

Seth Francis  
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## **A Thin Membrane Called Honor**

### **Hymenoplasty in Muslim Cultures**



The concept of virginity in western cultures as I have come to understand it relates to memories of a nervous, fumbling experience most are happy to get out of the way quickly. Yet there are many cultures around the world that still place great value on the concept of virginity, and the ability to prove that virginity with the presence of a hymen, a thin membrane that partially covers the entrance to the vagina and is presumed to be broken at a woman's first experience of sexual intercourse. In these cultures the hymen itself is therefore the object of worship, and a woman is expected to have an intact hymen on her wedding night and to bleed when the marriage is consummated, proving her sacred virginity by showing everyone the bloody white sheets of the nuptial bed. What a shocking concept in itself. Not only this strong requirement for a woman to be a virgin to be eligible for marriage, but for all of your family and friends to want to see the blood that came out of you while you were sharing the most intimate, private moment of your wedding night. Women failing the "virginity test" are often divorced by their husbands instantly, disowned and often beaten by their family members, and in some cases even killed, also by family members. Killed for not being a virgin? This seems unbelievable at first, yet as I investigated I realized that this tradition has been practiced for thousands of years, even the bible speaks about this kind of murder as an obligation of the family member. The King James' Bible states:

"If a man takes a wife and, after lying with her, dislikes her and slanders her and gives her a bad name, saying, 'I married this woman, but when I approached her, I did not find proof of her virginity,' then the girl's father and mother...shall display the cloth[that the couple slept on] before the elders of the town...If, however, the charge is true and no proof of the girl's virginity can be found, she shall be brought to the door of her father's house and there the men of the town shall stone her to death" (Deuteronomy 22:13-21).

This seems like a savage practice reserved for the history books, and yet there is the story of Du'a Aswad, the seventeen year old Kurdish girl from Northern Iraq who fell in love with a boy, and stayed out with him one night. Her family had no idea if they actually slept together, but assumed

they did and the next day decided she must die. Eight men dragged her out into the street and a large crowd gathered around her, at least one thousand men joining in the assault. They ripped off her clothes to humiliate her and kicked her around like a soccer ball, and as she pleaded for sympathy they gathered rocks and concrete blocks and dropped them on her. It took thirty minutes for Du'a to die, and when she was dead and could no longer feel shame, some men in the crowd covered her legs and bottom again as if the obscenity were in a teenage girl's bare flesh rather than her bleeding corpse (Kristof 82). This was a killing for "honor," and this was in April of 2007.

People stoning each other to death in itself seems absurd in this day and age, let alone as punishment for *possibly* having had sex before marriage, yet the United Nations Population Fund has estimated that there are 5,000 similar honor killings a year, almost all in the Muslim world, with Pakistan's government uncovering 1,261 honor killings in 2003 alone. That is more than 26 murders every week. Some even say that because many of the executions are disguised as accidents or suicides, the number is closer to 6,000 around the world each year (Kristof 82). Unbelievably, many of the family members responsible for these brutal murders often go unpunished, explaining that they were in a "blind fury" and were "defending their honor." Courts in Jordan, Egypt and Syria still legally tolerate a father killing a daughter after hearing she was pregnant, or a brother killing a sister two days after hearing she had committed adultery, both being granted total excuse (Abu-Odeh).

These statistics compelled me to investigate what was going on in these cultures and what was being done to combat these barbaric murders and that is when I found out about the procedure called "hymenoplasty." Several western newspapers reported that Muslim women in Paris were undergoing an operation to restore their hymens and simulate the appearance of virginity that is so important in their culture (Sciolino). Muslim women were experiencing such extreme social pressure to be virgins that some were even taking their own lives (Mehri). One woman stated "I thought of suicide after my first sexual relationship, because I couldn't see any other solution. I was terrified [my family] might kill me, [so] I got a bottle of Panadol and a bottle of household chemicals, I drank them and said, 'that's it'." Fortunately she survived the ordeal and found a solution as other's have, for combating the pressure placed on them to prove their "honor," with simple hymen surgery (Mehri). Also known as "hymenorrhaphy," "revirgination," and "hymen

restoration,” the surgery is quick and painless and so is conducted as an outpatient procedure, usually taking only about 30 minutes and requiring a simple re-attachment of the hymenal remnants with a few stitches. If there are no remnants left, a small strip is taken from the internal vaginal wall for reconstruction. There is very little pain so only basic over-the-counter painkillers are all that is needed, and the hymen is fully restored and the surgery undetectable in about 5 days (Prakash).

As I continued to research, it became clear that this extreme social pressure surrounding virginity was being experienced predominantly by women in Muslim cultures which correlated with the data on honor killings, and it was mostly Muslim women seeking hymen restoration as a result. This led me to ask the following questions: Who are the women requesting this procedure, what are the various viewpoints on hymenoplasty in Muslim cultures, what are the legal and ethical issues related to the procedure, and how did the hymen become such an important symbol in Muslim culture?

### **The Patients**

A New York Times article writes of a 23-year-old French student, a Muslim of Moroccan descent who received the procedure that involved only “...one semicircular cut, 10 dissolving stitches and a discounted fee of \$2900,” a seemingly small price to pay to avoid punishment. The student is quoted as saying: “In my culture, not to be a virgin is to be dirt... [and] right now virginity is more important to me than life.” The article goes on to explain how young Muslim women in France are caught between the freedoms of European society and the deep-rooted traditions of their parents’ and grandparents’ generations. One London gynecologist explains that “if you’re a Muslim woman growing up in more open societies in Europe, you can easily end up having sex before marriage, so if you’re looking to marry a Muslim and don’t want to have problems, you’ll try to recapture your virginity” (Sciolino). At first glance it appeared that the procedure was only prevalent in western societies, yet as I searched it became clear that wherever there was a culture that placed great importance on chastity until marriage and required the hymen as proof of this virginity, the procedure of hymenoplasty was available. Nowadays Muslim women commonly seek certificates of virginity from Gynecologists to provide proof to family members and this has led to an increasing demand for hymen replacements which, if done properly, are not

detected and will produce the tell-tale bleeding on the wedding night (Sciolino).

One 26 year old French woman told of how she received the operation to prove to her husband's family that she was a virgin. She stated that "[t]hey know that you can pour blood on the sheets on the wedding night, so I have to have better proof." Interestingly, Chinese manufacturers are now leading the way with non-surgical options, such as artificial elastic hymens filled with fake blood that can simulate virginity (Mehri).

All of this makes you wonder though, that if so many women in strict traditional cultures around the world are trying to fake the "bloody sheet" proof of virginity, are all of these women having sex before marriage or is there something else going on?

The young French student receiving the procedure stated that she had never had intercourse and only discovered her hymen was torn when she tried to obtain a certificate of virginity to present to her boyfriend and his family. She says she bled after an accident on a horse when she was 10, but this would mean that the hymen doesn't necessarily indicate virginity (Sciolino).

### **The Myth**

Nawal El Saadawi, a doctor from Egypt, explains in her book "The Hidden Face of Eve" that there are various types of hymen, each one with different attributes. "11.2% of girls," she writes, "are born with an elastic hymen, 16.16% with so fine a membrane that it is easily torn, 31.32% with a thick elastic hymen, and only 41.32% with what may be considered a normal hymen. Many girls are born without a hymen at all." She explains that the elastic hymen will flex and often not break with penetration during intercourse, and the thick elastic hymen, if not perforated correctly, can prevent even basic menstrual flow. In one case she writes about a young pregnant girl that was found murdered for "honor," but after the autopsy it was found that she simply had an elastic hymen and the build-up of menstruation blood was creating the appearance of pregnancy. She was a virgin (26).

Further research reveals that the hymen can be damaged whilst playing sport, riding a bike, jumping into water from a height, masturbating, inserting a tampon, or even from inspection by a gynecologist. Girls blessed with what is considered a "normal" hymen, are therefore even less likely to have an intact hymen by the time their wedding night comes around. One report shows that the hymen was intact in only 57% of virgins, and the appearances were greatly affected by

tampon use (Patterson). Also it is documented that the hymen is a relatively bloodless membrane that is unlikely to bleed significantly even if torn (Raveenthiran). More than 30% of girls have no bleeding at all during their first sexual act (Sadaawi 28). This would explain why hymenoplasty often includes a small capsule of blood like liquid sewn into the hymen that will break when the hymen is torn and create the appearance of blood flow that will most likely not occur naturally, even from a properly prepared hymen (Prakash). A report in the Indian Journal of Surgery states that it is actually minor lacerations of the vaginal wall due to violent penetration that appears to be responsible for the “blood stained bed-sheets,” not a broken hymen at all (Raveenthiran).

Contrastingly, another study shows that the hymen was *intact* in as many as 52% of adolescent girls who admitted to have had sexual intercourse, and Sadaawi encountered one instance where she was asked to perform a caesarian section on a woman, because she had an intact hymen and did not want to damage it (30).

These studies explicitly show that the appearance of the hymen is a far from accurate indicator as to whether a woman is a virgin or not, yet in these cultures the hymen is considered the most important part of a woman’s body. Sadaawi explains that for an Arab girl, the hymen is more important than one of her eyes or a limb, and even losing her life would be less catastrophic for her family than losing her hymen (26).

It is easy then to imagine the suffering a girl might go through in a culture with these practices, without even understanding what has gone wrong. She might be completely innocent of any sexual activity but unable to prove it, and so punished to the extreme of human capacity.

Doctor Sadaawi explains that “...the hymen can be compared to the appendix since it has no real bodily functions to fulfill. If it had an important function we would not have found so many girls born without any hymen at all or others with just a remnant” (28).

So the hymen has no function in the body and is statistically only likely to be present in about half of women at their time of first intercourse. The practice of checking for an intact hymen as a sign of virginity is therefore about as useful as some of the virginity tests of the middle ages such as the urine test (a virgin’s urine is clear and sparkling), or looking at which way the woman’s breasts point (a virgin’s breasts point up), and knowing the factual data of the hymen, the modern virginity test seems almost as ridiculous.

But if the hymen does not actually demonstrate virginity, where did this idea come from?

### **History of the Hymen and Virginity**

Dr. V. Raveenthiran proposes that it started out of confusion between the Greek words “Hymen” and “Hymn.” Although they sound similar, the word “hymen” means “membrane,” so appropriately the membrane that covered the opening to the vagina was termed “hymen vaginalis.” The word “hymn” however, refers to the minor Greek god in mythology who is believed to preside over marriage ceremonies. As virginity ends with consummation of marriage, “Hymn” was mistakenly associated with chastity, where in fact Goddess Hera is the patron of marital relations, and Goddess Aphrodite the supporter of marital affairs. The god Hymn has no influence over sexual intercourse, and so linking “hymen vaginalis” with virginity appears to be a mythical misinterpretation, perpetuated by an inaccurate cultural practice.

Also if we look at the origin of the word “virgin,” we find that the French term “virgine” is derived from Latin by the words “vir,” meaning “man,” and “genere,” meaning generated or “created for.” Revirgination through hymenoplasty can then be seen as a renewing of the dedication of a woman to the use, pleasure and control of a man, a practice seen to perpetuate a human rights offence against the equality of men and women. Unmarried women should be no more required to remain virgins or prove their virginity as a condition of marriage than unmarried men, and the idea that a woman unable to prove her virginity to a man requires a surgical procedure to rise to a status worthy of him, without regard to his chastity, appears so discriminatory that many gynecologists refuse to perform the procedure (Cook 267).

### **Religion vs. Culture – The reasons for the value of virginity**

Both the Bible and the Koran state that a bride is supposed to be a virgin on her wedding night, and so it is easy to blame adherence to religious doctrine for such traditions. Yet one Syrian cleric, Sheikh Mohamad Habash, was quick to point out that the virginity issue is not about religion, and that “...when people wait for the virgin’s blood to be spilled on the sheet, these are cultural traditions...[t]his is not related to Shariah law” (Mehri).

This makes sense because if this were a religious practice, we would surely see it occur in America, a country founded on Christianity, or Indonesia, a heavily Muslim populated country, yet these accounts are almost non-existent (Cook). Understanding that this is a cultural practice is a very

important because cultural practices can be influenced and changed through education, but suggesting that a religious practice is wrong, or a doctrine needs to be changed is very dangerous and quickly dismissed.

Anthropology expert Diane King confirms that virginity is indeed related to cultural and not religious beliefs, and that the many diverse cultures in which honor killings are found have in common “patrilineal kinship reckoning,” that is the father is the head of the family and places great value on the makeup of the family tree. This patrilineal sovereignty, or the ability to define the composition of a blood line and its boundaries, is central to the logic of honor killings, she claims, stating “I was unable to find a single case of an honor killing occurring among a non-patrilineal group” (319). King writes that “honor” is ultimately demonstrated through the possession of a clear lineage, and “it can be lost through evidence of or gossip-inflamed suspicion of sexual (or even flirtatious) activity outside marriage.” “Honor,” she writes, “is deeply bound up with ideas of virtue and malignity and can be restored by an ‘honor killing’.” Or as the common Arab saying goes, the shame is “wiped out in blood” (324). This seems to be a distorted concept, where a man’s honor is more closely related to the behavior of the women in the family than his own behavior. It seems a man can be a womanizer of the worst kind and still is considered honorable if the women in his family can protect their genitals (Sadaawi 31).

Another important point King brings up is that in patrilineage only males can keep a category going from generation to generation, and every female is a potential bearer of offspring who do not belong to their category. This explains the control shown by men to keep their women with intact hymens as they represent a physical barrier against such a violation. The cultural theory that men are the primary genitors of children is called “patrogenesis,” and according to the Moroccan Arabs, “women do not contribute at all to the hereditary background of a child; they are the receptacle which receives the male seed” (325). From these ideas it appears that women are expected to simply serve the needs of their men and feel honored to receive the gift of their children.

Nawal El Sadaawi states that virginity is a strict moral code in these cultures, “yet one would think that the first criterion of a moral code,” she posits, “if it is indeed to be moral, should be that it applies to all without exception, and does not yield to any form of discrimination whether on the basis of sex, color, or class” (27). The brutal orthodoxy required of women however, is

accompanied by an almost unlimited license for men, where only poverty can bring a man shame. The number of a Muslim man's sexual conquests is a symbol of pride and boasting, and so it appears that these moral codes are gender specific.

### **Ethical Conflicts of the Surgeon**

There are many ethical conflicts surrounding hymenoplasty and in many Muslim countries the surgery still remains illegal, with some doctors facing serious repercussions for disobeying. There is obvious debate as to whether hymenoplasty is an act of liberation or repression, and the French college of Gynecologists and Obstetricians opposes the procedure on moral, cultural and health grounds. The group's leader stated: "attaching so much importance to the hymen is regression, submission to the intolerance of the past" (Sciolino). The argument that the procedure perpetuates gender discrimination is certainly valid, but the repercussions of refusing the procedure appear to be a far greater evil. Anthropologist Clellan S. Ford conducted a survey in 1997 of 190 societies around the world concluding that in 24% of the societies, premarital sex was strongly disapproved of, and in this group virginity had to be proved with tests, with severe punishments for those who failed (Bhugra). It seems then that hymenoplasty must be provided as an option for women, as no young girl deserves to be punished by a sexist, oppressive practice that can be avoided with a harmless surgery.

Many doctors are hesitant with the procedure as they are confronted with questions of deceit. Should a doctor participate in the deceit between spouses, and what are the psychological repercussions of founding a marriage and family life on deception? How involved, if at all, should a doctor be in the decision of whether the procedure is appropriate for a patient? (Raveenthiran) Feminists argue that the surgery is exploiting women's lack of self esteem, and doctors argue that as the hymen has no function in the body whatsoever the surgery has no principle in medicine on the basis of health improvement. One article in the journal of Gynecology and Obstetrics points out that however the surgery is viewed, doctors have a responsibility to perform the operation to combat patients seeking out the procedure from unqualified practitioners. There are millions of women in cultures that demand proof of virginity before marriage, and there are cases in Guatemala for instance, where women have suffered numerous health problems from poorly performed hymenoplasty. To simply insure that women can have access to safe, professional service is reason



enough for many doctors (Cook).

However, the most persuasive stance for advocating the procedure stems from Article 12 of the “Women’s Convention,” stating that women should enjoy, “on a basis of equality of men and women, access to health care services.” Such services include those that women, on an individual basis, consider appropriate to their purposes, even when others, including women, disagree.

Women who have the competent capacity to determine that this procedure is in the best interest of their well-being, have just as much right to receive it as men do to receive say penile enlargement surgery, which is commonly accepted worldwide and often funded by health insurance (Cook).

### **Virginity as a Target**

One of the most powerful uses of this procedure arises in the case of girls that have lost their virginity through forced intercourse. In some parts of the world up to one third of adolescent girls report that their first sexual experience was forced (Cook). Imagine the terror experienced by a girl in a traditional culture that places such a high value on virginity, when she is raped and suddenly has her honor and her social worth stripped from her. It is no wonder that so often these girls commit suicide, having nothing left to live for. In fact in these cultures it is common for rape to be used as a weapon to terrorize certain ethnic groups because leaders lose their authority when they can’t protect their women. These cultural codes of sexual honor are supposed to protect women, and in fact create an environment where women are systematically dishonored and disgraced (Kristof 83). It is not surprising then that hymenoplasty is commonly used in the process of rape re-habilitation and often even funded by some government medical plans for this purpose (Cook). Clearly in these cases helping to repair the appearance of virginity seems obvious, but regardless of the reasons a patient might request the procedure, it has been proven as an effective method for combating the brutal practice of “honor killings.” In 1996 Egypt reported that its trade in hymen repairs reduced “cleansing” murders by 80% over the previous 10 years (Paterson).

### **Conclusion**

And so it seems that hymenoplasty acts an effective temporary method for combating an archaic tradition founded on the requirement of inaccurate “proof” to maintain this idea of “honor.” This surgery prevents social consequences that are unjust, oppressive and based purely on gender discrimination, and even though this procedure does *in part* perpetuate this discrimination, the

consequences far outweigh the setbacks in the advancement of equality. No woman should have to suffer for not having an intact hymen, whatever the reasons. But while hymen repair may be a quick fix, it can't reconcile centuries of ingrained tradition with attitudes of modern society. Ultimately education is needed to teach cultures that adhere to this practice that the hymen in no way indicates virginity and that the double standard of virginity is just another part in the overwhelming discrimination against women. Women should not have to adhere to *any* rules and regulations that do not stand for the men of the same culture. Women follow these traditions based on moral values, and as Sadaawi posits, "the anatomical constitution of human beings can have nothing to do with moral values, for moral values are the product of social systems imposed by the ruling class with the aim of serving certain economical and political interests and to insure the situation of power is maintained" (27). In these cultures, the ruling class is men, and their interests seem to lie in perpetuating the idea that a woman's job is to serve a man's needs, to bear his children and insure his pride in patrilineage. This gender discrimination must stop. It is at the core of many other closely related, brutal practices such as female genital mutilation and forced prostitution, and clearly violates all the principles of human rights that we all hold so dear. Dr. Sadaawi reports that change is slowly taking place as education leads to the empowerment of women, but still to this day honor killings are just as rampant and ruthlessly barbaric in their torturous methods. As Nicholas Kristof puts it, "the paradox of honor killings is that societies with the most rigid moral codes end up sanctioning behavior that is supremely immoral: murder" (82). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century we have the technology and experience to overcome these oppressive practices, and we cannot allow any practice that advocates violence towards others based on the perpetuation of ignorant myths for which the knowledge and research to prove it as such is so readily available. It is our duty to educate, and until reform arrives, it is our duty to provide whatever support and services can combat those enforcing such practices, even if it means surgically recreating the appearance of the thin, useless membrane called "honor."

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