



girl was arrested in Dubai the same day and taken to the police station with her boyfriend, Mahir. The accused were referred to the Ajman police for investigation on grounds of adultery, but the case was transferred to Dubai because the two had had sex at a local hotel there. The Dubai public prosecution arrested them under the charge of copulation with consent. A virginity test carried out showed the girl was having sex for over six months. During the interrogation, the accused both confessed to having sex several times in the hotel in Dubai.

Mahir said Ittab was his sister's friend and their relationship dated back eight months. He loved the girl and wanted to marry her but her family objected because he is Muslim and the girl is Druze. The court officials tried to convince the father to let his daughter marry her lover and drop the charges, but he refused. He preferred his daughter be imprisoned rather than let her marry a Muslim Syrian. As a result, the two young lovers were sent to jail. And this is Dubai, where billions of dollars are spent on modern buildings, magnificent skyscrapers and man-made islands, but where unmarried couples can still be jailed for engaging in consensual intercourse.

Such extreme cases may not be the norm, but the fear of such harsh repercussions – or an even worse outcome – has led many women to resort to hymenoplasty. Furthermore, according to gynaecologist Dr Faysal al-Kak, focus group studies have shown that more men than expected still prefer to marry a virgin. "Observational research at private clinics has shown that more and more women seek hymenoplasty to avoid the whole worry of being a non-virgin," Kak explains.

Zeinab, a 31-year-old Lebanese Shiite, lost her virginity willingly to a man she thought she was going to marry. "I was 27, and being in a serious relationship made me feel secure," she says. The couple, preparing for their wedding, got into an argument that led to their eventual break-up, which left Zeinab lost, confused and worried that no one would marry her.

"Hymenoplasty was the only option for me," says Zeinab, who admits she was advised by a friend to get the operation. "It may have been the wrong thing to do, but I preferred to do it than deal with the whole problem of explaining myself to my future husband." Zeinab says that she does not engage in intercourse with her current fiancé – "not before we get married."

The procedure itself is considered relatively minor from a surgical standpoint, which is why it has become a convenient solution for some. Women have the choice to either tighten the hymen or repair it completely. The hymen is a membranous surgical fold of tissue behind the external vaginal lips. Research shows that the biological function of the hymen is still uncertain, but some scientists assume that it protects the vagina from infection in infants. The social function of it, though, seems to be a myth that still manages to have a strong impact on modern society.

The rupture of the hymen is often expected to come with blood, which has become traditionally important proof of a woman's virginity. However, Kak says that not all women bleed even if they are virgins. Factors such as sports activities and the use of tampons may decrease the chances of bleeding during a first sexual experience. Moreover, the hymen of some women is very elastic and will allow penetration without bleeding. In fact, a survey conducted by Dr Sara Paterson-Brown, consultant obstetrician and gynaecologist at Queen Charlotte's Hospital in London, shows that out of 41 surveyed females, only 14 bled, 26 did not, and one did not remember.

Although increasing in popularity, hymenoplasty is illegal in Lebanon and considered somewhat unethical because of its deceptive implications. Many doctors, however, regularly perform this procedure for Lebanese women as well as other Arabs who travel to Lebanon solely for that purpose. The operation costs between \$100 and \$500, depending on the patient and where they are from; some doctors take advantage of a woman's desperation and charge up to \$1,000.

Lebanon is not the only country in the Middle East where this procedure is available. Nadia, 27-years-old and from the UAE, said that she went to a local clinic in Dubai to have the 90-minute surgery done. She waited for her fiancé to go on a business trip, reclaimed her virginity and got married a month later. She paid over \$2,500 for the procedure, which is officially banned to unmarried women in Dubai.

Kak says that although today's youth seem to be living in a more liberal environment, their parents don't seem to share the same tolerance towards sexual relationships. "The two generations do not seem to be meeting, driving most of the young to do what they do in silence."

"I'm a 24-year-old Syrian girl who lived in Lebanon; I lost my virginity in Beirut at 15. When my parents found out, their immediate reaction was to send me off to the gynaecologist to 'get my hymen fixed' and then they threatened to put my then partner in jail." She explains that her parents refused to believe that their daughter had consensual sexual intercourse and wanted to blame the boy for raping her. "I think it was easier for them to digest that than to admit that their 15-year-old daughter was sexually active."

Open public discussion of sensitive issues and long-standing taboos like sexual habits and perceptions is uncommon in the Arab world, and there is a lack of thorough research on the subject. However, the American University of Beirut (AUB) recently hosted a conference on Sexuality in the Arab World, and the subject of premarital sex was broached. An opinion poll conducted by Information International for the American University of Beirut Medical Centre explored university students' perceptions on sexual issues and tackled topics, including sexual attitudes, behaviour and virginity. Lebanon is considered the most open-minded country in the Middle East, therefore, the results of the study can not be applied to the whole region.

The poll found that the majority of male university students, 61 per cent, approve of sex before marriage, compared to a much lower 27.3 per cent of female students. The AUB poll goes on to show that out of the females who disapprove of premarital sex, 56.4 per cent have no problem with sexual flirting (sexual activity without penetration) and 18.8 per cent approve of anal sex. Out of the males who disapprove of premarital sex, 66.7 per cent did not consider sexual flirting wrong and 32.5 per cent were okay with anal sex.

The students in the study were distributed equally by gender and by university, with the country's five major universities included. Overall, the results indicated that attitudes among Lebanese students towards sexual activity are rather liberal, even amongst Muslims, compared to the rest of the Middle East. The lack of formal research, however, makes it difficult to obtain more detailed insight.

Although all those polled in the AUB study were university students, and are therefore more likely to be exposed to liberal Western attitudes, the results still show how distinctively Lebanon stands out from the rest of the Arab world as an oasis of individual freedom.

"Lebanon is one of the Middle East's great ironies in that the very holiday visitors who've made Lebanon their playground are the same ones who run repressive regimes at home and deny their fellow citizens the freedoms the elites so freely indulge in, in Lebanon," says Hussein, a 30-year-old private banker living in Kuwait City. Hussein says that women in the Middle East are not as innocent as they seem. "I have my fair share of fun with the girls here and some are nationals," he says. "But, I don't think it's a bad thing; we are all human's and we all have our needs."

Mohammad, Hussein's friend and roommate, says that what he finds rather disturbing is that fact that women who say they are virgins still flirt and, in most cases, practice anal sex, but claim purity because their hymen is intact. "I think that this is wrong. I would rather be with someone who is more honest with herself, even if she's not a virgin," he says.

"This is very much in line with the double standard I've seen at work elsewhere in the more sexually 'righteous' parts of the world. A lot of people seem to have a fetish about the preservation of a woman's hymen at the expense of all else and, therefore, anal sex isn't counted as actual sex in their eyes, which is in stark contrast to attitudes in the developed world," says Rania, a 25-year-old, post graduate student at AUB.

Yasmin, 22, a Jordanian student at AUB, says that there is a lot to consider when talking about sex. "Promiscuity should not only be judged by the state of a woman's hymen. How about the way she dresses? The amount of make-up she wears? The way she carries herself?" she explains. "Men should not judge or generalise about women who have lost their virginity – it's not a big deal. It's what's on her mind that is." >

