

# Nonpenetrative sexuality of never-married young women: An Egyptian experience

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Article

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## ABSTRACT

**Background:** The gap between puberty and marriage is widening. Among Egyptian women aged 35 years and older, 3.3% have never-married.

**Objective:** The current study was carried out to assess the type and frequency of nonpenetrative sexual activity among a sample of never-married Egyptian women.

**Patients and Methods:** A total of 300 never-married women, aged 18–39 years, were the participant of this study. Their sexual activity and related matters were surveyed using a self-report questionnaire designed by the authors.

**Results:** Overall, 45% of women described their degree of arousal as ‘somewhat difficult.’ Romance novels were the most common cause of sexual arousal (58%). After arousal, only 18.7% reported that they release their sexual tensions by masturbation. Guilt feelings were the cause that prevented 80% of women from masturbation. Indulging in a romantic relation was admitted by 27% of the sample. This relation most commonly was in the form of speaking on the phone or chatting on WhatsApp with a male partner. Admission to the presence of a romantic relation was more common in rural living women.

**Conclusion:** Sexual arousal was most commonly caused by romantic novels in our sample. After arousal, masturbation may be the method of releasing tension, as physical contact with members of the opposite sex seems to be rare.

**Key Words:** Never-married, sexuality, women.

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## INTRODUCTION

Marriage as a life-course event is one that is experienced by virtually all Egyptians, male and female<sup>[1]</sup>. Salem<sup>[2]</sup> calculated age of marriage according to three surveys done in 1998, 2006 and 2012. She noticed an ascent in age of first marriage, especially in women. The percentage of women married by the age of 18 years declined from 30.9% in 1998 to 21.1% in 2012, and the percentage of women who married by the age of 30 rose from 91.5% in 1998 to 92.9% in 2012. According to official numbers of the 2017 census in Egypt, 3.3% of women aged 35 years and older have never-married<sup>[3]</sup>.

A PubMed search retrieved no papers looking at premarital sexuality in Egypt. In the United States, during 2011–2013, 44% of never-married female teenagers (4.3 million) (and 47% of never-married male teenagers (4.8 million) had sexual intercourse at least once<sup>[4]</sup>. In a British survey of 11161 men and women, the proportion of those aged 19–16 years reporting first heterosexual intercourse at younger than 16 years was 30% for men and 26% for women<sup>[5]</sup>. Parish *et al.*<sup>[6]</sup> noticed 30–50% of urban Chinese women and men, in their 20s and 30s, have engaged in premarital sex. The prevalence of premarital sex among

Ethiopian high school youths was 22.5%, of which 63.9% were males. The majority (60.2%) had their first sexual intercourse at the age of 15–19 years<sup>[7]</sup>.

In countries with predominantly Islamic population, the situation may be different, at least for women. In Turkey, a study among high school students<sup>[8]</sup> showed that 5.1% of females practiced sexual intercourse. Moreover, among 949 male and female students in a Turkish University, the average age for first sexual experience was 17.47±1.79 years, and 3.2% of females had a sexual experience (compared with 56.8% in males)<sup>[9]</sup>. Sexual and reproductive behaviors among undergraduate university students in Mashhad, Iran, were surveyed. Among 590 male and female students with a mean age of 20.8±1.5 years, the mean age of first sexual experience was 23.7 years, with a significant difference between both sexes. Females who had a premarital sexual experience comprised 7.3% of the sample, whereas this experience was reported by 32.9% of males<sup>[10]</sup>. Of the 1181 unmarried Malaysians aged 15–21 years, 9% reported having had sexual intercourse; males were significantly more experienced compared with females<sup>[11]</sup>. Eleven years later, another survey of Malaysian youth aged 12–19 years found that 5.4% had premarital sexual intercourse with a higher incidence

among males<sup>[12]</sup>.

In Egypt, no figures are available about premarital sexual intercourse owing to cultural and religious barriers. However, the spread of 'Urfi'(customary) marriage may give a hint about this participant. Between 70 and 90%, among the thousands of on-going paternity lawsuits in Egypt (14000–21000 cases), were a direct consequence of urfimarriages<sup>[13]</sup>.

Our pilot study showed that direct asking about penetrative sex in our locality produced repulsive reactions or untrue answers, so we chose to work on nonpenetrative sexuality.

As the gap between puberty and marriage is a period of high sexual needs, the current study was carried out to assess the type and frequency of sexual activity among a sample of never-married Egyptian women.

## PATIENTS AND METHODS

This cross-sectional observational study started after obtaining approval from the Department of Dermatology and Andrology and the research ethics committee at Faculty of Medicine, Benha University.

Participants were 300 women who attended the outpatient clinic of Benha Faculty of Medicine during the period between July 2019 and January 2020. After explaining the nature and aim of the study, all participants gave their informed consent.

Participants were never-married women, aged 18–39 years, who were not experiencing diseases affecting sexuality. Illiterate women were not included in the study.

A self-report questionnaire, designed by the investigators, was the tool used in this study. Confidentiality and anonymity were secured. The questionnaire included sociodemographic data, sexual activity, and the presence of a romantic relationship.

### Statistical analysis

The clinical data were recorded on a report form. These data were tabulated and analyzed using the computer program statistical package for social science, version 20 (Armonk, New York, IBM Corp. USA). To obtain intergroup comparison of categorical data,  $\chi^2$  test ( $\chi^2$  value) and Fisher exact test were performed.

A *P* value less than 0.05 was considered statistically significant, more than 0.05 was considered statistically insignificant, and *P* value less than 0.01 was considered highly significant in all analyses.

## RESULTS

### Demographic data

Age of our participants ranged from 20 to 39 years. Most of them (83.7%) lived in urban areas and 96.3% had

a university degree. Employed women constituted 75.3% of the sample (Table 1).

### Sexual activity

The commonest answer about ease of arousal was 'somewhat difficult' (45%). Romance novels were the most common cause of sexual arousal (58%). Only 18.7% of the sample admitted that they masturbate, and the commonest frequency was once or more/week (48.2%). University degree holders comprised 92.8% among masturbators. Guilt feelings prevented 80% of the sample to masturbate (Table 2).

**Table 1:** Demographic data

	<i>n</i> %
Age	
20–29	211 (69.3)
30–39	89 (29.7)
Residence	
Rural	49 (16.3)
Urban	251 (83.7)
Educational level	
Read and write	4 (1.3)
Secondary school	7 (2.3)
University degree	289 (96.3)
Occupation	
Student	10 (3.3)
Employed	226 (75.3)
Unemployed	64 (21.3)

**Table 2:** Sexual activity

	<i>n</i> %
How easily are you sexually aroused	
Very easily	2 (0.7)
Easily	57 (19.0)
Somewhat easily	64 (21.3)
Somewhat difficult	135 (45.0)
Difficult	42 (14.0)
Very difficult	0
What stimulates you to be sexually aroused (more than one choice is allowed)?	
Watching romantic movies	83 (27.7)
Talking to males on phone	39 (13.0)
Romance novels	174 (58.0)
Watching pornography	4 (1.3)
What do you do after sexual arousal	
Masturbate	56 (18.7)

Nothing	244 (81.3)
If you masturbate, how many times do you practice masturbation? (56)	
Once or more/day	5 (8.9)
Once or more/week	27 (48.2)
Once or more/month	24 (42.9)
If you don't practice masturbation what is the cause? (244) <sup>a</sup>	
Forbidden	179 (73.4)
Guilt	200 (82.0)
Fear	5 (2.0)
Inappropriate	8 (3.3)
Educational level of those admitting masturbation (56)	
Can only read and write	2 (3.6)
Secondary school	2 (3.6)
University degree	52 (92.8)

<sup>a</sup>More than one choice was allowed.

### Sexual activity

The commonest answer about ease of arousal was 'somewhat difficult' (45%). Romance novels were the most common cause of sexual arousal (58%). Only 18.7% of the sample admitted that they masturbate, and the commonest frequency was once or more/week (48.2%). University degree holders comprised 92.8% among masturbators. Guilt feelings prevented 80% of the sample to masturbate (Table 2).

### Romantic relationships

Table 3 shows that most participants (73%) declined

to answer a question about whether or not they had a romantic relationship. For those admitting the presence of a romantic relationship, using mobile or WhatsApp chats was the commonest extent this relation reached (52.9%).

### Residence in relation to some aspects of sexuality

Reporting sexual arousal as 'somewhat difficult' was more commonly reported by urban living women than rural living women, with a statistically significant difference ( $P < 0.001$ ). The same is true about the effect of romance novels as a source of arousal ( $P < 0.023$ ) (Table 4).

### Residence in relation to some aspects of romantic relationship

Surprisingly, more of the women living in rural areas admitted having a romantic relationship and were ready to answer questions about it than urban living women ( $P < 0.006$ ). However, more women living in urban areas reported that speaking on the phone or chatting on WhatsApp with a boyfriend was the limit of their relation ( $P < 0.006$ ) (Table 5).

**Table 3:** Romantic relationships.

Romantic relationship	n (%)
Did you have any romantic relationship?	
Decline to answer	219 (73.0)
Do not have any romantic relationship	30 (10.0)
Yes	51 (17)
If yes to what extent did it reach? (N=51)	
Speaking on the phone	27 (52.9)
Sitting together in public places	21 (41.2)
Touching hands	2 (3.9)
Body touching	1 (2.0)

**Table 4:** Residence in relationship to some aspects of sexuality.

	Residence [n (%)]			P value
	Rural (49)	Urban (251)	FET	
How easily are you sexually aroused				
Very easily	0	2 (0.8)		
Easily	16 (32.7)	41 (16.3)		
Somewhat easily	18 (36.7)	46 (18.3)	21.2	<0.001**
Somewhat difficult	13 (26.5)	122 (48.6)		
Difficult	2 (4.1)	40 (15.9)		

What stimulates you to be sexually aroused (more than one choice was allowed)?				
Watching romantic movies	18 (36.7)	65 (25.9)		
Talking to males on phone	11 (22.4)	28 (11.2)	9.53	0.023*
Romance novels	20 (40.8)	154 (61.4)		
Watching pornography	0	4 (1.6)		
What do you do after sexual arousal				
Masturbate	9 (18.4)	47 (18.7)	0.003	0.95
Nothing	40 (81.6)	204 (81.3)		

FET, Fisher exact test.

\*Statistically significant.

\*\*Statistically highly significant.

**Table 5:** Residence in relation to some aspects of romantic relationship

	Residence [n (%)]			FET	P value
	Rural (49)	Urban (251)			
Did you have any romantic relationship?					
Decline to answer	26 (53.1)	193 (76.9)			
Do not have romantic relationship	11 (22.4)	19 (7.6)	16.52	0.006**	
Yes	12 (24.5)	39 (15.5)			
If yes to what extent did it reach? (n=51)					
Speaking on the phone	5 (9.8)	22 (43.1)			
Sitting together in public places	6 (11.8)	15 (29.4)	16.52	0.006**	
Touching hands	1 (2.0)	1 (2.0)			
Body touching	0	1 (2.0)			

FET, Fisher exact test.

\*\*Statistically highly significant.

## DISCUSSION

Attitudes about premarital sex are diverse across the world. Traditions, religions, and culture may be the factors governing different views toward such an issue. The Pew Research Center's 2013 Global Attitudes survey<sup>[14]</sup> asked 40 117 respondents in 40 countries what they thought about some topics often discussed as moral issues, for example, extramarital affairs, gambling, homosexuality, abortion, and premarital sex. Generally, African and predominantly Muslim countries tend to find most of these activities morally unacceptable, whereas in advanced economies, such as those in Western Europe, Japan, and North America, people tend to be more accepting or to not consider these moral issues at all. For example, sex between unmarried adults was considered morally unacceptable by 90% of Egyptians, 95% of Jordanians, and 97% of Indonesians, whereas 6% only of Frenchmen and Germans considered it so.

One limitation of the present study is that we could not include questions about premarital sexual intercourse owing to the objections of the medical ethics committee. However, we were allowed to ask about masturbation. In this respect, only 18.7% of our participants admitted that they practice masturbation. It is hard to compare our results with results obtained in other countries because the reported rates of masturbation varies, reflecting methodological differences in terms of survey design, question wording, and method of questioning, for example, the prevalence of masturbation in women in China was 10%<sup>[15]</sup>, 32% in Russia<sup>[16]</sup>, 71% in the UK<sup>[17]</sup>, 85.5% in Sweden<sup>[18]</sup>, and 89.2% of never-married women engaged in masturbation in an American sample<sup>[19]</sup>.

The percentage of those admitting masturbation (18.7%) in our study seems very small. This may be owing, at least in part, to the known religious and social opposition of this practice. Masturbation was associated with negative

feelings as guilt (in 82%) or religious belief (in 73.4%). Aneja *et al.*<sup>[20]</sup> described two cases of depression caused by masturbatory guilt. Greenberg and Archambault<sup>[21]</sup> found that guilty feelings connected with masturbation occurred in 40% of a sample of university students in USA. Feelings of guilt related to masturbation were reported by ~10.9% of a sample of young Korean men in military service<sup>[22]</sup>. Davidson and Darling<sup>[19]</sup> reported a feeling of guilt after masturbation by 15.4% among post-college-age women.

Only 17% of our sample admitted being engaged in a romantic relationship and 73% even declined to give an answer. This reflects the objection of most Egyptians to such relationship. An Indian study<sup>[23]</sup> found that despite strict norms prohibiting premarital opposite-sex mixing, 19 and 9% of young men and women, respectively, had been involved in a romantic partnership. When asked about the extent to which the romantic relationship reached, 74% of women reported holding hands, 46% had kissed a romantic partner, and 26% had sex.

The most common cause of sexual arousal among our participants was reading romance novels, for example, Rewat Abeer (58%) versus 1.3% only chose watching pornography. This result is expected, taking into account that pornography is not very popular among women compared with men<sup>[24]</sup> and that our participants would like to give a socially accepted response.

By definition, romance novels are fiction focused on a central love story, which is concluded in an emotionally satisfying and optimistic manner. It can introduce women to potential positive effects in their sex lives. However, although ostensibly harmless escapism, romance novels can also perpetuate the myth of effortless and romantic sexual encounters and influence crucial aspects of readers' sexual health attitudes and behaviors. Ideally, romantic fiction can function to both entertain and educate readers, by combining them with clear and comprehensive continuing public sexual education, via the promotion of realistic expectations and depictions of safer sexual practices<sup>[25]</sup>.

Wu<sup>[26]</sup> compared college women who read romance novels with women who do not read them. The results indicate that women readers self-reported greater sex drive and greater number or orgasms required for sexual. However, female readers had fewer sex partners and were older when they first thought about sex and had their first sexual intercourse. The study concluded that female readers nourish a fulfilling sex life in the context of idealistic monogamous faithfulness, while at the same time vividly satisfying desires and sexual fantasy through fabricated characters.

The current study showed that more women in rural areas reported ever having romantic relations compared

with urban areas. This may be owing to the fact that hiding such relationship is easier in rural areas. An American study<sup>[27]</sup> found that more teens from rural areas reported ever having sex (24%) compared with urban teens (19.7%). The percentage of those who have more than or equal to four lifetime partners in rural teens was 6.4% compared with 4.3% in urban teens, and 2.8% of rural women ever got pregnant versus 1.7% of urban women. Similarly, a Nigerian study<sup>[28]</sup> comprising 772 men and women aged 15–24 years reported that those who ever had sexual intercourse were 64.9% in rural areas versus 44.1% in urban areas ( $P < 0.001$ ), and more respondents in rural areas reporting having more than one sexual partner (29.5 vs 20.4%;  $P = 0.04$ ). On the contrary, Martens *et al.*<sup>[29]</sup>, in Manitoba, Canada, found that 39% of teens reported sexual intercourse, with higher rates in urban areas (46%) than in rural areas (30%).

## CONCLUSION

Romance novels are the most common cause of causing sexual arousal in this group of never-married young women. Masturbation may be the method of releasing this tension, as physical contact with members of the opposite sex seems to be rare.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There are no conflict of interest.

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