

Negotiating virginity: Embodiment, stigma, sexual autonomy, and the contestation of Islamic and social norms among Indonesian Muslim women

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Article Information	Abstract:
Submitted: 2023-08-27 Revised: 2023-10-26 Published: 2023-12-27	Virginity among Indonesian Muslim women constitutes a contested arena in which embodiment, stigma, sexual autonomy, Islamic norms, and social expectations intersect, raising issues of control, honor, privacy, and gendered moral judgment. This study aims to analyze how Muslim women interpret virginity and how these meanings are shaped by biological knowledge, social constructions, religious norms, and institutional practices. Using a qualitative case study approach, the research involved 12 Muslim women. Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation, and were analyzed thematically using Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework. Four major findings emerged: (1) virginity cannot be determined by hymenal integrity or first-intercourse bleeding because anatomical variations and nonsexual factors make the <i>hymen</i> an unreliable indicator of sexual history; (2) virginity is associated with stigma, moral judgment, restrictions on self-actualization, and partner selection, but does not determine women's worth or dignity; (3) participants rejected institutional virginity testing and negotiated disclosure during <i>ta'aruf</i> through honesty, privacy, and the protection of personal disgrace; and (4) Islamic sources frame virginity through chastity, honor, self-restraint, prohibition of illicit sexual relations, marital preference, dignity, and confidentiality. The study concludes that virginity is a multidimensional construct negotiated across biological, social, religious, and gendered domains. Its main contribution lies in distinguishing Islamic sexual ethics from the objectification and institutional control of women's bodies.
Keywords: Virginity; Embodiment; Stigma; Muslim Women.	



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INTRODUCTION

Virginity remains a contested issue because its meaning is shaped by social, cultural, and religious values, particularly in patriarchal societies where it is often treated as a measure of women's honor (Mehroliassani et al., 2020; Robatjazi et al., 2015). This perception stems from the traditional assumption that virginity is indicated by an intact hymen and bleeding during first sexual intercourse after marriage, despite the lack of medical or scientific evidence supporting such claims (Cook & Dickens, 2009; Saraiya, 2015). In many cultures, bloodstains on bedsheets after the wedding night are even expected as proof of virginity, creating pressure, reinforcing gender inequality, and linking women's worth to their sexual history (Mishori et al., 2019; Militz, 2022; Olamijuwon & Odimegwu, 2022). These myths persist across generations, shaping moral expectations of purity and honor while generating stigma and rejection toward women perceived as non-virgins (Tampubolon, 2021; Udasmoro, 2022). Virginity, therefore, cannot be reduced to a biological condition but should be understood as a social construction involving embodiment, morality, stigma, and gender relations.

Previous studies can be grouped into three major strands. First, anatomical research demonstrates that the hymen varies in shape, size, and elasticity and undergoes natural changes throughout women's lives (Jaral, 2015; Kotb & Abo-Zeid, 2022; Matswetu & Bhana, 2018). Second, studies challenge the myth that bleeding or a hymenal condition provides scientifically valid evidence of female virginity (Savira et al., 2022; Putri, 2019; Andani, 2023). Third, research on cultural constructions shows how an intact hymen is symbolically associated with purity, thereby legitimizing invasive virginity testing practices targeting women (Moussaoui et al., 2022; Wynn & Hassanein, 2017; Zayed et al., 2022). Despite addressing anatomy, biological myths, and cultural constructions, previous scholarship remains fragmented and has rarely integrated biological knowledge, social stigma, religious norms, marital relations, privacy, and institutional practices. This study addresses this gap by examining virginity as an arena in which embodiment, morality, stigma, autonomy, *ta'aruf*, and Islamic discourses on chastity, *zina*, marriage, and the protection of personal disgrace are negotiated.

This study aims to analyze how Muslim women understand virginity and how these meanings are shaped by biological knowledge, social constructions, religious norms, and institutional practices. It addresses four questions: how virginity is constructed beyond anatomical indicators; how stigma shapes women's social experiences; how privacy and autonomy are negotiated within institutional settings and *ta'aruf*; and how Islamic literature frames chastity, *zina*, marriage, and the protection of personal disgrace. To explain these complexities, the study integrates Fredrickson and Roberts' Objectification Theory to examine the reduction of women's bodies to objects of social evaluation, Goffman's Stigma Theory to analyze labeling and its social consequences for women perceived as non-virgins, and Foucault's concept of disciplinary power to understand surveillance, normalization, and the regulation of sexuality through institutions and social relations. These perspectives are employed complementarily to conceptualize virginity not merely as a bodily issue but as a process of social evaluation, labeling, and surveillance.

The study specifically addresses the reduction of female virginity to hymenal condition and its use as a basis for moral judgment, social stigma, partner selection, and institutional surveillance. Such reductionism overlooks anatomical variation, reinforces bodily objectification, restricts autonomy, and generates tensions among religious norms, privacy, and the dignity of Muslim women. Accordingly, Objectification Theory, Stigma Theory, and disciplinary power are brought into dialogue with Islamic literature on chastity, *zina*, marital

preference, and the protection of personal disgrace. Theoretically, this study offers an integrative understanding of virginity as a biological, social, religious, gendered, and institutional construction. Practically, it supports reproductive health education, gender-sensitive religious literacy, privacy protection, the rejection of discriminatory virginity testing, and stigma reduction, while emphasizing equal sexual and moral responsibility for both women and men.

METHOD

Research Approach

This study employed a qualitative case study design to examine the construction of virginity in Muslim women's experiences and within Islamic perspectives (Mtisi, 2022). This approach was selected because the study focuses on participants' meanings, experiences, views, and interpretations regarding virginity, stigma, social control, privacy, and marital relationships. The analysis emphasizes interpretive depth and the interconnections among personal experiences, social norms, religious values, and institutional practices rather than statistical generalization (Carminati, 2018). Accordingly, the findings are oriented toward transferability to social, cultural, and religious contexts with comparable characteristics.

Data Sources

The study used primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from 12 Muslim women with diverse backgrounds and experiences, including participants with medical backgrounds and relevant knowledge of female anatomy and virginity. Participants were selected purposively and subsequently recruited through snowball sampling. Secondary data included the Qur'an, hadiths concerning marriage and concealment of personal disgrace, Tafsir Ibn Katsir, Tafsir Al-Sa'di, and works by Samsuri, Sari, At-Tabrani, Al-Ramli, Najwah, Nur, and Rosmita. These sources were used to examine virginity in relation to chastity, honor, the prohibition of *zina*, marriage, privacy, and moral protection.

Data Collection

Data were collected through in-depth interviews, observation, and documentation. Interviews served as the primary method for exploring participants' views on virginity, hymenal condition, stigma, discrimination, partner selection, virginity testing, privacy, and disclosure during *ta'aruf*. Observation was used to understand the social contexts underlying participants' perspectives, while documentation provided complementary information. Islamic perspectives were examined through the Qur'an, hadith, tafsir, and Islamic literature addressing chastity, honor, *zina*, marriage, and concealment of personal disgrace. Data collection was conducted iteratively until relevant patterns were sufficiently identified.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis. First, the researchers familiarized themselves with the data by repeatedly reading interview transcripts and documentary sources. Second, relevant data were assigned initial codes. Third, related codes were grouped into preliminary themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed against the entire dataset to ensure consistency. Fifth, each theme was defined and named according to its substantive meaning. Sixth, the findings were organized into thematic narratives integrating empirical data, gender perspectives, and Islamic sources. This process generated themes concerning bodily objectification, stigma, social control, privacy, marriage, and the moral-religious construction of virginity.

Data Trustworthiness

Data trustworthiness was ensured through source and methodological triangulation. Source triangulation involved comparing perspectives across participants with different backgrounds and experiences, including those with medical expertise, and relating them to Islamic sources and relevant literature to strengthen interpretive credibility. Methodological triangulation was conducted by comparing and confirming findings from interviews, observations, and documentation (Carter et al., 2014; Natow, 2020). Interpretive consistency was further examined through repeated review of transcripts, codes, categories, and themes to ensure that the analysis remained grounded in the data. This process helped minimize researcher bias and ensured that the resulting themes represented consistent patterns of meaning across empirical and documentary sources.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Deconstructing virginity and the objectification of women's bodies

The findings reveal informants' criticism of equating virginity with the condition of the hymen. The gender perspective lies in the social construction of women's bodies as indicators of sexual experience, honor, and moral character, which does not always align with knowledge of women's physiological and anatomical diversity. The data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis: data familiarization, initial coding, theme identification, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report writing. Based on the coding process and the categorization of meaning patterns, four main themes were identified, as presented in the following table.

Table 1

Deconstructing Virginity and the Objectification of Women's Bodies

No.	Theme	Key Finding	Implication of the Finding
1	Virginity as a Social Construct	Virginity is understood as a concept shaped by social and sexual norms rather than as a biological condition with a definitive indicator.	Virginity is positioned as a social construct that shapes perceptions of women's bodies and sexuality.
2	Anatomical Variation and the Unreliability of the Hymen as an Indicator of Virginity	Variations in women's anatomy and the diverse factors affecting the hymen indicate that the hymen cannot serve as a sole indicator of virginity.	Understandings of virginity should recognize women's biological variation rather than reduce sexual status to a specific anatomical condition.
3	Virginity Is Not a Measure of Women's Worth	The findings reveal tension between views linking virginity to honor and views rejecting virginity as a measure of women's morality, worth, or character.	Women's worth, honor, and moral character should not be determined by virginity status.
4	Resistance to Stigma and Body-Based Judgments	Informants reject shaming, exclusion, and judgments of women based on virginity status and bodily condition.	Resistance to stigma reinforces women's position as subjects whose value and dignity extend beyond virginity status and bodily condition.

Source: Processed by the researcher (2023).

The first theme shows that the informants questioned the assumption that virginity can be anatomically verified. Aurora stated, "There is actually nothing that can definitively indicate virginity," although society continues to associate it with the condition of the hymen

(Interview, 12 February 2023). Deana explained that a virgin is understood as a woman “whose honor remains intact and who has never engaged in sexual intercourse” (Interview, 14 February 2023). These statements indicate that virginity is defined not only in relation to sexual experience but also through social norms concerning women’s bodies and honor. Thus, a discrepancy exists between socially constructed meanings of virginity and women’s actual bodily conditions.

The second theme highlights the informants’ emphasis on women’s biological diversity in questioning the hymen as an indicator of virginity. Esty stated that “physiologically and anatomically, every woman is different because the condition of the hymen also varies” (Interview, 16 February 2023). Aurora noted that “the hymen can tear due to many factors” (Interview, 12 February 2023), while Deana emphasized that this condition is not caused solely by sexual intercourse (Interview, 14 February 2023). Isella added that “some women are born without a hymen” and that changes may result from “falling off a bicycle or other accidents” (Interview, 17 February 2023). These statements reflect the informants’ understanding rather than individual medical diagnoses. Overall, the hymen was regarded as a biologically variable condition that cannot serve as a straightforward indicator of virginity.

The third theme reveals a tension between views that associate virginity with honor and those that reject it as a measure of women’s moral character. Deana stated that a virgin is understood as a woman whose “honor remains intact and who has never engaged in sexual intercourse” (Interview, 14 February 2023). Conversely, Isella asserted that “virginity does not determine whether someone is good or bad” (Interview, 17 February 2023). Christy likewise stated that virginity is “not the only standard for judging a person” (Interview, 16 February 2023). These accounts demonstrate the informants’ efforts to separate virginity status from women’s character and self-worth. Virginity was therefore not positioned as the sole measure of women’s honor, morality, or overall worth.

The fourth theme demonstrates resistance to social stigma based on virginity status. Isella stated, “Not being a virgin before marriage is acceptable because virginity does not determine whether someone is good or bad” (Interview, 17 February 2023). Christy emphasized, “Not being a virgin is not a disgrace for which someone should be ostracized ... virginity is not the only standard for judging a person” (Interview, 16 February 2023). The terms “disgrace” and “ostracized” indicate the social consequences women may experience when perceived as failing to meet standards of virginity. However, both informants rejected virginity status as a basis for ostracism, stigmatization, or moral judgment. This resistance locates women’s worth and dignity beyond assessments based solely on their virginity status or bodily condition.

Together, the four themes reveal a progression from the deconstruction of virginity to resistance against body-based judgments of women. The informants understood virginity as a social construction, questioned the reliability of the hymen as an indicator because of biological variation, separated virginity status from women’s worth, and rejected stigma and exclusion. From the perspective of Fredrickson and Roberts’ (1997) *Objectification Theory*, associating the hymen with virginity positions women’s bodies as objects of social observation and evaluation. Women’s identities are thereby reduced to the condition of a specific body part used to determine their sexual experience, honor, and social acceptability. In contrast, the informants’ views disrupt the presumed relationship among bodily characteristics, sexual status, and women’s social worth. The deconstruction of virginity thus represents resistance to bodily objectification while affirming that women’s dignity is not determined by their anatomical condition or virginity status.

Virginity, stigma, and social control over women's sexuality

The thematic analysis based on Braun and Clarke (2006) identified four themes illustrating how virginity status shapes women's social and moral experiences. These themes were constructed from recurring patterns of meaning across the interviews: (1) social stigma against women who are not virgins, (2) restrictions on freedom and opportunities for self-actualization, (3) virginity as a consideration in partner selection, and (4) regret, morality, and pressure to return to sexual norms. Collectively, these themes demonstrate that virginity is understood not merely as a personal matter but also as an issue associated with social judgment, family relationships, partner selection, and religious norms.

Table 2

Virginity, Stigma, and Social Control over Women's Sexuality

No.	Thematic Theme	Key Finding	Implication of the Finding
1	Social Stigma against Non-Virgin Women	Being non-virgin generates negative labeling and judgments associated with moral transgression.	Sexual stigma shapes social and moral judgments of women based on their virginity status.
2	Restrictions on Freedom and Self-Actualization	Stigma surrounding non-virginity can make women feel restricted, constrained, and socially pressured, although opportunities for self-actualization remain.	Stigma may constrain women's freedom and self-actualization but does not entirely eliminate their opportunities for personal development.
3	Virginity as a Consideration in Partner Selection	Virginity is perceived as a consideration for men when choosing a partner and may affect women's opportunities to find a partner.	Virginity status may influence women's acceptance in marital relationships and their opportunities to find a partner.
4	Regret, Morality, and the Call for Repentance	Non-virginity is understood as a moral and religious issue that may evoke regret and encourage repentance and self-improvement.	Religious norms may shape self-evaluation, feelings of regret, and motivation for behavioral change.

Source: Processed by the researcher (2023).

The first theme reveals the social stigma attached to women who are not virgins. Okta stated, "Such stigma does exist because people assume that women who are not virgins have done something beyond moral boundaries" (Interview, 15 February 2023). Jubellia similarly noted that "stigma surrounding virginity is widespread" and that negative judgments concerning non-virgin status may affect women (Interview, 15 February 2023). Raisa viewed such experiences negatively from an Islamic perspective because sexual relations that contravene religious norms are understood as *zina* (Interview, 16 February 2023). These data demonstrate that non-virgin status is understood not merely as a personal experience but is also associated with social judgments concerning propriety, morality, and conformity to religious norms.

The second theme shows that stigma also shapes women's social experiences. Jubellia stated that negative judgments concerning non-virgin status "often make women feel restricted and constrained in their freedom" (Interview, 15 February 2023). This statement indicates that stigma may impose restrictions at both personal and social levels. However, Okta emphasized that, despite such stigma, it "does not mean that she should be denied the space or opportunity to actualize herself" (Interview, 15 February 2023). These perspectives

demonstrate that stigma may create feelings of constraint without necessarily eliminating all opportunities for women's development and self-actualization.

The third theme indicates that virginity status may affect marital relationships and women's prospects of finding a partner. Jubellia stated that "virginity may be a primary consideration for men seeking a partner" because some men desire a partner who is perceived to have preserved herself for someone with whom a relationship is religiously lawful (Interview, 15 February 2023). She also disclosed, "As someone who was 'not a virgin' before marriage, I have found it extremely difficult to find a partner, even to this day" (Interview, 15 February 2023). This finding demonstrates that virginity operates not only as a moral category but also as a consideration in partner selection that may influence women's acceptance within marital relationships.

The fourth theme demonstrates that the experience of not being a virgin is also interpreted through moral and religious frameworks. Raisa, who stated that she had not been a virgin since high school, viewed the experience negatively from an Islamic perspective because sexual relations outside religious norms are understood as *zina* (Interview, 16 February 2023). Nevertheless, she emphasized the importance of embracing such individuals and advising them to prevent further involvement. The experience also generated regret and a desire to repent and become a better person. This finding indicates that non-virgin status produces not only social judgment but may also be internalized through self-evaluation, regret, and a religiously motivated desire for self-improvement.

Together, the four themes demonstrate that virginity functions as a social category that generates labeling, restrictions, and consequences for women's social position. From the perspective of Goffman's (1963) *Stigma Theory*, "non-virgin" status may become a discrediting attribute when associated with moral transgression, diminished suitability as a partner, or deviation from sexual norms. This is evident in Jubellia's feelings of restriction and difficulty finding a partner, as well as Raisa's internalization of moral judgment through regret and a desire to repent. However, Okta's perspective demonstrates that stigma does not necessarily eliminate women's opportunities for self-actualization. Thus, stigma shapes identity, social acceptance, partner relationships, and self-perception while still leaving room for resistance to such labeling.

Virginity surveillance, privacy, autonomy, institutions, and marriage

The thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) identified four themes illustrating how virginity is understood, monitored, and negotiated within religious, institutional, and marital contexts. These themes were developed by grouping recurring patterns of meaning in the data: (1) virginity as honor and a moral obligation, (2) rejection of virginity testing as a form of institutional control, (3) the privacy and confidentiality of virginity status as protection from disgrace, and (4) the negotiation of virginity disclosure during the *ta'aruf* process. Collectively, these themes reveal differing views among informants regarding the boundaries between religious norms, the right to privacy, and the perceived need to know a prospective partner's virginity status within marital relationships.

Table 3

Virginity Surveillance, Privacy, Autonomy, Institutions, and Marriage

No.	Thematic Theme	Key Finding	Implication of the Finding
1	Virginity as Honor and Moral Obligation	Virginity is understood as part of preserving women's self-respect, honor, religious commitment, and purity.	Virginity is situated within a religious-moral framework that regulates women's sexual behavior and honor.

2	Rejection of Virginity Testing as Institutional Control	Virginity examinations or tests conducted by institutions are perceived as discriminatory, degrading human dignity, and restricting women's freedom.	There is a demand for institutions to respect women's privacy, dignity, and autonomy over their bodies.
3	Privacy and Confidentiality of Virginity as Protection of Personal Shame	Virginity status is regarded as a private matter that should not be disclosed or freely questioned by others.	The protection of personal shame and confidentiality serves as a basis for limiting external intervention in women's sexual lives.
4	Negotiating Virginity Disclosure in <i>Ta'aruf</i>	Questions about virginity during <i>ta'aruf</i> are considered acceptable under certain circumstances when accompanied by honesty, explanation, and non-judgment; by contrast, such questions are considered inappropriate in dating relationships.	Virginity disclosure is negotiated according to the relational context, marital intentions, honesty, and respect for privacy.

Source: Processed by the researcher (2023).

The first theme shows that some informants understood virginity as part of women's self-worth, honor, and religious commitment. Sherly stated that preserving virginity is part of "maintaining a woman's self-respect," as well as her reputation, honor, and religion (Interview, 13 February 2023). Zahira likewise emphasized that *zina* is religiously prohibited because it is considered to compromise women's purity and entails consequences in both this world and the hereafter (Interview, 15 February 2023). These perspectives indicate that virginity is understood not merely as a sexual status but within a moral-religious framework that links sexual conduct to women's personal honor and religiosity.

The second theme reveals opposition to institutionally administered virginity examinations. Aurora stated, "I disagree with organizations or institutions imposing such rules on their employees because they are discriminatory, degrading to human dignity, and restrictive of individual freedom" (Interview, 12 February 2023). This statement suggests that virginity testing is perceived as exceeding institutional authority over women's bodies and private lives. Such opposition is grounded in concerns regarding discrimination, human dignity, and individual freedom. The informant thus distinguished between moral norms concerning virginity and institutional practices involving the direct examination of women's bodies.

The third theme shows that some informants regarded virginity status as a private matter that should remain confidential. Rahma stated, "It is a disgrace; we should conceal our disgrace and not disclose it" (Interview, 15 February 2023). She further emphasized that such a status "should not be questioned by others" and considered premarital health examinations more appropriate. Kamila similarly stated that virginity should not be questioned because individuals are not permitted to disclose their own disgrace unless an urgent interest is involved (Interview, 15 February 2023). These data indicate that the privacy of virginity status is understood as requiring protection from unnecessary intervention and disclosure.

The fourth theme demonstrates that disclosure of virginity status is negotiated differently within the contexts of *ta'aruf* and dating. Isella considered questions about virginity "entirely reasonable" during *ta'aruf* because Indonesian society regards virginity as important; in her view, such questions should be answered honestly and accompanied by an explanation (Interview, 17 February 2023). Deana also accepted such questions provided

that the prospective husband was willing to consider the prospective wife's reasons and "did not immediately judge her negatively" (Interview, 14 February 2023). However, she regarded the same question within a dating relationship as "unethical and inappropriate." These findings demonstrate that disclosure of virginity status depends on the relational context, the purpose of the relationship, honesty, and how the question is posed.

Together, the four themes show that virginity is negotiated across religious norms, institutional surveillance, privacy, and marital disclosure. From the perspective of Foucault's (1978) concept of *disciplinary power*, women's bodies and sexuality become objects of regulation through norms that define sexual conduct as acceptable and moral. Sherly's and Zahira's views illustrate the formation of moral-religious standards, whereas Aurora's rejection of virginity testing demonstrates resistance to institutional surveillance. Rahma's and Kamila's statements about concealing disgrace indicate the internalization of norms through self-regulation, while Isella's and Deana's views demonstrate that disclosure is contextually negotiated during *ta'aruf*. Thus, virginity is controlled through norms, examinations, disclosure, and self-regulation, while privacy and women's autonomy provide space for resistance.

Virginity from an Islamic perspective

The literature review indicates that, from an Islamic perspective, virginity is understood not merely as a sexual status but also in relation to purity, honor, morality, and the regulation of sexual conduct. The Qur'an affirms the equal dignity of men and women and prohibits *zina* as a basis for preserving honor and chastity. Hadith literature expresses a preference for virgin women in marriage without prohibiting marriage to widows, while the teaching on concealing disgrace protects individual privacy. The thematic analysis identified four themes: (1) purity and honor, (2) the prohibition of *zina*, (3) marital preference, and (4) disgrace, confidentiality, and moral protection.

Table 1
Thematic Findings on Virginity from an Islamic Perspective

No.	Thematic Theme	Qur'anic and Hadith Evidence	Meaning of the Finding	Source
1	Virginity, Purity, and Women's Honor	Qur'an 16:97 affirms the equal status of men and women in attaining a good life based on faith and righteous deeds. Qur'an 24:31 instructs believing women to guard their gaze, chastity, and modesty. Qur'an 3:42 portrays Mary as a woman chosen and purified by Allah.	Virginity is situated within a framework of purity, honor, self-restraint, and obedience to Allah, while human dignity is also associated with faith and righteous deeds.	The Qur'an; Samsuri (2020); Ibn Kathir (1999)
2	Prohibition of Adultery and the Preservation of Purity	Qur'an 17:32 prohibits approaching adultery and describes it as an indecent act. Qur'an 12:24 illustrates Allah's protection of Prophet Joseph from an indecent act.	The prohibition of adultery provides a normative basis for preserving personal purity and regulating sexual behavior in accordance with religious teachings.	The Qur'an; Al-Sa'di (2002); Sari (2015)
3	Virginity as a Marital Preference	A hadith reported by Ibn Majah recommends marrying virgins. A hadith narrated by Ahmad from Anas ibn Malik	Virginity is positioned as one preference in partner selection, but it does not prohibit	At-Tabrani (1995); Al-Ramli (2016); Ibn Kathir (1999); Najwah (2018)

		recommends marrying women who are loving and fertile. Qur'an 24:26 associates virtuous women with virtuous men.	marriage to widows or women who are no longer virgins.	
4	Shame, Confidentiality, and Moral Protection	A hadith concerning the concealment of personal faults encourages individuals who have committed sinful acts to conceal their faults rather than disclose them publicly.	The protection of personal faults positions sexual experiences as matters that should not be publicly disclosed, while providing space for the protection of personal dignity and privacy.	Hadith on concealing personal faults; Nur & Rosmita (2022)

Source: Processed by the researcher (2023).

The first and second themes demonstrate that virginity in Islamic literature is constructed within a framework of purity, honor, self-restraint, and the regulation of sexual conduct. Qur'an 16:97 affirms that the worth of men and women is determined by faith and righteous deeds, while Qur'an 24:31 emphasizes lowering the gaze and preserving sexual honor. Purity is also represented through Maryam in Qur'an 3:42 and associated with the concepts of *'izzah* and *'iffah*. Furthermore, Qur'an 17:32 prohibits *zina* and acts that may lead to it, while Qur'an 12:24 depicts Allah's protection of the Prophet Yusuf from indecency. Tafsir literature presents these verses as a basis for preserving honor and avoiding prohibited sexual conduct. Virginity is therefore understood not merely in anatomical terms but as part of a moral-religious construction emphasizing purity, self-control, and religious observance until lawful marriage, without treating sexual status as the sole measure of a person's worth.

The third and fourth themes demonstrate that virginity acquires meaning within marital relationships, partner selection, and the protection of honor and privacy. A hadith narrated by Ibn Majah recommends marrying virgin women, while a hadith narrated by Ahmad from Anas ibn Malik emphasizes the qualities of *wadud* and *walud*. The literature interprets marriage to a virgin woman as recommended, while maintaining that marriage to a widow remains permissible. Qur'an 24:26 is also used to associate good partners with one another, thereby positioning virginity as a normative marital preference rather than an absolute requirement. At the same time, the literature refers to hadiths encouraging individuals to conceal sins or disgrace rather than disclose them. This principle affirms the protection of individual honor, confidentiality, and privacy, including for those who have committed sexual transgressions. Sexual morality in Islamic literature thus operates not only through partner-selection norms, prohibitions, and behavioral regulation but also through the protection of dignity and personal confidentiality.

Overall, from an Islamic perspective, virginity is not merely a sexual status or biological condition but part of a moral-religious framework encompassing purity, honor, self-restraint, marriage, and privacy protection. Within marriage, virginity is positioned as a normative preference rather than an absolute condition of women's marital eligibility. The principle of concealing disgrace further underscores the importance of protecting personal dignity and confidentiality. A person's worth, therefore, cannot be reduced to their virginity status.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that virginity among Muslim women is a multidimensional concept shaped by the interaction of biological knowledge, social constructions, religious

norms, and institutional practices. The study produced four principal findings: (1) virginity cannot be determined by hymenal integrity or bleeding during first intercourse because anatomical variation and nonsexual factors make the *hymen* an unreliable indicator of sexual experience; (2) virginity status is associated with social stigma, moral judgment, restrictions on self-actualization, and partner selection, but does not determine women's worth or dignity; (3) the informants rejected virginity testing as a form of institutional control over women's bodies, while disclosure during *ta'aruf* was negotiated through honesty, privacy, and the protection of personal disgrace; and (4) Islamic sources position virginity within a framework of purity, honor, self-restraint, the prohibition of *zina*, marital preference, dignity, and individual confidentiality. Overall, virginity constitutes a site where sexual morality, gender constructions, bodily autonomy, privacy, and Muslim women's dignity are negotiated.

These findings are relevant to debates concerning women's bodies, morality, privacy, and gender discrimination in Indonesia. Virginity is often treated as a measure of women's honor, even though the condition of the *hymen* cannot medically establish a history of sexual intercourse (Robatjazi et al., 2016). Virginity testing is therefore problematic because it may cause trauma, violate privacy and dignity, and generate discrimination against women (Crosby et al., 2020; WHO, 2018). The informants' rejection of virginity-related stigma demonstrates resistance to norms that position women's bodies and sexuality as objects of moral control, as criticized in studies of the medicalization of virginity and hymenal reconstruction (Ahmadi, 2016; Wild et al., 2015). Nevertheless, the aspiration to reserve sexual relations for marriage remains strong as a religious value (Leavitt et al., 2021; McFarland et al., 2011). The tension among religious norms, medical knowledge, and the right to dignity underscores the need for a discourse on virginity oriented toward protecting human dignity, promoting responsible sexuality education, and reducing judgment against women.

Theoretically, the findings demonstrate that virginity is a multidimensional construction shaped by the body, religious norms, culture, and gendered power relations. The medical perspective separates sexual status from the anatomical condition of the *hymen*, whereas the religious perspective situates sexual restraint within the framework of *iffah*, honor, and the prohibition against approaching *zina* (Al-Khateeb et al., 2023; Al-Sa'di, 2002). *Objectification Theory* explains how women's bodies become objects of social evaluation (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Satinsky et al., 2012), while stigma attached to deviations from prevailing norms may produce a *spoiled identity* (Goffman, 1963; Waldschmidt, 2022). Foucault (1978) demonstrates that the surveillance of sexuality operates through the production of norms and social control. Religious values, however, are not synonymous with objectification or discrimination. Qur'an 16:97 affirms the equal moral responsibility of men and women. Virginity is therefore more appropriately understood in terms of sexual ethics, personal integrity, and reciprocal moral responsibility rather than merely as a biological indicator of women's dignity.

This study highlights the need to develop religious understandings that reconcile fidelity to moral values with respect for human dignity. The informants' experiences demonstrate that women may encounter psychological and social pressure when virginity is positioned as the sole measure of self-worth (Sabia & Rees, 2008). At the same time, Islamic teachings concerning *iffah*, repentance, concealment of disgrace, and the prohibition of *zina* demonstrate that sexual morality extends beyond punishment to encompass protection, recovery, and opportunities for self-improvement (Osman, 2023). The principles of concealing disgrace and refraining from humiliating individuals who regard their past sexual

experiences as moral transgressions and seek self-improvement provide a basis for a compassionate socio-religious approach (Agnes & Songwathana, 2021; Saharso, 2022). Maryam's purity and the Prophet Yusuf's steadfastness may be interpreted as symbols of moral integrity rather than as justification for evaluating human worth based on bodily anatomy (Ibn Kathir, 1999). This study, therefore, emphasizes the importance of integrating religious, medical, and gender literacy to prevent piety from becoming a source of stigma that degrades women.

Compared with previous studies, this research demonstrates that virginity in Indonesia is not merely a biological condition but a moral and social construction heavily laden with judgments about women. Mishori et al. (2019) and Moussaoui et al. (2022) demonstrate that the condition of the hymen cannot provide definitive evidence of sexual activity, while Tampubolon (2021) and Wynn and Hassanein (2017) highlight the effects of stigma in restricting women's social participation. The present findings are consistent with these studies regarding the limitations of anatomical indicators and the social consequences of virginity-related stigma. However, this study adds the dimension of Muslim women's internal negotiation among medical knowledge, cultural expectations, and religious teachings. Unlike studies that primarily criticize stigma, the informants continued to uphold the Islamic value of sexual purity without necessarily endorsing surveillance of women's bodies. The contribution of this study lies in integrating religious, medical, institutional, and women's experiential perspectives to provide a contextualized understanding of virginity in Indonesia.

Based on these findings, concrete measures are required to shift the discourse on virginity from surveillance of women's bodies toward education in sexual ethics, reproductive health, and respect for human dignity. Educational and religious institutions should explain that the condition of the hymen cannot reliably indicate a person's sexual history while simultaneously promoting equal responsibility among men and women for regulating sexual conduct. Public institutions should not use virginity testing as a requirement for education, employment, or recruitment because it is potentially discriminatory and lacks an adequate medical basis. During *ta'aruf*, communication about personal experiences should be guided by relevance, honesty, consent, privacy, and the protection of personal dignity. Society should also avoid stigmatizing women on the basis of their virginity status and provide psychological and religious support for individuals who require recovery or consciously seek reflection and self-improvement without experiencing exclusion or loss of social opportunities.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that virginity among Muslim women is a multidimensional concept that cannot be reduced to a specific biological condition. Hymenal integrity and bleeding during first sexual intercourse cannot serve as definitive indicators of sexual history because of anatomical variations and nonsexual factors. Nevertheless, virginity retains social and religious significance through its associations with honor, purity, self-restraint, stigma, partner selection, and moral judgment. The findings also reveal resistance to virginity testing as a form of institutional control over women's bodies and the negotiation of disclosure during *ta'aruf* based on honesty, privacy, and the protection of personal disgrace. Theoretically, this study distinguishes sexual morality from the objectification of women's bodies and demonstrates that virginity constitutes a site of negotiation among religious values, gender norms, bodily autonomy, privacy, and dignity. This distinction enables criticism of stigma without negating the moral values upheld by Muslim women.

This study contributes to understanding virginity as a construction shaped by biological, social, gender, religious, and institutional dimensions. The findings demonstrate that rejecting the hymen as a definitive indicator of sexual history does not necessarily entail rejecting Islamic sexual ethics. Instead, it enables a distinction between sexual moral responsibility and the objectification of women's bodies. In practical terms, the findings support the development of accurate, gender-sensitive, and dignity-based reproductive health and sexual ethics education. This study also emphasizes the importance of discontinuing virginity testing as an instrument of institutional assessment, strengthening privacy protection, and developing socio-religious approaches that do not discriminate on the basis of virginity status. These implications are relevant to educational institutions, healthcare services, religious organizations, and public institutions seeking to develop more equitable approaches to women's sexuality.

This study is limited by the scope of the Muslim women's experiences and the Islamic sources analyzed, and therefore does not represent the full diversity of Muslim perspectives in Indonesia. It also does not compare experiences across regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, age groups, educational levels, or affiliations with religious organizations. The perspectives of men, families, religious leaders, healthcare professionals, and institutions have not been examined to an equal extent. Future research should include more diverse participants, adopt comparative approaches across regions and generations, and examine the interactions among religious norms, medical knowledge, institutional policies, and women's experiences. Longitudinal and mixed-methods approaches may also be employed to understand changes in attitudes toward virginity and their social and psychological implications over time.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTION STATEMENT

Siti Nazla Raihana: Conceptualization; Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project Administration; Visualization; Writing Original Draft; Writing Review & Editing. **Salma Nuha Ghufro:** Data Curation; Formal Analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Supervision; Validation; Writing Original Draft; Writing Review & Editing.

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