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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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Do We Need to Talk about Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities? An Introduction to the Volume

Juliane Hammer and Samah Choudhury (volume editors)

We open the introduction to our open access edited volume *Sexual Violence in Muslim Communities: Towards Awareness and Accountability* with a question. It is rhetorical but needs to be answered with an emphatic yes. Sexual violence affects those who are victims and survivors directly and forever, but it also tears at the fabric of our societies and communities globally. While awareness of sexual violence in its many forms and with its many victims is growing, there still is a pervasive silence around it that has in part to do with its perceived link to sex and sexuality. But this silence is also about hierarchical systems and structures that are designed to channel power to some who then can abuse that power with impunity. When those in positions of power are the ones who decide whether an issue is worth talking about, the silence around sexual violence begins to make sense. A commitment to justice demands that we break that silence here and now. This volume and its contributors are offering a contribution to that worthy project.

The Story of the Project and of the Volume

Between 2020 and 2025, a group of scholars in North America convened to advance the “Religion and Sexual Abuse Project.” It was supported in part by the Henry Luce Foundation, which needs to be acknowledged here for having recognized the significance and urgency of research on religion and sexual abuse. The project conveners described it in these words:

The Religion and Sexual Abuse Project is a collaboration between scholars of religion with a range of geographic and tradition expertise for understanding the dynamics of sexual abuse and misconduct in religious communities. Project leaders understand the deep harm caused by sexual abuse as well as the importance of situating sexual abuse in broader cultural, historical, and social contexts. This project aims to support fruitful conversations between different stakeholders in a range of domains including academia, faith-based community, media, and advocacy.¹

One of the co-editors of this volume, Juliane Hammer, received a subgrant for a project titled, “HEART to Grow: Addressing and Preventing Sexual Abuse in US Muslim

¹ <https://www.religionandsexualabuseproject.org/>

Communities.” This was conceived and implemented as a participatory research project with HEART to Grow, a US-based Muslim organization that addresses sexual violence, offers sex education, and advocates for reproductive justice.² In deliberating over what the most impactful deliverable for such a subgrant might be, the idea for an edited volume emerged, and Juliane convinced her friend her friend and colleague, Samah Choudhury, to join her as co-editor of the volume.

In March of 2023, we (Juliane and Samah) distributed a call for abstracts that read:

Sexual abuse is ubiquitous in our societies and communities, and religious communities are no exception. Surrounded by silence, victims and survivors live among us, while perpetrators are not held accountable or prevented from committing further abuse. Inspired by the work of the Religion and Abuse Project (funded by the Henry Luce Foundation), our goal is to put together a collection of essays that focuses on sexual abuse in Muslim minority contexts in which anti-Muslim hostility and racism play a central role in shaping and informing Muslim conversations on gender and sexuality. These include North America, Europe, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand, but we are open to other locations where Muslims constitute minoritized communities as well.

The proposed volume is intended to function as a source for communities, academics, advocates, and service providers, bringing together the ideas, research, and resources of authors in and beyond academia.

We seek essays that raise awareness of sexual abuse in Muslim communities, analyze or offer support to victims and survivors, and present ideas and projects aimed at holding perpetrators accountable. We are particularly interested in public-facing, interdisciplinary, transnational, and intersectional approaches to the question of Muslims and sexual abuse.

- *Topics may include, but are not limited to:*
- *What do we know about sexual abuse in Muslim communities?*
- *Challenges to addressing sexual violence in communal settings*
- *Sexual violence as a public health crisis*
- *Religious resources for addressing sexual abuse*
- *Religion as a roadblock to addressing sexual violence*

We welcome submissions from community organizers and activists, professors, adjunct or contingent faculty, independent scholars, post-docs, and graduate students working in a variety of fields, including religious studies, history, literature, critical ethnic studies, women’s and gender studies, and others in the humanities and beyond.

The abstracts submitted were deeply moving for their breadth and urgency. We convened a group of 25 contributors who, over the course of the following year, ultimately wrote the 24 chapters that comprise the present volume. We also built community that year, shared ideas and feedback, and held an online symposium in order to assist each other in the difficult work of writing about sexual violence. The community and solidarity dimensions of

² <https://hearttogrow.org/>

the project were indispensable to us because work on sexual violence is so often isolating. Being with one another was a reminder that we are not alone in our efforts.

The volume was published in the fall of 2024, amidst the ongoing genocide in Gaza and the West Bank, right after the 2024 US election season, and in the midst of global climate catastrophe that saw a hurricane devastate parts of North Carolina in late September. Sexual violence is not the only important issue in our world, so it is imperative to recognize the intersectional nature of the hierarchies and systems that oppress so many of us, though not all to the same extent and in the same ways. By addressing sexual violence and demanding justice, we also extend a hand in solidarity to all those marginalized and oppressed by the structural violence of unequal and unjust global systems.

SV in Muslim Minority Contexts: Anti-Muslim Hostility and the Double Bind

In the process of defining the scope of the volume, we recognized that our own location in the United States provides a good bit of the framing for how we approach efforts against sexual violence in Muslim contexts, and it is that context which has shaped our own work on the topic. While sexual violence is an issue of global, staggering proportions which does not distinguish between Muslims in the United States (who are a minority religious community that also constitutes a racialized minority) and those in Muslim-majority societies, we decided to focus the volume on contexts in which Muslims are a minority without limiting the scope to Europe and North America. This has yielded a body of work that accounts for the intersectional nature of Muslim life and the experiences of sexual violence, particularly as it reflects (and cannot be disentangled from) the anti-Muslim hostility faced in these minority contexts. This entanglement has been referred to as a unique double bind, in which advocates, activists, and survivors must contend with the tension between their commitment to address (and end) sexual violence in their communities alongside their concerns that such “internal” critiques of systemic structures of patriarchy (and all the violence it makes possible) will be weaponized against their communities. Rochelle Terman has described the double bind between imperialism and gender injustice through these questions: “In an age of Islamophobia, how does one engage in a feminist critique of women’s status in Muslim contexts without providing ideological fuel for undesired political ambitions? When the US invokes the oppression of Muslim women to justify war, how do we practice feminist solidarity without strengthening orientalism and imperialism?” (Terman 2016, 78).

The issue of anti-Muslim hostility and racism, in its intersection with efforts against sexual violence, appears in many of the chapters, either directly addressed or as part of the backdrop of the work. Samah Choudhury’s chapter, “Locating Islam in the Language of Sexual Violence,” placed at the beginning of the volume, offers insights into the dynamics that play out in the other chapters, and, more importantly, in the advocacy work that is described therein.

Defining Sexual Violence

The contributors to this volume have embraced a variety of definitions of sexual violence. Some draw on the definition used by the World Health Organization, others utilize that used by the US-based Center for Disease Control, and still others formulate their own understanding of the parameters and boundaries of sexual violence. Some of us use the terms violence and abuse interchangeably, based on the understanding that violence committed against another human being constitutes abuse even if it is a singular event. Others understand abuse to follow patterns. In both cases, it is clear that the dynamics of sexual violence/abuse are about power and control, not sexual pleasure or desire.

Sexual violence is typically understood as part of a wider spectrum of gender-based violence (GBV) that also includes intimate partner violence, domestic violence, elder and child abuse, and violence against queer individuals and communities. Section 3 of this volume specifically focuses on the intersection between sexual violence and spiritual abuse, sometimes also called religious abuse. Here it is important to note that religion can be an important dimension in patterns of sexual abuse, and as this volume focuses on Muslim communities, it is easy to see how the double bind gets activated. Indeed, in focusing on Muslims and sexual violence, the authors and editors of the volume run the risk of reifying a “natural” link between Islam and such violence. One way to resist the double bind is to recognize, research, and discuss the way in which religion in general, and Islam in particular, can both be called upon as a roadblock to addressing sexual violence, and just as much a resource in our efforts to combat it. This resource-roadblock binary is also nuanced and complicated and is demonstrated in many chapters in the volume.

The authors of the chapters are united in their recognition of sexual violence as an urgent and significant issue that affects the lives of many people and that tears at the fabric of Muslim communities and families. We embrace critical frameworks and have a deep commitment to working in the world in our various capacities as advocates, scholars, and service providers. While a framework that is critical of patriarchy as a systemic foundation for our societies and communities (non-Muslim and Muslim alike) is something shared by many authors, the ethical sources for our work against sexual violence do not necessitate a commitment to feminist critique and analysis. It is also significant that the very term “feminist” is fervently debated in Muslim contexts and sometimes leads to an embrace of alternative terms. Chief among these is the concept of “gender justice,” which draws on the core Islamic ethical value of justice and argues for the significance of a gender focus in working towards that justice in our families, communities, and societies at large.

The Contributors to the Volume

From the outset, we wanted this book to be open access and available upon its publication to anyone with an interest in the topic. The call for contributions was open to scholars, advocates, and service providers which required an openness on our part to a range of approaches, methods, and positionalities. The track record for collaborative work between scholars and advocates is certainly mixed, with activists rightfully complaining that scholars tend towards patronizing and hierarchy-oriented treatments of advocates and their

work. Nancy Khalil's chapter, "Academics, Community Activists, Muslim Leadership, Limits, and Collaboration" in this volume offers a thoughtful reflection on these dynamics.

Given the diversity of the authors, it is not surprising that the volume also spans a wide spectrum of disciplinary approaches, research methodologies, and even citation styles and spelling conventions. We made the decision to not force a particular reference format or spelling convention onto authors and thus onto the volume. The result is a book that embraces the diversity in its pages, a small contribution to resisting academic disciplining and the colonial/supremacist conventions that value singular standards over the multitudes of images, stories, sources, interpretations, and arguments that our approach instead makes possible.

Intended Audience

This book is intended for everyone who cares, everyone who wants to learn more about sexual violence in Muslim communities, everyone who want to join the fight to end SV, and especially for those who might not yet believe that sexual violence is as pervasive, egregious, and urgent an issue as it is. To that end, the collection of chapters (and one poem) exists as a single PDF, both permanently housed at the Boston University Open Library (with a stable URL) and on a dedicated website. In both locations, interested readers can also access, read, and download individual chapters from the volume. From the outset, it was our expectation that certain chapters would be of particular significance to specific audiences in terms of topic, geographical location, methodological approach, and sources. Sometimes edited volumes strive for coherent content, but we wanted the diverse approaches and methods of the book to be held together by its focus on sexual violence in Muslim communities on one hand and the commitment of all authors to end such violence on the other.

The structure of the volume therefore is not based on methodological distinctions, nor does it divide the authors by their status as scholars, advocates, or service providers. We created seven sections that provide thematic structure:

- Media and Community Discourses on Sexual Violence
- The Realities of Sexual Violence - Empirical Studies
- Spiritual Abuse and Sexual Violence
- Religious Texts and Interpretations
- Critical Approaches to Sexual Violence
- Resources for Addressing Sexual Violence
- Reflections on Advocacy Work.

As with hadith collections and Islamic legal texts, these chapters touch on and interact with more than any one of these themes.

As long as there is sexual violence in this world, we must continue our struggle against it. Through raising awareness of the issue (to which this book is a small contribution),

supporting victims and survivors, and demanding that perpetrators be held accountable, we are part of a movement that, in the words of Mariame Kaba, needs to “do this ‘til we free us.” (Kaba 2021). We invite our readers to join us.

Juliane Hammer (she/her) is Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She specializes in the study of gender and sexuality in Muslim societies and communities, race and gender in US Muslim communities, as well as contemporary Muslim thought, activism and practice, and Sufism. She is the author of three monographs: *Peaceful Families: American Muslim Efforts against Domestic Violence* (Princeton, 2019); *American Muslim Women, Religious Authority, and Activism: More Than a Prayer* (Austin, TX, 2012), and *Palestinians Born in Exile: Diaspora and the Search for a Homeland* (Austin, TX, 2005). She is also the co-editor of *A Jihad for Justice: The Work and Life of Amina Wadud* (with Kecia Ali and Laury Silvers, 2012); the *Cambridge Companion to American Islam* (with Omid Safi, 2013), and *Muslim Women and Gender Justice: Concepts, Sources, and Histories* (with Dina El Omari and Mouhannad Khorchide, 2020).

Samah Choudhury is a Postdoctoral Researcher and Instructor with the Department of Race, Diaspora, and Indigeneity at the University of Chicago. Her research focuses on Islam, comedy, race, and secularism. Her book manuscript, *American Muslim Humor*, asks how a “sense of humor” came to be a prized trait of the modern secular subject and why Muslims in the present are imagined to lack this comportment. Her work has been supported by the Asian American Religions Research Initiative, the Center for Islam in the Contemporary World, the UNC Chapel Hill Asian American Center, the Institute for Social Policy and Understanding, and the Pauli Murray Center for History and Social Justice. She previously taught at Ithaca College and earned her PhD in Islamic Studies from UNC Chapel Hill in 2020.

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