

## **The Psychological Effects of the Importance of Virginity in Women in the Middle East**

In traditional societies such as the Middle East, sexuality is usually the topic that parents and educators tend to skip. The lack of open discussions on sexuality led it to morph into a taboo and a source of fear. In turn, this taboo on sexuality invested itself in the huge importance of maintaining one's virginity. An individual, whether a male or a female, is considered a virgin if they have not engaged in sexual intercourse. However, the domination of patriarchy in Middle Eastern societies associated the concept of virginity in women with notions of purity and honor of the family.

Patriarchal societies most often paint a female's identity as a man's possession. Thereby, a female's sexual decisions are no longer hers to make rather her father's or husband's. Thus, controlling and taming a woman's sexual desires is thought to be significant in order to avoid humiliation on her wedding day. The humiliation of a non-virgin bride could lead her to many dangerous consequences that range from divorce to murder in some cases. These consequences have pushed women to becoming haunted by the initiative of verifying their virginity on their wedding nights.

The issue of a woman maintaining or losing her virginity before marriage is not our major concern. Nonetheless, our attention is mainly focused on how virginity gravely affects women's psychological states. According to most Middle Eastern females, the blood drops on their wedding day is the only method to prove that they are not guilty of being non-virgins. Moreover, this bleeding also determines for many females other significant aspects such as having a successful and constructive marriage.

Virginity is so sacred in Middle Eastern societies, that it often pushes women to go to extensive measures to help prove that they are virgins. One procedure that women use to ensure their bleeding on their wedding day is through hymenoplasty. Hymenoplasty is a cosmetic procedure that surgically reconstructs a woman's hymen. The hymen is a thin membrane found on the opening of the vagina which usually tears upon the first intercourse. The tearing of the hymen is what causes the bleeding which could indicate virginity. As a result, by restoring the hymen a woman is capable of bleeding after the next sexual intercourse she engages in.

The important presence of the hymen is a culturally internalized value in the Middle East. To an extent where a Hymenoplasty has become a procedure intended to save women and their families from societal dishonor. This could be traced back to the fact that in traditional societies, families feel that a non-virgin female creates shame and disgrace because her marriage marketability is sternly affected.

Pre-marital virginity is perhaps the most cherished possession of a Middle Eastern female, because it increases her chances of getting married. The physical condition of being a

virgin is considered the most desirable quality that men look for in their future brides. As a result, non-virgin women are valued as un-appropriate and second-handed brides because they have been with other men before their husbands.

The fact that virginity drastically affects the probability of a woman's marriage; women have become burdened by the idea of taming their sexual desires in order to ensure a groom. This burden could be linked to the reality that women's societal position in the Middle East is highly dependent on their marital status. Therefore, losing virginity is deemed as punishment because it limits a woman's chances of having a prosperous marriage. These circumstances have created grave psychological pressures in women to a degree that some unmarried women choose to commit suicide or leave their community.

Aside from the fact that virginity is regarded as the symbol of chastity and virtue, many Middle Eastern women decide to engage in pre-marital sex. However, by choosing to lose their virginity they are also in danger of sacrificing their dignity if discovered. As a result, women tend to feel imprisoned by the first man they give sexual pleasure to. Moreover, females feel convicted because virginity is correlated with men's masculinity. Men in the Middle East consider "being the first to possess a girl" as a masculine achievement which women fear because it is often used against their honor and purity.

In additions to the feelings of guilt and conviction, women are unable to express the stress they are undergoing because it risks uncovering their secret. The absence of social support plays a significant role in reinforcing further self blame and hatred. Moreover, women also sense that they are totally alone and helpless because they are unable to seek the understanding and acceptance from those closest to them. This leads them to develop anxiety and depression symptoms which could push them to develop more serious pathological disorders.

The values in the Middle East that associate virginity with reputation and honor are generating a source of fear for women. Women sense that their dignity is being demeaned because their worth is being equated with her physical aspect of being a virgin. Also, women are being forced to tame their human right of sexuality in order prove their worth. The process of proving one's worth through virginity is definitely hurting the self-respect of women.

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