

# Let's Talk About Virginity

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Taboo subjects such as the importance of virginity for Jordanian women and their sexual knowledge were open for public discussions in recent debates in the Kingdom. A private hospital which organised a lecture on virginity issues recently drew a large crowd that participated in an open and frank dialogue. For the first time in the Kingdom's history physicians and psychiatrists presented the issue from a social, psychological and anatomical angle. Medical experts agreed that virginity should not be a prerequisite for men in choosing their partners.

One psychiatrist, Mohammed Habashneh, said the issue of women bleeding on their wedding night to prove they are virgins has always been a source of fear and concern for both men and women in Jordan and elsewhere in the Arab world. Pathologist Ahmad Bani Hani of the National Institute of Forensic Medicine concurred: Women are afraid they might not bleed and men are afraid that their performance on the night of marriage will not lead to their wives' bleeding, he said. People place great concern and attention on a "simple body part [the hymen] without realising the grave effects it poses to women's mental health," Habashneh told the audience that "women in this part of the world are haunted by the idea of wanting to prove they are virgins from the time they become aware of this issue until their wedding night," the psychiatrist said.

The consequences for a woman not to bleed on her wedding night could be dangerous, such as divorce and in some cases murder by their families: "We had families coming to the national institute first thing in the morning after the wedding night, wanting to examine the woman because she did not bleed," said Bani Hani. "This is such a humiliating

process for woman. Men do not face similar embarrassing and stressful moments, and sometimes they are impotent but do not want to admit it," he told the gathering.

From a societal perspective, the pathologist said that bleeding on the wedding night takes precedence over more important issues such as having a happy and constructive marital life and children. Habashneh echoed Bani Hani's remarks saying that trust between couples should not be based on "drops of blood, but it seems that women in our part of the world are guilty [of not being virgins] until proven otherwise."

"The hymen is not 100 per cent indicative of virginity", Bani Hani said. From a medical point of view, gynaecologist Randa Abu Zarour said women might not bleed on the wedding night because hymens are not one size. There are women who are born without a hymen or where the hymen is elastic and does not break, she explained. Habashneh pointed out that there is nothing in the Holy Koran or the Prophet's sayings stipulating that a woman must bleed on her wedding night. But a participant disagreed: "Islam implied indirectly that women should bleed in order to prove that they did not engage in sexual intercourse before getting married," the man said.

A second man asked the experts if animals had a hymen "because I want to know if God placed the hymen in women for a certain reason." The experts could not answer his question. One male participant said the virginity issue is absurd because women are "our mothers, sisters, daughters and wives. The best thing to do is just to forget this issue altogether and to close your eyes on the wedding night."



Nabila Hilmi, *People Series*, 1993

But another participant recommended having his wife undergo a virginity test before the night of wedding “so that I will make sure my wife is a virgin and I will marry her with a peaceful mind.” A female participant said at the end of the lecture: “The whole issue of doubting a woman’s virginity is insulting. If my husband wants to take me to the Forensic Department to make sure I am a virgin, then I do not need such a man to start a life with or have children with.”

In a separate study released recently on sexual knowledge, attitudes and behaviour among married women conducted by a local psychiatrist revealed misconceptions on the subject. Jordanian psychiatrist Walid Sarhan said in his findings that the average educated couples in the cities think they know enough about sex, but their sexual life [is characterised by] little harmony and poor communication. Based on his study’s findings and examination of female patients, Sarhan maintains that female sexual non-satisfaction is greatly affected by male sexual knowledge ... and in most cases it has a negative effect. “Sexual issues are rarely discussed in Arab countries and research in this field is very limited,” Sarhan said. His study sought to obtain informa-

tion about knowledge, attitudes and sexual behaviour and practices among Jordanian women.

The questions focused on standard sexual knowledge and related topics. 150 questionnaires were distributed to married women in Amman aged 18 to 56 with a marriage lasting up to 40 years. Of the 150 women surveyed, 21 rated themselves as possessing an excellent level of sexual knowledge, 65 rated their level as very good, 50 as good and 14 as weak, he said. On the question of how important sex is to a married woman, 57 said it was very important, 77 said it was important, 12 decided it was not important while four said they didn’t know. Meanwhile, 37 women said they provided their children with sexual education, 88 said they do not, and the remainder did not have children. But in a separate question, 134 said religion would not stop them from obtaining education about sex, with only nine answering in the affirmative and seven saying they did not know. Sarhan, who is the general director of Al Rashid Hospital [for psychiatric treatment] pointed out that sexual education is lacking in the Arab world and is hardly touched upon in school curricula: “Teachers usually skip the subject because they find it embarrassing and fear they might have problems in their classrooms,” he concluded.