

# Sexual Education of Palestinian University Students: Between Perceptions and Cultural Barriers

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## Abstract

This study explored the sexual education perceptions in the Palestinian society, as perceived by Al-Quds University students. Perceptions regarding sexual education were evaluated using an index with 50 items, which was developed by the researchers. It was administrated to 369 undergraduate students who were selected using the stratified method. The findings show that students at Al-Quds University were moderately knowledgeable of sexual education; females had fewer knowledge of sexual education than males. The statistics show that gender, school, academic year and religious commitment are significant predictors of students' perceptions of sexual education. Sexual education is a sensitive and sometimes taboo concept in the conservative Palestinian society that adheres to its religious, cultural and moral values.

**Keywords:** sexual education, sexual socialization, patriarchal society, taboo

## 1. Introduction

Sexual education for youth is one of the most hotly debated issues in the social sciences and among policy makers, program planners and educators. Sexual education refers to life-conscious processes throughout life, where people learn about gender, biological, psychological and socio-cultural perspectives (Goldfarb & Constantine, 2011).

Education regarding sexual and reproductive health has been identified by the United Nations Secretary-General as a key priority in the development of a System Wide Action Plan on Youth (UN, 2012). According to UNESCO (2009), the preparation of children and youth has always been a major challenge for humanity, in terms of gender sexual education and in a world with AIDS.

Historically, young people in many cultures are not informed about sexual relationships, and the discussion of these issues is considered taboo on sociological terms. Today, there is a strong international commitment to promoting comprehensive sexual education, especially from the perspectives on strengthening human rights, health and youth (UNESCO, 2009).

Recently, the WHO (2010) underlines the importance of sexual health in laws, politics and human rights, education, society, culture, economy and health. The call was supported by the various sectors' legal approach, based on the programs described, as well as key entry points that promote sexual health. This must be done by providing information and assistance to the broad and concrete subject of educational initiatives.

## 2. Background and Literature Review

According to the WHO (2010), sexual health is the physical and emotional health and well-being of the people, couples and families, and to the social and economic development of communities. Sexuality lives in all cultures and societies. Sexual socialization is described as a process by which young people acquire sexual knowledge and norms (Ward, 2003). Historically, the sexual socialization of the youth created at the house and has traditionally been performed by the respected elders in the extended family, rather than by the child's parents. However, parents provide and shape their values, including sexuality, which is often postponed to child marriage. Nevertheless, many parents do not provide enough sexual education for their children and what they provide are rare and low quality as perceived by the children (Huong, 2010).

The main goal of sexual education is to promote sexual health (National Guidelines Task Force (NGTF, 1996). Sexual health is a state of well-being and physical, emotional, mental and social safety in relation to sexuality; and not just the absence of illness, dysfunction or disability. Therefore, the concept of sexual health should be the objective of life and personal relationships, and not only improve the relationship between counseling and sexually transmitted diseases and prosecution (WHO, 1975).

According to Goldfarb & Constantine (2011), sexual education for adolescents occurs in the context of the biological, cognitive and social-emotional developmental progressions and issues of adolescence. However, the progressive education movement of the late 19th century led to the introduction of social hygiene in North American school curricula and the advent of school-based formal sex education as part of the curriculum in junior high school or high school (Connell, 1993, 1996; Thorne, 1993; Elia, 2009).

From the 1960s onwards, support for sexual education in schools gained widespread support. Yet, schools and parents do little to help youth make sense of their sexuality. However, the literature that was reviewed indicates that college students have a positive attitude towards implementing sexual education at school level (Yesudas et al., 2008). In the same time, sexual education may be taught informally, such as when someone receives information from a friend, religious leader, on the internet, or from a culture's various other media that may leads to a range of conflicting and confusing messages about sexuality and gender (Goldfarb & Constantine, 2011).

Therefore, a thorough high-quality curriculum-based sexual education program would help children and young people to navigate these messages; develop positive norms about themselves, about relationships, about their health and about responsible citizenship (UNESCO, 2009).

The outbreak of AIDS has resulted in a new sense of urgency in terms of sexual education, which is seen by most scientists as a vital public health strategy (UNESCO, 2009; WHO, 2010).

The international agreements include: the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in 1994; the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995; and the World Summit on Children in 2002 affirming the right of all children and adolescents to receive sexual and reproductive health (SRH) information, education and services in accordance with their specific needs (UNESCO, 2009).

A substantial body of research has examined sexual education in various ways. A recent study performed by Song (2015) indicated that participants do not have formal sexual education; neither schools nor parents were the main providers of sexual education. Graf & Patrick (2015) concluded that, friends were the most common sources of sexual matters during their lives.

The study done by Chi et al. (2015) found a significant impact of a sexual education program on sexual health knowledge for university students in Southwest China. Meanwhile, Goldfarb & Constantine (2011) concluded that there is a demand for sexual education among traditionally underserved youth, including sexual minorities, youth with disabilities, and those in foster care. Huong (2010) indicated that sexual values within families and the influence of culture need to be considered as a channel to convey sexual values to children. According to Bleakley et al. (2009), the most often reported sources of sexual information were the media, friends, teachers and mothers.

In the Arab world, the Arab Human Development Report (2009) indicated that sexual education is a taboo in the male-oriented culture of denial. Women are victims of cultural and social practices that cause material harm to women, such as female genital mutilation (FGM), child marriage and murder or the so-called 'honor crimes'.

In short, despite the widely recognized importance of sexual education, it remains a sensitive and sometimes taboo issue in many cultures around the world, and in the Palestinian Arab culture in particular. Additionally, empirical testing of these assumptions in the Palestinian family is recommended.

### **3. Purpose and Scope**

This study addressed the sexual education socialization in the Palestinian society, as perceived by students at Al-Quds University. The objectives of the study were threefold, i.e.: to examine the perceptions of sexual education of students at Al-Quds University; to assess their knowledge of sexuality; to identify the sources of information from which students learn about sexual education; and to explore how socio-demographic factors influence their knowledge of sexual education.

The study is considered the first of its kind, according to the best knowledge of the authors. It is a leading study that deals with a taboo and sensitive topic in the conservative Palestinian society.

### **4. Hypotheses**

The study proposed the following hypotheses:

4.1 There are no statistical significant differences at  $\alpha \leq 0.05$  in the perceptions of sexual education of students at Al-Quds University in terms of place of residence, gender, school, college, and academic year.

4.2 There are no statistical significant correlation at  $\alpha \leq 0.05$  between religious commitment, academic achievement and the perceptions regarding sexual education of students at Al-Quds University.

## 5. Methodology

### 5.1 Approach

The study was a descriptive research study that used a mixed approach of quantitative and qualitative design, and a questionnaire. This was considered appropriate to the research, which was exploratory research, and it was considered that this approach would provide more meaningful in-depth data.

### 5.2 Population and Sampling

The population of the study consisted of students at Al-Quds University at the main campus - Abu Dies - during the academic year 2017/2018. The total complement was 9464 (4421 males to 5043 females) (Al-Quds University, 2017).

The sample comprised 369 students (173 males and 196 females), all full-time undergraduate students at Al-Quds University, who were selected based on gender and academic year using a stratified approach. The sample size was calculated using the sampling web <http://www.surveysystem.com/sscalc.htm> sample size calculator, with a margin error of 0.05.

### 5.3 Instrumentation

Students' perceptions of sexual education were evaluated using an index with 50 items, which was developed by the researchers. A 5-point Likert scale was used to measure responses, with available responses ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Participants at the Al-Quds University main campus - Abu Dies - were asked to complete the questionnaire. The survey instrument sought to obtain background information from the students, such as the gender, college, school, place of residence, religious commitment, academic year, and academic achievement.

#### 5.3.1 Instrument Validity

Validation of the instrument was done in two distinct phases. The first involved a focus group session (N=18); while the second phase involved implementation of a pilot study (N = 70), which was done to validate the survey using exploratory factor analysis. Factor loading for all items exceeded 0.65 (0.67 to 0.89), which means that the items are considered suitable for measuring every item regarding the perception of sexual education among students at Al-Quds University.

#### 5.3.2 Instrument Reliability

Reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha and the Split-half Coefficient to determine the reliability and consistency of the survey. The scores for the survey instrument for Cronbach's Alpha and the Split-half Coefficient were 0.87 and 0.85, respectively. This indicates very good reliability and consistency.

### 5.4 Sample Socio-demographic Characteristics

The demographic breakdown of the participants was gender, place of residence, college, school, academic year, religious commitment and academic achievement. In total, 369 students were included and four focus groups were conducted. The GPA of respondents was recorded at between 60 and 95 points (M 78.16; SD 6.87). Females represented 53.1% of the participants, while the remaining 46.9% were males. Students were drawn from fourteen faculties: arts - 53.9%; sciences - 46.1%. The majority (78.9%) were from public schools. Half (56.4%) of the participants were from rural areas, 33.1% were from urban areas, and the remaining 10.6% were from refugee camps. The largest group in terms of university year were students in the senior year (34.4%), while: 27.6% of the participants were in their sophomore year, 20.3% were in their junior year and 17.6% were freshmen. Most 66.1% of the students were religiously committed.

### 5.5 Data Analysis

The questionnaire items were rated on a Likert scale of 1–5 (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The highest score indicated a higher perception of sexual education. Descriptive statistics gauged the perceptions of the sampled population regarding sexual education. The following statistical techniques were measured: Regression, T-test; One-way analysis of variance; Tukey test; Cronbach's Alpha; Split-half Coefficient; Factor Analysis using SPSS.

## 6. Findings

The mean score of the perceptions regarding sexual education, as reported by the sample of 369 participants, was moderate (M 3.30; SD 0.37). The total score showed that 66% of the students were moderately knowledgeable of sexual education. Furthermore, the main indicators of sexual education knowledge, as perceived by students and ranked in descending order, are as follows: it is necessary for students to define the topic of sexual education (M 3.95; SD 1.00); human sexual motive deserves attention, as do other motives (M 3.93; SD 0.95); sexual education is an important educational goal (M 3.89; SD 1.31); sexual education protects youth from deviation (M 3.82; SD 1.11); sexual education limits sexual deviation (M 3.79; SD 1.09). Participants also indicated that: sexual education is an intruder topic in Palestinian culture (M 3.70; SD 1.06); even though it does not violate heavenly religions (M 3.68; SD 0.94); but dealing with sexual education should be approached carefully (M 3.66; SD 1.04); some students behave illogically when sexual education is addressed (M 3.65; SD 1.00); students prefer that sexual education be provided to males and females separately (M 3.63; SD 0.98).

The results also showed that friends were the most frequently reported source of sexual information (M 3.79; SD 1.16), followed by; the internet (M 3.77; SD 1.18); and religion (M 3.39; SD 1.20). Participants indicated that the issue of sexual education is the responsibility of the family (M 4.13; SD 0.94), as well as: the school (M 3.85; SD 1.00); the university (M 3.75; SD 1.07).

The study investigated student demographics in terms of perceptions regarding sexual education, with the aim of identifying differences. The findings show that college, place of residency and academic achievement do not indicate any significant differences. However, it was found that academic year, gender, school and religious commitment are significant variables. In relation to gender, the differences were in favor of males (M 3.37; SD 0.35) compared to (M 3.24; SD 0.38) for female participants, where the T.test value was (3.329,  $P = 0.001$ ). With school, the differences favored students from private schools (M 3.44; SD 0.54) compared to public school participants (M 3.26; SD 0.30), where the T.test value was (-2.771,  $P = 0.007$ ).

Differences were found in terms of students' academic year level, i.e. in favor of senior students (M 3.44; SD 0.27) compared to freshman participants (M 2.87; SD 0.32), where the F-value was (48.823,  $P = 0.000$ ). Finally, the findings indicated that there is a statistically significant negative correlation between religious commitment and the average score of perceptions regarding sexual education of students at Al-Quds University: the Beta-value was (-0.218,  $P = 0.000$ ).

## 7. Discussion

The findings of the study show that: students at Al-Quds University were moderately knowledgeable of sexual education; females had a lower knowledge of sexual education than males. In fact, sex is a sensitive topic in the conservative Palestinian society, which adheres to its religious and moral values. In the Palestinian Arab society, the family is characterized by being patriarchal in relation to the gender differentiation between males and females. Gender separation starts at a very early age in the individual's life. Males are raised in the men's world, while females are raised in the women's world, according to several educational, moral, aesthetic, intellectual, philosophical and even practical approaches. The Palestinian culture seeks to direct males towards an affirmation of masculine qualities like manhood, chivalry, bravery, gallantry, daring and stamina. On the other hand, it stresses directing females towards feminism, decency, decorum, virginity, love of children, home economics and stability (Barakat, 1993; Muhawi & Kana'na, 2001; Banat & Rimawi, 2014; Banat, 2010, 2014a, 2015). It follows that there is a lack of sexual education and that the family does not provide sufficient sexual education for their children. Additionally, what they do provide is perceived by children as infrequent and of poor quality. In this context, one of the students said: "I feel embarrassed to ask about the sexual education topic; but sometimes certain things in sexual education happen that make me feel lost". The student continued: "I strongly support answering students' questions about sexual education, and I am ready to participate in academic sexual workshops".

Since its establishment in 1984, Al-Quds University has been considered one of the leading educational institutions in Palestinian society. It offers a vibrant learning environment by encouraging an exchange of ideas and freedom of expression, as well as leading innovative research. It also helps students to develop their personality and to adapt to the study environment and overcome all the problems they face with choosing a major subject, managing their time and adjusting effectively to the study and social environment (Banat & Rimawi, 2014, 2017). However, in the past, the university did not offer a course that addresses sexual education, because of the sensitivity of the topic in the conservative Palestinian society. However, Al-Quds University provides information on sexual education for the students through various courses that can be undertaken during their university studies. In this regard, one of the participants said: "Sexual education is a vague topic in students' minds". The student continued, "As a university student, it is important to know about sexual education; and I think that sexual

education should be taught at the university". Another student said: "I feel my sexual knowledge today is different from yesterday; and I think that the university role completes the family and school roles in providing sexual information".

The study findings show that students from private schools had better sexual education knowledge. This result suggests the sub-cultural differences in education in Palestinian society. Private schools are co-educational schools that seek to preserve their existence and raise their members in an open social manner that supports qualities such as independence, freedom, development of skills and abilities, and access to and interaction with the world. In co-education schools, girls and boys work collaboratively, exchange ideas and debate issues, and the presence of both genders shows a good return in building a sound platform for personal growth, peer connectedness, and healthy sexual education. In this context, one of the participants from a private school said: "I have a clear picture on the sexual education topic. I feel relaxed talking about sexual education topics, and it's easy for me to participate in sexual education discussions". On the contrary, one of the single-sex school students said: "I wish to participate more on the sexual education topic if it is not complicated like this in Palestinian society".

The study findings furthermore reveal that senior students scored higher on sexual education knowledge. The familiarity is considered one of the key psychological processes that link people together in an environment. Senior students spend a long time at the university during their undergraduate course, when the formation and development of one's personality, the fulfillment of aspirations, social interaction with peers (the most frequently reported source of sexual information) and the other gender, contributes to the development of a healthy sexual education. According to Blanton (2014), the period of time spent studying at college is often used as a time of exploration for the students to experience living as young adults without the parental supervision associated with living at home. Students are allowed the freedom to act independently and pursue personal goals and agendas without parental regulation, which affects their sexual education knowledge positively. Taking into consideration the qualitative data, one of the senior students argued that: "Students' fear of the sexual education topic is exaggerated; and it's better to leave the freshman students to discover facts about sexuality by themselves".

Finally, the findings revealed that religious commitment correlated negatively with sexual education perceptions: deeply religious students reported less sexual education perceptions and had a more conservative attitude towards sexuality. Religious commitment in the Palestinian family occupies a large space in its social, intellectual and emotional life. It is natural that the religious creed is respected by all members of Palestinian society, due to the concentrated effort that the parents exert in bringing up their children. The process of socialization in Palestinian society is based on religious education and the teachings of Islam. The majority of the Palestinian population is Muslim, and the teachings of Islam influence their daily, social and cultural life (Banat, 2010).

Moreover, the values of marriage, family and familial duty are still emphasized by many aspects of Palestinian society. Marriage is the only culturally and legally acceptable way to regulate a family in Palestinian society. The teachings of Islam call for legal Sharia marriage within the framework of wedlock, in order to prevent mixing of lineage; and any sexual relationships outside of marriage are considered taboo and a great sin, which leads to legal punishment. "An approach not adultery, undoubtedly that is immodesty and a very vile path" (Isra: 32).

Additionally, the Palestinian conservative culture and background affect how individuals receive and interpret messages about sexuality. In a Palestinian Muslim society, Islam calls for sexual education of children in a way that is appropriate to their age, by both the family and the school and within the context of Islamic teaching. However, despite the low rate of child abandonment in Palestinian society, and the under-reporting of offences, especially of incest cases that are considered risk factors that reflect the lack of sexual education and the confusing messages about sexuality and gender, young people receive in the Islamic patriarchal Palestinian society (Banat, 2014b). In this regard, one of the deeply-religious students indicated: "Talking about sexual education is taboo in the Palestinian society, and crosses the values and norms of Palestinian society". The student continued by saying: "Sexual education is an intruder notion in Palestinian culture, and it's better to leave the "sexual education" facts to the family, based on the teaching of Islam, which is very clear".

## 8. Conclusion and Recommendations

Sexual education is a sensitive and sometimes taboo concept in the conservative Palestinian society that adheres to its religious, cultural and moral values. The findings of the study have several implications in terms of sexual education for parents, schools, universities, religious leaders, policy makers and social workers. Importantly, there are still a lot of needs that must be addressed in the area of healthy sexual education in Palestinian society.

Given the findings and conclusion of this study, the following recommendations are made:

1. It is necessary for children's questions on sexual education to be answered by parents in a healthy

atmosphere.

2. Sexual education should be addressed in the Palestinian formal curriculum and at universities as well.
3. Further studies should be conducted to ensure better understanding of sexual education among youth in Palestinian schools.

### Competing Interests Statement

The authors declare that there are no competing or potential conflicts of interest.

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