

Ending the Practice of Virginitiy Testing Forever: A Call to Government, Health Professionals and Society in India

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Introduction

Virginitiy testing or per vaginal examination, is the inspection or the examination of the female genitalia to assess whether a woman or girl has experienced sexual intercourse [1]. These methods are carried out under the presumption that a woman who had the intercourse earlier will have a specific appearance of the genitalia [1,2]. It is predominantly done on unmarried females either without obtaining their consent or in those settings where they are unable to give consent [2].

Current Status

The practice has been reported in close to 20 nations and is present in all the regions of the world amidst the impending globalization [3]. It is quite surprising that due to varied reasons the testing is being done in different parts of the world and overall is being considered as the indicator of their character [1]. The epidemiological analysis revealed that it is being done not only to ascertain their eligibility for wedding (in India), but also as a part of the sexual assault examination or enrollment in the police force [1,3,4]. The situation becomes even more frightening as it is not always done by a doctor, but even by the police personnel or a community leader [1].

Elimination of the Practice

The World Health Organization advocates for the elimination of this practice regardless of the settings, as it is clinically not useful (as none of the practiced methods can prove whether a woman or girl has been exposed to sexual intercourse in the past), non-scientific and can turn out to be a painful exercise [3]. Moreover, in cases of rape assessment, the act in itself results in additional pain, revisiting the experience and the trauma [1,2]. In-fact, definitive evidence is available to suggest that most of the women experience unpleasant short and long-term physical, mental and social consequences of this practice, ranging from anxiety, depression, post-traumatic stress, suicide or are killed by the family (if the test reveals that the female had sexual intercourse earlier, in the name of honor killing) [1-3].

At the same time, it is a humiliating act and is a serious violation of human basic rights & a marker that gender inequality & discrimination against female is very much prevalent [2,5]. In India, an appeal has been

made to remove 'virginitiy test' from medical textbooks considering the lack of any scientific logic and interference with the fundamental rights of women [6]. In order to eliminate this practice, there is an immense need to raise awareness among the health professionals & society about its inconclusive nature, the detrimental effect on women and the rationale that it has to be permanently stopped [3]. Even the World Health Organization has come up with a new toolkit to respond to the incidents of sexual violence and it is high time that such toolkits are implemented worldwide to make a significant impact on the same [7]. The role of Government is quite crucial and they have to formulate and implement laws to curb these practices, especially in India, where it is very commonly performed [4,6]. Simultaneously, the health professionals should be targeted to make them realize that by indulging in these examinations they are violating human rights and thus should never support or perform the practice owing to its futile nature [1-3].

Conclusion

In conclusion, the elimination of this harmful and un-scientific practice, not only from India but across the world will essentially need a collaborative response from the national Governments and the society. It is high time that the health professionals should act as the change agent, but then they have to be supported by appropriate laws.

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