

'Virginity testing': a human rights violation, with no scientific basis – UN

A group of United Nations agencies has issued a [joint statement](#) calling for a ban on tests meant to assess the virginity of a girl or a woman, which is a common practice in at least 20 countries.

The statement, which was issued during the World Congress of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) in Rio de Janeiro, stresses that such tests are both unscientific, and a violation of human rights.

So-called “virginity testing” – also often referred to as hymen, “two-finger” or per vaginal examination – is a gynecological inspection of female genitalia carried out in the false belief that it can reliably determine whether a woman or girl has had vaginal intercourse.

In a global call to eliminate violence against women and girls everywhere, the UN Human Rights Office (OHCHR), UN Women and the [World Health Organization](#) (WHO), said that “this medically unnecessary, and often times painful, humiliating and traumatic practice must end”.

The practice is a long-standing tradition documented in at least 20 countries, spanning all regions of the world. Women and girls are often forced to undergo virginity testing for various reasons, including requests from parents or potential partners to establish marriage eligibility or even from potential employers.

It is mostly performed by doctors, police officers, or community leaders on women and girls, in order to assess their virtue, honour or social value.

In their statement, the UN agencies explained that the practice has “no scientific or clinical basis” and that “there is no examination that can prove a girl or woman has had sex”, as the “appearance of girl’s or woman’s hymen cannot prove whether they have had sexual intercourse or are sexually active or not”.

In addition, the UN agencies denounce virginity testing as a violation of the rights of girls and women, which can be detrimental to their physical, psychological and social well-being. The examination can be “painful, humiliating and traumatic” and reinforces stereotyped notions of female sexuality and gender inequality.

In some regions, it is common for health professionals to perform virginity testing on victims of rape, supposedly to ascertain whether or not rape occurred. Given the lack of clinical basis, the procedure is deemed “unnecessary” and “can cause pain and mimic the original act of sexual violence, exacerbating survivors’ sense of disempowerment and cause re-

victimisation,” said the agencies.

“The result of this unscientific test can impact upon judicial proceedings, often to the detriment of victims and in favour of perpetrators, sometimes resulting in perpetrators being acquitted,” the statement added.

“Given that these procedures are unnecessary and potentially harmful, it is unethical for doctors or other health providers to undertake them. Such procedures must never be carried out,” the joint statement read, calling for a collaborative response across societies, supported by the public health community and all health professionals.

“Health professionals can be great agents for change,” said Dr. Princess Nothema Simelela, WHO’s Assistant Director-General for Family, Women’s, Children’s and Adolescents’ Health.

“With support from health systems and governments, they can recognise that ‘virginity testing’ has no medical or clinical bases, refuse to carry out the harmful practice, and educate the public about this,” she noted, adding that that, in doing so, they would be “upholding the Hippocratic oath of ‘do no harm’ and safeguarding the human rights of girls and women in their care”.