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# Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities: Towards Awareness and Accountab

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*Sexual Violence  
in Muslim  
Communities*

Towards Awareness  
and Accountability

Edited by Samah Choudhury and Juliane Hammer

Foreword by Kecia Ali

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## **Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities: Towards Awareness and Accountability**

### **Foreword to the Volume**

*Kecia Ali*

When we talk about sexual violence, we name the forms it takes and the harms it causes. Addressing words and acts on a spectrum from verbal harassment to forcible rape, this volume explores myriad overlapping and intersecting manifestations of sexual violence. It insists that we think beyond a dyad of stand-alone abusers and individual victims/survivors to understand the familial, social, institutional, and community structures and dynamics that enable and perpetuate sexual violence at every scale. Gathering the empirical and the theoretical, the ethnographic and the textual, the contemporary and the historical, this volume insists that we must talk about sexual violence, both what makes specifically *sexual* violence and what makes some ways of conceptualizing, verbalizing, and having sex violent.

When we talk about sexual violence, we name its perpetrators, obvious and not-so-obvious. Rapists, paradigmatically, and molesters, of course. But while abusers are most frequently imagined as dangerous strangers, most sexual violence, like most other violence, comes from those known and maybe trusted, like teachers, bosses, preachers, police, fathers, uncles, neighbors, husbands, ex-husbands, and boyfriends. When we talk about sexual violence, we see how it is facilitated and sustained through mundane structures, both formal and informal. Sometimes, families pressure girls and women to marry, stay married, or stay silent. Doctors sometimes ignore women's experiences of pain and counsel them to tolerate intercourse, as good wives should. Imams and Sufi shaykhs, sometimes abusers themselves, may use their spiritual authority to counsel followers to remain in abusive and sexually violent relationships. Government officials may, through procedural obstacles or otherwise, refuse to acknowledge or effectively discourage sexual violence meted out to detainees and prisoners, among other vulnerable populations.

When we talk about sexual violence, we recognize its victims and survivors. We listen. We believe them. We validate their experiences, insisting that they shouldn't have had to suffer what they did. That it wasn't their fault. That they are not alone. That they can seek healing and seek recourse. That although Islam-talk is often mobilized to preempt disclosure and enforce shame, there are resources within the tradition that emphasize intention, consent, and dignity.

When we talk about sexual violence, we grapple with its overt effects and its hidden wounds, including spiritual wounds.

When we talk about sexual violence, we admit that it exists. This acknowledgment itself matters. James Baldwin famously wrote that "Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced." When we talk about sexual violence, seriously and thoughtfully, understanding its prevalence, its modalities, and its effects, we can mourn those who did not survive it, support those who have, and think effectively about prevention. We can begin to imagine and cultivate communities and societies free of its taint.

What do we talk about when we talk about sexual violence? We talk about justice. We talk about love.

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**Kecia Ali** is Professor of Religion at Boston University, where she has taught since 2006. Her books include *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith, and Jurisprudence*; *Marriage and Slavery in Early Islam*; *The Lives of Muhammad*; and, most recently, a study of academic gender politics: *The Woman Question in Islamic Studies*. She has also edited two readers on American Muslim marriage and divorce, *Half of Faith: American Muslim Marriage and Divorce in the Twenty-First Century* and *Tying the Knot: A Feminist/Womanist Guide to Muslim Marriage in America*, both freely downloadable through OpenBU.