

LET'S TALK ABOUT SEXUALITY

By Ghena Ismail

On March 22, 1996 the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab World hosted a lecture about sexuality by Dr. Marie-Therese Khair Badawi, a clinical psychologist, professor of psychology at St. Joseph University, and author of a book about the repressed desire and sexual life of Lebanese women.

Dr. Badawi started her lecture by saying that sexuality is being discussed more frequently in Lebanon in the mass media and even in schools. However, it is always placed within the context of marriage and procreation. She explained that we learn to repress our sexual desires and to view them as being "shameful" from childhood onwards. Parents severely discourage their children from exploring their bodies; when caught touching their sexual organs, children are immediately scolded. She added that many of the children's and young people's queries about sex are often disregarded. Thus, ignorance develops and feelings of guilt in association with this "ambiguous" subject prevail.

Among the issues that are engulfed with much superstition in our society is masturbation. Dr. Badawi asserted that masturbation is part of the norm of self-exploration and self-knowledge. The only time it becomes problematic is when it is used as an alternative to developing relationships with others. Another issue that Dr. Badawi discussed was the importance of apprenticeship in sexual relationships. She explained that sex is not mechanical, and that for a couple to reach sexual fulfillment they need time to get used to each other's bodies and to discover the erogenous zones.

Dr. Badawi thinks that the public needs to be better educated about issues related to sex, and that sex should not be associated with guilt and limited within the framework of marriage only. However, she simultaneously believes that sexual desires have to be restricted within a certain defined framework. This framework necessitates that we understand the following:

First:
We are not supposed to have sex with the people

with whom we are closely related, such as parents, grandparents, brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, *etc.*

Second:
In light of the above, we should develop a new ethical meaning for sex. This meaning should develop independently of any preconceived ideas or stereotypes about sex. The conditions of this new ethical code are:

- 1) Rehabilitating our bodies, *i.e.*, we should give our sexual desires their due respect.
- 2) Respecting the body, *i.e.*, we have to respect our bodies and the bodies of others as well. We should not place ourselves or our partners in relationships of unequal power in which an individual is used as a means to an end, *i.e.*, to satisfy sexual needs.
- 3) Responsibility. When I enter a relationship with an individual, I should bear the consequences of my words and actions, *i.e.*, if I tell a person that I love him or her, I can not, two hours later, tell someone else that I love him or her.

Dr. Badawi concluded that the adoption of these ideas does not mean that one can attain a sexual utopia, for there is no ultimate knowledge about sex. She explained that we know from Freud that "sexual desire is directly linked to feelings of inferiority and thus it can never fully actualize itself." However, what Dr. Badawi aims at is having all the characteristics related to sex liberated from any preconceived ideas in order to make these characteristics more humane.

Following the lecture was a discussion between Dr. Badawi and the students. Very few of the students were willing to express their thoughts or to openly present their fears. The majority still feel reluctant to talk about the issue of sexuality in public, despite the problems that they may be experiencing. The fact that many of young people desperately need to discuss the issue of sexuality with someone knowledgeable was clearly illustrated at the end of the discussion session. As soon as the session concluded, many students rushed to Dr. Badawi to ask her for the address of her clinic.