

## **Socio-cultural Factors Affecting Victims/Survivors of Rape and Sexual Assault**

Healthy sexual intimacy is usually considered to be a physical expression of love, bonding, and commitment between partners. The term 'making love' is often used to reflect the multiple dimensions associated with the biological act that can be involved during sex. For some preserving their first acts of intimacy to be with someone special or after marriage can be an integral part of a person's identity and belief system, often forming the foundation for starting a family of their own and having children. These aspects can have additional devastating effects on anyone who has experienced sexual abuse and be the source of socio-cultural as well as personal difficulties.

### ***Sexual Assault and Virginity***

Some people believe that virginity is a sign of 'purity' and 'innocence' and can be a measure of a person's value of trustworthiness, virtuous and honour, and that being raped or sexually assaulted has detrimental effects on their 'virginity' and consequently cause enormous distress, shame and prospects of any future life partner choices. It can be helpful to consider the points below:

- Being raped or sexually assaulted is not the same thing as having sex. Rape is an act of violence against somebody. Having sex WITH someone involves mutual consent.
- Giving your virginity is a choice, something you want to willingly do. It is not something which can be taken.
- Virginity is not a physical state. It is a concept, and something personal
- Deciding to give or lose your virginity is a mental and emotional decision you make to give of yourself when you are ready, and not when someone uses physical force, coercion, threats, intimidation to have sex.

### ***Virginity***

Virginity can be understood in different ways to different people, and like many socio-cultural definitions and meanings can change over time. Virginity can be considered on biological, emotional, psychological and spiritually levels as a state of being.

Defining virginity is not straightforward – sex and virginity can mean many different things to different individuals. For some a "virgin," is a person who has not had penetrative, penis-

in-vagina sex with another person. However, for others sexual acts can include oral or anal sex, using fingers or objects or any type of sexual touching.

### ***Myths about virginity***

One of the biggest myths about first-time vaginal sex is that the hymen will break and is a sign of whether a female is a virgin or not. Although during sex, the hymen can tear and cause minor bleeding, in many cases:

- **the hymen has torn before any sexual activity** - some activities, such as sports, can cause minor tears in the hymen.
- **the hymen may not tear during sex** - It is flexible, stretchy, and elastic and does not usually cover the entire vaginal opening. Otherwise, menstrual blood would be unable to come out
- **some people are born without a [hymen](#).**
- **it is impossible to tell whether a person has had sex just by examining their hymen.** This is because the hymen is naturally open
- **the hymen can heal** completely after an assault (95% of cases)
- **identical looking hymens** have been between pregnant women and women who have never had sex have in studies
- **Only 50% of women bleed** at first intercourse.

Learn more about the anatomy and functionality of the hymen here:

<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10216242168381668&set=p.10216242168381668&type=3>

### ***Should I tell my partner?***

Despite more awareness and understanding about sexual violence and abuse, not everyone will have an understanding or non-judgemental response to disclosures. Not everybody knows how to respond or process the knowledge of someone close to them being sexually

assaulted. There is no guarantee how anyone may react to knowing that their partner or prospective partner has experienced sexual assault. Disclosing abuse is a very personal decision and can affect intimate relationships for the better or lead to a break down in a relationship. If you chose not to share what has happened to you that is perfectly okay. This is your experience, and your journey for you to decide whether you want to share that you have been sexually abused, and with who and how much you want to share. However, It is always advisable after any sexual assault that you at least get professional advice around risks of any sexually transmitted infections which could potentially be passed to any intimate partners. This can be done in complete confidence through [sexual health services](#)