



Shame, secrecy and silence keep women in sex purgatory

Many migrant women are still in the dark, writes **Kate Aubusson**.

Hela Jaffar had been married for two years before she mustered the courage to see a gynaecologist in secret. It was two years of not knowing how her body worked sexually, nor how to be intimate with her husband. He was just as naive.

“My husband didn’t know what a woman’s [sexual] organs were. He just didn’t know what to do and neither did I,” said Ms Jaffar, who migrated to Australia from Iraq.

“He didn’t allow me to see a gynaecologist, so I went without his consent.”

At first, her husband had blamed her for their sexual inadequacies. Once she had gained a little knowledge and some semblance of sexual agency, he punished her for it, she said.

“As a woman, you are doomed either way. On one side you’re not supposed to know anything about sex, because that means you might have tried it [before marriage]. On the other side, they blame you because you don’t know anything,” Ms Jaffar said.

She said she was made to feel her desires were abhorrent and her now ex-husband felt his were a sign of weakness.

“When I asked for sex, I was said to be a bitch,” she said. “I was scared of him. If I ever was not obedient he would threaten to take my kids away. I was scared of being humiliated. It was hell for 16 years.”

Ms Jaffar now supports migrant women as a case worker at

the Community Migrant Resource Centre in Parramatta.

Shame, secrecy, silence and fear were keeping many new migrant women in the dark about their own sexual and reproductive health, a recent study published in the *Archives of Sexual Behaviour* found. Cultural and religious beliefs were major barriers to many women accessing health services, the researchers warned. They had held focus groups with 169 single, married, divorced and widowed women who arrived in Australia or Canada from Sudan, South Sudan, Somalia, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sri

Lanka, India and Latin America within the previous six years. The women were between 18 and 70 with religious backgrounds traversing Islam (66 per cent), Christianity (20 per cent), Hinduism (7 per cent), Sikhism (2 per cent) and Buddhism (1 per cent).

Migrant and refugee women had higher rates of sexual health problems, lead researcher Jane Ussher at Western Sydney University’s Translational Health Research Institute said.

“Many of the women in the focus groups were not allowed to talk or even think about sex before marriage,” Professor Ussher said. A woman who spoke about sex was tarred as a

“whore”, “vulgar” or “not a good girl”, several women told their focus groups.

“Any knowledge that these women have about sexual health issues is often pieced together from female friends, relatives and the media,” Professor Ussher said.

Their wedding night was often a frightening experience, with one Iraqi woman saying: “I thought he

was doing the wrong things, and I started screaming.”

Professor Ussher said there was “still a lot of shame around sex and very little knowledge about sexual desire”.

“They either had not experienced desire or, if they had, they were not allowed to express it,” she said. The exceptions were some Islamic women whose beliefs dictated a husband must please his wife, but women were still not permitted to ask for sex.

Many said they had no consensual rights and couldn’t say no “because god or the angel would punish them”, Professor Ussher said.

Several women said they were shocked and frightened when they got their first period, thinking they were sick, injured, or they were being punished for some unknown wrongdoing.

Many participants had urinary tract and yeast infections but avoided or put off seeing a doctor. Several women became more sexually proactive and others rebelled by educating daughters about sexual rights, learning about consent and finding their own sexual pleasure when they came to Australia.

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06 Aug 2017
Sun Herald, Sydney

Author: Kate Aubusson • Section: General News • Article type : News Item
Audience : 175,652 • Page: 5 • Printed Size: 546.00cm² • Market: NSW
Country: Australia • ASR: AUD 23,306 • Words: 680 • Item ID: 823340858

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**Case worker Hela
Jaffar supports
migrant women
in Parramatta.**
Photo: Nick Moir