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## South Africa's virginity testing



By Antony Kaminju  
Pietermaritzburg, South Africa

### Having her virginity regularly tested makes South African Nsomawethu Tshobeni feel good.

"At 31 I'm very proud to be a virgin, and when I attend the test regularly it gives me self-esteem as a woman," said the nurse who works in the coastal city of Durban.

A revival in the traditional practice among young Zulu women in South Africa is portrayed by supporters as the best way to stop unwanted pregnancies and the spread of HIV/Aids.

But opponents say the practice is sexist and outdated and can even increase the chances of Aids - given the widely held misconception that unprotected sex with a virgin is safe or can cure Aids.

### Workshop

Some 200 young Zulu women attended a session in Pietermaritzburg in KwaZulu-Natal province ranging in age from seven to 31.

They met five female elders in a workshop and discussed general sexuality as well as more specific problems.

The physical examination to determine if they have ever had sex seemed very much a secondary part of the proceedings.



Human rights activists say virginity testing is demeaning

How to deal with rape, which is at epidemic levels in South Africa, was one of the topics that came up during the session.

The discussions, however, rarely mentioned condoms, regarded in South Africa as the first defence against Aids.

### 'Colonialist mentality'

Instead, abstinence was highlighted as the main way to prevent infection.

Nomagugu Gobese, an elderly woman who founded the

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Nomkhubulwane Culture and Youth Development Organisation and who is dubbed "auntie" by many of the girls who come for testing, is among those who strongly support the tradition.

Gobese said virginity testing had been practised for hundreds of years and those opposing the tradition, which she likened to a religion, were adopting "a colonialist mentality".



Female elders discussed general sexuality matters with the girls

"The lesson should be to teach the school kids on how to abstain and not to make them think that it's OK to fall pregnant," she said.

Makhosaza June has been sending her 24-year-old daughter for virginity tests every month.

"I have seen the effect on my daughter since she started attending the tests," she says.

"She now has self-respect and she is the one who wants to attend those tests, I don't force her."

### Risk

But Loveness Jambaya, of the non-governmental advocacy group Gender Links in Johannesburg, said the practice puts women's lives into jeopardy.

"You are at greater risk of rape because of (the incorrect) belief of sex with virgins helping to fight Aids. And if you're found to have had sex you are open to being ostracised by the community and all forms of abuse," she said.



"HIV/Aids is the greatest risk they face."

“ This event gives me a chance to meet other girls who are virgins. I now know myself and I'm responsible for my body ”

For generations Zulu homes have run tests to ensure their daughters fetch a higher "lobola", the traditional payment made by the groom's family to the bride's family.

Sthabile Buthelezi, 25

"It's unacceptable. It's imposed on a girl but not a boy which is unfair," says Cecilia Ncube of the UN's women's rights agency, Unifem in Johannesburg.

"And it stigmatises.

"A man is expected to marry a virgin - if she is exposed then she will be an outcast in the community."

South Africa's parliament in 2005 considered a proposal to ban the tests, but the measure was defeated.

### Tests

Doctors and Zulu elders concede the tests do not in themselves reveal whether a person is HIV-positive.

But the tests can reveal who may be having unsafe sex and which among them need counselling and possibly treatment.

Supporters add that girls who successfully pass the tests receive reaffirmation for their choice to remain chaste.

Sthabile Buthelezi, 25, said she had been attending virginity testing sessions since 1994.

"This event gives me a chance to meet other girls who are virgins, and we can show the whole world that we are virgins. I now know myself and I'm responsible for my body," she said.

For those who say the virginity tests place too much of an onus on women, Nomagugu Gobese has a surprise.

She said she will begin testing boys later. Medical experts might question her methods, but she said she is sure she will be able to tell who has been having sex.

"Boys should be taught to be good mannered as well, not just girls.

"Otherwise we are fighting a losing battle by concentrating on the girls only," she said.

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