

# There will be blood: honour, virginity and red drops

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**The 6th of February is a well-known date for NGOs, CSOs and activists committed to end Female Genital Mutilation (FGM). As the international day against FGM will highlight existing projects and good practises to end it, it is also a great moment to focus on the unknown - or less known - social norms aimed at controlling women's bodies.**

Growing up, virginity and hymen were the topics of conversations with my fellow girl friends. Virginity was, for us, a key to a successful, blessed, honorific and socially well-approved marriage. As part of our social existence, virginity and marriage are tied to each other. Marriage is the main objective and greatest achievement for young girls to be accepted and treated as a respected woman within their families and at a larger scale, their communities. Several ways to protect virginity and to ensure that young girls will one day become wives, exist, such as virginity testing or the tasfih.

I remember being a young and naive teenager, coming back from her summer holidays in Algeria and excited to meet with my friends. As we gathered after weeks of not talking to each other (no smartphones back then!), one of them was talking to us about her new status. She was now officially marbouta, a future pure wife. She talked about it and bragged about it. I was angry, why on earth wasn't I purified for my future?! Quickly after coming home, I wanted to confront my mother, and double-check with her in case we missed a very very important activity for me. I was straightforward: "Mama, why am I not marbouta?". I will never forget my mother's face as her breath stopped, suddenly turned to face me and yelled at me "don't you ever mention this and if someone talks to you about this again you come to me".

## **Without knowing it, we were talking about tasfih**

In several communities virginity and "social honour" are linked. And to protect this so-called honour, women are facing social pressure from families, communities and even from the government, to avoid sexual intercourses outside marriage. Hymen is the living symbol of a soon-to-be-woman's purity and might be checked by family members before the wedding night (virginity certificate) or after the wedding night with the traditional "dance with the bleeding sheet" and in certain cases if the husband expresses reservations regarding his wife's "purity". And tasfih/rbat is a traditional practice for young girls that still exists in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia: "the closed vagina".

Tasfih<sup>[1]</sup> is done on young girls before puberty and is a spiritual practise: Girls are taken to a qabla (traditional midwife) and must repeat seven times "wald el nas khet wa ana haït" which can be translated as "People's son is a string and I'm a wall". This sentence is highly sexualised and symbolises the incapacity for the new marbouta (knotted) – msakra (closed) girl to have sexual intercourses outside of marriage. It can only be undone before the wedding and by saying "wald el nas haït wa an khet" meaning "People's son is a wall and I'm a string".

[1] Variations of the practice exist

***“I was 11. I was playing outside when my aunt told me we had to go see someone. I trusted her, she is my aunt. We arrived at a weird place where few women were waiting for us. They told me how lucky I was while they were preparing me. They asked me to turn around a spike and repeat a sentence. They grabbed me, I was screaming when I saw the knife, and cut my thigh. Not once, but 7 times.”***

Tasfih must be recognised as a psychological violence against women and girls, as in some cases the young girls are also forced to have several non-medicalised checks of their vaginas to ensure their virginity. The ritual is practised in different ways, but in most cases, it leads to the cutting of the young girl. Tasfih is considered as a way to protect young girls and future young women from losing their virginity. This practice has led to serious issues, situations where vaginismus occurs, psychological trauma, fear of sexual intercourses, or even worse, young girls being raped and not trusted. Indeed, people believe that rape cannot happen after tasfih as men’s sexual capacities are supposedly corrupted by this privileged condition. The objectification, instrumentalization and parternalization of young girls and women’s bodies are a threat to our human rights and our right to exist. When it comes to protecting virginity and the so-called “honour of the family” all the means necessary are used and the existence of our wishes and desires completely erased.

## **Two fingers, one hymen**

Red, suffering, bleeding, blood on the sheets must be seen. For that reason, Virginity testing still exists in several countries.

Virginity testing also referred to as hymen, “two-finger” or per vaginal examination, is an inspection of the female genitalia meant to determine whether a woman or girl has had vaginal intercourse [2].

It is proven that these tests have negative and dangerous impact on girls and women’s mental and physical health. Virginity testing practice is a controversial and potentially dangerous surgical procedure on women’s lives based on ethical, social and cultural standpoints and they happen every day. And not only girls and women are being checked, often without their own consent, with fear of social pressure and family pressure, but they can also receive a “virginity certificate” given by the doctor. Some sort of golden pass for a securised and good marriage.

***“One day, on holiday in my parents’ country of origin, I was 16, they took me to a place where an old woman lived. She asked me to take off my clothes and my underwear. I said no. They grabbed me, and stripped me naked, and spread my legs. The old lady started checking my vagina. I was screaming for help, and crying. She was doing something down there and it was burning me.”***

Virginity tests aren’t only practised by doctors and gynecologists. Older women, the matriarchs of their community, can be in charge of checking one’s hymen. Those procedures are controversial and putting women in potentially endangering situation. Many stories exist of newlywed women being repudiated because their husbands didn’t believe they were virgins: she enjoyed it, she didn’t bleed, she knew what to do, I feel like she was with someone else before me. Lots of them were psychologically destroyed and publicly humiliated as they had to swear they were virgins: but their word didn’t matter in comparison with a man’s word, and they were already considered as the one who brought shame on their family.

This obsession with virginity is extremely disturbing as this topic is also taboo within certain communities. As migrant women and daughters of migrant women, we had to preserve traditions, to show our belongings to our countries of origin, to perpetuate traditions. 2020 is the decade in which we hope to end practices such as early and forced marriage, female genital mutilation, and it must also be the decade ending virginity testing.

**Few years ago I swore I’d shine a light on all the harmful traditional practises I grew up with, I know of, I’ve heard of, I was told of, targeting my sisters, nieces, friends, cousins, mothers, and all women and girls worldwide. And this is only the beginning of the storytelling by the proud and angry feminist that I am.**

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[2] <https://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/eliminating-virginity-testing-interagency-statement/en>