

VIRGINITY TESTING AND HYMENOPLASTY



HARMFUL PRACTICES: DEFINITION AND CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

Harmful Practices are forms of violence which have been committed primarily against women and girls in communities and societies for so long that they are considered, or presented by perpetrators, as part of accepted 'cultural' practice. In these cases, religion, culture, patriarchal codes of behaviour and perceived notions of 'honour' are used by one or more perpetrators as an excuse for coercive control, threats and abuse. The most common are forced or early marriage, so called 'honour' based violence, female genital mutilation or cutting (FGM/C) and other lesser reported forms such as faith-based abuse, menstrual huts, acid attacks, so called 'corrective' rape and others. Harmful practices occur across all sexes, sexual identities and genders. They are not unique to a culture or religion. Often one and more forms of harmful practices occur at the same time, escalating risks and resulting in barriers to disclosure.

The notion of 'honour' is as relevant in broader discussions on coercive control and other forms of violence against women and girls globally. It is important that we understand this continuum while distinctively understanding the specific risks (such as multiple perpetrators) and needs of women from BME backgrounds who experience so called 'honour' based abuse and harmful practices. In the UK 'honour' based abuse and harmful practices definitions are shaped by the experiences of global majority/BME women's barriers to access, institutional racism and the specific contexts of escalation of risk in migrant and diaspora communities. Therefore, within the multiagency coordinated community response model of domestic abuse, harmful practices and so called 'honour' based abuse response is more effective when defined, informed and delivered by led by and for BME/global majority women's organizations.

WHAT IS VIRGINITY TESTING?

A virginity test is a method of checking a woman or girl's genitals in a physically invasive manner to determine whether her hymen is intact. It is based on the mistaken belief that if her hymen has been broken then she has had virginal intercourse and linked to the belief that women should not have sex before marriage. It is a physical and sexual violation which can lead to long term psychological trauma.

VIRGINITY TESTING AND HYMENOPLASTY



WHAT IS HYMENOPLASTY?

Hymenoplasty (also known as hymenorrhaphy or hymen reconstruction or hymen repair) is a form of vaginal surgery that involves reconstructing the hymen, giving the impression that the woman or girl is a virgin. The aim of the procedure is to ensure that she bleeds when she has virginal intercourse. The procedure has no medical justification, and carries physical, social and psychological risks.

Women may present as consenting to hymenoplasty but it's important to understand the coercive and controlling context in which it takes place. Both Virginty Testing and Hymenoplasty are based on the misogynistic belief that women are defined by their virginty and will often be linked to perceptions of 'honour' in a family. Virginty testing and hymenoplasty are often linked to other forms of abuse such as honour' based abuse, forced and child marriage and domestic abuse.

It is illegal to carry out, offer or aid and abet virginty testing or hymenoplasty in any part of the UK. It is also illegal for UK nationals and residents to carry out a virginty test or hymenoplasty outside the UK. The offence carries a maximum sentence of 5 years imprisonment and/or an unlimited fine.

WARNING SIGNS AND INDICATORS INCLUDE BUT NOT LIMITED TO:

- Depression, self-harm, suicidal thoughts or eating disorders.
- Isolation.
- Physical pain (if procedures have been carried out).
- Psychological trauma, including post-traumatic stress disorder.
- Restriction in movement, e.g., not allowed to see friends or have a job.
- Truanting from school.
- Running away from home.
- Individuals always being chaperoned by family members/ spouse.
- Isolation including lack of friends, access to phones or internet.
- Lack of access to documents such as passport.
- Substance misuse.
- Having siblings who were forced to marry.

VIRGINITY TESTING AND HYMENOPLASTY



DOS AND DONTS

DO:

- Follow the ONE Chance rule - this may be the only opportunity you have to speak to the victim.
- Believe the person and ensure their safety.
- Ensure that you see the client alone.
- Be trauma informed in approach and be led by survivors as they are experts by experience.
- Take them seriously and be patient in understanding the dynamics of power and risks.
- Consider that there may be multiple perpetrators.
- Listen to what the victim wants to happen and be honest if you will need to break their confidentiality (e.g., if a child is at risk).
- Establish safe means of contact.
- If under 18, follow child safeguarding procedures.
- If over 18, follow adult safeguarding procedures.
- If over 16 consider a MARAC referral.
- Offer specialist support (see agency details below).
- Be extremely careful how information is recorded and shielded within your organisation.
- **ALWAYS REMEMBER - IN AN EMERGENCY DIAL 999..**

DON'TS:

- Attempt to mediate.
- Send them away.
- Let the family, community or social network know about the disclosure.
- Meet in a place where you could be seen by a member of the family/ community.
- Use members of the family or community to interpret.
- Underestimate the perpetrator/s of forced marriage.
- Underestimate the risk even if there have been no previous reports.

VIRGINITY TESTING AND HYMENOPLASTY



AGENCIES

You can refer cases and enquire about training on harmful practices via your local P&ACT Ending Harmful Practices Agencies:

Women and Girls Network - Bromley, Ealing & Hounslow

Email: rcc@wgn.org.uk Phone: 0808 801 0660

Phoenix (P&ACT) Project at PLIAS Resettlement - Barnet, Brent, H&F, Harrow & Ealing

Email: shirley.ricketts@plias.co.uk Phone: 07494 091586 or 0208 838 6800

Midaye - H&F, Kensington & Chelsea, Westminster

Email: contact@midaye.org.uk Phone: 07593440944

FORWARD - Croydon, Bexley, Greenwich & Merton

Email: forward@forwarduk.org.uk Phone: 0208 960 4000

Southall Black Sisters - Ealing, Hillingdon & Hounslow

Email: info@southallblacksisters.co.uk Phone: 020 8571 9595

Ashiana Network - Barking & Dagenham, Havering, Newham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets & Waltham Forest

Email: info@ashiana.org.uk Phone: 02085390427

IKWRO Women's Rights Organization - Camden, Enfield, Merton, Southwark & Sutton

Email: info@ikwro.org.uk Phone: 020 7920 6460

Kurdish and Middle Eastern Women's Organization - Enfield, Hackney, Haringey & Islington

Email: referrals@kmewo.com Phone: 020 72631027

Latin American Women's Rights Service - City of London, Haringey, Lambeth, Lewisham, Southwark & Sutton

Email: priscila@lawrs.org.uk Phone: 020 7336 0888

Asian Women's Resource Centre - Brent, Barnet, Kensington & Chelsea, Richmond & Harrow

Email: info@awrc.org.uk Phone: 020 8961 6549

DVIP - Kensington & Chelsea, Kingston upon Thames, Lambeth & Wandsworth

Email: DVIP.al-aman@richmondfellowship.org.uk Phone: 020 8563 2250

IMECE - Barking & Dagenham, Hackney, Islington, Lewisham, Redbridge, Tower Hamlets & Waltham Forest

Email: vawgreferral@imece.org.uk Phone: 0207 354 1959