

'Doctor Sex' Quickens Albanian Pulses

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Weekly TV sex advice show fronted by elderly doctor has Albanians glued to their screens.

Channel-surfing Albanian TV viewers are likely to be greeted by an unusual spectacle late every Thursday night - a genial grandfather chatting candidly about sex.

Since autumn last year, Adem Harxhi, a 65-year-old doctor who used to live in the US, has been hosting an hour-long weekly discussion show on the private TV station, Gjeli Vizion. "Sex and Sexuality" is devoted, as its title suggests, to discussing the tricky business of making love in a conservative climate.

On the streets of Tirana, Harxhi has become something of a celebrity - strangers smile and hail him by his nickname, Doctor Sex. On screen, his zeal for exploding Albania's sexual taboos is tempered by his relaxed, patriarchal manner, which may explain how he is so popular in a society that has traditionally shied away openly discussing sex.

However, the doctor's grown-up son, who still lives in the US, is less than impressed by his father's new-found fame. He is reported to have begged Harxhi not to do anything that will embarrass him when he comes back to Tirana.

Harxhi is unfazed by his dubious celebrity. He told IWPR that his concern for the bedroom habits of his countrymen was sparked during the communist era, when patients at his eye clinic began confiding in him about their sex lives. After migrating to the US in 1992, he studied sexuality in earnest and came back to Albania with a mission - to improve the quality of life by tearing down the taboos around sex.

The commonest problem he finds in his audience is timidity - people are just too nervous to discover ways of making sex better. Laughing, he remembers the tale of a mine-worker who complained he was too shy to have sex with his wife. Doctor Harxhi turned on the man, "How could this happen to you? You use your drill deep inside rocks and mountains, but you can't drill your wife? Are you a miner or what?"

Such words aren't to everyone's liking and a handful of callers to his show become wildly abusive. "Tune your TV set to a different channel if you don't like me," Harxhi answers back calmly, before returning to his mantra, "Make love as much as possible, so that you can relax, rid yourself of stress and regenerate."

His show follows a simple format - Harxhi starts off talking about a specific sexual issue, but digresses when the phone rings and an anonymous, sometimes anxious, caller asks him for advice of a sexual nature.

The popularity of the show and the manner of questions that get asked on it - such as how may a man bring his woman to orgasm - have confirmed the need for a frank debate on the sexual mores of modern Albania.

Albanian society's conservative attitudes changed little following the fall of communism. Although censorship was eased and new private media channels offered pornography, there wasn't much in the way of sex education.

"People generally believe that the kids will grow up better if such things are not explained to them," said paediatrician Lira Gjika, adding that many fear their families would be shamed if their children began to openly discuss sexual matters.

Sex in the days of Hoxha's communism was a deeply private affair, and it was rare even for young lovers to be seen kissing in public. The state-owned TV channel, TVSH, censored any risqué sequences from the foreign films it broadcast and, according to the director Saimir Kumbaro, altogether banned kisses from Albanian films.

With today's hardcore porn films airing late at night on private TV stations and the profusion of top-shelf magazines, such censorship is a thing of the past. However, the open discussion of sex remains taboo.

Society continues to believe that sex education will confuse, or worse still, corrupt its children. Thus innocent queries such as "where do babies come from" are either discouraged or dismissed with an invented explanation, according to paediatrician Linda Spahi.

"Albanian families tend not to discuss sexual matters, despite the fact that people generally speak more freely than they did in the past," said psychologist Edmond Dragoti. The state has done little better, having only introduced sex education to Albanian schools in 1999.

What little liberalisation there has been is viewed as a reflection of the more relaxed attitudes of returning émigrés - but this has come at a cost. An estimated 80 per cent of Albania's AIDS patients were infected abroad, and now HIV infection is spreading amongst the population as a whole.

According to Doctor Memo Boci, who runs the national anti-AIDS programme, only 15 per cent of the population use condoms.

A number of chemists have reported that they often get kids buying them on behalf of their parents, who are too ashamed to do so themselves.

For Doctor Harxhi, the avoidance of a public debate around sex and contraception poses real dangers for the health of the nation.

He regularly focuses on safe sex techniques during his show, and his coy viewers call in to get advice, never giving their names - such is the embarrassment many Albanians feel at raising such issues face-to-face with their doctor.

While many of today's parents recognise the value of Harxhi's show, his openness has yet to be taken up in more traditional households.

"We are another generation. It is not easy for us to change," said a middle-aged Tirana-based writer.

"It is necessary that these things are taught," said Adelina, a woman in her thirties with two teenage children. "But Doctor Harxhi says them so openly..."

"My God! I cannot watch the show with my children. I follow it with my husband in the bedroom, and then

we debate whether or not to talk to the kids about sex."

While such prudery is the order of the day, the demand for Harxhi's weekly dose of earthy, grandfatherly advice is assured.

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