

For Immediate Release



AUB international conference on sexuality among Arab youths highlights new trends

Beirut, Lebanon- 06/04/2011 - Discrepancy between societal and religious values and norms, on the one hand, and sexual desires and practices, on the other, is what's governing sexual behavior among youths in the Arab world, noted participants on the first day of a two-day international conference on youth, sexuality and self-expression in the Arab world.

"Much of the way we are behaving is inconsistent with the attitudes we have towards sex," said AUB Professor Samir Khalaf, who heads the Center for Behavioral Research at the University and has published extensively on the topic of sexuality in the Arab world. "There is a salient social hypocrisy at all levels," he added in his keynote speech during the opening sessions of the conference on April 6, 2011. "While women are celebrated and glamorized if they are sexually attractive; they are condemned if they are sexually active," he said. Moreover, the Arabic culture does not have a word for a "fallen" man, only for a "fallen" woman.

Organized by the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs in collaboration with the Goethe Institute in Lebanon, the two-day conference, entitled "Youth, Sexuality, and Self-Expression in the Arab World," explores and examines the factors that define sexuality among youth in the Arab world through the research studies and papers presented by social scientists from the Arab world, Europe, and the United States.

While new social trends, such as delayed marriage, are creating a force of "superfluous, youthful sexual energy," that needs to find ways to express itself, societal norms still condemn extra-marital sex, at least for women, noted Khalaf.

Nevertheless, "deformations" of conventional marriage have emerged throughout the Arab world, said Khalaf, citing examples such as: *mut'ah* marriage, a temporary marital contract mostly practiced by Shia Muslims that allows for short-term conjugal relations; *urfi* marriage, which is similar to *mut'ah*, but is secretive and unregistered and practiced by Sunnis; and *misyar* marriage, a rare and controversial type of Muslim marriage that allows a couple to live separately and only meet for sexual relations.

Moreover, young people are increasingly becoming more open and defiant in expressing their sexuality, even though feelings of guilt and shame among women are still present, said Dr. Brigitte Houry, clinical psychiatrist at the AUB Faculty of Medicine.

Some presenters argued that once a society opens up its discourse on sexuality, it is also more likely to become more civically engaged.

Will the recent changes in Egyptian society offer more freedom of expression or a religious backlash; will they impact on economic and educational reforms and how will all these potential changes affect sexual behaviors and attitudes among young people of Egypt, asked American University of Cairo Professor Ghada Barsoum and Dr. Shereen El-Feki, the vice-chair of the UN Global Commission on HIV and the Law who presented on the recent uprising in Egypt as well as sexual behavior among married and unmarried young Egyptians.

Other presenters included: Dr. Silje Matthiesen from the University Hospital of Hamburg, who talked about sexual behavior of the internet generation in Germany; Angelika Hessling from the Federal center for Health Education in Germany who addressed sex education, sexuality and contraceptive behavior among young people with German and migrant backgrounds; Joumana Haddad, poet, cultural editor of An-Nahar, and founder and editor-in-chief of Jasad, a cultural Arabic magazine specializing in the literature and arts of the body, who highlighted the hypocritical and sexist standards in the Arab world; filmmaker and film scholar and curator Viola Shafik, PhD, who discussed sexuality in Egyptian cinema; Sara Ajlyakin who presented on the lingerie industry in Damascus; and AUB Professor Faysal El-Kak who overviewed how medicine and public health help regulate aspects of youth sexuality through procedures such as hymen replacement surgeries and health policies that serve socio-cultural considerations.

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Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of more than 7,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

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