

VIRGINITY: A SOCIAL, RELIGIOUS AND CULTURAL-CONSTRUCT THAT OPPRESSES ALL WOMEN

Virginity is not a medical nor a scientific term but a social, cultural and religious construct. Scientifically, there is no way to determine whether a person (male or female) has had sexual intercourse yet still nowadays many women worldwide must undergo virginity tests for a different variety of reasons. These examinations are “painful, humiliating and traumatic”, says the WHO and they reinforce stereotyped notions of female sexuality and gender inequality. It is time to understand that women’s value and honor do not depend on their virginity.

It is time to tell the truth: you cannot lose your virginity!

Remember when you were young and your parents, teachers and the whole society were telling you, directly or indirectly, things like “*be careful before losing your virginity with the wrong person*”, “*be sure he is THE one before having your first time with him*”, “*once you have lost your virginity it will never come back*”, “*if you lose it to the wrong guy you will regret it forever*”. These were all lies because virginity does not exist.

According to the Oxford Dictionary, virginity is the state of being a virgin and a virgin is a person who has never had sex¹. However, throughout history, when people spoke about virginity, they only

referred to women’s virginity due to the idea of woman’s purity that has been the cornerstone of many different cultures, religions and societies around the world. Indeed, virginity is not a medical nor a scientific term but a social, cultural and religious construct². Scientifically, there is no way to determine whether a person (male or female) has had sexual intercourse yet still nowadays many women worldwide must undergo virginity tests for a different variety of reasons. These tests are carried out in order to determine whether a girl or a woman is a virgin and there are two main types: the hymen’s check and the two-finger test. The first one consists of a person, usually a doctor, that checks the status of the girl or woman’s hymen, whilst the latter consists of a

¹ Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com. *virgin_1 noun - Definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes | Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary at OxfordLearnersDictionaries.com*. [online] Available at: <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/virgin_1>

² Apps.who.int. 2018. *Eliminating Virginity Testing: An Interagency Statement*. [online] Available at: <<http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/275451/WHO-RHR-18.15-eng.pdf?ua=1>>

person, usually a doctor, who inserts two fingers in the vagina of the girl or woman to see the vaginal laxity³.

It seems then that the hymen is a proof of virginity but this is actually false. Indeed, the concept of women's virginity is based on two anatomical myths that have been used for centuries to control women's sexuality. In the TedxTalk called "*The virginity fraud*", Dr. Dølvik Brochmann and Dr. Støkken Dahl explain these two myths: on one hand, it is believed that the hymen breaks and bleeds the first time a woman has vaginal sex; on the other hand, it is also believed that after the first sexual intercourse the hymen disappears or it is radically altered⁴. It is thought so because almost everybody pictures the hymen as a membrane that obstructs the vagina yet it is actually a rim of tissue at the outer opening of the vagina and normally it is shaped as a doughnut, meaning that it has a hole right in the middle.

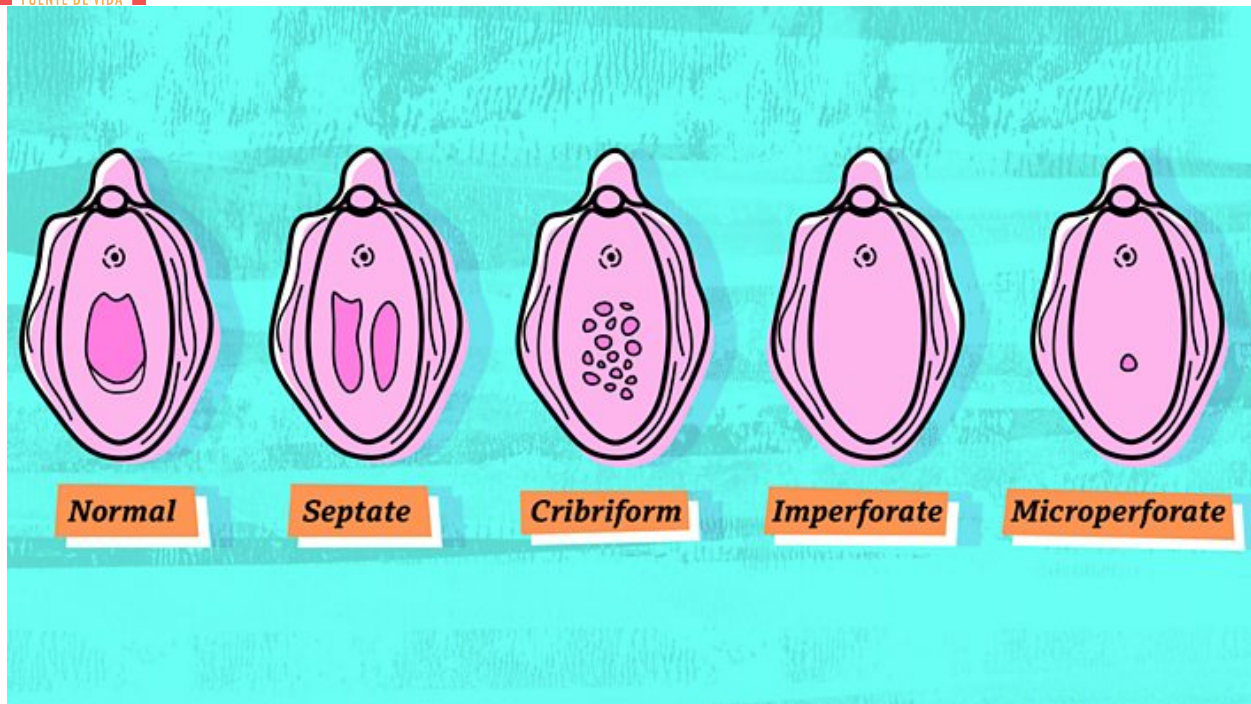
Furthermore, the two Norwegian doctors explain why these two myths are false. Firstly, the hymen cannot be broken, because it naturally stretches since it is a very elastic membrane. Indeed, for the majority of women the hymen can stretch enough

to have sexual intercourse without suffering any damage. For some other women it may tear a bit when the penis is introduced in the vagina, meaning that it can slightly change its aspect but it will still be there. Secondly, the hymen cannot disappear and even if its aspects may change a bit, it cannot be proven which was its original aspect nor that it has changed due to the fact that there are many different anatomical variants of hymens. Basically there are as many hymens as women in the world. In the figure below you can see some types of hymens but there are women who are born without a hymen and there are also women who are born with an imperforate hymen⁵. The latter will lead to many different health problems such as back pain, pain during urination or pain during the girl's first period since the blood would have no way to go out from the vagina. For instance, the girl who is born with an imperforate hymen must undergo a medical surgery through which a doctor will make a cut in the hymen in order to remove the extra tissue covering it. This is also necessary to have future sexual intercourse since with the penetration the hymen would not stretch nor break so it would be anatomically impossible to have sexual relations or get pregnant otherwise.

³ Ibidem note 2

⁴ Youtube.com. 2018. *The virginity fraud* | Nina Dølvik Brochmann & Ellen Støkken Dahl | TEDxOslo. [online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fBQnQTKhsq4&t=619s>>

⁵ Childrenshospital.org. n.d. *Imperforate Hymen* | Boston Children's Hospital. [online] Available at: <<https://www.childrenshospital.org/conditions-and-treatments/conditions/i/imperforate-hymen>>



Source: Watts, G., 2019. Hymen abnormalities: Using my first tampon put me in A&E - BBC Three. [online] BBC.

Therefore, it is clear that the hymen is not a proof of virginity and that there is no way to check whether a girl is a virgin or not, but there are still many countries and many occasions in which girls and women are obliged to undergo these virginity tests.

For instance, in Indonesia female recruits were obliged, until a month ago, to undergo the “two-finger test” before being accepted in the army⁶. The military was justifying this rule by stating that the test was needed in order to determine recruits’ morality. However, it seems that the only morality they needed to check was women’s since male recruits were not submitted to this examination. Female cadets were then suffering a double discrimination: a violation of their human rights by being obliged to endure this test and an unfair inequality in the selection process. A month ago a ban over this practice was put into effect,

but there is no certainty that it will last long, especially due to the fact that it was a verbal instruction given by the army chief⁷. For this reason, it is urgent that the Indonesian government issues a legally binding decree in order to ensure that the ban will be permanent and that no other female recruit will ever have to undergo this test.

According to a 2018 report written by the WHO, UN Women and UNCHR, female prisoners are more likely to suffer from mistreatment and abuses, including forced virginity examinations⁸. For example, Amnesty International USA declared that, during the peaceful protests of 2011 in Tahrir Square in Egypt, the women who have been taken into custody have been forced to endure virginity tests⁹. Moreover, according to Reuters, Yazidi women who had been kidnaped by the Islamic

⁶ Reuters, 2021. *Indonesian army says it has stopped invasive 'virginity tests' on female cadets*. [online] CNN. Available at: <<https://edition.cnn.com/2021/08/11/asia/indonesia-army-stops-virginity-tests-intl-hnk/index.html>>

⁷ DW.COM. 2021. *Indonesia: Will the army's ban on 'virginity tests' last?* | DW [online] Available at:

<<https://www.dw.com/en/indonesia-will-the-armys-ban-on-virginity-tests-last/a-58897962>>

⁸ Ibidem note 2

⁹ Amnesty International USA. 2011. *'Virginity Tests' for Egyptian Women Protesters – Amnesty International USA*. [online] Available at:

State were routinely tested by Kurdish officials in Iraq until 2016¹⁰. Nowadays, in Iran, women's rights activists are subjected to virginity examinations while in prison¹¹.

In addition to this, virginity tests are performed also on rape victims in order to check whether they have been really sexually assaulted or, in some cases, if the survivor had a previous history of having sex¹². The victims will then suffer a double trauma and a double violation of human rights. Indeed, in different countries once you denounce this crime, you need to undergo the virginity test and in many countries if it results that you were not a virgin before the rape then you are considered to be a "lady of easy virtue", meaning that the attacker won't be punished or he will be convicted with a lower jail sentence¹³. Some of the countries where this used to happen were Pakistan, India, Bangladesh until a law banned them.

Moreover, virginity tests are also required before marriage by many different cultures. In African, Middle Eastern and South-Eastern Asian countries such as Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Indonesia, Afghanistan or Pakistan. Indeed, in these countries before the celebration of the marriage or before the first night as a married couple, the bride is obliged to go to a clinic and to endure the virginity test. This obligation can arise from the bride's family to check whether the honor of the family is still intact, from the groom's family to check

whether the bride is really a virgin or from both. Moreover, the girl will also have to pass a "second test": there must be blood on the bed sheet on the wedding night. What may seem an absurd tradition for some people, it is actually a matter of life and death for others. Indeed, if the girl is not a virgin then there can be bad consequences such as public humiliation, divorce and, in the most extreme cases, prison or honor-killing. For instance, in Afghanistan women who fail virginity tests are imprisoned since premarital sex is considered to be a moral crime¹⁴.

However, the chastity of women is also important for other cultures such as for the Romani culture. They always celebrate a ceremony to demonstrate that the bride is pure before the marriage takes place. Indeed, the Roma brides must endure the so-called "*handkerchief ceremony*", or "*gathering*", right before the beginning of the wedding ceremony¹⁵. The *handkerchief ceremony* consists of taking the bride to a separate room where the ritual will be performed by an adult woman of the family, usually the matriarch. During this ceremony all married women are invited to be present. The woman performing the rite will use a handkerchief decorated nicely which is usually half a meter long and it will introduce it inside the vagina of the bride to break her hymen. If afterwards there are three roses on the handkerchief, the girl is a virgin so the marriage will be celebrated and the handkerchief will be

<<https://www.amnestyusa.org/virginity-tests-for-egyptian-women-protesters/>>

¹⁰ Gliniski, S., 2020. *Afghan women illegally forced into 'virginity tests'*. [online] Reuters.com. Available at: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-afghanistan-women-rights-trfn-idUSKBN274110>>

¹¹ International Observatory of Human Rights. 2021. *Iran: women's rights activists subjected to virginity tests in prison - International Observatory of Human Rights*. [online] Available at: <<https://observatoryihr.org/news/iran-womens-rights-activists-subjected-to-virginity-tests-in-prison/>>

¹² Who.int. 2018. *United Nations agencies call for ban on virginity testing*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.who.int/news/item/17-10-2018-United-nations-agencies-call-for-ban-on-virginity-testing>>

¹³ France 24. 2021. *'Raped twice': Pakistan virginity tests block justice for victims - France 24*. [online] Available at: <<https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210113-raped-twice-pakistan-virginity-tests-block-justice-for-victims>>

¹⁴ Barr, H., 2020. *Fresh Calls to End Afghanistan's 'Virginity Exams'*. [online] Human Rights Watch. Available at: <<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/10/12/fresh-calls-end-afghanistans-virginity-exams>>

¹⁵ Schofield, H., 2021. *French government condemns reality TV 'virginity test'*. [online] BBC News. Available at: <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-56600958>>

shown to all guests at the wedding ceremony. On the other hand, if the girl does not pass the test, the wedding will be annulled by the groom's family and the bride's family will be dishonored in front of their community.

Moreover, nowadays virginity tests are also performed in Western countries such as the UK, France, Germany or the USA. This test is usually required by people belonging to religious communities yet it is not always so. For example, in 2019, the rapper T.I. confessed to the *Ladies Like Us* podcast that he and his daughter "have yearly trips to the gynecologist to check her hymen"¹⁶.

To sum up, virginity tests are practiced in many different countries around the world and for a variety of reasons such as to enter in the army, to get married, when arrested by the police or when being a victim of rape among many others. This still happens today regardless of the fact that the WHO together with different UN organs have repeatedly urged all countries to stop these examinations which are considered to be a violation of girls' and women's human rights. Indeed, the human rights that are violated by virginity testing are: the right to be protected from discrimination based on sex; the right to life; the right to privacy and physical integrity; the right to be free from torture or cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment; the right to the highest attainable standard of health and the rights of the child.¹⁷ The WHO has defined these examinations as "painful, humiliating and

traumatic", moreover it has affirmed that "virginity testing' reinforces stereotyped notions of female sexuality and gender inequality"¹⁸.

Among the medical community it is widely known that the hymen is not a proof of virginity and that there is no way to check whether a person is a virgin or not yet there are still many doctors around the world who perform the virginity tests. The BBC investigation found some private clinics that sell these tests at £150 or £300 in the UK.¹⁹ Moreover, the same clinics offer hymen-repair surgery which costs about £1,500 - £3,000. This intervention, called also hymenoplasty, consists of a temporary surgical reconstruction of the hymen which will allow for the woman to tear and bleed the first time they engage in sexual intercourse after this surgery.²⁰ In contrast, there are an American company, Hymenshop, and a German-based company, Virginiacare, that sell thousands of fake hymen kits every year, especially in the USA. This fake hymen must be placed in the vagina before the sexual intercourse and afterwards some fake blood will drop simulating the bleeding some girls may experience after their first penetration.²¹ Clinics and companies are responding to the demand of the consumers yet the states should put an end to this market. Virginity tests should be illegal in all countries around the world since they are just a fraud and they perpetuate sexual stigma as well as human rights violations.

These tests are not only useless, discriminatory and painful but they also put an enormous pressure on young girls and women who can only

¹⁶ Campoamor, D., 2021. *Call T.I. taking his daughter for a 'virginity test' what it really is.* [online] CNN.

Available at:

<<https://edition.cnn.com/2019/11/19/opinions/ti-virginity-test-daughter-campoamor/index.html>>

¹⁷ Ibidem note 2

¹⁸ UN News. 2018. *'Virginity testing': a human rights violation, with no scientific basis - UN.* [online]

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¹⁹ Stonehouse, R., 2020. *Controversial 'virginity tests' sold by UK clinics.* [online] BBC News. Available at:

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²⁰ theplasticsurgeryclinic.ca. n.d. *Hymen Repair | The plastic surgery clinic.* [online] Available at:

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[lso%20known,engage%20in%20intercourse%20after%20surgery.>](https://www.theplasticsurgeryclinic.ca/surgical-procedures/body/hymen-repair/#:~:text=Hymen%20repair%20surgery%2C%20a)

²¹ Noor, P., 2019. *'Now I have to check your hymen': the shocking persistence of virginity tests.* [online] the Guardian. Available at:

<<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2019/dec/09/hymen-virginity-tests-us-ti>>

hope to be lucky and get a positive result. Indeed, this article proves that virginity testing is a practice perpetuated due to gender discrimination, misinformation and misconception about women's body. There should be more sex education in schools, there should be more awareness of the bad consequences the concept of virginity has on our young girls, there should be a punishment for doctors who perform these unethical tests and for the persons who oblige women to endure them, there should be laws protecting women from these kind of abuses and, finally, there should be more trust in women.

In conclusion, woman's hymen is not a proof of virginity, a woman's honor is not determined by the fact that she has never had premarital sex, a woman's value is not less because she has had more than one sexual partner and, most importantly, a woman's sexual life is none of your business, or even better, it is only her business.

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