefining traditional constructions of sexuality as well as the emergence of a new geography of sexuality. Although youth are busy negotiating new terrains of sexuality, public policy’s stance towards young people’s sexuality in the Muslim world is still characterized by silence and denial. This is evidenced by the lack of comprehensive sexual and reproductive health education, which would empower young people in relation to sexuality.

**Sexuality as a Contested Domain**

Sexual attitudes and behaviors are tangled up in religion, culture, politics, and economics. All of these factors come together to create an individual’s sexuality. For the purpose of this chapter, sexuality will be defined as:

> ... a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviours, practices, roles, and relationships. (World Health Organization 2006)

As such, sexuality is a mirror of the conditions of a society at any moment in time. For example, examining the domain of sexuality can lead to a better understanding of the conditions that led to the uprisings and the 2011 Revolution in Egypt; sexuality will also be a measure of progress (or lack thereof) (El-Feki 2013). Tahrir Square and the 2011 Revolution created an atmosphere of antistructure, in which “the structures of everyday life were disrupted or overturned, but new structures have not yet emerged to replace them” (Peterson 2011: xi). Antistructure leads to transformations in existing social structures that may or may not resemble the old and this seems to be happening in Egypt currently. Sexuality is a domain in which many ideological wars are fought and is “an especially dense transfer point for
relations of power” (Foucault 1978: 103). Discrepancies between Islamic doctrine and application, changing relations between the sexes, various socioeconomic and political transformations, and competing claims for legitimacy and authenticity further add to the contested domain of sexuality and increase tensions experienced by young people navigating the growing gap between expectations and reality.

Construction of Sexuality

In Islamic Doctrine

Most who research sexuality in the Muslim world would agree that Islam is a critical factor in understanding sexual behavior; however, the exact significance of Islam is harder to pin down (Ilkkaracan 2002; Uhlmann 2005). Obermeyer (2000) claims that traditional Moroccan culture – like most cultures in the Muslim world – exhibits a fundamental contradiction between a relatively permissive religious doctrine and a system of social institutions that leads to double standards regarding sexual behavior. Although Islam has a generally positive view of sexuality, less noted is the importance in Islamic doctrine to mutual consent, reciprocity, and shared pleasure (Bouhdiba 1975; Obermeyer 2000). Simultaneously discussing ways to increase pleasure and rules of purification related to intercourse, a link between sexual enjoyment and the duties of believers is established; a parallel is drawn between the sacred and the sexual. Divine law introduces order and regulates sexual activity – for both men AND women – instead of letting unchecked instincts lead to chaos. Both the individual and the greater Muslim community are meant to benefit from this system. At the same time, sexual standards in Islam are paradoxical: on the one hand the exercise of sexuality is encouraged yet, on the other hand, sex is only permissible within marriage and homosexuality is considered a perversion (Dialmy 2010; Obermeyer 2000). Hegemonic status is given to marital heterosexuality; any exploration of sexuality outside of this framework is not tolerated by Islam (Obermeyer 2000).

In Application

Inegalitarian constructions of gender in the Muslim world temper – and even contradict in certain situations – the generally positive attitude Islam has towards sexuality. Practices such as veiling, female genital mutilation (FGM), honor killings, and defloration rites generate discussion regarding the extent to which these practices express a “Muslim” construction of gender and sexuality (Abu Lughod 2001; Obermeyer 2000). Many different people with varying interests have engaged in this project of defining the nature of “Muslim” sexuality; the eroticization of the Orient has always been a preoccupation of the Western colonial imagination (Abu-Lughod 2001; Uhlmann 2005). Western discourses focus on practices such as veiling and FGM as signs of repressive control of women’s bodies and women’s sexuality. In the Muslim world itself, some argue that the misogynist practices of sexuality are
corruptions of the ideals of the Qur’an and other religious texts, while others claim that legal and sacred texts do indeed carry messages that perpetuate certain attitudes and beliefs towards the bodies and behavior of women (Bouhdiba 1975; Ilkkaracan 2002; Sabbah 1984). All of these discussions share the presumption that there is such a thing as a “Muslim sexuality” when neither Islam nor sexuality should be essentialized or taken as things with intrinsic and transhistorical meanings but rather understood within specific sociohistorical contexts (Abu-Lughod 2001; Ilkkaracan 2001; Imam 1997; Uhlmann 2005). It is difficult to define what is intrinsic to Islam about shaping sexual behavior, and this task becomes more complex when Islam interacts with various socioeconomic and political systems.

In most societies, religion is central to sexual regulation; therefore, it is of no great surprise that many discriminatory practices are justified through recourse to Islam. As one of the most powerful – if not the most powerful – cultural vehicles in the region, utilizing Islam as a carrier for particular messages ensures success in achieving social and cultural prominence. At the same time, Islam plays an important role in national identification processes, representing a marker of national difference from the West. Consequently, behavior that is seen to not conform to religious norms is represented as un-Egyptian for example (Pratt 2007). In Ilkkaracan’s (2002) examination of the violation of women’s sexual rights in the Middle East and North Africa, she concludes that religion is misused as a powerful instrument of control with the goal of legitimizing violations of women’s human rights. Similarly, in an analysis of Egyptian Bedouin weddings, Abu-Lughod (2001) argues that Islam is not a blueprint for sexuality but rather a weapon in the changing relations of power. Changing wedding rituals such as the loss of the female dancer symbolize the decrease in women’s ability to successfully challenge men rather than the even contest between the sexes that was symbolized by previously included wedding rituals. Furthermore, invocations of Islam and the proper behavior of women in the context of weddings are commonly heard among older men, effectively displacing women as prime actors in the rites that produced and reproduced Bedouin constructions of sexuality and desire.

While the exact role played by Islam in shaping the gender order and sexual behavior seems indeterminate, many argue that traditional cultural regimes in the Muslim world concur in considering the sexual order both binary and hierarchical at the same time (Dialmy 2005, 2010; Obermeyer 2000). This order revolves around two poles: one, which is superior and dominating and made up of men, and the other, which is inferior and passive and made up of women and homosexuals (Dialmy 2005, 2010). In order to distinguish between man and not man, social initiation is achieved through circumcision. Male circumcision is an opportunity to celebrate and take pride since masculine identity is more prized, while female circumcision takes place silently and in secret and is a means of policing female sexuality. This dichotomy of active/passive is predicated on “a masculinist definition of the sexual act as penetration” and is located within cultural regimes that are typified by a “general importance of male dominance, the centrality of penetration to conceptions of sex and the radical disjunction of active and passive roles in male homosexuality” (Dialmy 2005: 18). In this case, it is the sexual act rather than sexual organs that are constitutive of gender (Obermeyer 2000).
The active/passive dichotomy is central in traditional organizations of sexuality in the Muslim world with the definition of sex as penetrative privileging male satisfaction (Dialmy 2005, 2010; Obermeyer 2000). This power structure fosters a keen awareness in partners of “inferior” rank of the political dimension of sexual relations. Obermeyer (2000) suggests that women have an acute perceptiveness of the imbalanced system that regulates their relations to their husbands, considering it their duty to allow their husbands to have sex with them whenever they wish but refusing to ask for sex directly as it would decrease their power.

Interestingly, the masculine subconscious contains a different image of female sexuality one, one that turns her into the stronger sexuality (Ahmed 1992; Dialmy 2005; Ilkkaracan 2002; Mernissi 1987). Analyzing the double theory of sexual dynamics in medieval canonical texts and historical interpretations of Islam, Mernissi (1987) presents an “explicit” theory of female sexuality in which women are depicted as passive subjects and an underlying “implicit” theory in which women are depicted as hunters and a constant challenge to man’s virility. Male and female sexual drives are construed as opposites: men as rational and capable of self-control and women as emotional and lacking self-control. Uncontrolled female sexuality is regarded as a potential cause of discord with threatening implications for the social order (Ahmed 1992; Dialmy 2005; Ilkkaracan 2002; Mernissi 1987). Therefore, social order requires male control of women’s bodies and sexuality. Practices such as defloration rites, FGM, and honor crimes have evolved in order to police female sexuality (Dialmy 2005; Ilkkaracan 2002; Lee 2011). This depiction of female sexuality justifies early marriage, seclusion, and more generally a subjection to a strict hierarchy that denies women freedom of movement and instils contempt towards sexual pleasure.

Uhlmann (2005: 13) contrasts this view of sexuality with that of European society, arguing that “if in European societies differences in the essence of men and women produce the social differentiation, then in the Middle East and North Africa it is rather the enforcement of the differentiation that produces the differences between men and women.” In the European context, the cultural construction of reproduction (sexual intercourse, pregnancy, etc.) structures both kinship and gender. The association of women with the domestic domain is rationalized through their internalized role as caregivers, in contrast with the masculine role as breadwinner. Uhlmann (ibid.) suggests that the seclusion of women and their attachment to the domestic domain in the Muslim world is directly related to the differential sexual functioning of men and women, organized around the act of penetration. Since the consequences of sex are potentially more devastating for women and their families more generally, women are policed as closely as possible, a mission in which women themselves act as the primary policing agents of their own sexuality. In the latter region, the issue is the moral policing of sex rather than the expression of gendered essence. And it is this policing, an integral aspect of which is education and upbringing that produces the differences between the genders. The act of penetration is more salient in the cultural idioms and metaphors that are used to evaluate the two genders in the Muslim world than it is in Europe (Dialmy 2005, 2010; Uhlmann 2005).
This analysis of the masculine subconscious and of the sexual order is merely a provisional approximation of sexuality in the Muslim world, since social phenomena occupy specific socioeconomic and political conjunctures and are always contingent and contestable. Specific mechanisms that are utilized to police sexuality differ within the Muslim world according to geographical location, time, class, and race of a given community. Unfortunately, the role of the interaction of Islam with specific socioeconomic and political systems in shaping sexuality in different Muslim communities is still a relatively unexplored issue; there is a striking lack of empirical data on sexual behavior (Al-Shdayfat and Green 2012; Ilkkaracan 2001). By examining laws and practices such as civil and religious marriages, bride prices, polygyny, marriage consent, reproductive health, extramarital relationships, and domestic violence, more light can be shed on the ways religion is used to create and perpetuate oppression and injustice in certain societies. Although the exact role Islam plays in shaping sexual order and behavior is indeterminate, Islam will definitely continue to be critical in the configuration of sexuality in the Muslim world. Instead of striving to define what is intrinsic to Islam in shaping sexual behavior, it would be more beneficial to explore the variable roles discourses on religion can play in constructions of sexuality.

Socioeconomic and Political Changes

In this age of globalization, women’s bodies, sexuality, and masculinities are increasingly becoming arenas of intense conflict, an ideological terrain in which forces such as the religious right or the state fight to maintain control (Ilkkaracan 2002). Public-discourse versions of masculinities and of racialized Middle Eastern maleness, for example, play a large role in the analysis of political change and social conflict in the region (Amar 2011). These “institutionalized methods of masculinity studies” shape geopolitics and generate support for war, occupation, and repression in the region (ibid.: 38). However, public discourses such as these obscure the multiplicity of social realities and create hypervisible “fetishized figures” that are not recognizable in socio-economic and political contexts of production. The most popular subjects of modern geopolitical hypervisibility are “moralised, criminalised, racialized, colonised masculinities . . . twinned with their fetishized Others of victims – the supposedly suppressed traditionalised veiled woman and the supposedly Occidentally-identified modernized gay man” (Amar 2011: 40). Amar calls for gender/sexuality/coloniality-conscious ways to understand emerging formations and trends, ways that more accurately highlight the existing social realities. On a similar note, Ilkkaracan (2002) argues that tendencies to essentialize Islam result in an inaccurate portrayal of cultural practices such as FGM, stoning, and virginity tests and obscure the wide diversity of Muslim societies. By focusing on a combination of political, economic, and social inequalities rather than an “Islamic” version of sexuality, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of topics such as violations of women’s sexual rights. In the following section, this chapter will explore some of the historical and sociopolitical factors that have had an impact on sexuality in the Muslim world drawing examples mainly from Egypt, Morocco, and Turkey.
Modernization

Since the nineteenth century, there have been many modern legal, economic, and social reforms in the Muslim world. Women have occupied and continue to occupy a central place in modernization efforts in the region; modernists within the Muslim world as well as mainstream development discourse argue that reforms in the position of women in the economic, educational, and legal spheres will lead to greater gender equality in all spheres and consequently more “modernization” and economic development (Ilkkaracan 2002; World Bank 2004). Modernization in Turkey, for example, included the adoption of the Turkish Civil Code in 1926 based on the Swiss Civil Code (Ilkkaracan 2002). Aimed at complete secularization, this code banned polygamy and granted women equal rights in matters of divorce, child custody, and inheritance. Again it is important to note that legal reforms and the extent to which these legal reforms redefined or failed to redefine gender relations and sexuality vary greatly between countries in the Muslim world. While Turkey adopted a fully secular civil code, Iran and countries in the Gulf—despite different interpretations—continue to rely on Islamic legal jurisprudence as the fundamental law. Other countries such as Egypt retained an “Islamic” interpretation of personal status laws yet introduced modern reforms such as an increase in the minimum age of marriage to 18 and the criminalization of FGM (Ilkkaracan 2002; Tadros 2010).

In addition, decades of government commitment and increased public spending have enabled Muslim countries to make impressive strides in women’s education and health in order to address existing gender disparities. According to the World Bank (2004), the average years of schooling for women in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) increased from 0.5 year in 1960 to 4.5 years in 1999. Countries such as Qatar, United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Libya have achieved gender development indices that fall into the top 2 groups, which are comprised of countries with high and medium to high equality in human development index (HDI) achievements—a long and healthy life, knowledge, and a decent standard of living—between men and women (UNDP 2015: 223). Women in the MENA are living longer and healthier lives; fertility and maternal mortality rates have decreased and contraceptive use has increased (World Bank 2004). Partly due to the aforementioned increase in women’s educational attainment rates as well as the decrease in fertility rates of working-age women, the MENA has seen a corresponding increase in female labor force participation rates.

Although much effort has been directed towards reforming women’s positions in the name of modernization and development, the impact of these reforms has been contradictory or divergent depending on class, race, or ethnicity (Ilkkaracan 2002). Generally speaking, those who benefit the most from modernization attempts tend to be women from the urban middle or upper classes as well as those who are a part of the dominant ethnic or racial group. Regional disparities in socioeconomic conditions are experienced more by women than men and contribute to the contradictory impact of modern reforms. While many Muslim countries in the MENA region have made considerable progress at the primary level in raising girls’ completion rates, girls from rural and socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds are often at a disadvantage to boys (UNDP 2015). Poor rural children—both boys and girls—are
disproportionately represented in the share of out-of-school children. Household wealth is a major determinant of higher education with almost half of the students pursuing higher education from the richest 20% of the population and only 4% from the poorest 20% (Handoussa 2010). In 2005, 71.2% of Egyptian women aged 19 to 22 in the top wealth quintile had been enrolled in tertiary education, compared to 39.5% in the second quintile and 6.6% in the bottom quintile – all evidence that the poverty gap is wider than the gender gap in some cases (Handoussa 2010; World Bank 2008).

Modern legal reforms theoretically created many opportunities for women yet the implementation of these new laws was classed and racialized. In Egypt for example at the end of the nineteenth century, new rape laws were imported from France as part of the process of nation-state building (Ilkkaracan 2002). These laws may have standardized penal codes bringing criminal procedures under the authority of the state; however, these new laws superimposed a system that did nothing to discourage rape while introducing new forms of discrimination based on gender and class. Justice was only accessible by women who could afford to hire lawyers and pay legal expenses. Another example of the negative impact of modern legal reforms on women’s lives and sexuality can be seen among Kurdish women in Turkey (Ilkkaracan 2001, 2002). Legal reforms have prohibited practices such as early and forced marriages, polygyny, and honor crimes since the 1920s; however, only a minority of Kurdish women who have had access to education can benefit from the legal reforms. Those who have never been to school and therefore speak no Turkish are unable to turn to legal institutions in cases of violations as Turkish is the official language in all governmental organizations.

Sharabi (1988) offers an explanation as to why modern reforms have had such a divergent and contradictory impact on women. Working within a Marxist framework of historical realism, Sharabi (ibid.) describes societies in the Muslim world and the Middle East specifically as “neopatriarchal,” proposing that neopatriarchy is a response of patriarchal societies to the advent of capitalism. Although these reforms may be implemented in the name of “modernity,” in neopatriarchal societies “modernity” is fetishized and imposed from the outside rather than arising from native experiences through reflective transformations. Therefore, what is modern is largely inauthentic with little relationship to local practice. Regional socioeconomic disparities combined with a disguised underlying formation of patriarchy results in the gendered, classed, and racialized outcomes of modern reforms.

**Nationalism**

In times of independence and nation-state building, States often seek to manage citizens’ sexual behaviors and identities usually in an attempt to define national identity and to save the nation from “Others” (Lee 2011). With colonization, Arab societies “set up structures of passive defence around zones rightly regarded as essential: the family, women, the home” (Bouhdiba 1975: 231). Similarly, Najmabadi (2005) argues that Iran’s cultural and political interactions with Europe
during the nineteenth century influenced the emergence of a new regime of sexual and gender regulations in Iran that was deeply connected with the concept of “achieving modernity.” Since the early nineteenth century, the “woman question” has been central to debates regarding the achievement of independence and nation-state building in the Middle East; when power is being contested women often become markers of political goals and cultural identity (Ahmed 1992; Fay 2008; Moghadam 1994). This era of postcolonial state formation coincided with women’s increasing participation in political movements and debates and a rise of feminist consciousness in countries such as Egypt (Badran 1993, 1995; Baron 1994; Ilkkaracan 2002). Women’s movements were more focused on expanding women’s opportunities for education and employment and less focused on sexual rights (Fay 2008). In Egypt, most of these movements were eventually incorporated into nationalist movements and the lack of independent feminist organizations during this time was paralleled by the state’s appropriation of women’s issues (Al-Ali 2000). For most countries in the region, this was an era of “state feminism” during which many state policies and programs were introduced during this time that implemented changes in the productive and reproductive roles of women. Although state feminism provided important social services for women such as education, health, and employment, it did not challenge personal status laws that institutionalized women’s dependency on a personal and familial level.

Nationalist movements and ideologies often pose contradictory roles for women. During struggles for liberation, women play a significant role however they often get side-lined post-liberation – as seen in Algeria and Iran (Moghadam 1994). The lack of compatibility between the projects of nationalism and feminism is further emphasized once independence is achieved. In the name of nationalism and development, women are allowed and encouraged to participate more fully in social and political life yet at the same time they are seen as mothers and bearers of the newly constructed nation. This leads to new strategies of policing women and their sexuality, a sexuality, which is now in service to the nation-state and expected to reproduce and maintain of the newly constructed “national identity.” For instance, as noted by Ilkkaracan (2002), in Turkey the foundation of a secular and “modern” nation-state led to changes in gender roles in order to destroy ties to the Ottoman Empire and to attack existing foundations of religious hegemony. Nationalist discourses focused on the sexual identity and behavior of Turkish women in an effort to establish a new nationalist morality that would justify women’s increasing participation in the public sphere. This preoccupation with women’s chastity and virtue led to the creation of the Statute for Awards and Discipline in High School Education in 1995, which states that “proof of unchastity” is a valid reason for expulsion. Institutionalizing a customary practice, this statute led to the suicides of many young women who were forced to undergo “virginity tests.” In 2002, after many protests and campaigns by the Turkish women’s movement and by international Human Rights organizations the Ministry of Education finally deleted the clause stating that “proof of unchastity” was reason for expulsion.

The policing of sexuality continues to be a tool used by the state even decades after independence has been achieved to promote national security and national sovereignty (Lee 2011; Pratt 2007). More recently, governments of Muslim
countries have been targeting homosexuality, examining these attacks illuminates the links between the sphere of interpersonal relations and notions of nationalism especially in the arena of international relations. Discourse and practices of national security “are rooted in (gendered) assumptions of ‘masculinized dignity and feminized sacrifice that sustain that sense of autonomous nationhood’” (Pratt 2007: 130). Consequently, sexuality becomes an arena of constant surveillance and control, as well as an inextricable part of the national and state processes that constitute the sphere of international politics.

In May 2001, the Egyptian police descended onto the “Queen Boat,” the location of a nightclub informally known to be a hang-out for gay men, arresting and detaining around 60 men (ibid.). Twenty-one were found guilty of “habitual debauchery” and sentenced to terms of one to two years and the remaining defendants were acquitted. Previously, the Egyptian authorities had turned a blind eye to the activities of the gay community in Egypt; however, the Queen Boat case may be seen as an instance where homosexuality was punished in order to reproduce heteronormativity. Just as women are punished for failing to conform to dominant notions of female sexual behavior, so are gay men, for failing to conform to dominant notions of male sexual behavior. This event also created an opportunity for government officials, the media, and other civil society activists, to “perform” a discourse of national security through which national sovereignty was reproduced and political order was maintained.

... the public harassment of homosexual men represents an opportunity to regain control of the ‘inner domain’ of the nation – meaning the sphere of personal and familial relations – by (re)asserting heterosexism as the only socially and politically acceptable means of ordering gender relations and identities. The fixing of sexual identities as heterosexual reinforces the boundaries of permissible behaviour for both men and women within the national collective, thereby contributing to the construction of national difference. (ibid.: 138)

This highlights how insecurities at a national level – stemming from global political and economic processes – impact gender and sexual relations and identities. In turn in an attempt to alleviate these insecurities, states attempt to re-establish hetero-normative hierarchies of gender relations and identities. Norms surrounding sexuality and sexual behavior become markers of national identity, and they delineate boundaries of the national collective.

**Rise of the Religious Right**

In the decades since many countries in the Muslim world achieved independence, several factors have contributed to the creation of an unfavorable atmosphere regarding liberal reforms, such as those in the area of sexuality. These same factors have also encouraged the rise of religious right-wing movements. As noted above, many of the social and economic reforms attempted in the name of modernization resulted in regional socioeconomic disparities and an increasing gap between the
Westernized elite and the majority. Disillusionment with Westernized rulers, along with urbanization, migration, and increasing poverty, has created a vacuum wherein religious right-wing movements have gained support. Occupations and war have only added to the increasingly hostile atmosphere against the West and aided fundamentalist groups in constructing the West and its alleged culture as an “enemy.” Religious fundamentalists utilize this perceived threat against “Muslim” identity by constructing a “Muslim” female identity as a sphere of control against the enemy, the West. Similar to nationalist ideologies, women become bearers of constructed group identities and the control of women’s sexuality becomes an integral component of fundamentalist agendas.

One of the most visible strategies utilized by the religious right in controlling women’s sexuality and in demonstrating their political power is their dress code, the most perceptible form of identity creation. It is interesting to note that the misuse of the ḥijāb by the religious right has had a stronger effect on the Western audience than the Muslim one, as evidenced by the preoccupation with veiling in Western media. Aware of the power of the imagery of ḥijāb, the Islamic religious right has tried to prescribe or violently enforce extreme forms of veiling that only previously existed in certain communities. Fundamentalists have also revived previously extinct cultural practices such as temporary marriage or mut’ah that are disadvantageous to women and reappraised them as “Islamic.” Furthermore, the rise of the Islamic religious right has caused women in countries such as Iran and Algeria to lose previously gained legal rights (Ilkkaracan 2002). The Family Protection Act of 1967 – which restrained men’s legal right to polygamous marriage, enforced a woman’s right to divorce with mutual consent, and improved women’s chances of retaining custody of their children – was deemed un-Islamic in 1979 after the Islamic revolution in Iran. Similarly, in 1984 Algeria passed a repressive family law that legalized polygyny and retracted Algerian women’s rights in the family.

Hence, these conservative actors dominate the limited space available for public debate around policies related to sexuality. This semi-monopoly allows right wing religious groups to greatly influence the state’s sexuality politics both domestically and internationally. While some may argue that this is a representation of the increasing power and popularity of Muslim conservative forces, Bahgat and Affifi (2004) argue that in Egypt empirical evidence suggests that the daily life practices of many individuals do not strictly conform to the agenda of these forces, especially when it comes to youth. This constituency is largely removed from discourses and policymaking around sexuality resulting in a gap between perceptions and discourses and current practices.

**New Geography of sex**

Policy interventions and normative shifts in the Muslim Arab world along with an increase in life spans, a decrease in fertility, and improvements in maternal and child health care have ushered in a youth bulge (Fernea 2003; Singerman 2007). Unemployment levels are high throughout the region, yet at the same time a larger number
of people have graduated from secondary schools and universities than ever before (Fernea 2003). The improvement in the standards and duration of education among girls, the increase in women’s labor force participation, the increase in contraception use, the spread of the ideology of sexual consumerism, and the crisis of housing shortages and unemployment have resulted in delayed marriage (Dialmy 2005; Singerman 2007). As a result of these demographic and socio-economic changes, the average age of marriage has increased to the upper 20s and early 30s especially in urban centers, resulting in many young people facing the expectation of celibacy (Dialmy 2005; Obermeyer 2000; Singerman 2007). As adulthood has been historically linked to early and universal marriage in most Muslim countries, young people experience a prolonged adolescence and an ambivalent, liminal social status. During this prolonged “waithood,” young people are expected to live with their parents, sometimes to remain financially dependent on their families, and to abide by the rules of the household. This has resulted in a potential discrepancy between conventional expectations that sexual activity be postponed until marriage and the realities of the youth (Dialmy 2005; Obermeyer 2000). There is increasing evidence that suggests that young people are indeed transgressing conservative norms that limit sexuality to marriage (Bahgat and Afifi 2004; Ghani et al. 2014; Holzner and Oetomo 2004; Singerman 2007; Utomo and Mcdonald 2008). As sexuality and marriage are decoupling, Muslim countries are witnessing an emergence of a new geography of sex with new discourses and debates about sexuality and morality, generational conflict, the appearance of “new” forms of marriage and a rise of a “marriage black market,” and noncommercial premarital and nonmarital sex.

**New Forms of Marriage**

Prolonged waithood is transforming marital institutions and intimate relations in the region. Whether young people are delaying marriage because of financial burdens, lack of a suitable spouse, a preference to remain single, or new forms of desire, they are navigating the evolving domain of sexuality and creating new approaches to intimate life and sexuality. The demographic and socioeconomic changes mentioned above have brought about the appearance of “new” forms of marriage or as Singerman (2007: 29) puts it a “marriage black market” where marriage substitutes can be found in an environment of weak regulation. The two most common marital innovations are de facto or ‘urfi marriages and visitation or nikāh al-misyār (traveler’s marriage) (Dialmy 2005; Singerman 2007). ‘Urfi marriages – where the couple’s family and general community are unaware of the marriage – are usually secretive and not registered with the government. In Egypt, ‘urfi marriages are becoming increasingly popular among young people. Crude estimates claim that these marriages number from 20,000 to 30,000 a year. In 2000 the Minister of Social Affairs claimed that the incidence of ‘urfi marriage among university students was 17%; other studies estimate that ‘urfi marriages are prevalent among 4% of the total population of youth ages 18–30 and increasing to 6% among university students (Singerman 2007). This type of marriage reduces or eliminates the financial burden
associated with traditional marriage and also removes the need for familial approval in the choice of the partner. For some young people, de facto marriages provide a marital framework in which sexual urges can be fulfilled and therefore legitimizing or justifying sexual relations.

The emergence of visitation or misyār marriages can also be linked to the rise in the cost of marriage (Dialmy 2005; Singerman 2007). In order to decrease non-marital affairs, visitation marriages have become a legitimate alternative. In these marriages, the wife is visited by the husband, who is not contractually or legally obligated to provide housing for the wife (Singerman 2007). In many cases, women in misyār marriages forgo their rights to equitable sexual access to their husband creating a softened form of polygyny where a man can visit his new wife without the knowledge of his co-resident wife (Dialmy 2005). There is also an increase in zawāj al-misyāf (summer marriage) among Saudi Arabians, which are enacted during extended vacations. Seen as a way to avoid illegitimate sex (sex outside of marriage), these short-term marriages are negotiated during trips abroad. Misyāf marriages are similar to ‘urfī marriages in that they are secretive and not registered with the government; however, the bride is aware that it will end at a particular time. Although these marriage substitutes have always existed, their proliferation and expansion beyond the margins of society point to the changing terrain of sexuality and normative behavior. More research is needed to understand these trends; however, they clearly represent a growing phenomenon and reflect the complex negotiations young people and their families experience.

**Premarital/Nonmarital Sexuality**

With the current marriage system in transition, many sources point to the rising rate of premarital sex in many Muslim countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Morocco, Tunisia, and Egypt (Bahgat and Afifi 2004; Dialmy 2005; Ghani et al. 2014; Holzner and Oetomo 2004; Utomo and McDonald 2008). It is difficult to determine the prevalence of premarital sexual relations as many reports and studies often conflict one another or are based on anecdotal evidence. In a study of patterns of marriage and family formation in Egypt conducted in 2004, researchers asked young men and women if they knew someone close to them who had been involved in a sexual relationship (El Tawila and Khadr 2004). About 13% of single young males responded affirmatively compared to only 3.4% of single females. When the question was posed to engaged young males, the number increased to 22% and remained the same for engaged females. When they were asked about their own experiences, numbers decreased considerably, probably due to the sensitive nature of the topic: only 1.4% of males reported any sexual experiences compared to less than 1% of females.

Although the accuracy of such surveys may be difficult to determine due to the taboo nature of the subject, sporadic evidence does suggest a rise in premarital sexual behavior. Statistics for other indicators reflecting the existence of premarital sexual behavior such as hymen reconstruction surgery and back-street abortions are
also difficult to come by and are largely based on observations and anecdotal evidence. Interviews with gynecologists in Cairo indicate that two or three young women visit clinics each month requesting hymen reconstruction surgery (Bahgat and Afifi 2004). Anecdotal evidence suggests that the demand for hymen repair is not limited to urban centers but also exists in rural governorates as well. Gynecologists also see women in their clinics suffering complications from back-street abortions, which are generally attributed to out-of-wedlock pregnancy.

For those who do not want to completely break from cultural and religious taboos against premarital sex, there is nonpenetrative sex (ibid.). Commentators have suggested that nonpenetrative sex is widely practiced especially in urban areas and is used by young unmarried couples to preserve virginity. Again, evidence is scarce with regards to how youth engage in sexual activity before marriage, but available evidence highlights a growing tension between Egyptian norms and practices and youth’s desires and practices. There may be an increasing permissiveness with respect to premarital sex – mostly among urban, middle, and upper class young adults – but there is a continuing accommodation to tradition (Obermeyer 2000). Young women especially feel the tension between the norm of premarital chastity and the behavior of many, as consequences of premarital sexual activity are harsher for females than for males. This may partly explain the discrepancy between male and female reporting about sexual activity in the study mentioned earlier. There is still a high value placed on female virginity in the Egyptian society. Nonsexual dating relationships on the other hand are much more common; although these relationships are still frowned upon by society, they do not hold the same social stigma as premarital sex (Bahgat and Afifi 2004).

This emerging youth subculture is promoted by the spread of mass media and technology, which bring youth into contact with the global youth culture, and may encourage them to choose nontraditional patterns of behavior and to define new sources of identity. Youth are routinely exposed to global discourses of sexuality that do not necessarily oppose premarital sexuality (Bennett 2007; Utomo and Mcdonald 2008). These transnational flows transmit images of what Berger and Luckmann (1966) refer to as “discrepant worlds.” These discrepant world views are further complicated as a result of Islamic doctrine and its application, changing relations between the sexes, socio-economic transformations, and competing claims for legitimacy and authenticity. Consequently, youth are attuned to global trends but rooted in local sensitivities. Young people feel pressure to adhere to socio-religious norms as evidenced by their feelings of guilt at transgressing social mores (Bahgat and Afifi 2004). The evidence of increased sexual activity among youth and the emergence of nonconventional forms of marriage indicates that conservative religious discourses do not exert the only influence over Egyptian youth. However, as much as this conservative discourse may not reflect the lived realities and practices of Egyptian youth, it largely informs how matters related to sexuality are dealt with in the public realm and in schools where sex education remains a controversial topic.
Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) Education in Muslim Countries

The severe lack of knowledge among young people regarding sexual and reproductive health (SRH) in the Muslim world is a serious concern especially in light of the changing sexual terrain among Muslim youth (Farrag and Hayter 2014; Geel 2012; Oraby 2013). Many studies have examined the increasing need and insufficient provision of SRH education in Islamic countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Egypt (Farrag and Hayter 2014; Geel 2012; Ghani et al. 2014; Holzner and Oetomo 2004; Utomo and Mcdonald 2008). As adolescent SRH education is controversial in Muslim countries such as Egypt, only limited aspects of SRH topics are covered in Egyptian public schools and little is known how well this subject is taught or how students react to it. Central to the debates concerning the provision of SRH education is a disagreement over what values (religious, secular, etc.) should underpin SRH curriculums (Tabatabaie 2015). In Egypt for example, conservative discourse largely informs matters related to sexuality including sex education (Bahgat and Affifi 2004). This monopoly is detrimental to youth in a variety of ways: they are more likely to be unaware of sexual and reproductive health implications of their actions, they are likely to experience guilt and confusion over sexual feelings, which may lead to regret and remorse if social mores are transgressed, and they are ill-equipped to emotionally deal with a sexual relationship.

Egypt like other Muslim countries is characterized by a “culture of silence” pertaining to young people’s sexuality and as a result public policy does not mandate comprehensive SRH education that would more accurately reflect the sexual behavior of the youth. Instead of acknowledging and adapting to social changes, there exists a collective unwillingness to recognize any behavior that falls short of a marital ideal, “a resistance buttressed by religious interpretation and social convention” (El-Feki 2013: 20). More recently, there has been some evidence of changes in policy towards sexual health. Previously, the Egyptian state widely claimed that all human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) infected Egyptians acquired the infection either through a blood transfusion or through sexual intercourse abroad. Claims such as this fuelled arguments against sex education by arguing that “promiscuity” was a Western problem. Increasing public health concerns about the rise of sexually transmitted infections and HIV have pushed sex education and sexual health to the forefront of health agendas in many Islamic countries. There is also growing concern about teenage unplanned pregnancy rates in Egypt, estimated to be about 4% and 7% among 15–19 year olds fuelling a trend towards the adoption of sexual health promotion to reduce unplanned pregnancies (Abdel-Tawab et al. 2013).

Why the Culture of Silence?

Contemporary debates about sexual and reproductive health education highlight contrasting ideologies and their claim for legitimacy and power. On the one hand is the belief that SRH education enables young people to make informed safe decisions about sex, while on the other hand there are those that argue that it is
morally destabilizing and promotes risky sexual behavior. Although the majority of evidence supports that SRH education is empowering and protective, the latter view still exists especially in the Muslim world (Kirby et al. 2007; Shepherd et al. 2010). Central to these debates are the controversial issues of childhood and adolescent sexuality and a disagreement over what values should underpin SRH education (Farrag and Hayter 2014; Tabatabaie 2015). Consequently, religious value systems have profound effects on SRH education policies and practices. Tabatabaie (2015: 277) points out that the controversial nature of educating children and young people about SRH is not a result of Islamic doctrine but rather “the result of cultural sexual taboos that, although contradicting Islamic teachings, are strongly overlaid onto local understandings of Islam.”

Discourses of childhood innocence and protection have rendered children’s sexual subjectivities invisible and function as a rationale for denying children and adolescents relevant information about sexuality and relationships (ibid.). Similarly, the ideal young Muslim is conceptualized as one who transitions asexually from birth to puberty and then remains nonsexual after puberty until marriage. Under this conceptualization, adolescence is ideally a short phase and early marriage is intended to maintain the purity and integrity of the Muslim individual and society – given the hegemonic Islamic discourse on premarital sex and its prohibition. This does not account for lived realities of Muslim youth today, realities that include delayed marriage and exposure to global flows and peer groups. Additionally, in Islamic discourses of childhood, children are seen as immature, vulnerable, and needing protection and therefore unable to make independent informed decisions about sexual matters. An important strategy utilized in controlling and preventing childhood and adolescent sexualities is delaying the “awakening” of sexual awareness and subjectivity. It is believed that even educational sexual discussions could lead to premature sexualization and corruption.

In addition to underlying debates about childhood and adolescent sexualities, SRH education is seen as a manifestation of the pervasive influence of the West and of the Western social mores that clash with Muslim values and norms about sex and gender (Farrag and Hayter 2014). Demographic and socio-economic transformations leading to concerns about the rise of STIs, HIV, and unplanned pregnancies have prompted a growing recognition of adolescent health issues. Hence, sex education and sexual health are becoming more prominent on the health agendas of many countries in the Muslim world. However, health educators and professionals are fighting an uphill battle since one of the key features of SRH education in Muslim settings is the strong correlation between religion, culture, and health policy. The major influence of religious leaders in the planning and implementation of SRH education may be a substantial source of tension and negativity and functions as a barrier in the provision of SRH education.
Barriers to SRH Education

Many families do little to educate their children about sexual and reproductive health; according to the 2009 Survey of Young People in Egypt (Population Council 2010), more than 73% of young people surveyed had never talked to their families about puberty (Bahgat and Afifi 2004). Findings showed gender and class differences with findings higher among young men (93%) than among young women (56%) and among those who were poorest (80%) compared to the wealthiest (65%). And although the majority of youth are enrolled in school presenting a valuable opportunity for governments to educate youth about SRH, evidence suggests that little if any information is disseminated about topics such as puberty, reproduction, or STIs (Bahgat and Afifi 2004; Farrag and Hayter 2014; Geel 2012; Oraby 2013). Almost 70% of girls but only 45% of boys can describe any changes that occur during puberty, and those who can describe changes learn this information on their own; only 6% of boys and 7% of girls reported learning about puberty through school (Bahgat and Afifi 2004). In most Egyptian classrooms, if SRH topics are covered, they are done so in biology and not covered in any detail. Other times, SRH sections are skipped or covered inadequately because teachers are unprepared or embarrassed (Geel 2012).

In a study conducted in public secondary schools across three governorates in Egypt, Geel (ibid.) found that students knew little about puberty and relied on different sources of information. While the majority of female students claimed to have knowledge about changes associated with puberty, when asked they knew very little. Male students on the other hand were more upfront about their lack of knowledge. The study also found that female students referred to their mothers as the main source of information about SRH, followed by friends and relatives; male students’ main source of information was their peers, followed by the Internet and teachers. In another study, adolescent knowledge about family planning was more encouraging with 99% of girls and 97% of boys having heard of family planning as well as contraception methods such as the pill and the IUD (Ibrahim et al. 2000). However, only 14% of boys and 5% of girls could identify condoms as a method of contraception, which may have something to do with the fact that condoms are often associated with illicit relationships leading to knowledge of condoms being underreported. Overall knowledge of STIs was also low: only 3.4% of girls and 11% of boys could identity gonorrhea and only 5% of girls and 3.5% of boys could identity syphilis. Knowledge of HIV/AIDS was higher with approximately 66% of girls and 76% of boys able to identify HIV/AIDS.

Studies such as the one conducted by Geel (2012) demonstrate that the current provision of SRH education in Egypt is insufficient and that adolescents have a great demand for SRH information. Most of the male and female students reported that they did not know enough for their age and could not point to what it was they did not know about (ibid.). All of the teachers and the supervisors interviewed stressed the importance of teaching SRH education in school; however, they stated that many barriers such as inadequate curricula, insufficient materials, and communication challenges hindered their provision of SRH education. Half of the teachers felt that
the curriculum was inadequate, lacking information about STIs, female circumcision, and early marriage and pregnancy. Since no standards or guidelines exist for teaching SRH education, teachers have to rely on themselves to gather such information. Some suggested that the Ministry of Health should provide training courses on SRH and that SRH materials should be available in school libraries. Others posited that it would be helpful to bring in specialists in order to conduct seminars on SRH, similar to private schools in Egypt.

In addition, both students and teachers emphasized the communication challenges faced, most commonly being too embarrassed to talk about SRH (Farrag and Hayter 2014; Geel 2012). They all stated that teachers lacked the communication skills and preparation to discuss such topics with students, all agreeing that SRH classes should be held separately for girls and boys in order to alleviate some of this embarrassment. Farrag and Hayter (2014) in their examination of school nurses and the provision of SRH education in Egypt also found that school nurses displayed a lack of confidence about their skills and knowledge related to SRH education and more specifically related to the unclear nature and goals of SRH education. They suggest that the lack of confidence may be linked to anxieties about cultural and social transgressions of teaching SRH since many nurses stated that they would be more comfortable if there was official approval.

School nurses also referenced culture and family repeatedly, when discussing both personal beliefs and the greater cultural and political context related to SRH education in Egypt (ibid.). Nurses were aware of how religion and culture affected health policy; some stated that these social and political issues were potentially holding back the development of SRH education especially the notion that such education would transgress “family values.” Other participants expressed concerns that SRH education was a symptom of the West and that such “modernization” could be a negative force socially and culturally. Interestingly, participants were anxious that their own morality may be at question if they were involved in the provision of SRH education. Farrag and Hayter (2014) posit that this may be linked to dominant gender roles in Muslim cultures – since most nurses are female – and the cultural image and norm of women as demure and sexually naïve. Although nurses seemed concerned about transgressing parental and familial values, they were more concerned about being blamed for the development of a permissive culture or being seen as morally inferior by parents and society.

These studies contribute to the discussion about SRH education in Muslim countries highlighting the need for SRH education and the barriers that educators experience in the provision of SRH education in Muslim setting. There is great need for high-level policy support in order to provide legitimacy and also a SRH policy framework to practice within. School nurses, teachers, and supervisors need to be more prepared, including training on sexuality and sexual health. Furthermore, parental and community support must be secured in order to provide adolescents with accurate SRH information, which is likely to be a difficult process due to the perceived encroachment of Western values. Many teachers and supervisors indicated that schools should not be the only source of SRH education but that efforts should be made to strengthen the roles of both the family and the media and the government.
in providing adolescents with accurate SRH information. Pilot government and nongovernment youth-friendly clinics have been established. However, their reach and success remain limited due to societal reluctance to address these issues, cultural and religious sensitivities, and lack of government commitment (Oraby 2013). In order to develop SRH education, it is integral that educators and policymakers are perceived as actors from within rather than as “Western experts.”

**Science or Religion Class?**

One of the most repeated themes in the literature on SRH education in Muslim settings is how to integrate SRH information into school curriculums in a culturally acceptable manner. When asked what class SRH education should be integrated into, students and supervisors were divided – some felt that it should be integrated into science class in order to give the topics more prominence and less room more embarrassment, while others suggested integrating it into the religion curriculum to make it more culturally acceptable (Geel 2012). This emphasizes the disagreement over what values – religious or secular – should underpin SRH education (Tabatabaie 2015). It is also indicative of the wider debates surrounding the role of religion in schools in Egypt and the perception that SRH topics must be presented within the prevailing cultural framework in order to gain legitimacy. Some argue that the secularization of sexuality is the only solution and that as long as an Islamic framework is utilized the power of Islam is reinforced. Others argue that in order to fulfil the goal of providing youth with the necessary knowledge and tools, SRH education must be framed in a culturally and religiously acceptable manner (Bennett 2007; Utomo and Mcdonald 2008). Many NGOs and secular and Islamic women’s organizations are working to produce an alternative discourse on sexual and reproductive health that brings together Islam and women’s rights and which has legitimacy in moderate religious circles.

Arguing that comprehensive SRH education is a right of all Muslim youth especially in light of current trends in sexual behavior, Bennett (2007) considers the moral framework of Islam in relation to education, reproduction, and sexuality and stresses the need for Muslim youth to receive SRH education that is religiously appropriate. Bennett (ibid.: 380) emphasizes the need to acknowledge the ever-present gap between the social reality of Muslims and their religious doctrine by highlighting current trends of sexual behavior and the reproductive health status of Indonesian youth: “The possibilities of preventing premarital sex and of delaying sexual initiation need to be viewed as distinct, but can be better understood as complementary possibility co-existing along a continuum of ideally safer and better informed choices for young Indonesians.” Instead of painting Islam as a barrier to SRH education, she claims that relevant textual sources need to be examined to reveal potential for promoting the reproductive health and rights of Muslims in specific cultural contexts. Different interpretations of these texts may be indicative of the different power dynamics invested (Bennett 2007). She concludes that Islamic understandings of reproduction and sexuality are inherently compatible with SRH
education, as long as cultural sexual taboos that may be overlaid onto local understandings of Islam are recognized (Bennett 2007; Khan and Khan 2015). This sort of work opens up a new discursive space and a new site of agency, where SRH is framed in a way that is compatible with Islamic faith (Utomo and McDonald 2008).

**Discussion and Conclusion**

Demographic and socio-economic changes have resulted in a new geography of sex and sexuality, yet public policy is still characterized by silence as evidenced by the lack of comprehensive SRH education. As the link between marriage and sexuality is dissolving, young people are ill-equipped to safely negotiate this new terrain, a terrain that includes new marriage substitutes and new sexual behavior and norms. Discrepancies between Islamic doctrine and application, changing relations between the sexes, various socioeconomic and political transformations, and competing claims for legitimacy and authenticity further add to the contested domain of sexuality and increase tensions experienced by young people navigating the growing gap between expectations and reality. Youth are forced to deal with these contradictory influences and as evidence suggests do not always conform to strict socio-religious norms. The resulting dissonance does not allow youth to neither completely accommodate nor resist either sphere and forces them to resort to their own mechanisms to navigate their way through the contradictions. Youth are navigating their way through conflicting liberal and Islamist discourses by creating hybrid identities and realities.

Nevertheless, this constituency is largely removed from discourse and policymaking around sexuality, which is largely dominated by conservative actors (Bahgat and Afifi 2004). Consequently, young people resort to mechanisms of silent resistance and/or accommodation further leading to feelings of ambivalence as a result of the widening gap between young people’s lived experiences and society’s expectations. These mechanisms include but are not limited to fashionable styles of veiling, engaging in premarital sexual relations, unorthodox types of marriage, hymen reconstruction, and having illegal abortions. The absence of a counter discourse that more accurately reflects the lives of this population leaves young people without the necessary knowledge and tools to safely make and defend individual choices. Without coping mechanisms, they are left with feelings of shame and guilt towards their own practices and left unable to defend their autonomy in the face of socio-religious attacks.

The provision of SRH education is important as it raises awareness regarding sexual and reproductive health implications of young people’s actions. It may also decrease feelings of guilt over sexual feelings and over transgressing social mores and better equip youth to deal emotionally with a sexual relationship. Evidence suggests that families and even schools do little to educate children about puberty, sexuality, and reproduction. As a result, those engaging in premarital sex do not take the necessary precautions to prevent the transmission of STIs since condom awareness appears to be low. In addition, while they may have knowledge of family
planning, it is unclear if they are able to correctly use various methods of family planning. There is a definite need for high-level policy support in order to provide legitimacy for SRH education and also a SRH policy framework to practice within. Some argue that a fully secular SRH framework is “today politically unthinkable” and that in order to achieve reform it must be from within the community, in the name of Islam, through the re-interpretation of texts, others argue that as long as Islam is utilized in any manner its power is reinforced (Bahgat and Afifi 2004; Bennett 2007; Dialmy 2010: 166). Whether fully secular or not, it is important that policy changes come from within rather than being perceived as “Western experts” exporting ideas about sex and sexuality. Reforms should not be flatly imported to a local context; theoretical models need to be reworked as a direct response to specific juridical, historical, and theological exigencies of the present.

There are also efforts to provide alternative platforms of SRH education for youth in the Muslim world. In a study on the role of youth-friendly clinics (YFCs) in addressing young people’s SRH in Egypt, Oraby (2013) found that the use of peer educators encouraged young people to talk about sensitive matters. Additionally, peer educators received extensive training on youth SRH topics and displayed less concern about the negative attitudes of the surrounding community. Oraby (ibid.) concludes that although there is great potential in YFCs, their role remains restricted due to societal reluctance to address these issues and cultural and religious sensitivities. Another example is Maalouma, which uses technology to provide an alternative platform of education (Zohney 2015). Maalouma is a prime example of the potential that technology possesses; it is Egypt’s first website to provide information on reproductive rights and sexuality, as well as online youth services (Zohney 2015, 2016). Maalouma publishes articles, provides private counselling services through text messaging, and offers e-learning modules and infographic material, as well as other web content on sexuality. Online platforms such as Maalouma have successfully developed a model to address sexuality in an interactive manner and to respond to the needs of the youth with the kind of content on sexuality that they require as well as anonymity.

It is also important that sexuality is not pigeonholed as a health issue by solely focusing on its association with disease, harm, and danger (Cornwall 2006). Although development agencies have explicitly dealt with issues of sexuality in programs on health and population, they have disregarded their significance for employment, livelihoods, security, housing, education, governance, and social protection. It is important to note that the issues of nondiscrimination and recognition at the core of sexual rights are fundamental to human dignity. On a similar note, Holzner and Oetomo (2004) argue that there is a need to shift prevailing discourses about youth sexuality from ones of prohibition and intimidation to ones of citizenship and human rights. In most Muslim countries, discourses about youth sexuality focus on prohibition, creating a regulatory framework where issues such as gender relations and sexual relations are not discussed and unintended consequences of youth sexuality such as pregnancy are used to demonstrate the horrors of youth sexuality (ibid.). A nonprohibitive sexuality discourse for youth would emphasize their rights and responsibilities as citizens and would build on a belief in their ability
to balance needs with rights, therefore, empowering young people in relation to sexuality. Nonprohibition means having the necessary knowledge and information and an acceptance of desire, dialogue, negotiation, and pleasure.

Cornwall (2006) notes that before pushing for sexual rights, we must be cautious that we are not making assumptions about other people’s sexual identities, codes, and practices. In order to do so, more research is needed to define what “sexual rights” mean in the everyday lives of various people, in different kinds of relationships, and in various cultural and political settings, including peoples’ understanding of their own bodies, desires, pleasures, and sexual relationships. Deeb and Al-Kassim (2011) argue that one of the challenges posed by sexuality studies in the Middle East is a return to concepts and debates seemingly put to rest in order to achieve more nuanced analyses of sexuality. Nevertheless, since sexuality and especially young people’s sexuality is a taboo subject in many Islamic countries, it is a difficult topic to research (Al-Shdayfat and Green 2012). In Lebanon for example, although there has been a steady increase in the number of pro-LGBT organizations, sexual and gender nonconformity continues to be criminalized and widely stigmatized (Mohamed 2015). Massad (2007) believes that this rise in pro-LGBT organizations has contributed to the hardships faced by sexual and gender nonconformists, arguing that they have introduced and promoted foreign sexual identities, lifestyles, and sexual epistemologies, consequently prompting resistance to behavior that is sexual and gender nonconforming.

It is important to note that because of their differences in history, religion, and culture, the West should not serve as a guide to how change will play out in the Muslim world. Furthermore, development is a nonlinear journey and different societies take different paths. However, a society that allows people to make their own choices, that provides them with the education, tools, and opportunities to do so, and that respects the rights of others in the process is a better place for it. This is not fundamentally incompatible with social values in the Muslim world, which historically was open to the full spectrum of human sexuality, nor does it clash with the region’s dominant faith – it is through certain interpretations of Islam that many Muslims are boxing themselves and their religion in. Religion is often used as both an instrument of a particular control mechanism and as a cultural system, however concentrating on the role of religion in constructing sexuality without considering its interaction with economic and political structures in a particular community can lead to essentialized notions of religion and sexuality.

References


