



Virginity- An Update on Uncharted Territory

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Abstract

Traditionally cultures around the world place a high value on virginity in women leading to tremendous pressure on girls and their families. Today it continues to play the role of a major determinant in their future sexual lives. Historically and socially it is considered an exalted virtue denoting purity. However, with the recent changes in sexual freedom amongst women, it is necessary to examine certain recent issues with reference to feminine sexuality as well its bio-psycho-social roots. It is important to understand the significance of social constraints on sexuality and reproduction within the different cultural systems along with the dominant influence of religious sentiments on virginity. Also it is imperative to have an understanding of how some of these historical value systems enforced in society play a causative role in sexual dysfunction amongst women today and be cognizant of methods to ameliorate the same.

Keywords: Virginity; Culture and sexuality; Sexuality; Reproduction

Introduction

The concept of virginity has traditionally involved sexual abstinence before marriage; in order to subsequently engage in sexual acts only with the marriage partner. This review highlights certain recent issues with reference to virginity as both a biological fact of life and a concept with multiple social meanings and consequences. Biologically, a woman's sex drive is no different from that of a man but an individual's sexuality is shaped by social and cultural processes also. Thus virginity needs to be viewed primarily as a social construct [1]. The gender roles and conditioning that society exposes every individual, determines their full range of potential and produces a significant impact on their sexuality.

Society raises women not only to be more cooperative sexually, but also to be more wary. As a result sexual vigilance often replaces sexual responsiveness. It structures as well constrains the development and expression of sexuality in its members and a knowledge of the impact of culture can make it easier to understand and make decisions about our own sexuality. According to anthropological gender scholars there exists several theoretical models and prototypes particularly with respect to sexuality in several cultures [2]. In particular there are several barriers to the study of sexuality such as language, equating the concepts with religion as well as attitudinal issues due to which these concepts are unexplored in the South Asian countries such as India, Nepal, Bangladesh etc. [3]. Both men and women are generally conditioned by their upbringing and by the prevailing cultural attitudes, to believe that men by virtue of being male are supposed to be sexually knowledgeable and have a highly demanding sexual drive in contrast to women who should be sexually innocent, relatively inert and should neither initiate nor pursue a man. Such assumptions limit a healthy and responsible expression and may even prevent a man from expressing his receptiveness and in turn place undue burden and responsibility to always initiate sexual activity. The significance of

sexuality and reproduction within any particular social system is relevant in the context of both biology and culture combined. Hence a thorough understanding of biological facts is important in order to understand the position of women in society.

Historical Perspective

In order to better understand the influence of contemporary social beliefs on sexuality around the globe we must examine their historical roots and how relevant these ideas are to us today in our society.

Religious views: In Hinduism which is prevalent in several South Asian countries; premarital virginity on the part of the bride was considered the ideal. The prevailing Hindu marriage ceremony centers around the Kanyadan ritual, which literally means gift of a virgin, by father of the maiden through which the Hindus believe they gain greatest spiritual merit [4].

The concept of sexual activity for procreation is associated with both Judaic and Christian tradition. The early Christians associated sex with sin and the New Testament clearly equated spirituality with sexual abstinence and celibacy, celebrating chastity and virginal status as holy. The elevation of Mary's status as the Blessed Virgin as well as emphasis on the sin committed by Eve during the middle ages gave rise to these two contradictory crystallized images of women which has influenced society's view of female sexuality. This belief that sex is sinful persisted throughout the middle ages as human sexual organs were considered to be designed solely for procreation by the Church [5]. Even Islam places a high value on sexual behavior within marriage but considers premarital sex to be sinful [6].

Sexual behaviors that provide pleasure without the possibility of procreation have been viewed at various times as immoral, sinful, perverted or illegal across religions and societies. In Roman times, Vestal Virgins were strictly celibate priestesses dedicated to Goddess Vesta brought to the temple before puberty and required to remain celibate on penalty of death [7]. However the same guidelines did not

apply throughout the world. In ancient China around 200 B.C. Taoism promoted sexual activity for spiritual growth and harmony and sex manuals in India such as the Kama sutra were available for the common man [8].

Socio Cultural Roots

Cultural traditions place special value and significance on virginity, a state of never having engaged in sexual intercourse, especially in the case of unmarried females and associate the same with notions of personal purity and honor. The practice of clitoridectomy of young unmarried girls in several tribes predates even the origin of religion and it was believed to protect a woman against her own temptations, hence preserving her chastity. There was a strong association of clitoral mutilation with premarital chastity in Nigeria and Egypt usually performed by an old woman in the village with assistance from female relatives of the girl [9]. More recently news reports of the practice being widespread in the urban metropolitan Indian city of Mumbai have emerged. It is seen even today and several reasons are put forward including religion, tradition, hygiene with the actual intent of controlling the women's sexuality.

Virginity has long been a custom associated with the esteem of the kin group and the ideology represents the issue of men's access to women and underlying themes of inequality of the sexes. This represented male dominance and female subjugation which had become more pronounced and men insisted on their exclusive right to the women they owned [10]. Thus the woman was required to be a virgin at marriage and monogamous thereafter so the man could be certain that any child she conceived was his [11].

Contemporary Roman Catholic organizations across the world continue to maintain the belief that the only moral sexual expression occurs within marriage, for the purpose of procreation; hence individuals must engage in the same only after marriage [12]. Today with efficient contraception these two functions can be separated. The widespread acceptance of these contraceptives has permitted sexuality to be separated from procreation. The oral contraceptive pill was introduced in 1960 and by 1972 its use by unmarried individuals was legalized. The subsequent availability of legal abortion effectively separated sexuality from procreation leading to the sexual revolution of the 1960s [13]. Despite these changes in the social milieu the legacies prophesied regarding virginity continue to pervade the minds of subsequent generations. Various psychosocial factors have been shown to be powerful predisposing factors that influence an early age of onset of coitus. These include poverty, family conflict, marital disruption, low self-esteem, lack of parental supervision, etc. [14]. Research has also provided insights into characteristics of those who choose to delay the onset of sexual intercourse until after marriage. It is believed that a woman should value her sexuality only as a necessary precursor to reproduction, rather than something deeply pleasurable in itself. Gender role expectations for males and females are reflected in the existence of this sexual double standard i.e., different levels of sexual permissiveness with more restrictive standards almost always applied to women globally. Studies show that women who endorse dysfunctional sexual beliefs propagated by society and subsequently internalized do indeed have a greater risk for sexual dysfunction [15].

These attitudes reflect the long standing pressures on women today to acknowledge sex as a basic part of their lives but not feel entitled to an optimum response [16]. A 23-year longitudinal study examined gender differences in pleasure, anxiety and guilt in response to loss of

virginity amongst men and women. Wide gender differences were seen as men reported more pleasure than women, and women reported more guilt [17]. Research findings highlight a strong gender asymmetry in affective sexual experience [18]. This behavioral conditioning causes women to suppress their sexuality, not necessarily her desire for sex, but certainly acceptance of the same and hence the full enjoyment of sexual intercourse. It may go so far as to convince a young woman that not only is it a taboo subject but indulging in the same is nothing short of sinful.

The Way Forward- Future of Female Sexuality

The virginity meter is valued in society even today and bleeding with the first intercourse, the resultant tearing of the hymen considered the benchmark to prove the virginal status. Undue emphasis on the intactness of the hymen as reiterated by media messages is only counterproductive to developing sexual responsibility. It has long been known that indeed so many factors can cause the hymen to tear such as sporting activities, etc. [19]. The advent of hymenoplasty, vaginal tightening and fairness creams marketed by media promising to recapture the lost virginity for women are but indicators of much importance the issue of virginity holds in the society mindset. The rising trend of undergoing hymenoplasty to conceal the loss of their virginity seen largely in South Asia and the countries of Middle East is a reflection of the same archaic concepts held by society. The taboos on pre-marital sexual relationships contribute to this social anxiety over the hymen of women. This in turn not only adds fuel to the existing sexual double standards but also underscores awareness regarding sexual difficulties and disorders faced by women.

A psychosocial re-orientation to sexuality is the need of the hour to address the questionable cultural themes such as sex for reproduction and the wide distinction between male and female gender roles. Despite contrary evidence against this concept and popularization of sex as a basic instinct by the work of Sigmund Freud the double standard continues to remain remarkably intact in present day society. An in depth cultural and social analysis of the American society also highlights that powerful media depictions of both extremes of feminine sexuality ranging from abstinence to extravagance is harmful as it places a young woman's worth entirely on her sexuality [20]. Addressing common myths regarding sexuality of women such as women cannot and are uninterested in sexual activity at different stages of their life cycle must also be addressed.

Although loss of virginity remains a salient experience throughout a person's lifetime very little is known about whether this experience has implications for later sexual functioning especially sexual satisfaction [21]. The importance of sensitive sexual upbringing by informed parents and teachers needs to be highlighted as it is a necessity for a person to achieve his or her full potential for sexual pleasure. If young individuals today are to become more responsible about their own sexuality they not only need to move beyond age old traditional concepts of preserving virginity until marriage but also understand their own sexuality and to have contraception accessible to them. Sexual responsibility involves emphasis more on the concept of personal sexual responsibility rather than religious prohibitions and traditional sexual attitudes to premarital sex.

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