

Virginity Testing

International Association of Forensic Nurses

Statement of Problem

Virginity testing is a human rights violation and occurs in multiple societies and cultures as a form of gender-based discrimination and violence (WHO, 2018). Virginity testing involves an examination of the female genitalia, often by a health care professional, intended to correlate the appearance and status of the hymen in women or girls with previous sexual intercourse (Independent Forensic Expert Group, 2015; Olson & Garcia-Moreno, 2017). Visual inspection of the external genitalia is often combined with a “two-finger test”, involving the insertion of one or more fingers into the vagina to assess the size of the vaginal (hymenal) opening (Independent Forensic Expert Group, 2015). Health care professionals or untrained individuals conduct these examinations and conclude whether women or often young girls have experienced consensual sex or sexual assault/abuse (WHO, 2018). Examinations are often performed by force without the individual’s consent and cooperation (Mishori et al., 2019). Virginity testing is traumatic, painful, and humiliating (WHO, 2018).

In many patriarchal cultures, virginity is an important societal norm that determines the honor of the individual woman or girl, her family and community, and the State (Frank et al., 1999; Crosby et al., 2020). Virginity testing examinations are conducted under a variety of circumstances and settings: prior to marriage to establish virginity; to disprove or prove an allegation of sexual violence; to legally assess the allegation of a woman or girl not being a virgin in the absence of bleeding on her wedding night; and to intimidate political activists and detainees. In certain countries, the State has been known to forcibly conduct virginity testing when women or girls are accused of adultery or prostitution (Crosby, et al., 2020).

Even though the World Health Organization published a joint statement with the United Nation’s Human Rights Office and UN Women in 2018 officially denouncing the practice of virginity testing and calling for the elimination of this human rights violation, virginity testing remains a common practice in various regions of the world. Virginity testing is culturally accepted and frequently conducted in Afghanistan, Brazil, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Iran, Jamaica, Jordan, Palestine, South Africa, Swaziland, Turkey, and Zimbabwe (WHO, 2018). Globalization has resulted in increased virginity testing among some communities in Canada and Europe (Crosby et al., 2020). As recently as 2016, a member of the Egyptian parliament called for virginity tests for female university entrants to discourage premarital sex (Crosby et al., 2020). Indonesia requires a virginity test when an unmarried woman applies for a job in the military (Crosby et al., 2020). Although officially banned in Afghanistan, virginity testing remains widespread, both officially by the State, and unofficially by family request (Crosby et al., 2020). In the United States, virginity testing occurs in non-immigrant populations, such as Orthodox Jewish communities and certain fundamentalist Christian groups (Crosby et al., 2020).

Virginity testing is not supported by any medical evidence. Decades of research have solidified that the appearance and condition of the hymen and other genital structures cannot diagnose consensual sexual intercourse, sexual abuse/assault, or other forms of sexual violence (Adams, Farst, & Kellogg, 2018; Drocton et al., 2008; Gallion, Milam, & Littrel, 2016; Heger et al., 2003; Heger et al., 2002; Sachs & Chu, 2002).

Virginity testing has been linked to a variety of negative short-term and long-term physical and psychosocial consequences. The examination is often painful and traumatic as damage to the genitalia

with resulting bleeding and infection can occur (WHO, 2018). Virginity testing is commonly performed under unhygienic conditions potentially increasing the risk of infections including Human Immunodeficiency Virus (LeRoux, 2006). Psychological trauma can also result from virginity testing. The examination violates the individual's physical integrity, autonomy, and privacy, especially when performed without consent (WHO, 2018). The exam can result in significant negative emotions such as intense anxiety, guilt, shame, depression, loss of self-esteem, post-traumatic stress disorder, powerlessness, humiliation, and panic (Crosby, 2020).

"Failing" the exam and being labeled a "non-virgin" can result in devastating outcomes for the individual. Punishment for failing virginity testing can include beatings; sexual assaults, including gang rape; and/or denial of food (Leclerc-Madlala, 2006; Shalboub-Kevorkian, 2005). Women have been murdered as the result of failing virginity testing, in some instances as "honor killings" by family members (Crosby et al., 2020). Women have committed suicide after failing virginity tests (Crosby et al., 2020). Additionally, failing the examination can result in educational, marriage, and employment discrimination (WHO, 2018). Ostracism from family and the community can also occur leaving these girls and women at heightened vulnerability for violence, including forced prostitution and human trafficking (George, 2008; Shalboub-Kevorkian, 2005). The WHO (2018) states "virginity testing is detrimental to a woman's or girl's physical integrity and psychosocial well-being and is likely to cause long-lasting damage."

Association Position

The International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) asserts that:

1. Virginity testing violates an individual's human rights.
2. Virginity testing is an example of gender-based discrimination.
3. Virginity testing is a form of sexual violence.
4. Virginity testing cannot accurately determine a woman or girl's sexual activity status.
5. Virginity testing cannot reliably tell if a woman or girl has experienced sexual abuse or assault.
6. Virginity testing is not supported by any healthcare or medical evidence.
7. Virginity testing can result in significant physical, psychological, and social consequences.
8. Health care providers must cease performing virginity testing examinations.
9. Health care providers must educate patients, families, communities, and governments regarding the inaccuracies of virginity testing.
10. Health care providers must advocate for vulnerable individuals by educating individuals, families, communities, and governments regarding the negative short-term and long-term consequences of virginity testing.

Rationale

As the largest international forensic nursing association, the IAFN is committed to upholding human rights and abolishing sexual violence. The International Association of Forensic Nurses (IAFN) declares that virginity testing constitutes a human rights violation and is a traumatizing, sexually violent practice. IAFN calls for the global elimination of virginity testing.

References

- Adams, J., Farst, K., & Kellogg, N. (2018). Interpretation of medical findings in suspected child sexual abuse. *Journal of Pediatric & Adolescent Gynecology*, 31(3), 225-231.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpag.2017.12.011>

- CNN (2019). Call T.I. taking his daughter for a virginity check what it really is. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/11/19/opinions/ti-virginity-test-daughter-campoamor/index.html>
- Crosby, S., Oleng, N., Volpellier, M., & Mishori, R. (2020). Virginity testing: Recommendations for primary care physicians in Europe and North America. *BMJ Global Health*, 5, e002057. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjgh-2019-002057>
- Drocton, P., Sachs, C., Chu, L., & Wheeler, M. (2008). Validation set correlates of anogenital injury after sexual assault. *Academy of Emergency Medicine*, 15(3), 231-238. <https://doi.org/10.1111.j.1553-2712.2008.00050.x> PMID:18304053
- Frank, N., Bauer, H., Arican, N., Fincanci, S., & Iacopino, V. (1999). Virginity examinations in Turkey: Role of forensic physicians in controlling female sexuality. *Journal of the American Medical Association*, 282, 485-490. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.282.5.485>
- George, E. (2008). Virginity testing and South Africa's HIV/AIDS crisis: Beyond rights universalism and cultural relativism towards health capabilities. *California Law Review*, 96(6), 1447-1519. <https://doi.org/10.15779/Z38RD8G>
- Heger, A., McConnell, G., Ticson, L., Guerra, L., Lister, J., & Zaragoza, T. (2003). Healing patterns in anogenital injuries: A longitudinal study of injuries associated with sexual abuse, accidental injuries, and surgery in the preadolescent child. *Pediatrics*, 112, 829-837.
- Heger, A., Ticson, L., Velasquez, O., & Bernier, R. (2002). Children referred for possible sexual abuse: Medical findings in 2364 children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 26, 645-659.
- Independent Forensic Group (2015). Statement on virginity testing. *Journal of Forensic and Legal Medicine*, 33, 121-124. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jflm.2015.02.012>
- Leclerc-Madlala, S. (2003). Protecting girlhood: Virginity revivals in the era of AIDS. *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equality*, 56, 16-25. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4066360>
- Le Roux, L. (2006). Harmful traditional practices, male circumcision, and virginity testing of girls and the legal rights of children. Cape Town: University of Western Cape <http://etd.uwc.ac.za/xmlui/handle/11394/1995>
- Olson, R. & Garcia-Moreno, C. (2017). Virginity testing: A systematic review. *Reproductive Health*, 14(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-017-0319-0>
- Mishori, R., Ferdowsian, H., Naimer, K., Volpellier, M., & McHale, T. (2019). The little tissue that couldn't- Dispelling myths about the hymen's role in determining sexual history and assault. *Reproductive Health*, 16(74), 1-9. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-019-0731-8>
- Sach, C., & Chu, L. (2002). Predictors of genitorectal injury in female victims of suspected sexual assault. *Academy Emergency Medicine*, 9(2), 146-151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1553-2712.2002.tb00232.x>

Shalhoub-Kevorkian, N. (2005). Imposition of virginity testing: A life-saver or a license to kill? *Social Science Medicine*, 60(6), 1187-1196. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.socscimed.2004.07.005>

World Health Organization (2018). *Eliminating Virginity Testing: An Interagency Statement*. Retrieved from: <http://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/275451/WHO-RHR-18.15-eng.pdf?ua=1>