

Roundtable: Sexuality

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A roundtable discussion on sexuality took place at the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World, Lebanese American University (LAU). Among the participants were undergraduate and graduate students from various Lebanese universities. It was moderated by Dr. Marie Therese Kheir Badawi.

Marie Thérèse Kheir Badawi: Why, in your opinion, is the issue of sexuality such a taboo subject especially when it has to do with a woman's body?

Ali: I strongly believe that the only two issues that will remain illegitimate (forbidden) to discuss throughout one's life are those of sex and death. Had sex not been the reproductive tool and the indirect source of life, it would not have received such attention. Hence, the importance of sex stems not from the actual act of sex and the pleasure it produces, but rather from its outcome. Therefore, the consequences resulting from sexual acts are what gives it such a sacred role, be it on the religious, social, or educational level. Moreover, the importance of woman stems from the fact that she is the source of birth. Besides, the importance of her body, in my opinion, has nothing to do with pleasure but with life, despite the fact that in our society anything that has to do with bodily pleasure is looked down upon and equated with shame or haram.

Jamal: It is true that early on, society and religion proclaimed the sexual act important just for the sake of procreation. However, nowadays the situation has changed. Women are looking for sexual pleasure not just within the confines of marriage and for the sake of procreation. Sexual intercourse is no longer restricted to marriage; women are engaging in premarital sex and view sex differently. They admit that they have desires and are willing to talk about them. However, the way a patriarchal society views sex has not changed. Moreover, men are afraid of this change and fear the power of women's sexuality. Women's sexual potency is greater than that of men, and hence society and men want to control and repress it because it scares them.

Maxime: According to me and based on my observations, most premarital sexual relationships among my generation stem from the repression (forbidden) in society. Engaging in sexual activity for the youth is a revolt against the norms and traditions imposed by society. Given that we want to be liberal, we are tempted to do what we feel like doing irrespective of the consequences. Hence, our revolt has no vision or goal other than acting out what we feel like doing. I have many foreign friends, French to be specific, who are very open about their sexuality because sexual repression is less pronounced in France. In Lebanon, this suppression makes the suppressed desirable and urges the repressed individual to act out his desires in secret.

Marie Thérèse: Are the people around you open about their premarital sexual experiences and do they publicize them?

Maxime: Not really, most of my friends who are sexually active either hide the fact that they are engaging in premarital sex or publicize it only among their friends and within inner circles.

Jamal: Prior to living abroad, I used to think that the sexual freedom prevalent in the West enables women to be more content than we are. However, when I went abroad and after engaging in many discussions related to sexuality I realized that the sexual freedom they enjoy is not helping them overcome their personal problems. Women suffer various problems that are difficult to overcome. For instance, rape is widespread and women suffer a lot as a result.

Sahar: I agree with Jamal. Having the freedom to express oneself sexually does not imply that one no longer has problems. We mistakenly equate engaging freely in sexual relations with the absence of problems and that is not the case. I also believe that we women are not the real problem, the problem lies in men. Women are demanding to be emancipated and free, yet I strongly believe that prior to that we need to liberate men. If women move on and men remain where they

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are nothing will change. Women in fact are well aware of their sexual needs and desires; however, they repress them or act them out in secret because they fear society and men. Eastern men are afraid of the potent sexual powers of women, and that is why they subordinate them and try to dominate them through the taboos imposed by society.

Marie Thérèse: How does one know if a woman is really a virgin or whether she had had her hymen repaired (hymenoplasty)? How do you judge a woman who after falling in love with a man sleeps with him believing that they are going to marry, yet, they don't end up together?

Samar: Can I say something before we try to answer this question. I think we are focusing on the end result and forgetting what caused the problem in the first place. I strongly believe that the main problem in our society is really not sexuality or virginity which are taboo subjects, but rather the gap between our generation and that of our parents. There is a communication problem between the two generations; we can't really talk to our parents and that is why sensitive subjects such as sexuality and virginity have become taboo subjects not to be discussed. People of my generation are hesitant to talk about sexuality even among each other for they are brain washed not to discuss such issues. Hence, the main problem is that of communication. If we can voice our opinions and lift the barriers imposed on this kind of communication, half the problem will be solved. If I am discreet about my opinions concerning sexuality, people will judge me upon their own conclusions. Their assumption could be wrong. However, if I am open and honest about my opinions, then people will know exactly where I stand. Even though a lot of people are engaged in premarital affairs no one talks about them.

Marie Thérèse: If we don't communicate with our parents and parents don't voice their opinions, then who is responsible for this brain washing?

Maysa: Mothers are the ones who instill such values in their daughters (virginity). Girls are socialized to view sex as a taboo, and the way women view sexuality greatly affects the way men view the relationship they are involved in. I don't know why, but those who try to hide their sexual affairs are the ones whose affairs are publicized the most.

Samar: I think the answer is very simple: this round table is about sexuality and virginity, and automatically we assume that it is targeted towards women.

Marie Thérèse: Women are the ones who possess a hymen that is expected to bleed when ruptured. They are the ones who lose their virginity not men.

Samar: In my opinion, virginity is more a principal than something physical.

Sophia: It is true but not for many people for there are a lot of women who engage in all sorts of sexual activities (sodomy or anal sex, oral sex, foreplay) where everything is permissible except the actual act of penetration. Given that the hymen proves a woman's virginity, rupturing it implies losing ones virginity.

Jamal: I believe that being virginal is the biggest lie ever. How does one define virginity? I understand women who undergo hymen repair operations or engage in sexual acts but never the act of penetration. Men have imposed such a fake condition and they deserve the false (fake) virginity they are receiving.

Samar: I disagree. Why would I would I want to be involved with someone who is obsessed with the fact that I am virgin or not. Why would I want to pretend to be something that I am not just to please a man or get married to him. I would never do such a thing and I hope no one participating in this round table does that.

Marie Thérèse: Why?

Samar: Because I am never going to sell out. This is who I am and if the man doesn't like what he sees then good riddance. We are always worried about people's talk, how society will view us, ruining our reputation, etc. and in my opinion that is wrong. Each and every person is free to think the way they want but let them not impose it on me. I want to live my life according to my rules and not those dictated to me by society. I decided to live outside of society and refuse to abide by it's rules. Who said that society and what it stands for is right? Isn't it possible that society is wrong?

Marie Thérèse: Who is society?

Samar: It is the people around us.

Marie Thérèse: Maysa was saying that it is not society or men but the relationship between mother and daughter and how the former instills in the latter those values that enforce these inhibitions. What do you think?

Samar: I disagree, not all mothers do that.

Maysa: I agree totally with Samar that one has to bear the consequences of one's actions. However, there is a problem in Lebanon that prevents women from doing so and it is our legal system. The law can interfere, and couples may face imprisonment for engaging in premarital sexual activities. This is the problem in Lebanon.

Ali: To go back to the issue of virginity. Based on my research, and after much investigation on why men view virginity as a requirement I came up with the conclusion that irrespective of ones religion, 95% of all the men I interviewed don't like their partners to compare them with other men. They go mad if they sleep with an experienced woman and she compares them to another man. This is why men refuse to marry sexually experienced women.

Marie Thérèse: Would you go out with and even contemplate marrying an experienced woman?

Ali: I have no problem dating or getting married to a sexually experienced women. On the contrary I prefer my wife to be experienced. Why should I be bothered if she compares me to other men. We might not be sexually compatible, and I might not be the right person for her. Let the best man win.

Marie Thérèse: How come you are different from the men you interviewed?

Ali: I don't know why I am like this. I hate stereotypes and have worked hard on myself.

Marie Thérèse: Had all men been like you, we wouldn't have a problem

Samar: It is all about freeing ones mind of stereotypes and the ingrained habits of the mind.

Ali: In Lebanon there is no one society but different societies that form a confederation where bad laws rule. Lebanon has an underground society. An act is not deemed wrong until someone sees it. Hence, as long as I am doing something in the dark it is not wrong. The minute someone finds out then the problem arises.

Marie Thérèse: You claim to have no problem with the issue of losing one's virginity, does that apply to your sister?

Ali: I believe in personal freedom, hence I have no right to tell my sister what to do with her life provided that she is mature and knows what she is doing. If she knows the difference between what is right and wrong, and if she chooses to do wrong then it is her problem.

Sahar: You used the word wrong, what do you mean by that? Losing one's virginity?

Ali: We are supposedly talking about a mature woman, and in this case I have no say in the matter. If my 25 year old sister decided to engage in a premarital affair then it is her choice. But let's suppose my sister is a 16 year old girl who is under the impression that she

knows what she is doing at her young age. I will interfere in such a case and try to talk some sense into her. Being aware of the consequences is all that matters, and lets face it the consequences are grave and endless when one doesn't know what he/she is getting into (sexually transmitted diseases, teenage pregnancy, abortion, illegitimate children, etc.). It is unfair to bring an unwanted child into this world. Conceiving out of wedlock is a crime. Why should a baby be punished for something he/she didn't do. Illegitimate children are considered social outcasts and this rejection affects them throughout their lives. It is important to note that one can't live outside society and that we are not living in the wild.

Marie Thérèse: You are very liberal, it is very rare to find such men.

Ali: I doubt I will get married to a Lebanese woman. Lebanese women are unable to shed the ingrained habits of the mind that they have acquired from their upbringing and society. They are too weak to fight them.

Sophia: The same applies to men. A lot of my female friends refuse to marry Lebanese men because they view them as backward, traditional and patriarchal. There is a communication problem between men and women.

Maxime: When choosing a wife the least important variable to consider is whether she is a virgin or not. Intellectual maturity, spiritual compatibility, ethics, etc. ought to be among the criteria considered. The issue of sexuality is not discussed openly because people are afraid to express their opinions openly. As a result, one starts to censor oneself for fear of being rejected by society.

Marie Thérèse: Who is society in your opinion, Maxime?

Maxime: I agree with Samar, society is the people around us.

Ali: There is a gap between what I want to be and what society expects me to be. Society imposes things on us.

Maysa: None of the participants in this roundtable believe that premarital sex is wrong. I personally talk openly about sexuality even in front of my parents who are conservative. I managed to change them and with time they adjusted to the fact that I am not against premarital sex. My father knows that I am sexually active even though I didn't go up to him and tell him I am engaging in premarital sex.

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Marie Thérèse: What you are saying is that your father knows that you have premarital affairs and he has no problem with that?

Maysa: Whether he has a problem or not is not the issue. We reached a compromise. My father was very strict with me and my sisters when we were growing up. There was a huge list of dos and don'ts. Besides, there was flagrant discrimination between the girls in my family and our boys. However, step by step things started changing. I became economically independent and bought my freedom. I worked hard to earn it. In my opinion, economic independence is liberating, but when one is economically independent that does not imply that he/she is free. I know a lot of economically independent friends who are still influenced by their parents.

Samar: The only manner I can discuss sex with my dad is jokingly.

Sophia: Sometimes parents don't monitor their children's actions but there is auto censorship.

Marie Thérèse: Where did this transmission come from?

Jamal: It is funny how we talk about women as victims.

Marie Thérèse: Why are women always at a disadvantage?

Maysa: I believe it is high time women started taking responsibility for their actions. It is our problem and we should stop blaming men. Let's start talking about us and stop blaming the other.

Ali: The educational system also takes part in this censorship. I remember when I was a student our biology teacher used to skip the chapter on reproduction. This was at La Sagesse, a Christian school, not in Al-Makassed.

Sahar: What do you mean? What difference does it make?

Ali: My point is that when you are in a Christian missionary school that uses a foreign language talking about sexuality is easier than in Arabic. Moreover, it is pertinent and expected. I also believe that the Makassed is more strict than the Sagesse.

Marie Thérèse: I agree with Ali for when sexual education was no longer obligatory, the schools that taught in Arabic decided to delete it, but in schools where the subject was taught in French or English, it remained a requirement.

Sahar: I strongly believe that we are leaving out a very important variable which is religion. Given that religion plays a very important role in this part of the world it is partly responsible for the repression prevalent. With the widespread of secularism, people in the West became more liberal and free. There is one question I would like to ask Maysa: Many women believe that in engaging in sexual relations their problems will go away. Was that the case with you, did premarital sex solve your problems as a woman in the Arab world?

Maysa: I was never under the impression that once I became sexually active all my problems would be resolved. I had general problems like any teenager for I didn't have the freedom to go out and wasn't allowed to go to parties etc. However, engaging in sexual activity didn't solve or increase my problems. Also I disagree with you on the issue of religion. People in the West are secular, it is true, but the impact of religion and the aura surrounding it have not disappeared. The guilt feelings surrounding sexuality still exist despite the relative sexual freedom prevalent in the West. Hence, religion still has an impact in the West, the only difference being its intensity.

Maxime: I believe the problem is less related to religion than to society. If we take Paris as an example, no one knows or cares about what the others are doing with their life. On the contrary, in Lebanon everyone knows everyone and expressing one's sexuality openly will lead to a scandal. One of the most powerful tools used by society to restrict sexual relations is gossip or people's talk. People gossip about each other because they have nothing better to do.

Jamal: It is not just that, it is a totally different mentality. In the United States and at the height of the sexual revolution, feminists were visiting doctors and asking them to rupture their hymens. The exact opposite happens over here: women flock to doctors to repair their hymens prior to getting married.

Sophia: The guilt surrounding the sexual act as a result of the effect of religion is still very prevalent. I have a friend who got married recently to her boyfriend of many years. Given that the groom was living in France, they got married over there and contracted a civil marriage. According to her, the fact that she wasn't married to the guy religiously bothered her and prevented her, temporarily, from fully partaking in the sexual act. She had a problem sleeping with her husband prior to contracting a religious marriage. This legalization of sex via marriage was something she and I both found weird. It is important to mention that the friend in question is secular and was brought up in a secular environment.