

Virginity, FGM, and the Sexual Subjugation of Women

Have you lost your virginity?

It's a bit of an uncomfortable question to answer, isn't it? Well, fortunately, you won't have to answer it because hopefully, by the end of this article, it will be clear that virginity is not something that you do lose, but is in fact a fundamental pillar of an oppressive belief system.

It seems, to me, that sometimes people consider worth in relation to sex, as more important than worth in relation to personhood. I believe it is necessary to recognize that the concept of virginity is a social construct that functions to commodify women and subjugate them.

Through biblical texts and societal perpetuation, the "virgin" became defined as a woman who had not engaged in sexual intercourse, as proven by her "unbroken" hymen. Most believed women's virginites were a necessity in marriage, because women who were impure were considered damaged goods. Marrying a "virgin" woman would also ensure that any future children were certainly yours, an important point, in a time that placed such a heavy emphasis on inheritance.

However, unfortunately, while this is not so blatant in contemporary society this stigma has been carried forward through to today.

Observing "virginity" from an anatomical point of view, the hymen does, in fact, exist, but, if you have your period (which is the case for most women), it shows that the hymen does not fully cover the vaginal canal, and therefore does not need to be "broken".



So, what does this mean for virginity? If a virgin is defined by an “unbroken” hymen, then virginity is a rare medical condition rather than an inalienable fact of life. While it is true that they can stretch or tear during sex, this can also happen by riding a bike, inserting a tampon, or playing sports.

With all this in mind, it becomes clear that physically, virginity does not exist for most people and therefore should not play such a large part of our day-to-day lives. Society has taken a rare medical condition, blown it out of proportion, normalised it by turning it into a myth, and made it seem like it should be a relevant part in every person’s life, when, in reality this social construct only deserves minimal attention. You lose your keys, your wallet, or your phone, not your virginity.

There is also the issue of rape. If a “virgin” is sexually assaulted, does that count as “losing” her, or indeed his, virginity? The importance we place on this idea of “virgin pureness” creates painful emotional conflicts for victims of sexual assault, who in the wake of such a damaging experience, are left feeling impure, invalid, and worthless because of the unforgivable actions of another person.

Furthermore, virginity is spoken of as if it is a tangible thing to be “given” or “taken” freely. In doing so, we commodify the sexual body and allow it to determine our worth - whether we have “lost” our sexual purity or “taken” someone else’s. It is incredibly objectifying. This notion is dangerous as it morphs a potentially meaningful, pleasurable experience into a status competition.

In some places around the world, this emphasis on “purity” and “sexual innocence” of women and young girls is taken even further in the form of FGM (Female Genital Mutilation). This is a completely unethical practice, with zero health benefits where young girls, usually between the ages of infancy and 15, are subjected to the damaging of perfectly healthy female anatomy.

In the same way the concept of virginity strives to reduce and destroy female bodily autonomy, FGM is used to limit a female child’s “excessive sexuality” and “curb her appetite”. FGM is a physical manifestation of the harmful beliefs virginity and purity feed into, that goes as far as cutting young girls, children, to enforce the twisted belief systems that support such horrific actions.

A brief review of the procedures involved in FGM illustrate how barbaric the process is. There are four categories of FGM. Type 1 is the partial or total removal of the clitoral glans (the external and visible part of the clitoris, which is a sensitive part of the female genitals), and/or the clitoral hood (the fold of skin surrounding the clitoral glans). Type 2 is the partial or total removal of the clitoral glans and the labia minora (the inner folds of the vulva), with or without removal of the labia majora (the outer folds of skin of the vulva). Type 3 is known as infibulation; this is the narrowing of the vaginal opening through the creation of a covering seal. The seal is formed by cutting and repositioning the labia minora, or labia majora,

sometimes through stitching, with or without removal of the clitoral prepuce/clitoral hood and glans (Type I FGM). Often deinfibulation must be carried out after, which is the practice of cutting open the sealed vaginal opening of an infibulated woman. Finally Type 4, covers everything else for example, pricking, piercing, incising, scraping, and cauterizing the genital area. These descriptions of FGM have come from WHO's official website.

Although most prevalent in the Western, Eastern, and North-Eastern regions of Africa, and in some countries in the Middle East and Asia. The practice seeps through to other countries, generally due to migrants from these areas. Therefore, it is really a global issue.

To tackle the issue of virginity and the harmful practices it propagates, a number of urgent actions are required. Firstly, actions targeted at communities in which practices like FGM are prevalent. This would include education for school children on the issue so they are aware of it, and a service where young women can go to in order to seek help if they are being pressured to undergo FGM. Thirdly, doctors in the impacted area should be as strongly discouraged as possible to not practice such crimes and be trained to recognise and report families asking them to carry out such procedures.

Surprisingly, FGM is not actually illegal in all countries where it is most common. According to Equality Now, only 26 out of 29 of the countries in Africa traditionally practicing FGM have laws prohibiting it, with punishments ranging from fines, to 3 months, to life in prison. Therefore, in countries where the law does not back the move away from FGM, there will be issues in encouraging the population to turn their backs on the practice.

There is a cultural battle to be won. Strong public support exists for FGM in some countries where the practice has yet to be outlawed. In Mali, for example, there is currently no law in place prohibiting FGM. Multiple laws have been proposed but polls indicate that 79.1% of both women and men believe that the practice should continue. Therefore a lot of educational work remains to be done to make FGM socially unacceptable before anti FGM laws can be enacted. However, that is not to say it is not possible. At some point FGM was permitted in all 29 countries and most had a population that was supportive of FGM. Now places like Kenya have 92.5% of women and 88.8% of men believing that the practice should cease and there is a law in place that punishes people involved in FGM with up to 3 years imprisonment and a fine of up to 200,000 shillings (USD \$2000). Kenya's overall rates of FGM have been steadily declining, so it is possible with education, focus and drive to turn the tide in countries like Mali.

On a wider scale, there should be a drive towards education globally, to dispel harmful myths and stereotypes around virginity and its meaning in today's society, so that we can build a new generation of people who have minimal use or regard

for views that can cause harm. This education could be completed through workshops or placing an extra module in citizenship classes, depending on the country and its general educational structure. However, it is important that as many young people as possible have access to this information, to allow for the change we need to be cultivated.

In conclusion, virginity is not real. It is a socially constructed phenomenon that functions to police our bodies and make us feel guilty about our sexual experience. It leads to practices such as FGM, which perpetuates the view that women exist solely for the sexual convenience of men. It continuously puts power in the hands of heterosexual men, and subjugates and takes power away from women. It leads not only to emotionally damaging complications but also sickening, physical harm pressed upon the most vulnerable people of our societies.

It doesn't need to be debated, it doesn't need to be "considered," and it doesn't need to be contested because it's not a question of theory. It is our duty and our obligation to use whatever resources we have available to put a stop to this blatant infringement of human rights and bodily autonomy.