Virginity- An Update on Uncharted Territory

Mehak Nagpal1 and T. S. Sathyanarayana Rao2

1Department of Psychiatry, E.S.I.C Model Hospital & PGIMSR, New Delhi, India
2Department of Psychiatry, JSS Medical College Hospital, JSS University, Mysuru, India

Corresponding author: Sathyanarayana Rao TS, Department of Psychiatry, JSS Medical College Hospital, JSS University, Mysuru, India, Tel: 0821-254-8400; E-mail: tsrao19@yahoo.com

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 its bio-psycho-social roots and how relevant these ideas are to us today in our 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.
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 the 1960s [13].

Although loss of virginity remains a salient experience throughout a woman's life, it is an important stage in a person's life that has a significant impact on her emotional and psychological well-being. The way in which society perceives and values virginity can have profound implications for later sexual functioning, especially sexual satisfaction. 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.

References