

# Transcript

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Welcome everyone.

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This is the very first meeting of the woman's rights in the Middle East seminar. Thank you for being here. We started a little bit late this year.

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But hopefully we will.

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Be on a regular basis again from now on, so it's wonderful to have.

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Our guest tonight is WN triple.

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Doctor Nathi, I will introduce her first and then then get to.

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Special part.

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She's a research fellow at the Institute of Arab and Islamic Studies at the University of Exeter, and she earned her PhD from soaz University of London.

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A few.

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Ago, her work on gender and sexuality in Iran is you can find it in great detail in her book.

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Female bodies and sexualities in Iran and the search for defiance.

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I highly recommend that book. It's grounded in extensive demographic research that you conducted with two generations of Iranian women in Tehran.

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And her current work after the book has expanded these themes by examining the shifting masculinities, cultural norms and sexual attitudes among tehrans 1990s generation. And it draws on in depth discussions with both men and.

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Umm, the research also offers insights into the complex gender dynamics within the Iranian society and makes a significant contribution to academic debates on gender and sexuality in Iran and the Middle East, which is exactly.

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What we're here?

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To learn and to talk about.

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I have had the privilege of knowing that is there for the last.

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I am not going to say how many years that will reveal how old I am, but we met when we were doing a masters degree in Tehran. Allah Metabo Tower University and then yeah, we didn't really keep in touch.

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And.

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Yeah, yeah. But then after a while we realised we do have some connections with one of our colleagues here like.

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They are very closely related.

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So.

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She has.

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Lot of Wasps here tonight. Treat her well.

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But yeah, it's so wonderful. It's kind of like coming full circle to hear about your most recent work. And so, without further ado, please join me in welcoming.

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Thank you so much Maya John for having me here and thank you all for being here today. I'm going to read through a text because then it's going to.

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More.

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Like for you, it's been more easier for you to follow.

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In today's talk, I will describe my research.

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On the.

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Experiences of the 1990s generation in Tehran and I will share some of my concerns and challenges as it was the first time I was conducting ethnography among the.

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North and I will focus on how the normal female virginity shapes masculinities and argue that for younger men in Tehran, these norms generate complex and sometimes contradictory ideas of masculinity.

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Through \*\*\*\* graphic findings, I will highlight how these generations experiences reflect a broader shift in how masculinity is understood and performed.

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So about my project.

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Background and field work. I started my field work in Tehran in 2019 while doing my postdoc at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Tehran. My project was titled Narratives of Femininities and Masculinities among the youth.

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And due to the sensitivity of discussing sex and sexuality in Iranian academia, my proposed project focused on the effects.

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Of recent changes in their state's sexual policies on university as students, perceptions of marriage and childbearing. But in practise, I was continuing my intergenerational research on collecting narratives of body and sexuality within the Iranian context.

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And to achieve this I conducted in depth interviews with unmarried male and female university.

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Born in the 90s, I asked them about their bodily and sexual experiences.

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Such as when they first learned about sex, their first sexual contact, how they felt afterward, and their use of contraception and sexual health.

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So I was particularly interested in tracking shifts in their narratives and understanding how these young men and women perceive themselves as sexual being within the framework of gender policies, cultural expectations, and social norms.

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Although in my previous work as Marianne mentioned, I had collected women's narratives of embodiment.

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This was.

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First time I interviewed men and asked them similar questions.

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So in general, throughout my research, I mean my work. I'm interested in understanding how embodiment is shaped by social, cultural, religious, economic, and political factors. For example, as I discuss in detail in my book.

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Even natural bodily experiences like menstruation and puberty are heavily influenced by cultural meaning, scientific discourses, and religious regulations.

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These factors serve to reproduce unjustified the shame associated with the female body as sexuality in Iranian context, I explore how bodies are constructed at the intersection of multiple discourses and, more importantly, how.

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These constructions shape women's relations.

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With their bodies.

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In this project I had the opportunity to examine how men perceive and define their masculinities.

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Through their own narratives of intimacy and embodiment, in my previous field work, I had heard a great deal about men. Obviously, their perceptions of sex and sexual pleasure and their attitudes toward gender norms, such as female virginity.

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From female informants. But this time I was able to ask men directly and gain insights into how they understood their own bodies and sexuality.

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As they navigated the evolving social, cultural context of their.

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Lives.

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So.

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Let me share some challenges I've faced while discussing sexuality in a culture where the topic is a consider shameful and taboo, I think so you're interested.

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In my previous research with women, I found that talking about sex was difficult, especially with the older generation and with the older generation. I mean, my mom's generation 1950s were born in 1950s.

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You gave us a ring? Yeah.

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But I have but I had a strategy.

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None.

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I would often start the conversation by asking about menstruation, which felt less taboo and was something we could relate to through shared bodily experience.

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Even though my female informants were always women that I had no previous connection with.

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And still, as a woman, I felt more at ease, at ease to start the conversation and ask my question. I even enjoyed my conversations with the older generations of women as they invited me to their homes, showed me their photo albums and shared memories from the times when they were growing up. Before and after the Islamic revolution in 1979.

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And they were even most eager to talk explicitly about their sexual experiences.

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As they never had the chance before.

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But with man, however, I had to rethink my approach. I didn't have a shared bodily experience to draw on, so I usually began by asking how they first learned about sex.

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This question often brought up stories about their time in same sex schools and their early sexual encounters with other boys. Just to remind you that all schools in Iran are sex AG.

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During the first few interviews, I was super nervous. I wasn't even sure about the use of language. I faced the taboos and the gender norms. I have internalised myself in the family of social cultural contexts of my own life.

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Would it be inappropriate for me as a woman to discuss sex with men I was meeting for the first time?

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Would I be able to ask them personally intimate questions?

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I also worry they might use explicit or vulgar language just to.

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Me. Uncomfortable.

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But what I found was quite the opposite.

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The man I interviewed were also nervous and expressed surprise at having this conversation with a female researcher. Some even confided secrets they had never shared with anyone but their therapist. While a few did use explicit language.

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They often apologised and asked for permission before doing so. I even asked them about the meaning of the slangs they use and they explained, so this is how I'm proving over a period of two years.

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In between, obviously COVID happened. I interviewed around 15 men. As I listened to their stories, I heard about their insecurities and feelings of shame, betrayal and even abuse.

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I realised even as someone who was familiar with.

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With the cruel perceptions of femininities and masculinities, I had this unified and stereotypical image of heterosexual men in Iranian context.

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So why the normal female virginity? I mean, why? I'm looking at masculinity in relation to female virginity.

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It's interesting because, for example, if you speak with someone in Tehran right now and ask them is virginity is still important, they would probably tell you that there are no virgins anymore.

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Especially among the younger generations, they would say that everyone is having premarital sexual relations and no one cares about virginity anymore.

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I'm not saying that it's not true, but it's partially partially true in the way. But when you sit down and talk one-on-one with a younger woman, you realised that they are still deeply aware of the norm. If they do choose to have complex to have complete sexual relations, and I mean by general intercourse.

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Engage in other forms of sexual intimacy to keep their high men intact. It is a decision they make in relation to their own cultural and familial context. As many of my female informants noted, female virginity remains important for both men and families.

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Although many topics and issues came up during my conversations with main informants, I specifically asked them about the norm of female virginity because I was curious to hear their perspective.

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This norm offers a lens through which we can analyse how ideals of both femininity and masculinity are constructed. Understanding how men behave and perform according to the norm of female virginity, or why men place importance on these expectation.

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Is essential for uncovering how it shapes their sexual experiences.

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Image.

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Virginity is often framed within an honest shame framework. In this context, losing virginity before marriage is seen as bringing dishonour to women and shame to their male relatives, who are expected to protect the family's reputation.

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However, this prime framework is simplifying. I think the situation because virginity is not just about protecting men's honour, it also shapes how men assert their sexual competence and define their masculinity.

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So if we're going into my field work findings, I just, I have to explain this concept of hegemonic masculinity, a very important concept in gender studies introduced by Connell and widely applied, especially in the field of masculinity studies. His Germanic masculinity refers to the dominant ideals of manhood.

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Those that are praised and aspired to in a given culture. While these ideals can change over time and vary across society, they often represent characteristics.

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Such as heterosexuality, physical strength and sexual authority. As Connell argues, there is a spectrum of different types of masculinity in every society that are positioned in relation to hegemonic masculinity.

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And all men try to achieve it. So at the top stands the hegemonic masculinity, an ideal type, obviously, and at the bottom is subordinate masculinity. Subordinate masculinities are the masculinity. Masculinities at our marginalised and oppressed by the dominant or hegemonic masculinity.

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We can describe them as masculinities that are more for example, emotional or non authoritative or non heteronormative. The hierarchy of masculinities has provided an insightful framework for studying gender relations in a given society.

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Still, there have been many critics of the concept since introduction in early 80s.

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Here in my argument, I followed the critic of Marcia Inhorn to highlight the limits of categories such as hegemonic masculinity in understanding the construction of masculinities and the hierarchy of gender relations in a variety of socio cultural contexts.

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Inhorn argues that the realities of men's lives and their embodied masculinities.

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Reveal the.

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Advance nature. A man might perform different types of masculinities over his lifetime.

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Which often contrasts with general assumptions about masculinities inherit negraphes, and I suggest, if you are interested, read her books because it's fascinating and the emergence of new types of masculinity, especially in relation to.

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Reproductive technology. She talks about Arab men and how their life realities and their relationships with their wives and children are different from the stereotypical image of an angry man, a patriarch who is violent and without emotion.

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A Usman. Perceptions of the normal female virginity to argue that instead of categorising it, is important to show their nuance and evolving understandings of masculinity. For example, if you want to categorise masculinities in relation to female virginity, the hegemonic type would be a man who is sexually active.

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Concerned with his own sexual satisfaction, yet expects to marry a virgin.

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I couldn't find anyone among my mailing formats who I could put clearly into this category. Even those who wanted to marry a virgin on the opposite end of the spectrum is a masculinity that places no importance on female virginity.

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And doesn't ask or even think about it in intimate relationships among mine. 15 in formats, three of them explicitly mentioned that virginity was not an issue for them. I could see through the way they reacted to my question is female virginity is important for you?

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That they truly didn't care throughout the conversations, their views remained consistent, but based on their multiple sexual experiences and popularity among their peers, still couldn't categorise them as subordinate masculinities. Masculinity that doesn't care about, for example, his other and reputation.

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Of his female relatives, etcetera. In between obit in Farsi in between, where the majority of my informants that based on their own life experiences express nuance and sometimes contradictory aspects toward the norm of female virginity.

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I give you examples from my ethnography. So first example is Sohail and Mohammed.

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And Sohail, born in 1991, I'm from an affluent, non religious family, described himself as someone who values emotional connection over casual sex. When I asked whether virginity mattered to him in marriage responded.

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And I called. Why would it matter to?

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It's.

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Like I'm bridging myself and of course.

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However, he also admitted that he would not enter into a relationship with the Virgin.

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He explained that he was concerned about the emotional attention and support required after a woman's first sexual experience.

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Several other interviewees also said they would never date or engage in a sexual relationship with a virgin woman. They pointed to the importance of sexual intimacy while dating, but also revealed other reasons behind their actions.

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Mohammed, who was the same age as Sohay, grew up in a religious and wealthy bazaar family. He laughed as he told me that before having any physical contact with his girlfriends.

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He used to engage in temporary marriage. See there. Now, however, he had different religious viewpoints. Mohammed explained that for some young men, the reason virginity remains important is because they are still immature.

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Kids.

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He remembered, and I called. If someone had told me five years ago that my future wife wasn't a virgin, I probably wouldn't have been able to sleep. I used to spend nights thinking about it, whether my wife would be a virgin or not.

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What age?

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For example.

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For example, I once had this girlfriend. I really loved, and I'd keep hoping that when she came to my place she would turn out to be a virgin because if she wasn't, my whole mind sent about her would change.

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But now, no, not anymore. I've come. I've come to terms with the fact that just like I had experiences she would have had hers too. And of course, but it's still similar to Sohay. Mohammed explained that he would not date a virgin.

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As I called first of all.

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I don't want to.

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The one who breaks the barrier for.

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I mean, why should I be the first one to do this? You know the stigma of this is still huge for me. And of course.

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The phrase breaking the barrier for others.

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Came up repeatedly.

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So other men. Sorry, I I thought like for the.

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No.

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No, no. For other women, yeah.

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Sorry. No, it's like it.

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Yes, the robot came up repeatedly in interviews with other young men. They expressed that once a woman has lost her virginity, she gains more freedom to engage in further relationship with other men. Interestingly, as I observed my feel.

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Male doctors who perform high menoplasty hymen repair surgery have similar beliefs.

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These doctors claim that by restoring the high man, they restore purity to women. According to them, women who seek the procedure do so because they do. They no longer want premarital sexual relations.

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And are preparing for marriage. The doctors argue that the surgery acts as a barrier against further sexual activity before marriage. Mohammed places importance on men's responsibility over women's sexual activity.

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While while this responsibility may differ.

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From the traditional notions of Beirut, other enormous parasite like obsession with family honour, it remains a distinctly masculine trait.

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So the second example is Jose.

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I'm at Hossein, born in 1997, an undergraduate student in a coffee shop in central Tehran. His family lives in a smaller city in northern Iran. While he resides alone in Tehran. Over the past few months, he has been in a relationship with one of his university classmates.

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He said he felt guilty because he was unsure whether he wanted to marry her.

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When I asked why he hesitated, he explained, because she and the girl thought she was entering a lasting relationship and that's why she agreed to have sex.

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And.

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Course, Hosain said that virginity didn't matter to him as long as the woman had moved on from her past. When I asked him what he meant by moving on, he explained. And I quote, I mean, she shouldn't still be thinking.

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About her previous partner.

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It should be a.

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That's fully behind her end of goal.

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Hussain, similar to Sohail, highlights his gendered and stereotypical presumption about sex that women become emotionally attached through sexual relations, while for men it is merely a physical experience, even though their personal experiences and intimate relationships prove otherwise.

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Which I come back to it.

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I then asked does her past really matter to you? He paused briefly and replied and I called. Yes, not to the extent that I let it ruin everything.

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But to some degree it does matter. Overall, though, I prefer it if her first time was with me. And of course. But I ask why he has stated and said I don't know. Maybe it's a wrong belief. I mean, I've been with other myself, but that's still.

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My preference? That said, if it's not the case, it's not a big.

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Either and of course.

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A significant point in Hosain's remarks, according other interviews, is the feeling of guilt. On one hand, he internalises the expectation of valuing a woman's virginity in the context of marriage. On the other hand, he feels guilty about being complicit in compromising this norm through premarital sexual relationships.

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For hose, virginity becomes a source of internal conflict and doubt, leaving him torn between societal expectations and his personal experiences.

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Third example is Amir.

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Amirbourne in 1994 and we met and talked at his university campus, and our conversation lasted about two hours. Amy was from a very interesting background. His grandfather and father were famous. Revolutionary.

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Religious singers but singers say and he was raised in a very religious environment. But he mentioned that he had different political views from his family and no longer held religious religious beliefs.

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He had a variety of sexual experiences with boys and girls and identified himself as bisexual, a secret that no one knew about. He went into a great deal of detail to narrate his sexual experiences, his obsessions and fetishes.

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He is now in an emotional relationship with a girl and told me that he needed this emotional connection. He told me that in his first sexual relationship with a girl in high school, he refused to have complete intercourse with her.

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Arguing that.

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And I called.

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She couldn't make a logical decision at the moment.

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Later, the girl broke up with him and had another partner with whom she had complete sexual intercourse.

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So based on the conversation we had earlier, I asked him if you knew you didn't want to marry this girl. Would you still be willing to have sex with her? Amir paused for a moment and then said and I called.

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No, not with someone like her because I feel she needs this virginity for her family, for the fact that if a sister comes to their house later, she has to be a virgin and the one who takes her virginity has to be her husband.



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If she loses her virginity, she won't be able to get married. Virginity isn't the sexual concept at all. It's completely cultural, completely tied to the cultural atmosphere she is living in.

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Ethically, I have no issue. I have an issue with it taking otherwise taking care of virginity is no better than for me, and of course.

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Another slag that came up a lot during my conversation about virginity with made interviews was.

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Zadama, Parde, Barry man Coronado.

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Or curtains here refers to the hymen as in Persian. The hymen is translated to Parde Becorat. So if I want to translate this slime into English, that would be.

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Removing her virginity.

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But I think the Persian language they use highlights more clearly how they define their active and masculine assertiveness in sexual intercourse.

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Although in their description it seems that women are submissive and passive, their experiences such as amazed with his girlfriend with his first girlfriend and so had repeatedly expressing his sexual insecurities challenge.

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This perception. So he, for instance, kept emphasising. I don't know why girls break up with me. I even asked them if I was bad in sex.

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And they said no.

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To highlight that sex is very important for girls nowadays, men like him even face pressure, such as taking pills to perform as girls expect in order to secure a relationship with someone they like.

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Going back to Amir, in his own words, he takes it upon himself to decide whether engaging in a sexual relationship and losing.

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Her virginity would be beneficial for the girl's future and whether the decision she might make in the moment is rational. To Amir, this is an ethical and responsible behaviour for any young man to consider the cultural and familiar circumstances of his partner.

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Rather than acting purely out of selfish desires for sex.

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Based on Amir's description of the girl's family, I could see what he meant because she was from a religious family in a city in central Iran and was attending university in Tehran. This perspective shows his care and compassion towards the girl as he prioritises.

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Her well-being over his own desires.

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Ultimately, the reasoning and justification of these young men might seem similar to hegemonic masculinity, which defines manhood through a sense of directed protectiveness and safeguarding women. However, it is more complex and layered, due to the meanings they attach to their decisions and behaviour.

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These men are acutely aware of the impact losing virginity can have.

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On women's social standing within her family and the potential reduction in her prospects for marriage.

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For this reason, they perceive themselves as morally irresponsible and act cautiously in their decisions. This sense of responsibility is closely tied to their guilt discussed earlier, which arises from engaging in behaviour they recognise as unethical.

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Or responsible toward the woman and her future.

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They experience tension between their rejection of traditional religion norms and their continued performance based on cultural expectations. Amir and Muhammad may outwardly oppose the virginity norm, claiming that virginity at the time of marriage is meaningless to them.

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However, this attitude does not translate into irresponsible behaviour toward women before marriage. First, as Amir describes, they consider the cultural and social atmosphere and the woman's family.

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Circumstances before making a decision about engaging in a sexual relationship. Second, if they conclude that virginity is important for the woman's future, they refrain from engaging in a relationship even with her consent, and instead contribute to preserving her virginity.

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If a man like Hosain chooses to engage in a relationship despite being aware of the importance of virginity for the woman he experiences guilt for having acted irresponsibly and unethically.

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This tension, I think, is due to shift in sexual norms as younger generations of women. As I mentioned before, are more actively involved in sexual relations.

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Just to highlight and summarise what I want to argue here is that I remember that after transcribing the interviews and reading them for the first time, I tried to categorise and label them in relation to hegemonic masculinity.

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And for example, I remember I labelled Hussain.

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I don't know if.

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It's a good translation of the Persian word or not, but as unsettled masculinity mardoni Guillermo Azza and Amir as ethical masculinity, and I try to sort of put others into these two different.

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Categories.

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But I soon realised the limitation of categorization which can oversimplify the complexity of the context.

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How they're sort of interlinked to each other.

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And first of all, I could not clearly distinguish between these categories and 2nd I could not place them.

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Within a hierarchical relationship, so it's hard to give a definite sort of conclusion as this papers is still a work in progress and I would like to hear your thoughts on it. However, I believe that the inner conflicts, the emergence of emotions such as guilt, responsibility and the contradictions.

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Doubts observed in the statements of the interviewees point to a shift in the ideologues of masculinity and the construction of new meanings of manhood among these generations.

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This transformation suggests that forms of masculinities are not coherent or easy to recognise. Instead, they are being redefined in response to broader social, cultural and individual changes.

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These new constructions reflect masculinities that are more aware of ethical and emotional complexities, even as they remain entangled in the framework of traditional norms.

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Thank you.

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Wow, thank you so very much. This was such a fresh perspective and I'm sure.

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That has contributed to why we're seeing so many faces tonight. That's something that not a lot of people have worked on and have stories to tell from. So I I specifically myself really appreciate it.

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Let me kick start the discussion with a question and I might be stealing this question from many people, but I have the privilege, so I will.

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Asked so.

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Yeah. Do you have paper?

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And that is.

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The shifts that you think have happened, or you predict or you have observed in these like new trends of masculinity and masculin tension after the.

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My life. Freedom of money, yeah.

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There seem to be from someone from afar who hasn't done research on that, like gender on your own really has only experienced gender in Iran.

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1st.

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It was very positively, very pleasantly shocking. They like the new perspectives that you would hear from young men. I mean, I only saw it on social media and like for maybe from people around me, of course.

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But it's seem like such a drastic.

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Shift. Of course not, like omnipotent or.

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Omnipresent any or, umm, like uh, homogeneous, completely but this?

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Complete openness and recognition of the leadership of women of they, like their recognising their subjectivity and.

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Just looks the.

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They take him for grantedness of the equal footing that they now saw just took me by surprise. This kind of like builds some bass and like.

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The context for this transformation like this, the masculine tensions or like magnet mazap like uncomfortable masculine.

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That you you have heard from.

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Heard about from your, umm interviewees, I was wondering if you see such a connection. If you if you saw the.

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The exact thing that we that others saw after the movement already in young men, or if you saw like the beginnings of it, do you see a connection there? And do you see a like a certain development?

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In the process.

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Thank you for the question, because I think it's very important and I wish I could continue working on this.

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Especially after the women life freedom movement. But to answer your question, I think yes, obviously I mean.

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Obviously the the killing of mass harmony or that that have mass of mass of M in E was a turning point and it changed many things. Changed everything like to before her death and after her death. Especially when you even when you walk in the streets of Tehran, you could see women who not wearing hijab anymore.

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And man like acting very supportive of of their.

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Women and but I think it it built on the shifts or the changes were happening before you know it's it wasn't like out of blue you know you because you could see among especially the.

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The 90s, and obviously the younger generation after how they behave and reacted differently even in terms of their clothing and their sexual relations, their relations in general. And so I think it's.

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It's completely sort of to follow that shifts and trends, but here I think it would be interesting just to go back and ask men the same questions because.

00:36:10

Obviously, after the Bummula freedom movement, many other aspects and issues that you can work on, you know you can ask them about and. But yeah, I think.

00:36:22

Yeah, I would.

00:36:22

Be curious to know how much of the tension is released now because like as you mentioned there's there's this like contrast between like respecting the woman's.

00:36:32

Like cultural, like restraints, but also kind of like reproducing them by not like asking the woman what she wants, but just like deciding for her that, yeah.

00:36:47

This will get you into trouble. I'm not gonna have sex with you. So I wonder, like, if you go back to the same people, how much of the sanction will be now? It's just like out the window, but yeah, I'll stop here and open the floor to questions.

00:36:55

Yeah.