

# Reconciling Contradictions: University Women's Experiences with Shifting Premarital Relations in Fez, Morocco

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## Introduction

- Recent surveys in Morocco have begun to document statistics of sexual experience, as well as the unmet health needs that may arise.
- Studies that have attempted to investigate these issues have limited their participant pool to married Moroccans due to the concept of *hshouma*, or shame.
- With the opening of the city's first mall in 2013, the city has seen increased gender-mixing in the public sphere and an opening for male-female relationships.

## Background Research

- Public**
- Proverbs regarding women as sexual passives that require control
  - Honor/Shame: regarding virginity maintenance as a social duty
  - Misinformation about contraception and high prevalence of annual STI infection among adolescents

- Private**
- *Moudawana* reforms in 2004 under King Mohammed VI
  - Role of AMPF in advocating for youth reproductive healthcare
  - Rising age at marriage and the emergence of adolescence
  - Portrayal of sexuality in novels, film, and the Internet

- In Between**
- Creation or claim of heterotopias, both physical and digital
  - The *hammam* as the original site of male-female interaction
  - Social media and chatrooms as avenue for sexual expression

## Research Questions

*How has the normalization of dating, and in some cases premarital sex, impacted male-female relationships and the daily experience of woman?*

- (1) Sexual Education: Was this ever offered, and is it important?
- (2) Peer Pressure: What pressures exist to engage in this culture?
- (3) Contraception: What access do women have to protection?
- (4) Perceptions: What stereotypes exist and societally and individually?

## Methods

**Ethnographic Observation:** Two weeks were spent accompanying a key informant around the city as well as observing lectures in the key informant's classes.

**Interviews:** This study uses a semi-structured interview consisting of two demographic and seven probe questions. The interviews lasted between five and thirty minutes, and took place between December 2016 and January 2017. Most interviews were conducted at the Université Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah Dhar Mahraz in Fez, Morocco.

**Participants:** The final sample consisted of eleven unmarried women ages 20-23, all in the first year of either a Gender Studies or Cultural Studies master program.

## Results

### *Ethnographic*

Dating was freely discussed among classmates, and critical discussions on virginity and women's issues were had during student presentations.

### *Interviews*

- Sexual Education: Complete lack of education after puberty, with most popular alternatives being the Internet and friends. All participants agreed that sexual education is crucial prior to marriage.
- Peer Pressure: Wide spectrum of answers regarding who is to blame.
- Contraception: Available, but the risk of stigma is high. Women rely on male friends for contraception, or travel far with a fake ring to purchase.
- Perceptions: Good vs. bad girl dichotomy enforced despite normalization. Eight of the women believe that dating is necessary before marriage, four of which also believe that physical affection is necessary.

### *Alternative Strategies for Dating*

- Couples may use secret or inaccessible locations for dating and sexual experiences. Often these are tourist-filled cafes and restaurants.
- Social media such as Tinder and Whats App are used to find or communicate with partners, despite the dangers of catfishing.

## Discussion

### *Lack of Education and Services*

Faced with an almost total lack of sexual health services, Moroccan women are left to rely on gossip and Internet searches to fill in the gaps prior to marriage. The aspect of emotional preparation and maturity is often neglected.

### *Reinforced Dichotomies, New Hierarchies*

Assumptions about a woman's moral strength are made based on her dating life and presumed piety. This spectrum reinforced the 'Aisha Kandisha vs. Fatima' archetypes, condemning behavior that does not fit these values and essentially dismissing female libido.

### *Heterosexual Friendships*

Male friends may become significant others, or may assist a friend with the dating process by introducing them to potential matches and protecting them from conservative families. The importance of becoming friends before spouses is universally agreed upon.

## Future Research

- Is dating simply a trend? By correlating the popularity of dating with influence of Western media and Islamic identity salience one could determine potential cultural shifts.
- How else is virginity manifesting, now that women must also be a technological blank slate prior to marriage?
- Are there Muslim countries that have found ways to discuss sexuality in ways that strengthen, and don't threaten, spirituality?
- Will shifts in dating culture become permanent, and abolish the "morality switch" that men make prior to marriage?

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