

Performing Sexiness but NOT Sex

Negotiating the social risks of engaging in premarital sex among women

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Background:

Engaging in premarital sex in Lebanon-Beirut, a relatively conservative, traditional and patriarchal society, carries significant social risks, specifically for young women.

My research study aims to investigate:

- ✳ what the social risks are of engaging in premarital sex among university students in Beirut;
- ✳ how these risks are negotiated and dealt with; and
- ✳ how gender differences and power relations influence these risks.

Methods:

I conducted in-depth semi structured interviews with 35 university students, both males and females, aged between 18 and 26 years. However, in this poster I will only draw on the findings revealed by 18 young women.

Findings:

Literature based on western cultures shows that engaging in premarital sex is perceived as a personal and individual decision.



My data reveal that, in Lebanon, the decision of engaging or refraining from premarital sex is greatly shaped and influenced by social pressures and control. These risks are socially learned, socially reproduced, socially instituted, and are highly gendered.



Social risks of engaging in premarital sex for women:

- ✳ **Risking purity and reputation:** Women who do not conform to the social and moral expectations of 'purity' are at high risk of losing their good and "respectable" reputation. Women's purity is merely assessed through women's success in preserving their chastity and virginity until marriage. The social perceptions of a 'dirty and disrespectful' woman are associated with notions of impurity in relation to the woman's body and its openings.
- ✳ **Shared risk:** Engaging in premarital sex is not merely an individual risk! Rather, it is a shared risk. The family members taking such individual decisions and risks are in fact exposing their family's social reputation, image and social status to shame, blame and dishonour.
- ✳ **Future risk:** Women assured that losing virginity (intact hymen) will entail a very high risk of being "unmarriageable" or decreasing her chances of getting married. She will also risk being seen as promiscuous and might carry this related stigma for the rest of her life.

Yet, at the same time, the Lebanese society encourages, to a large extent, the beautiful and sexually attractive physical appearance of women. Therefore, whilst some women perform and value sexiness and seductiveness, they refrain from having penetrative sex.



Responding to the social risks:

Women can find different ways to deal with or respond to these social risks while still engaging in premarital sex, such as:

- ✳ **Social performance of chastity, purity and virginity** (despite dressing in a sexy way) including undergoing hymen reconstruction before marriage
- ✳ **Negotiating non-vaginal-penetrative sex** with their sex partners (boyfriends)
- ✳ **Performing being a victim of rape or sexual assault** (in some cases)

