



HEART



The Sex Talk Book Clubs Report



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Table of Contents

02	Acknowledgements
03	Executive Summary
04	Introduction
05	Literature Review
11	The Program
13	Methods
16	Results
27	Recommendations
32	Appendix
36	References

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Executive Summary

Compared to the general population, Muslims have lower levels of knowledge on sexual and reproductive health (SRH). Conversations around sex education are stigmatized in many Muslim communities, and young Muslims often struggle to access sex education resources that are both scientifically accurate and sensitive to their personal and religious identities. To address this need, HEART to Grow (HEART)– a national non-profit working to advance sexual health literacy and prevent gender-based violence in Muslim communities– trained 10 Muslim college students to lead book clubs in their communities using *The Sex Talk: A Muslim's Guide to Healthy Sex & Relationships*. These 7-week-long book clubs were judgment-free environments for young Muslims to have comprehensive discussions around sex education, healthy relationships, and values-based decision-making.

The book club's impact was measured through pre- and post-tests (book club leads), focus group discussions (book club leads), and a post-participation survey (participants). Focus group discussions revealed that the book clubs positively impacted book club leads as they were able to co-create an inclusive, judgment-free community, leaving them more prepared to have SRH discussions with their broader communities and make informed SRH decisions. This demonstrates that the book club format is a useful way to increase SRH knowledge and facilitate discussions on sex education among Muslim communities.

Introduction

Sex education is a vital component of healthy development, yet many young Muslims face significant barriers in accessing medically accurate, culturally and religiously relevant information (Oraby, 2024). In response to this gap, HEART developed *The Sex Talk: A Muslim's Guide to Healthy Sex & Relationships* book, a resource designed to provide Muslims of all ages with essential knowledge on sexual health, consent, and healthy relationships. To further engage with this critical topic, HEART launched a series of book clubs (i.e., Sex Talk Book Club Program) led by young Muslim college students to foster discussions on the book's content within their communities. This program aimed to (a) familiarize 18-25-year-old Muslims with the sexual and reproductive health information, (b) normalize conversations around sexual and reproductive health, and (c) train this group to lead book clubs in their own local communities.

This paper seeks to evaluate the impact of the Sex Talk Book Club program by analyzing how using the book in a community context equipped participants to make informed decisions about their bodies, relationships, and sexual health. Through a mixed-method design consisting of pre- and post-surveys, community discussions, and follow-up focus groups, this research aims to answer the following questions: (1) What was the efficacy of facilitator training? and (b) what were participants' experiences in the book club? This evaluation will provide insights into how culturally specific programming can provide sex education and promote reproductive justice within Muslim communities.

Literature Review

Understanding the State of Sex Education Among Muslims

Comprehensive Sexuality Education encompasses information on sex and sexual health, healthy relationships, consent, and reproductive decision-making. It has been correlated with delays in sex initiation, lower sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates, and may prevent some of the factors associated with sexual violence perpetration (Garzón-Orjuela et al., 2020; Kirby, 2008; Schneider & Hirsch, 2020). Yet, many Muslims lack this knowledge. A systematic review of 59 studies conducted across 22 countries found that Muslim women worldwide have poor sexual and reproductive health knowledge (Alomair et al., 2020). The information they had held was often unscientific; they were more likely to hold misconceptions regarding contraception use and sexually transmitted infections. This pattern persists in Western countries, even though sexual health knowledge is often available through public school sex education classes. For example, a scoping review of 22 articles on the sexual health of young Muslims in Canada and other Western countries found that Muslim youth receive less information on sexual health than their non-Muslim peers (Alomair et al., 2020). The issue of sex education is compounded for Muslims who are sexual or gender minorities; a survey of over 600 queer Muslims found that 90% faced stigma in sex education discussions (Queer Crescent, 2019).

Cultural and Religious Barriers

This knowledge deficit results from barriers to accessing scientifically accurate and religiously informed education. Cultural taboos and a lack of culturally and religiously relevant sexual health education hinder-

-Muslims' ability to access this critical information. Despite these challenges, the favorable attitude of Islam towards sexual health knowledge means many Muslims are open to receiving culturally informed and religiously grounded sex education, if made available.

Islam allows and encourages sexual and reproductive education (Oraby, 2024). The Qur'an routinely emphasizes the pursuit of beneficial knowledge. In addition, the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) regularly received questions from men and women regarding SRH during his lifetime (Oraby, 2024). However, despite the Islamic basis of sex education, cultural taboos can pose a barrier to open conversation and seeking information. For example, some Muslim parents, who often serve as the gatekeepers of this knowledge, believe that it is inappropriate for their children to receive sex education before marriage. A 38-year-old unmarried woman in Iran stated that while she was interested in learning about menstruation, she was unable to, as her family believed it was improper for an unmarried woman to know about such a topic (Alomair et al., 2020). Some mothers believed sex education would be delivered by their daughter's future husband, who would presumably be more knowledgeable (Orgocka, 2004). Such attitudes are rooted in the misconception that receiving sex education would lead to an interest in premarital sex, which is haram (forbidden) in orthodox Islam (Alomair et al., 2020; Orgocka, 2004; Zain Al-Dien, 2010). Thus, Muslim youth are often hesitant to ask their parents questions related to their sexual or reproductive health, in fear that doing so would indicate to their parents that they intended to become sexually active (Zain Al-Dien, 2010).

Cultural norms pose a barrier even in families that are supportive of sex education (Othman et al., 2020; Zain Al-Dien, 2010). Evidence shows that Muslim parents and children are generally supportive of parent-delivered sex education (Zain Al-Dien, 2010). Yet, because many Muslim parents come from cultures where conversations on SRH are considered shameful-

-or taboo, they are unable to have these critical conversations with their children (Gausman et al., 2020; Oraby, 2024; Othman et al., 2020; Zain Al-Dien, 2010). A study on Muslim parent-child communication on sexuality found that mothers felt embarrassed to talk about sex with their daughters and planned on postponing messaging on SRH until their children were older (Orgocka, 2004).

In addition to these barriers, parents may lack the knowledge necessary to provide sex education (Othman et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2017). Interviews with nine Muslim adolescents in Canada who took sex education classes at their public school revealed that although the youth wanted their parents to impart this knowledge, their parents were not qualified to give scientific information (Zain Al-Dien, 2010). Parent-delivered sex education tends to be limited in its scope, with a narrow focus on warning against premarital sex and pregnancy, leading to Muslim youth missing out on vital information on puberty, menstruation, and healthy relationships (UNESCO, 2018; Zain Al-Dien, 2010). As a result, Muslims depend on unreliable sources of information, including friends and the media (Meldrum et al., 2015). Taken together, cultural and familial taboos and parents' lack of information perpetuate underdeveloped understandings of sexual health. As such, many Muslims will become sexually active without ever having received sex education and are less likely to engage in safe sex practices, irrespective of marital status (Oraby, 2024; Wong et al., 2017).

In School Education

School-based sex education can be an avenue for Muslims to receive useful, scientific information concerning their SRH (Zain Al-Dien, 2010). According to a study of Muslim mothers and daughters, Muslim mothers wished for their daughters to attend sex education classes so they could learn scientifically correct information (Orgocka, 2004). However, these programs are often culturally or religiously insensitive to Muslim students, limiting their efficacy (Afroz et al., 2021; Zain Al-Dien, 2010; Wong et al., 2017).

When such classes are not religiously and culturally informed, they receive lower interest from parents and adolescents (Othman et al., 2020). For example, a scoping review of 22 articles on the sexual health of young Muslims found that they felt like the education they received did not take their experiences into account (Wong et al., 2017). Another study found Muslim youth thought these classes were irrelevant to them because, though they were sexually abstinent, the classes were overwhelmingly focused on sex (Orgocka, 2004). Other studies reported that the classes displayed explicit content that made them uncomfortable (Zain Al-Dien, 2010). Lastly, since some classes were not comprehensive, focusing instead on the dangers of pregnancy and STIs caused some Muslim youth to view these classes as a “waste of time” (Zain Al-Dien, 2010). The lack of a culturally sensitive, comprehensive curriculum alienates Muslim students and limits the efficacy of public school offerings. Islamic schools do not provide culturally sensitive, comprehensive sexual education, either. (Meldrum et al., 2015). A survey of 38 young Muslim adolescents found that 40% of their Islamic institutions did not offer sex education (Orgocka, 2004). When sex education is offered in Islamic schools or centers, it is often of limited scope; in one case, the only subject taught was Islamic social principles (Orgocka, 2004; Zain Al-Dien, 2010). Education provided by Islamic institutions is often limited by the fear that discussion of certain topics will arouse illicit sexual interest in students. Thus, discussions are largely limited to descriptions of Islamic guidelines on gender relations, with little to no attention given to topics such as contraception, healthy relationships, etc (Kaya-Postema, 2022). Therefore, Muslim adolescents go without resources that address their unique needs and experiences.

Comprehensive Sexuality Education

The limitations of sexual health education provided by parents and schools highlight the necessity for programming that is culturally appropriate, scientifically sound, and religiously informed, a need acknowledged by-

-young Muslims and their parents (Afroz et al., 2021; Othman et al., 2020; Wong et al., 2017). Previous evidence has shown that Muslims greatly benefit when sexual health education takes their religious and cultural background into account. For example, HEART previously worked alongside an Arab community organization to develop a sexual health education program for Arab and Muslim women. The program successfully increased their knowledge on various sexual topics, highlighting the efficacy of tailored sexual health programming (Hussain et al., 2019).

Comprehensive Sexuality Education (CSE) can address the limitations of the content-limited sex education that Muslim youth receive by providing sex education in a holistic and culturally-sensitive manner. CSE is an evidence-based approach to sex education that discusses multiple aspects of sexuality and relationships, including puberty, menstruation, reproduction, contraception, and STIs (UNESCO, 2018). It involves providing culturally relevant information on health and well-being beyond simple discussions about sex. CSE has been found to effectively reduce adolescent pregnancy and the transmission of STIs, which is important as some Muslims are sexually active before marriage (Ali-Faisal, 2016; Chin et al., 2012; Saharso et al., 2023). CSE is also culturally informed, addressing taboo or stigmatized topics in ways that respect cultural norms while still providing holistic, evidence-based education (UNESCO, 2018).

Need for Islamic Sex Education

In response to the need for culturally and religiously informed education, HEART developed a comprehensive SRH education program that facilitates peer-to-peer discussion through nationwide book clubs featuring *The Sex Talk: A Muslim's Guide to Healthy Sex and Relationships*. HEART adopted a peer-to-peer education model based on the literature on the effectiveness of peer-delivered sex education in facilitating discussions around SRH. Peer-delivered sex education improves engagement with the material as peers-

-can cultivate a more approachable environment compared to older instructors (Benton et al., 2020; Layzer et al., 2017). These approaches are successful in boosting students' sexual health awareness in school and community environments (Akuiyibo et al., 2021; Benton et al., 2020; Hussain et al., 2019; Layzer et al., 2017; Rotz et al., 2018; Strange et al., 2002). For example, a peer education program implemented in a Muslim-majority community in northwestern Nigeria was found to improve understanding of STIs, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV), and HIV stigma (Akuiyibo et al., 2021). These teaching models support both peer educators and the audience. Peer educators benefit from improved public speaking skills and increased confidence in discussing sexual concerns, while recipients gain sexual health knowledge delivered in an accessible manner by a relatable peer (Layzer et al., 2017; Strange et al., 2002). Furthermore, book clubs have previously proven beneficial in initiating discussions on sensitive themes, including health and racial health justice (Rich, 2021).

For Muslims from cultures where discussions about sex are considered "shameful," the peer book club approach gives a safe space to discuss such topics (Abusalim et al., 2025; Mohajir, 2015). The creation of these judgment-free environments challenges the internal and external shame surrounding sexual and relationship health and provides the opportunity to dispel myths with scientifically backed information. Furthermore, the participants' shared Muslim background provides common understandings of unique cultural, religious, and familial challenges, which is important as they discuss and explore sensitive subjects.



The Program

In 2022, HEART published its groundbreaking publication, *The Sex Talk: A Muslim’s Guide for Healthy Sex and Relationships*. This first-of-its-kind resource offers readers of all ages– but particularly young Muslims– a candid discussion of sex, sexual health, and relationships, in a way that is inclusive, intersectional, and centers lived experiences. It features medically accurate information, reflection boxes, discussion prompts, resources for more information, and is supported by Islamic research from leading Muslim feminist scholars, all with the aim of equipping Muslims with critical and comprehensive sexual health education in a way that centers choice and considers their faith and cultural context. The book also offers a framework for sexual health decision-making inspired by the Arabic word *ridha*, which means “fullness of choice” or, in other words, consent. The RIDHA framework is an acronym that grounds healthy sexual relationships in core Islamic values of *rahma* (compassion), *‘ilm* (knowledge), *adalah* (equity), and *hurma* (safety). We believe that centering the concept of *ridha* – fullness of choice – is the best way to honor a Muslim’s right to fully consent and be in control of their sexual health decision-making and ultimately experience a thriving relationship. Put simply, it provides a powerful vision of what it means to be an informed person of faith navigating sex and relationships, and it also includes a collection of useful tools and user-friendly advice to help readers achieve that vision in their lives.

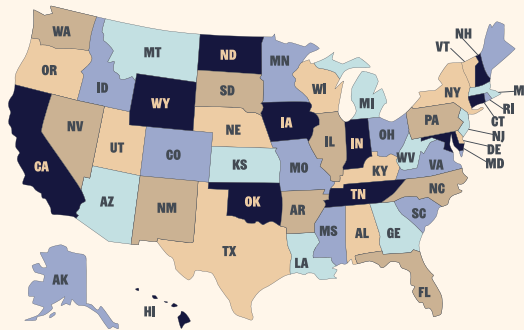
The *Sex Talk* was always intended to spark conversation and to encourage community readings and dialogue. With this in mind, the *Sex Talk Book*

club program was designed to include a peer education model that provides spaces for judgment-free conversation in local Muslim communities.

Beginning in 2022, this year-long program consisted of the following components:



10 fellows



5 states



2-day training

Ten book club leaders from 5 states applied and received a 2-day, hands-on training to facilitate community-led conversations on sex, consent, and healthy relationships. Book club leads were chosen with consideration to their geographical location, with a focus on individuals from states where sexual and reproductive health resources were under attack. They received ongoing professional development and technical assistance as they recruited participants and planned the launch of their book clubs in their local communities.

Given the potentially sensitive nature of the book club discussions, this included training on responding to sensitive disclosures, community criticism, and conflict.

Additionally, book club leads could access a trauma-informed therapist and chaplain to process traumatic disclosures, if needed. These book club leads were paired to lead five book clubs for seven weeks in their local communities, reaching over ninety more Muslims. The program's efficacy was evaluated through pre- and post-tests and focus groups with book club leads and a post-book club survey of the participants.

Methods

Recruitment

Ten college students were recruited via application to lead a seven-week-long book club program via HEART's social media accounts and listservs during Ramadan of 2023, starting March 23 and ending on April 21. Eligibility criteria for leading a book included: being 18-25 and identifying as a Muslim. Book club leads were supported with a \$1500 stipend, copies of the Sex Talk Book, facilitation training, and technical support from the HEART team.

All participants were informed of HEART's research plans prior to joining the programming and were given the opportunity to consent to research. For book club leads, participation in the research study was required, as detailed on the application. On the last day of their training, book club leads were provided with information on the focus group discussion (FGD),

including the process and the type of questions that would be asked on the surveys. Details regarding confidentiality and voluntary participation were also provided in recruitment emails and repeatedly verbally on Zoom. Leads were asked to respond to the email confirming their participation, and focus groups were scheduled by the research team based on availability. Six months after the conclusion of the book clubs, leads were sent the same information to recruit for follow-up surveys and focus group participation.

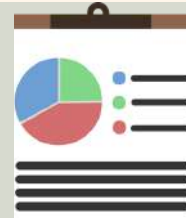
Ethical Approval

HEART worked with CURL to seek ethical approval for this study which was granted on May 24, 2023, by Loyola University Chicago's Institutional Review Board.



Book Club Participant Survey

This survey was developed and conducted to assess the effectiveness of HEART's Sex Talk: A Muslim's Guide to Healthy Sex & Relationships book club program.



Participant Survey

Book Club Leads Survey

Book club leads were administered a pre and post-survey to assess how well the book club training equipped young Muslim leaders with the skills and knowledge to facilitate discussions on sex education, reproductive justice, and healthy relationships. It also measured the leaders' improvement over time in understanding and guiding others through these topics. The post-club surveys aim to gather insights from participants on their learning experience and how the book has influenced their ability to make informed decisions and share knowledge.



Pre and post test

Focus Group Discussion

The final component of the evaluation was a focus group with ten book club leads a year after the initial Sex Talk Book Club program to explore their experiences leading and facilitating the book clubs, their reflections on the book, and the technical support offered by HEART, in addition to the ways the program supported their own learning and development.



Focus Group Discussion

Results



Participant Survey

Book Club Participant Survey

Initially, we intended to use an ANOVA to see whether the data varied based on demographic traits. We did not find statistically significant variance in any of the questions based on ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or education level.



Book Club Leads Survey

Book Club Leads Pre and Post Test

A total of five out of ten facilitators had filled out both pre- and post-tests; a sample size as small as this required a non-parametric test (the Wilcoxon Signed-Rank test) as normality could not be assumed. None of the results for any of the questions were statistically significant.



Focus group discussion

Focus Group Discussion

The focus group discussions with former book leads yielded the richest results, allowing for the construction of three main themes: policing barriers, inclusive community building, and preparedness for SRH discussions and decisions. These themes are described in greater detail in the following pages.

Key Takeaways



Policing Barriers

Book club facilitators expressed concerns with self-policing (i.e., internal guilt and shame) and external policing by community members in both traditional and progressive spaces. Participants also shared that policing inhibits connections and networks (such as these book clubs) that enable SRH education and decision-making.



Inclusive Community Building

Book club leads created nonjudgmental environments that encouraged SRH discussions in the book clubs. They shared that this environment allowed them to process their experiences and questions together, without shame or policing.



Preparedness for SRH Discussions & Decisions

The sharing of scientific and spiritual knowledge, as well as personal experiences in these book clubs, prepared leads for SRH discussions and decisions with their own families and partners.

These themes are directly related. Namely, the policing of SRH information in Muslim communities creates the need for inclusive spaces where information can be shared freely. After experiencing such communities, book club leads were empowered to have discussions and make decisions in community with their families, friends, and partners.



Theme 1: Policing Barriers to SRH

Community Policing

During the focus group, book club leads expressed anxiety about policing hindering SRH discussions. Some of these concerns included feelings of guilt, a form of self-policing. One facilitator, Tulip, explicitly described the policing of SRH discussions that occurs in traditional settings such as mosques:

So I think that it's often hard to have conversations with other Muslims about sex because the areas or places where we do have conversations are extremely heavily censored and policed spaces. Like, I see a lot of the Muslims of like mosques and stuff, and it's, you know, it's hard to talk about stuff at a mosque because someone will overhear and be like, so-and-so was encouraging your daughter or son to commit zina (premarital sex).

Tulip

This sentiment was seconded by Iris, who stated that having conversations in their local Sudanese community was complicated by a “fear of outing people, whether it be of their sexual history, their sexuality, whatever the case may be,” as “everyone knows each other” (Focus Group Transcription).

A recurring phenomenon demonstrated by Tulip's and Iris's comments was that, in such communities, social networks were also networks of surveillance. Because community members know each other and their parents, they were always under threat of acquaintances eavesdropping on their conversations and reporting sensitive information (or accusations of promoting zina) to family members.

Other participants also acknowledged that such policing was equally present in more liberal, non-traditional spaces:

Sometimes in quote-unquote progressive Muslim spaces, it feels like you have to prove your haram-ness [...] you can be like, "yeah, I'm f***** all the time, and I drank when I did it, and I ate pork, you know what I mean?" [...] Or you want to dress in a certain way, and everyone's like, oh, but weren't you wearing booty shorts the other day? You know what I mean? It's the same thing.

Facilitator

This behavior, explicitly pointed out as "still haram policing" by Poppy, engaged in what the facilitator called "the same thing," presumably surveillance and policing over one's SRH decisions (Focus Group Transcription). Notably, policing in "progressive" communities does not make use of social networks to reveal sensitive information to friends and family. Instead, this form of policing relies on peer expectations of wearing revealing clothes, having regular sex, and consuming haram substances (i.e., drinking, eating pork).



Self Policing

Community policing of SRH was internalized as self-policing, manifesting in the form of guilt around book club leads' individual understandings of the Qur'an. Daisy, for example, notes that "a lot of people in our group were dealing with feelings of guilt for even reading certain interpretations of what was in the book," which contributed to "trauma [...] surrounding these topics, especially around sex" (Focus Group Transcription). Lilly and Poppy noted that participants in their book club shared similar feelings.



Theme 2: Inclusive Community Building

Inclusivity of Spiritual and Religious Beliefs

A recurring reflection among book club leads was that the book clubs provided inclusive environments for discussing sex education. In contrast to environments of community policing, these inclusive environments allowed open discussions of sexual health while still respecting participants' experiences and faith. For example, Orchid highlighted how the book clubs facilitated discussions on topics such as sex and abortion while being inclusive of the participants' religious beliefs.

I would say, I think myself, along with our participants, experienced almost a sense of relief, that the beliefs that they held in their head[s], they were able to reconcile those with their faith and the religious beliefs they had. And I think, at least for me personally, I knew that these communities existed, but I don't think I had ever been a part of one that was rooted in faith, but also rooted in all these other things that I believe about sex ed and abortion, all these other things.

Poppy

Azalea echoed this idea, relating that “in our group [...] a lot of us wish that we [...] got this in our sex education, whether in high school or whatever time, and especially with the spiritually affirming lens.” By explicitly welcoming the faith of the participants, the book clubs and The Sex Talk book provided a form of inclusion that the leads recognized as unique. Book club leads and participants had successfully co-created a space in which Muslims could come together to discuss SRH topics amongst themselves, rather than have to seek education in secular spaces that did not acknowledge their religious beliefs.

The Sex Talk contributed to this community-building by providing inclusive research and resources on Islam-inspired sex education and bringing participants together to discuss with people with similar perspectives. According to Orchid, it felt “validating to see these experiences that you align with being in a physical book that people can read and share and talk about.”

I feel like having a physical book that delves into these topic, it just feels like, okay, wow, these things that I have thought about or these things that I have been confused about or hard questions about or was ashamed about, other people are thinking about this and not only thinking about it, but doing research on it and publishing literature on it.

Orchid

Lack of Hierarchy and Inclusivity

This element was also present in the book clubs themselves, as they eased some of the typical barriers—shame, policing— to discussing SRH in Muslim communities. Participants described inclusivity as a lack of hierarchy and the ability to question without fear of judgment, and a space to share experiences without being policed. Carnation felt that their book club “helped us actually [...] talk about sex with each other [...] about our own personal experiences [...] otherwise I think with Muslims, it’s just kind of-

-“tough,” highlighting how the group disrupted norms that make conversations unsafe. Along the same lines, Tulip remarked that the book club allowed participants to “talk to each other about this as equals as opposed to only having it preached to them by a figure of authority,” describing this as a shift from authority-based teaching as “seriously impactful [...] to everyone in the book club.” Together, these firsthand accounts demonstrate that inclusive book clubs worked synergistically for participants to have conversations that would otherwise be difficult to initiate or participate in.



Making Space for Interrogations

For participants, the book clubs were inclusive communities that addressed the need for judgment-free environments, as policing was prevalent in other Muslim spaces. As Poppy remarked, a recurring emotion participants shared was “excitement that a space like this exists, which to me affirms that not only is there a need for this community and this material, but people are excited to be interacting with it as well.”

up questioning things wasn’t always welcomed [...] I feel like even just the act of questioning is very freeing.”



Another way the book clubs created an inclusive environment was by welcoming participants to interrogate and think critically about the ideas they were raised with. Iris, for example, mentioned that “growing

Some participants, like Poppy, used this environment of open questioning to redefine their understanding of Islam and how it related to sexuality:

Something that I've really grappled [...] with is [...] culture infiltrating into religion [...] because everything I thought was wrong with religion was actually a projection of [...] the misogyny that is in culture [...] the Arab culture I come from is extremely patriarchal however Islam is not that at all [...] with the RIDHA framework it really roots sexuality and this conversation back into Islam and removes culture completely.

Poppy

Poppy's concern with separating Islam and culture was echoed by Daisy:

[The book was] affirming because I do wish [...] I had a book like this when I was younger [...] struggling with like culture versus religion [...] I feel like a lot of [the participants] were still very much in that [...] phase of battling religion and culture [...] thinking like 'wow this is like this sucks [...] the religion is [...] toxic because it was taught to me culturally' [...] so I think it was [...] affirming and liberating in a lot of different ways to have a community where I could be like 'this is [...] what it actually is and it's not the culture'.

Daisy

As implied by Poppy, this process of questioning the ideas around sex and sexuality that the leads and participants were raised with is part of broader generational work helping youth unlearn harmful suppositions, extending past the book clubs themselves. In this way, the book clubs prefigured a larger cultural shift.

I'm excited about being [part of] this new generation that gets to create safety and inclusivity in this conversation and root it back into Islam and completely remove the cultural expectations that have caused us so much stigma and shame and guilt.

Poppy



Theme 3: Preparedness for SRH Discussions & Decisions

Understanding Past Experiences

The Sex Talk equipped facilitators with the language and ideas necessary to understand past experiences and to make decisions on SRH in the present and future, principally through healthy communication with others.

For example, Daisy remarked that the book “made me [...] realize that maybe a situation that, at the time, [...] just felt a little off [and after] putting words to that [...] I’m looking back and thinking that was not consensual.” For Daisy, the book gave them the language necessary to understand a past situation as harmful.

Regarding current and future SRH decision-making, Iris revealed that the book helped them understand the limits of their knowledge and the need to seek knowledge from others.

“The book [...] and [...] reading it in community, made me realize that I actually don’t know how to navigate a lot of relationships, [...] I think this book taught me that I need to seek more guidance [...] and I think that was a sentiment that a lot of our participants felt too.

Iris

The book club’s discussion of values in one’s relationships was also useful in Azalea’s group discussions, providing them with “some of those words to really frame that conversation,” as they thought through the values that were important to them. Thus, the material discussed in the book club, primarily the RIDHA framework, promoted communication with others as part of SRH decision-making. The cautious attitude adopted by Iris and their participants also runs contrary to the conservative misconception that SRH-

-education encourages sexual activity.

Conversations Across Diverse Experience Levels

The book club also helped participants feel confident in having conversations about SRH with people with different sexual activity levels, including peers who are not sexually active. For example, Azalea noted feeling better prepared to talk to other Muslims about sex because of the book club, and counter the assumption that SRH education is limited to sexually active individuals:

“Moving forward now, I know how to [...] invite people who might have previously been uncomfortable talking about sex just because they think that [...] to have these conversations, you have to be engaged in an act. [...] before HEART, I wasn't really talking to other Muslims about sex because of that misconception, but now I know how to have the conversation.

Azalea

Conversations discussing SRH without assuming sexual activity depart from policing mindsets described in the first theme, which tend to presume and expect high levels of sexual activity. Azalea also noted that the book was helpful for “people in different phases of [experience with sex]” and that “it was a really good way for me and my partner to [...] ask each other questions [...] [and discuss] topics of trauma with him, especially because we’re getting married next year.” Here, we can see the Sex Talk helping Azalea prepare for a very significant relationship decision while working through difficult past issues.

The Sex Talk book clubs’ religious and spiritual sensitivity in addressing these topics was also helpful for Poppy in initiating conversations with their mother about sex. According to Poppy, these conversations are “still a very PG version of what I would like to say,” but now “includes that spirituality element” that Poppy desired in conversations with their mother.



Overall, the book and book clubs' recognition of the different religious beliefs, values, and sexual activity/experience that people bring into a relationship helped prepare participants for discussions about sex beyond the book clubs. The responses of Daisy and Azalea, in particular, focused on the language that the book club equipped them with. Combined with Poppy and Azalea's use of the book as a medium to facilitate discussions with partners and parents, a recurring characteristic of the Sex Talk and book clubs is that they ease communication in one's personal networks.

This communication enabled the spread of information and healthy decision-making with friends and family. As such, the book club not only increased personal agency but also extended to increase agency in one's community. Thus, a prefigured cultural shift as described in Theme 2 has begun bearing its first fruits in the wider world.



Recommendations

HEART's Sex Talk Book Club program showed encouraging results in meeting the critical demand for comprehensive, culturally relevant sex education among young Muslims. This initiative has created inclusive spaces for open discussions on SRH topics that are commonly considered taboo in many Muslim communities.

The evaluation of the program revealed several key findings:

The book clubs successfully developed nonjudgmental environments in which individuals could freely discuss SRH themes, combating the impacts of self- and community policing, which frequently limit access to SRH information.



The program fostered inclusive community development, allowing participants to process their experiences and questions together without fear of judgment.

Facilitators and participants reported feeling more prepared for SRH discussions and decision-making, both within their families and with friends and partners.



While the statistical analysis of pre- and post-test data for book club leads produced no significant results due to the limited sample size, the qualitative findings from focus group discussions demonstrated the program's positive influence. The Sex Talk Book Club program tackles many of the literature reviews highlighting challenges to SRH education, such as cultural taboos, a lack of culturally relevant information, and the limits of both parent-delivered and school-based sex education for Muslim youth.

Our findings align with previous studies that show removing shame and judgment fosters safe, inclusive environments that encourage open and honest conversations. These environments have lasting benefits because they give participants the shared language and confidence to continue these discussions with friends, family, and their communities.

Taking these findings into account, we offer the following recommendations and lessons learned for those working to promote sexual health literacy in the communities they live, work, and pray.

Recommendation #1

Move at the speed of trust

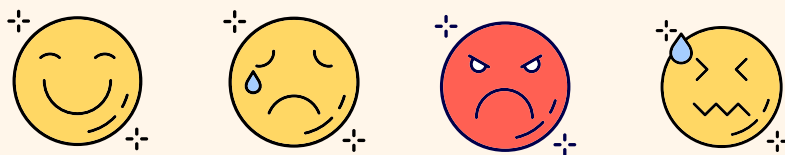


The book clubs were designed to facilitate a safe, nonjudgmental environment where young Muslims could have much-needed complex and nuanced conversations about healthy sex and relationships. Co-creating such spaces for young people required us to put a significant effort into building relationships and cultivating trust, especially as some participants may have previous negative experiences in mainstream Muslim environments. We introduced our community agreements from the-

-beginning, ensuring participants and HEART staff had a common ground of safety, care, and belonging in the book club space. We recognize that conflict and disagreement are inevitable, and we provided book club leads with conflict training so that there was a shared process through which individuals could work through potential issues. The beginning of the book clubs coincided with a leadership transition at HEART and was set against the backdrop of global unrest. Thus, we adjusted our initial timeline for the book clubs to ensure that our book club leads received the care, time, and attention needed to feel adequately trained and supported to execute their book clubs. These actions helped establish trust and foster strong relationships between book club leads and HEART staff, facilitating the program's success.

Recommendation #2

Be aware that conversations about sex, faith, and violence can bring up mixed emotions, even when facilitated in a trauma-informed manner.



When individuals encounter our resources, particularly The Sex Talk, they are often refreshed by our queer-affirming, non-prescriptive, and faith-inspired lens. Many individuals in the Muslim community have been socialized to interact with sex and relationships in binary ways; sex can only occur between two married individuals of the opposite sex. On the other hand, HEART's programming is expansive, recognizing that "there is no one way to be Muslim" and that people experience sex in diverse ways. While HEART programming often leaves people feeling affirmed, it can also lead to complex emotions that may cause them to feel overwhelmed. We anticipated that book club participants would have a similar experience,-

-and designed the book clubs in a trauma-informed manner. The very existence of the book evokes a range of emotions in readers, from gratitude and relief to grief and anger at not having had access to these resources earlier. While the book club affirmed many of their experiences and identities, it also made them realize how other Muslim communities—whether traditional or conservative— failed to hold the fullness of their realities. The book clubs also discussed sensitive topics such as gender-based violence, which could trigger painful memories. Thus, we needed to recognize and prepare for the range of emotions that would arise during the discussions.

Recommendation #3

Remember care work is an important component of building inclusive communities.



Our book clubs were comprised of directly impacted Muslims of color, many of whom were feeling the dual effect of local and global injustices. Book club sessions took place against the backdrop of the ongoing genocides of Palestinians and Sudanese people. As mentioned above, the discussion content was at times sensitive. We knew that for our book clubs to be successful, we would have to be intentional in creating a safe, trauma-informed space for both leads and participants.

Thus, we worked to cultivate an environment in which all participants could be comfortable processing and expressing their emotions. Simultaneously, we ensured that book club leads were prepared to hold space for the participants' reactions. We partnered with trauma-informed-

-therapists to develop a facilitation training for the book club leads, checked in with them periodically, and provided access to a trauma-informed therapist and chaplain. Participants directly impacted by global injustices also had the opportunity to attend our healing circles, group therapy, and access monetary support from our mutual aid funds.



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Appendix

The Sex Talk: A Muslim's Guide to Healthy Sex & Relationships: Table of Contents

Introduction

Chapter One: What Does Islam Have to Do With It?

Chapter Two: Sex Ed 101

Chapter Three: What to Expect

Chapter Four: Keeping Up with Your Sexual Health

Chapter Five: Relationships: The Good, The Bad, and The In-Between