Deconstructing Sexuality in the Middle East
Challenges and Discourses

Edited by

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Contents

List of Contributors vii
Acknowledgements xi

1 Introduction: Sexuality as a Contested Political Domain in the Middle East
   Pinar İkkaracan 1

2 Criminal Law, Women and Sexuality in the Middle East
   Sherifa Zuhur 17

3 How Adultery Almost Derailed Turkey’s Aspirations to Join the European Union
   Pinar İkkaracan 41

4 Fighting Honor Crimes: Evidence of Civil Society in Jordan
   Stefanie Eileen Nanes 65

5 Sex Education in Lebanon: Between Secular and Religious Discourses
   Azzah Shararah Baydoun 83

6 Contesting Discourses of Sexuality in Post-Revolutionary Iran
   Hammed Shahidian 101

7 Who Said That Love is Forbidden? Gender and Sexuality in Iraqi Public Discourse of the 1970s and 1980s
   Achim Rohde 139

8 Militarization, Nation and Gender: Women’s Bodies as Arenas of Violent Conflict
   Rubina Saigol 165

9 Towards a Cultural Definition of Rape: Dilemmas in Dealing with Rape Victims in Palestinian Society
   Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian 177

10 The ‘Natasha’ Experience: Migrant Sex Workers from the Former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in Turkey
    Leyla Gülçür and Pinar İkkaracan 199

Index 215
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Chapter 5

Sex Education in Lebanon: Between Secular and Religious Discourses

Azzah Shararah Baydoun

This chapter portrays the public debate that took place in the spring of 1999 in Lebanon between advocates of school sex education for pubescent students and their adversaries. An attempt is made to contextualize this debate within the highly polarized diverse 'communities' of Lebanese society. This diversity is manifested in two broadly opposing approaches to challenges posed by the compulsory affiliation of Lebanon – as all developing countries – with the 'global village.' On one hand, there is the traditional approach adopted by the formal religious authorities, whose organizational competence and political influence is anchored in the Lebanese political sectarian system. On the other, there is the modern, obliquely secular approach adopted by individuals and organizations, both governmental and non-governmental, who lack the experience and rootedness of their sectarianist counterparts but who are sensitized to the urgency of problems posed by the contemporary world, and are struggling to promote what they conceive to be scientifically based – and therefore effective – solutions. The debate was triggered by the issuing of the Lebanese Presidential Decree ordering the 'elimination of the chapter on human reproduction from the Life and Earth Sciences of the eighth grade in the pre-university curriculum.'\(^1\) This analysis of the debate is based on documents produced around and about the debate, and on interviews with most of the actors involved in it.\(^2\)

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1 Presidential Decree 2066, 'Elimination of Chapter 1 from the Life and Earth Sciences curriculum for the eighth grade from the Basic Education cycle,' The Lebanese Official Gazette, 2, 3 January 2000, 76.

2 Official documents from the Ministry of Education and annexed institutions, and documents from the archives of health NGOs were examined, as were related materials from the media. Interviews were furthermore conducted with most of the educational and health authorities from governmental, UN and non-governmental sectors that participated in the process of formulation of the sex education curriculum. Also interviewed were religious personnel delegated by their authorities to voice in writing discontent with the curriculum. Several school counselors from secular as well as religious affiliated schools were also interviewed, all in an attempt to describe the process of the formulation of the curriculum, the mechanism of its elimination, and the responses it elicited from different sectors of civil society, thereby providing background to the debate between the two parties.
Introduction: A Brief History of Sex Education Curriculum Development in Lebanon

Sex education was first ‘officially’ addressed in Lebanon in 1995, five years after the cessation of the civil war military activity that ravaged Lebanese society and arrested the development of its state and private institutions for more than fifteen years.3 A national plan for educational development was formulated within the context of ‘Reconstruction and Development’ of Lebanon – an essential component of the platform of all successive post-war governments. The Educational Plan was drawn in partnership with the UN and its institutions, which provided their expertise and support for programs aimed at AIDS prevention.4 The approach adopted was a defensive one, aimed at arming youth with tools to prevent the spread of AIDS. The curriculum was designed to transmit knowledge as well as to promote ‘the development of skills and positive attitudes’ and was coupled with incentives in the attempt to promote healthy sexual behavior among prepubescent students.5

Over a three-year period beginning early 1995, more than 30 experts and consultants from different educational, health, and social institutions set out detailed guidelines for the ‘Education for the Prevention of AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Diseases’ program, under the administration of the Educational Center for Research and Development (CERD). The program was elaborated as a package of three sections, respectively focusing on information acquisition, development of practical skills and tools, and social attitudes. These sections constitute high school curriculum material which curricula designers, textbook authors, and teachers can draw from, or upon which they can model educational material.

3 ‘Unofficial,’ or informal, attempts to introduce sex education include efforts by university professor and psychoanalyst Munir Chamoun in the early 1960s to establish an educational program in the Catholic school system for students aged 10 to adolescence (author interview). As well, the Lebanese Family Planning Association has had sex-education initiatives over the past 30 years variously termed family education, population education, childbirth safety, and sex safety. The association has at various times partnered with the government to form committees to address the goal of incorporating sex education, a major component of population education, in pre-university curricula (author interview). The perseverance of this association has finally borne fruit. A teacher’s manual/reference book on ‘Population Education’ was published in 2004 with the collaboration of CTD, including a chapter on sex education under the camouflaged title ‘Health and Life’ (Y. Abi Salloum, ed., The Reference Book in Population Education (Beirut: CTD and LFPA, 2004).

4 In 1998 the number of reported cases of HIV/AIDS was estimated to be 529 adult men and women among an estimated total population of three-and-a-half million (no general census of Lebanon is available). It is worth noting that 53% of the cases were locally infected, the remaining were not permanent residents (foreigners or immigrants). 2004 statistics show 772 cases, 58% of whom were infected locally, 79% of whom were infected through sexual relations, 59% of whom were in the age range 31–50. The estimation is provided by the ‘The National Program for CIDA and STD Prevention,’ a program that is executed through partnership between the Ministry of Health and WHO, and aims at limiting the spread of the disease by various health education strategies.

The program’s learning objectives, content, and suggested methods and activities were harmonious with the vision and goals of the new pre-university school curriculum. Accordingly the package presumes an active learner, with the teacher in the role of animator in a class resembling a workshop rather than the traditional learning environment prevalent in most Lebanese schools until only recently. What distinguishes this program and its components is that it invites students to participate in consolidating the foundations of their own knowledge. The approach of the program presumes students to be responsible individuals capable of building up their own knowledge and reflecting on their experiences so that they can reach wise decisions. These decisions in turn are understood to be based on their interests and those of their community, and thus, it is presumed, will be in harmony with community values. Students’ behavior, as such, is rendered personal and based on individual conviction rather than on identification with a ‘virtuous’ model valid for all people and all occasions.

However, this does not mean that the sex-education curriculum package adopts a totally value-free approach. Despite its respect for students’ capabilities and its focus on decision-making, the program ultimately disseminates values that are understood to be fixed and prevalent in Lebanese popular consciousness, thus the family is assumed to be a main reference in raising awareness on sexual matters and a primary garrison against the spread of AIDS; limiting sexual relations only to marriage is ranked as the primary method for preventing AIDS and STDs; the importance of postponing all kinds of sexual relationship until marriage is emphasized, and abortion is alluded to by describing it as an emergency means of pregnancy termination within the context of Lebanese law. As such, the approach of the curriculum operates within a framework based on widespread, embedded values, and forms the context that frames students’ decisions. So, for example, using the guidelines of the sex-education package, the Life and Earth Sciences curriculum for the eighth grade was titled ‘Reproduction in Human Beings.’ The curriculum covers anatomical and physiological characteristics of puberty; a brief description of male and female reproductive organs; the menstrual cycle, and fertilization. The program guidelines suggest that teachers give a quick presentation of birth control methods, on condition that this presentation is placed in its social and legal context. This

6 The pre-war Formal Lebanese Educational System was a constant target of attack from Lebanese educators and all other parties concerned for its conservative and authoritative, top-down style of knowledge transmission based on a passive learner. The new curriculum tried to address this problem by introducing a participatory/interactive educational model.

7 Group of Educational and Health Experts, Education for AIDS and STD Prevention.

8 Lebanese Law dictates that induced abortion is legal strictly as a medically therapeutic measure and is otherwise illegal. The courts treat abortions performed for reasons related to rape, incest or extramarital relations with ‘leniency’ (codes number 209 and 539 of the Lebanese Criminal Law).

9 The eighth grade corresponds to eight years of formal schooling. Assuming formal schooling starts with kindergarten in the age range from 4 to 6, eighth grade students are between ages 12 to 14.
presentation is to be followed by another brief one on sexually transmitted diseases, among them AIDS, and a quick mention of STD prevention methods.10

This curriculum was designed as a unit of the official Life Sciences textbook for the eighth grade French and English language divisions, in four chapters.11 Needless to say, these chapters were originally written in a sober, scientific style. With the new curriculum, questions, exercises, and tasks related to them were added, reasserting scientific terminology and definitions.12

Religious Opposition to the Sex Education Curriculum and Its Elimination by the Government

The sex education curriculum described above, which only aimed at prevention, did not withstand the forces opposing it.13 Muslim religious leaders of the ‘highest order’ intervened with the ‘highest political authorities’ to freeze its implementation.14 Kutlat Al-Wafa’a Lil Muqawama (a Shiite-affiliated parliamentary group whose name literally means ‘Loyalty to the Resistance [to the Israeli occupation] Group’) lobbied the Prime Minister to eliminate the sex education curriculum, and sent a letter dated

10 Group of Educational and Health Experts, Education for CIDA and STD’s Prevention; Group of Educational Experts, ‘Curricula of General Pre-University Education and its Objectives’ (Beirut: Lebanese Official Gazette [Presidential Decree no. 10227]), 5 August 1977.

11 The Lebanese public educational system offers the students the choice of English or French as a second language, the first being Arabic. Official schools have, accordingly, parallel corresponding divisions of each grade. These chapters resort to illustrations of reproductive organs and their functions and to photographic illustrations of manifestations of genetic inheritance (photos of identical twins), symptoms of one STD (the hand of a person afflicted with syphilis), adolescent interest in the opposite sex (a photo of two young male and two female adolescents talking to each other in the playground).

12 The terminology and expressions that describe reproduction, particularly those that describe reproductive organs, lend themselves to vulgarisms (as seems to be the case worldwide!). Thus, educational officials work hard to seek a scientific or ‘polite’ terminology to aid teachers and students in comfortably discussing human sexuality. See for example Kutlat Al-Wafa’a Lilmuqawamah (literally ‘Loyalty to the Resistance’ Parliamentary Group – referring to resistance to the Israeli occupation) ‘Remarks on Some Subjects of the New Curriculum,’ a letter addressed to the Lebanese Minister of National Education and Youth and Sports, Archives of the Department of Common Managerial Interest (Ministry of Education), no. 5522/11, 30 June 1999.

13 This approach to sex education is termed ‘preventive’ when compared with the declared objectives and contents of some of the sex education curricula adopted by schools in industrial countries, which go beyond ‘teaching about sex’ to ‘exploring sexuality,’ reflecting these societies’ liberal values. Some of these curricula have stated goals of helping individuals achieve sexual mastery in their choices and behavior, within a context almost entirely free of value judgments. See, for example, Patricia Schiller, Creative Approach to Sex Education and Counseling, 2nd ed. (New York: Association Press, 1977): 24.

14 Author interview with the Minister of Education, who is referring to the religious leaders and the President of the Republic, thus relieving himself of the responsibility of the decision taken.
30 June 1999 to the Ministry of Education explaining its rationale for this request.\textsuperscript{15} The Arfan Tawhidiyya (an educational institution of Druze affiliation) followed suit.\textsuperscript{16} Both of these sectarian groups run their own school systems for intermediate classes, which this curriculum addresses.\textsuperscript{17} These parties' open declaration of their disapproval does not mean that they are the only ones who oppose the high school sex education curriculum; others, some of whom actually participated in designing the curriculum, are ambivalent about its adoption. For these (Christian schools, mainly), the open opposition declared by various parties and religious image leaders spared them the embarrassment of taking a stand that might blemish their 'liberal' public image.\textsuperscript{18}

There are various alleged rationales for this opposition. Kutlat Al-Wafa\‘a Lil Mugawama objects on the grounds that students aged 12–14 years will be studying topics that ‘provoke them to perversion.’ After listing the curriculum’s topics in its letter to the Minister of Education, this group urges the government (through the Minister) to note the ‘the content’s bluntness in its headings, so one can imagine the details!’ The group argues that the curriculum is on par with vulgar advertisements and pornographic films.\textsuperscript{19}

As for the Arfan Tawhidiyya, representatives insist that classroom study of human reproduction and sexuality conflicts with religious and moral values because it encourages freedom and a light-hearted attitude toward sexual practices. They also claim that this education orients the student’s attention toward the body and should thus be replaced by religious education. ‘School education should focus on the spirit and the mind, perpetuating their triumph in the battle with instincts to achieve humans’ transcendence to their higher state.’

Though the Minister of Education asked officials to formulate an adequate response to these two letters, a Presidential Decree (No. 2066) was nevertheless

\textsuperscript{15} Kutlat Al-Wafa\‘a Lilmukawamah, ‘Remarks on Some Subjects of the New Curriculum.’ The group represents the Hezbollah political party in the Lebanese parliament. Educational specialists believe that this party draws on the prestige it has gained in resisting the Israeli occupation to impose its point of view on the government in various fields, education being one of them.

\textsuperscript{16} Al-‘Ir\‘an Altawhidiah Institution, ‘A Letter Addressed to CERD Regarding School Sex Education,’ 30 May 1999 (Beirut: CERD Archives, no. 144/ 86). The Druze is one of 19 official religious sects of the multi-sectarian communities of Lebanon. It is one of four Muslim sects. Their affiliates make up less than 15% of the total Lebanese population.

\textsuperscript{17} Sectarian communities’ right to establish schools and to teach their own religious dogma (and follow a ‘non-Lebanese’ educational system alongside the Lebanese if they so choose) is sanctified by the Lebanese Constitution. As such almost all sectarian communities have their own school system, and many have their own universities. Sectarian schools enroll more than 60% of Lebanese students.

\textsuperscript{18} This was asserted to me by the director of the Arfan Tawhidiyya Institution; he claimed to have consulted with other religious educational institutions (Catholic schools, Al-Makassid [Sunnite], Al-Aamlieh [Shiite], Al-Mahdi Schools [Shiite], etc.), and said that each of these religious educational institutions encouraged him to write to CERD objecting to the sex education curriculum (author interview).

\textsuperscript{19} Kutlat Al-Wafa\‘a Lilmukawamah, ‘Remarks on Some Subjects of the New Curriculum.’
issued, ordering the ‘complete elimination of the chapter on the reproduction of life in humans’ from the Life and Earth Sciences curriculum in the eighth grade, and adopting it for the twelfth grade (the last pre-university grade). 20 The rationales for removing sex education from intermediate education and adopting it for older students are based on the Constitution (which specifies the pre-university academic curricula of public schools); on the suggestion of the Minister of Education; on a draft prepared by the Advisory Council, and on approval by the Government Ministerial Cabinet. 21

Prominent among the arguments defending the aforementioned Presidential Decree was the position of the Minister of Education. While the Minister consulted educational specialists charged with approving the new school curricula including the sex education curriculum, documents show that the Minister bowed to what he considered to be the ‘desire’ of the majority in Lebanese society. In an interview the Education Minister noted that religious organizations, as represented by their leaders, expressed opposition to school sex education. 22 The minister argued that he had no choice in the face of this majority opposition, and asserted that in fact the sex education curriculum was simply postponed, to be incorporated into all Lebanese Baccalaureate level divisions and sections (grade 12). 23

Responses to Elimination of the Sex Education Curriculum

Let us turn now to consider the responses to this situation of the various educational, health, and civil institutions involved. The few voices that objected to depriving students aged 12–14 of the sex education curriculum argued on several fronts. 24 For one thing, there was dismay concerning the arbitrariness of the mechanisms

20 The response provided to the Ministry of Education explained the need for sex education in contemporary Lebanese society, and restated the headings of the suggested curriculum and their presentation methods, which are far from pornographic. Mustapha Yaghi, ‘A Letter Addressed to the Al-Ifran Altawhidiha Institution,’ 14 June 1999 (Beirut: CERD Archives, no. 144/ ξ); and author interview with Sami Aboulmouna, educational director of the Arfan Altawhidiha Institution, Mount Lebanon (Chouf), 12 April 2004. Presidential Decree 2066, 76.

21 Mohammad Youssef Baydoun (Minister of Education, Youth and Sports), author interview, Beirut, 21 May 2000.

22 See footnotes 17 and 19.

23 Mohammad Youssef Baydoun, author interview, 21 May 2000.

24 Radio, television and print media are the main channels for expressing the often-conflicting views in Lebanese society. Except for extraordinary situations, the media is generally open to all parties to express views on social issues. It is thus significant that coverage of the sex education issue was very slim, in fact about 10 times more media coverage was directed at the debate over religious education in schools, which occurred in the same time period (judging from one local newspaper’s archives – As-Safir Daily). In other coverage, a prominent local NGO convened an entire day of discussion over the religious education debate, which was attended by various religious, secular, and educational officials, but ignored the sex education issue. Perhaps the most important dialogue on sex education occurred on the Sireh Wa Infatahet [Let’s Talk Since You Brought it Up], Future TV, 24 November 1999
characterizing the elimination decision. Supporters of the sex education curriculum denounced the politicians’ use of the crude privileges of their political posts to override three years of work by advisory committees of CERD. Journalists, academicians, and social and health activists accused the Minister of Education of valuing his political and electoral interests over the educational interest of students.\textsuperscript{25} Representatives of religious educational institutions were also accused of abandoning democracy by declining to try and influence their colleagues in the Advisory Educational Committee through dialogue, resorting instead to political pressure.\textsuperscript{26} There was criticism as well of the government’s yielding to religious officials who in most cases did not have the scientific qualifications for making pedagogical decisions.\textsuperscript{27}

Through the media, sex education supporters addressed the Lebanese public to try and clarify the urgency of responding to the societal needs for such a program, arguing that:

\begin{itemize}
  \item Statistics collected from partial qualitative studies, some claimed, indicate that Lebanese youth tend to engage in sexual activity at an early age.\textsuperscript{28} Others indicate that the majority of mothers are ignorant of sexual facts, which makes most families unqualified to teach sex education.\textsuperscript{29}
  \item Advocates of school sex education refer to the single quantitative and qualitative study conducted by CERD (1999), the experiences of health counselors, and anecdotal reports from the hotlines of some AIDS awareness organizations to demonstrate the desperate need of young Lebanese adolescents of both sexes for information related to their bodies and to sex education at younger ages in general.\textsuperscript{30}
  \item There have been assertions that children must be armed against the sexual violations – incestuous and otherwise – which are on the rise in Lebanese society.\textsuperscript{31} This requires
\end{itemize}

which featured some of the educational and health experts involved in developing the sex education curriculum, and opposition groups.

\textsuperscript{25} G.H.S., ‘Minister of Education Eliminates Sex Education,’ \textit{As-Safir Daily}, 9 September 1999.

\textsuperscript{26} Toufic Osseiran, General Director of the Lebanese Family Planning Association, on the TV talk show \textit{Sireh Wa Infatahet}, 4 November 1999.

\textsuperscript{27} Michel As-Sabaa, ‘Our Contribution to Ideological Globalization,’ \textit{As-Safir Daily}, 22 July 1999.

\textsuperscript{28} And in most cases this occurs outside of marriage, as surveys indicate a rise in the marital age for both sexes. Thus, according to the WHO (Elissar Razi, Coordinator of Health Activities for the World Health Organization, on the TV talk show \textit{Sireh Was Infatahet}, 24 November 1999) depriving students of sex education places youths within a ‘high risk’ category.

\textsuperscript{29} Toufic Osseiran, the head of the Family Planning Association – the first and most active of its kind in Lebanon speaking on the TV talk show \textit{Sireh Was Infatahet}, 24 November 1999. He cited a population study conducted by the association in the mid-seventies in Az-Zahrani, one of the six Lebanese Muhavazat (geographical region).

\textsuperscript{30} Author interviews: Toufic Osseiran, General Secretary of the Family Planning Association, Beirut, 3 April 2000; and Nada Al-Agar Naja, coordinator of health and environmental education, World Health Organization (WHO), Beirut, 5 April 2000.

\textsuperscript{31} Prominent advocate of early sex education Marie Therese Khair Badawi, a psychoanalyst and a researcher on sexuality speaking on the TV talk show \textit{Sireh Was Infatahet} (24 November 1999).
lowering the age at which sex education is provided, rather than eliminating it during puberty and postponing it as has happened.

In fact many private schools (and a few religious ones) chose to disregard the decree to eliminate sex education. Some of these private and religious schools teach French curricula alongside Lebanese official curricula and offer, accordingly, a form of sex education. Others, some (but not all) of which are Anglophone, teach the eliminated chapters on human reproduction and supplement them with lectures on sex education, presented by medical, health, or psychology experts (author interviews). 32

Themes of the Polemic

The public ‘discussion’ between the designers of the sex education curricula and sex education supporters on one hand, and opposition groups on another – was in fact not a discussion but a polemic between two fixed positions. 33 This polemic is characterized by a notable tactic on both sides: avoiding the essence of the other’s argument and ignoring his referential framework. An example of this is opponents’ singular defense of ‘spiritual and societal values,’ (which are allegedly non-existent in proponents’ reality), and the sex education proponents’ focus on ‘scientific facts,’ (which opponents putatively have no access to). Thus values are claimed by opponents to belong to them and only them, while scientific fact is claimed by proponents to belong exclusively to them. In the same vein opponents, specifically religious leaders, ignore the reality of those whom they claim to represent, particularly if that disregard serves their argument, while sex education proponents focus on the status quo without sufficiently addressing the role of religious values in influencing and possibly transforming that status quo. These kinds of blinders on both sides further obstruct dialogue and negotiation. An analysis of this polemic will provide some insight into the issues underlying the debate in the cultural space of the Lebanese society.

32 Author interviews: Diana Abulabdeh, biology teacher and school counselor at the International College, Beirut, 5 May 2000; Claude Ghrayib, school counselor at the Lycee Français, Beirut, 26 May 2000; Robert Rizk, teacher at Université Saint Joseph and a school counselor at Sacre Coeur, Mount Lebanon (Kfar Hbab), 21 May 2000; Munir Chamoun, teacher, Université Saint Joseph and a psychoanalyst, Beirut, 6 May 2000.

33 It goes without saying that sex education everywhere has been a hotly debated issue. In the USA, for example, its endorsement required debate, opinion polls, and general and local conferences – professional and civil – as well as diligent efforts from sex education defenders and opponents to gather and organize support. Sex education was only endorsed and adopted gradually in each of the states in the US, as its proponents became a majority. It is worth noting that it was religious organizations in the US that most vehemently campaigned against sex education in schools. See David R. Stronk, Discussing Sex in the Classroom: Reading for Teachers (Washington D.C.: Natural Science Teachers Association, 1982).
The Need for Sex Education: A Reality of Lebanese Society or an Intrusion by the ‘Promiscuous West’?

Supporters of school sex education claim that their stance is based on the realities of contemporary life, which have rendered conventional (traditional) familial and ethical restraints insufficient. They argue that contemporary dilemmas related to youth sexuality have pervaded Lebanese society, and that the possibility for limiting their negative impact depends on arming youth with adequate information and behavioral skills.

Those who oppose sex education argue that social problems around youth sexuality are not something in any way relevant to Lebanese culture. Based on their assumption that school sex education is recommended by the UN organizations consultants, they argue that incorporating sex education in the school curriculum is a surrender to the dominance of the corrupt, ‘promiscuous West’ which will only lead to an entrenchment of immorality within Lebanese society.

‘Knowledge Restraints’ Versus ‘Knowledge Provokes Sexual Activity’

The sex education curriculum includes a scientific foundation of the anatomical, physiological, and functional biology of human reproduction. This content is based on the hypothesis that scientific knowledge is a necessary component – though insufficient on its own – of responsible and low-risk adolescence sex behavior. The perspective is that providing students with scientific information about their sexual and biological instincts and urges increases the probability that students will choose safe sexual practices. The information provided includes scientific terminology, illustrations, discussion of natural functions and discussions of various forms of birth control, safe sex tools, and the means for preventing transmission of STDs and such.

The described biological foundation of the sex education program was the basis for the attack on the curriculum by opponents, who argue that crude and detailed discussion of human reproduction in an educational context leads to moral perversion, because it stimulates the instincts and provokes promiscuous behavior.34

Self-Control Versus Religious Coercion

The sex education curriculum aims at training students to acquire decision-making skills and techniques by drawing upon their mental, emotional, relational, and ethical resources. It aspires, furthermore, to motivate students to develop these resources in order to consolidate their decision-making abilities.

Sex education opponents are solidly convinced that pubescent students at the onset of adolescence do not possess the moral and behavioral discipline necessary to curb their latent instinctual urges. They further argue that moral and behavioral

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restraint cannot be personalized; it is imperative that it should be religiously-based, as (they argue) ‘rules’ that are tied to the sacred are inherently and necessarily coercive and thus highly effective in regulating sexual behavior.

A Unified Target Population Versus Sectarian Groups

The official school curriculum was designed to address students of the different sectarian communities in Lebanon as a unified audience. This concept of a group, homogenous in its common condition of puberty, has been a target issue for opposition groups, each of which argues that the curriculum’s framework is irrelevant to the needs of students from ‘their sect’ in terms of degree of knowledge and information, and in terms of approach and timing.

Opposition groups present arguments closely tied to the particularities of their respective sects. The essence of these arguments revolves around a basic postulate: that the justifications and guidelines for teaching sex education in the school curriculum are irrelevant for their context:

- One Druze religious cleric claims that the lifestyle of his community (primarily rural-dwellers) is characterized by abstinence, and particularly abstinence from excessive sexual activity.35
- A Shiite religious cleric and manager of a chain of schools objects on the basis his community rejects open discussion of sex. He argues that sex education in the classroom will only undermine the foundation on which group members are socialized, and furthermore ‘deprives parents of authority over their children.’36
- Most of the religious clerics and religious school senior administrators emphasize that the religious moral and behavioral restraints that characterize their own sect is an assured guarantee against risky sexual practices. ‘Perhaps youths from other sects need sex education;’ their own youth, each sect claims, don’t!37
- A Catholic school official suggests that a distinction be made between the topics, approaches, and means by which the subject is taught based on social level and region ‘since it is impossible to approach the subject with urban students and rural ones in the same way.’38

35 One of the educators in this community boasts that the late Kamal Jumblat (a prominent Druze leader), the role model and behavioral reference for his group, did not have sex with his wife except once, and that was to conceive his son Walid – heir to the current Druze leadership (author interview with Druze educator Sami Aboulmouna, educational director of the Arfan Attawhidiah Institution, Mount Lebanon (Chouf), 12 April 2004.

36 Moustapha Kassir, educational director of Al-Mahdi Schools, Beirut, 2 May 2000.

37 Author interviews: Sami Aboulmouna, ibid., Moustapha Kassir, ibid., Kamel Dallal, faculty member at the Lebanese American University and head of education department at Al Makassed Al-Islamiah Association, Beirut, 2 June 2000; and Amira Bourghol, religious counselor at Batoul High School, Beirut, 20 May 2000.

38 Monsieur Zeidan, interviewed by Saada Alwa in ‘Sex Education: A Scientific Necessity or an Invitation to Promiscuity?’ As-Safir Daily, 13 July 1999.
Empirical Data Versus Ideological Assumptions

The ‘Education for AIDS Prevention’ project included a CERD qualitative and quantitative study (done on a sample selected by quota from schools in Beirut comprising students of three age groups ranging between 12 and 15, as well as mothers and teachers of students of these age groups); the aim of the study was to inquire into youth behavior and health generally in order to identify topics to be included in school curricula. The final recommendations resulting from the qualitative analysis of 27 focus groups expressed the need for sex education.\textsuperscript{39} It is important to note that these recommendations emerged from spontaneous discussions of the focus groups, without the intervention of their respective facilitators.\textsuperscript{40} Moreover, in private schools, which do offer limited sex education, the process usually begins with asking students to anonymously write down and submit questions of any type that they wish to discuss. Teachers and administrators said in interviews that questions about sex and sexuality always figure prominently.\textsuperscript{41} As well, the Lebanese Family Planning Association, which has sponsored discussions with youth on diverse matters for over 30 years, has documented a growing and urgent need for sex education, based on the response of young people to its lectures and activities.\textsuperscript{42}

It is clear that while supporters of sex education have been methodological in their documentation of the need for sex-education, based on expressed and documented need, opponents – primarily Muslim clerics – derive their arguments against sex education from reiterated, stereotypical and undocumented claims, such as: ‘No one can deny that sexual knowledge leads to sexual practices at an early age;’ ‘Language and picture are always provocative to practice,’ or ‘Asking questions related to sex provokes and incites practice,’ etc.\textsuperscript{43}

Some of the opposition groups declare that they do not need studies investigating student needs, because they can rely on logic to make their own decisions. The Shiite sheikh delegated by the Hezbollah-affiliated parliamentary group Kutlat al-wafa’ lilmukawamah to write a letter to the government expressing opposition to school sex education argues that divine religions prohibit extramarital sex and hence there is no need to teach this to unmarried students.\textsuperscript{44} A Sunni cleric (head of religious

\textsuperscript{39} CERD, \textit{Health and Environmental Education: The Results of Qualitative and Quantitative studies of 1998} (Beirut, 1999).

\textsuperscript{40} The issue of sex education was not specifically addressed by the researchers; rather, those interviewed were simply asked what in general was missing from school curricula.

\textsuperscript{41} Author interviews: Claude Ghayyib, 26 May 2000; Robert Rizk, 21 May 2000; and Munir Chamoun, ibid.

\textsuperscript{42} Toufic Osseiran (General Secretary of Family Planning Association), author interview, Beirut, 3 April 2000; and Archives of Lebanese Family Planning Association, ‘The Final Report of the Round Table on Dimensions of Consciousness Raising about School Sex Education,’ 8 November 1997, Beit Mery, Lebanon.

\textsuperscript{43} Author interviews: Sami Aboulmoula; Moustapha Kassir, Toufic Osseiran; Kamel Dallal (Head of the Education Department at the Al Makassed Al-Islamiah Association), Beirut, 2 June 2000; and Ousama Haddad (Al Makassed Al-Islamiah Association), Beirut, 19 May 2000.

\textsuperscript{44} Author interview.
education in the most prominent Sunni school chain in Lebanon – Al Makasid) argues that the target groups for sex education are below the current average age for marriage in Lebanon and therefore such education is unacceptable.45

These and similar arguments assume that all students below the average age of first marriage do not need any knowledge on sexuality, so there is no need for sex education for adolescent students. It is further argued by Muslim clerics who oppose sex education that it is sufficient to adhere to the exercise of taharah to be observed starting with the onset of puberty, and to follow the teachings of the Qur’an and hadith (the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad), which strongly oppose all forms of sexual deviation and, to paraphrase several clerics interviewed ‘arm the child against adult sexual molestations and violations.’46

In interviews some sex education opponents relied on personal observations and anecdotes as conclusive evidence in support of their viewpoint. One Druze cleric recounted that proper child-rearing meant that his adolescent boy was able to resist the temptation of internet pornography though he was certainly able to access it. These observations lead the cleric to the conclusion that there really is no need for school-based sex education.47 A Shiite cleric told the author that he himself could satisfactorily provide all the sex education his daughter required, implying that sex education should be left to parents.48

‘Sex:’ Terminological Tension and the Power of Words

Much of the debate between supporters and opponents of sex education is predicated on terminology. ‘Sex’ is perhaps the term that generates the most disagreement; it is used by proponents of sex education in a comprehensive sense, to refer to all the processes, systems and behaviors (and all their mental, physical and emotional health implications) related to human reproduction.49 For sex education opponents, sex is defined in its narrowest sense to refer to intercourse between an adult male and an adult female.

While the sex education terminology in the discourse of educators and health professionals and activists is assumed by proponents to convey a neutral, scientific message, the same terminology in opponents’ discourse seems to belong to a value-

45 Author interview.
46 In this context taharah – literally purity – refers to the Islamic ritual of washing oneself following intercourse, involuntary ejaculation or menstruation.
47 Author interview, Sami Aboulmouna, educational director of the Arfan Attawhidah Institution, Mount Lebanon (Chouf), 12 April 2004.
48 Moustapha Kassir, educational director of Al-Mahdi Schools, Beirut, 2 May 2000.
49 In the television talk show cited earlier the psychoanalyst (Badawi) argued that sexuality in children is a scientifically proven fact, while medical doctor Nizar Rida denied childhood sexuality existed except in ‘the perverted Freudian mind.’ Badawi argued that a child’s ‘Where did I come from?’ question should be addressed using a comprehensive definition of ‘sex,’ while the medical doctor restricted the meaning of ‘sex’ to adult sexual feelings and behaviors.
laden semantic field engaged with morality, vice, corruption and the opposition of East and West.

Simple Dualities Versus Complex Realities

In attempting to illustrate the disagreements that frame the debate on sex education in schools in Lebanon rather simplistically it may appear that there are basically two dialectically opposed poles; however the matter is more complex. In reality there are more nuanced perspectives all along the spectrum in this debate, and there are representatives from both sides who ‘off the record’ express understanding and even agreement with their opponents; this is especially true of some of those who publicly oppose sex education in the schools.50 I have noted in interviews conducted with representatives from both sides a decline in the intensity of the oppositional tone of religious authorities and, equally, a greater willingness to negotiate on the part of CERD officials and NGO activists.51

Despite the earlier characterization of a unified opposition to sex-education there is in fact a lack of consensus between the various groups opposing sex-education, as well as a lack of internal harmony within each group. In terms of motives and rationales the respective spiritual leaders of the Sunni sect, the Druze sect, and the

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50 While it is not possible to absolutely reference such a declaration I can tell the reader that in more than one instance a hand has reached across the desk to turn off the tape recorder so that the interviewee could speak ‘off the record’ to me. One of the secular spokespersons I interviewed told me he avoids participating in television talk shows with religious leaders, and disregards their televised diatribes, because he is fed up with their affirmations to him, ‘off the record,’ that in fact they agree with most of what he is saying about these sensitive topics! This interviewee declared that he has been told by religious figures ‘off the record’ that they simply cannot publicly support his pro-sex education views because it is inappropriate for them to publicly make such a declaration.

51 For example, the Shiite cleric who was delegated by Hezbollah Kutlat Al-Wafa'a Lil Muqawama to write the oft cited letter to the government demanding the elimination of the ‘human reproduction’ chapter, and elsewhere called for elimination of the entire curriculum did not oppose (after discussion) the oral teaching of some form of sex education at an appropriate time, through appropriate methods and by competent teachers following specific moral guidelines reinforced with certain moral restraints. On the other side, the director in charge of ‘AIDS Prevention’ at the CERD project said that approval for sex-education in the school curricula was not given the attention it deserved from CERD and the Ministry of Education because there were much graver matters to address in the course of transition to a new curriculum. Mustapha Yaghi, CERD General Coordinator of Sciences said in an interview with me that one matter that should have received attention was an effort to negotiate with the religious representatives who resigned from the CERD advisory committee, to try and achieve consensus on the sex education curriculum issue. As well, Catholic schools do in fact teach a form of sex education and were among the first to endorse a ‘sex awareness’ program in the early 1960s under the supervision of Dr. Munir Chamoun. Despite this, Catholic leaders did not hesitate to ‘encourage’ the educational director of the Druze Arfan Schools to present his fierce objections to sex education (author interview with Sami Aboulmouna, educational director of the Arfan Attawhidia Institution, Mount Lebanon [Chouf]).
Shiite sect vary in their positions, as is evident in the few published newspaper interviews highlighting the views of prominent figures in these sects.  

For his part, the current president of CERD, upon accepting his post in 1999 (thus he did not participate in the process of formulation of the new curricula) announced his reservations concerning the new official curricula. Though convinced of students’ right to the sexual knowledge appropriate to their age, he believes that the taboos prevalent in Lebanese society suggest delaying the teaching of the new sex-education curriculum to a later stage. Since CERD has jurisdiction over education and curricula development, including sex-education, this statement has important implications.

The opposition to sex education in schools dismisses students’ right to scientific knowledge of their own bodies and bodily functions and to related health and prophylactic measures. Opposition groups proclaim, implicitly or explicitly, that such knowledge falls within the realm of religious values. However, though each opposition group states that their youth constituents are well-armed against risky sexual practices through the religious constraints engendered by their respective faiths, at times they seem less than certain about the youths’ immunity. This uncertainty stems from an acknowledged inability to control the inflow of sexual and sex-related material through media and electronic communications channels. Leaders of sects opposed to sex education expect the government to find ways to address this formidable problem; at the same time there is evident hesitation to unequivocally denounce sex education in schools as long as there are no alternate ways to address media and other exposure to the broader realities of adolescence in the twenty-first century.

Sex education supporters are also not without ambivalence; their uncertainty stems from their inability to explain the failure of educational specialists in religious institutions to sense the potential dangers of youth ignorance of sexual matters. Though sex education supporters are certain that the effort expended in designing the sex education curriculum was characterized by scientific methodology, they are uncertain whether the effort expended to prepare Lebanese society for curriculum implementation was sufficient.

52 Interviews by the journalist Saada Alwa with prominent religious authorities included the President of the Druze High Court of Appeals, who stated ‘there is no need for sex education in schools, for our ancestors married and reproduced and lived their lives without sex education’; whereas Mohammed Hussein Fadlallah, a high – maybe the highest – Shiite religious authority in Lebanon claimed he welcomes sex education ‘under the right conditions.’ Another prominent figure from the Shiite sect, Mohammed Hassan Al-Ameen, asserted that ‘eliminating sex education in curricula is like burying one’s head in the sand’ (See As-Safir Daily, 13 July 1999). These two Shiite positions differ markedly from the perspective mentioned earlier of Kutlat Al-Wafa’ Lil Muqawama, the parliamentary Shiite group footnoted above which utterly opposes any form of sex education in schools.

53 Author interview with Nimr Freiba, head of the Educational Center for Research and Development (CERD), Beirut, 10 April 2000.

54 The Lebanese people are not surprised when a new governmental official eliminates projects launched by his predecessor or freezes decisions taken during the rule of an earlier government. In fact this seems to be standard practice.
Beyond the Polemic

Discordant Values and Discrepant Approaches

In the formulation of the sex education curriculum, in the mechanism of its elimination, and in the nature of the debates between a broad spectrum of educational specialists, concerned religious leaders and intellectuals and academicians, we can nevertheless delineate two opposing approaches to dealing with the winds of change blowing through the Lebanese society.

Whereas one group tends towards adopting new tools and pedagogical approaches to address contemporary issues, the other group chooses to resort to its educational-cultural storehouse (namely religion), claiming that this storehouse of traditional ethical and moral guidelines is sufficient, and in fact indispensable and superior, for dealing with any issues contemporary society presents.

It comes as no surprise that the issue of sex education engendered reaction from religious leaders and communities; this is a well-documented phenomenon predicated on a foundational theme of all the major religions, that the moral/spiritual self is constructed through suppressing, and redirecting or regulating, primal sexual urges.\(^\text{55}\) Such socialization internalizes taboos and in theory dispenses with the need for external mechanisms for regulating human sexual behavior.\(^\text{56}\) In psychoanalytic theory this process constitutes a determinant factor in the acquisition of the individual’s humanity, and the moral order that frames this process is closely tied to the culture of the group.\(^\text{57}\)

In Lebanon, opposition groups have objected to the adoption of a borrowed framework for socializing Lebanese youth – namely sex education. In their opinion, this education (even in its simplest, most scientific approach) is contaminated with the values of the society that produced it (‘the West’) and alien to the values of Lebanese society.

However, a closer look at the actual substance of the material being debated reveals a degree of congruence between the values diffused within the suggested sex education curriculum and the religious values proclaimed by opposition. Religious leaders’ opposition to the curriculum seems on analysis more related to the source of the material and the identities of those who support and promote it, than to the actual substance of the program. That is, according to opposition groups if the curriculum as it stands is presented as science, and taught by Life Sciences instructors, then sex education promotes promiscuity and perversion; however, if taught by religious officials within the framework of an authoritative religious structure (and resorting to prohibition and intimidation), a certain form of sex education does not conflict

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with religious values. Perhaps religious leaders’ sharp opposition to sex education in schools stems from their objection to being deprived of jurisdiction, and consequently of their authority to represent ‘the sacred’ in managing a basic aspect of human existence.

The issue of sex education of Lebanese youth at the age of puberty (and onset of adolescence) falls within a broader context of recent debates within Lebanese society. Among these are: the debate on civil marriage, the fight for women’s rights, the campaign against violence against women, and the battles for regulations that prohibit child labor, child abuse, and torture. It is worth noting that it was inconceivable previously that these and other similar topics be articulated in public. Their exposure over the last few years in talk shows and features broadcasted by Lebanese television channels is a novelty and is not uninfluenced by western media.\(^{58}\) Many of these debates reflect the general struggle between ‘modernity’ and ‘tradition,’ a recurrent struggle in the age of globalization. They are furthermore characterized by a current global phenomenon that many traditional societies are grappling with: the transferring of familial issues, historically kept behind closed doors, from the ‘private’ to the ‘public’ sphere.\(^{59}\)

Adolescents are still, in Lebanese and Eastern cultures, subject to the hegemony of the familial/‘private’ sphere, arenas that are a stronghold for religious authority. The ‘private’ sphere is in fact regulated and legislated by the various religious sects in Lebanon, each of which has legal jurisdiction over issues relating to marriage and the family, including divorce, child custody, inheritance etc. The religious sects and their institutions fiercely defend this jurisdiction. This was particularly revealed in recent debates around civil marriage in Lebanon, in 1998, when religious leaders attacked civil marriage supporters as immoral and corrupted by Western influence, and roused opposition from the pulpit through fear-mongering.\(^{60}\) The reaction of religious leaders opposed to sex education in schools was not, as shown above, much different. However, the size and scope of the reaction/opposition in this case was relatively weak (if compared to the reaction of the religious authorities to the demands of civil marriage advocates), and proportionate (in size and scope) to the reactions of supporters of the sex education curriculum, primarily because the debate in this case was aborted by the government’s quick fulfillment of religious leaders’ demands. This is not surprising as religious authorities of all the official sects in Lebanon have the historical authority, political status, infrastructures and networks to hold sway in most of Lebanon’s recent civil struggles.

School-based sex education is used in many developed as well as developing countries as part of a larger strategy to combat urgent problems, including teenage

\(^{58}\) It is not uncommon that the day after one of these talk shows at least one religious authority voices discontent in the media and demands action be taken by the political authority to ban or at least monitor such talk.

\(^{59}\) The slogan ‘from Private to Public’ is voiced, implicitly but sometimes explicitly, by most advocacy NGO platforms that deal with these issues. See for instance Azzah Shararrah Baydoun, *Women in Non-Governmental Organizations: Lebanese Women between Serving Others and Doing Justice to Themselves* [In Arabic.] (Beirut: Dar An-Nahar, 2002).

\(^{60}\) Ahmad Baydoun, *Nineteen Salvaged Groups: The Lebanese in the Battle for Civil Marriage* [In Arabic] (Beirut: Dar An-Nahar, 1999).
pregnancy outside marriage, sexually transmitted diseases (the foremost being HIV), and population growth. These issues are well-documented threats to national development and health, and many developing nations have adopted wide-scale, youth-oriented, sex-education programs, adapted to the framework of prevailing cultural and social values, including specific strategies – such as school sex education – to shift social perceptions regarding sexuality issues from the realm of ‘dishonor and shame’ to the realm of ‘science and control.’

In Lebanese society, HIV/AIDS is considered by health professionals and educators a serious problem not because it is widespread nor due to prevalent sexual behaviors as the case may be in other societies, but (or so they claim), because of the nature of the disease which does not respect national boundaries in this age of transnational traffic of people. Secular educators and health professionals argue the danger of turning a blind eye to this reality and propose sex education as a valuable tool for dealing with the risk posed to Lebanese youth in contemporary society. Opponents to sex education argue that religiously embedded value systems and moral codes that govern youth sexual conduct remain highly effective in all the religious communities in Lebanon and thus there is no urgent need to replace them with school-based sex education.

Unfortunately studies documenting the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in Lebanese society lack accuracy and comprehensiveness; thus educators and health workers lack the information base necessary to assign the matter’s urgency level, challenge the monopoly of religious authority over this arena, and convincingly argue the need for sex-education. In short, wide-spread social support for school-based sex-education is impeded by a perceived lack of urgency based on a dearth of hard statistics regarding youth sexual behavior in Lebanon. This in turn means it is difficult to organize and mobilize the different forces that are aware of the urgent need to address these issues, namely parental councils in public schools, health educators, psychological counselors, life sciences teachers, some religious officials and non-governmental organizations working in related fields.

Lebanese society has a history of ignoring growing problems until they become dangerously urgent. But while journalists may voice opinions on the ‘sad’ state of Lebanese civil society as manifested by the battle over school sex-education, and academics can express ‘amazement’ at their society’s inability to solve its

61 Mustapha Yaghi (General Coordinator of Sciences in [CERD]), author interview, Beirut, 18 April 2000; and Nada Al-Agar Naja (Coordinator of Health and Environmental Education, World Health Organization), author interview, Beirut, 5 April 2000.

62 The most salient ‘ignored’ problem is of course ‘Political Sectarianism’ which divides the state and political institutions positions and ‘bounties’ among the 19 religious sects of Lebanon in proportion to the alleged (never confirmed due to absence of population census) percentage of the population of each sect. It is common knowledge that sectarianism is a major contributor to the corruption and inefficiency of the state and has rendered Lebanese society extremely vulnerable to schisms exploding periodically in the form of civil wars. See for instance Ahmad Baydoun, The Adventures of Otherness: the Lebanese as Arabs, Sects and Phoenicians [In Arabic] (Beirut: Dar An-Nahar, 2005).

problems, educators cannot afford either the luxury of ‘amazement’ nor the latitude of contemplation over the ‘sad state of affairs of the civil society,’ for they are de jure responsible for the prompt search for concrete and satisfactory solutions to this problem. Perhaps a first step in finding such solutions is to lift the verbal exchange that has characterized this issue from the swamp of polemic to an actual substantive debate anchored in facts and responsive to real needs.