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AUB doctor takes on myths of female sexuality

Brooke Anderson | The Daily Star



BEIRUT: Why do women suppress their sexual desire? What if everything you thought about female sexuality was wrong? What if they're not suited for monogamy? What if they are as randy as men? These are just a few of the questions posed by Faysal El Kak, a public health lecturer and gynecologist at the American University of Beirut, during a recent lecture to students and faculty members.

Clearly, Kak is no ordinary doctor. Instead of just sticking to the Hippocratic Oath, he believes that a doctor should be “an agent of change, an agent of promotion of knowledge and awareness-raising,” something he is doing through a series of lectures confronting taboo subjects.

This particular lecture took attendees on a journey through the history of female sexuality across the world. Kak pointed to a long-held narrative that described female sexual desire as passive, receptive, responsive and complex, while male desire is portrayed as spontaneous, driven, initiating and constant, an analysis that prompted a short outburst of laughter from the audience of mainly women.

He pointed to an idea prevalent in gender theory circles that this version of sexual desire in women “is socially and culturally constructed as a means of controlling female sexuality.”

He pointed to instances of slut shaming or physical punishment, which he said led to “the creation of a situation whereby women learn to ignore or disregard their own physical arousal.”

The fear of being judged for allowing themselves to feel sexual desire might be so ingrained in women that it could be difficult for them to open up – even in a confidential setting.

Two studies conducted around five years ago in the United States and the Netherlands exposed women to a session of televised pornography. Both studies found a discord between the reaction of their genitals, which were monitored by a machine, and how they reported their arousal when asked.

In other cases where women were unable to engage with their partner despite efforts to do so, it was found that they were inhibited and limited by previous negative experiences, according to a 2013 U.S. study.

Kak described a new, female-friendly “pink” Viagra, as an attempt to bring the “disordered mind into functioning body,” while the more traditional blue Viagra brings “the disordered body into functioning mind,” a nod to the fact that for men sexual dysfunction tends to be more of a physical problem whereas for women it’s usually emotional.

It might seem that Kak is pushing the envelope. But if the enormous amount of online anonymous questions about female desire on sites such as E-Tobb is anything to go by, there is indeed a demand for answers.

Sara Helou, co-founder of the Internet platform for anonymous medical queries, on which Kak is a contributor, said that women regularly asked about how to increase their level of sexual desire.

“A lot of women ask why they can’t get an orgasm,” said Helou, who attended Wednesday’s conference.

She said the high number of women present at the event signaled “a need to raise awareness about this in the Arab world.”

For Kak, a doctor at heart, discussing this subject is still partly about improving the women’s health.

“There’s a lot of research going on, and this is affecting women’s lives and their intimate relationships,” Kak said.

“There are a lot of misconceptions and this reflects on women’s well-being.”

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