

TAHTAL MIJHAR

HOW YOUNG PEOPLE RELATE TO THEIR PARENTS

Ghena Ismail

Sociologists and psychologists agree that our society is in a transitory stage. Some people resist the idea of adapting to new ideas, out of fear that such ideas may threaten our customs and traditions. This transitory state inevitably affects family relationships. It is worth noting, however, that social change is not a peculiar experience, but rather, an ordinary everyday affair. But since the family is a sacred social institution, especially in our Arab societies, any change is usually subject to considerable resistance and questioning. This response definitely affects the relationship between young people and their parents. In an attempt to set a defined framework for this relationship, an age of consent (21) was established in the West. The issue is not as clear cut in our society, however.

Independence, trust, communication, and conflict were major themes discussed in the second symposium of IWSAW's talk-in program, Tahtal Mijhar ("Under the Microscope") which was held on December 17, 1996. The discussion was moderated by Ghena Ismail, IWSAW staffer, and was attended by the Friends of IWSAW, who helped prepare this program, and students from various Lebanese universities. The guest speakers at the symposium were Dr. Nabih Eid, a family doctor and a Psychology professor at the Lebanese American University (LAU), and Dr. Hassan Hammoud, a Professor of Sociology and Social work at the same university.

At the beginning of the session, a video report prepared by the Friends of IWSAW, which featured young people from LAU, the American University of Beirut (AUB), and the Beirut Arab University revealed that many young people, men and women alike, felt that they reached the age of consent in the eyes of their parents only when they got married. Other respondents said that they never reached the age of consent in the eyes of their parents. Only one respondent said that the age of consent depended on the young person's character.

Since most of us live with our parents until marriage, do we have the right to ask for independence? Is independence needed for the well-being of the individual, or is it a concept imported from the West? Can independence be achieved in our collectivist society? What are the conditions of this independence and what is the

thin line dividing independence from individualism?

There was clearly a consensus among participants that we have the right to ask for independence and that independence is essential for the development of a mature personality. However, the debate revolved around the definition of this independence and the ideal method of achieving it.

Dr. Eid stressed that independence is necessary for character development, and that it is something that parents should work on developing right from the birth of their children. "One should learn to dichotomize oneself from one's parents." Dr. Hammoud, however, preferred to see independence as a process of "extension" rather than "dichotomy". "Young people are the outcome of a certain history and a group of experiences. They cannot and should not be viewed as independent of their past. Communication and understanding should be the method for resolving any conflict between young people and their parents."

To what extent do parents frequently understand their children's problems and concerns? How frequently do young people confide in their parents and resort to them in times of crisis? The video report prepared by the Friends revealed that many young people preferred to confide in their friends when they were facing a problem, especially if it was personal. Does this reflect a lack of confidence in parents' abilities to help their children, or is it just a way to maintain a certain level of privacy? What if parents were not as understanding as they should be? What if they were never



Ghena Ismail: Moderator of the talk-in



Audience members at the talk-in

ready to acknowledge their children's rights to independence? Even then, young people should not assume negative attitudes, Dr. Hammoud asserted. "Forging a fruitful dialogue and an atmosphere of trust is the method that young people should use to persuade their parents of their decisions."

However, it seemed from the video reports prepared by the Friends that not all young people approve of or believe in the realism of this solution. A twenty-two year old woman who works at a local radio station had to go to Qana in April to cover the massacre. Knowing that there was no way to persuade her parents of the



Nabih Eid and Hassan Hammoud: The guest speakers

necessity of her going to Qana, she lied to them and told them that she was at the radio station. While some participants thought that her behavior was irresponsible, others believed that she was simply performing her duty and thus was not to be blamed for lying to her parents. "Had she told them, she would have subjected them to an unnecessary state of worry," one of the participants argued. Dr. Eid and Dr. Hammoud, however, strongly disagreed. Dr.

Hammoud said that someone had to

know where she had gone. "If she had died, someone would have had to go and pick her up!"

However, while lying was not justified as a means for avoiding conflict, it was stated by both Dr. Eid and Dr. Hammoud as well as by some of the participants that it was not necessary to confide to parents every single detail. A certain degree of privacy can and, perhaps, should be maintained. It was made clear that maintaining privacy does not contradict with being honest with parents. "Having privacy is different from lying," one of the participants asserted.

In conclusion, the importance of independence for the development of healthy and mature characters was emphasized by both Dr. Eid and Dr. Hammoud. Ideally speaking, parents should have worked on building independence in their children from early childhood. However, even if parents did not do so, young people need to know that the best method to achieve independence is building trust through effective dialogue. This may be difficult; young people should not give up, they should keep trying, because the easy or quick solution adopted by many of them, namely lying, is not safe and is not good in the long run. Once a lie is uncovered, young people will lose their parents' trust, which they utterly need. Young people have to orient their maturity and growing knowledge towards building an honest and healthy relationship, rather than towards rebelling and taking negative stands.