

Outing the sexual taboo

Unveiling issues of sexuality among university students in Lebanon

Open public discussion of sensitive issues and long-standing taboos like sexual habits and perceptions is uncommon in Lebanon and there is a lack of thorough research on the subject. However, a recent conference by the American University of Beirut on 'Sexuality in the Arab World' tackled some of those topics, including sexual attitudes, behaviors and virginity. An opinion poll conducted by *Information International* for the American University of Beirut Medical Center between 19-21 November 2003, explored university students' perceptions on those issues, with a margin of error of $\pm 2.6\%$.

The poll found that the majority of male university students, or 61%, approve of sex before marriage, compared to a much lower 27.3% of female students. The students in the study were distributed equally by gender and by university over the following five institutions (in each university, a random sample of students was selected from the various faculties and majors):

- American University of Beirut (AUB)
- Université St. Joseph (USJ)
- Beirut Arab University (BAU)
- Lebanese University 1 (LU-Campus 1)
- Lebanese University 2 (LU-Campus 2)

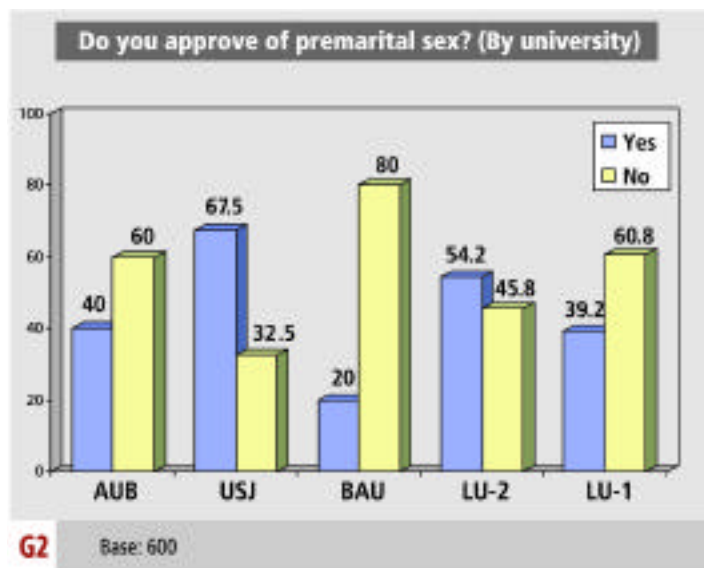
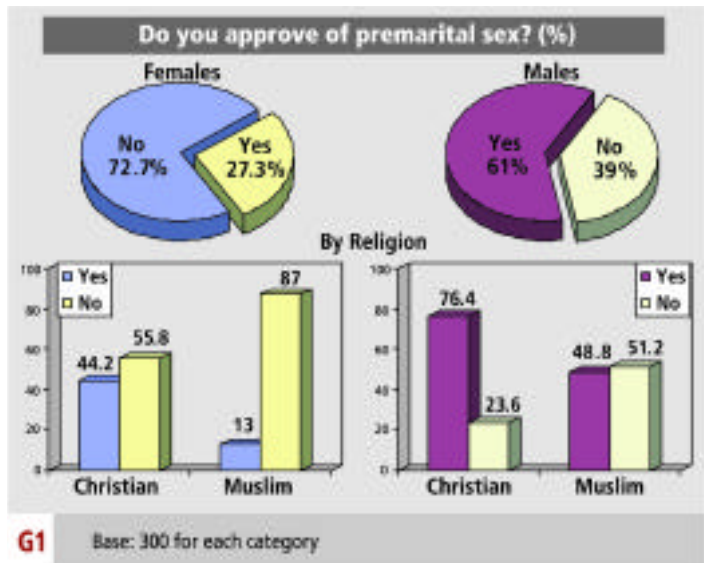
Gender and religious differences

Gender and religious differences were detected in the survey, with females taking a more conservative approach to sexual issues than males, and Christians having more liberal views than Muslims. In terms of religion, 44.2% of Christian females and 76.4% of Christian males approved of sex before marriage, compared with 13% of Muslim females and 48.8% of Muslim males, as shown in **Graph 1**. The survey also showed that 46.6% of respondents pray daily, out of which 36.1% approved of premarital sex, while 63.9% did not.

Views of premarital sex

The institution with the most tolerant attitude toward premarital sex was the USJ, with almost 68% of its students (both male and female) approving, in contrast to BAU, which was the least liberal, with a 20% approval rating, as shown in **Graph 2**. The Lebanese University (Campus 2) was the second most tolerant, followed by the AUB and the Lebanese University (Campus 1). Those who approved of premarital sex supported it on the following grounds (please note that only the 'yes' responses are shown):

	Females	Males
■ Out of love	86.6%	80.9%
■ Out of physical need	50.0%	70.5%
■ For company and coziness	50.0%	64.5%
■ For enjoyment and fun	43.9%	61.7%
■ To gain more experience	24.4%	54.1%



In contrast, those who disapproved gave the following reasons (only 'no' responses are shown):

	Females	Males
■ Personal conviction	85.8%	86.3%
■ Religious reasons	71.1%	82.1%
■ Fear of STDs*	49.5%	53.0%
■ Fear of parents and family	46.3%	47.9%
■ Fear of societal prejudice	43.1%	49.6%

Other sexual behavior

However, out of the females who disapprove of premarital sex, 56.4% have no problem with sexual flirting (sexual activity without penetration) and 18.8% approve of anal sex. Out of the males who disapprove of premarital sex, 66.7% did not consider sexual flirting wrong and 32.5% were okay with anal sex.

In general (out of those who approve and disapprove of premarital sex), anal sex was considered an acceptable alternative to sex by 20.7% of women polled (see **Graph 3**), compared with 36.3% of men polled .

Virginity and marriage

More than half of the men polled in the survey said they would marry a non-virgin, with a breakdown by religion showing that 72.4% of Christian men had no problem with such an arrangement, compared with 45.8% of Muslim men, as illustrated in **Graph 4**. Out of those who would not agree to marry a non-virgin, the main reason cited was a lack of trust (75%), followed by religious considerations (62.5%), fear of STDs (54.7%), fear of family embarrassment (49.2%) and fear of social embarrassment (45.3%). However, a proportion of those respondents (52.3%) would reconsider their stance if the woman in question had been raped, while 64% would reconsider if it was the result of a physical accident.

The majority of male respondents, or 65.7%, also stated that they would marry a woman with whom they were having premarital sex (see **Graph 5**), with 22.8% of Christians who said they would not, compared with 41% of Muslims who concurred on that point.

In addition, 88.3% of males polled had heard of the procedure of hymenal restoration, but only 25.7% of them approved of it. This is in comparison with 82% of women who were familiar with the procedure, out of which only 19.1% approved.

Finally, 72.3% of males polled believed their partner should have the right to know about previous sexual encounters, whereas a lower proportion of females surveyed, or 65.3%, felt their husband should know about their previous sexual experiences. ■

* STDs = Sexually transmitted diseases

