

NASSS looks to spread sexual awareness, dispel misinformation



(The Daily Star/Hasan Shaaban)

Nazih Osseiran | The Daily Star

BEIRUT: Sex is still very much a taboo subject in Lebanon. Despite relatively liberal social attitudes, the subject is rarely approached in a methodical and scientific manner, and the public's knowledge is tarnished by misinformation and myth. An amalgamation of doctors, scholars and activists are trying to counter such distortions.

The Network of Arab Scholars on Sexuality and Sexual Health (NASSS) held its second regional meeting Thursday, part of its effort to spread awareness and dispel misinformation that is becoming increasingly prevalent among youth.

"I like to define the Arab nations with the three Fs," president of the Egyptian Family Health Society Dr. Mamdouh Wahba said during the event. "Faith, family ... I will leave the last one for you to figure out."

Attendees erupted in laughter.

The event marked an occasion for doctors, academics, activists and advocacy groups to meet and exchange ideas and benefit from each other's expertise.

Dr. Faysal al-Kak, the network's coordinator and a founding member, emphasized the importance of initiating a conversation about sexuality in the Middle East. "What is important is that we join the global discussion," he said. "Things are developing here like they are across the globe, but it is very hush-hush."

The network's inception dates back to 2006. After four years of lobbying, the founding members were finally able to secure funding from AUB's Faculty of Arts and Sciences for their project, which officially launched in 2010. There have been three phases to the project, with each phase lasting two years.

The first phase entailed advocacy and training. In the second phase, the group reached out to Arab scholars and began networking. In the third phase, now in progress, the network is being solidified and efforts geared toward growing it. By 2017 the group plans to publish a book about sexuality in the Middle East.

NASSS has designed school curricula to teach students about sexuality and safe reproductive methods. They have also designed a handbook that helps parents explain sex to their younger children.

Some doctors voiced disturbing revelations that highlighted the extent of sexual misinformation within Lebanese society. "I had some patients who were rubbing vinegar or yogurt on their vulva," a doctor affiliated with USJ said. "There are a lot of unhealthy practices like this that are stemming from ignorance."

Another doctor recounted the pressures young teens are facing when it comes to discovering and exploring their sexuality. "I have cases of girls that have been blackmailed into having sex, as boys had threatened to share their Snapchat pictures," she said, referring to a popular mobile image-sharing application. "This is what 15-year-old Lebanese boys are doing," she added, stressing that she had come across such cases on more than one occasion.

Speaking to The Daily Star after the event, Kak explained that sexuality in Lebanon is often marred by violence. "The burning theme was how young people, whether married or single, express their sexuality within the existing cultural context," he said. "We were questioning the issue of violence in sexual relations, why they express violence ... we also explored the issues around these practices, such as the idea of preserving the hymen because of the pressure of preserving the hymen for marriage."

Kak described courtship in Lebanon as a "marriage market." Because there are more women than men in the country, women are facing increased pressure when it comes to accommodating their partner's needs, in hope of securing a marriage proposal.

"The women would say things like, 'I was forced into having sexual relations, it didn't happen at my pace,' or, 'I found myself in a setting where I was pressured to do this,'" he said. "There is also structural or societal violence, where you find yourself wanting to do anal sex or other types of sex because ... you want to keep him in a serious relationship so that he can marry you later on."

Tackling such issues in Lebanon is a particular challenge due to the myriad characteristics of the country's 18 sects. "You are not talking about one community with one corporate identity. There is so much diversity and so much tolerance of a lot of sexual things," Kak explained. "On the other hand there are also a lot of conservative attitudes. As researchers, you have to be very smart in trying to address things in a different way, yet in a diverse way."

The most surprising thing Kak concluded as a result of his research was the extent of the complexity of female sexuality.

"Engaging in sexual activity is more complex and multifaceted than most of us think. It is a very smart, complex process that females engage in when deciding to engage in sexual activities," he said.

"There is so much sophistication in shaping the decision to engage in sexual activity, and such complexities draw from a lot of cultural, personal and socioeconomic traits."