



KARMA NIRVANA

Supporting victims of honour-based abuse
and forced marriage

Virginity **Myths**

Shining the Spotlight
on Virginity Testing and
Hymenoplasty in the UK



About Karma Nirvana

Karma Nirvana is the longest established specialist charity supporting victims and survivors of Honour Based Abuse. Since our inception, we have successfully provided support to thousands of people affected by Honour Based Abuse and supporting professionals from the police, social services, and schools to help them better understand the issues. We exist to support, empower and educate all those impacted by Honour Based Abuse throughout the UK.

We work to 'break the silence' on Honour Based Abuse by empowering those affected to speak out and by 'shining the spotlight' on Honour Based Abuse to improve national understanding, detection and practice. We have been working in this field for over 25 years.

We have campaigned for improved legislation on these issues and their effective criminalisation. Karma Nirvana took a leading role in campaigning for; the criminalisation of forced marriage, civil remedy for forced marriage through the Forced Marriage (civil protection) Act 2007, the first thematic national review into policing Honour Based Abuse. We are currently campaigning for a follow-up review as police data evidences a decline in reports relating to Honour Based Abuse since the first inspection. We were the first organisation in the UK to become members of the global Girls not Brides partnership. We are currently leading on; the campaign as Co-Chairs of Girls Nots Brides UK to make marrying a child a crime in England and Wales and working alongside Richard Holden MP and Dr Charlotte Proudman to ban virginity testing and Hymenoplasty in the UK.

Karma Nirvana delivers the government-backed Honour Based Abuse helpline, supporting all those impacted by Honour Based Abuse throughout the UK. In 2020 -21, the national Honour Based Abuse helpline received just over 12,500 contacts.

We offer training to professionals and regularly work with police, Forced Marriage Unit, UK Border Force, NHS, social services, local government and teachers. We provide a range of educational resources to understand and tackle Honour Based Abuse through accredited training programmes, seminars, conferences and workshops.

We were finalists for the Helpline Impact Award in 2017; awarded the British Asian Business Community Award in 2015; were Highly Commended by The Charity Awards in 2015 and were Finalists for the Most Admired Charity by Third Sector Awards in 2015.

In 2015, we worked with Cosmopolitan Magazine to campaign for the first National Day of Memory for victims of Honour Killings. This is now marked annually on the 14th July.

In 2019, we became secretariat to the All-Party Parliamentary Group chaired by Virendra Sharma MP and Baroness Cox.

Our founder Jasvinder Sanghera was awarded Commander of the British Empire in 2013 to recognise her outstanding contribution to tackling forced marriage and Honour Based Abuse. Her TedX Talk on 'Fighting Forced Marriage and Honour Based Abuse' has been watched over 2.1 million times.

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Campaign – Virginty Myths

‘Virginty Myths’ is a national campaign that has sparked a movement to address negative social norms on the concept of ‘virginty’.

We believe that every woman deserves the right to make any decision about her body – free from shame, stigma or discrimination, without pressure to subscribe to “gender-based societal norms”, and without fear of harm.

This is why we are campaigning to end the practice of Virginty Testing and Hymenoplasty, in addition to tackling the shame and stigma commonly associated with virginty. Virginty is a deeply embedded social norm that has no scientific basis.



Defining Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty:

Virginity Testing

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines Virginity Testing as:

“

the 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.”

The examination has no scientific merit or clinical indication – the appearance of a hymen is not a reliable indication of intercourse, and no known examination can prove a history of vaginal intercourse. The WHO recognises the practice of Virginity Testing as a clear “violation of the victim’s human rights”.

Hymenoplasty

In many cases, victims who know they will fail or have failed a Virginity Test will resort to unsafe surgical solutions to avoid the consequences of ‘not being a virgin.’ Also known as hymen restoration surgery and re-virginisation, Hymenoplasty is a surgical procedure to reconstruct the hymen. Medical websites have described Hymenoplasties as a ‘simple procedure that involves stitching the torn edges of the hymen together with dissolvable stitches.’ In reality, survivors with lived experience of the procedure have shared that it has caused significant physical and psychological trauma and harm.

“

I don’t understand. My parents took me to a clinic in London to test my virginity. I have never had sex before, but the clinic said my hymen was not intact. So my parents booked for me to have my hymen “repaired”, but I managed to escape before this happened.

Sommer
17 years old
UK

“

I’m so scared because my parents want me to abort my boyfriend’s baby. They have planned for me to have my hymen repaired after the abortion so that I can be ‘married off’ as a virgin

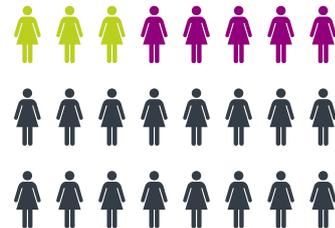
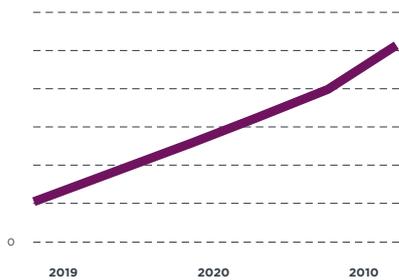
Mia
23 years old
UK

The problem of Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty in the UK

In the last two years, disclosures relating to Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty have increased to Karma Nirvana’s national Honour Based Abuse helpline. Between 2020 - 2021, our national helpline supported 41 women and girls, where ‘sex before marriage’ / not being a “virgin” was recognised as the motive for abuse from perpetrators.

In November 2020, Karma Nirvana worked with the BBC to investigate Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty in the UK. The investigation identified 21 clinics that would carry out hymen-repair surgery, costing in the region of £1,300 - £3,000. Data from NHS England shows 69 hymen-repair procedures have been carried out in the past five years.

Honour Based Abuse Helpline insights



- Disclosures of virginity testing and hymen repair surgery have **increased over the last two years**
- The **average age of victims is 23 y/o**. The youngest callers have been 17 y/o, and the eldest over 35 y/o



- **4 out of 5 callers** that disclosed being subjected to Virginity Testing and Hymen Repair had received “threats to kill” from perpetrators
- **Parents and relatives** are most likely to be perpetrators of abuse

Virginty Testing: the consequences

Virginty Testing causes physical, physiological and social harm.

Physical harm: ‘Virginty Tests’ can result in physical harm to women and girls being examined, including by aggravating existing injuries in cases of survivors. Self-harm as attempted suicide has also taken place for some women or girls due to the ‘virginty testing. Harm may also come from relatives who, as a consequence of a perceived ‘failed’ test, may hurt or kill the woman or girl in the name of so-called ‘honour’. For example, a young girl from London, Heshu Yones, was forced to have a virginty test in 2002, which she allegedly failed, making her ‘unmarriageable’ within the community. The murder of Heshu Yones was the first in the UK to be recognised by police as an ‘honour killing’.

Psychological harm: Women and girls who have been subject to ‘virginty tests’ report experiencing extreme fear and anxiety before going for a test. On the national helpline, one caller explained that she felt like she was “walking into her own funeral”, knowing that she would ‘fail’ the test. Long

term effects including depression, a sense of violation of one’s privacy, and re-victimisation (for survivors of sexual assault) have also been reported by women and girls.

Social harm: Virginty Testing is often associated with harmful traditional and cultural norms that expose women and girls to stigma and perceived shame and dishonour to themselves, their families and communities. Women or girls can be ostracised or even killed because they have had (or they are believed to have had) sexual intercourse outside of norms imposed by society – for example, before marriage. Additionally, child marriage is used in some communities as a falsely perceived “protective” measure to avoid the shame and consequences of a girl who had sexual intercourse before marriage. Some girls may therefore be married off as children to avoid any sexual activity before marriage.



Virginty and Hymen Myths: Impact on Women and Girls

We recognise Virginty testing and Hymenoplasty as forms of Violence Against Women and Girls, which is both cause and consequence of gender inequality. In our recent written submission to the Home Office's Call for Evidence for the subsequent Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, we have invited the government to support our call for legislative changes to enable complete protection for ALL women and girls from this hidden harm.

Virginty Testing is rarely an isolated incident of abuse. It is often associated with other behaviours that discriminate against, limit or harm women and girls. In our experience, this can include other forms of Honour Based Abuse, such as forced marriage.

How Virginty Testing and Hymenoplasties are occurring in England and Wales

1. A female's behaviour makes her family question her virginty status. To prove to her family and community that she is a 'pure' and 'upstanding' member of her family and community, she is forced into taking a virginty test.
2. A female is about to be married and her future in-laws are asking for proof of her virginty.
3. A female has been married but does not pass the 'bleed on the sheet' test
4. A female has had vaginal intercourse either with consent or without consent and is made to 'restore her honour.'

Our proposal to for change

We believe it is time to ban the evasive and sexist practice of testing a woman or girls' virginity, and we need to shut down the virginity myth once and for all. As part of this campaign and improving law and policy in this area, we are keen to break the myths that perpetuate harmful ideologies on virginity and the hymen.

Here is our vision for change:

- **Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty are currently allowed to take place without consequence.** Karma Nirvana is calling for a ban on the harmful practices of Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty. The practice is a recognised form of sexual violence in law. Inserting fingers into the vagina of a female, who did not consent to the examination or was coerced into examination, will amount to sexual assault under the current CPS guidelines. However, we know that many women and girls are reluctant to report this abuse linked to normalisation and acceptance of such practices within society.
- **The concept of virginity is not medical or scientific. Instead, it is a social and cultural construct.** Karma Nirvana wants to reset harmful perceptions linked to virginity that perpetuate violence against women and girls through education. We know that many women and girls do not come forward to report, with many not recognising this to be abuse. However, since the start of our campaign in October 2020, we have experienced a **75% increase in the number of contacts** calling our national helpline related to Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty. Challenging harmful myths linked to virginity enables potential victims to understand this issue as a form of abuse and control rather than rooted in any medical merit.

Karma Nirvana has a dedicated legal team that has supported drafting new legislation on banning Virginity Testing and Hymenoplasty. We are working alongside Richard Holden MP to support our call for legislative protection for women and girls. Our proposal for change is supported by over 20 women's sector organisations, including Refuge, The Five Foundation and the Middle Eastern Women's Society Organisation.

Four ways that you can support our Virginity Myths Campaign:

- 01** **Join the campaign** - We welcome support from individuals and organisations to our call for change. If you would like to find out how you can support the campaign, please contact our campaigns team at campaigns@karmanirvana.org.uk or call **0113 887 0281**

- 02** **Spread the word** - Use your social media channels to remind society that virginity is a myth without scientific or medical merit. You can do this by sharing one of our “Virginity Myth” social assets, supported with one of our suggested tweets. These can be found at www.karmanirvana.org.uk

- 03** **Amplify our Campaign** - If you are a journalist or your organisation would like to use its platform to amplify this campaign, please get in touch with our campaigns team at campaigns@karmanirvana.org.uk

- 03** **Do you have a personal story?** - If you have a personal story connected to our campaign that you would like to share anonymously? Please contact our team at info@karmanirvana.org.uk or call our national helpline on **08005999247** to find out more about how you can do this.



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