

VIRGIN TESTING IS A THREAT TO WOMEN AND GIRLS' BODILY AUTONOMY

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Last week, several media houses including [Spark TV](#) and [KFM](#) reported about His Grace Stephen Kaziimba's pastoral visit to some schools in Wakiso district ahead of celebrations to mark 50 years of the diocese of Kampala in Wakiso district. They share that His Grace has put aside some cash rewards for an initiative meant to reward girls who are found to be virgins after an assessment.

This is not the first time, a 'power holder' in this country has made comments of this nature. In 2017, a [report](#) from Daily Monitor showed that the LCIII chairperson for Busoba Sub County in Mbale District pledged to reward virgin girls between the ages of 15-18. He is quoted to have said *"It's rare today to find a virgin girl, so those who have remained virgin must be appreciated. I will work with medical personnel to carry out virginity tests every February to verify the beneficiaries of his initiative."* In 2003 Mityana diocesan Bishop, Rev. Dunstan Bukenya was also [reported](#) to have promised to give Uganda shillings 100,000 to every girl of the Anglican Church who marries while still a virgin.

There have been several groups supporting the practice of virgin testing here in Uganda but also in other African countries like South Africa. The Zulu monarchy long practiced the tradition of virginity testing termed as "ukuhlolwa". It has been justified as a cultural practice for some, while others justify it as a means of tackling the rising spread of HIV and as a strategy to curb the growing cases of young people getting involved in sex before marriage. Furthermore, we have also seen leaders like the LCIII in Mbale get [promise](#) to award bursaries to girls on the condition that they refrain from sex for the duration of their tertiary education and agree to undergo regular testing to prove they are still virgins.

This virgin testing debate is not new, it has in the past been practiced and perceived as a means of safeguarding the family's honor. This [paper](#) for instance explains that the concept of Family honor was explored through the lens of property theory which states that honor appears as an intangible type of property. The paper further explains that although honor is bestowed on female bodies, it is largely owned by the male members of the family. A man's honor is associated with his power to protect his property, and his women are his most prized possession. When women and girls act honorably, the price of the property increases for the family, and vice versa, when they act dishonorably, the value of the property decreases significantly.

This practice clearly entrenches gender inequality by holding girls to a different sexual responsibility and standard than boys, and rewarding conformation with a harmful stereotype entirely unrelated to academic potential and the right to education, under the guise of public health considerations. The social expectation that girls and women should remain "virgins" (i.e. without having sexual intercourse) is based on stereotyped notions that female sexuality should be curtailed within marriage. This notion is harmful to women and girls because it is physically invasive, and it interferes with women's right to bodily integrity. The tests are only performed on female bodies;

therefore, it is discriminatory. This lack of bodily autonomy has massive implications beyond the profound harms to individual women and girls.

Virgin testing and the practises that follow are in fact a violation of Article 33 (1) of the Constitution of the Republic of Uganda which provides for the rights of women, stating that women shall be accorded full and equal dignity of person with men. Virgin testing clearly violates this right just by the virtue of the fact that it is only done to women and girls.

It is also a violation of Clause 6 of Article 33 which prohibits the practise of any cultures, customs or traditions which are against the dignity, welfare, or interest of women or which undermine their status and virgin testing is evidently one of these. It further infringes on several international human rights instruments that protect an individual's dignity, and physical and mental integrity like the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR).

Additionally the World Health Organisation in 2018 in their report [Eliminating virginity testing – An interagency statement](#) shared that “*Virginity testing is often performed by inspecting the hymen for tears or its size of opening, and/or inserting fingers into the vagina (the “two-finger” test). Both techniques are practiced under the belief that the appearance of the female genitalia can indicate a girl's or woman's history of sexual activity. There is no evidence that either method can prove whether a woman or girl has had vaginal intercourse or not.*” This clearly shows that the practice does not even serve the purpose for which it is done and is actually a form of sexual violence against women and girls. The report further shows that the term “virginity” is actually not a medical or scientific term. Rather, the concept of “virginity” is a social, cultural and religious construct – one that reflects gender discrimination against women and girls.

Virginity testing causes physical, psychological and social harms. In the case of survivors of violence, "virginity tests" may cause physical injury to the women and girls being tested, especially by worsening existing injuries. In addition, relatives have been seen to injure or kill the girl in the name of so-called "honor" if they believe the test has been failed. As a result of the "virginity testing," some women and girls have also attempted suicide or self-harmed. Psychologically, Women and girls who have had "virginity tests" have described intense fear and anxiety leading up to the procedure as well as crying, and fainting while it was being performed. Women and girls have also spoken of long-term impacts such as re-victimization (for survivors of sexual assault), self-hatred, and loss of self-esteem, despair, a sense of privacy and body autonomy being violated. Socially, virginity testing subjects women and girls to stigma, as well as feelings of shame and disgrace in front of their peers, families, and communities. Because they engaged in- or are thought to have engaged in- sexual activity outside of the social norms set by society, women or girls may face rejection or even death. In some groups, early marriage is also utilized as a sort of incorrectly understood "protective" strategy to shield a girl from the embarrassment and repercussions of having sex before marriage. Therefore, in order to prevent any kind of sexual activity before marriage, certain girls may be married off early.

The practice of placing virginity requirements and passing the test on young girls and women, therefore, upholds patriarchy and like any other women's rights struggle, it is a socially oppressive practice, a form of gender-based violence and should be treated as such.