

TAHTAL-MIJHAR *Relationships: Young Men and Women*

By Ghena Ismail

The Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World has been organizing meetings for young people for several months. These young people, who are collectively known as the Friends of IWSAW, are students from different Lebanese universities such as LAU, AUB, St. Joseph University and the Lebanese University. What united this group of students was their enthusiasm for humanitarian and social issues. To share their concerns with a wider audience, the Friends came up with the idea of a talk-in program which was given the title, *Tahtal-Mijhar* ("Under the Microscope"), which had the following objectives:

1. To provide a platform for young people, men and women alike, to voice their concerns, problems and questions in an informal but structured educational setting.
2. To become aware of the existing values and norms of our society.
3. To help IWSAW develop closer links with members of the younger generation.

The first symposium was held on June 6, 1996 and examined



Dr. Mona Fayad

the topic "Relationships between Young Men and Women in Lebanon Today". The discussion was moderated by Ghena Ismail, IWSAW staffer and *Al-Raida* Assistant Editor, and was attended by the Friends of IWSAW and students from various Lebanese universities. The guests of the symposium were Dr. Muna Fayyad and Dr. Nabih Eid. Dr. Fayyad studied applied psychology at the Sorbonne University, is a professor at

the Lebanese University, and has made many socio-psychological studies and publications. Dr. Eid studied family medicine at AUB, completed his higher studies in physio-psychological problems, and is now a professor at LAU. He has also practiced medicine since 1980 in Beirut.

The discussion was divided into three main parts. The first part focused on the beginning of relationships. A video report prepared by the Friends of IWSAW, and

which covered young people in the LAU, AUB, St. Joseph University, Lebanese University and the Arab University, revealed that it was the men who made the first move, and that traditionally the woman is looked upon as promiscuous if she dares to approach someone in whom she is interested. However, the majority of young men said that although tradition dictates such a scenario, most of them did not mind if a woman made it known that she is interested. A few even said they welcomed such a gesture and would feel relieved by it. The response from young women was different. There was much distrust on the part of young women about men's acceptance of their assertiveness. Most of them argued that young men pretend to be open-minded, but in reality a man looks down on any young woman who approaches him. Thus, women do not feel encouraged to make the first move.

The two psychologists explained that the fear on the part of the Lebanese young women was only understandable. Dr. Eid said that the girl needs to feel secure within her society in order for her to oppose traditions which dictate a certain scenario for the start of a relationship. Dr. Fayyad stated that Lebanese society is in a confused and rapidly changing state. It is neither Eastern nor Western in its belief system. There is much tension between forces of change and forces of tradition and perceived ideals that probably never existed. However, she observed that even though it is the man who often makes the first move in our society, he doesn't do so unless he is encouraged by the woman.



Dr. Nabih Eid

Within the framework of the beginning of relationships also, the game of "hard-to-get" was discussed. While some objected to the whole process and thought that when an adult wants to enter a relationship, he or she should need no stimulants or subterfuge, others thought it is part of the process of seduction. However, it was stated that very often this game is so over-played by the young women that it arouses disgust and confusion; the young man ends up not knowing whether the girl truly rejects him or is only playing



Audience members at the talk-in are amused by the comments of young people on a video report

games. Moreover, the "hard-to-get" game, if prolonged, establishes a poor basis for the relationship. The "thrill of conquest" becomes the ultimate aim of the man rather than knowing the girl herself.

The second part of the discussion focused on the goals of a relationship. The video report, prepared by friends of IWSAW, which also covered all of the universities of the first video report, revealed a difference between the definitions of young men and those of young women. While young men emphasized sex, entertainment or friendship, young women stressed the importance of emotional security for them and blamed the men for being 'unclear and evasive'. It is worth noting also that most respondents preferred not to state a certain goal for the relationship, for according to them, a relationship should develop spontaneously and naturally.

While Dr. Fayyad agreed that a relationship should develop spontaneously, Dr. Eid stressed that clarity is needed, because the girl cannot serve as a "field experience" for the man for the three years of college. He explained that once the man enters a relationship, he should be willing to discuss with the girl what is going on and where they are heading as a couple. Obviously, the definition of "clarity" varied from one person to another. While some identified it with a clear, stated definition right from the beginning, others took it for a general framework that might hold a number of possibilities.

It became clear throughout the discussion that age is a determining factor in the goal and nature of a relationship. While a girl can afford to play, or have an undefined rela-

tionship at the age of sixteen, she cannot do so any longer at the age of twenty-five. This was considered a key explanation for the failure of relationships between college students. "While a twenty-two year old girl is ready for marriage, a man of the same age or even three years older is probably not, because tradition allocates the financial responsibility to him if and when he chooses to marry."

Dr. Fayyad pointed that if marriage was not possible, we cannot disregard the emotional needs of either men or women. Dr. Eid commented that according to a study conducted by Masters and Johnson these emotional needs are instinctively the same for men and women. "Any difference in dealing with them is attributed to the socialization process." Dr. Eid explained that,

according to Bell's study, while men replied that they can have sex merely for "pleasure", women consistently tied sex to "meaning".

The final part of the discussion addressed the following question: Within the social context in which we are living, which constricts and condemns any woman who opposes tradition, how should the young woman behave?

Dr. Fayyad stated that the woman needs to decide for herself what she wants to do. She should not bother herself by trying to figure out how the man will perceive her behavior. "Man's perception should not be the criterion for woman's behavior or self-esteem."

Also, it was stated by one of the participants that the woman should choose right from the beginning a man from a similar background. If she is a conservative woman, for instance, she should not go out with a man who is liberal. This would eliminate many of the problems that may arise later in a relationship.

Finally, the conclusion was that the success of any relationship largely depends on how it begins and the basis on which it is founded. Although every couple are free to set their own rules, certain characteristics such as honesty, clarity, knowing what one wants and respecting what the other may want in addition to understanding one's own capacities and limitations can certainly account for the success of any relationship.

The next discussion session of *Tahtal-Mijhar* will take place in October and it will tackle the relationships between young people and their parents.