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A STORYBOOK OF INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUES & TRANSCENDENCE



## LET'S TALK

A STORYBOOK OF INTERGENERATIONAL DIALOGUES AND TRANSCENDENCE

*English edition - September 2021*



**MOTHERS AND DAUGHTERS** *narratives on sexuality  
& relationships*

*Aziza Khalidi & Christina Kaili*

*together with the women from Cyprus & Lebanon who shared their stories*

**The Mothers and Daughters project**

This storybook is produced for the EU-funded project “Mothers and Daughters Narratives on Sexuality and Relationships” (Project No. 198).

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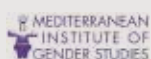
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**Disclaimer**

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## FOREWORD

The purpose of this storybook is to provide an experiential and relational learning tool based on the narratives of those often excluded from the public discourse. The content of this book is a compilation of the stories and experiences emerging from the intergenerational dialogues between nine pairs of mothers and their daughters in Cyprus and Lebanon. The variability, the plurality of their experiences bring to the forefront the dynamic and inspiring elements of the mother-daughter relationship. We highlight the impact of the relationship on both individual transformation and wider social change.

The storybook seeks to transmit knowledge through a mosaic of stories that capture the commonalities of mother-daughter experiences. Not to compare but to highlight and to exchange experiences. We have also included our impressions and insights in dialogue with these stories to highlight the scientific themes explored in the Mothers and Daughters project. This storybook should be approached as a work of art. We provide a space to the reader to become immersed in the experiences of women and contribute to their interpretation.

Dr Aziza Khalidi and Dr Christina Kaili

*chapter one***THE MOTHERS & DAUGHTERS PROJECT:  
INTRODUCTION**

In the context of the current multiple crises, decisions and discussions taking place about gender, sexuality and relationships often exclude women's voices. Women's narratives and stories on these issues – that largely still remain taboo – are absent from public dialogue and debate. At the same time, political decisions often do not reflect women's specific realities and needs. In this process, it is also important that we focus on the voices of those silenced, and particularly marginalized groups of women.

Within this framework, the mother-daughter relationship can potentially act as a conduit for personal empowerment, personal agency and self-efficacy in making decisions about gender roles, sexuality and relationships.

The Mothers and Daughters project engaged mothers and their adult daughters in a facilitated dialogue about their experiences of gender, sexuality and relationships. Dialogue and storytelling between mothers and daughters helped reveal important aspects of this intergenerational interaction and the way it informs the journey of gendered experiences, socialization as well as the construction of perceptions and attitudes about sexuality in our society. The project took place simultaneously in Cyprus and Lebanon, aiming to illuminate the intercultural dimensions of these issues in the Eastern Mediterranean region.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the dialogues between mothers and daughters were implemented online. With the informed consent of the participants, the discussions were recorded for presentation in this storybook. We hope that the storybook will be used to instigate further dialogue and awareness-raising among young people and the general public about women's experiences, gender norms and sexual rights.



## chapter two

# THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIP: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Within the framework of the “Mother and Daughters Narratives on Sexuality and Relationships” project, a series of intergenerational dialogues were conducted in Cyprus and Lebanon between March and June 2021.

In putting together this storybook, our aim was to listen to the voices of the women who wanted to participate and share their experiences. In this sense, it was a participatory process of ethnographic research, which was paired and further boosted by our desk research.

The **desk research** consisted of a review of relevant literature on intergenerational dialogues between mothers and daughters. The purpose of the desk review was to map methodologies and other information to assess the situation relating to gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) in the two countries. Specifically, the reviews focused on the latest data, legislation, educational frameworks and prevalent social norms on these issues, and provided insights on obstacles, gaps and areas of intervention for the fulfilment of SRHR. This desk review contributed to the discussion guide that facilitated a series of conversations with mothers and daughters on gender equality, sexuality and relationships in Cyprus and Lebanon.

For the **ethnographic research**, pairs of mothers and daughters living in Cyprus and Lebanon were invited to participate in in-depth interviews. A total of nine pairs of mothers and daughters were selected. The age range of participant mothers was 35-60 years and the age range of participant-daughters was 18-33 years.

As this was qualitative research it aimed at a diverse group in terms of age, sexual orientation, race and ethnic background, residency status, as well as geography (urban or rural).

Our research informed **an interview guide**, which we used to facilitate the interviews with the mothers and daughters. The overall guiding themes revolved around the mother-daughter relationships and their potential to bring about social change.

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## THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER INTERVIEWS

Based on our research (Berger, 2018; Brock and Jennings, 1993; Lesch and Kruger, 2005; Matyastik Baier and Wampler, 2008) we decided to interview the mothers and daughters first separately and then together.

The first stage allowed the participants a safe space in which to reflect on individual experiences, feelings and life circumstances and to express openly without filtering their responses. The second stage allowed for mutual validation and empowerment that facilitated better conversation and contributed in bringing out a diverse and intergenerational analysis.

Therefore, the interviews were structured as follows:

1. 45 minute - interview with mother
2. 45 minute - interview with daughter
3. 30 minute - joint conversation

This is also in line with the reflexivity in feminist methodologies and participatory research, which involves a mutual acknowledgement of women's roles within patriarchal societies and the cultural baggage that can shape women's identity and agency.

The personal accounts captured in the storybook have respected the principles of consent and anonymity, for example through the use of pseudonyms.

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## PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH IN UNCERTAIN TIMES

Taking into consideration the different cultural contexts, as well as the political volatility for both countries, the safety of the research space was paramount. We ensured safe space, confidentiality, anonymity and maintained contact with the participants despite the pandemic, as well as ongoing economic and humanitarian crises.

Despite the timeframe of this project, we succeeded in conducting participatory research with unique demographics. We were fortunate to have a wealth of information/knowledge provided by women from Cyprus and Lebanon (including Syrian refugees) partly provided by our solidarity networks and partner think tanks that allowed us to access participants from various and marginalized communities.

During these turbulent times and in the context of volatile environments, women's needs on issues of sexuality, relationships and reproductive rights are deprioritized in the public dialogue. In response, this storybook seeks to contribute to and enrich the public dialogue by reflecting the diversity in women's cultural, religious, ethnic, sexual, socio-economic backgrounds within the geographical proximity of Cyprus and Lebanon in the Eastern Mediterranean space.

## chapter three

# THE PLOT. THE JOURNEY. THE NARRATIVES.

## A MOSAIC OF STORIES

This chapter presents a story of stories. A mosaic of narratives from the lens of the mother-daughter relationship in Cyprus and Lebanon. The stories portray how mothers and daughters navigate their dynamic in key turning points of their lives, specifically in relation to womanhood, sexuality, reproductive rights and relationships.

The setting for the plot is two distinct but interrelated cultural contexts in the Mediterranean region. The quotes have been compiled and categorized in the following themes:

1. Messages on womanhood, sexuality, and relationships
2. Formative moments in the mother-daughter journey
3. Intergenerational challenges, tensions, and contradictions
4. Personal agency and reciprocal learning for social change
5. Facilitating healthier mother-daughter relationships through social change

## THE CYPRUS PLOT

### MESSAGES ON WOMANHOOD, SEXUALITY, AND RELATIONSHIPS

*Society's expectations on women and mothers can often be unrealistic. The narratives of the women who took part in our project highlight how the mother-daughter relationship can provide a space in which to question these expectations. More than that, an understanding that society's norms and standards can be impossible to live up to has the potential to strengthen the relationship between mothers and daughters.*

#### *Motherhood as performance:*

#### *Meeting societal expectations vs expressing feelings and vulnerabilities*

##### ***Katia (mother) & Anna (daughter)***

Katia: I didn't want my daughters to see me fail... I think that accepting your vulnerability and being real, this is the strongest version of yourself you can be. For me, the best moment was when I told my children, you know, I'm not perfect, I'm just a person who's going through my own journey. So allowing yourself to be vulnerable, this can be a key turning point in your life, because only then can you start to grow.

Anna: I got it, finally, that my parents weren't perfect people. So I started seeing things from her perspective, and she from mine... I never expected us to have the relationship we have now and I know that whatever happens, I have someone at my side who is trying her best for me and for everyone around her.

##### ***Anastasia (mother) & Danae (daughter)***

Anastasia: I'm an expressive person, I cry from joy, I cry from sadness. I allow my children to contradict me, tell me I'm wrong. I wanted to learn from them, so I said, make me a better person. They shouldn't feel like their mum is infallible... After all, we can have flawed relationships, we can get into arguments, we can do bad things. I doubt most parents allow themselves to be vulnerable or show weakness in front of their children. For me it's imperative to apologize to your child when you're in the wrong, because this teaches them that they are also allowed to make mistakes, to make amends and therefore grow as a person.

Danae: The first thing I remember her telling me is that being sensitive, and vulnerable, is not neces-

sarily a weakness. I think this greatly affected my later relationships. My mum also complained about how little my dad expressed his feelings; and because everyone always commented how like my dad I am, I made a special effort to articulate my feelings.

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### *Education and independence*

*The mothers' stories brought to the surface again and again values that they felt were essential to pass on to their daughters, for example, independence. This value touches upon many areas of life, for example, education, financial independence, and autonomy.*

Stephanie (mother): When we arrived in Cyprus, a girl's only purpose in life was supposed to be marriage. The parents were responsible for building a house and these kinds of things. My attitude was always that it is not my responsibility to build a house for you, it is my responsibility to make sure you have an education in order to be independent. I don't want you to be dependent on anyone. Therefore, I made a conscious effort to talk about your education and when you will go to university. So, I didn't talk about cooking, I didn't talk about the importance of learning how to sew.

Just recently it was her birthday and I got her a sewing machine and some sewing lessons because I thought it's quite handy to know and she is now being less of a consumerist, so I thought that's something nice for her. Conversations always focused on becoming independent, for me that was a really big deal.

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### *Gender equality in education and employment*

#### ***Athena (mother) & Natalia (daughter)***

Athena: We've had a lot of talks about women's status, about how women should have equal rights. We talk about the injustices a lot at home. Of course, even her studies in the film sector will have her ending up in a male-dominated field. You can count on the fingers of one hand the women cinematographers who have made it in Hollywood. But even when you can only find one or two women, there's a misconception that women dominate in creative fields. So in the end it doesn't matter that there are more women biologists than cinematographers. Inequality can be found everywhere.

This is why I raised Natalia the same way that I raised Aris, my son. As equals. I didn't apply any criteria that were different in terms of their independence and trying new things. Basically, I don't think girls and boys should be raised differently.

Natalia: For sure, my mentality has been shaped by my mum's views on critical thinking. She always urged me to think for myself and make my own decisions.

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### *Self-love, self-care, and body positivity*

#### ***Anastasia (mother) & Danae (daughter)***

Anastasia: At the age of 55, I still can't say I'm comfortable in my own skin; however, I wish nothing more than my daughters to be comfortable in theirs. I want them to push back against all the things their grandmother just accepted as a given, things that I made some attempts at resisting. I want them to know that while this happens to be where we live and this is the way things are, there's other ways of doing things too. It means we've had this body image thrust upon us, where we're constantly trying to lose weight or make our breasts look bigger or smaller, or dye our hair. Well now I'm trying to allow my hair to go white, but it's tough. It's a whole life where we're trying to be something we're not.

#### ***Elpida (mother) & Katerina (daughter)***

Elpida: You need to look after yourself as well. It's alright to make sacrifices but up to a point, you have to set certain limits. He has to make sacrifices too, and also push you to take care of yourself. This is the only way to feel complete. I always struggled with my self-confidence, I didn't value myself enough and this is something my husband really helped me with. I wanted my children to have confidence and I think together with my husband we managed to instil them with self-esteem.

Katerina: I don't remember a single time I was made to feel bad about my body. She'll never judge me for who I am, or tell me to change how I look, or dress. Instead, she'll say dress how you like. What she tried to impress on me was the need to look after myself. Because if I didn't, others wouldn't either. These are the key messages she tried to pass on to me: have a good time, take care of yourself.

When we argued about my eating habits, it was because I was overdoing it with the junk food, and she brought it up more as a health issue. She wasn't making me feel bad about my body. A few years back I dropped a few pounds and lots of people commented that I used to be a bit chubby. It's not the nicest thing to hear, but really, when it's from friends and acquaintances, it doesn't hurt as much as from family.

#### **Athena (mother) & Natalia (daughter)**

Athena: I worried a lot about body image and eating disorders so it was one of the first things I started to talk to her about. Body image especially is a topic that has an enormous impact on girls' lives, you really can't get away from it. I'm not like my own mother. You should see how she talks to Natalia. There isn't a single visit where she won't bring up diets. She even keeps on at me about it, she tells me to lose weight, she tells Natalia to lose weight. For years I've been telling her to stop commenting on their bodies, but she just doesn't get it, she keeps bringing it up.

For me, it's definitely an issue; the way I grew up, it was inevitable, but I tried really hard not to pass on those insecurities to my own children. I wanted them to feel good about the way they look, and I think I managed it. I have a brother too by the way, and they never said the same sorts of things to him. It was always to me: I need to watch my figure, I need to be pretty.

Natalia: I think the feeling of empowerment played a big role in our relationship. She always spoke to me about what it is to be a woman. Since I was a little girl, she'd tell me that I need to claim my rights and make decisions over my body, and what we have now is something that we've been working on over the years. What I mean is, what we share now, it's the result of years of conversations.

#### **Katia (mother) & Anna (daughter)**

Katia: I remember when she was in her early years of high school, another mum told me some girls take the sandwiches out of their (female) classmates' school bags. I found this grotesque, so sick, and it motivated me to start the conversation with her. It was really shocking to know 13-year-olds had such unhealthy attitudes and were luring others into their way of thinking.

Anna: It's not just in Cyprus, obviously, but women here do have a particular obsession with being thin. There's a stereotype for sure, they need to be made up, hair, nails, everything. My grandmother especially is really particular about it.

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### **Bodily autonomy and sexual agency**

*Sexual autonomy was a major concern in the mother-daughter discussions. Mothers were keen to convey to their daughters that they have decision-making rights in their relationships. Another concern was how to deal with the frustration around ongoing social norms around sexual relationships, and the privileged position that men still hold in this regard.*

#### **Athena (mother) & Natalia (daughter)**

Athena: We've talked about abortion many times, actually. Even Aris, my son, had a whole argument at school about the issue when the new legislation was coming in 2-3 years ago. We're very firm in this family about the fact that it's a woman's right to choose.

Natalia: Yes, we talked a lot about it, about how my consent matters. The key thing is that pregnancy is something that I should want. I remember her mentioning pro-choice protests happening around the world, and the message we got was that our bodies were our own, and we got to decide what we happens to them.

*Stephanie (mother) spoke to her daughter about contraception, and it brought up the issues of safety and protection in the context of relationships.*

Stephanie: We talked about birth control because I thought you can have sex if that's what you want

to do, but just know there are consequences that might effect the rest of your life. So, rather than do that, you should be on birth control because guys are less likely to take care of it. They are not responsible. In the end, you are the one who's going to be responsible so you need to take care of yourself.

*The notion of pleasure was also brought up.*

Elpida: Regarding sexuality and relationships, I'll say this. Sex is something that will be part of my daughters' lives. And they should enjoy it. It shouldn't be a chore or something they are forced to do.

*The journey towards building sexual agency also included the acceptance of different sexual orientations.*

### **Athena (mother) & Natalia (daughter)**

Athena: I always said to them, if you meet someone, a boy or a girl... I mean, I left it open like that, for both of them, to let them know either is fine.

Natalia: I don't really remember but I think from a really young age, my mum had been clear about it, to me and my brother, that it's ok to be with as many partners as you want, of whatever gender, so I never thought of it as strange. I mean, I never saw it as abnormal since I was a kid, my parents had friends who were gay, lesbian, bisexual. It was clear to us from early on that it can be like that.

In Cypriot society, it's especially hard to be a gay man; women who are lesbians have it slightly easier. It's about the macho image, what it means to be a man. There's a stigma with women too, but it isn't commented on as much, it's seen as more acceptable.

Stephanie (mother): I tried to present homosexuality as part of life too and it's not their choice; that is the way they are.

*The issue of safety is central in the effort to empower daughters to cope with incidents of sexual harassment that frequently occur in public places in Cyprus.*

Athena (mother): I worry about how people see her when she's out and about. It weighs on me, I know it's wrong, but I'll tell her for example, as she's leaving the house, if you're going to be cycling, don't do it in a skirt. I feel bad about it, I want her to wear what she wants, however she wants but... at the same time I worry. It's really unfair to us women, we always have to be aware of how we dress, it makes me sad.

Anastasia (mother): I can't leave my house any hour of the day, I can't go wandering about any time I want, I'd get catcalled, the usual stuff, it's things we experience, all of us women, anywhere.

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## FORMATIVE MOMENTS IN THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER JOURNEY

*The mother-daughter relationship can provide a framework in which to question conventional power structures, for example, family, culture and religion. When talking about sexual orientation, and specifically homosexuality, the women have challenged and negotiated issues like sin and shame in the wider context of a patriarchal Cypriot society.*

*The mothers and daughters have had to deal with issues of marginalization and harsh preconceptions, which have resulted in some defining moments in their mother-daughter relationships.*

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### *Coming out: Accepting and contesting religion*

*A key moment in the relationship between Katia (mother) and Anna (daughter) was a confrontation with spiritual leaders following Anna's coming out.*

### **Katia (mother) & Anna (daughter)**

Katia: When Anna came out, it shook my worldview. Whatever we thought we knew about our relationship to the church was completely upended. Her grandmother's initial reaction was that we should take her to a priest so she can confess her sins and then he can "fix" her. So I was in a situation where I had to accept my child on the one hand, but also be ok with God on the other. Not with the church, but with God, because initially I felt that there was an element of sin involved.

At some point, I ended up confronting my own priest. He had made what I thought was a very anti-gay speech. So I explained to him why that made me uncomfortable, how the church is supposed to be accepting of all kinds of people, and that moment when he apologized and admitted he was wrong – I'm getting goosebumps just remembering it – I felt I had dared to make a change. It makes me sad that the church makes gay people feel they don't belong, that God doesn't love them.

Anna: I knew that the bigger part of my mum's struggle with accepting my sexual orientation didn't have to do with society, but religion. The church as an institution was also an issue... at Easter, for example, I had to dress up and go to church, but I had to be modest too. It wasn't sticking with my idea of womanhood or what religion should be. I lost my faith, I completely removed myself from that world, and that's when I actually started feeling more free as a person.

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### *Growing out of tensions and conflict in patriarchal families and societies*

*Gender dynamics and power relations at home (the private sphere) play a central role in mothers 'and daughters' dialogues about sexuality and relationships. They bring to the surface the interconnectedness of these issues with the patriarchal, religious culture in Cyprus, and the way in which these issues are expressed within the family.*

*Anastasia (mother) talked about sharing the same values with her partner in raising Danae (daughter). The choice to give her both their surnames was one of the earliest decisions that had a lasting impact on Danae. This did not mean that there were no conflicts, particularly over Danae's sexuality, a situation in which Anastasia found herself having to manage the reactions of both her partner, and her own mother.*

Anastasia: I'm always playing peacekeeper, aren't all mums doing the same? Most of us, anyway. I think I managed it, it mattered more to me that I was able to communicate directly with her, to tell her what I felt, and how I felt it, rather than taking my partner's side. I have a lot of anger in me, which causes difficulties in my relationship with my partner. For sure it ends up affecting Danae too. But I try to impress on her that we should feel compassion too; dads didn't choose to be brought up in the way they were. If they're willing, we should talk to them so they understand the woman's perspective.

When Danae told us she was involved with another woman, I had to mediate her relationship with her dad, but I also had to deal with how I felt about it, which made things very tense. In the meantime, she had her studies and the pandemic was going on, all of which exacerbated the situation. So we said let's not talk about it until she comes back to Cyprus. So one day at the beach it caught us all unawares, and we had a blowup about it as we were in the water. Maybe I did too much of the talking, but it turned out OK. And I had the strangest feeling as the waves washed over us, that they were washing us clean too... We talked it out, the three of us, and I realized I had to deal with it in my own way, and let her dad deal with it in his. It's not that he doesn't accept her, it's that he expresses himself differently. He's not as expressive as I am. After that, I encouraged the two of them to go up to the mountains for a 3-day trip. Maybe they didn't resolve all the issues around her sexuality, but I think it did them good.

Danae: I didn't feel comfortable coming out to them for years, despite the fact that we had open conversations about sexuality at home, and we even went to Pride parades as a family. Basically, I wasn't fully at ease with my sexuality for a long time; I wanted to be sure, because all my talks with mum ran along the lines of: tell me about the boys you like.

So until I had real experiences I could rely on, I didn't feel like I could tell her. It wasn't the best way to do it, but I ended up telling them over the phone that I was in a same-sex relationship. I thought my parents would be totally relaxed about it, that's what they had led me to believe. But then I realized that while I hadn't upended their worldview, I'd upended things they took for granted about our family. They needed more time or space, or for us to all be together for them to properly process it. The expectations I had of them – and I told my mum first because I felt more comfortable telling her before telling my dad – my expectations were in the end completely out of sync with their reaction.

I felt I couldn't express this part of myself in Cyprus. I think I needed the distance to process it myself and then tell them, but my mum saw it differently. She said, why didn't you say something all these years I've been asking you? But it's hard to articulate; people assume you've always been gay and you've always known, but actually you need time to figure it out for yourself... When I worked through my feelings and it became clear, I just wanted to share with my mum that I was in my first relation-



ship, despite the fact that it isn't what she was expecting.

My parents thought I had announced it to them and never wanted to talk about it again, which led to a big blowup. What I had actually said to my mum was that I didn't want it to be some life-changing event, it doesn't need to be this painful thing, we don't have to talk about it all the time, it's something normal. And I felt hard done by because all these years she kept asking me to open up, and once I did, she didn't react in the way I expected. So we both shut down. She was crying when I told her, but not because she was upset, but because she wanted us all together when we had the discussion, and I took it the wrong way. We got our wires crossed, no doubt. Mum can be a bit dramatic at times, and she thought I never wanted to talk to her again, and that she had messed up. She didn't know how to take it back and apologize.

*For mothers, balancing the relationship with their partner while fighting for their daughter and her freedoms can be a source of tension. Especially when the burden of responsibility of the home (the private sphere) is unequally shared.*

#### **Stephanie (mother) & Melanie (daughter)**

Stephanie: There was a lot of disagreement in the household. At the beginning when we first came (to Cyprus), my husband was very equal in sharing responsibilities. Later he started neglecting his part, went to work, and I was left to do everything else: cooking, cleaning... My daughter doesn't have a good relationship with her dad and to be honest nobody really has a good relationship with him.

Melanie: My mum's relationship with my dad has definitely left its mark on me and the way I see my relationships and my priorities within them. Above all, there needs to be mutual respect. My partner needs to encourage and support me in life.

#### **Elpida (mother) & Katerina (daughter)**

Elpida: Katerina's dad does slip up sometimes, he has a tendency to undermine women, or talk about men's work and women's work. But over the years we've come a long way in changing his mind through our open conversations at home.

He's the type of man who will actually listen and try to change, although it's challenging going against what he's been brought up to believe. In any case, we are always in dialogue about these issues... So while I always had issues with self-esteem and confidence, he actually helped me a lot.

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### **Tackling intergenerational expectations**

*Grandmothers bring another perspective to the mother-daughter relationship. They highlight the need to balance family and cultural values on one side, and the need to develop and become independent and empowered on the other. Intergenerational education in matters of sex, for example, have not traditionally been a given.*

*Elpida mentions the lack of information from her own mother which led to her first sexual experience being a traumatic one. She only found out about sex and pleasure with her husband.*

Elpida: I was never close to my mum, and she did little to prepare me about the facts of life. I didn't benefit from the right kind of guidance or experience, and I think it's an intergenerational gap that persists... She didn't tell me anything for example about my first time, so that I could have been more comfortable when I started having sex. I ended up feeling bad, feeling guilty about it, it ended up being a bit of a traumatic experience for me, and I knew I didn't want my daughters to experience the same thing... We have so many taboos in Cyprus that it's hard to overcome this issue, I think

*In this way, the relationship with their own mothers can often act as a trigger for women to open up the conversation with their daughters about independence and being agents of social change.*

#### **Anastasia (mother) & Danae (daughter)**

Anastasia: Danae's grandmother is a huge role model for her. My mum was a teacher and a go-getter, her relationship with my daughter is excellent. It also acts as a trigger for us to have conversations as a mother and daughter. I had a completely different dynamic growing up. My mum was a believer, and my dad was an atheist, not that she was like the stereotype of a religious person that you might



be thinking of. I mean, she lived with a man who went from a strict believer to an atheist, while she herself had a strong faith and came from a family with huge ties to politics. But she remained a pillar for us in her massive capacity for acceptance, which was very progressive for her generation.

So the two relationships, between me and my mother, and between me and my daughter, cannot be compared, except for maybe the element of acceptance and unconditional love. For example, we didn't christen our children. So, for a woman of so much faith, and political ties, it was amazing how she took part in our little pagan rituals on the beach, which we did instead of christening the children in a church. So I had no choice, really, but to show the same kind of love and acceptance to my own daughters.

Danae: My grandmother is open-minded – well, as open-minded as a grandmother can be, I guess – and she always asked me about my relationships.

*On the other hand, pressure from the older generations, especially for women to get married and have children remains an ongoing issue in Cypriot society. In this context, a woman's value seems to remain predominantly tied to external beauty standards.*

### **Athena (mother) & Natalia (daughter)**

Athena: When I grew up and gained my independence I was still under enormous pressure to get married and have children. It didn't seem to matter that I had been awarded a scholarship or that I was a brilliant student. She just wanted me to get married and settle down, really traditional stuff. I think my mum wanted me to get married also because my dad was pretty much absent from my life as well. If you ask Yiannis, my husband, he'll tell you we basically had a church wedding to stop my mum's badgering; if it had been up to us, we still wouldn't be married.

Natalia: I remember well how my grandmother would pester my mum with all the Cypriot standards of hers, you should eat less, you need to watch your figure, etc. and my mum would push back. And if my grandmother said the same sort of thing to me, mum would get really mad at her. She fought hard for me to be ok and just be myself.

Athena: Sure, she used to tell her you need to cover up more, but it was jokingly, almost. It's different when it's a grandmother commenting on the way her granddaughter dresses, it's not the same when it's coming from your mum.

Natalia: My grandparents had such an interesting dynamic. My grandfather was a total patriarch, the head of the family, but he was also very dependent on my grandmother, you know? And he was supposed to be the foundation of the household. It's really interesting because despite my grandmother being very capable, she accepted that traditional family framework.

### **Stephanie (mother)**

Stephanie: My mother was ahead of her time. She didn't belong in that generation, but she was a workaholic so we never really had the usual mother-daughter relationship. In fact, I didn't have a particularly good relationship with my mother. I felt like she was always picking on me. My teeth weren't straight enough, I was not thin enough, I wasn't beautiful enough, all these things and finally when I was at university I stood up to her.

### **Anastasia (mother) & Danae (daughter)**

Danae: All these experiences and discussions are actually really helpful if we can listen to each other without judging each other's opinions as too much or not enough. That's it really, we need to listen to each other without judgement and expectations, because otherwise you get disappointed and then upset.

Each person has lived through a different set of experiences which has formed her mentality. We lived through different situations, different cultures, maybe we had friends from other places in the world who helped shape our opinions and that's ok... We don't live in a vacuum where we can remain completely unaffected by outside voices. It's easier to hold certain opinions than to act on them, because acting means society will see you and judge you. For example, I come from Cyprus which has a really patriarchal society, but I'm now studying in another, more progressive country, and this has shaped me a great deal.

Anastasia: And don't forget Danae, our own relationship operates within a wider family dynamic, which for example, your dad has a huge role in.

Danae: That's true, despite the fact that we always talked openly at home about feminism and equality, there are still differences in, say, how much work you do around the house and how much dad does, in how you treat Constantinos, my brother, and Maria, my sister. It shows even more when we're with other relatives, grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts and uncles – you see that in a wider social context, feminist principles are not so easy to implement.

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## INTERGENERATIONAL CHALLENGES, TENSIONS AND CONTRADICTIONS

*The mothers and daughters identified various challenges and systemic barriers they must overcome on an individual, collective, and institutional level. These include lack of education and inclusive sex education, the persistence of heteronormativity which results in a society that isn't supportive of the LGBTQI community, the hypersexualization of girls and women, sexism, and sexual violence.*

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### *Lack of education on sexuality, consent, and gender-based violence*

#### ***Athena (mother) & Natalia (daughter)***

Athena: There's a lot going on right now, especially with the Me Too movement, so topics like rape are in the news, and we've used that as a jumping off point to talk about consent. It shouldn't be that hard, or that complicated. I'm thinking about bringing it up in class with my students too. The discussion needs to happen in schools – what do we mean by consent? What do we mean by harassment? The ministry of education needs to take action.

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### *Pervasive heteronormativity and a lack of systemic support for LGBTQI people*

#### ***Katia (mother) & Anna (daughter)***

Anna: Every time I meet someone new and I come out, it's challenging. Especially as I don't know how they'll react. Our society is still very patriarchal, especially when a woman comes out as a lesbian, she's likely to be overly sexualized by others.

Especially if you come out in Cyprus, there's a lack of representation, so I was just copying what I saw, which meant I presented as a total tomboy, very butch, because those were the only visible lesbians I saw... For mum and dad, they were ok with having gay friends, but when it came to me, their daughter, things were a little different.

Katia: It took me by surprise and then I had to change my worldview. I had to make a lot of changes actually, I had to review a lot of things I believed... I felt I had to educate myself, with Anna's input, and to really get my facts right about homosexuality...

A child needs to have parental support in the coming out process. It was a huge moment of upheaval, and I felt for her. But there also needs to be some institutional support – some organization, somewhere the person coming out can go for advice. It's not only a huge change for them, but also for their family, and changes like that need to be handled right.

#### ***Elpida (mother) & Katerina (daughter)***

Elpida: I didn't want my children to ever bully those who are different in any way, be it in appearance or sexuality, or anything. I wanted them to accept people as they were.

Katerina: I understood, even at a young age, that not all children are the same, and I didn't judge them.

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## Oversexualization of girls

*From a very young age, girls are exposed to the mainstream beauty standards and the idea that part of femininity is to be “sexy”. Such standards are promoted by fashion, pop culture as well as in schools and through local traditions.*

Stephanie (mother): How can you not be aware of body image in Cyprus? I mean, even in the sixth grade when they were graduating from elementary school I remember the girls wearing halter tops and doing belly dancing. I thought to myself how sexual is this? This is super over-sexualization of 11- or 12-year-old girls. I was disgusted when I left that celebration.

## PERSONAL AGENCY AND RECIPROCAL LEARNING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

*The mother-daughter relationship is described in the women’s narratives as a tool for experiential and intergenerational learning and unlearning that contributes to building sexual agency and healthier relationships in the long-term. These stories bring up the empowerment and independence that comes from this process of (un)learning and contesting of social structures (e.g. family, school, religion). Through this shared process, political agency emerges for social change.*

### **Katia (mother) and Anna (daughter)**

Anna: I mean, even the smallest things, from stupid friend requests on Facebook, to street harassment... Men just don’t understand the daily challenges we go through as women. There are certain experiences and certain lessons that you can only really be taught by a woman who’s actually gone through them herself.

Katia: The mother-daughter relationship is all about social change. And we need to entrench that so we can really understand the gravity and impact these kinds of relationships can have on society.

### **Stephanie (mother) & Melanie (daughter)**

Melanie: It’s a very important relationship that will actually help you figure out who you want to be in this world. And you’ve got a person that has been in your shoes in one way or another. I feel the mother-daughter relationship gives you a certain perspective in life through which you can interpret what you see, learn and experience in life.

Stephanie: It’s a lifetime relationship. And it can bring you very much happiness. I think it’s a human relationship that can be painful if it’s not really nurtured in a good way, but if it is nurtured in a good way, it can bring you a lot of happiness. I think maybe we take it for granted.

### **Elpida (mother) & Katerina (daughter)**

Elpida: I think the mother-daughter relationship is very important... It makes women more confident and independent even from an early age.

Katerina: The mother-daughter relationship can define the daughter’s life. Even your self-perception is shaped by your mother. I’ve seen a lot of different scenarios... I’ve seen girls whose confidence was knocked down by their mums and they had a lot of issues later in life... It makes a huge impact on your development as a person. Your mum is the one who provides you with your principles... She’ll teach you respect and trust, self-respect and self-care, what you should put up with from others, all very important things.

### **Athena (mother) and Natalia (daughter)**

Athena: I think it is tough to stop worrying about your child’s day-to-day, and just assume they’re getting on ok, and if they need you they will let you know. I think that’s challenging for any parent. We share activist experiences, and feminist activities, something that really strengthens our bond, it’s amazing to live through these things together. I feel like it’s an ongoing journey.

Natalia: I got the tools to build healthy romantic and sexual relationships too.

### **Anastasia (mother) & Danae (daughter)**

Anastasia: I was ready to open the floodgates and share everything with her, all the relationships I had had, but I felt she wasn't yet ready to hear it. But she knew I was there when she was, and I think that's the important thing. To feel as though there's nothing she can say to me that I'll think is sinful or shameful or any of that rubbish people say.

Danae: It's a two-way process. First a mother goes to her daughter with information, but then the daughter has experiences of her own, and it becomes a dialogue, because the parent needs to figure out what the child wants. Still, the first stage is key in how a person deals with sex. I was really lucky in that regard, because my parents avoided the usual conventions, like for example, if someone stayed over, it wasn't shameful. Sex was seen as normal.

But both sides of the process are important. There has to be a willingness to change, to learn... I feel like even when I'd say something she had no answer to, I was at the very least heard, my message had been received. And we didn't need to clash over everything we didn't agree on, we could hold our own differing views and try to understand each other. It allowed us to connect through a two-way dialogue... A lot of our talks center around what I need. You might want to pose questions of your own. After all, to know, to understand, you have to ask.

Anastasia: Patience is key. What Danae mentioned about needing space, that was a conscious decision on my part to just... to let her tell me what she wanted to say and I'm pleased she did. Danae helps me be a better person, I'm so lucky, I'm blessed to have her in my life. I'm proud too, I remind myself of that day at the beach, in the sea, and I hope all mums have moments like that, where they can have breakthroughs and hug each other and say I love you. Moments like that are worth it all.

Danae: Well, what I want to say is... mum taught me it's ok to cry, and it's ok to be vulnerable, that it's better to say what's on my mind than keep it all inside, and this all helped me build healthier friendships and relationships, and it's really important to me.

Anastasia: (cries)

Danae: Mummy...

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### *Mothers and daughters learning from each other*

*The mother-daughter relationship can thus be seen as dynamic and ever-changing. Especially from adolescence and into adulthood, the relationship begins to become essentially interactive through the negotiation of boundaries and the questioning of social orders. This allows the relationship to become a field of production of new meanings and attitudes. Daughters teach their mothers through dialogue and their own example. They can exchange empowerment tactics to deal with a society that looks to restrict women of both their generations.*

#### **Katia (mother) & Anna (daughter)**

Anna: I remember one empowering moment, we were in the car and I opened up a discussion about sex, and she turns to me and says, is it appropriate to talk about such things? And I said, mum if you were my dad and I was your son, wouldn't we be having this conversation at some point? And she said, you're right, actually, and we started to talk. It was a small moment, but it really changed the way we talked to each other.

Katia: Yes, let me tell you, I speak to Anna as an equal, that is to say, I learn a lot from her too and I find that to be a really positive thing. I've learned a lot from Anna. And many times I've realized I've been in the wrong, my way of thinking had been off, and I needed to learn from my children. In order to develop as people, we have to learn from the younger generation.

Anna: We all put ourselves first... but when we start seeing others' point of view, we develop compassion and the ability to learn from someone else's experience. When I started to listen up, it really helped me, on a lot of issues. I'm better at managing my stresses and my worries, I'm not kidding!

[She turns to her mum] I listen to you, don't think that I don't, even when I get annoyed as you're speaking to me, I still follow your advice. For example, two things you told me really stuck with me. The first was – you only hit rock bottom once in your life, and the second was – choose what you want most, rather than what you want now. These are two pieces of advice that I keep in mind, always.

Katia: I also learned a lot from Anna. I'm in a male-dominated field and my daughter's power taught me a lot. I reviewed a lot of things, I thought I was confident and capable, but there was still a part of me that thought men should be on top. Going through the process with my daughter empowered me to go toe-to-toe with the men I deal with at work. We're talking about pilots and engineers, the kind of men that have patriarchal attitudes stamped into their DNA... but now... well, now they give me respect and I like that, because I can show them I'm not afraid of them, I'm not less than them.

This is something Anna really helped me with. The experiences I had in the course of this whole story, this upheaval, the new information I had to process because of her, actually made me wiser. It's a journey, and it continues on. We share a lot of wonderful experiences every time we meet and if we argue a little, the laughs that follow more than make up for it.

***Elpida (mother) & Katerina (daughter)***

Elpida: I keep myself open and present for my daughters to come and speak to me whenever they want my advice. And vice versa. I need my daughters to advise me too. After all, they live in this new era so they can give me advice about it. There are certain things I never learned when I was younger, and I'm still discovering them now.

Katerina: I remember a few months ago, when I had started volunteering at the Cyprus Family Planning Association [an NGO], I came home and had a conversation with my parents about sexting, and my dad was like, what crazy thing will they think of next? OK, so we didn't go too deep into it, but still, the fact he sat and listened and asked questions, it goes to show that talks like that can help create a bridge in a relationship, not be detrimental to it.

***Anastasia (mother) & Danae (daughter)***

Danae: Talking about this stuff makes me realize we're now on a more equal footing, adults who are learning from each other, rather than just mum and daughter. We tend to think of a daughter learning from her mother and that's it, but now I think we can talk to each other without judgement, and both end up discovering new things.

Anastasia: It's been a while since I realized that learning from Danae is part the process of maturing and I actively seek to do just that. I think there's a blurring of boundaries between the adult to adult kind of relationship and the mother-daughter relationship at times, but in fact this is exactly what helps us avoid smothering each other.

I'm 55 years old and still sometimes I look for my mum. It might bother me when she comments on my appearance and tries to pull down the hemline of my skirt, but there are times I still want to simply be her daughter. I want my daughters to feel this too and to seek it out with me, but also to tell me if I'm crossing any boundaries. I don't like to impinge on their lives.

Danae, when you were in your teens, I had a lot of trouble with this, because you spent so much time shut up in your room. I ended up freaking out that maybe you had depression and I barged in. But mostly, I tried to respect you. I pushed just a little to see if there was anything personal you wanted to talk about. And I assured you that when you wanted to, you could come and find me to talk. I don't know if that's how you felt too, but that's how I saw it.

Danae: Yeah, I'm aware that our relationship when I was a teen has had an impact on our relationship now, and that you made an effort to give me space. That's what I needed in my teens, but sometimes there can be too much space, to the point of losing the connection. And it's even harder when it becomes long distance and over the phone, during a pandemic, it's difficult to understand boundaries when you can't see the other person.

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***Claiming the space for different narratives***

*Mothers and daughters at times expressed dissatisfaction with the narrow confines of gender roles, as well as the stereotypes and social expectations inflicted on women. In their individual and collective attitude towards the world, they often choose ways of resistance. The conscious choice to diverge from convention can be seen as an ongoing battle, sometimes won, sometimes lost.*

***Anastasia (mother) & Danae (daughter)***

Anastasia: I want my daughters to rise up against convention, but I'm also afraid of encouraging them to do so. I want them to do it because it's the right thing, as simple as that. On the other hand, it's a tough road to go down. I'm still on it myself, so I'm well aware of the challenges. They might not come up against the same challenges, maybe they'll decide to make their lives abroad. In other places, conventions have long started shifting.

So she sees the daily battles I engage in, the talks I have with her dad, she sees my involvement in different fields where I try to fight for things that are self-evident... It's particularly clear in my professional life, where I work with abused or migrant women, there's always an element of injustice I'm trying to right.

Then again, maybe I'm giving them the opposite lesson too. I pick my battles, and certain battles I may choose not to take up, Danae would absolutely forge ahead with. That's what I was mentioning at the beginning, there are situations where the mum might have no chance to fight, the daughter comes along and gives it a go. Maybe she fails, but she picks herself up and tries again, and maybe it's her own daughter who finally emerges victorious.

This process is as empowering as it is terrifying, because earnest women, those who fight, face a lot of adversity and failure. But in terms of the woman's perspective, I think I tried to empower my children overall. No matter what we were going through, I always wanted to see joy in my daughter's eyes. I want her to find people who love her and respect her, and for her to respect herself. I'm still trying to get there for myself, to be honest. I think we sowed the seeds with these conversations, and when the time is right, we'll see the results. I really feel it will turn out like this.

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### *Sexual agency is political agency: A push for activism*

*The political dimension of sexual autonomy, diversity, sexism and access to rights were all part of these mother-daughter stories. The mothers have all touched on a number of important issues which are often considered taboo, when opening up the dialogue with their daughters, such as sexual and gender-based violence, boundaries, consent, relationships, sexuality, acceptance, racism.*

*The mother-daughter relationship must also look inwards to examine intergenerational relationships and the impact these have around some cases political autonomy and control.*

Anastasia (mother): We have a lot of political talks at home... I tell my children we can talk about anything, nothing is off limits or taboo in this house. The challenge has more to do with the fact that her father and I express ourselves differently, so it's sometimes difficult to be aligned. We took her grandfather - my late father - to the first Pride parade, and we were three generations there, my father, me, and Danae.

#### **Athena (mother) and Natalia (daughter)**

Athena: With everything going on right now, with the Me Too movement, and the definition of rape, there are a lot of examples in the news that can stimulate the discussion on consent.

Natalia: All these issues were topics of conversation for a long time in our house, but now I feel like what's more important is to take action. It's a complaint I used to have of my parents - they talked a lot about social justice at home, but they never seemed to do anything about it... but more recently, I feel they've thrown themselves into activism a lot more and in this way they have set a crucial example for us. They took us to protests when we were younger, and now me and my brother go together. Here in England, I've joined up to a number of causes. My parents essentially gave me the space to shape my activism and political identity. And with this mothers-daughters project, it's a more personal type of activism, which I find both important and empowering.

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## FACILITATING HEALTHIER MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH SOCIAL CHANGE

The intergenerational dialogue between mothers and daughters revealed key questions about gender equality that remain unaddressed on the individual, collective, and institutional levels. Significant social changes are needed to boost the mother-daughter relationship as a conduit to sexual (and



political) agency. These include:

1. Comprehensive sex education at all levels of schooling, starting from a very young age as a key strategy in combating sexism, as well as sexual and gender-based violence
2. Creation of safe-spaces for open dialogue with a diverse range of mothers and daughters
3. Additional storytelling projects with the involvement of fathers
4. Improved childcare and parental policies
5. Access to justice for those affected by domestic and gender-based violence
6. Socio-economic empowerment and independence
7. Political acknowledgment of women

As one mother, Anastasia, said: You start off with this person that came out of your body, who's a part of you, who you love more than anything in the world, and it gives you immense strength, you join forces and you go to the next level, which is the community level. After that, it's the institutional level, that's how it works.

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### *Seminars to empower women and inform them of their rights*

Katerina (daughter): Seminars or that sort of thing would be a good idea, targeting mothers and daughters, but also the wider public so as to support and nurture their relationship. I think it would do a lot of good in society.

Katia (mother): They should be educated around what they will have to put up with in life but also what they have a right to refuse to put up with.

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### *Engage male partners in the gender equality movement*

Anastasia (mother): I think dads need to get involved, otherwise you'll never achieve equality. It takes two to have the kids, after all. Maybe we need to help men understand what it means to be a modern woman. Maybe they hold it against us that we have the privilege of carrying children, maybe they never get over that. Danae, what do you think?

Danae: I agree, I think you end up seeing parents predominantly in terms of their relationship to each other. My friends, for example, I can see how the relationships they have are really affected by what they saw growing up at home, the parents' dynamic is very important.

Natalia (daughter): As much effort as my mum — or any mum — puts in to make her daughter an independent person, someone who strives for social change, it all needs to happen with the boys too. If we don't include them in this effort, then we'll always have rapists, or people who uphold and support patriarchal societies.

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### *Comprehensive sex education*

Anna (daughter): Sex education at school is terrible. So the child turns to the parent, and the parent also didn't get proper sex education and doesn't know how to talk about it to their child, so it stays a taboo.

Danae (daughter): You can't keep subjects taboo in society, because if they are considered taboo there, then they won't get brought up in personal relationships either.

Athena (mother): Gender-based violence also needs to be covered in school, systematically, at all levels of education as well as for the parents' associations. This remains a huge gap.

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### *Transformation at the policy level*

Melanie (daughter): You give birth to a child, have time with it!

Anastasia (mother): If we were to raise them differently, then yes we'd also bring about structural change.

Athena (mother): The state could do a lot to help support these relationships that offer so much in our communities, like maybe if people weren't forced to work extremely long days, they'd have some time to dedicate to their children.

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## **THE LEBANON PLOT**

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### MESSAGES ON WOMANHOOD, SEXUALITY, AND RELATIONSHIPS

*We begin the Lebanon plot with narratives on womanhood – from the body, where the mother reflects on the need of her daughter to know her body, to her wishes for her daughter regarding her body, to her reflection on how society influences how we see our body.*

**Maryam (mother):** It is important now, the first thing to know is her biology. It took a long while for me to find out about menstruation and it shouldn't be like that – I mean, to understand how hormones can affect her psyche. It's very, very important for me that my daughter loves being a woman.

These attributes [of womanhood], especially menstruation, the reproductive system, breasts, these are attributes nobody can argue about... there is something special related to the spirit and psyche... renewal, innovation, fertility. These are manifested through giving birth, and renewal through menstruation.

I would like my daughter to be able to enjoy her body and have satisfaction, and to trust herself and to have respect for her body. Respect exists through feelings, that is for her to value the feelings of her body – her feelings... and I taught her that the condition of a sexual relationship is love.

*Now let us explore womanhood as a concept, as a set of attributes and a journey of discovery.*

**Muna (daughter):** How do women and men differ? Maybe by their way of thinking, sometimes, frankly, I feel the woman is a bit – or more than a bit – aware than the man, I feel the woman is more aware, thus I feel they [women and men] are different.

**Hania (mother):** Society influences how we view ourselves. For example, they used to explain to us that the body is a sin, or menstruation makes a woman not clean.

**Nuha (daughter):** Womanhood itself, I guess we are speaking about compassion, about being there for your kids and trying to work things out in a way by listening more, by being there for your children, this I learned a lot from mum, unconditional love or anything meaning that we love one another even though we are not seeing eye to eye on some matters.

**Hania (mother):** Womanhood is tenderness, safety, struggle, compassion, and love.

Rana (daughter): [Womanhood] is boldness, justice, that is, standing up against wrongdoing. I used to hear stories from her work, she sees an injustice and she faces up to it. According to Sadawi, womanhood, or femininity, is the feeling of responsibility.

**Nuha (daughter):** For me, womanhood is different from femininity because womanhood has more to do with the biological aspect, whereas femininity is more about expression and behavior.

**Maryam (mother):** Even if a woman is shy by nature, she's strong because she's used to multi-tasking and she can bear a lot depending on her history. In general, a woman endures, a woman knows how... I am saying in general, a woman is capable of coordinating and fixing things.

**Samia (mother):** The only difference between a male and a female is biological, there is no difference in their work, their behavior; both need to be on the same level of respect and morality.



**Maryam (mother):** I think one discovers feminine attributes individually, I do not know why one should teach another on the attributes of the feminine, this is innate, this is something she has, I don't think one should teach others about it, because no one taught me how to be a woman, or how to be a man, you can get that from your upbringing and before that you feel them... they are things you need or you don't have.

**Hania (mother):** I don't know why someone would teach another the qualities of a female, this is innate, something that she has. No one taught me how to be a woman or how to be a man, these are things you get from your upbringing, you feel that these qualities are things that you want or you don't have.

**Hania (mother):** I understood the meaning of femininity and womanhood from my mother and the meaning of manhood from my father. Regarding identity, I do not feel that anybody puts it in words, I feel it's acquired, what a woman observes, how she lives, and how we live our own identity in front of her.

**Mizyana (mother):** Just like in our villages, a woman is a homemaker – clean, tidy, good in child-rearing, qualities like this – her husband's proud of her and her family's proud of her as someone who takes care of her home and raises her daughters and sons properly. She also is well raised, that is from a good family, I mean a respectable person.

**Nuha (daughter):** I wear what I want... I do not think of how the other person sees me; for example, I was joking with my aunt, she is a beautician who removes hair. She used to ask me if I wanted my eyebrows done, and I used to ask why? She would say because at university, your eyebrows should be "done"... it's frowned upon if you don't. I would say, you want to get me engaged early? Why would it matter to a man? In this way I used to express that I don't care.

**Nuha (daughter):** I recall having a normal upbringing and a correct one, things were very much in order, but I somehow feel that my [sexual] orientation is not restricted to the male... no... there is something else, so what is it? I was searching along with my friends about this topic; for sure there is a specific reason, and maybe it's normal, because there are many animals like this. I used to care a lot about animals when I was a little girl, and I've observed that there are homosexual relationships among animals, so this is supposed to be normal, right? Why not us?

I needed the space to experience, to live out the choices I'm making, and try things independently without any interference, you see? This is what I want, what I am, this is the thing that I like, this is how I can find my identity because I was still exploring myself.

**Hania (mother):** Regarding sexual orientation, for sure it is part of sexuality, and I know that it exists, for sure it has a biological dimension. I know about these matters but I do not know much. I still have a problem with understanding this matter. So when my daughter asked if we should engage in this study, I told her, isn't it better if we prepare? Since my thoughts are not yet clear.

Another thing, you see... in my generation, I used to observe that there are girls who have a different orientation, I used to know that this thing exists, it's not something strange to me, however in my generation it wasn't accepted as it is nowadays, these things were taboo then, whoever was involved... It was different... Now there is more acceptance. Of course, countries differ regarding acceptance, I am pleased about that, truly; I am telling you even if I'm not capable of understanding, I care about respecting whatever it means.

No one was imposing anything on anybody, but since my daughter was little I used to observe that she felt more comfortable with trousers and shorts – practical clothing rather than more feminine clothes.

*Now, let us explore narratives on sexuality and premarital messages from mothers.*

**Mizyana (mother):** I did not inform my daughter [about sexual relations] because she is not yet married, however, she knows better than I do!

When my daughter got engaged, we started to tell her about sexuality... about life... but she already knows from her girlfriends she chats to over the phone, in fact, I get information from her.

**Naya (daughter):** When she asked me about sexual relations I felt like an idiot because I don't know anything... I should know, in case anyone asks me like you did, today you asked me casually and I

told you for some reason I felt safe, but to talk to a person other than you, I need to be prepared, to know more.

**Nuha (daughter):** Of course [talking about their sex life] is different among men compared to women; it is more like a story, as if we congratulating him, he has become a man, bravo... With a young woman... Beware! God forgive us, never allow anyone to touch you, [he] may ruin you, what's his name, how can he accept you if he touches this thing that is called your hymen because all your value stops there with this piece of skin that does not tear but expands. Things have greatly changed now, but I am speaking about society in general.

**Rana (daughter):** What I can remember the most was being 8 years old, and my mother trying to explain sex to me, I did not understand, then afterwards a school friend told me that the penis enters the vagina.

The body, yes we discussed it [my mother and I] ... since we were children my parents told us don't let anyone touch you, this is your own body don't let anyone touch you, especially those parts, the private parts.

Definitely, there should always be consent [in sexual activity], we can change our mind if something's not right. If there is anything bothering us, we definitely have to stop and the partner or partners should stop.

**Nuha (daughter):** Narrating the story [of my coming out] made me anxious and agitated, especially topics like gender identity, because I didn't want my mother to find out about that side of me, and I also didn't want her or my father to start interfering with my life. I wanted the space to allow myself to make my own choices, to explore my life and my choices until I reach a place that I am comfortable enough to share it with them.

It is not how I identify myself, I identify myself by my name. It's none of other people's business to know anything about my sexual orientation or my preferences etc... in the same way, it's none of my business to know about theirs, I wouldn't go around asking people, who do you like to be in bed with?

Masturbation was never a topic of discussion, never did we discuss this at home, and at school they used to tell us it's not good, it's a sin. At home, we never mentioned the topic except recently maybe a year ago, it was part of my coming out to my family, and we talked a bit my mum and I was telling her, there are lots I disagree with in the things we learned or brought up to believe, such as the stigma that goes with sexuality and sexual pleasure and masturbation, for example what if I learn about masturbation from my friend? I was 21 or 22 years of age at the time.

**Samia (mother):** Yes we talk about [sexual orientation]. She tells you if the human being is made that way, is it their fault? [My daughter] knows about these topics, she reads about them, we talk a lot about these topics also, it's not wrong to do this. I want to see caring, love, complete support for the [sexual act] to be [performed].

**Maryam (mother):** When she was younger, my daughter would tease me and say when you have a baby you used to say "BOK!" and poof, a baby emerges! But we did eventually start talking about it. After each lesson at school, she would come to me and talk, I would tell her what I could, within my own limits, and eventually she found out a lot.

**Samia (mother):** The man may have problems for example with premature ejaculation or not being good at foreplay, but ultimately he behaves as if he is the only active party, the "doer" in the situation...

**Maryam (mother):** There is a big problem in expressing [matters of sexuality] between men and women because there is no sexuality culture. More information would allow the man to better understand the woman's body, how to make her feel pleasure, and how to have harmony between them.

My daughter should respect the body as a great thing, not something that is low, or dirty... not like they used to teach us – that the body is sin, or when a woman menstruates she is dirty... I do not miss the opportunity to transmit such messages, since I already suffered through my upbringing.

I also feel that the harm that the mother does to the daughter from this aspect – from her relationship with her womanhood or femininity and with her body, may never heal. I started to reflect on this at my age... there are things that do not heal... and may result sometimes in frigidity. I hope this does not happen to my daughter. I pray to God.

*Pleasure is a unique aspect of sexuality; let us explore the narrative.*

**Hania (mother):** Pleasure during the sexual act is necessary. Frustration results if one party takes pleasure alone because they have to be together for sure, each according to his/her rhythm, but it's necessary that both parties feel pleasure. I do not recall if this topic was discussed as such with my daughter.

I've been married for 20 years and I can tell you that the sexual act is something very important, sexual pleasure is something very important. It is neither shameful nor dirty. The big concepts of shame and purity are not related. Sexual pleasure exists in any case, the orgasm is very important and it's very important to understand the impact it has on your life and even your mood.

**Rana (daughter):** One time my mother told me about menstruation and sexual relationships – actually she talked to me about sexual assault – she was explaining basically to protect me, she didn't mention the subject of pleasure. I was very young at the time (11 years old), I was astonished. As for the topic of pleasure, I remember a certain occasion we talked about it... I remember that.

**Maryam (mother):** About the orgasm? We didn't even know what to call it... just a strange situation women encounter, how to reach it? What is its relation to masturbation and the accompanying feelings of shame and guilt? All those heavy feelings... one word from my mother and I would have been rid of all that negativity.

*Now we move on to the matter of sexuality as a relationship, as a taboo.*

**Samia (mother):** If he wants to sleep with his wife, his wife has to comply... as if he is some machine.. some... I don't want to say more.

**Hania (mother):** If a subject like that [sexuality] came up... I myself didn't bring it up, but I did react if there was an ongoing discussion.

**Samia (mother):** My daughter when she was little used to ask me how do people have children? I used to answer her: I vomit and there they are!

**Mizyana (mother):** I am quite comfortable talking to my daughter about sexuality because my own mother made me comfortable, by telling me stories.

**Samia (mother):** When my children were young, I would make sure they would not see me (having sex)... they should be kept separate... this is my takeaway from my parents, because we were in one house, in one room. It was wrong.

**Maryam (mother):** I told my daughter the whole story bit by bit. I answered her questions as they came up, especially as she had a brother who came after her and my sisters became pregnant, so there were pregnancies and childbirths. She had questions every time, which I answered in turn. But I worried as well, because she seemed very anxious, and it was challenging to make sure I answered all her questions carefully.

**Mizyana (mother):** If a woman is comfortable and gives comfort to her husband, why shouldn't she feel pleasure? She would feel pleasure when she is tidy, and the welcoming way she receives her husband when he enters the home.

I pray that my daughters live a good life and express themselves about their lives not as I expressed about mine, and that they live a better life than my own.

**Hania (mother):** Like my husband, two of my daughters are introverts, so those are relationships that need a bit more work. One of them, Nuha, as a teenager she didn't express herself or engage in the usual teen tantrums, so I used to tell her please, once a month write for me on a piece of paper everything you feel.

**Mizyana (mother):** When I grew up, I knew that life (in my community) was wrong and here life is correct, how we were living there, and what are the rights of the husband and what are his duties.

What is right? What is right is for the wife to obey her husband, and when her daughters argue with their husbands they have to obey their husbands, whatever they say, they say yes, and like me they should always sit quietly.

**Naya (daughter):** Frankly I see a man's demands as too much. When we came to Lebanon, we wanted to get married to Syrians, and my brothers wanted to get married and settle in a separate home. However, in Beirut and with the financial situation it was very difficult. We were all residing in the same home and I used to see how my sisters-in-law treated their husbands. My sister-in-law communicates nervously, and my brother threatens her in response that he will marry a second wife. I feel what my brother is saying is wrong, however nervous my sister-in-law is. Now my brother is calm by nature and likes a calm woman. If the wife asks calmly, chances are she may get what she desires, life is mutual understanding.

**Hania (mother):** God has graced me in allowing me to become self-aware back when I left the country and married in the US. I made my life in the US. Before returning to Lebanon and giving birth to my daughter, I started discovering who I am and realized that the values my parents had given me were good, and that I shouldn't deviate from them.

For example, my father taught me to be civil, one must pay down every last cent of debt. On the other hand, there are things that I do not want my children to experience. My husband and I chose what we wanted to transmit to my children. Each of my children has a strong personality, this is what I wanted for them – self esteem, which I don't have... I suffered a lot with my self-esteem, my objective and that of their father was to boost our children's self esteem as well as their confidence.

My daughter has always been my pride and joy and she still is, and not just because she is [my daughter]. The only matter that unsettled me in her upbringing and in my relationship with her is her lack of openness [towards me], I always have to guess what she might be going through. This makes me tired, she is similar to her father in that regard... So I'd like this relationship to be easier. I am one who articulates with ease and finds it difficult being with another person who does not. So I try to respect that [difference], but it's still difficult for me.

**Hania (mother):** Seriously! [regarding adherence to social norms of appearance] Shaping eyebrows to cope with social norms is the easiest of all to deal with, society gives itself the right to ask, to intrude, to criticize the way [my daughter] dresses. This was very annoying. She doesn't care about style at all. This was a big problem and at the same time, I seriously hated myself when I told her to dress more fashionably. I am trying as much as I can now, she thinks that I interfere a lot, I don't know her view on the topic but now I do not interfere at all, except in a light-hearted way.

## FORMATIVE MOMENTS IN THE MOTHER-DAUGHTER JOURNEY

*Our conversations explored the key experiences and turning points in relation to sexuality, relationships and reproductive rights within the shared journey of the mothers and daughters. These stories involved conscious decisions to go against the grain in a patriarchal society. For example, the experience of the developmental stage of puberty involved many important discussions on menstruation, body changes, sexual intercourse and pregnancy.*

**Hania (mother):** However a woman looks when she wakes up, messy or whatever, it makes no difference to me. What I do care about is a woman's relationship with herself, whether she's comfortable in her own skin. But society values a woman's appearance above all. This has put me in an extremely difficult situation. Sometimes, I hate myself – my daughter feels the pressure to remove her body hair, to trim her eyebrows, etc. but she doesn't want to. She's very rebellious... she's asking, why? I stand with her but at the same time I am put in a difficult situation. The area I live in, people are greatly obsessed with appearance.

**Rana (daughter):** My mother prepared me for the advent of menstruation from her experience. She was a child and when she first menstruated she was very afraid because no one had prepared her ahead of time. My friends would cry a lot and feel afraid, whereas I was much more comfortable and ready because my mum had prepared me ahead of time.

**Muna (daughter):** It is renewal, even psychologically, you feel the difference not only with the body. I feel comfortable after it passes. During menstruation I feel irritated a lot. After menstruation there is a lot of harmony between the body and the psyche. I feel renewed after menstruation.

*Regarding intercourse, we heard the following narratives.*

**Nuha (daughter):** I used to ask my mother about the first experience, how does it happen, how does it differ, how does it compare? How do women experience the same thing in different ways and why?

Most girls find out about sexuality from the internet or from each other or from boys, but I found out from my mother. Later on, I realized that this was rare.

[She turns to her mother] You waited for me to be ready to hear the answers, but I have been ready and waiting for a long while.

**Hania (mother):** I advised my daughter the following – try anything in life except two things: don't ever think of experimenting with drugs, because they change the body chemistry, and do not sleep with anyone without a contraceptive. Mistakes in such matters cannot be corrected.

**Rana (daughter):** The message I received from my mother is that premarital sex is not a necessary condition. This makes me feel comfortable when I am in a relationship with a young man and at the same time do not feel the urge to have sex.

*Now let us visit Maryam's experience regarding pregnancy.*

**Maryam (mother):** I used to tell my daughter how pregnancy was the most beautiful time of my life. About feeling my baby within me, I used to tell her how I used to converse with her while she was in my tummy, I built a relationship with her, every time she moved was a source of joy. I used to tell her that the first two to three months were difficult, there was vomiting and such but the rest more than made up for it. I even used to talk to her about the delivery, how my husband recorded it and how I did not feel the pain.

**Rana (daughter):** I remember, my mother and I used to talk about women growing into their role in the marriage, and how to raise children, but not about marriage as a relationship between a man and a woman. We were also in agreement that the relationship before marriage may not necessarily be improved with marriage. Most mothers talk to their daughter about the wedding night to link in their minds sex with marriage. My mother did not do that, this is very good of her because I did not feel ashamed if I felt affection towards a young man.

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## INTERGENERATIONAL CHALLENGES, TENSIONS, AND CONTRADICTIONS

*In their conversations, the mothers and daughters identified key challenges in several areas of private and public life. These challenges included gendered power relations, violence against women, gender identity and sexual orientation. There are other topics including decisions about abortion, and negotiating family size, the importance of communication, as well as the impact of the refugee status.*

**Muna (daughter):** In our society, guys can share more openly, more freely. People will applaud him ... Bravo! Well done! On the other hand, girls keep quiet, they cannot share a lot, especially if they have a lot of experience in terms of relationships, because then they would become the subject of never-ending gossip. Girls are afraid of society's opinion, so they keep quiet.

*Violence against women is another key challenge voiced. Let's explore...*

**Muna (daughter):** I know what violence against women has so many facets – economic, sexual, physical and verbal, psychological.

**Samia (mother):** Forcing sexual relations can be done through beating, which is a form of violence. There are several types, not necessarily physical, it can be verbal and psychological violence.

**Mizyana (mother):** When a woman is tired and the man is not tired... the man insists to have sex.. so it has to be done... That's what he wants... In my case, sometimes he forces me, sometimes he doesn't.

**Muna (daughter):** We're often threatened with stories of honor killings. If a girl is known to have had sex with a guy, she can be killed, and this trend is increasing.

**Samia (mother):** I had a very ugly experience that stays with me to this day. When I was a child, we had a male relative who used to come visit. Why did I feel afraid? Because he shared a bed with us and I was always aware that he could touch me. I would never do that to my own children, let anyone share their room.

My husband is the jealous type. He can't take on the [financial] responsibility either, so I carry all the load and the responsibilities, whereas he is dependent. If he doesn't get his way, he raises his voice and even tries to beat me, although it didn't hurt so much that I couldn't bear it.

*Another challenge is gender identity and sexual orientation, the following are some reflections.*

**Hania (mother):** My daughter and I used to talk about sexual orientation in the context of conversations about movies and such. I used to say [LGBTQI] individuals had problems in their childhood and this thing can be corrected with therapy, then she used to tell me I was wrong, there are people who are born this way. This is still not clear for me, even at 56 years old, but my knowledge and insight on this matter are limited... I am lost.

I wasn't that surprised when my daughter came out, I had some doubts, but I always imagined my daughter would share her life with a man. I know that she was tormented for some time before she told me. I thought our family was open-minded, but it seems not enough for her to talk to us.

**Nuha (daughter):** Before I came out, LGBTQI ... it just didn't exist in my social environment.

*Now let us consider reflections on abortion.*

**Nuha (daughter):** I don't know what I would do if I was in this situation, but what I know for sure is that people should have the right to choose. But the question is about what? The right to safe abortion? Now, mum for example, I think she agrees with me about safety, but not when it comes to the ethical part.

**Rana (daughter):** I believe abortion should not be allowed, and before this situation happens – when someone decides they do not want any more children – they should go to the doctor and take things that prevent pregnancy and that's it. If a pregnancy occurs, and I don't want it and the other person also doesn't want it, then we have to find a solution... because ultimately this is a human being with rights, so I can't abort.

**Maryam (mother):** They know about abortion, she and her sister know because they know how it happens.

*Now the refugee challenge, read through...*

**Mizyana (mother):** My daughter should find out about matters around sexuality only when she intends to get married. But when she goes out with her peers they tell her things anyway. We do not allow it [in our norms]... it is not our country here and I am afraid that my daughter is receiving harmful information.

**Naya (daughter):** I did not leave school, my parents stopped me because here in Beirut the cost of education is high. It was my mother's decision, consequently I chose to stop going out with my friends because they have continued their studies and belong to another, more open culture, which is different from that of my home country of Syria.

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## PERSONAL AGENCY AND RECIPROCAL LEARNING FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

*The following are narratives by mothers and daughters on specific information, choices and shared empowerment that translate into personal agency in matters of sexuality, relationships and reproductive rights. The values discussed included justice, truthfulness, love, privacy, independence, and autonomy. The discussions with mothers and daughters also revealed their understanding of sex education.*

**Muna (daughter):** What are feminine attributes? I think boldness and justice – I mean, standing up to wrongdoing. My mother used to tell me stories of things that happened to her, when she saw an injustice, she'd speak out against it.

**Maryam (mother):** I told my daughter that love should be the basis of a sexual relationship.

**Hania (mother):** Nuha is my pride and joy, she's a real lady. The only thing that annoyed me as she was growing up was her lack of openness. I always had to guess what she was going through. I wish our relationship was a bit easier. I am the type who can articulate and I find it difficult to communicate with someone who doesn't.



**Rana (daughter):** I learned to be strong and not to be dependent on anybody – a man or anyone. I learned to seek education and to work and not to depend [financially] on anyone, I can do everything on my own. My mother always told me it's okay if a young woman cannot cook or clean, it does not reflect badly on her, the most important matter is your education, focus on it, that's what my mother used to tell me.

**Samia (daughter):** Nawal Saadawi (an Arab feminist) states that the fetus literally belongs to the woman... My mother prepared me to accept this idea, implicitly, without saying it, I remember the documentary about how a fetus develops. This is something very beautiful... I would like to do the same with my children but I don't know how.

**Rana (daughter):** I need to know why it is so very difficult for a woman to find pleasure in an intimate relationship, I mean, it is very easy for the male to "finish" first.

*About choice, let us examine the following on abortion, and the body.*

**Naya (daughter):** My mother and I never talked about abortion, nor about sex of course. She found those topics too sensitive. Parents should make their children aware. Young women search the internet on their own. However, what my mother gave me was the foundation to seek knowledge and identify the right knowledge about specific topics such as abortion.

**Nuha (daughter):** My mother used to tell me, this is your body and you decide. Nobody can force you to do anything, you decide. She used to emphasize that I had to say no when I needed to say no and I should say why. I needed first to have self-esteem in order to say no.

*Finally, about empowerment.*

**Maryam (mother):** My daughter should know that she is strong and capable.

**Rana (daughter):** The daughter acquires her self-confidence from the mother's support.

*The mother-daughter relationship can be very powerful in terms of mutual learning, for example, in the area of bodily autonomy and rights. First let us examine mutual learning between mother and daughter.*

**Maryam (mother):** We may be talking about a story we heard or a subject we read about, and we discuss. Now I am learning from my daughter.

**Rana (daughter):** As I was growing up, my mother made me feel it's normal to be who I want to be, in fact, I have the right to be how I want to be, and think the way I do.

*Now about bodily autonomy, let's examine the following reflections.*

**Rana (daughter):** There was a revolution in my grandmother's family when my grandmother decided to keep the baby. They told her that it is not her decision to abort but her husband's. She however proclaimed that this time she wanted to keep it. She did not take her husband's view into consideration when she said, I don't want to abort, I want to get off the bus immediately, I want to have this baby.

**Muna (daughter):** My mother and I never talked about abortion, not once, nor did we talk about sex of course, never did we touch those subjects that she considers very sensitive. The parents have to raise awareness in their children. Sometimes daughters look on the internet on their own. We did not address those topics directly, her talking gave me the foundation to educate myself about correct information about any topic, that is to get the right information about abortion, is it the right of the woman to abort or not.

## FACILITATING HEALTHIER MOTHER-DAUGHTER RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH SOCIAL CHANGE

*Social changes were expressed in the following conversations, mainly around gender equality, quality of sexual relations, consent and pleasure. Other topics included men and criminalizing gender-based violence awareness and sex education at schools.*

**Maryam (mother):** Equality should be among two human beings irrespective of sex.

**Rana (daughter):** Equality is supposed to be from one human to another, a young man dealing with another young man is supposed to be that same as a young woman dealing with another young woman.

**Nuha (daughter):** This thing – gender equality – is currently not found in Lebanon, and in several countries, not only us. Equality should be from all aspects, for example, at home, equality means that he also works in the home, housework is not restricted to women. Regarding the workplace, it always seems to be the case that even when a man and a woman have the same position, he will be paid more. This shows an absence of equality, which should be addressed.

**Maryam (mother):** You're asking my opinion about equality? This means respecting the privacy of the woman and the privacy of the man. Equality is equivalence – equivalence in opportunities, justice, respect (no one is better than anyone else), there is no superior sex. What it doesn't mean is that a woman needs to be like a man. On the contrary [equality] is for the woman to be in sync with her womanhood, which has its strengths as well as its weaknesses.

**Nuha (daughter):** Everyone should have access to equal rights because everyone is equal, everyone is born equal. It is unacceptable to say that there is a superior sex, or one should have more privileges than another. However, at the same time we should very much take into consideration the needs, the physical and emotional needs of men are distinct from those of women. Also we cannot generalize to say that all women have the same needs and all men have the same needs. So it's really about inclusivity and listening to all groups, and identifying their respective needs and wants in order to have a good quality of life, so that men and women can coexist with ease.

*Gender-based violence is another area that requires change.*

**Maryam (mother):** "Did he hurt you?" When people ask such a question they imply that hitting is okay but hurting is bad. In addition, when you tell someone about a man who hits his wife using a condemning tone, you can be shaming him but also implicitly making excuses for him.

When a woman goes to the police station and complains about being beaten, more often than not they say this is just a beating, and they free the perpetrator. The same thing happens with sexual harassment. There is complicity from various aspects of our culture – some popular sayings, from songs, from stories – you feel as if society is condoning this act.

Nour, for example, decided not to wear her scarf [hijab] and it's amazing the amount of abuse she received on social media... I personally report any page that encourages violence, I do that immediately. How do these people allow themselves to threaten the life of a woman they do not know? They also don't know why she decided to remove the scarf in the first place, how dare they give themselves such a right? The audacity!

**Samia (mother):** I've experienced a lot of violence in my life. It's so ugly. I believe a man should be held accountable even if the violence is verbal.

*Consider the need for change regarding consent in sexual relations. There's a need to raise awareness on consent and constraints in sexual relations. Explore the following reflections.*

**Muna (daughter):** It is very easy to have forced sex, it is very easy. Because if we say it is difficult for the woman to feel pleasure, it follows that feeling forced occurs 100 percent of the time. We need to raise women's awareness, and we need to prevent this situation from happening, we need to raise the awareness of women as well as of men.

**Naya (daughter):** The woman shouldn't do anything by force. Frankly, she should be fully willing at a personal level. She should never do anything forced in that position.

*On the need to change our society to accept sex as a pleasurable act for women, explore this reflection.*

**Nuha (daughter):** It is a right to experience pleasure with whoever they are with. Sexual experience, if they want it, is important to have pleasure.

*Knowledge and raising awareness are both important as an aspect of social change, examine these reflections.*

**Samia (mother):** My daughter Muna and I have discussed sexuality, because as I indicated, she was



already exposed to the topic at school. We are of the type who have studied and who know and who talk together and argue and express our views about such subjects.

**Muna (daughter):** Yes, of course school plays a role in learning about sexuality. My mother used to tell me when you grow up such and such... and she used to make me aware since I was little, so I had an idea. Then an NGO called Movement Social came to our school when I was in sixth grade [elementary school] and they took the girls aside and started teaching us about the period products and other topics. It was things that I already knew.

**Naya (daughter):** I have discussed the topic of sexuality a lot, not necessarily with my mother, sometimes we watch TV series, and sometimes at my secondary school.

## *chapter four*

### **CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND THE WAY FORWARD**

In putting this storybook together, we made the conscious decision to let the powerful stories by the women in Cyprus and Lebanon speak for themselves. It was meant to be a creative endeavor, above all, one that would be open to everyone's own interpretation.

But beyond its role as a book filled with the types of stories that are rarely told – those about mothers and daughters – this book is also a tool. Specifically, it's a tool based on feminist principles that can be used to enhance intercultural dialogue and learning in order to effect social and political change. Given our current climate, where a global pandemic, as well as multiple economic and socio-political struggles rage on, this remains the definitive struggle for women well beyond the Mediterranean region.

Moving forward, we bring together certain key threads that emerged from the stories, in order to synthesize our own interpretation as researchers.

First, personal agency and reciprocal learning and unlearning in the mother-daughter relationship was of paramount importance to the women. At the personal level, mothers and daughters alike saw the reciprocity of learning and unlearning as an essential element of building sexual agency and healthier relationships in the long-term.

Any woman, mother and daughter, must be able to express her voice whenever she is ready. Every mother in this storybook clearly wants to be a role model for her daughters as she enters decision-making processes. And every daughter is pushing the boundaries of traditional families and patriarchal institutions, progressing from being aware and educated, to expressing her voice and being visible in the public sphere.

Second, women from both generations identified comprehensive sex education at all levels of schooling as a necessary step in combating sexism, as well as sexual and gender-based violence. This is because socio-economic empowerment and independence depends on having access to education and information on sexual and reproductive services. Poverty and lack of access to public health was indicated as the norm for many marginalized groups in both countries. With education, economic independence and intergenerational dialogue as their priority, young women in particular are looking to place sexuality, sexual and reproductive health and rights at the top of the agenda in their countries.

This is interrelated with the need for stronger public discourse on sexuality, consent, family planning, contraception, access to abortion, and menstrual products. For example, currently in Lebanon menstrual poverty affects half the population, which includes migrant workers and refugee women.

Lastly, these stories highlight the need for access to safe spaces where femininity and bodily autonomy can be expressed. Daring to speak out in highly sexist and xenophobic environments affected historically by Western colonialism, war and conflict, is in itself revolutionary.

The women who are sharing their own stories have defied the conventions that stifle and repress voices speaking on taboo subjects such as sexuality and sexual agency. Openly talking about these still-controversial topics in this storybook pushes them to the forefront of public discourse, affecting both the public and private spheres.

Women have exercised in this storybook the courage to transcend geographical and cultural space(s). They have raised their voices loud and clear.

These stories inspire social change. They are the future.

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**MOTHERS AND** *narratives on sexuality*  
**DAUGHTERS** *of relationships*