

Maintaining Moroccan Honor in Spain

Thao Pham, PhD

CIFAS, Columbia University, USA

Abstract: Spain and Morocco have had a long and tumultuous relationship. Spanish culture, like Moroccan and other societies in the Mediterranean area, used to place a high value on family honor and female chastity. However, the death of the Spanish dictator and Spain's entrance into the European Union have drastically changed Spanish culture and further expand the cultural and political gulf between these two countries. For Moroccan immigrant women in Spain, virginity remains important for Islamic marriages because Moroccan grooms and their families can still demand proof of virginity to validate the union. Nevertheless, young Moroccan women still partake in the sexual freedom granted in Spain and other European countries. Sexual experimenting, however, comes with a price. In order to mask evidence of behaviors that have strayed from the cultural dicta, Moroccan women would request for certificates of virginity or hymen reconstruction surgeries to maintain their family honor. Drawn from ethnographic data, interviews, and textual and discourse analysis, this paper addresses the controversy related to the need to preserve honor and female chastity in Spain and the Spanish institutions' reaction to this need.

Introduction

Proof of virginity is morally and socially important in Muslim societies like Morocco because it intricately weaves into their system of honor and marriage. While some European countries have been contending with the veil dilemma in public places and the proliferation of hymen reconstruction surgeries, certificates of virginity may start to grow in popularity among Moroccan female immigrants who live in countries that value documents and seals as proof and truth. Purity may still be symbolically tied to family honor just as veiling may symbolize female submission and gender inequality.

Since the 1990s, more and more Moroccan women have been emigrating to Spain and other European countries. With this trend of female-initiated immigration comes the complex female-oriented negotiation of imported customs and values. Moroccan female immigrants have to manage the cultural values they hold as important against the reality and practicality of living in a place with contradicting values and beliefs. The goal for many Moroccan Muslim women is to marry, have children, and provide a decent home for their working husbands. Due to economic necessity, Moroccan immigrant women find the traditional goal difficult to obtain and to maintain. Furthermore, they work and live in a host society that is currently obsessed with promoting gender equality so being a housewife may not carry the same value in Spain as it does in Morocco. Nevertheless, to be married may remain a priority for these women, but to whom, how, and why one marries may vary depending on one's needs or the family's needs.

The strength of kin and social network can transcend international borders if the woman still depends heavily on family members. Virginity remains important if the woman decides to have an Islamic marriage. The sexual freedom granted in Europe comes with a price, prompting a proliferation of reconstruction surgeries to maintain family honor. On the other hand, the loosening of network ties allows women more freedom to choose their desired partner, yet freedom requires sufficient resources and without it, an immigrant woman has to fend for herself.

Nevertheless, return migrant women often resort to having their fathers or brothers represent them at the signing of the marriage contract in Morocco and have the contract translated into Spanish in order to register and apply for the family reunification program in Spain. In essence, the Moroccan woman's European residency commodifies her. She converts into a gift presented in the alliance (*liff*) of marriage. Moroccan immigrant women from Holland are often referred to as 'gold-edged papers', whereas the ones from Spain are simply called 'visas' (Wikan 2000).

Some migrant women would marry a family member to sponsor them to come to Europe. Often these women would not have the official wedding ceremony that publicizes their social and sexual union and validates their status change. What this means for Moroccan female immigrants is a transnational restriction on their behaviors. Virginity or at least the appearance of chastity must be maintained until the family and community acknowledge the union. Thus, the value of immigrant women appreciates in accordance to their social wares: residency status, virginity, and reputation.

For many anthropologists, the gift of women is closely tied to the kin groups (Levi-Strauss 1963, Mauss 1990). Families form alliances by exchanging their women, making them a form of property. In order to gauge the value of the female-*cum*-property, the reproductive quality of women needs to be assessed. The purity of the female sexual system would ensure any offspring from her womb comes only from her husband. Keeping daughters chaste would secure their exchange value and validate the family's reputation of producing honest goods. The underlying assumption of having a

virgin bride would translate into having a loyal, modest wife. Consequently, the raping of women threatens the morality of their kin group, damaging their value as gifts (Rubin 1975). Damaged women are haunted and unpredictable. If their families cannot control them, their husbands and affines will not be able to either.

Moroccans traditionally manifests the value of virgins through the bridewealth. In Morocco, virgins traditionally command a higher bridewealth value than their divorced or widowed counterparts (Maher 1974, Evers Rosander 1991, Westermarck 1921). The bridewealth locks the productive and reproductive services of the woman to her husband and his agnates. The higher bridewealth of virgins not only commends the effort of the bride's family but also provides the woman with more means to secure her role as a wife and later as a mother. Thus, a marriage of convenience prolongs the bride's virginal status and enables her to transfer this status to the next marriage. Any breach upon this status endangers the transference. A verification of a nonsexual breach may ensure the woman's reproductive value and her family's honor.

The Verification of Virginit

Determining what constitutes a virgin in Western medicine would mean the existence of an intact hymen. To obtain proof of a healthy hymen requires a medical examination by a physician, who then documents the finding. However, a damaged hymen or a lack of one does not mean the woman has had sexual intercourse. Accidents, physical exertion, and other factors may render the loss of the medical proof of virginit.

The traditional Mediterranean practice of a bloodstained piece of cloth or clothing to verify virginit also has its flaws. Not all women bleed from their first bout of intercourse. Hymens vary in shape, size, texture and durability, making them unreliable in determining virginal status (Blank 2007). Nevertheless, a woman's virginit has a commodifiable value for the Moroccan family as it embodies community respect and honor, purity, patriarchal protection and control. Given the complex embodiment of virginit for many Moroccan families, maintaining this pure status until the marriage act is imperative. The physical distancing of unmarried daughters from the natal families due to internal and international migration complicates the traditional hold fathers and brothers may have on their women's behaviors and ultimately, to family honor.

In addition to being a socially desired prerequisite for marriage, virginit also has legal support in the *Moudawana*, the Moroccan Family Code. Although no where in the *Moudawana* states that a proof of virginit should be met before marriage, the marriage is considered 'defective' and the contract may be annulled if either party believes that they have been deceived by fraud¹. Moreover, the groom may not insist on the consummation of the marriage before paying the bride her share of the *sdaq* (bridewealth)². If the marriage is consummated before receiving the money from the *sdaq*, the bride can no longer claim it. The bride's family may take the groom to court, but it would be his word against hers, and the word of a man tends to outweigh those of a woman unless her family has extensive and important connections in the government.

Hence, the cultural value of virginit has merged with the Occidental value in documentation as the verification of truth. Married Moroccan women can still recall the simple virginit tests of bleeding on the bedsheets or the bridal panties as proof. The custom of displaying bloodstained panties in a tray is quite common. In fact, some families have been known to pin the virginit certificate officially issued by a doctor to the garment. For others, a certificate of virginit from a medical doctor is enough to justify one's purity, particularly immigrant couples who wish to spend their wedding nights privately rather than publicly. Nevertheless, certificates and documentation have served as proof for European immigrants who may not have the time nor the social capital to gather the necessary male witnesses to prove a fact. Bureaucracy has provided Morocco efficiency and links to its Western partners.

The European Controversy

1 Article 63 notes that "either spouse who was placed under duress or deceived by fraud with the intent to induce him or her to agree to the marriage, or by facts expressly stipulated as a condition in the contract, can petition for the annulment of the marriage before or after the consummation within a period not to exceed two months from the date when the duress was lifted, or when she or he discovered the fraud. She or he has the right to demand compensation."

2 Article 27 of the *Moudawana* deals with the *sdaq*, stipulating that an amount needs to be specified upon the conclusion of the marriage contract. If the two parties cannot agree on the amount, the court will intervene to determine the amount given the 'social' background of both the husband and wife.

Muslim immigrant women encounter different cultural praxes regarding sex and family life in Europe. Although some Moroccan women do have premarital sex, the consequences for their actions during the wedding night differ depending on the area of Morocco (Westermarck 1921). The wedding tends to have a performative quality, in which virginity needs to be demonstrated but may not be necessarily factual (Combs-Schilling 1989). However, with the resurgence of fundamentalist Islamic practices in many parts of the world, including Morocco, being an *adri* (a virgin) on the wedding night in order to uphold the family's honor has brought many Muslim women to clinics for certificates of virginity or for hymen reconstruction surgery (Crumbly 2008, USA Today 2006).

The 'artificial' virginity is not a new practice in Morocco. In the past, brides have spilled vials of animal blood on sheets and panties to replace their virginal stains (Combs-Schilling 1989, Westermarck 1921, Mernissi 1987). The modern version of artificial virginity, hymenoplasty, reminds women of the religious and social limitations of their behavior when returning to Morocco. The need to maintain the appearance of virginity for nuptial purposes after enjoying the sexual permissiveness of the European milieu may reach a climatic compromise although drastic at times. Nevertheless, doctors and authority figures in some receiving countries would sympathize with the women's plight and collaborate with their need to maintain a façade of purity. Other countries, however, view the proliferation of virginity validation and reconstruction as another representation of Islamic sexist oppression and backwardness.

In 2002 the Partido Popular, the more conservative of the two main Spanish political parties, proposed a law in the parliament of the Andalusia provincial government in reaction to a growing number of requests for certificates of virginity within that region. The majority of the requests had come from Moroccan female immigrants who have been residing in Spain and wanted to return to Morocco to marry (Bosch 2002). The certification law stipulates that the virginity certificates invade the patients' privacy, which infringes upon the Spanish constitution. Both the Office of Medical College of Malaga and the Office of Medical College of Barcelona approved the initiative, and their commission of ethics has been implementing reports regarding the certificates of virginity in Spain.

The Spanish politicians and medical professionals, who are against the administering of certificates of virginity, argue for the need to maintain the patient's *'intimidad'*, the confidentiality and rights of intimacy for the patients. The subjective evaluation of virginal status may place the patient in a vicarious position should the given opinion proves unfavorable. Refusing to participate in the evaluation of virginity is not only a moral decision but a professional one as well.

Despite the official reports and protocols of handling the requests for virginity test and approval, European doctors continue to debate whether or not to issue these tests. European doctors who had seen the results of honor killing in their hospitals do not hesitate to sign certificates of virginity when requested (Sage 2007). A report shows that hundreds of certificates of virginity are delivered annually in Belgium to Muslim immigrant families (Amy 2008). Some Spanish doctors continue to administer the certificate of virginity in respecting their patients' religious and cultural values. Others, however, find the practice unethical, disrespectful, and 'unfitting' (*no cabida*) towards women in Spain (Bosch 2002). Moreover, they will not administer the certificates unless the court obligates them.

Although some medical practitioners refuse to corroborate with the Moroccan immigrant communities, hymenoplasty has proliferated in various parts of Europe. Parisian doctors have reported reconstructing seven to eight hymens a month. The price for the 20 to 30 minute operation averages around 500 euros (Crumbly 2008). Although the medical community in Germany may consider hymenoplasty a taboo topic, German doctors have widely catered to the Muslim population need to adhere to traditional customs of honor and female purity. One German doctor advertises his hymenoplasty service on the internet at 1250 euros. Although hymenoplasty has proliferated in other European countries with a longer history of Moroccan immigration, hymen reconstructive surgery has not been widely reported as problematic within the Moroccan immigrant community in Spain. Hymenoplasty appears to be utilized more by Spanish gypsies, but that is not to say that Moroccans do not patronize these clinics nor do they return to Morocco for their surgeries.

Although operations related to correct consequences of sexual behaviors (hymenoplasty, abortion, etc.) are illegal in Morocco, many Moroccan women have some familiarity with the doctors and the clinics that are willing to preserve their families' honor with surgery and money. With hymenoplasty costing between 500 and 1,000 dirham (DH)³ in Morocco and the average annual expenditure of a family of farmers is 65 DH, this economic value indicates which social classes participate in the virgin restoration (Mernissi 2003). However, the price for hymenoplasty in 1968 was 2,000 DH due to the supply of doctors performing the operation relative to its demand. Hence, Moroccan women in previous generations who had hymenoplasty would have come from an upper-middle to upper class background. As a matter of fact, Moroccan women who currently study abroad almost exclusively come from the upper-class Moroccan families with

3 Twelve dirham is equivalent to one euro.

money and connections (Mernissi 2003).

Women, who have had pre-marital sex, may have their marriages annulled by the grooms' families. When such events occur, the women not only dishonor their family but also stigmatize other family members, especially the unwed female members. The unmarried females of the family also run the risk of becoming undesirable as prospective brides. If one girl in the family is not a virgin that stigma transfers to her sisters and close female cousins. Although virginity vicariously affects female marriageability, it directly affects family honor.

Virginity has a direct link to the honor system. For a group wanting to exchange its women, the wife-givers, in forming alliances, the purity of a woman represents the care, the value, and the trustworthiness of the group from which she originates. It may also ensure that the offspring from the untainted woman clearly belong to the receiving group, the wife-takers (Holy 1989). The solidifying of alliances in an environment in which the government cannot be trusted is imperative for survival. Virginity, as indicated in its need for verification and certification, is a product of a social act. When linked to honor and marriage, the virginity of a woman no longer belongs solely to her. The protection of her body as a commodity becomes the responsibility of the group, particularly the head of the family and other male members assigned to protect her. Her virginity is a crucial unifying element in maintaining the cohesiveness of group. Since the premature loss of virginity affects the entire group's reputation, a responsible woman guards her chastity or hides any evidence of its damage.

Trapped in between the desire for rights and adhering to cultural norms, Moroccan immigrant women make choices that may enhance or break transnational relational ties, especially when their behaviors endanger their families' honor. Moroccan women complain about the sexual exploitation of European women on television, in films, and also on the streets. Spanish and other European women's tendency to go topless at poolside and at the beach provoke feelings of pity from Moroccan women who believe European women need to attract men by exposing their bodies. During a panel discussion of Ramadan, Moroccan men complain about the difficulty in observing Ramadan in Spain due to the Spanish women's provocative manner of dressing. Moroccan women worry their husbands may stray and their daughters may imitate the sexualized behaviors of Western women.

Thus, virginity remains imperative in perpetuating the traditional honor and marriage system, imported by Moroccan immigrants. Moroccan women constantly affirm their pre-marital virgin status with each other, partly to evaluate each other as well as to elevate themselves. The women in several focus groups of this study enjoy talking about their deflowering experience and would repeat the same stories again and again to their compatriots. They would beam with pride recounting how their relatives would pass around their blood-stained underwear or white sheets during their weddings as the confirmation of an intact family honor. Additionally, the younger, single Moroccan women of the group often ask each other about their status of virginity. The answers are always overwhelmingly affirmative despite the contrary.

Conclusion

Living in Spain may provide Moroccan women with more opportunities and freedom in their movements and behaviors, but the consequences of too much sexual freedom may cause some women to find external solutions to maintain the honor of their family. Certificates of virginity offer women a documented proof of their pure state. Whether or not the medical examination can technically confirm purity remains controversial. However, in the current world of bureaucracy, a certified document can supply the necessary validation of the woman's chastity amidst the temptation to behave more European.

Although disguising or reinventing virginity has existed prior to certificates and surgery, women have more knowledge and means to manipulate their situation. The responses of the Medical Association in the Andalusia and Catalonia regions of Spain recycle the perception of Muslim immigrant women as backwards and oppressed. Ironically, the certification and the reconstruction of virginity demonstrate these women's agency in negotiating between two cultural practices.

Like generations of women before them, Moroccan female immigrants have learned to manipulate the system that structure their lives. The resettlement in Spain, as in other European countries, may entice Moroccan women to behave differently than they would have in Morocco, but they have found a solution to their transgression from traditional values. By prohibiting the issuance of certificates of virginity, the Spanish governing bodies are insisting that women deal with their sexual state privately. In Morocco, women's sexual state is a public matter. Nevertheless, Moroccan immigrant women straddle between these distinctive policies. They do not see their living in Spain as a binary choice between acculturation and non-integration. In actuality, the certificate of virginity and hymenoplasty are linking devices in negotiating between the Western value of individualism and the non-Western value of collectivism.

Women who can afford surgery can reconstruct their hymen without anyone knowing. Indeed, the certification or the operation may bring immense joy to their kin groups. The woman's family and her future affines would appreciate the control a female immigrant may have despite the cultural assumption that women cannot control their sexual urges. Oftentimes, Moroccan women who choose to maintain their kin network and engage with the Moroccan community abroad have to demonstrate their chastity to family members, in-laws, and compatriots. The documented virginity qualifies as proof in lieu of the traditional blood-staining performance.

The popularity of the modern methods of virgin (re)construction, however, only supports the notion that the reproductive state of a Moroccan woman still does not belong solely to her because her kin and social association binds her to certain appearances. Some immigrant women return to the entrapment of the Moroccan traditional honor system, hoping to marry without dishonoring their family in the process. For these Moroccan women, the possibility to behave differently has its limits.

Nonetheless, in order for immigrant women to integrate into a European society without denouncing their family and their traditional values, resources must be in place to accommodate their needs. A verification of virginity is a validation of purity. For Spanish doctors and their governing associations, the argument for the confidentiality and privacy of the patient contradicts the personal requests of patients to have the certification of their sexual status. Moreover, it contradicts the respect for multiculturalism for which the Spanish government and other European countries have been proposing.

References

- Amy, Jean-Jacques. 2008. Certificates of Virginity and Reconstruction of the Hymen. *The European Journal of Contraception and Reproductive Healthcare* June 2008; 13(2): 111-113.
- Blank, Hanne. 2007. *Virgin: The Untouched History*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Bosch, Xavier. 2002. Spanish doctors draw up advice on ethics of virginity certificates. *BMJ Journal* 324 (7344): 996-1002.
- Combs-Schilling. 1989. *Sacred Performances: Islam, Sexuality and Sacrifice*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Crumbley, Bruce. July 13, 2008. "The Dilemma of 'Virginity' Restoration," *The Times*. Accessed May 2, 2010. <http://www.time.com/time/world/article/0,8599,1822297,00.html>
- Evers Rosander, Eva. 1991. *Women in a Borderland: Managing Muslim Identity Where Morocco Meets Spain*. Stockholm: Stockholm University.
- Holy, Ladislav. 1989. *Kinship, Honor and Solidarity: Cousin Marriage in the Middle East*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Levi-Strauss, Claude. 1963. *Structural Anthropology*. New York: Harper Basic Books.
- Maher, Vanessa. 1974. *Women and Property in Morocco: Their Changing Relation to the Process of Social Stratification in the Middle Atlas*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Mauss, Marcel. 1990. *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies*. W.D. Halls, transl. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.
- Mernissi, Fatima. 1987. *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Revised Edition). Indiana University Press.
- 2003 [1982] Virginity and Patriarchy. *Women's Studies International Forum* 5(2):183-191.
- Rubin, Gayle. 1975. "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the Political Economy of Sex." In *Toward an Anthropology of Women*. Rayna Reiter, ed. Pp. 157-210. New York: Monthly Review.
- Sage, Adam. May 7 2007. "Doctors Face Moral Dilemma Over Restoring Muslim Brides' Virginity," [The Sunday Times](http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article1756072.ece). Accessed 4/2/2010. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/world/europe/article1756072.ece>
- Westermarck, Edward. 1921. *The History of Human Marriage (Volume 1)*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Library.
- Wikan, Unni. 2000. Citizenship on Trial: Nadia's Case. Theme issue, "The End of Tolerance: Engaging Cultural Differences," *Daedalus* 12 (4): 55-76.
- USA Today. June 25, 2006 "Young Muslim Women in Europe to Go to Extremes to Be Virgins – Again." Accessed 5/2/2010. http://www.usatoday.com/news/health/2006-06-25-restoring-virginity_x.htm