

Breaking taboos one at a time

“Have you done it?” “Do you have a past?” “How far have you gone with someone?” “Ms or Mrs?”...

From friends, relatives, partners, spouses or even the OB/GYN — at some point, everyone’s shown some strange (read: intrusive) interest in your sexual history. Addressing these deep-seated insecurities among the youth and adults, we speak to gender rights activists and a psychiatrist to deconstruct why people still cling to the social construct of ‘virginity’ in this day and age.

Why do people do what they do?

From a psychological standpoint, Dr Ashique Selim, MRCPsych, MBBS, Lead Consultant Psychiatrist and Managing Director, Psychological Health and Wellness Clinic (PHWC) explains that we cannot have a conversation about sex and sexuality without addressing the patriarchy that we live in.

“Controlling or prohibiting people from engaging in sexual acts, allows for gender disparity to exist. As a result of this continuing system, female sexuality is something that’s largely monitored. Placing importance on the first sexual act is closely related to the religious and cultural beliefs of a particular society which happens to be a global phenomenon. It’s present in the USA, Middle East, and Eastern countries as well. Hence, it is not predominant to just our faith but rather extends across other religions as well,” says Dr Selim.

Generally, in conservative cultures, the preservation of the first sexual act is reserved for after a religious or spiritual ceremony such as marriage. However, in liberal societies, there is the value placed on chastity among some people, while in others there can be undue pressure to have the first act at a certain time or age i.e., ‘before the high school prom.’

Dr Ashique states that people are having sex now as they were in the past, whether it’s before, after or during marriage, since the beginning of time. Hence, pre-marital sex is not entirely the media’s fault because teenage pregnancy has been an issue for generations.

“Our grandparents or great-grandparents were getting married at the age of 13 and having children at 16, which at the time was the norm. Nowadays, people remain children longer since marriage has been pushed back due to societies becoming more educated. When equipped with the right information and the freedom to

exercise their choices, the youth should be able to make healthy decisions at the right time without pressures imposed by mass media or society,” he informs.

Dr Selim feels that people should be given autonomy at a younger age because they have far more access to information than previous generations.

In his line of work, he has found that people tend to confuse real-life sexual acts with those in pornography, thus suffering from performance anxiety. So, it is important to understand what healthy sexual acts entail, without demonising it as ‘dirty’ or ‘sinful.’

“People who have a low sex drive should not feel guilty about it; nor should someone with a higher libido, just as long as they are

areas such as policy and awareness while working with individuals who are experiencing difficulties with these issues. In the same vein, we must take into account the structure of our society whilst being sensitive to people’s belief systems; we have to be complicit with both sides in order to live with a healthy balance.

“Sex involves a lot of different things aside from the act itself. One needs to factor in Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) and unwanted pregnancies — so it’s extremely important that when one is choosing to have sex, they must be aware of the risks and consequences.”

The state of gender rights and bodily autonomy

Drawing from her expertise in gender

Tasaffy Hossain elaborates that the issue of virginity, and the ‘need’ sometimes to present oneself as a virgin or not, both are problematic, if there is social/peer pressure put on it. This creates a need for young people to fit in, to try to get to that ‘status,’ as opposed to considering important issues like comfort, choices, consent, and being able to understand what feels good and what does not. Instead, we see people never thinking about it or considering themselves and their bodies and minds as something to explore; or we see young people trying to fit into the larger peer ‘cool’ factors, still not focusing on their own selves enough.

Neither of these ways leads us to understand ourselves better, to focus on pleasure being a core right for everyone, and eventually in relationships leaves us feeling unfulfilled, and not being able to enjoy satisfactory sexual lives with partners.

“We see all forms of insecurities among both women and men; about their bodies (breast sizes and penis lengths); about what makes orgasms happen; orgasming too soon or too late; not being able to satisfy their partner’s needs, not being able to communicate their own needs — the list is endless. But at the core, it really is the lack of sexual understanding of oneself,” highlights Tasaffy.

But beyond all these, there are other elements that are worth considering for the youth when it comes to physical intimacy.

Someone with a disability, gender dysphoria or chronic illness might not love or feel comfortable in their body directly, but being able to explore how pleasure is in their mind, body and soul can create space for exploring different forms of joy and high.

Another important factor would be to encourage and learn how to pay attention and communicate with others, to understand what someone else is enjoying, ask and listen, explore together and hold space for growing and figuring out pleasure as partners. Nothing can beat verbal and non-verbal communication when it comes to sexual and romantic relationships.

“There’s so much when we look into the diversity of human love, sexuality, and pleasure. Narrowing it down to virginity and pressure to satisfy society’s needs, is really leaving one’s own capacity to feel pleasure in the backseat. Safe, consensual, communicative sexual relationships need to become more of the fantasies we aim to achieve,” says Tasaffy Hossain.



well informed and are being safe,” Dr Selim elaborates that readiness to be sexually active is based on one’s individuality — someone may be ready earlier while others may want to wait it out. “If we accelerate the process or suppress it, it can have a negative effect on our mental health either way,” he says.

As a mental health professional and a father, he observed that even now, censorship of basic biology textbooks takes place even in progressive English medium schools.

“It’s a common practice to remove the chapter on reproductive health to refrain children from seeing what genitalia looks like,” he says.

Dr Ashique Selim emphasises that substantial work needs to be done in

sensitisation, Tasaffy Hossain, Founder and Coordinator, Bonhishikha-Unlearn Gender, explains that the concept of virginity is largely attached to girls and women as opposed to men, however, there is still some wholesome value placed on virginity in general.

“If we delve deep into understanding what role virginity plays in society, it will eventually link to the basics of ‘who gets to own the womb of a woman’ as it is linked with heirs and who will inherit a man’s (or their male ancestors’) lineage. There is no other ‘real’ reason to obsess over virginity,” she explains. This has eventually been translated into the cultural, social and traditional measure of ‘how good’ women are and thus valuing them when it comes to their role, largely as a wife.