

18. "Sex & Islam" Sara Nasserzadeh ID 01:14

Okay, welcome everybody today. I am so thrilled for today's guest. I am joined by Dr. Sara Nasserzadeh, who is a world-renowned researcher, award-winning author, and a social psychologist specializing in love, relationships, sexuality, and intercultural fluency.

She's a senior technical and cultural advisor to the United Nations and an elected member of the Interagency Task Force on Religion and Development. In 2009, Dr. Nasserzadeh founded the Middle East Sexual Health Committee at the World Association for Sexual Health to provide a voice to advocates of sexual health within the region. In 2006, Dr. Nasserzadeh joined the BBC World Service to create and host a radio, online, and TV show that was dedicated to providing accurate, evidence-informed, and culturally responsive information about sexuality to a Farsi-speaking audience.

BBC Persia named her as one of BBC's top 100 women in 2019. I love her motto, which is that we can create world peace, one relationship at a time. Her most recent research was on genital practices around the world and a decade-long research project that led to an introduction to a whole new model of love called emergent love, which we're going to talk about today.

She lives in Los Angeles, and I will list her full bio in the show notes along with links to her work on emergent love and her Relationship Panoramic Inventory, which is kind of like a DIY annual wellness exam for your relationship. Welcome, Sara. Thank you.

Thanks, Emily. Thanks for having me. Yes, I'm so thrilled to have you on.

So for those of you tuning into this episode, this is part of a kickoff miniseries for the podcast where I'm exploring the intersection between faith and sex and relationships. And Dr. Sara, if that's okay that I call you that. Absolutely.

Right. I mean, she's so global, and she really knows so much about everything, but I reached out to her specifically so that we could dive into the relationship between Islam and sexuality and relationships. And so that's going to be the focus for today's conversation.

So Sara, bearing in mind that Islam is a huge world religion, and of course, cultural differences play into how it's interpreted. What would you say are some general trends that you see around sex and relationship practices, particularly among Americans who practice Islam? Well, that's a very broad question. A couple of notes before we go there.

You were very kind to say that I know a lot about many things. Not really. I feel like the more of an expert people think we are, the less we feel like we know personally.

Right. The more you know, the more you know how much you really don't know. Exactly.

Exactly. That's the way I am. But thank you for that.

I just wanted to clarify. So I know that I joined you to speak about faith and Islam in particular. I just want to put a disclaimer out that I am no expert on Islam or any other religion.

It's just that I had the privilege to work with various groups and study interfaith. And on that note, I would like to invite people to think that when we are thinking about Christians, Muslims, and other faith groups or religious structured religious groups, we need to really think that specific to Islam, particularly in Quran, there's a verse that talks about there are as many ways to explore God and be faithful to God as there are humans on earth. So if you really just capture the whole conversation that we have in that light, that will give us an opportunity to explore without feeling like, you know, whatever that I'm saying is actually set in a stone or it has any like a golden proof or, you know, like that.

I wanted to put that also. Thank you. That this is like my experience and my understanding of the faith and the groups that I worked with.

Yes. Now going right. So now going to your question as, you know, Muslims who practice Islam, which could be in many different ways.

Right. Your question is how they link that into the sexuality that they're experiencing. Is that like the question? Yes.

Like what would you say is the general feeling about sexuality for people who practice Islam? And of course, with any religion, there are people who are a bit more Orthodox and people who are a bit more progressive. And so I know that there's a wide range, but I think a lot of people hold stereotypes. And so part of our conversation today is hopefully to debunk some myths and shed some light on the truth.

And so I do think it's helpful sometimes to start more broadly in a discussion of what trends you typically see, say, in your sex therapy practice. Yeah, sure. Obviously, that's a big part.

Absolutely. So again, before we do that, this is so annoying. Before we do that, let's put it into the context.

We first talk about culture because, you know, like a person practices their rituals or beliefs not in vacuum, but within a cultural context. Right. Even within the United States of America, our beautiful big country, there's so many varieties of cultural pockets that we are living in within the context.

Culture is basically who we are. So if we really simplify it, right. And then within those cultures, there are norms that we are experiencing.

Norms are what majority of people do. And it's a very different description from what we call, oh, this is normal. Is this normal? We're not talking about that.

We're talking about norms, which within sociology, field of sociology, the way that is described is the majority of people, whatever that they do, that becomes the norm. Right. So if we choose as individuals or as groups to go by those norms, abide by them, we receive positive rewards.

If we choose to go against it, then we are punished in one way or the other. So this is no different for the Muslim communities and a person who perceives, you know, and some of these norms are actually imposed. Some of them are real because, you know, everybody's talking about it.

They're overt. And some of them are perceived. And within the Muslim community, in my humble experience, there are so many perceived norms and expectations that we haven't even explored because contrary to what people believe that many people believe that Muslims, we just, you know, label people in that box.

Many people don't even speak Arabic as their first language. So the common script that unites all the Muslims, regardless of which sect they're coming from, is Quran. And Quran is written in Arabic.

Arabic is a very rich language. So the way that I read it, as you know, I learned Arabic as a second language or third, fourth language. It's a very different understanding than a scholar in Arabic language.

So there you can see how we get divided based on our interpretation, the interpretations that are handed to us, and also translations that we get from different parts. So that this is only within the Muslim community. Imagine that with the outside the Muslim community, what would be the perception? Exactly.

Yeah. And so, and so let's talk a little bit about that. What do you think are some of the perceptions of the Muslim community as it relates to sex and relationships and love and marriage? So basically the first thing that I hear from people is a sense of pity and those condescending atmosphere that I experienced where I go to a setting like, oh my God, that poor woman.

Oh my God, that must be too hot in the summer day under that covering. And it's really interesting to me because if you really read through the history, and if you actually experience people who choose their rituals, who choose their attires, who choose the way that they practice their religion, there is a reason the religion or the religious beliefs or rituals serve them in one way or the other for the most part. So for us, it's a little bit ignorant just to be on the other side and feel privileged and feel like, even worse, feel the sense that I'm the hero, let's go rescue them.

So that is the first thing that I see that, you know, a sense of patronization and almost sympathy. Yeah. And it's so true.

I know like when I've spoken to women who choose to wear a head covering or hijab, that a lot of them who make that choice do so because it's symbolic and meaningful to them, it makes them feel close to God, almost like someone maybe wearing a cross necklace or something. I almost have the sense it's like an accessory that's symbolic and meaningful to them as opposed to something that they feel is oppressing in any way. And also modesty is a very big value in Islam.

And as a sign of modesty, you don't actually put on flashy clothes, or you don't show off with your body. So the body is to serve you, not you to serve the body in a way. Yeah.

So there's a fundamental difference, I think, where we are thinking about the Muslim mentality. And the other thing is, you know, the word Islam and Muslim in general, Muslim, the person who is practicing Islam, is the person who is submitting to the will of God. And with that, you're relinquishing all the ego, you know, unhealthy ego, supposedly, you know, that and I'm not saying that all Muslims are, you know, really avoiding by all of those, obviously, but that is the meaning that it is.

And these actually follows to the, you know, route of modesty, open heartedness, kindness, seeing everybody with the same eyes. So it's not like nowhere in Quran, it says Muslims are the chosen tribe, or chosen groups. There is nowhere in Quran.

As a matter of fact, if you read it, it says that, you know, you're all brothers and sisters, regardless of the colors, and the colors are listed. As you know, yellow, and brown, and red, and all of those are actually listed. So these are the ones that you know, if we the more you will know, as you know, the origin, the more we also can hold people responsible to abide by them, you know, can you read it? Right, right.

So talk about that a little bit more about what you mean about holding people responsible. Like, for example, in Islam, one of the things that come really like, you know, if a person knows Islam, even the basics, they know, health of the person, mental health and physical health is of gold value in Islam. So that's why, you know, as a person who works around sexuality, I have a leverage point.

So if I go to a community, I want to open up a negotiation piece, I start there. I say, look, do you remember that from the Prophet as well as Quran, the scripts, you know, the Holy Script. So health of the person comes first.

The other one is education. Almost all the verses in Islam ends with something that is including that for people who think, thinking is very much valued in Islam. Nowhere in Quran, it says, close your eyes and just follow like a sheep.

Yeah, I like that. You know, it says, question it, find your own way. So it's a very, almost

intellectual in a way, you know, so these two that, you know, for your audience, if they're really, really wanting to, if they're colleagues who are working within community or their clinical setting or any setting, really social setting, it's really helpful to know that these two golden rules apply in Islam, that education and health comes first for anyone.

I think that is really good to know. And I can see how from your perspective, that would be a really great segue into a discussion about sexual health being a part of that. Yes, absolutely.

Sexual health actually is a part of that from health perspective, but also, although within Islam, it's not allowed for a Muslim person to explore sex before marriage, extra marriage. However, within the constitute of marriage, within the constitute that is described, you know, there are certain, like the liberty is obviously offered that, you know, you can explore almost anything with your partner, you know, in a consensual way. Well, and I think that's a good point because I think a lot of people do have this perception that there's huge gender inequality among Islamic people.

And that I imagine extends even once people are married into perhaps gender equality in sexual relations. And so I'm curious what it actually says about, you know, male sexual pleasure versus female sexual pleasure. You know, there's stuff written in the Bible, for example, that kind of speaks to submitting to your husband.

And I'm curious if there's any of that written in the Quran as well. Well, it's the same way I would say in that phrase that you just said, submitting to your husband. One of the things that I find a little bit challenging when working within the Muslim community is specifically, I'm not saying this is like specific to Muslims, but you know, like, because as you know, I work cross faith.

But this issue of before marriage, you keep yourself intact. And you know, hymen is so sacred. And you know, you keep it together, you keep your virginity, and you know, almost the component of innocence, you have to preserve that.

As soon as you sign the marriage contract, you need to be it all and give it all to your partner. And this is a point of huge discrepancy. So when I work in South Asia, Asia, Middle East, North Africa, the majority of cases that I see is vaginismus, which is the involuntary contraction of the muscles of inside vagina and the opening of the vagina, so that there is no entering.

Penetration can't happen. Penetration. So it's a very, in that way.

So there are, there are lots of dichotomies that are going on that we really, as practitioners, and as people who have friends in that faith, we need to know how to navigate that, to be able to help the person to kind of move on without stigmatizing or patronizing. Definitely. And that's something I see in my practice all the time for people

really not just who come from the Islamic faith, but any faith where there was a lot of rigid messaging around sexuality.

And it's like the message is your whole life. Don't do it. It's wrong.

Keep your legs together, this or that. And then suddenly you get married and now everything is supposed to be okay, but the body holds on to the message of no. And that shows up with that pelvic floor spasm, which can make intercourse at worst impossible and at best really, really painful for people.

That's very true. Yes. So talk a little bit about your work on genital practices.

And I know it's popular these days for women to try to get like their hymens repaired or even purchase, you know, little gels or things that they, suppositories that they can insert. So it will appear like they're bleeding the first time. Tell me what you've learned through your research about genital practices.

Well, is it okay to into a couple of sentences, I tell you how it came to be because it's really born out of pain. So not physical pain, but really pain of, so, you know, as psychosexual therapies, I work with this, like with genitalia around genitalia advocacy and, you know, practice and policy and everything. But and I was a privileged one because I did a medical rotation.

So I know how they look like, how they function. You know, I had that. But in the supervision groups, when I talk to people, I have to actually teach my own colleagues about anatomy first.

So we don't have that luxury of a medical professional, for example, that they actually see what they're dealing with. Right. They're like hypothetically, okay, this goes where this is how it works.

So that was the initial idea that, okay, so what do people do to their genitalia? Or, for example, a person comes to you and with recurring pain, something doesn't make sense. And then you hear that they have bacterial infection because of the douching system that they use. You know, for people who don't know, you know, there are certain things to take away the smell of your genitalia, which is absolutely healthy in majority of cases that, you know, so they soak themselves, they sit in this, you know, bucket or, you know, their, their baths, and then they use the douches over the counter.

And they actually kill the good bacteria for the vagina. And then especially for people in female bodies, and then they cause themselves dryness and lack of balance in the healthy bacteria in the area and they cause recurring bacterial infection for themselves. Right.

So these are the things that, you know, we saw. So I teamed up with, at that time, one of

my very smart associates, Raika Kumro, who is a very big name now in Turkey. So we teamed up and then we did quite a few years it took, and that we pulled all of the, you know, connections that I had that we had, and also all of my connections within the United Nations system, which I'm really grateful to.

So we went to really different villages and, you know, different places. The first question was, growing up, what did you call your genitalia? And that was like, fascinating. So that was, the other one was, what do you do to groom yourself? You know, do you trim the hair? Do you do this? Do you do that? Like, for example, in Zimbabwe, girls at earlier age of eight, they start pulling down on the inner labia to make it longer to look like closer, you know, like it looks closed.

So that's more attractive. And imagine people that go through labiaplasty to actually cut them shorter and tuck them in. So it's a very difficult practice, no? Yeah, that's amazing.

It's really interesting. So that was that. And, and also within the United States, when we talk about genital practices, many people immediately go to the genital cutting practices.

So they feel like, oh, my God, you know, so we're talking about genital cutting or genital mutilation. But, but that wasn't it, really, we saw it all. And it's interesting, many of these practices by the definition of world health organizations could be categorized as mutilation.

Oh, I'm, I completely can see that. Even the piercing, even ribbing, you know, many things that people do to their genitalia. Yeah.

Which is really fascinating to me that, you know, politically, what is highlighted, what is not highlighted? What is your choice? What is not your choice? And depending in which country you live in, and the jurisdiction, you know, like a system that you're in? Yeah. Yeah. And I think it's important to note that a lot of these genital practices we're talking about are things that women do.

You know, of course, men, there are cultural differences around circumcision or to not circumcise. And that's different, I think, through a lot of cultures. But I think when it comes to female genitalia, we see so many different things that women do, whether it's trying to mask the odor, or it sounds like stretching or cutting or hymen, you know, repair.

So what do you see happening generally of people who are Islamic? Islamic meaning within the Muslim community, within the Muslim community, within the Muslim community, male circumcision is like the Jewish community. So it is a part of the practice. However, within the Jewish community, there's specific days that you do it within the first on the eight days and know the celebration around it.

And in the Muslim community, depending on which country you live in, and which culture, it could be anytime before the person becomes a teenager. So that is that and there are different types of you know, circumcision as well. And one of the practices that is very much represented by media and you know, other groups as Islam's guidance of practice is this genital cutting for women.

It's absolutely not related to Islam, even like by bit, there is not a word in any of the well, there's only one hadith that this debated that, you know, like a woman asks the Prophet that, you know, so this is going on in my family, there was a case, and then the Prophet just said that, well, why don't you cut it a little bit back? And that was it. Yeah, all the scripts, you know, that that I'm aware of. And that had nothing to do with you know, that one of the things that I would love to use your platform to educate people about is there is no female circumcision.

There is no circumference to be circumcised. Thank you. So that is like, it's just linguistically wrong.

So that's one. And also, because circumcision, again, is debated. So for example, in Northern America, the Pediatric Association, American Pediatric Association, they put all of this summary that you know, so they recommend for it, although they leave it into the hands of parents inside or the guardians.

To clarify for a moment, Sara, I mean, the clitoris and the clitoral hood are around structure, right? I mean, there's a circumference there, no? Well, if you think about the whole clitoral, okay, the whole as a whole, yes, there is no, right? It's not like a round thing that you take the tip off. Right. Okay.

So that that's what I'm referring to. Right. Okay.

Also, the way that is caught is not like the male that you know, they actually literally go around or cut through. Right. So but for female, usually they just go and pull it and cut it or they cut the whole clitoris or they cut the whole foreskin of the, you know, like the clitoral hood and clitoris tip and also the labia, the inner labia.

And so in some cases they cut the whole thing and then they sew it all together. And that's actually extremely dangerous. Oh yes.

And there's all kinds of health issues that come from that practice. Exactly. So if we are talking about the language of the, let's see what we want to do.

If you are an activist, you want to shed light on a practice that is not necessarily against human rights, bodily integrity, you know, health for that matter. Right. Then go with genital mutilation, make it a strong, you know, raise a point.

If you're an advocate trying to raise money for a cause, you know, however that you

define your roles, then behind the closed doors with the professionals and all of that. Okay. Use whichever that fits the situation.

Again, not circumcision because that's just wrong between cutting and mutilation. Right. But when you are a practitioner, one thing that I've seen done quite a few times, and it really breaks my heart, is people walking to these communities that this practice is done for whatever reason, any cultural practice serves a purpose.

So we need to first get to the purpose and then go around it. Right. To educate people through health, through education, whatever that we discussed.

Right. But it's not okay when people go with this, you know, again, condescending tones and feeling like I know better than you. They walk into the communities and then they say, you Bedevi people, you are just a bunch of savages.

You are cutting your girls or whatever. We're going to stop you. One time I was actually consulting on a project in Australia many years ago, 2005 or something.

And that was exactly what happened. And that's why I was needed. Yeah.

And actually sit with the community and say, hey, these people are not actually terrible people. And also going back to the history of the, you know, colonization and all of these things that other people did to other people, you know, like imposing democracy in a way, you know, or taking the land away. So there is this bitter taste already there.

So you can't just go and take a practice away and say that nobody will know better. Let us just educate you and enlighten you. Right.

On that note, we actually had a campaign within the WHO and UN system, and then now in majority of cases is cutting/mutilation, depending on who you deal with. As practitioners or people within the community, we should never use the word mutilation in front of a person who's gone through the process unless they use it. I cannot debilitate you.

I cannot put you down. I cannot call you with a label and then say, oh, now that I crashed you to the floor, can I help you? Right. Doesn't work like that.

Yeah. And also we know that even people, just the good news for people who've been through the practice, there is still orgasm happening. There is still, you know, sexual pleasure happening.

There are studies on that. So it's not like, you know, they're doomed for life because that's another question that I get all the time that, oh my God, you know, my body is taken away from me and the trauma is not repairable because what am I going to do? I'm not going to reconstruct the clitoris for a person, you know? So these are the ones

that, you know, we need to be a little bit gentle that as a matter of helping you destroy people. I'm curious to learn a little bit more about that because that's news to me.

I mean, I definitely am one who assumed that anyone who's gone through genital cutting or mutilation, if you want to use that word that the majority of them experienced a significant loss in sexual pleasure, but is that not what studies are finding? Well, the loss of sexual pleasure, the way that majority of people experience them, depending on the type of cutting could be experienced. However, the miracle of clitoris, that is the, you know, the place that gives majority of the pleasure for many women, by the way, that's not the only one because of course, internal stimulation as well. Um, majority of clitoris is intact actually inside.

So nobody touched them. So if they learn the way to stimulate the inner part of clitoris, like, you know, inside clitoral tissue, then they can stimulate, um, uh, some pleasure experience orgasm. How many women learn that though? I'm curious.

How many women would you say learn that about partners who are willing to work with them to, you know, rediscover pleasure in a new way? That's a very good question. Uh, I would say not many because within the communities that this is practiced also putting it into the context. Many people think that sexual pleasure is a manly privilege, right? So you just offer your body to get pregnant and to offer pleasure to your partner and assuming that this is like, um, you know, like a heterosexual relationship with a man.

So in that case, uh, then yes, couple it with the context of the culture, not too many women. Yeah. You know, you've, you've spoken a few times so far about the importance of language and our word choice.

And when you and I were emailing back and forth, initially I posed the following question, which was what messages are written in the Quran that might be misinterpreted as an effort to control sexuality. And you said we can do better than to use the word control. And I would love to learn a bit more about what you meant by that, because I always use the word control when talking about religion and sexuality.

And so I think it'd be so empowering for me and for my audience to have better language. I really, um, admire you for bringing that up because first of all, language is something that I'm obsessed with. I don't know if you know, my first degree is linguistics because I thought if we don't know how to talk, I mean, we're not getting anywhere.

And often language is all we have to communicate. And it's the least effective place to be, you know, like the tool that we have. So let's talk about control.

One of the assumptions and going back to the first question that you posed at the beginning of the podcast, we talked about the assumptions that people have and stereotypical assumptions that people have around Muslim community. I think it's really

interesting because control is one of them that always comes up. Who is controlling what? Even with the genital practices, one of the things that I was left with was who owns whose genitalia? Like if your partner asks you to go get a Brazilian wax, is this whose genitalia are we talking about? But I want to do it because I want to give pleasure to my partner.

Yes. But that would not occur to you if your partner didn't pose it. Yes.

Right. So then I can actually expand it across cultures and, you know, whatever. Right.

Um, but within the Muslim community, I would say there are gender roles. There are certain interpretations of Islam that talk about LGBTQ+ communities that about the, you know, around the loot community, we didn't go on and the interpretation of that going beyond and without considering the context that we are living with. Right.

So, for example, we are going to lose a very faithful Muslim Muslim from the community because of their sexual orientation. To me, it's reducing a person to. Can I like talk about anything here? Yes, of course.

Please. So for me, many of the words that are used for LGBTQ communities, by the way, is mostly gay men rather than women. So lesbians don't get the privilege to be talked about as much, just like, you know, the gays, they are actually often reduced.

Even the word that describes a gay person, even the words within a majority of cultures that oppose it is reduced to the asshole. So in a way, we know a body part without the body part. Right.

So it's like, so really, are you kidding me? Like the whole person is ignored. Yeah. And that that body part is highlighted.

So these are the things that we are trying, like, for example, with the BBC program that we had, I worked so hard with the Academy of Language in Iran to see if we could expand those words that, you know, we don't actually call them with that street and vulgar language, but actually cut it like a relationship orientation, sexual orientation, you know, so that John Money talks about, you know, when you when you when you talk about a gay person, it's like a person who writes with right hand and left hand. It is orientation. Right.

People really need to accept that. Mm hmm. It is what it is.

Yep. So like even scientifically, you know, we have brain studies. We have like it's really interesting to me that, yes, parts of it is socially constructed, context constructed.

But on the other side of it is really interesting as how and it's all based on fear to let go of that control that, you know, that, you know, here's what we know. But also, if you had

just expanded beyond Islam, beyond were on beyond anything, you know, in cultures, when there's a when there's a lineage of traditions, even try your best to cook an ancient ancient recipe in a different way, add an ingredient, see what will happen to you. My husband gets furious at his mother when she does that, because he's Persian, as you know, we've talked about that.

And so he's like, these recipes have been around for thousands of years, because they're perfect. Don't change the ingredient. Exactly.

So it's as if, you know, we want to hold on to that. Yeah. And in the meat stuff, if you're actually shitting human beings, it's not just the food ingredient.

It's like, you know, this is a valuable member of the community that we're going to lose. So when you talk about the things that are controlling the gender roles that did not evolve over time. Also, with Arabic language, we have masculine and feminine, like French, like a Spanish, like German, you know, like we have that.

So when you read the script, there are certain things that are assigned to men and women that people cannot see beyond that I find talking about linguistics that I find limiting. So these are the things that I can tell you and the specific instructions that made sense 1000 years ago. But right now, we are struggling to expand it to our modern life and marrying them with the with our definition of human rights.

Right. Now, tell me, is my understanding correct? And I'm sure it varies from country to country that there are obviously a lot of obviously a lot of prohibitions around homosexuality and being gay, as we've discussed. But what I think my understanding is that in some countries in particular, that people are more open to those who are transgender.

Can you speak to that a little bit? Well, it's a blessing and a curse, I have to say. So first of all, we have intersex recognized in some of the countries within the Middle East and Muslim, you know, cultural script. And so that's intersex because many people, you know, they can't distinguish kind of between all of these, right? You know, as soon as you say gay, they say, Oh, are they trans? Are they pedophile? You know, I do whatever, you know, they don't even, you know, distinguish.

So that's that intersex. There are also terms in some of the countries within the Middle East, like the Polynesian culture, for example. The other one is the gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer.

So all of these have different treatments within different cultures, right? Transgender, unfortunately, Iran, so for example, was one of the first countries that, you know, the Supreme Leader said, well, if you really feel like you're trapped in a male body, then please, by all means. So it was really progressive for a religious leader to do that. And

everybody jumped on it.

It was fantastic until it wasn't. Yeah. There's a darker side.

The darker side became the society was not quite ready for them. The other one is because you're not allowed to be gay, then you choose the other route. Yep.

If I'm in a male body, I'm actually quite fine to be male. I just prefer a male partner, you know, as an intimate partner, as a companion for myself. Now I'm going to change myself to a woman.

And I go all the way to change all of my body parts to become a woman, and then be in a relationship with a man. Yeah, that is not even comprehensible. And that's what's happening.

Yeah. That's what's happening. The other thing is, yeah, so we can go talk about so many different things.

I know there's so many different things we could talk about. I'm curious, do you know if there are any sex positive messages that are written in the Quran that might be overlooked? Absolutely. So you talked about pleasure a little bit earlier.

There are detailed books that, you know, people know about Kama Sutra. Yeah. I invite you to read the Islamic text.

I mean, like the Perfumed Garden? Perfumed Garden. Well, I don't know the names in English, because I read them in the actual language. But that's a good one.

I'm pretty sure. Yeah. It's a really interesting, like, for example, Halyat al-Mutaghin, like, you know, there are so many different texts.

It is really interesting, because, like, they are so specific about using the five senses to create sexual excitation. And it's both partners. It's never gender specific.

It's both partners. There's a Hadith from a prophet himself that says, don't be like a sparrow that goes to your female partner and goes away. Make sure that, you know, both parties are aligned.

So it's really, this is a poor translation, but I think that's what it is. It's really interesting just to see that these are the parts that I think we can analyze Islam and what is, you know, like, wrong and limiting and, you know, all of that, without dismissing it, obviously. But on the other side of it, again, if you are practitioners, to move the needle forward to find a way, we should become that water that doesn't need to move the blocks, but finds a way through or around the blocks to get the job done, which is creating satisfactory relationships, preserving bodily integrity, bringing consensual, you know, dynamic to the couple of them.

So these are the things that, you know, at least use what we can to make people's lives more satisfactory within, you know, what we can. But I think there are so many positives that they can be drawn. The sense of equality, again, health, education, the rising of your partner.

It's very, very important. One, respect is very much, yes, there are contradictory comments that, you know, in one verse, it could be like, you know, respect your daughter and wife and mother, you know, all of that. And then in the other one, nudge them gently or, you know, like push them or lash them gently to listen to you.

So I hear that. And I grew up with that dilemma. That's why I followed this field.

I'm like, I don't listen to anyone. I want to make sense of this for me. Yeah.

I'm not a practicing Muslim, just as a disclaimer. Right. Can you, you mentioned that, and we didn't really talk about it that much at the beginning about what your experience was like growing up.

You say that you heard some of these contradictory messages. What was life like for you and how did you eventually end up in the field of sexuality and relationships? How personal do you want to go? As personal as you're comfortable going. Basically, I am a product of paradox.

That's the best way I can say it. Because my parents are from different sects of Islam. They're not supposed to be married.

Okay. Okay. So that's that.

There's that. There's that. And so my mother was my father's manager.

And then so anyway, so there was a lot of story on their side. And then they got together and they made cases to make this happen because my mother's father was an Islamic scholar. It's a very interesting thing to go to.

So imagine that as a child growing up in that, and they spoke different languages. They spoke. So it's no surprise for people that I'm a cultural advisor.

So I had to make sense of it for me. Exactly. Yeah.

Yeah. We tend to somehow go into a career. I think that in some way reflects an experience that we had in our childhood.

I know that's true for me. Absolutely. I would love to hear your story.

Well, my dad is an OBGYN. And so I grew up in a home where sex really was not a taboo subject. And I think naturally I became a sex therapist long before I even realized

because I was comfortable talking to my parents about it, but none of my friends were.

And so they came to me for sex advice and questions. And so I think it's something that really found me more than something I sought out. That's a part of my story.

That's actually really interesting. I think the overlap at some points, because in our family, we talked about sex. We were educated.

My mother really had a formal session, sit down, we're going to go through this. And I was like, I don't know, seven. It was very early for me too.

Yeah. So it was a part of it. And the name that we gave to our genitalia, I thought everybody grew up like that.

Which I was absolutely not. It was not true. And then little by little, as people came to me for advice, I'm like, who am I to advise? What do I know? I went to my parents and my parents bought me books and told me whatever that they knew.

That wasn't enough because also our generation was changing so fast that their knowledge or their information or the books that we had in Iran at the time available. We didn't even have words for certain things. Orgasm was not a thing.

Right. So you grew up in Iran then? I grew up in Iran. And then I went to England for my education.

But then I kept a very close tight with the United Nations Academy of Medical Sciences. And I wrote a whole sexual health curriculum for the country. So it sounds like you grew up in, at least in your family home, was very sex positive, but that is not typical for most people growing up in the Islamic faith.

Correct. I mean, at least from what I see in my practice, granted, I'm seeing people who are coming in because they have problems. So my sample size is a clinical or my sample is a clinical sample rather.

But then if you talk about, look, you talked about my family and then Islamic. Well, you said your parents came from different Islamic sects. Yes.

The way that they grew up. But it's really interesting. My mother says the prayers are still, the father doesn't.

They both went to Mecca. They experienced had. I went to Mecca because I wanted to experience this for myself.

I went to Vatican. I went to like, I went to all the faith, you know, like hubs and they're all incredible. I highly recommend all of them.

And it's really interesting just to be at the energy of people, you know, that's a totally different conversation. But when we talk about Muslims, when I see a person from Marrakesh, it is a majority Muslim, you know, Muslim country or Saudi Arabia, different parts of Saudi Arabia, different families, different social classes of Saudi Arabia. The same with Iran.

And Iran is a huge country. That's another thing that, you know, people kind of, you know, different languages, different cuisine, different clothing. You know, it's a very different.

Yeah. There's a lot of diversity, of course. Exactly.

So thank God we live in a diverse country so we can actually understand and appreciate kind of vibe. But I think it's really important to check in with people who come to us as how much of Islam they abide by. What are the rituals around the religion and faith that they abide by? So I wrote something that I can share with you as a resource.

I call it the sexual culture index. There are instructions that could go as detailed as what to talk about when you have sex, when to have sex. Like, for example, in Judaism, that it's an act for God almost that, you know, if I'm translating from Hebrew correctly, that if when you have a sex in Shabbat, you know, for the Shabbat time.

So these are the things that if you think about it in different religions, we have instructions how to do it, where to do it, when to do it, with whom to do it, who deserves what. And the pleasure is very new in many of the, you know, cultures, I would say, but it's not very new, especially in Islam and Judaism. It's not anything new.

So if you go to the Old Testament and Quran, they're very much, you know, like similar. Yeah, so yes, sex was talked about, but it was a dichotomy even in my family, because we did talk about it, but we were not supposed to have sex before, you know, being committed to a partner. So it's, it's all about, you know, how you balance it.

Exactly. Exactly. What advice do you give your clients who feel, you know, called to still practice Islam or, you know, to practice Islam, but who are struggling with sexuality as it relates to their faith? I would say first sit down, think to yourself, what is it about Islam and being a Muslim that you cherish most, that you celebrate most for yourself? What are the rituals that are attached to those and whether they are encouraging or inhibiting to your sexual practices and sexual wants and needs? That's one.

The other one is educate yourself, educate yourself. When I had clients, I needed them to masturbate because of my protocol of treatment. And they came to me and said, this is like about 20 years ago in London.

I clearly remember a couple, beautiful, sweet couple who came to me and I said, I need you to masturbate in this style that I want, because it was a re-sensitization of the penis

in that case. And then the gentleman just looked at me and said, well, you know, in my religion, it's not allowed. I said, what is your religion? And then he said Islam.

I said, okay, who is your Mujtahid or Imam that you're talking? Is that okay if I talk to them? And he said, yeah, absolutely. And then I talked to them because in that case, the bigger goal was saving a marriage. He was allowed to masturbate.

And I can give you 11,000 examples that we went around so many different things because of a higher stake. So as a practitioner, please don't give up. And I don't know how many of your listeners are practitioners, Emily.

There's a good percentage. Okay. So lovely colleagues.

I'm not asking you to be pushy or disrespectful towards your clients of any faith. What I'm asking you is don't be curious. We are past that era of, you know, we could afford curiosity, be genuinely interested.

I like that distinction, right? Curiosity has a level of ignorance behind it. We can't afford it. Yeah.

Genuine interest brings informed questions, you know, ignites creativity for you to really find a way as how to get through the hindrance just to get, you know, to where you want to be. And please, please don't mistake your role with an advocate of a person and, um, rescuer. That's a bad place to position yourself.

It's not fair on you. And it's not fair on the client, especially for LGBTQ, go live your life, be true to yourself. And I need to deal with the rest of it.

When they're killed, they're isolated from the community. They cut from the inheritance. Um, please don't do that.

Consider the context of person's life. Yeah. Thank you for that.

I think those are very wise words and I hope that everybody listens carefully to them. Um, Sara, what would you say are some of the biggest stereotypes around Muslim women? And can you debunk some of them for our listeners? That they are controlled. But we're not going to say controlled.

Yeah. So, well, some of them are in relationships. I mean, it's not only in Muslim communities, but, you know, I posted something on my Instagram yesterday on narcissism and how they control.

I mean, narcissism is not anything to control you without even knowing. Right. So stereotypes, they are submissive.

Do you know how many times people insulted my therapeutic voice and saying that, Oh,

you're so soft to spoken just because you're coming from Iran. They didn't let you talk. I'm like, I was the representative of the school since I was three.

Yeah. So nobody silence me. So I, if I have something that period, I can't shut up.

You will. Yeah. It's just the tone of my voice and it's a very melodic language.

So in most of the Mediterranean, you know, um, region, that is the tone of our voice, you know? Right. Do you know how many times they tell me that, you know, Oh my God, and how can we help you? And that's all good faith. I love you for saying that the impact on me.

Right. Stick with me first. Yeah.

I think so. That's like little three-year-old Sara. I don't need saving.

Yeah, exactly. Right. That's one again.

You know, I don't want the advocates to be discouraged by hearing this, but on the other side of it, please, you know, like that's really important because that, that creates a chasm between you and the person that you want to help. So that's one. So the control, the assuming that they need rescuing, um, submissive is a big, big, big part of it.

And whatever that the, the outsider knows of Islam, they project that on the Muslim Muslim woman to sit with them and ask them. So here are the things that I know. What is your take on it? Not what Islam again, you know, going back to the beginning of our conversation, like this is my understanding of Islam.

I'm pretty sure between 1.6 million people that are out there and practice different forms of Islam. They're like, this woman is crazy. Or some people say, Oh yeah, absolutely.

You know, and somewhere in between. So it's, it's that just giving them the benefit of the doubt, the opportunity to, uh, if you really, really want to know, giving them the opportunity to tell you what they abide by. Right.

Right. Yeah. And I think, I think of, I mean, there are so many stereotypes about every major religion.

And I think that especially for Muslim women, that they suffer a lot of stereotypes that are so unfortunate and so untrue. I mean, I can think of off the top of my head, three couples I've had come through my office that are of different cultures where one is from a, you know, let's say a middle Eastern country, one that is Islamic majority. And it's that person in the relationship who wants to try all kinds of wild and crazy sexual things with their partner, who is coming from a Western culture, who is the more inhibited one.

And so people come from all different places and have all kinds of desires and interest

and desires for pleasure. And I think we have to, as you said, we, we can't afford to just be curious anymore. We have to be genuine.

What did you say? Genuinely interested. Yes. Yeah.

Genuinely interested. I think that's a beautiful message for people who are listening is totally off topic, but if they're thinking of dating, that's my advice to you too. Oh yes.

It's great advice. It's great advice. It's great advice.

Sara, I want to talk a little bit about your emergent love model, because I think it's, it's such an interesting model and I'd love for you to share it with people because you are writing a book about it. Yes. It's actually really interesting.

That took me like, this is basically the whole life that I lived that sorrow that can't shut up. I told you about, so I would get in a cab. I would say, are you happy in your relationship? And then the guy just looked at me back then.

We didn't have lady drivers, but now we do all genders and unisexes, but it's really interesting. I would say like, are you happy? What? I was like, yeah, I just want to learn. Are you happy? And he said, yes.

I'm like, why do you think so? Why do you think not? Because many of the relationships that were around me and my parents' cases, both of them sociologists, I overheard them like, you know, talking about their cases and all of that. I was like, is there one rule, something that I could just say one, two, three, four, five. Yeah.

What's the secret sauce? Yeah, that, that. And then I always wondered what happened to Cinderella when they went to that castle after getting married, because I was living in the after marriage part as a child of a family and that was no Cinderella case. So, you know, these are the things that I was thinking.

And with that love story of the parents, so how did they end up bickering? So all of these, and then it started with a huge case of really curiosity at the beginning. And then little by little I started, okay, don't laugh at me, but I'm that kind of person. I would just carry my professor's bag, honest to God, just to be at his presence that when he walked down the streets, I would just say, well, what do you think about that? What do you think about that? If he even could comment on the relationship of a crow to the tree, why would the crow choose to? I'm trying not to laugh, imagining you following your professor around, carrying his briefcase.

I think I was really annoying because teachers pet questions, too many questions. And like, you know, that, right. But everything was relational because I couldn't imagine that, you know, something existed in, you know, like vacuum at the age of 14, I was introduced to many different religions.

I was very blessed to be in that cosmopolitan Tehran. So I went to churches, I went to different synagogues, I went to, you know, Orthodox church. Oh, why are they different from that one? And then introduced to many good books and movies.

And although unfortunately now more than ever, Iran is very isolated. Back then also we didn't have, and we grew up in war, you know, I, you know. Yeah.

My husband too. Yeah. So I'm sure you heard that as well.

So the resources were not as much, but still, you know, the relationships existed. And then I grew up to be introduced to Sufism. Sufism is all about context.

Everything is relative. Everything is relative. You see blue, I see bluish green.

Who's right? I don't know. Do you know what I mean? So that's, that's fascinating. And then little by little growing older and older, just with this kind of anecdotes that I, that I had, then I, that I studied linguistics and then sort of the language that we attach.

Then I became obsessed with the way that people say different words in different languages to express love. And then I became a little bit more mature and studied research methodology. You know, this is after I moved to London, then I realized that, Oh, that's really interesting because that's not only the, um, the experience, but also the way that people express through those experiences or vice versa experience through expressions.

Right. And then I started questioning myself, would I speak this freely about sex in Farsi as I do in English or French, or, you know, any other language. Right.

And that's interesting. What I've heard about people who are, you know, multi-linguistic is that the way they feel about things changes based on what language they're speaking. Absolutely.

What is allowed, what is not allowed the nuances of the language. And then I did the PhD in, um, information, you know, like, uh, how to access heart rich groups, uh, and what is the information that they need. And then I studied health behavior models, motivational models, then, then clinically psychosexual therapy, sexual medicine, couples therapy.

So the knowledge kept coming and I had to make sense of it to this date. I dread when people say, send us your CV and I'm like, Oh, the relationship person from bedroom to boardroom. Is that enough? It's good.

It's good. Yeah. So it's like that piece of it.

Right. So the love came to be when I sat with clients over and over and over again, hearing I was cheated by love. Was it it? Am I supposed to live like this? You tell me, if you tell me I'm supposed to live like this, I'll be happy.

Just tell me, this is it. Like, who am I to tell you that? And then my own experiences of love and life and relationship. And, you know, so all of these came together into a, in about 12 years ago, I started going back through my therapy notes.

I journal after my sessions. Okay. So this came up, this came up.

What does it make sense? My clients, you know, having fun with that, I make collages for them. And then, um, I realized that I could actually do a thematic analysis here, like based on ground theory to see what are the words that I hear from couples who I assume to be thriving, not satisfied, not content necessarily, but thriving. So I went through that the whole research is, you know, is there if people want to see how it was done, basically what came out of it, trust, commitment, compassion/empathy, two very different things.

We don't need empathy. We need compassion. That's really important. The majority of pieces of relationship and then shared vision, physical attraction, which is very different than sexual excitation. Um, so these were the things that came up based on the first research, right? The quality qualitative being me, it was not enough. So I went forward.

I know a little bit about that. It's just too much, but I love philosophy and analyzing things, but give me something to do. No, right.

Yeah. I'm going to see the numbers. And then, so then we put it into a quantitative research with the US representative sample that became the relationship, panoramic inventory, the checkpoint that you just said at the beginning.

Um, so here's how I work with it. Love doesn't come first. Basically to me, you need log, good quality log, good quality spark, put them together.

Fire is created. That is emerging love. So the ingredients need to be there continuously.

If you take one away for one second, the fire dies. That's emerging love. Yeah.

And the logs being, like you said, trust, compassion, the physical attraction, commitment, shared vision, shared vision. And there are individual traits that go into it, like thinking style, circadian rhythm. You know, there are so many compatibilities, adverse childhood experiences, healing from trauma, um, sexual satisfaction.

So within the relationship, panoramic inventory, we try to craft 12 validated skills within the inventory. So it's the only one that we have right now, uh, that is, you know, really a very good 360 review of the couple of them that, you know, main domains. And then through that, you know, that, you know, oh, okay.

So these are a little bit of a crack here, little bit of a crack here. Let's attend. Let's mend before the fire goes off.

Right. And then little by little, that's what is important to me. I can't, I can't tolerate another heartbreak.

People are too beautiful to experience that. So yeah, that's. Well, thank you so much for your work and your contribution.

Where can people find the inventory and learn more about you? Um, I'm all over social media. If people care about like little bites, if, uh, I have a website, drsaranasserzadeh.com. And I'm, I think it will come in a link it in the bio. Thank you.

In the resource page, there are certain things that people might find helpful. So for example, if you're working with minority groups or, um, outreach populations, there's a book, uh, the wheel of context for sexuality education that, you know, these accessible people can get. Um, yeah, so, um, I think these are the ones, but for inventory it's, uh, it has its own platform that is relationship-panoramic.com. Couples can take it.

And if they both or all of the parties consent, they can receive the report themselves. It takes about 30 minutes to complete. And then, uh, if not, uh, they can provide the name of a provider that the report goes to the provider so that they can facilitate the report for them and kind of highlight the areas that they're strong at that could pull from to make other areas.

So it sounds like a really good tool to reference even before starting therapy with someone so that you know what you're working with. Yeah. All of my clients have to take it before I see them.

Yeah. I need my, your data, an Eagle eye. I yes.

Yes. Well, sorry. Thank you so, so much for talking with me today.

I don't care what you say. I think you are very, very knowledgeable and I learned so much from you and I know my audience will too. Um, I think there are so many great takeaway message from messages from today's conversation.

So if you're listening, please share it with a friend and don't forget to subscribe. Lovely. Thank you so much for having me.

It was really enjoyable. Thank you. Thank you.

Okay. I'm going to stop recording.