

Health Awareness Among Lebanese Women

A Random Survey

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In an attempt to investigate health awareness among Lebanese women, we administered a random sample survey (see below). The size of the sample is 201 women of which the majority are in age bracket between 20 and 30 years old (39.3%), single (58.7%), with a university education (75.1%) and engaged in remunerated work or employment (57.7%).

The questionnaire was devised along four broad categories of health awareness and behavioral attitudes: 1) one part of the questionnaire inquired, notably, about health habits such as smoking, exercising, and undergoing medical examinations. 2) Another part probed into dependency on tranquilizers. It is important to note that mention of substance abuse is recurrent throughout this file because of a hypothesis that the Lebanese war has increased dependency on tranquilizers among women. Our questions query whether the respondents consume tranquilizers, and where it applies, to identify the drug, the frequency of use and if by a doctor's prescription. 3) The questionnaire looked into perceived gender sensitivity in medical treatment by examining preference for a male or a fe-

male gynecologist. Respondents were also asked to indicate whether they have experienced or noticed any sexual discrimination by medical staff and doctors in their treatment of patients. 4) Respondents were also asked to specify health and medical issues they would like to know about more.

HEALTH HABITS:

Smoking, Exercising and Regular Medical examinations

A majority of the sample are non-smokers (71.7%). The proportion of women who follow a fitness program through regular exercise is relatively high (47.8%). However, the number of women who do not exercise is still greater (49.7%), even if only by a small margin (1.9%).

If regular medical check-ups and visits to a

gynecologist indicate health conscious attitudes, practices and behaviors, the women in our sample seem to lack it. Hence, the majority do not uphold regular medical care. A majority of 108 women (53.7%), do not perform annual exams nor check-ups at their doctors' (see Table 1).

In a traditional society like Lebanon, gynecological examinations are limited to married women. In our sample which includes 78 married women (see Table 2), 71 said they visit their gynecologist regularly. Single women, however, do not perform regular gynecological exams, lest they are accused of being promiscuous and engaging in pre-marital sex. It is also highly possible that single women do perform gynecological exams but would not reveal them to us.

SUBSTANCE ABUSE: Tranquilizers

The majority of women in our sample (80.1%), do not take tranquilizers on a regular basis and in many cases do not take any. Lexotanil and Tranxen, popular muscle relaxants, are the common drugs used by the 33 (16.4%), women in our sample (see Table 3) who consume

tranquilizers. Still, the majority of these 33 women cannot be definitely classified as addicts because they resort to tranquilizers only when needed. Nevertheless, "Only when needed" is relative to each woman and therefore a subjective indicator. To reduce the subjectivity, our multiple choice question specified a time pattern: "everyday, more than 3 times a week and less than 3 times a week" (see Table 4). Yet, by answering only when needed, the respondents imply that tranquilizers are taken only in cases of extreme stress and not in a systematic pattern. The number of women who take tranquilizers everyday amounts to 21.2% of our sample, and although they are not the majority of an already small group (12 out of 33) they are proportionately high and cannot be ignored.

Most of the sampled women use these tranquilizers without a doctor's prescription, 14 out of 33 women (42.4%), compared to the 12 (36.4%) who follow a doctor's prescription, and 21.2% who refrained from answering the question altogether. Comparative research and epidemiological reports in Lebanon state that females use illicit drugs less often than males and even more rarely abuse it(1).

PERCEIVED GENDER SENSITIVITY IN MEDICAL TREATMENT

The women's preference, in our sample, is for a male rather than a female gynecologist, although many (34.8%), did not answer the question related to the subject. The pro-

Table 1 Frequency of Regular Medical Check-ups Summer - Fall 1994		
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Have Regular Medical Check-ups	80	39.8
Do Not Have Regular Medical Check-ups	108	53.7
No Answer	13	6.5
Total	201	100.0

Table 2 Frequency of Gynecological Medical Check-ups Summer - Fall 1994		
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Visit their Gynecologist Regularly	71	35.3
Do Not Visit their Gynecologist Regularly	108	53.7
No Answer	22	11
Total	201	100.0

Table 3 Frequency of Use of Tranquilizers Summer - Fall 1994		
	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Yes	33	16.4
No	161	80.1
No Answer	7	3.5
Total	201	100.0

portion who preferred a male doctor (33.9%), was slightly higher than those who stated an explicit preference for a female doctor (31.3%). Lebanese

women seem to prefer male over female gynecologists, partly out of habit, and partly because of a cultural attitude that men are more competent

(1) E. Karam; **Substance Abuse in Lebanon**. Expert Report. WHO 1993. Lebanon.

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than women in medicine (see Table 5). Many women said the sex of the doctor made no difference to them, they looked for the doctor's competence (31.8%), or they had not thought about it in these terms before. Others already had a male doctor or were accustomed to him. Over 10% said that they either trust or feel more comfortable with male doctors. Nevertheless, a good proportion of the women (19.4%), insisted on a female gynecologist, because being a woman herself, they feel she understands them better. One respondent preferred a woman over the man because of a bad experience with the latter.

HEALTH ISSUES LEBANESE WOMEN WANT TO KNOW MORE ABOUT

The women in this sample wanted to know about more than one health issue, which had to be grouped together. Consequently, the number of responses exceeds the sample size of 201.

Table 4

Frequency at Which Tranquilizers are Taken
Summer - Fall 1994

Relationship	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Everyday	7	21.2
Only When Needed	19	57.6
More Than 3 Times/Week	4	12.1
Less Than 3 Times/Week	1	3.0
No Answer	2	6.1
Total	33	100.0

Table 5

Reasons Attributed to Perceived Preferences for Male or Female Gynecologist
Summer - Fall 1994

	Total Number of Respondents	Percentage
It Makes No Difference	64	31.8
Already Have a Male Doctor	9	4.5
Relax Better With Male Doctor	11	5.5
Trust Male More Than Female	10	4.9
Prefer Male Dr. Out of Habit	8	4.0
There Are More Male Drs.	1	0.5
Feels More Comfortable With A Female Doctor Because She Understands Better	39	19.4
Other	3	1.5
No Answer	56	27.9
Total	134	100.0

Health Issues Number of Responses

Cancer	47
HIV/AIDS and other STD	38
General Health Issues	26
Nutrition and Health: Cholesterol, Diabetes, Glands, Blood Count, Blood diseases, Metabolism, Back pains, Viruses, Pollution, Head problems, Ulcers, etc.	21
Heart Disease	9
Children's Health	9
Genetics, Rare Diseases and Medication	8
Women's Health	7
Diseases like Measles, T.B., Asthma, Plague	4
Effects of Tranquilizers and Smoking	3
Old Age issues	2
No Answer	35
TOTAL	209

CONCLUSION

Judging from the results of this survey, Lebanese women possess some degree of general awareness about health matters and issues, and are eager to know more. It seems, however, that they lack initiative in proper health practices and behaviors, such as exercising, getting regular

medical exams, and not consuming antiseptic drugs without a doctor's prescription.

The sample in this survey screened Lebanese women from a variety of income brackets and regions in the country, in both rural and urban settings. The sample bias most probably lies in the fact that the majority are

university graduates and, consequently, possess minimal knowledge in public health issues.

However and if we were to generalize on the basis of this sample, Lebanese women seem to lack the discipline and the attitude needed to develop the practices and behaviors of a health-conscious person.

Questionnaire

Health Awareness Among Lebanese Women

For Al-Raida / The Institute for Women Studies in the Arab World / LAU
(formerly BUC)

- Age: less than 20 ___ 20 - 30 ___ 30 - 40 ___
40 - 50 ___ More than 50 ___
- Marital Status: Single ___ Married ___ Widowed ___ Divorced ___
- No. of children: None ___ 1 - 2 ___ 3 - 4 ___ More than 4 ___
- Education: Elementary ___ Complementary ___ Secondary ___
University ___ Vocational ___
- Yearly family income level in L.L.:
below 3 million ___ 3 to 6 million ___ 6 to 10 million ___
10 to 20 million ___ 20 to 40 million ___ More than 40 million
- Work status: Working ___ Non-working ___
- Do you smoke? Yes ___ No ___
- Do you exercise? Yes ___ No ___
- Do you take any medication for nervous tension? Yes ___ No ___
If yes, what kind? _____
- How often and how many pills? (specify number that applies to you)
Everyday ___ More than three times/week ___ Only when needed ___
less than three times/week ___
- Is this medication prescribed by a doctor? Yes ___ No ___
- Do you go to your doctor for a general overall check-up regularly? Yes ___ No ___
- Do you see your gynecologist regularly? Yes ___ No ___
- Do you prefer to see a male gynecologist or a female gynecologist?
Male ___ Female ___ Why? _____
- Do you feel that doctors differ in their treatment and attention between male and female patients? Yes ___ No ___
Explain _____
- Do you feel that hospitals staff differ in their treatment and attention between male and female patients? Yes ___ No ___
Explain _____
- What health issues would you like to know more about?

Lebanese women seem to prefer male over female gynecologists, out of habit, and because of a cultural attitude that men are more competent than women in medicine.