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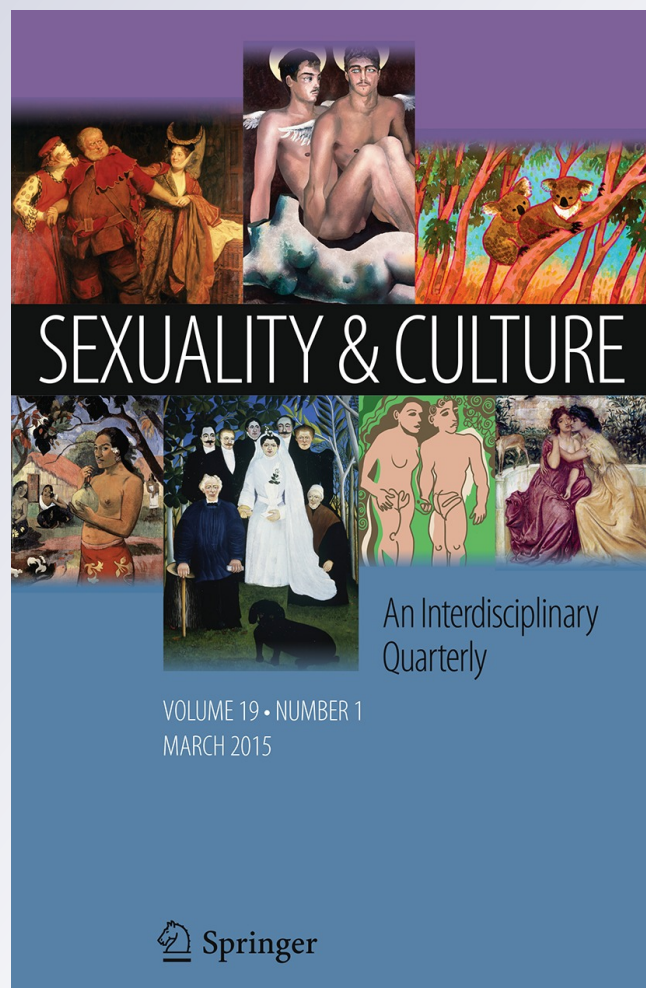
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## “You go home and tell that to my dad!” Conflicting Claims and Understandings on Hymen and Virginit

Hanna Cinthio

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**Abstract** In this article I examine different understandings of and claims concerning virginity. Several young women in Sweden suffer from strong patriarchal chastity ideals, even to the extent that some undergo surgery to restore a lost virginity. Swedish sexual politics, believing strongly in the power of evidence based information, have a clearly stated agenda to prevent this by “eradicating the hymen myth” through informative campaigns in schools and by educating professionals who encounter the problem. At the same time, the targeted teenagers themselves seem to hold a multifaceted and contextual view on the matter. They may be fed scientific information in school, and gain anatomically correct knowledge of the hymen, but they also need to maneuver within a different normative field where the hymen plays a symbolic role rather than a factual one. In the article I explore the charged discourse around the hymen, analyze the narratives of teenage informants who tell me of their thoughts and experiences in the matter, and discuss the possible different purposes served by the upholding of the concept. I argue that intellectual, factual knowledge is not necessarily relevant when dealing with emotionally and culturally charged beliefs, and that the ideologically driven agenda of “the truth shall set you free” is not fully in touch with the complex social reality of those who are subjected to the chastity ideals. Attacking misconceptions around the hymen does not necessarily recognize the principal dilemma of the collective asserting power over the individual in matters concerning relationships and sexuality.

**Keywords** Hymen · Virginity · Sweden · Sexuality

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## Introduction

Alongside *swine flu* and *fish pedicure*, the *vaginal corona* (in Swedish: *slidkrans*) gained status as one of the highlighted new words of 2009, chosen by the Language Council of Sweden after intense campaigning by the Swedish Association for Sexuality Education, RFSU. In connection with launching the new term, RFSU also published a booklet with the purpose of dispelling myths surrounding hymen and virginity (Knöfel for RFSU 2009). It was soon followed up with translations into English, Arabic and Sorani Kurdish and gained some attention in different parts of the world, inspiring the influential sex ed website Scarleteen to re-brand the hymen and start referring to it as a corona instead. The need for the campaign seems obvious: according to several studies, misconceptions around the hymen are common among Swedish adolescents who seem to hold a rather mechanical and incorrect perception of the membrane in question (see for instance Christianson and Eriksson 2011). This is not necessarily put in perspective by the educational system. Only six percent of graduates from Swedish teacher education programs have received training in sexuality education, and students can still find information in their biology textbooks about how the hymen breaks or tears during the first intercourse; an impression of a visible, lid-like cover which remains intact until ruptured by sex. One very concrete manifestation of ideas and ideals related to virginity is the phenomenon of *hymenoplasty*—young women going under the knife in order to get their virginity surgically “restored”; a practice which, however ethically questionable, seems to meet no formal judicial obstacles. The idea of controllable chastity and the methods—surgical and others—that have developed in order to “rescue” young women who worry about not bleeding on the wedding night have dominated the heated Swedish public debate on virginity. Politically, the response has not been one of altered legislation around the surgical procedures but rather a pronounced national agenda aiming to change attitudes through correct information. Focus has been on anatomical detail, in a “to be or not to be” dispute around the membrane itself, more than on the social context shaping the ideals.

In this article I will examine the charged dispute around the hymen by presenting and analyzing the descriptions of teenagers who are subjected to virginity ideals and patriarchal chastity norms in everyday life. They may get correct anatomical information about the hymen through the educational system, but they also need to manage in contexts where significance is ascribed to the hymen on a symbolical level and where the myths are upheld for different reasons. This balancing act leads them to develop a flexible understanding of the hymen which is multifaceted and contextual, although the ideologically driven agenda to “eradicate the hymen myth” is not fully in touch with the complex social reality of those who are affected by it.

## Background and Previous Research

Regardless of ethnic and cultural background, Swedish teenagers seem somewhat misguided when it comes to hymen and virginity. The imagination of the “popping cherry” is widespread and educators testify that many students are flabbergasted

when confronted with the rather undramatic truth of the matter—namely, that there is no lid-like membrane covering the vaginal opening, but that the opening is encircled by elastic folds of mucous tissue, individually shaped in every female, and that a majority of women do *not* bleed during their first vaginal intercourse. However, these erroneous beliefs have not really been problematized until it was realized that certain girls suffer from such pressing demands to preserve their virginity that they succumb to vaginal reconstructive surgery—hymenoplasty;—in order to feel safe during the wedding night.

How an operation for reasons of chastity expectations should be regarded seemingly remains open to interpretation. This question has been processed in debate forums and in other media but has also been discussed clinically and scientifically (see for instance Bekker et al. 1996; Logmans et al. 1998; Essén 2007; Amy 2008, O'Connor 2008; Cook and Dickens 2009; van Moorst et al. 2012; Juth and Lynøe 2014; Kopelman 2014). In the NCK (National Centre for Knowledge on Men's Violence against Women) handbook of 2011, the legal perspective on hymenoplasty is addressed by Professor of medical law Elisabeth Rynning, who finds that the regulations surrounding the procedure are unclear, but that there is no general prohibition against it, however the available methods do not seem to fully meet the legal prerequisites stating that they should be scientific and evidence-based. There are different methods and levels of surgery available on the virginity market. According to some of the larger plastic surgery websites which appear through a Google search, the regular procedure which usually takes around 30–45 min means that the torn edges of the hymen are sutured back together using dissolvable stitches. If this for some reason is not possible, a new hymen can be created either using a flap of the vaginal lining, complete with its blood supply, or through an incision in the vaginal membrane where both sides are pulled and stitched together. Some clinics also offer alternative procedures such as the insertion of Alloplant, a tear-through biomaterial used for transplantation. There are also plenty of before and after-pictures and instructive hymenoplasty videos available on the Internet.<sup>1</sup>

Concerns have been raised about the lack of medical quality assurances, see for instance Essén (2007, pages 120–121), and the results presented in the Dutch study by van Moorst et al. (2012) show that 17 out of 19 women did *not* bleed during the first intercourse after undergoing reconstructive hymen surgery, which suggests that the efficacy of the method might be open to doubt. Another perspective on hymen restoration, and probably the most frequently voiced, has also been applied when it comes to the issuing of “virginity certificates”—factual or untrue—within the public health care system. Critics argue that although justified by some as a means of protecting young women from the violent consequences of a destructive myth, these operations and certificates become part of upholding the very same ideas. A stamped document signed by a gynecologist—regardless of the purpose behind providing it—suggests that there is in fact a hymen which can be checked. And

<sup>1</sup> Information obtained from the websites of Toronto Surgery, Cosmetic Gynecology Center of San Antonio, Wellness Kliniek, and Dr. Prabhash's Cosmetic Surgery Clinic. Dr. Prabhash has also uploaded informative visual material on hymenoplasty to Youtube.

should it produce the desired result of bloodstained sheets on the wedding night, the surgical procedure serves to confirm the ideal that it claims to rescue the individual from in the short term. There are also critics of the overarching ethical dilemma of intentional deceit within the profession, see for instance the commentary by Raphael (1998) in response to the article from the same year by Logmans et al. A different and rather interesting angle has to do with the long-term subversive effect of these operations—the more widespread and known they get, the less certain one can be about the nature of a woman's virginity. Is it real or fake? Did she protect it and keep it intact, or did she buy it? Pekgul (2008) holds that these operations will gradually lead to a devaluation of the entire concept of virginity, thus liberating women and men who are suffering from destructive norms.

There are indeed some scholars who have interpreted hymen reconstructions as proof of increasing agency and authorship among women, see for instance Goksel (2012). Still, Pekgul is rather alone in her position in Sweden, and the emphasis remains on correct information as the superior means of countering the problem. As mentioned earlier, RFSU were much commended for their initiative of launching an educational booklet about the vaginal corona with the purpose of eradicating destructive myths about virginity. Midwives and researchers Carola Eriksson and Monica Christianson have also been very active in agitating against what they see as misconceptions among health care professionals and others. Advocating the use of the term “vaginal opening” instead, they give lectures around the country, claiming vehemently that “there is no such thing as a hymen; it is only a myth”. This rhetoric seems to have had influence on Swedish sexual politics. In November 2011, the Minister of Gender Equality, Nyamko Sabuni, took part in a round table arranged by NCK together with school health care professionals. Afterwards, she commented the session by stating that schools have a pivotal role in the efforts to combat “hymen myths” and to increase awareness and knowledge on anatomy and sexuality.

But what is it exactly that we need to know, to teach, and to combat? Even though the subject has been so widely discussed, and the political agenda is explicit, it is still hard to get any uncontested, scientifically based answer as to what really is and is not the case. It seems to be easier to rely either on subjective experience or on ideology than on science when choosing a standpoint in the debate, and in any case, there is no real consensus within the medical domain itself. The midwife/researcher duo mentioned above recently published an article about hymen myths and misconceptions among professionals (Christianson and Eriksson 2013). The article is based on a survey conducted among European midwives during a congress. It reports that two-thirds of the responding midwives do believe that girls “are born with a covering membrane that breaks during the first vaginal intercourse”, and more than one in five claims that virginity “can be verified by a gynecological examination”. If there is nothing to see, as the authors claim, one wonders what is really being looked for during such examinations. It is intriguing that professionals of the same occupation, with similar educational background and clinical experience, can perceive the same reality in so different ways. On one end of the spectrum we find those who argue that there is simply no membrane to be torn or broken, and that no doctor could ever tell with certainty that a girl or woman has had sexual intercourse by examining her genitals. Then again, such examinations are



being carried out all the time, for example in forensic cases. You will get hundreds of hits by entering the search words “hymen not intact” at the Indian court case database *Indiankanoon*, and on the Internet you can find online tutorial videos of virginity examinations posted by physicians. This goes on in spite of evidence which indicates the difficulty in using hymenal measurements when determining virginity status (see for example Rogers and Stark 1998; Goodyear-Smith and Laidlaw 1998; Curtis and San Lazaro 1999; Berenson et al. 2002; Adams et al. 2004.)

Much of the previous research related to the hymen obviously deals with medical aspects, but there are other relevant sources of literature as well. In the Swedish field of culture and sexuality, pioneers such as Månsson (1984), Lewin (1991) were the first to examine junctions between youth, sexuality, and the multicultural society. They have been followed by others such as Forsberg (2005) who applies an intersectional perspective on ideas of respectability among young women, and Hammarén (2008) who takes interest in young men’s construction of gender and sexuality in multicultural suburbs. Another body of research is conducted within the domain of the Swedish honor related violence discourse, often examining the experiences and life stories of young women (for instance Eldén 2003; Ouis 2009; Björktomta 2012); while fewer studies (Rexvid and Schlytter 2012) focus on perceptions among young men. Mariet Ghadimi (2007) was the first to carry out a quantitative survey in Sweden among both boys and girls about attitudes towards premarital sex and virginity, showing how conservative values correlate with immigrant background. Her results were confirmed in a later, more extensive study (Högdin et al., in *Stockholms stad* 2009b). On the global arena we find authorities like Fatima Mernissi, who already in (1975) wrote her seminal book “Beyond the Veil” about male–female dynamics in a modern Muslim society, and some years later very specifically about hymen myths and artificial virginity in her excellent piece “Virginity and Patriarchy” (1982). There are also some more recent and very interesting studies about the symbolic complex of virginity among young women of North African descent in The Netherlands (Buitelaar 2002) and in France (Skandrani et al. 2010).

And this is where I believe my research fits in. My study is based on interviews conducted with fifteen teenagers over a period of several years. They all live in the same residential area which is part of a larger city district in southern Sweden, and they have gone to the same local elementary school. This school, where I worked within a sex education project called “Life-Talks” for some time before commencing my research, had around 1000 pupils whereof none had Swedish ethnic background (i.e. they or at least one of their parents were born abroad). 25 different languages were represented at the school and a vast majority, around 75 %, had Arabic as mother tongue. Around one-fifth of the pupils were newly arrived immigrants. The school struggled with declining grades and was closed down in 2013, partly due to the inability to rectify the poor results but also because of problems with violence and lacking security. Internally, the school had also battled other, less visible, challenges; some of them related to norms concerning gender and sexuality. I encountered these issues when I was employed as a “life-talker” at the school with the objective of improving the quality of education on sexuality and

relations, and that experience inspired the design of my research study. In this article, I will focus on the topic of hymen and virginity, and examine how my informants navigate between conflicting truths, claims, and understandings surrounding it.

## Method

I have been active in the same geographic area on and off since 1997 in different capacities but always with youth and social work in focus. The “Life-Talks” project, in which I was employed for 1 year, served as an inspiration for the design of my research project and when I started my PhD studies, I had a base of informants consisting of former pupils whom I had already met through my work and who were used to discussing personal issues with me. “Life-Talks” thus generated informants to my study and also affected those informants’ knowledge of certain aspects discussed.

While I am undoubtedly drawing from my experiences as a practitioner in the field, this article is largely based on a research study with the purpose of exploring the life worlds and experiences of teenagers who grow up as part of Swedish society but who are also subjected to virginity ideals and patriarchal chastity norms. For the specific purpose of this article, I have selected the data that best highlights the importance and functions of virginity; however my overall research interest lies in norms regarding relations, sexuality, and marriage, and the discrepancies and conflicts between different norm systems. The study consists of a series of interviews with fifteen former pupils of the school where I used to work as a “life-talker”. The participants were recruited to the study after they finished elementary school. Some of them had gone on to high school at the time of the interviews while others were at home, unemployed and not studying. The participants were not newly arrived in Sweden but had spent the majority of their lives here—some were actually born here. They were not recruited on the basis of any specific problematic or social challenge, and they are of varying ethnicities (Iraq, Palestine, Iran, Kurdistan, Pakistan, Somali, Polish Roma) and religious backgrounds (Shi’a, Sunni, Orthodox Christian, Catholic). This is a conscious choice since I wanted to examine whether there might be normative and structural aspects that cut across ethnic and religious identity. The only visible factors they have in common are basically that they all live in the same neighborhood and have gone to the same school, where they have been at the receiving end of specific information interventions regarding sexuality.

During my research I have interviewed both girls and boys; however the girls are in majority (ten out of fifteen) and certainly more visible in this article. I have met the teenagers individually as well as in pairs, and several times over a period of about 1 year. The individual interviews enabled in-depth confidences and sharing of intimate information that may not have been possible in a group, while the pair interviews generated an interesting and lively dynamic, for instance when the informants disagreed on topics and had to elaborate their positions. With six key informants I have also conducted follow-up interviews 2–4 years after my study was



initiated. The follow-up has enabled me to track the key themes that were discussed, and to see how the informants' lives and situations as well as opinions and strategies have developed in regards to them.

Ranging between 2–3 h in length, these qualitative research interviews (see Kvale 1996) are respondent-focused, open, and explorative. Although they all include certain common topics related to my primary research interest, they vary a lot in scope and content. I have focused on general themes, such as family relations, rules and consequences, expectations, love and sex, etcetera, rather than asking precise and identical questions. Each interview has been recorded and then transcribed verbatim, followed by thematic structuring and thorough inductive analysis, with the intent of identifying patterns and overlapping themes or junctions. The participants have been anonymized for integrity reasons, and in the interview quotes, I use a single initial to denote each person while referring to myself as the interviewer.

## Results

The understanding of and the attitudes towards virginity is a complex matter. Many of the teenagers I have interviewed have been raised with a simplified, black-and-white idea of virginity as something which only pertains to girls and women, which only comes in an “all or nothing”- mode, and which is connected strictly to vaginal, heterosexual intercourse. They have told me that only female virginity is charged with significance, that female chastity—as opposed to male—is visible and can be controlled, and that only the girls' virginity is of importance to the family. Furthermore, it is only to be lost through “legitimate” sexual activity, which means no earlier than on the night of the wedding, within the boundaries of matrimony.

From attitude surveys made by the school before the start of “Life-talks”, it was clear that a majority of the pupils understood virginity not as an immaterial state or feeling, but as another expression for the hymen membrane. During the “Life-talks” sessions, it became apparent that they had an image of this membrane as a kind of protective cover, totally occluding the vaginal opening, and that this membrane was to be torn during the first sexual intercourse, causing a bleeding which would serve to prove that the girl or woman kept her virginity up until then. However, they also told me that there were other signs to indicate virginity (or the loss thereof). If the girl acted too keen or too interested during sex, her behavior might be interpreted as a sign of previous experience. If she was not “tight enough” inside, she might also be questioned. And in any case, as some girls told me, guys “just know”. This was something that many of them worried about, and whatever anatomical evidence presented did not help to reassure them. Ironically, the claim that a majority of women do *not* bleed during their first intercourse rather served as an additional source of anxiety. The girls often found it deeply unfair and problematic that even if they did exactly as they were supposed to, and stayed virgins, they might still not bleed on the wedding night.

The boys on the other hand had their own notions, questions, and insecurities regarding virginity. First of all, there was an apparent gender-based double standard.

While many of the boys were ok with the idea of having sexual relations before marriage, they said that they would prefer to marry a girl who lacked sexual experience, and that they would not accept it if their sisters wanted to enjoy the same sexual freedom that they allowed themselves. Of course other perspectives were represented as well. Some boys were equally strict when it came to themselves and for religious reasons could not tolerate premarital sex regardless of gender: “It says the same for men and women in the Qur’an, it is not allowed!” Others openly questioned the hypocrisy of their male peers and said that they wouldn’t mind if a girl “has a past, just like me”—it would be unrealistic and unfair to demand more of her. As for the actual event, they were often anxious about performance on their own part, but also wanted to know what to expect from the girl on the night of the wedding, if what they had been told was really true. Was there going to be a lot of blood? How much? Was it going to be messy and chaotic, scary even? It seemed as though their ideas were shaped partly by dramatic and exaggerated anecdotes of older boys, and I realized that some of them actually dreaded the occasion for that reason.

Analyzing the interviews conducted with my informants, I find marriage to be one of the most fundamental and omnipresent themes, both in its own right and through its centrality to other subjects. It is also, to a majority of the interviewed girls, a definite prerequisite for sex and often for intimacy on the whole. The natural consequence of this is that they usually wait—sometimes out of free will; sometimes reluctantly—to have sex until after the wedding. Protecting one’s chastity is essential in a social context where virginity is regarded as a vital asset in the collective economy of marriage. In all the interviews, marriage is talked about not so much as an event affecting the two individuals involved, but rather as a phenomenon of collective interest and active involvement by many other people:

Interviewer: When that happens, like, when the talk of getting married starts. Who is involved?

D: Father, mother, brothers, siblings, uncles... The whole family!

The nature and extent of such involvement varies and is also depending on whether or not the spouse-to-be is part of the same family. If this is the case, the match may have been a matter of discussion between adult relatives for quite some time, possibly without the couple even knowing about it. Otherwise the typical procedure is that mothers, sometimes through other persons acting as “brokers”, assess the potential and conditions for a possible engagement. Before even considering approaching another family, I’m told, most parents (or mothers, at least) conduct an informal background check referred to as “asking around”. This is done to find out whether the girl or boy is suitable for marriage, which has to do not only with the individual qualities of her/him but also with the overall reputation of their family. Neighbors, friends and other people might know things of importance that will affect the decision on how to move forward. Certain things are always central to the verdict, but there is a significant gender difference in the qualities looked for. S explains:

When they ask around about the girl, they ask about **her**. “Is she a good girl?”, like. When they ask around about the guy it’s more about his family, if they’ve got money and such.

The same topic arises in all interviews, for instance:

C: But the guys, they ask about... about her reputation.

N: How the girl is **as a girl**.

C: Like, does she have a reputation, is she good, is she bad? That’s all they want to know.

The dichotomy of “good” and “bad” girls seems to be a well understood and self-explanatory concept to all of the teenagers, however comprehensive and complex it sometimes appears to me. To do the things that make you into a “bad girl” means to bring shame upon yourself and your family members. It may affect not only your own marriageability but even that of others around you. And as C says, in response to the question of what constitutes a “bad girl”: *“If she’s lost her virginity, that’s the worst thing. That’s number one.”*

In some of the interviews, teenagers told of quite extreme practices framing the wedding. They claimed to know this from what older sisters or cousins had been through, and said that the wedding night was not an occasion of romantic intimacy between the two newlyweds but rather a physical test where older female relatives demanded to be present nearby or sometimes even in the same room to control that the girl actually bled. This was then to be proved to the families by demonstrating the stained bed sheet. The absence of blood would mean a great catastrophe and generate a dramatic response where the handing back of the shamed girl to her father might only be a first step. Among the students were also those who told of institutionalized virginity checks prior to marriage—sometimes carried out by medical professionals, sometimes by elders of the religious community (for example a female relative of a priest). The potential consequences of breaking this fundamental rule, of losing one’s virginity in a non-legitimate way—were described as ranging from the shame of a nullified marriage to brutal physical violence or even death: *“Some families are like that, they couldn’t let her live”*. Testimonies of virginity checks, before or during the wedding night, come from girls of different ethnic and religious backgrounds, and the perceived demand from family members of an intact hymen before marriage is present in the accounts of all the girls I have interviewed.

The word “respect” is frequently used in the discussions about what is and is not allowed when it comes to contact with persons of the opposite sex. Usually, the teenagers start by referring to expectations and demands of other people, rather than to their own personal feelings and values, in answering questions about what are acceptable to do in a relationship. Besides the absolute demand for virginity, most of the girls also see it as self-evident that they are not allowed to be physically “too close” to a person of the opposite sex, to kiss or even hug, to make out, etc. In some cases these limitations include sitting next to a (male) classmate on the bus, walking home from school together, or talking in the yard. In a few cases, girls believe that a potential non-physical relationship with a boy might be acceptable to the parents,

but that it would require an explicit commitment to future serious engagement. Sex before marriage is, to most of the girls interviewed, not only out of the question but also described as something distant and abstract that they don't really think too much about. When we talk about abstinence, almost all the girls tell me that they themselves think that waiting with sex until marriage is the right thing. Some argue from a religious standpoint while others say that it "feels better that way", and that it is a beautiful thing to "save oneself".

Interviewer: So if your best friend tells you that she's kissed a guy?

Z: Then she's a whore! (Laughs.) No, she's not a whore. But... (...)... You play, you kiss, you don't care about much...

Interviewer: So is it wrong to kiss?

Z: Yeah. To me, it is.

While some of the girls respond that they are abstaining not only from sex but basically from all kinds of close contact with boys, that they are doing so out of personal conviction and that it is not any kind of sacrifice but rather a choice which empowers them and makes them more respectable in their own eyes and others', there are also those who say that they would prefer more freedom of choice, and who would not mind being more intimate with boys, but that they either respect their parents too much to hurt them by doing something like that, or that they do not dare to challenge the rules and risk being caught.

A noticeable tendency is how the girls regulate and negotiate their behavior in relation to boys not out of the perspective of their own feelings and opinions, but out of consideration to their reputation. Usually they discuss reputation in connection to family, but it is also highly relevant among peers:

C: I think more about him than I think of myself. There, when it comes to kissing. I think "no, take it easy, easy... (...) you play hard to get, like that (...)

Interviewer: So it's a lot about him not losing his respect for you?

C: Yes. That's exactly what it's about.

I have been told several stories (by girls and boys alike!) of "tests" performed by boys with the purpose of investigating whether a girl is really worthy of a serious relationship, perhaps even with the prospect of marriage. This is basically about checking her character and how easily she gives into a guy and agrees to be physically intimate. Typically, the boy will flatter and sweet-talk her for some time, assure her that he loves her and that she can feel safe with him, and that whatever happens will stay between them. He then gradually starts putting emotional pressure on her to have sex with him. If she agrees, she fails the test. He might take advantage of the situation and enjoy the sex, perhaps even for some time, but he will lose respect for her, and he will not stay with her. Typically, the most disastrous scenario is when this happens within a couple who is engaged to be married. I have also been told of boys who persuade girls into things like sending revealing "selfies" in order to prove their commitment, and that these pictures are then used to coerce the girls into having sex by threatening to post the pictures online or show them to the girls' families.

The girls expressed that telling police or any other authority after being sexually victimized would be out of the question since the possible consequences connected to this—public shame, people's talk, being blamed by family members for getting into a risky situation, maybe even being punished or shunned for no longer being a virgin, and not being able to marry in the future—by far outweighed the arguments in favor of reporting. One of the interviewed girls had been through such an experience—she had been raped by a guy she was dating without her parents' consent or knowledge—and chose not to tell anybody at the time. She focused more on the loss of her virginity than on the fact that she had actually been violated and abused, and went through a lot of trouble just to hide the incident from her family because she feared she would have to take the blame for “letting it happen”.

## Discussion

It is important to recognize that being raised in this kind of setting, where a preserved chastity and a pure reputation means so much, may create an increased vulnerability and susceptibility to certain kinds of threats. In a mapping of honor related violence initiated by the Stockholm City Council 2009, we find that 12 out of 14 young women who tell about being raped have not reported this to the police out of fear that their families would react negatively. Being surrounded by ideals of purity, chastity, and honor, and of its opposites, seems to have a deep personal effect also on those who seemingly oppose or challenge these ideas. Many of the girls who have overstepped specific boundaries by, for instance, seeing boys or by dressing in a certain way, at the same time are very judgmental towards other girls for behaving “badly”. Referring to other girls as sluts or whores acting dirty and shameful is not uncommon, regardless of what one self might have done. One explanation for this might be the pretty simple trick of trying to look better by making others look bad, but it seems that many of the girls have internalized the norm system to the extent that they genuinely feel righteous in their judgment of others, and also on a deeper level experience shame and self-contempt over feelings they have or things they have done. (See for instance Bremer et al. 2006; Ouis 2009 on the topic of internalized norms of honor and shame.) Some girls have told me about feeling grossed out by their own selves for having sexual desires, for touching themselves or for giving into lust by making out with a boy—they look upon themselves as “dirty” and “guilty” and regret what they have done even though it felt good at the time. This corresponds with how female sexuality, in some of the interviews, was treated as something you give away like a gift to another person, something you do to please another, and not as something existing in its own right, and for your own sake. Men were described as sexual subjects, whereas for women, sex was thought to cause problems rather than pleasure.

Another aspect of internalized norms is that the informants are all—to varying extents—surprisingly understanding towards their parents and their standpoints. During the interviews, I find the teenagers switching positions in a constant flow back and forth; they might talk negatively about rules and limitations set by their parents, quote them (often rather humorously), and then move on to express how

they appreciate the concern behind those rules, or how they know where their parents “are coming from” and that it is natural for them to think the way they do. Although they describe diverse qualities of family relations, they all say in their own ways that they wish to make their parents happy and proud, that it matters to them what their families think, and that they would not want to disappoint them. Being part of a kinship system with strong ties and a shared collective standing is not only a burden; it is a source of confidence, safety, belonging, and identity. And in order to cope within this structure, it is necessary to conform to certain norms and beliefs—whether you share them or not.

I frequently heard the teenagers talk about virginity as something concrete and tangible; a verifiable physical status. “She’s lost it”, “he took it”—they were often using expressions indicating a material, controllable asset. It was solely discussed in a heterosexual, penile-vaginal penetration context (which means that certain other activities may, at least in theory, be performed without threatening the actual anatomical status, see for instance Medley-Rath, 2007). At the same time, the teenagers I interviewed had actually been getting quite a lot of information both on the anatomical aspects and on virginity as a social construct since their school had chosen to focus on these subjects through the specific, targeted work of “Life-talks”. When we sat down and discussed at length, most of them turned out to in fact possess a deeper and more complex understanding than the one expressed above. They realized that the hymen could not be an intact covering membrane, or how else would the menstruation blood exit the body? They had learned that a majority of women do not bleed during their first vaginal intercourse. They *knew* all these things. Still, they relapsed into a simplified and symbolically charged understanding of virginity during parts of the interviews. It seemed as though they held two parallel views of the term and the phenomenon, and they oscillated between these two depending on the context and character of the dialogue. When we talked about scientific facts of anatomy, they had no problems accepting the evidence that was presented. However, when we talked about family, future, and marriage, those data did no longer matter. They still had to live up to expectations based on irrational, or at least unempirical, beliefs and values of other people. My interpretation of this is that a critical and scientifically based reasoning around virginity is simply not relevant in situations where the surrounding players do not have that same understanding. Or, put in the biting words of one of the students after a discussion of myths about hymen and blood: “*You go home and tell that to my dad!*”.

In the Swedish debate, much emphasis has been placed on the conception of the hymen as a proof of female virginity, and on the different methods to which desperate young women resort in order to fake or reconstruct it. In the spirit of “the truth shall set you free”, informational efforts are made to enlighten teenagers anatomically, believing that this will resolve the problem. I argue that evidence-based argumentation will not be enough to crack the complex matter of families investing collective value and meaning into female virginity. As shown in my study, intellectual, factual knowledge is not necessarily relevant when dealing with emotionally and culturally charged beliefs. If we want to eradicate the hymen myth

that we find so destructive, we need to understand the reasons for clinging to it even when contradicted by science.

Conservative, patriarchal sexuality ideals have not come into existence simply by chance, and hymen myths and misconceptions are most likely upheld and perpetuated for certain reasons. First of all, there are severe religious taboos surrounding virginity. For instance, the holy scriptures of the Abrahamic faiths as well as Hindu and Sikh traditions are generally interpreted as stating that marriage is the sole acceptable framework for sex, thus ruling out pre- or extramarital sexual encounters as well as homosexual practices. Virginity is emphasized, and is only to be lost during the consummation of marriage. In other words, criticizing the virginity ideal could basically be interpreted as a way of questioning the commands of God.

Throughout history, marriage in most societies has been a crucial factor in societal dynamics. Seen from a global perspective, self-chosen love as a condition and a fundament for marriage is a late-modern and still quite marginal phenomenon (for an in-depth discussion on this topic, see for instance Coontz 2005). Regarded as a family affair, marriage has been a collective matter more based on pragmatic concerns—social stability, politics, strategy, economy—than on the manifestation of two independent individuals' mutual romantic feelings. Marriage has been a means to ends such as proliferation of the clan, power over assets, control over individuals, conflict resolution, and alliance building. In traditional patriarchal societies, where gender roles are clearly defined and very rigid, a man is valued primarily for his ability to guard, represent, and provide for his family members, and a woman not only for her reproductive and nurturing qualities but also for her virtue and chastity, which affect her reputation and are essential to her marriageability. The bride's virginity may in fact be considered an actual, tangible asset for which a high price is paid, and whenever a conception can generate capital, there is an incentive to preserve it.

While physically situated in the female body, it seems like the hymen itself, the perceptions and imperatives surrounding it, and the actual protection of it are not only of concern to women but also to men in the sense that female virginity is strongly associated with notions of masculinity. A chaste girl is a reflection of her father's and brothers' ability to protect the family honor, and a woman's virginity may also serve to amplify the strength and power of the man who marries her (as discussed by Mernissi 1982; Goksel 2006). Traditional ideals of virginity also emphasize a heterosexual standard since they depict male–female vaginal intercourse as the norm (see Medley-Rath 2007). In a setting where an unlawful loss of virginity is considered to bring shame, as described above, the preservation of it signifies the opposite which is honor. Emphasizing chastity provides a means of differentiating between moral and immoral, between purity and impurity, between good and bad. It enables the drawing of lines between people, between families and groups. This is probably no less important in situations where the norms of the surrounding society are different; for instance among migrant groups or faith-based minorities who may regard others as culturally or spiritually depraved because of their liberal views on sexuality. Thus, the virginity ideal becomes a tool for creating social prestige and respectability, for self-definition and identity construction.



Furthermore, and probably most importantly, upholding the idea of a controllable virginity is in itself a clever means of passively exerting control, particularly over young women. As long as unmarried girls believe that it will be physically visible if they have sex, they might keep themselves in check out of fear for repercussions.

All of the above is present in the stories of the teenagers I have interviewed, who obviously have a lot in common regardless of labels such as ethnicity and religious background. They talk about virginity in terms of personal religious beliefs, identity, and pride; they describe its impact on a girl's wedding market status, and explain its fundamental importance to the social prestige of their families. They compare themselves to "Swedes" who seem not to worry about premarital sex at all, they speculate about the attitudes of their future husbands concerning virginity, and they brood over possible ways of detecting a deflowered hymen in spite of the reassurances they have gotten from well-meaning sex educators. As for the aspect of control, an illuminating circumstance is that several of the mothers who took part in the Life-talk sessions for adults had no problem acknowledging the content of the information that was given to them, but questioned the fact that the same information was given to their teenagers in school. One mother pleaded outright: "We accept what you are saying, but please, don't tell our daughters! If they learn that there is no hymen to be broken, how will they behave?" Just like with any kind of belief that serves emotional purposes, there seem to be plenty of reasons to hold on to it, even when contradicted by scientific evidence. I argue that it is not necessarily the lack of proper information that keeps the myth alive, but rather the multiple functions of the myth. The control over a woman's hymen is, in my opinion, something that transcends the physical state. It indicates a value system and a set of beliefs in which the hymen is a representative emblem for something much bigger: the control of the group over the individual.

The intersection of a collectivist worldview among groups of people and an individualistic frame of reference permeating societal structures seems to me to be at the core of the matter. In line with state ideology, the Swedish system individualizes not only rights, but also responsibilities. I think we are asking a lot if we expect young women in precarious situations to stand up not only to their family members but also against specialists and professionals who may share the traditional beliefs about the hymen. In other words, there is a physical reality outside the ideological and idealistic realm of Swedish classrooms; a reality—sometimes guided by opposite principles—which a number of pupils are subjected to. We need to consider the possible scenarios that may emanate from this disparity—for instance, how a girl may deal psychologically and emotionally (and, on another level, legally) with rape if her main concern is that her parents might find out she is no longer a virgin, or how to protect a girl who has been told in school that there is no such thing as a hymen, but who is later faced with a virginity check—perhaps carried out in another country, as has been the case with some girls I know of—with catastrophic results.

Interestingly enough, the teenagers I interviewed not only gave similar testimonies when it came to the importance of virginity, but they all had a lot to say. They told me about their families' expectations and hopes in regards to marriage, they talked at length about the effect of chastity norms and reputation on

everyday life as well as on crucial events, and they also shared with me their difficulties and fears when we spoke about their exposure to certain risks and threats. I am astounded and grateful for their openness and confidence. The fact that I had an established relation to the teenagers before interviewing them is not entirely uncomplicated considering potential bias, effect on the interviews, anonymity aspects etcetera. I had to be very thorough in clarifying—both to myself and to my informants—my role as a researcher and how it differed from my former function. At times I found it challenging to keep strictly within my academic boundaries, and when a certain topic raised in an interview made it obvious that the person in front of me needed support of some kind I chose to help out with referral. At the same time, I believe that the existing relations of mutual trust and respect actually enabled these interviews and made them profound, earnest, and meaningful to an extent that would not have been possible otherwise.

## Conclusion

Over the last decades, Swedish society has become increasingly aware of the tribulations of young women who suffer from patriarchal chastity ideals, some even to the extent that they undergo vaginal surgery with the purpose of restoring their virginity. In attempt to combat this, Swedish politicians demand educational efforts to clarify misconceptions and increase knowledge. It may indeed be tempting to ascribe to the idea of the hymen as nothing but a mental chastity belt, a fictional myth serving purposes of social control, and to empower young women by telling them that there is absolutely no way any doctor could find out that they are no longer virgins. It is, however, necessary to distinguish between the hymen as a *social construct*, serving certain purposes, and the hymen as an *anatomical feature*, which needs to be understood and treated differently. We also need to be careful in our charitable endeavors considering the fact that, regardless of what we may or may not believe, there is no consensus even in the professional field on which the target group we aim to protect is dependent.

When listening to the voices of those primarily affected—teenagers navigating between traditional family norms and sexually liberal societal norms; between spaces in life shaped by different, sometimes opposite, worldviews and truths—it becomes obvious that the remedy is not that uncomplicated. My interviews show that virginity is a complex concept with multiple functions pertaining to identity and control, and that it is indeed possible to uphold and reproduce ideas and ideals of chastity in spite of having factual knowledge which contradicts those notions. I argue that the sexual political agenda lacks understanding of the complexity of traditional patterns which allow groups to assert power over individual members also in matters of sexuality, relationships, and reproduction, and to which the individual often stays loyal in spite of the obvious disadvantages.

There can be no single, simple solution when it comes to the complicated issue of virginity ideals. I definitely see the point in working long-term to obliterate the concept of “bleeding virgins”, and I also empathize with short-term emergency solutions for the individual, even though they may work to reconfirm the destructive

ideals. What bothers me is that I view the hymen as a small physical symbol of a much bigger contextual problem, which in my opinion gets lost on the ideological battlefield. I interpret the demand for virginity as an expression of the collective asserting rights and control over the individual on a broader scale; not only as a “misconception”, and I believe that this entire contextual issue needs to be understood and integrated into the efforts made in our classrooms, and in society as a whole, if we are to eventually achieve the change we desire. It is necessary to recognize the multiple incentives and rationales for maintaining what appears to be an obsolete and repressive conception, in order to address the root causes of the problem. Swedish society will not be able to adequately support and protect those caught between conflicting ideals if there is no understanding of the fundamental systematics and dynamics of the problem. In order for educational efforts to be relevant and in touch with the recipients, we must try to grasp the complexity of the collective; the intricate and essential patterns of love, loyalty, power, and identity, and take those into consideration when discussing sexual liberties and the fundamental right of self-determination.

The study design has been approved by the Swedish Central Ethical Review Board. All interviewed persons have given their informed consent to take part in the study.

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