

VIRGINITY DOES NOT DEFINE ME

VirginitDoesNotDefineMe

BanVirginitTesting

BanHymenoplasty



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The Virginity Does Not Define Me campaign:

- Challenges the false and harmful notion that virginity is in any way a measure of a girl's or woman's worth.
- Tackles dangerous myths around virginity.
- Calls for a ban of the harmful practices of virginity testing and hymenoplasty, which; perpetuate patriarchal and misogynistic norms, cause trauma and can trigger so-called "honour" based abuse.

We have received input for this campaign from experts including; The Royal College of Midwives and Mr Ashfaq Khan, a Gynaecologist and Obstetrician who is; Head of the Lower Genital Tract Disease Unit at Whittington Hospital, senior lecturer at UCL medical School and course director for the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists. Both are absolutely clear, like IKWRO, that virginity testing and hymenoplasty should be banned. We have also received legal expertise from Naomi Wiseman, Barrister at Garden Court Chambers who has worked with IKWRO to draft new legislation to ban hymenoplasty.



*Growing up, as a little girl, I was regularly told that play-fighting, doing the splits and kicks, jumping, lifting heavy things or riding a bike could "break your womanhood". When I was a teenager, I was told very firmly, never ever to use tampons. **I did not know exactly what virginity was, I just always thought of it as the value of my existence, and that based on this thing, my life would go one way, or the other.***

Payzee Mahmod, Survivor Activist and Campaign Officer at IKWRO Women's Rights Organisation



Virginity testing and hymenoplasty are harmful practices and an abuse of human rights

Both virginity testing and hymenoplasty are harmful practices and forms of “honour” based abuse. They are embedded in strict gendered rules, linked to social pressures of patriarchal norms, that wrongfully place value on perceived purity and chastity. The same person can be at risk of female genital mutilation, followed by virginity testing, hymenoplasty and child marriage or forced marriage. Many girls and women will be expected to demonstrate that they are virgins on the night of their wedding, by bleeding onto a white sheet when they first have sexual intercourse with their new husband. This sheet is kept by the family that she marries into, as supposed proof that she was a virgin up to the time of the marriage. A girl or woman may be judged and criticized for not being seen to bleed enough. There is no scientific merit to this false test, as around half of girls and women do not bleed when they first have sexual intercourse. These harmful practices amount to invasive, de-humanising and degrading treatment and are an abuse of human rights.

What is virginity testing?

Virginity testing, also referred as hymen, two-finger, or per vaginal examination, involves the inspection of the female genitalia and hymen. Hymens can be ruptured for many reasons other than sexual intercourse, including by the use of tampons, cervical smears (which the government are rightly working hard to promote), certain exercises or accidents. As hymens vary and not all bleed as a result of first penetrative sexual intercourse it is scientifically and medically incorrect to confirm or question virginity on account of the state of the hymen. The World Health Organisation and the United Nations issued a joint statement calling for the ban of virginity testing and it has been banned in France.

Rim Mahmoud, who leads IKWRO’s Counselling team, says

“Virginity testing is a form of sexual abuse, that results in severe psychological harm including traumatising, depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and self-worth, guilt, and suicide. Virginity Testing is an “honour” based abuse controlling tactic, as its underlying motivation is to control women’s sexuality and chastity and to protect the family’s perceived honour. Virginity testing has no scientific merit. It is associated with immediate and long-term physical, psychological, sexual and socio-economic implications.”

Payzee Mahmood shares how having to prove her virginity has impacted her:

“When I was 16 and coerced into a child marriage, I was expected to prove my virginity. I felt extremely humiliated and terrified. It was so traumatic and de-humanising to be pressured into proving my apparent worth. Even now, I find my experience of virginity testing so difficult to process; it was sexual and mental abuse. It should never be allowed to happen to any woman or girl again, whether in a clinic or domestic setting; the law needs to change to prohibit virginity testing.”

The Royal College of Midwives state;

“We are clear that virginity testing is a violation of women’s and girls’ human rights. In addition to being wholly indefensible and offensive, there is no medical benefit to virginity testing, and it is in any event not possible to conclude through an examination of the hymen whether or not a woman or girl is a virgin (even if such an examination was justifiable). The practice also runs the very real risk of further harm to a woman or girl through so-called “honour-based” abuse. In order to protect women and girls at risk. Parliament should act to outlaw this practice at the earliest opportunity.”

A ban of virginity testing is undermined without a ban on hymenoplasty.

The two harmful practices are inextricably linked and the banning of virginity testing is compromised, unless hymenoplasty is also banned.

Mr Ashfaq Khan states;

“Banning virginity test will have little impact without banning hymenoplasty.”

The legal continuation of both virginity testing and hymenoplasty undermines trust in the medical profession and the absence of legislation to prohibit both, undermines confidence in the government’s commitment to women’s rights.

What is hymenoplasty?

It is described as;

“A surgical procedure that attempts to recreate the hymen, a thin membrane at the lower end of the vagina of a girl or woman. It’s done by creating a tissue scar in a way that can allow bleeding to occur at the first occasion of penetrative sexual intercourse after the procedure.”

Other terms used for the procedure include hymen repair, virginity repair and re-virginisation (which can also include tightening the vaginal wall and altering the labia). All procedures carried out with the purpose of making a girl or woman bleed when she next has sexual intercourse present a falsehood and perpetuate dangerous myths that hymens and bleeding can demonstrate proof of virginity and that virginity and perceived purity are a measure of a girl’s or woman’s worth.

The is no justification for hymenoplasty on any grounds and it can cause multiple harms

Hymenoplasty is being undertaken by the same private clinics that offer virginity testing, which are driven by profit and do not have safeguarding as their primary concern. Worryingly, in 2020, The Sunday Times revealed that NHS facilities were used to carry out hymenoplasty 82 times in the past eight years. The NHS have been quoted in the media saying ‘operations to repair the hymen are only carried out exceptionally to secure physical or psychological health.’ These purported justifications do not stand up to scrutiny.

There is no medical, physical or psychological need for a woman or girl to have an intact hymen, or to have hymenoplasty. In fact, the procedure can cause physical and psychological harms.

The Royal College of Midwives state that;

“The procedure (hymenoplasty) has not been the subject of rigorous clinical research. It is not without complications of bleeding, inflammation and infection, because the procedure is carried out in an area of the body that is susceptible to contamination from vaginal discharge, urine or faeces. From a midwifery perspective, it is likely that the scarring in the vagina/near the perinium, has the potential to cause perineal/vaginal laceration during the birth of a baby, which has long term consequences for the woman’s sexual health and wellbeing”.

Rim Mahmoud explains;

“Hymenoplasty is associated with immediate and long-term physical, sexual, social and psychological complications. Some of these psychological harms include disempowerment, shame, low self-esteem and self-worth.”

Mr. Ashfaq Khan states;

“Hymen repair surgery is a non-essential surgery which can only be justified to offer a false virginity test report. Some professionals advocate hymenoplasty for alleviation of psychological impact following domestic or sexual abuse which is also an unacceptable excuse. Those victims need psychosocial support not a fake surgery.”

Rim Mahmoud supports this; saying;

“Hymenoplasty could also be used as a way to nullify the occurrence of the abuse, to hide the “shame”. This method of concealment and silencing to repudiate the fact that an abuse has taken place, has adverse psychological implications such as post-traumatic stress, depression and anxiety.”

Hymenoplasty is a form of and can be a trigger for “honour” based abuse

Hymenoplasty must never be seen as a safeguard against “honour” based abuse. It does not tackle the source of the danger; the potential perpetrators. Furthermore, if a girl or woman is discovered to have had hymenoplasty by those from whom she is attempting to hide not being a virgin, the risk level will escalate.

Significantly, research quoted by the Royal College of Midwives states;

“Bleeding may not occur during first coitus in over half of women with unruptured hymen and hymenoplasty cannot guarantee bleeding.”

If a girl or woman undertakes hymenoplasty because she is relying on bleeding to try to prevent “honour” based abuse and does not then bleed when she then has intercourse for the first time, she may be left vulnerable to violence.

It is imperative that if a woman or a girl is seeking hymenoplasty, that this is seen as a major red flag, that she is at risk of harm. She should be risk-assessed and where there is a life-long pattern of patriarchal abuse, with honour as motive, she may be at risk even when there is merely suspicion, or there are rumours that she has had sex outside of marriage. She must be safeguarded and be able to access support and where appropriate, refuge accommodation. She should also be offered specialist counselling to unpick any misconceptions that she holds that her worth is connected to virginity.

What needs to happen

Just as female genital mutilation, which causes significant health and psychological impacts, has rightly been banned, the equally harmful practices of virginity testing and hymenoplasty, for which there is no justification, must be banned with immediate effect.

IKWRO have worked with experts and Garden Court Chambers, to draft new legislation to extend the proposed ban on virginity testing, to also include a ban on hymenoplasty.

Simultaneously to banning these harmful practices, the patriarchal and misogynistic basis that underpin them, must be challenged. The government must increase sustained funding for specialist organisations, like IKWRO, to;

- **Engage the community to challenge the perception that a woman’s or girl’s worth is connected to virginity.**
- **Ensure Relationships and Sex education is taught to all students (with no exemptions for individuals or institutions) to challenge the perception that a woman’s or girl’s worth is connected to virginity and that students have access to support.**
- **Educate professionals to properly understand “honour” based abuse and best practice prevention and responses.**
- **Provide advice, advocacy, counselling and refuge to girls and women at risk of “honour” based abuse.**

Join the campaign

We welcome your support for the Virginity Does Not Define Me campaign. To discuss working together with IKWRO to achieve the aims of the campaign, please contact us at campaigns@ikwro.org.uk.



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