

## Let's Talk About Sex: Counselling Muslim Selves Online

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### Abstract:

*Islam Online Arabic, and particularly the counselling service Problems and Solutions, received harsh critique for being too 'open' or even 'un-Islamic' in their views and dealings with sensitive topics, not least with regards to sexuality. The counselling service Problems and Solutions can be considered the emblem of Islam Online's efforts to unite secular and Islamic perspectives and relate to contemporary Muslims' real lives and problems. Counsellors argue that there is a total lack of sexual education in the Arab world, a problem which must be faced head on. Problems and Solutions questioners could ask the most intimate of questions without shame or embarrassment. This article provides an overview of the types of questions about sexuality and sexual relations that questioners sent to Problems and Solutions counsellors. Moreover, the analysis sheds light on: 1) the various aspects of contemporary Arab marriages and taboo-ridden sexuality which counsellors believe to be detrimental to marriages, and 2) a variety of proposed local remedies, including encouraging men to aspire to the 'new man' ideal.*

### Keywords:

*masculinity, sexuality, social aspects, religion online, Middle East, Islam, gender*

**Title:** I am thinking of divorce and my husband is very religiously committed

**Female Questioner:**

I have been married for approximately three years. [...] My husband is very religiously committed (*multazim*) and he does not dishonour me at all, and is very kind to me, and in short is a man of good manners and morals. He loves our daughter a lot and is from a good

family. And all of these traits are all another wife could wish for. My problem is that my husband does not love me, and he has confessed this to me and that he married me because his family suggested me, and he found me suitable and I feel this in all his interactions with me. [...] I do not hear from him what a wife would like to hear from her husband, not even during sexual intercourse and intercourse has an allotted time, and is not related to love or desire for his wife. I am very romantic and this truly pains me [...] because I am not the woman my husband wishes for, and we have talked about this matter a lot, and he says that this is out of his hands [...] this life is harming my psyche [...] so what are your opinions? [...]

Second<sup>1</sup> Counsellor Response:

As for me, I sympathize with you [...] I cannot get past your 'religiously committed' (*multazim*) husband's actions, this word that has become hollow for us [...] Religious commitment, (*al-iltizām*) my sister, is following the path of the Prophet [...] and he was the gentlest of people and nicest of people. [...] Once he returned from travelling and he gave each of his wives a ring as a present, he gave it to each one in secret and told her not to tell the others about the ring. When sitting amongst them (his wives) one of them asked, 'Who is the dearest to you?' The Prophet responded, 'the one who has the ring!' [...] No, my sister ... the religiously committed (*al-multazim*) as I know him does not tell his wife that he does not love her, and that he only married her because his family urged him to do so, this is at best 'rude' as Egyptians say, or at worst, psychological abuse and harsh. And some men have no knowledge of a woman's psyche and her needs. And the truly religiously committed will learn this from the school of Mohammed Peace Be Upon Him - and the school of life - interacting with women and humans in general - an art, a science with many perspectives and literatures [...]<sup>2</sup>

Excerpt from Problems and Solutions (*mashākil wa hulūl*) (IslamOnline.net, 2004b 101-104).<sup>3</sup>

## Introduction

Muslims have been seeking advice about their personal lives on Islamic websites for over a decade. While numerous studies have dealt with Islamic advice or fatwas<sup>4</sup> in a variety of contexts both on- and offline (Agrama 2010, Bunt 2003, Kutsher 2009, Larsen 2011, Mariani 2006, Masud et al. 1996, Sisler 2009, Skovgaard-Petersen 2004, Stowasser and Abul-Magd 2004), there has been little scholarly documentation and analysis of other forms of counselling services on Islamic websites. In contrast, this article focuses on an interactive, Islamic, Arabic-language counselling service, which draws on global therapeutic counselling trends and tackles sexual relations head on.

IslamOnline.net was one of the most successful and influential Islamic websites worldwide, and was produced and run out of Cairo for more than a decade (Gräf 2008; Hofheinz 2007). Islam Online (IOL) was founded in 1997 as a website intended to deal with all aspects of life, drawing on an array of disciplines, including secular sciences such as medicine and psychology. Indeed, according to Gräf (2008: 1-2), IOL founders believed that Islamic jurisprudence and theology, although important, could not alone provide sufficient knowledge in all areas of life. This appears to be the case with regards to the counselling service Problems and Solutions (*mashākil wa hulūl*), which was a pioneering counselling service,<sup>5</sup> hosted by www.islamonline.net, and, later, www.onislam.net.<sup>6</sup> The current text uses a mixed method approach consisting of: 1) a longitudinal (offline) ethnographic study of the work environment in Cairo where Problems and Solutions was produced,<sup>7</sup> and 2) analysis of online counselling exchanges and counselling essays. I conducted my main fieldwork in the Islam Online offices in Cairo from the beginning of December 2009 until the end of June 2010.<sup>8</sup> I observed regular work tasks and sat in on the meetings of the IOL employees tasked with running the counselling service. In interviews I shared my analysis of the online counselling content, and invited my research participants to comment on my preliminary findings. All names in this article are pseudonyms for IOL counsellors.<sup>9</sup> In subsequent sections I write in ethnographic present.

IOL's 'WOW factor', according to my research participants, is derived amongst other things from being a pioneer with regards to tackling sexual relations in an educational and professional manner, and in the Arabic

language. In my research participants own rendition they were pioneers in talking about sex in this fashion. They maintain that popular TV shows, like *Kalām kibēr* (big talk) with the renowned sexologist Heba Kotb, on Arabic satellite channels, came much later on, and largely borrowed the 'how to talk about sex' from Islam Online (Abdel-Fadil, 2011, 2013).<sup>10</sup> Problems and Solutions can be considered the emblem of IOL's efforts to unite secular and Islamic perspectives and relate to contemporary Muslims' real lives and problems.

Individual users seek out Problems and Solutions counselling with all sorts of personal and relational problems. Many questions deal with love, marital problems, and sexual relations. This appears to mirror global trends with regards to online counselling.<sup>11</sup> Unparalleled by any other Islamic website, Problems and Solutions is serviced by counselling professionals with a background in secular fields such as psychology and psychiatry. IOL and Problems and Solutions counselling is founded on 'the message' (*al-risāla*),<sup>12</sup> which connotes a middle-way approach (*wasatiyya*) to Islam, is contemporary and centred on real life, tackles controversial topics, and aims to empower and create self and social awareness amongst its users (Abdel-Fadil 2011a, 2013a). At times, IOL - and particularly Problems and Solutions - receives harsh critique for being too 'open' or even 'un-Islamic' in their views and dealings with sensitive topics, not least with regards to sexuality. Some critics maliciously retorted that IOL ought to have been called 'secularism Online' rather than 'Islam Online' (Abdel-Fadil 2011a, 2013a).

Graphic and detailed depictions of sexual interactions do at times feature as part of the counselling process. While many of those who write to the counsellors appear fairly clueless about what to do between the sheets, there are of course segments of Arab society who live in an entirely different realm of sexuality, and who are knowledgeable, experienced, and far less taboo-ridden (Saad Khalaf, 2009). They are not, however, the typical candidates for Islam Online's guidance on sexual issues.

One memorable Problems and Solutions counselling exchange starts out with a man asking the following: 'I have been married for a few months now. I wonder if you can help me. Is there more than one sexual position?' The response from the counsellor lists a number of sources for sexual education on this matter, including the Kama Sutra. This example of a counselling

exchange serves to illustrate the level of knowledge that some of the questioners operate with. It also gives a preview of the type of answers counsellors may provide in response.

In an interview, Kamilia confirms that IOL (Arabic) has a particular emphasis on sexual education:

You know the problem with Arab society is that there is no good sexual education (*thaqafa ginseyya*). There is a total lack of sexual education. People need to get educated about sexual relations. So we in IOL try to address these issues. Of course, some people think it is outrageous that a website called something with Islam does this. We are not exactly taqlidi in our approach to Islam. We are very open-minded.

(Kamilia 2009)

Indeed, talking about sex is considered taboo in many segments of Arab society, particularly prior to marriage (Yousef & Abdel-Fadil, 2008). Still, the anonymity of the online counselling service allows for a safe space in which Muslim counselees can ask detailed intimate questions such as ‘is it ok to masturbate in Islam?’ Being hosted on an Islamic website presumably assists Problems and Solutions in their mission to enlighten Arab populations about sexual relations.<sup>13</sup>

The Problems and Solutions counselling service can be understood as part of a global trend in societies. According to Hoover (2006), one of the characteristics of contemporary societies is that individuals are seeking ways to improve and develop their ‘self’. Hoover (2006) describes this trend as the rise of ‘the culture of therapy’ and maintains that it is largely ‘based on and available’ through media. Indeed the boom of popular psychology and self-help books and websites in the last few decades support this analysis. Problems and Solutions’ unique fusion of Islamic ethics and therapeutic counselling appears to be the result of the counsellors’ own adaptation of Western secular counselling models to an Arab context (Abdel-Fadil 2015).<sup>14</sup>

All Problems and Solutions questions and answers are anonymised and then posted online. Each individual response is linked to similar and/or other counselling exchanges that might be of interest to the questioner. This

practice can be interpreted as part of a commitment to displaying a plurality of views on a given topic, particularly when taken together with the fact that Problems and Solutions moderators frequently send complex questions to more than one counsellor, and subsequently publish opposing views on possible solutions to the problem online. Problems and Solutions counsellors and moderators alike are intent on reaching as many users as possible, even if they are unable to meet the high demand for the interactive counselling services. A multitude of counselling essays are published in attempt to reach a wider readership than only those who receiving a one-on-one dialogue with a counsellor. Counselling essays sum up common problems and provide step-by-step guides on how to solve them, and feature titles such as 'How to romance your wife', and, 'the hush-hush guide to intimate conversation and a caressing touch'. In fact, one key finding of my research is that there appears to be much more emphasis on realizing good sexual relations in counselling essays on IOL Arabic than on IOL English (Abdel-Fadil, 2013b). On IOL Arabic it is repeatedly stated that sexual education is sorely lacking in Arab societies, and as a consequence many Arab spouses do not know much about sex prior to marriage. IOL Arabic also published collections of online counselling exchanges in book format with titles such as 'sexual Education' and 'sex from A to Z'. The volume 'sex from A to Z' is reported to have sold better than any other title.<sup>15</sup>

Without the presence of body language and tone of voice, e-counselling requires learning how to interpret clues in the text. Problems and Solutions counsellors exchanged expertise with one another, such as how to look for: key phrases, uneven first person narration, use of punctuation, clarity and formulation of problem, repetitions, (dis)organisation of thoughts, and aspects of the situation that may have been left out. To the trained eye, such clues can reveal a lot about the counselee's life, personality and mental state. Amongst other things, counsellors discussed their interpretations of particular usernames or email addresses which may at times reveal something about the counselee's perspective on herself, with nicknames like 'sad rose', 'lovely girl', 'desert jasmine' or 'lonely forever'.<sup>16</sup>

Counsellors referred to in this study have over a decade of 'hands-on' collective expertise of what troubles husband and wives in the Arab world in marital and sexual relations. Counsellors believe that problems in marital and sexual relations are embedded in local societal problems, and necessi-

tate context-sensitive remedies. This article sheds light on various aspects of contemporary Arab marriages and sexuality, which online counsellors believe to be detrimental to marriages.<sup>17</sup> The structure of this article and the subheadings mirror the societal problems that Problems and Solutions counsellors believe undermine Arab marriages. According to the counsellors, one of the fundamental problems Arab couples face today is the marriage system itself.

## The marriage system

### *Traditional taqlīdī marriages*

‘Why marry when you do not know each other?’ asks Samir rhetorically.<sup>18</sup> Samir explains that society during the time of the Prophet was not gender-segregated and that marriage and re-marriage were easy - far more easy than today. Samir bases his call for reform of the contemporary marriage system on his reading of the time of the Prophet Mohammed (which is to be emulated). He declares the whole contemporary marriage system is ‘faulty’ and ‘un-Islamic’. Indeed, Samir and the other Problems and Solutions counsellors critique the practice of traditional (*taqlīdī*) marriages, *ḡawāz al-salunāt*’ or ‘arranged marriages’. Such marriages (in their most conservative form) are arranged by the families of the spouses, and entail meeting with the prospective spouse only briefly, in the presence of many others, before marriage. The counsellors all agree that these types of marriages ought to be done away with, because one is basically marrying a stranger. The counsellors highlight how marrying someone you do not know means that there are no intimate feelings. When this is coupled with limited interaction with the opposite sex -and not least, severe lack of sexual knowledge and experience - this is a recipe for disaster.

Counsellors are sceptical of *taqlīdī* marriages because they do not allow for a well-informed selection of a spouse. One remedy as conceived by many counsellors is allowing for a long engagement and dating period in order to properly get to know each other before deciding whether to marry or not. On a whole, the counsellors place emphasis on deeds and interactions rather than the ritualistic aspects of religiosity when choosing a spouse.<sup>19</sup> This is also why counsellors often advise counselees to observe their betrothed interactions with as many people and in as many situations as possible,

in order to learn about their fundamental traits and character and to better assess their compatibility as a couple (IslamOnline.net, 2004a).

It is common to distinguish between 'love marriages' and 'arranged marriages' (*taqlidī*) in academic literature about marriages in the Arab world. Still, it is a widespread perception among Egyptians that 'arranged marriages' and 'love marriages' have roughly the same odds with regards to possibly ending in divorce. However, as Peterson and Abu Hashish (1999) rightly point out, although most contemporary marriages in Egypt may not necessarily be self-initiated 'love marriages' or represent a clear break from 'arranged marriages', one could perhaps argue that today many marriages are 'transitional' in that they are increasingly being brokered with the involvement of the spouses to be (Peterson and Abu Hashish, 1999). In other words, in practice there may be blurry lines between 'arranged' and 'love' marriages in an Arab context. It is against this backdrop that 'choosing skills' become important.

### *Lack of choosing skills*

Maysoon believes that many marriages fall apart due to lack of compatibility:

High divorce rates are related to the wrong choice [of partner] not because one of them [husband or wife] is bad, just that I chose someone unsuitable. There were no selection criteria, so it doesn't fit.

Problems and Solutions counsellors maintain that many people in the Arab world suffer from a lack of self-awareness and in turn do not know how to choose a prospective spouse. As a result, 'anything goes'. In the words of Lamia you 'marry anyone, as long as you avoid becoming a spinster. Or, there is no awareness about marriage, or finding a life-partner'.<sup>20</sup> Several of the counsellors elaborate on how Arabs have 'no choosing skills', and argue that they simply do not know what they are looking for beyond, the superficial.<sup>21</sup> As Reem elaborates,

When choosing a partner [...] beauty [as a criterion]... what types of beauty? Is beauty what makes a good marriage, or good sexual relations? We need to work with preconceptions, deconstruct them and discuss them.<sup>22</sup>

Here, Reem appears to be asking whether choosing a spouse based on beauty, attraction, or whimsical lust is what makes a good marriage or leads to agreeable sexual relations. This is in fact a reference to the multiple counselling exchanges and essays which deal with the pitfalls of steaming desire. A striking trait is the humoristic way in which many of the counsellors poke fun at how common it is to lust after a partner with film star looks - without taking any other traits into consideration or even factoring in their own attractiveness. In essence, the Problems and Solutions counsellors draw on a combination of the wisdoms of both 'love marriages' and traditionally brokered 'arranged marriages'. In the counsellors' reading, choosing a compatible spouse is not simply about selecting eye-candy or opting for the one who makes your heart race. It is not that the counsellors deny the existence of sexual chemistry. In the counsellors' rendering, however, selecting the right marital partner is also about deeper qualities, which, in turn, may induce the desire to make love.

The remedy on the micro-level is to create awareness and make tools and skills available to counsees. At the societal level, the remedy is a call for reform of the marriage system, and introducing marital - and sexual - education to Arab populations.

## Intimacy and martial communication

### *Tense communication*

,They (husbands and wives) do not know how to communicate with each other... they do not have communication skills...' - Lamia.

Problems and Solutions counsellors believe that young Arabs not only severely lack skills in choosing a partner but also lack the skills and tools for 'managing' a marriage, such as communication and problem-solving skills. This skill set is of course relevant to the sphere of intimate relations. The counsellors' cultivation of 'choosing skills' is an attempt to make counsees more self-aware and consequently assist them in making a more informed choice about who to marry, and can be seen as interlinked with Problems and Solutions's overall 'awareness project' (Abdel-Fadil, 2011a). Moreover, this strong emphasis on lack of skills is in accordance with counselling models catering to individuals and couples in other corners of the world

(Illouz, 2008; Hough, 2006; Miller and Rose, 2008; Rose, 1999). Still, on Problems and Solutions the focus on skills carries a local flavour. On a more elaborate note Rania discusses the importance of working on developing marital communication, and adds:

They must learn how to talk about emotions together, both the positive and the negative. [...] Couples must set aside time, time that is only yours as a couple, regardless of all [external] pressures....time that is not for sex. Marital life is a seed, you must continue to care for it. If you do not it will die. Or else you have one of those pretty trees that are hollow on the inside.

Rania focuses on the importance of developing verbal and emotional intimacy. This may involve hard work but the rewards are well worth the effort. Moreover, the emphasis on techniques for creating intimacy is in accordance with Illouz's (2008) analysis on marital counselling in the US. Nonetheless, there are culturally specific challenges to the intimate relations in Arab marriages, as discussed by Salwa:

The wife is tense in the relationship. There is no communication with the husband. The problem is that she does not understand herself [...] and, she did not choose her partner or husband... This creates problems and complaints. Then, you find out that they have sexual and communication problems.

Here Salwa is discussing tense communication from the point of view of a wife. Salwa also relates that there is often a correlation between good communication and good sexual relations, a point that several counsellors make, and will be elaborated on shortly. Talking openly about sex may be taboo even within the constraints of a marriage. While this may apply to both husband and wife, the wife may feel extra obliged to lay a lid on her sexual preferences. In Samir's words: 'she (the wife) is constantly worried and tense, not knowing whether to express or not express herself freely (about sexual relations), so there is <miscommunication><sup>23</sup> in life.'

Pushing a similar point about sexual relations and communication being interrelated, Khaled says:

For example with communication... people see their problem in daily life but not necessarily the reason behind it. Is it related to economic pressures? Or is it because I do not allow my wife to participate in daily decisions, etcetera? Or, is it related to the bridge of years between us? Or, our cultural or class differences? 'We do not talk... he thinks of me as a thing.' With sexual relations and communication.... Which is the illness and which are the symptoms?<sup>24</sup>

Khaled discusses how several problems can affect marital communication and sexual intimacy. He also draws attention to the tension between the questions 'which is the illness?' and 'which are the symptoms?' Furthermore, in his citation of a female counselee who complains that her husband thinks of her as 'a thing' and does not include her in decisions, lies a critique. Khaled appears to be suggesting a different type of union and partnership, one that is based on an equal footing. Moreover, much like Salwa, Khaled is suggesting that communication problems will manifest themselves in sexual relations.

It is evident that the Problems and Solutions counsellors draw attention to some of the same things, such as the link between verbal intimacy and sexual relations. Next, the relationship between communication and sexuality is explored.

### *Sexual ignorance, anxiety, fear and shame*

In the upbringing of girls, sex is either not talked about... silenced, ambiguous or (considered) indecent (eib) or terrifying. <Enter> ignorance, not understanding, no satisfaction, and hating it. Imagine, twenty years routine, for women having to do it but with no satisfaction, without feeling loved, etc. The suppression [...] Women are brought up to not accept sex, to believe that it is indecent, etc. Suddenly she has to deliver... it is difficult, a shock... she does not know sex from where (on her body)... ignorance. Instability in the sexual relations leads to general instability in the marriage - Salwa.

Salwa discusses how Arab women are brought up to fear sexual relations and to think of it as shameful and indecent. Additionally, she maintains that women are severely lacking in basic knowledge about sex. These factors

together contribute to fear and hatred of sexual relations. 'Imagine, twenty years routine, for women having to do it but with no satisfaction, without feeling loved, etc.' she says. Here Salwa is also signalling that there is a problem on the part of the husband who is equally sexually ignorant and unable to satisfy his wife's needs or communicate love, factors that no doubt only make matters worse. Salwa's focus is thus on mutually satisfying sexual relations. Moreover, Salwa concludes that when sexual relations do not work, this rocks the entire marriage.

Lamia discusses how sexual relations are an important pillar of marriage:

The husbands complain of the wife's frigidity [...] I think this comes from two things: One, we do not have sex education, and two, the relationship between the husband and wife is not only about sex, you know, in the end it is <based> on communication. There is a problem in communication, so it echoes in the intimate relationship.

Here, Lamia focuses on the link between good communication and good sexual relations. Moreover, she maintains that one of the problems facing couples is that there is no form of sexual education, which, in turn, leaves both husband and wife clueless as to what to do between the sheets. It is against this backdrop, that one begins to fathom that the question 'is there more than one sexual position?' as posed by one of the questioners, may be rather representative of how severely lacking sexual knowledge is for large segments of Arab populations. Actually, according to the counsellors there are two prevalent problems amongst Arab men with regards to sexuality: 1) being totally blank with regards to intimate relations, or 2) having highly skewed views about sex because everything they know is gleaned from watching porn. Women, broadly speaking, tend to suffer from 1) fear of intimate relations or 2) lack of sexual satisfaction, in the counsellors' rendition. Reem lists some of the common questions counselees ask about with regards to sexual relations. In her own words:

They write about everything starting from anxiety, fear of marriage, or virginity [...] A wife writes that her husband does not satisfy her needs, or does not understand her... Or, premature ejaculation, erectile dysfunction ... Or, complaints about the husband being too busy, or not into sexual relations. It is more common in our societies, that

the husband complains about the wife being preoccupied with the home etc. [...] Women complain about the Internet, porn sites and films, that the husband is satisfied with that... that he satisfies himself <solo>.

In accordance with other counsellors, Reem mentions fear and anxiety as commonplace problems among women, in addition to unsatisfied sexual needs. There is also mention of the husband being egotistical in his self-satisfaction through masturbation. In fact, the husband's pornography addiction as a barrier to or substitute for intimate relations with the wife is a topic that often surfaces in counselling exchanges. This might signal that Arab men may also struggle with expressing their sexual desires to their wives.

Sexual relations are profoundly shaped by the fact that many couples do not really know each other before their wedding night. Elaborating on this view and offering a slightly different angle on the question of sexual relations against the backdrop of ignorance coupled with shame, Samir delivers the following serious message with comic effect:

You ruin the natural relationship... If two love each other, they are going to want to touch each other, etc. Everything is messed up on this issue. The same goes for women. The woman who is raised with sex being haram and indecent and cover here and how, etc. ... All her life she was programmed like this.... then press a button, and taratatata<sup>25</sup> she will start to undress and be I don't know what [...] how realistic is that - and how? Often it is a man she does not know .... She met him once or twice for 30 minutes! After an hour and a half: 'undress!'... How? (laughter). But ...how? (laughter) ... make me understand, how?! (laughter). By the way, we often say it is a problem for women, but it is also a problem for men, [...] He is standing in front of a woman he doesn't know! What do you mean undress in front of a woman he does not know? What do you mean? Sleep with her... how... you know? And by the way, many of <erectile dysfunctions> are from this... he is doing something <unnatural>. What is natural is that there is a real relationship between us, and when this relationship develops, we will want to do that .... We will just be waiting for the right moment. But, brrrruppp!<sup>26</sup> ... what is it? Undress! Undress! ... Who?! ... Guys, this is not what we agreed upon! (laughter). So

this is <miscommunication>. The same goes for women. The woman is afraid of expressing herself freely about sex in case her husband says (alters to comic voice and laughingly), 'Uhuh, and where did you get that information from?' Ok? ... So, she does not know whether to express it or not.

Samir launches a critique at the entire taqlīdī marriage system that 'forces' sexual relations upon both men and women before they have even gotten the chance to know each other, let alone develop feelings for one another. One of the intriguing aspects of Samir's response is that he is criticizing the indoctrination of shame into females from an early age. At the other end of the spectrum, we have a wife who is knowledgeable about sexual relations, but is fearful of expressing her real desires and needs to her husband, in case there is backlash from her husband or suspicion of her and her propriety. Samir is not the only counsellor to mention in interviews that women may experience suspicion or unwarranted accusations of sexual promiscuity if they confess to knowing anything about sexual relations. Problems and counsellors are highly critical of the ideal that women should be ignorant of all aspects of sexual relations. On a slightly different note Rania says:

The number two problem amongst marital couples is sexual relations... lack of acceptance, lack of agreement, lack of honesty [...] We think talking about sexual relations is important, but it has to be professional. [...] Sexual relations within marriage is one way of expressing love, it is not only about love, but is part of marriage [...] Sexual relations, is part of marriage - not the whole marriage. Sex is not an ISO standard!<sup>27</sup> (laughter).

Problems that relate to sex are reportedly very common in counselling exchanges. Rania points to imperative problems in contemporary marital sexual relations: lack of acceptance, honesty and agreement. She indicates that these three issues must be rectified in order for both husbands and wives to enjoy pleasurable sexual relations. Moreover, Rania maintains that sex is only one way of expressing love and creating intimacy; it is not the entire marriage. An interesting aspect of Rania's response is that she suggests that there is a need for sex education amongst counselees, and that it is better that they receive guidance from a website that is both halal and scientific. Rania says, 'sometimes people say do not discuss this... Pretend it is not

there ... Put your heads in the dirt... They say you are outside of Islam... I disagree'. This represents the general sentiment amongst my research participants. Indeed, Maysoon is the only person I interviewed who was against the discussion of sexual relations in such a detailed fashion. She is also critical of the use of 'sexy titles' or 'hot headings' to draw the reader's attention. Moreover, Maysoon maintains that counselling answers about sexual relations should not be public:

The answer must go to his private (email) address. Imagine, I have been married for 20 years... everything is okay, we have some problems but in general it is okay. Then I read someone's problem, which is close to my situation, and the counsellors say your rights and your pleasures and the sexual relation has to be one, two, three, four... (and you think) damn! I've been fooled! Where is this awareness? What awareness?!

Thus, Maysoon questions the goal of creating awareness about sexual relations. She fears that this type of openness about sexual relations framed in a 'rights' perspective can create a sense of deprivation, followed by tension in the marriages of Problems and Solutions readers. It is important to note that some counselling responses are not published online for all to see.<sup>28</sup> In practice, this means that *some* of the questions that deal with sexual relations are already being channelled away from the public eye. Still, it would seem that Maysoon would like *all* counselling exchanges about sexual relations to be private. However, this stance appears to run counter to the goals of creating sexual awareness that other counsellors share. Most of the Problems and Solutions counsellors believe that too little sex education is a pressing problem in Arab societies, which in turn creates: fear, taboos, ignorance and in consequence, unsatisfactory sexual relations. The counsellors advocate for sexual education with the goal of achieving gratifying sexual relations that satisfy both spouses, which in turn, is an important step towards a thriving marriage.

### *Lack of partnership*

In counselling essays, counsellors discuss how some wives consider sex a duty to their husbands, a token for his pleasure - and may even negatively sanction their husband by withholding sex. This is held to be counter-pro-

ductive since sexual relations ought to be based on intimacy, love, warmth, and mutual satisfaction (Abdel-Fadil, 2013b), According to Reem, a common problem in marital relations is 'treating the other *their* way, without compromise or reaching common ground, then they discover differences they are not able to handle'. Thus, Reem calls for understanding the other's needs, and a willingness to compromise. She maintains that if spouses are unable to reach 'common ground' this may jeopardize the marital relationship. In a similar vein, Maysoon states, 'there is also the problem of selfishness... what *he* wants is not necessarily what *you* want. You have got to learn the other's desires'. This relates to differentiating between the 'I' and the 'we' in a relationship. Both Reem and Maysoon are advocating for 'togetherness' in the marital unit, in order for it to work. Envisioning the relationship as some form of 'togetherness' has clear implications for intimacy on all levels. Elaborating on the concept of selfishness, Maysoon says:

Selfishness: 'I should be happy, you should make me happy.' Why not make each other happy? Even women say, 'I am trying to make him happy' - she will be doing it in a way that she thinks will make him happy - not in the way that will actually make him happy.

In her response, Maysoon describes how both spouses must learn about the one another's needs, and then respond to them. Togetherness is dependent on learning to understand and accept the other. On a slightly different note, Reem shares her ideas about marital partnership:

mawada wa rahma (love and mercy, Quranic reference) in marriage. What does it mean? How do we achieve this? We can even disagree with the fiqh. We are not like some books that state that women were created to satisfy men. God did not create one gender for the satisfaction of the other. We have duties and commitments to one another [...] sexual relations, emotional, and body. There must be a deep communication between the two in order to achieve mawada wa rahma. We must break the axioms, the everyday beliefs about gender.

Qur'an verse 30:21, on the 'tranquillity' and 'love and mercy' (*mawada wa rahma*) of spousal relations is a common reference for ideal marital relations, and many counsellors refer to the example of the Prophet Mohammed in this context. The prophet Mohammed is portrayed as egalitarian and a

loving and affectionate husband. This is significant since the Prophet Mohammed serves as a model for emulation for contemporary Muslims. Here, Reem discusses *mawada wa rahma*: 'What does it mean? How do we reach this?' she asks. In her opinion, the answer lies in mutual obligations and commitment to one another on all levels, including sexual intimacy. In Reem's view, achieving *mawada wa rahma* is contingent upon abandoning misogynist ideas of women being created for the satisfaction of men only. Another interesting aspect of the counsellors' responses is that they mirror the way ideals for prospective spouses are changing in the Arab world. Whereas in the past, a husband's main attribute was to be a reliable financial provider for wife and children, nowadays, at least for certain segments of society, an ideal husband is a partner in 'deep communication' who is both communicative and emotionally expressive.<sup>29</sup> This type of masculinity ideal overlaps with what has been deemed 'the new man'<sup>30</sup> in counselling literature, a point I will return to shortly. Elaborating on gender constructs, Samir says:

We are swimming in a sea full of myths, illusions, and fantasies. [...]

You have to work with the conceptions. It is as if the man's goal is sex and in return he can deal with some feelings. And the woman wants emotions, and therefore can give sex. That is ridiculous! (laughter). Both are human, both want sex and emotions, perhaps in different ways, or this may change at different times of women's or men's lives, or from woman to woman. But, the two want both things. But, these conceptions.... 'Yeah. If a man gets close to a woman, he wants (only) one thing.' And the man becomes programmed that if he wants (that) something from a woman, he must get close to her. You ruin the natural relationship.

Here, Samir is concerned about how myths about gender are 'programmed' into men and women and how they guide behaviour away from natural gender relations. Indeed, he argues that gender stereotypes affect not only the way men and women see one another, but also the way they see *themselves*.<sup>31</sup> His other claim is that confessing to, and internalising the fact that women and men are not all that different from one another may positively impact sexual relations. The issue of togetherness, intimacy, and pleasurable sexual

relations are very much interlinked according to Problems and Solutions counsellors. Samir shares a revelation he had on this topic. In his own words:

I was trying to understand. It came gradually, it was like a <puzzle>, getting small parts, then I got the whole picture.[...] I will try to remember some of the steps for you (...) sexual relations [...] Eventually I felt it was something deeper than this (...) the next revelation was that, 'this is marriage without a relationship'<sup>32</sup> Same house, kids, sex (but) without a true, real relationship, in the human sense, love, and, and, and... this was <amazing> to me.<sup>33</sup> This is common. Another step was the psychosexual (...) Now I believe it is related to the system of marriage, it is faulty from A to Z. Now I find those who say if we repair sexual relations, everything will be fine, silly. It is only a small part of the story [...] First we must admit that the whole system is faulty before we try to fix it. Those who say sexual relations, or choice of partner, that we must help people with these matters... Choose how? 30 minute sittings, three times? Choose without sufficiently knowing them? We must have sufficient time to start relations or else it is a choice in the dark.

In this excerpt, Samir explains how he had this epiphany of 'this is marriage without a relationship!' Once again, Samir's critique of the whole marriage system 'from A to Z' surfaces in his response. Samir is without a doubt the counsellor who is the most explicit about the whole marital system being faulty and formulates his critique of the entire marriage system into one condensed sentence. This sets him apart from the other counsellors. However, by putting together the arguments of any of the other counsellors, it is evident that they highlight a number of the very same problems that Samir critiques. Nonetheless, what is truly unique to Samir is the suggested remedy:

I am giving you a noovi<sup>34</sup> idea (laughter), if we considered marriage a <healing partnership>... to heal both their (husband and wife) problematic backgrounds... If we think of it as therapeutic... It will make a huge difference. Marriage, expectations, needs, coalition, healing partnership, let's consider it a healing programme! It will be a different entry. The system is faulty [...] until we sort that out, this is not

marriage, ok legally it is, but humanity and relationship-wise, it is not marriage. If we do this, we will benefit. I am entering (marriage) to heal and be healed.

In Samir's analysis, marriages in the Arab world often lack a true relationship. This affects the psycho-sexual dynamics of the couple negatively. Samir's proposed remedy is to consider marriage a 'healing partnership' where husband and wife together heal from the negative effects of their upbringing, including shame and sexual traumas. This is an original take on the problem of 'a marriage system that is a fiasco from A to Z'. While none of the other counsellors suggest considering marriage as a healing relationship, several of them emphasize the importance of forging togetherness and a partnership. This emphasis on spouses seeing one another as 'life-partners' is echoed in counselling essays on IOL (Abdel-Fadil, 2013b). As will be illustrated, the 'new man' is particularly well-suited for a partnership with his wife.

*Men do not follow the example of the Prophet and 'the New Man'*

The men over here have not been trained to express their feelings. Quite the opposite: 'the man should not cry' and I don't know what... 'the man who expresses his feelings is a woman'. You programmed the boy to not express his feelings, and then you want to press a button and have him express his feelings (all of a sudden)? How, you know?! (laughter). It will not happen. [...] We try to work with this, to men: forget this stuff about you not expressing your feelings... It is nonsense. - Samir

Intriguingly, Samir, discusses how Arab men have been socialized into a concept of manhood that does not allow for them to show emotions, such as crying. Samir calls on men to become more comfortable with expressing their emotions. This form of manhood can be seen as an exemplification of Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005:832,838) concept of 'hegemonic masculinity':

Hegemonic masculinity was not assumed to be normal in the statistical sense; only a minority of men might enact it. But it was certainly normative. It embodied the currently most honored way of being a

man, it required all other men to position themselves in relation to it [...] Thus, hegemonic masculinities can be constructed that do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men. Yet these models do, in various ways, express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires. They provide models of relations with women and solutions to problems of gender relations. Furthermore, they articulate loosely with the practical constitution of masculinities as ways of living in everyday local circumstances. To the extent they do this, they contribute to hegemony in the society-wide gender order as a whole.

According to Connell and Messerschmidt (2005) hegemonic masculinities are subject to both change and challenge. Here, Samir appears to be challenging hegemonic conceptualizations of Arab masculinity of being 'tough' and 'assertive' (Armbrust 2006, Peteet 1994). The alternative masculinity construct Samir proposes is a 'softer' version, a man who talks about his feelings and flirts with his wife - a man who is still a man if he weeps in public.

Furthermore, Samir's call for men to become more comfortable expressing their emotions, is reminiscent of Illouz's argument that the American popular psychology trend has produced a new, 'softer' ideal of masculinity. Illouz (2008) terms this ideal 'the new man', a man who is both more in touch with his feelings and able to express his emotions. 'the new man' can be considered a masculinity construct that challenges 'hegemonic masculinity'. Moreover, the call for 'the new man' in the Problems and Solutions context looks for inspiration in the past, from the ideal character of the Prophet Mohammed. As exemplified by Omar:

[...] If a problem's solution will become clearer by incorporating religious references like ahadith, we will do this. For example, using the Prophet as an example and role model for fathers could add strength to an argument, that fathers should spend more time and play with their children. You know, in Middle Eastern society this is not necessarily a given. Actually we ran an episode on Anā (short-lived satellite counselling channel) asking male viewers: if their child asked them to go down on all fours and be a camelback ride for them - would they accept? You would be surprised at the amount of fathers

who said, 'No! I could never do that! That is indecent, etc. and here it is very called for to refer to ahadith about the Prophet's relationship to his children and his playfulness. I mean, if the founder of the first nation of Muslims had the time and the ability to do this, so should other fathers! (laughter). The example of the camelback is good, because there is a hadith about the Prophet doing just this in his play with children. So in this context... to add extra vigour to an argument, the use of religious sources is very helpful.

Here, Omar uses the example of the Prophet to project the image of an ideal father, who is gentle and playful in his dealings with his children. The example of the Prophet is thus used to strengthen the call for Arab men to transform their 'masculinity' along these suggested lines. It can be interpreted as a challenge to hegemonic masculinity constructs. This is evidence of a call for a gentle form of Muslim masculinity, and is consistent with Samuel's (2011:309) argument that constructs of Muslim masculinity, drawing on the example of the Prophet Mohammed, are being reconfigured towards a 'gentler more feminised male'. I would point out that the 'gentle Muslim masculinity ideal' is also reminiscent of 'the new man' ideal of contemporary American counselling and popular psychology as assessed by Illouz (2008), that is a man who is more emotionally available, actively participates in nurturing the family, and feminist. Similar pleas for a 'new man' are made in online counselling exchanges of Problems and Solutions (IslamOnline.net, 2004b). A number of IOL counselling essays explicitly address men on topics such as how to romance their wives, or how to create an intimate atmosphere. IOL also ran a series of counselling essays 'what is wrong with...', some of which were clearly addressed to male readers such as 'what is wrong with a man saying he is sorry'. In these essays hegemonic masculinity constructs were explicitly challenged.

In the introductory quote from a counselling exchange, Samir invokes the example of the Prophet, who is portrayed as a loving, playful, intimate and romantic husband. The Prophet Mohammed is depicted as the ideal role model for contemporary husbands to emulate. Both Omar and Samir argue that if the leader of a nation of Muslims had the time to prioritize flirting and romancing, then, so should contemporary Muslim men.<sup>35</sup> By citing the exemplary role of the Prophet, the counsellors add extra vigour to their

gender position. They are saying that not only are alternatives to hegemonic constructs of masculinity commendable, but that they are part an parcel of living by the sunna, the example of the Prophet's life (Abdel-Fadil, 2011a). Arab countries are local contexts where religious interpretations carry a significant weight. Counsellors are well aware of the impact factor of religiously tailored arguments (Abdel-Fadil 2015).

The 'new man' in Problems and Solutions counselling also shares commonalities with the alternative, idealized, soft, masculinities in Egyptian melodrama - which are clearly pitted against hegemonic forms of masculinity (Abdel-Fadil and Van Eynde 2016). Such depictions of alternative masculinities send a clear message to Egyptian and other Arab men that they must evolve into softer and more egalitarian forms of masculinities.<sup>36</sup> In a similar vein, some Problem and Solutions counsellors jokingly refer to Turkish soap operas dubbed in Syrian dialect, shaking many marriages in the Arab world. Particularly the lead character Muhannad in the series Noor is said to have lead to unrealistic expectations of the gentle, compassionate and romantic nature of an idealized husband, and to have contributed to marital conflicts. The Turkish soap opera hype and the widespread admiration for the dashing Muhannad represented as a soft-hearted 'new man' is to have created turmoil in numerous marriages in the Arab world, and has therefore received both journalistic and scholarly attention.<sup>37</sup> In fact, heightened expectations to romantic partners based on comparisons to the dreamy heroes of Turkish soaps do pop up in Problems & Answers counselling exchanges. Still, it can be argued that Muslim ideals of masculinity depicted through the idealized character and gentle nature of the Prophet Mohammed as compassionate, soft-hearted and romantic man, share a number of the very same traits as the mesmerizing and ionic screen-character Muhannad, the alternative masculinities in Egyptian melodrama, and the 'new man' ideal in counselling literature.

## Conclusion

Taboos, shame, and widespread ignorance about sexuality shape and create serious discord in sexual relations for many Arab couples, according to Problems and Solutions counsellors. The overarching goal is thus to create awareness about sexual relations, thereby enlightening Arab populations

and eradicating ignorance and fear. Most counsellors believe it is important to discuss sexual relations because this may contribute to both healing and improving marriages.

Problems and Solutions counsellors' counselling perspectives and skills focus connects them to global therapeutic trends. Nonetheless, the Problems and Solutions counselling service also has a distinctly local flavour. The types of problems that husbands and wives write in about point to particular relational problems prevalent in the Arab world. The counsellors link sexual problems at the micro-level to societal problems at the macro-level - problems they consider specific to Arab and Muslim contexts. One such example is the practice of *taqlidī* marriages, marriages where the spouses have very limited knowledge of each other before tying the knot, which may have serious repercussions throughout the marriage - not least in intimate relations.

Counsellors list the local societal problems that they believe affect marital life, and prescribe remedies such as increasing self-awareness, sexual awareness, bettering communication skills and broadening the range of gender roles.

One interesting local adaptation that shapes Problems and Solutions counselling is the use of religious knowledge to undermine what counsellors consider to be prevalent erroneous interpretations of gender attributed to Islam. A fascinating example of this is projecting the Prophet Mohammed as a 'soft masculinity' for Arab men to emulate. Intriguingly, this form of masculinity is both reminiscent of the 'new man' promoted in global trends of family therapy, and of the romantic heroes of Egyptian melodramas and popular Turkish soap operas.

Cultivating sexual awareness and teaching tools of communication and problem-solving at the level of the individual can be considered important remedies that help ward off sexual ignorance in the Arab world. The goal for Problems and Solutions counsellors is not only to help 'fix' a relational problem, but also to contribute to reforms in marital practices and perspectives on gender and sexuality that would in turn help improve relationships between spouses in the future. This is why the Problems and Solutions counselling exchanges about sexual relations are published for all to see

- and learn from. In this sense, the ambition of Problems and Solutions counselling is grander than simply counselling individual counsees about sexuality. Assisting counsees in solving a sexual problem is, from this perspective, only a temporary solution at the micro-level. What is really needed is a series of larger societal reforms at the macro-level, that will benefit the intimate lives of *all* husbands and wives. The overarching goal of Problems and Solutions counselling is to assist Arab populations in cultivating both the knowledge and the necessary skills to nourish healthy marriages and satisfying sexual relationships -in every possible way.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This is one of the instances in which more than one counsellor responded to the query of the counselee.

<sup>2</sup> In an effort to reach audiences with limited Internet access and hence overcome the digital divide, Islam Online published counselling exchanges on a range of themes in an affordable book-format. This quote is from one such book, but was originally published online.

<sup>3</sup> The excerpt from *Problems and Solutions* has been formatted differently, so as to not confuse it with quotes from interviews, later on in the text. It is my own translation into English from Arabic script.

<sup>4</sup> Religious opinions on what is permitted or prohibited in Islam.

<sup>5</sup> *Problems and Solutions* user statistics indicate that there is an over-representation of female users from Egypt and Saudi Arabia and that most users are young and educated surfing either from home or work, suggesting a middle class affiliation (Abdel-Fadil 2011a).

<sup>6</sup> Due to funds being pulled from On Islam (Arabic) in the post-Mubarak transition, the counselling service has not been active since then - but a decade of previous counselling exchanges was still available and searchable on their website, well in to 2013. At the time of writing (February 2016), the website appears to be temporarily suspended, possibly due to Mr. Hisham Gaffar, one of the prominent journalists of On Islam (and previous Islam Online) being behind bars. Media reports indicate and campaigns for his release state that he has been imprisoned under allegations of being a member of the banned organization The Muslim Brotherhood and of operating illegally with the aid of foreign funds. This dire situation reflects political tensions in Egypt. Despite protests from a spectrum of concerned citizens and activists, Mr. Gaffar has not been released.

<sup>7</sup> By virtue of being of partial Egyptian decent, in the field, I am neither fully an 'insider' nor an 'outsider' but fluctuate somewhere in between. I understand most cultural codes, but am nonetheless not entirely immersed in them. In addition, my research participants and I have overlapping modes of professional knowledge, since I have previously worked as a counsellor. In my view, my counselling background has been as important as being a partial 'insider' with regards to both facilitating my fieldwork, and the subsequent analysis. In this sense my study can be considered a case of what Hannerz (2004) calls 'studying sideways'. During my fieldwork, I observed first hand, how those responsible for running the Problems and Solutions counselling service were not just passionate about raising awareness with regards to consensual sexual relations, but were also ardent about creating awareness about societal taboos such as rape and incest (Abdel-Fadil, 2013a).

<sup>8</sup> I also met with my research participants in the spring of 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2013.

<sup>9</sup> Anonymization of the quotes is done in light of recent developments in Egypt and following the imprisonment of Mr. Gaffar.

<sup>10</sup> The show explicitly deals with sexual relations and Islam, and at times in a most graphic fashion. The producers of *Kalām kibēr* consider the show pioneering in the way it talks about sexual relations (Swank 2007).

<sup>11</sup> For instance 55 percent of those polled in an American survey, listed 'relationship issue with partner' as their reason for seeking online counselling (Pollock, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> This is an emic concept, and the main trope of what I have analysed as IOL's 'institutional narrative', building on Linde (2001). For more details on 'the message' and IOL's institutional narrative, see Abdel-Fadil 2011b, 2013a.

<sup>13</sup> Over the last decade or two, Arabic satellite channels have been following suite. For instance the MBC program *Kalām Nawa'em*, which translates as 'sweet Talk' is a hit.

<sup>14</sup> 'Home-grown' adaptation of secular counselling models to fit religious values, is commonplace amongst religiously committed counsellors in other corners of the world as well (Onedera 2008; Zinnbauer and Pargament 2000).

<sup>15</sup> I was unable to secure myself a copy for this very reason.

<sup>16</sup> These techniques are in accordance with general guidelines for online counsellors (Murphy, & Mitchell, 1998).

<sup>17</sup> As a general rule premarital (or extramarital) sexual relationships are considered 'illicit' (*zina*) and beyond 'Islamic boundaries' by the counsellors. Yet, ideals do not always match reality, and counsellors often receive questions relating to 'illicit' relationships as illustrated in Abdel-Fadil (2015), counsellors are well attuned to counsees' weaknesses but may have different 'zones of toleration' (Worthington et al., 2008) on the basis of which their responses may vary from clear-cut admonishment to a more forgiving approach.

<sup>18</sup> All subsequent quotes from Samir are from this interview. All interviews were conducted by myself in the colloquial Egyptian dialect of Arabic. All translations into English are my own. I have improved some translations of quotes since I last quoted from the same interview. This has to do with the fact that with the benefit of time and distance, it easier to detect residues of direct translations from Arabic into English which make little sense to non-Arabic speakers. I have therefore taken the liberty of bettering the English, even though some segments have been published elsewhere, regrettably in less comprehensible English.

<sup>19</sup> The Problems and Solutions counsellors' stance on religious commitment places a lot of emphasis on *mu'amalāt* that is interactions between humans rather than merely performing rituals of worship (*ibadāt*) (Abdel-Fadil, 2011a).

<sup>20</sup> All subsequent quotes from Lamia are from this interview.

<sup>21</sup> The Problems and Solutions counsellors' analysis of counsees not knowing how to choose spouses or focusing on superficial selection criteria is consistent with the findings of Peterson and Abu Hashshish's (1999) study of matchmaking in Cairo. In this study, men's main criteria for selecting a prospective wife were: marital status (never married) and attractiveness, while women viewed education and financial status as their 'top criteria' for prospective husbands.

- <sup>22</sup> All subsequent quotes from Reem are from this interview.
- <sup>23</sup> Words bracketed in this fashion signify that the word was inserted in English in the midst of a conversation conducted in colloquial Egyptian.
- <sup>24</sup> All subsequent quotes from Khaled are from this interview.
- <sup>25</sup> This is not a word but a sound effect or jingle signalling a swift transformation.
- <sup>26</sup> This is a sound effect (not a word), added for comic effect and to signal a sudden shift of scene.
- <sup>27</sup> Here, pronounced 'EZO' in Arabic. This is a reference to the standards developed by the International Organization for Standardization. See <http://www.iso.org/iso/home.html> for more information.
- <sup>28</sup> This is either in response to the request of the counslee or based on a decision the counsellors make based on the sensitivity of the topics discussed.
- <sup>29</sup> This ideal is specific to certain socio-economic and educated segments of society.
- <sup>30</sup> Illouz (2008) discusses how the term 'new man' has been used in counselling literature to describe new masculine ideals from the 1980s onwards. In an Arab context see for instance Inhorn (2012) and Naguib (2015) for recent ethnographic research on the concept of 'new man'.
- <sup>31</sup> Samir also conveys that gender stereotypes are a universal problem.
- <sup>32</sup> Emphasis in speech.
- <sup>33</sup> Another example of the mixture of English and Arabic: amazing is said in English, while the rest of the sentence is in Arabic.
- <sup>34</sup> Slang for 'new' or 'innovative'.
- <sup>35</sup> Arguments about the Prophet Mohammed's egalitarian nature, his taking part in household chores and child-rearing for instance (not only claims to his playfulness and romanticism) have been put forward in other contexts. See for instance, Mernissi (1995) and Abdel-Fadil (2002).
- <sup>36</sup> The emphasis on preferable forms of masculinities is indeed a crucial point, since melodramas in the Arab world target mixed gender audiences and are often viewed by nearly as many men as women.

<sup>37</sup> See for instance Gubash (2008), Buccianti (2010), Salamandra (2012) for more on how Arab audiences are entranced by Turkish soap operas. Their critical analysis shows that the character Muhannad represents far more, than an idealized soft-hearted, romantic McDreamy who swears his utter devotion to his beloved and challenges patriarchal structures. This of course does not alter the way the character is perceived in everyday imaginations.