

Brides-to-be Risk Their Health

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Women who've lost their virginity pay for dangerous medical procedure so their families won't be shamed.

The elderly woman with grey hair and wrinkled hands is surrounded by the tools of her trade - a rag splattered with blood, a scalpel, scissors, and some pieces of cotton.

"I have saved the lives of more than 300 girls in this room by reconstructing their hymens," claimed 60-year-old Ameena.

In Iraq's largely conservative Muslim society, women are expected to be virgins when they marry. Those who have lost their virginity and plan to get married turn to Ameena who has spent more than a decade reconstructing the hymens of such women.

"I'm doing this job for the sake of those pretty girls because I don't want them to be killed by their families," said Ameena, referring to the practice of honour killings, when a woman is murdered by her relatives in order to redeem the "shame" brought on them by an illicit affair.

Ameena charges between 300 and 400 US dollars for her services, and insists that her clients sign a pledge promising to keep her identity secret if the procedure goes wrong.

She reconstructs women's hymens by using a suturing thread - but does not use anaesthesia or any sanitising agents. She has not had any medical training and learned the reconstruction process from a midwife.

"The stitches must not be too thick, so that when they come undone the woman bleeds on the wedding night," said Ameena, who normally conducts the procedure one or two days before the marriage takes place.

Chovin, 30, was one of Ameena's clients, paying 400 dollars for the procedure. She fell in love with a man and lost her virginity to him. The man asked her parents for permission to wed Chovin, but they refused because he was poor. Her parents forced her to marry another man.

"[The procedure] ached very much and I could not walk well for some days," said Chovin. "On the wedding night, I was so afraid that I might be discovered. When it succeeded, I thought I was born anew because my life was saved."

Sabria, 56, works as a midwife and also performs hymen reconstruction. She acknowledged the latter isn't sanctioned by the health authorities, but said if she doesn't help the women who come to her, they could lose their life to an honour killing.

"Several days ago, a 16-year-old girl came to me with her mother," she said. "I reconstructed her hymen for free because they were poor. She was so young that she passed out sometimes from the pain."

Nazaneen, 25, lost her virginity when she was 18, after which her mother did not allow her to get married for several years for fear of discovery, eventually turning to Sabria.

"I never forgot that moment when I was at the hands of Sabria and I wished I could die," said Nazaneen, who now has one child. "But on the wedding night, my husband saw the blood and was quiet."

Medical authorities warn that the procedure is dangerous. Dr Peri Khalid, who specialises in gynecology and obstetrics, said she has treated women who have suffered health problems as a result of it.

"No one can reconstruct the hymen, and those who do this job are tricking people," she said. "This is done in an unscientific and unhealthy way."

But many women who have had the procedure said it is worth the risk. Hanar, a 26-year-old who got married a year ago, had lost her virginity to a man who didn't want to marry her, and was close to despair.

"I can never pay that woman back who saved my life and had my hymen reconstructed," she said.

Kawther Hasan, of the Kurdistan Women Union, warns that the availability of the procedure will increase the number of women having sex before marriage.

"More unmarried women will not be afraid of losing their virginity if such a solution is readily available," she said.

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