



Puberty, the Controversy Surrounding it, and the Confusion While Dealing With this Phase in the Lebanese/Arab Modern Environment¹

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Puberty is defined as the period when sexual maturity is achieved. This maturity does not take place over night; it is a gradual process that lasts a relatively long period of time. Biological maturity is reached upon ovulation for girls and with the discharge of semen for boys. Puberty is not over when one is able to perform his/her reproductive duties; it is a huge transformation that lasts for quite some time and involves the whole body and person.

Apart from the bodily changes, we notice several other transformations that involve all aspects of a teenager's life be they male or female. These range from discovering new cultural interests via the school, family or vocational institutions to becoming self conscious and comparing oneself to others. Moreover, during this phase the need arises to start focusing on a future specialization or profession. Besides, teenagers start understanding social roles such as mother, father, employee, director, manager and student. Hence, the realm of a teenager's existence is widened and his/her need to belong becomes more pertinent and desired. Given that this phase has a lot of future repercussions, knowing how teenagers experience puberty and come to terms with it, is very crucial.

Puberty differs between males and females socially and cul-

turally. For boys it is a simple and natural process that yields pleasure. The same does not apply to girls. This period has no benefits for girls except if they are brought up in a liberal family that respects one's freedom like the case of Raya. This freedom enables a girl to relate to her body in an open-minded and free manner. Most girls are happy to experience the first signs of puberty, yet this joy is often accompanied with a strange feeling that something "wrong" has happened. For most girls, puberty and specifically menstruation is a turbulent time that is accompanied with feelings of embarrassment and confusion such as the case of Rafif. Not to mention that for some menstruation is considered disgusting like the case of Sara, and for others there is denial that it even took place, like the case of Samira. Menstruation within some very conservative and traditional families yields more surveillance and responsibility. Besides, in certain families it goes hand in hand with wearing the veil.² Unlike girls, boys are more at ease during this phase and consider puberty to be a natural process.

Previously puberty and menstruation were long awaited, and often accompanied with celebration.³ This phase was considered the transition from childhood to youth and in turn meant the commencement of adulthood. Nowadays, the situation has changed; mothers are embarrassed and

bewildered when their daughters start menstruating. This reflects negatively on young girls who feel frightened and confused given that they are not prepared to cope with such a critical phase that will affect their future as a female.⁴ Previously the celebrations in preparation for puberty or accompanying it were staged around the same period for both girls and boys. It is important to note that the transition from childhood years to teenage years for boys was determined by the ritual of circumcision, a procedure that was usually performed on them before they reached puberty.⁵

The puberty stage these days is considered by many girls to be a fearsome one that is often coupled with distress. However, the same does not apply for boys given that circumcision has become a medical procedure that entails the removal of a piece of flesh. Circumcision is now considered a health concern and its social and ritualistic significance is dying out. My discussion with Tala proved the point that the ritualistic celebration allowed a girl to pass comfortably from childhood to puberty, just as was the case with the circumcision of boys.

Another observation that is worth mentioning is that discussing puberty with boys led automatically to discussions on sex. The same didn't happen with the girls. Puberty and menstruation for the girls I interviewed is mostly coupled with silence, embarrassment, and malaise. Raya, who is liberal and open-minded, is the only interviewee who felt in control during puberty. This stems from her artistic background given that she is interested in and has worked on the theme of the 'body' in theater and plays. Over and above that, Raya is the eldest of the sample and has ample experience in life.

How do Males deal with Puberty?

According to Ashraf and Paul, young boys learn about their bodily changes and are prepared for puberty by talking to friends, watching films, and reading reports. As far as Rany is concerned, he admits that he didn't know what was going on until he heard a lecture at school. It is important to note that there have been significant developments within some educational institutions where importance is given to sexual education. Yet, this is not always the case. Rarely do fathers discuss such issues with their sons, yet, the case of Rafik proves otherwise, even though Rafik comes from a religious and devout family from southern Lebanon. It is worth noting that some religious communities believe that discussing puberty with their children is considered a traditional and religious duty. Such a position is very progressive; yet, it is not a general rule among conservative groups.

Regarding sexual encounters males are divided into two groups: those who engage in consensual sexual relations with willing female partners just like Ashraf's case and oth-

ers who opt for masturbation or make use of the services of prostitutes. This often happens in Paul's milieu, however, Paul admits that he is still a virgin because he wants to share this act with someone he loves and not with just anyone. Mind you, there is a third group that denies engaging in the sexual act and makes no reference to masturbation whatsoever. This is because of the environment these boys belong to – one that is either very religious like Rany's family, or very traditional as is the case with Rafik and Moustapha. Most of the young men in the sample acknowledged that during puberty they experienced a transformation, they felt transposed from one phase to another. They also confessed that they were satisfied to have achieved the stage of manhood and were very pleased to have acquired the required masculine traits. As far as "acting like a man" Rami admits that he changed and started acting like a man. It dawned on him that "he ought to wake up" so he stopped hanging out a lot in the streets. It is well known that during this phase a lot of teenagers drop out of school and decide to start working. This was exactly what happened with Rami.

How do Girls Live this Experience?

This phase is viewed differently depending on the environment the girls come from and on their conditions. Tala was fortunate to experience the onset of menstruation the pleasant and traditional way. She was at school the first time she got her period and the school supervisor who is an elderly lady attended to her and congratulated her. Given that the supervisor belonged to the older generation that views the onset of menstruation as a joyful event which is cheered and applauded, Tala felt well surrounded and supported. Yet, this traditional approach is dying out. Had Tala experienced the onset of menstruation at home the situation would have been different because her mother belongs to the new generation that failed to preserve the old and traditional habits and refrained from adopting the scientific and modern habits. Tala didn't know how to behave and questioned whether she has grown up or not. Zaynab's case is no different than Tala's: as soon as she told her mother about her first period her mother was thrilled and overjoyed. Zaynab's mother immediately told her husband but avoided telling the neighbors out of fear of envy, given that this phase symbolizes the onset of the glorious phase of fertility.⁶

Raya's first experience with menstruation was positive. Her grandmother prepared her for the coming phase by telling her the story of the Red Horse.⁷ At first Raya was hesitant to talk about the subject, yet, after pestering her for answers she complied. It is worth noting that Raya belongs to the "modern girl" category; even though this group is liberal the girls still refuse to talk about intimate and personal matters in public. Yet, this does not mean that they don't talk about sexual issues all together. Raya talked very



openly about sexual matters. Raya, despite the fact that she is 'modern' and exposed, admits that at first she was embarrassed because she was developing breasts and felt the need to hide them. Yet, with time she became more comfortable with the bodily changes that were taking place and she got used to wearing a bra and started enjoying it. Moreover, she was very pleased with the way her body developed and felt that now clothes suited her better.

As far as Sara is concerned, her mother, who is of Turkish origin, was overjoyed when she found out that her daughter started menstruating. She immediately told Sara's father about what had happened. This bothered Sara a lot. Unlike her mother, Sara didn't see the need for celebration and refused to adopt the stand of her mother. Sara still refers to her period as "sickness" and she admits that she felt dirty and was very bothered and disgusted when she got her first period. Heba, who comes from a poor background and who lives in a poor district in Tripoli, was pleased that she started menstruating. Her mother was also very happy to hear the news. Heba admits that she takes advantage of her predicament to absent herself from school. Moreover, she is now more pampered and spoiled by her parents; yet, she admits that menstrual cramps bother her.

So is the case among traditional families and the elderly, yet, things happen differently within educated circles. Mothers usually don't talk about menstruation with their daughters and vice versa, as if they are embarrassed to discuss such issues. This is the case of Rafif who didn't tell anyone when she first started menstruating. However, Daad admits: "My mother was next to me and I don't remember I faced any problems." As for Reem, who comes from the Beqa', the first thing her mother asked her when she saw a stain of blood on her underwear was "where were you?" indirectly insinuating the possibility that her daughter might be engaging in an activity that might tarnish the honor of the family. Dana, despite the fact that she comes from the same environment, was the only one prepared by her mother for this phase. Maybe it is because her mother had worked as a nurse previously. Dana confesses that she wishes she were a boy and admits that she sometimes acts like boys. Moreover, she is very independent, has a strong personality and refuses to act in the traditional way. Yet, that does not mean that she rejects her femininity; she is currently living a love story that she hopes will end in marriage. Lynn was very happy to have reached puberty and admits that she was prepared for this period thanks to the girls living in her neighborhood. It is worth noting that the southern girls were the ones least prepared for puberty. One of the southern girls I interviewed claimed she had not yet started menstruating because she was very embarrassed to discuss the matter and because she wanted to avoid my questions. Yet, that does not necessarily imply that it is a characteristic of the south, but rather an

attribute of this specific environment that is mostly poor and has suffered gravely as a result of the Israeli occupation that yielded unwanted displacement. Nada's case, a Palestinian living in Ain El-Hilweh refugee camp, is no different; her mother did not care when she found out her daughter started menstruating. It is as if being displaced in a camp wipes out everything that is nice and traditional.

We notice that in traditional, poor and uneducated cultures no one discusses such issues with girls anymore. Yet, there are cultures that still highlight the importance of puberty, though discretely. Moreover, there are cultures that categorically refuse to talk about the issue and are even embarrassed to discuss it. Hence, it is rare to find parents who are willing to address issues related to puberty in order to prepare their children and help them deal with this phase. Without the support of parents and the school, teenagers are left to discover the truths about puberty from their friends or films and the like. This means that the parents have given up their duty because sex has become a taboo and something embarrassing.

The importance of puberty and the way one handles this period is of utmost importance given that it will have lasting effects on the life of this generation and its sexual and emotional experiences. After much investigation on the position of teenagers, be they male or female, vis-à-vis sex and love, it becomes apparent that their reactions and positions differ. Yet, this difference was not the result of a difference in gender, i.e. girls didn't have similar stands that were different to that of the boys. The difference was more related to rural/urban, poor/rich, educated/uneducated factors that were indicative in fostering the various positions. However, it is evident that there is acknowledgement of the prevalent gender differences existing especially in terms of what is expected of both sexes. Not to mention the Oriental society's accepting the traditional stand and discarding the possibility of premarital sex.

The findings of the research undertaken show that five of the informants, males and females, agreed that there is no difference between the sexes when it comes to sexual needs. They strongly believe that "sex is the same for both sexes." Moreover, they belong to the educated middle class that is influenced by Western education especially with regards to sexual equality. Yet, this group is also fully aware of the cultural specificities of the region and its requirements. Hence, they were against the sexual freedom common in the West given that they are aware of the customary social pressures.

There is another group of five interviewees who all agreed that there were differences among genders with regard to sex. Daad is the only group member who rejected this difference; however, she agreed that sex ought to be per-

formed after marriage. She admits that she openly talks about sex with her mother. Moreover, she asserts that the subject was discussed several times in class and with her teacher. Hence, she has no problem discussing sex given that her environment is open and encourages dialogue. Paul, however, admitted that he masturbates. Yet, he considers it to be something wrong (a misdemeanor). He often went to confession to try and get rid of this evil habit. He also admits that boys are more lustful and have more desires than girls do. Paul is affected by the prevalent habits and by the stereotypes widespread in society.

There is a third group that views sex in a very negative manner. The positions ranged from pure disgust, to regarding sex as unappealing, to hate, to believing that sex is of no use, to considering sexual activity as a requirement, to deeming sex without love as a taboo or haram even within the confines of a marriage, given that sex is "disgusting" and love is what makes it different.

The case of Lynn is worth mentioning given that she is a "tease" par excellence. The case in question expresses the average behavior of Lebanese urban girls towards sex. Yet, one has to admit that the position of Lynn is highly exaggerated and sometimes inaccurate and similar to "caricature". Lynn claims that she attracts the opposite sex: "We girls are different. Sexual relations are nice to engage in with someone we love or someone we are going to get married to. When a girl gives a boy what he wants he will leave her (an opinion she acquired from her milieu). Lynn wants a man to remain attached to her. She asserts that boys and girls view sex differently. "Young boys are like animals, they are unable to control their sexual drives. They see a woman and they immediately want to have her irrespective of everything. They get easily turned on and horny (she laughs). We girls are different. As far as I am concerned, sexual need ranks last on my scale of priorities."

Lynn disapproves of premarital sex and values virginity tremendously. She gives the example of her friend who had a sexual relation with her boyfriend though she is still, technically, a virgin. When asked what prompted her friend to be sexual with her boyfriend, Lynn asserted that it is because of her difficult family circumstances. Given that her father passed away and her mother has a boyfriend who frequents their house, there is sexual permissiveness within the family. Girls are less monitored in broken homes. There is so much laxity in such households where self-restraint is no longer required and pleasing others is no longer a necessity.

Lynn admits that her admirers are many. She claims: "I used to be mean with men, I used to be a tease. I would start talking to guys over the phone and would refuse to meet them. The purpose was to make them fond of me, and when they started becoming emotionally involved I would

dump them. It was easy and normal for me given that I didn't love them. However, with them it was different for they were in love with me. They used to pursue and follow me but I would ignore them. I am a changed person now. I regret what I did previously and am more mature and peaceful."

In contrast, we realized that rural girls express total ignorance when talking about matters related to sex. They refused to answer our questions given that unmarried virgins are not expected to know or talk about sex and sexual matters. Their answers were very reserved and they were totally understanding of their Eastern background.

Nadine, who belongs to an urban, educated and open-minded family, visits the United States of America often and she is aware that the sexual freedom allowed in the USA is not accepted in our part of the world. Nadine fully understands where this is coming from and values the requirements imposed by our culture. The most liberal of the respondents, who is 18 years old, asserted that she views sex from a liberal perspective, yet, she is also for "controlled" sexual activity if one could say that.

Based on the discussions one can conclude that there is an urgent need to introduce sex education in the school curricula. Leaving this matter in the hands of parents and schools who shy away from discussing such issues is harmful. Sex education is instrumental in protecting the youth from harmful sexual activities and helps prevent sexual harassment and abuse. Moreover, sex education contributes to sexual awareness among youth that in turn yields maturity.

Translated by Myriam Sfeir

END NOTES

1. The article is based on the data collected for the report prepared by CAWTAR on *Arab Adolescent Girls*. The names of the interviewees were changed.
2. This applies to the inhabitants of rural areas in Lebanon as well as other Arab countries where religion and religiosity are encouraged.
3. These celebrations still take place in the Island of Jerba in the South of Tunisia.
4. See: Al-Intiqal ila marhalat Al-Nodj: Maslh qawmi hawla al-Nashi' fi Misr, Population Council, New York: United States of America, Cairo, 2001. 60.6% of the girls experienced fear, shock and crying.
5. Ahmad Abou Dahhan, AL-Hizam, Dar El-Saqi, 2001.
6. Zaynab's family forced her to leave school and married her off at the age of thirteen. Her marriage failed miserably and she is still trying to get a divorce in vain.
7. The grandmother was directly involved given that Raya's mother had left the house due to family problems.