

**RECONSTRUCTING VIRGINITY: HIDDEN SENTIMENTS AND COMPLEXITIES
BEHIND HYMENOPLASTY IN KYRGYZSTAN**

By

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Declaration of Original Research and The Word Count

I hereby declare that this thesis is the result of original research; It contains no materials accepted for any other degree in any other institution and no materials previously written and/or published by another person, except where appropriate acknowledgement is made in the form on bibliographical reference.

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Abstract

This study aims to explore experiences and perceptions of young Kyrgyz women, who underwent the hymenoplasty, towards the hymen restoration surgery in Kyrgyzstan. In Kyrgyz society, the procedure of hymenoplasty is not a subject of open discussions and definitely not of a social approval. Also, due to the ethical character of the surgery, there is no existing statistical data about the hymenoplasty and number of women undergoing this genital cosmetic surgery in Kyrgyzstan. By focusing on the women's lived experiences, their voices, and meanings attached to this genital cosmetic surgery this research seeks to address the issue that remains yet unexplored within Kyrgyz society. The primary goal of this research is to examine the role hymen restoration surgery plays in lives of women in Kyrgyzstan: its impact on women's lives and their relationship with their families, as well as motives and circumstances that pushed/motivated women to undergo this surgery. Thus, I intend to raise Kyrgyz women's voices and explore the phenomenon from the inside.

Through applying qualitative research and in-depth interviewing, I examine the experiences, motives and desires of various Kyrgyz women who underwent the hymenoplasty in their given socio-cultural settings. I will argue that hymenoplasty is a complex phenomenon that cannot solely be identified through the binaries of resistance and subordination. Building on the theoretical framework of agency, subjectification and patriarchal bargaining I posit that Kyrgyz women exercise their own agency through undergoing hymen restoration surgery and negotiate between the dominant norms of their socio-cultural context and their personal desires and motives.

Keywords: women, agency, gender, subjectification, power, hymen, hymenoplasty, virginity.

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INTRODUCTION

“Thus, within the ideology of honour and shame, the protected hymen has a symbolic value where the whole family shares in the ownership of the hymen. While the hymen anatomically belongs to the girl, yet it culturally belongs to the whole group. The hymen becomes a social category, a social marker of honourable and respectable female. Dominant cultural norms regard the intact hymen not only as a proof of virginity, but also as the only acceptable proof.” (Ghanim, 2015, p. 43)

“What may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agential capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15)

Although in many societies the status of female virginity is not of a great significance and value, there are still the societies who put their strongest emphasis on the status of young women’s sexual purity and hymen in particular. Being a psychological and socially constructed notion, the idea of virginity became linked to physical bodies through employing the notion of hymen that is applicable only to female bodies. Thus, societies were able to control female sexuality through the idea of ‘universal’ thin membrane at the vaginal opening that in reality serves no anatomic function (Amy, 2008; Cook & Dickens, 2009; Ghanim, 2015). This type of social construction of female virginity contributes to the patriarchal notions of sexuality and masculinity by limiting the realm of sexuality to penile-vaginal intercourse penetration, and contributes to understanding of virgin as of a “girl yet unpenetrated by man” (Ghanim, 2015, p. 42)

The patriarchal attempts to control female sexuality can be observed on the notorious example of female genital mutilation (FGM) still practised in Sub-Saharan part of Africa and Arab states. FGM is a partial or total removal of the external female genitalia, and the practise remains one of the most common surgical procedures done for the cultural reasons (UNFPA, 2020). Despite the practice has been recognized as a violation of women’s and girls’ rights by multiple international, human rights and health organizations, the statistics shows

approximately 200 million girls and women across the world have been subjected to FGM nowadays (UNFPA, 2020; WHO, 2020). Besides, the surgery is usually performed by the local traditional health practitioners (not doctors) and proved to have no health benefits for women. It is important to note that the practice mostly appears to be involuntary for girls since the genital cutting is happening even when the family knows that it is harmful for the woman and might lead to serious health complications in future. Despite being performed against young girls' own will and mostly at parental request, this practice, nevertheless, has been considered as a 'social norm' quite for a long period of time (Cook & Dickens, 2009, pp. 268–269). Societal approval is deemed to stand higher than the negative consequences on women's physical and psychosexual health.

Another female genital cosmetic surgery focused on female sexuality that has recently jumped in high demand and popularity is labiaplasty which is also known as 'vaginal rejuvenation' or 'designer vagina'. Unlike the FGM this genital surgery is defined as "surgical reduction of the labia minora"(Runacres & Wood, 2016) and in most of the cases is done voluntarily by women who are willing to have an 'ideal' size or appearance of their labia minora or those women who are bothered by the excess tissue that makes them feel uncomfortable. This surgical procedure is more interconnected with 'aesthetic perception and image' of female vagina and is heavily influenced by media, their relationship and psychological well-being (Sharp et al., 2016)

By providing an overview of the two female genital surgical procedures, I would like to focus on the third and the most popular one in the context of my own home country Kyrgyzstan – hymenoplasty or hymen reconstruction surgery. Hymenoplasty is a type of genital cosmetic surgery that "aims to restore hymen; often done by women who seek and desire to repair reconstruct their broken hymen , usually for socio-cultural reasons" (Kaivanara, 2016, p. 71). This surgical operation became known worldwide in the late 1990s and started involving a lot of discussions around the topic of female virginity and hymen restoration(Amy, 2008). The prevalent opinion among many doctors, physicians and feminist scholars emphasized that not only hymenoplasty leads to commodification of women's bodies (female hymen in particular), but the surgery is also disputable on ethical grounds. Van Moorst and colleagues have argued that hymen restoration surgery is not an adequate solution to the issues "rooted in sexual and other social gender inequalities"(van Moorst et al., 2012, p. 95). Moreover, the procedure was seen as perpetuating discrimination and existing double standards

against women in “conforming to an expectation of virginity in unmarried women not expected or required of unmarried men.” (Cook & Dickens, 2009, p. 267). Despite physicians’ empathy and wishes to protect women-patients from cruelty or punishment from her relatives and family, many doctors felt reluctant to participate in the deceit of the partner by performing the repair of hymen or providing fake virginity certificates (Amy, 2008, p. 112). Thus, while some authors argued that hymenoplasty and other virginity related procedures reinforce women’s subordinate position and serve to the benefits of the patriarchal society, thus degrading women’s own dignity and individuality, discriminating against them and denying their own self-determination and sexuality by recreating virginity myth (Ghanim, 2015; Valenti, 2010; van Moorst et al., 2012), others have advocated for the hymen restoration surgery by emphasizing its agentive capacity and importance for the interest and well-being of women in the first place (Ahmadi, 2016; Cook & Dickens, 2009; Kaivanara, 2016).

First of all, I would like to highlight that within this thesis I will focus on hymenoplasty or hymen reconstruction surgery only. It is necessary to understand that unlike FGM, which is usually performed against young girls’ will, the hymenoplasty is usually done voluntarily by young women for the purpose of temporary restoration of their ‘hymeneal membrane’ and its anatomical integrity. Thus, women’s own desires, motives and interests play an important role when discussing hymenoplasty and comparing it to FGM. The purpose of hymenoplasty is to “protect young women and girls from the stigma or violence associated with ‘losing their virginity before marriage’” (Leye et al., 2018; Runacres & Wood, 2016; Sharp et al., 2016). Secondly, even though hymenoplasty and labiaplasty might sound to have more in common, in fact the surgical procedures differ from one another: while the former is done for the socio-cultural and religious reasons in order to reappear ‘virgin’ and maintain woman’s sense of ‘dignity’, the latter is mostly done for the purposes of aesthetic satisfaction and physical or psychological comfort of the woman (Sharp et al., 2016). It is important not to equate these three practices to each other. Moreover, considering the secretive nature of the topic and phenomenon and lack of research on the given topic in Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia, I find Kyrgyz women’s voices unheard and unrepresented in feminist academia and gender studies. Therefore, in my research I believe it is crucial to make Kyrgyz women’s experiences visible and their stories heard. Through listening, collecting and analysing the real stories of real Kyrgyz women who underwent the hymen restoration surgery, my best efforts will be put in the exploration of this phenomenon in Kyrgyz society from inside applying the unique lens of these women’s experiences.

Research Objective

The primary goal of this research is to examine the role hymen restoration surgery plays in lives of young¹ Kyrgyz women in Kyrgyzstan and its ramifications: its impact on women's lives and their relationship with their families, as well as motives and circumstances that motivated women to undergo this surgery. This thesis argues that hymenoplasty in the context of Kyrgyz society is a complex phenomenon, that cannot be solely classified as either women's submissiveness to the dominant norms or the defiance. Through applying Foucault's concept of subjectification, a process where humans are both subjects and objects of power - "always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power" (Foucault, 1980, p. 98); Mahmood's concept of embodied agency that is a "capacity to realize one's own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)". (Mahmood, 2006, p. 38); and Kandiyoti's concept of patriarchal bargaining that emphasizes how women in their society employ their own strategies to deal with the patriarchal system in order to gain more power and advance their position (Kandiyoti, 1988), I will argue that by undergoing hymenoplasty procedure women in Kyrgyz society exercise their own agency in order to both meet societal expectations and their personal goals and desires. In the case of young Kyrgyz women undergoing hymenoplasty, I believe hymen restoration surgery should not be seen as something imposed or forced on women, putting them in the position of 'victim' in need of salvation and deprived of any action but conformity. Such perspective denies an agentive capacity of women by automatically turning them into passive objects and depriving women of their ability to think, choose and act in their given situation. Thus, I argue that hymenoplasty in the context of those Kyrgyz women who underwent the surgery does not solely fall in the category of conformity or resistance.

Research questions:

- What are the experiences and perceptions of young Kyrgyz women who underwent the hymenoplasty prior getting married?
- What are the main reasons and motives to undergo hymen restoration surgery in Kyrgyzstan?

¹ Definition of young women in this research will be based on the definition of 'young people' with the age range of 10-24 stated by the World Health organization. However in terms of my research and the sampling technique that was used to reach my potential respondents, the age range for 'Young women' in this research will be 18-30.

- How does hymenoplasty influence life of women who undergo the hymen restoration surgery? (in case of women who underwent it and could possibly tell about the outcome and impact of the surgical procedure)

The structure of Thesis

Following this introduction, I will firstly provide contextual information on Kyrgyzstan during the Soviet period and after the country gained its independence, focusing on aspects of gender, religion and socio-cultural specificities of the country. This will help to have a better understanding and vision of current Kyrgyz culture and society. Next, I will discuss female embodiment and construction of Kyrgyz womanhood in Kyrgyz society focusing on women's bodily experiences in accordance with the socio-cultural norms such as remaining sexually 'pure' and virgin prior marriages. I will highlight the ideology of shame and honour, by showing the strength and peculiarity of public shaming in Kyrgyzstani context. Following section will include methodology, ethical considerations and limitations of this research. After the methodology section, I will present the relevant literature that has been already written on topics of hymenoplasty worldwide and in Kyrgyzstan. Finally, I will discuss the theoretical conceptions and theories that will be utilized for the analysis of the research data.

The analytical chapter will consist of two sub-chapters that will analyse women's experiences regarding hymenoplasty based on their context: virginity lost as a result of consensual sexual intercourse and as a result of non-consensual one. By non-consensual sexual intercourse I mean forced intercourse such as rape; and by consensual sexual intercourse I mean the intercourse based on mutual desire and agreement of both partners. In non-consensual part I will cover the stories based on women's own words and experiences of their involuntary loss of virginity whether it was due to rape or sexual assault. By consensual sexual intercourse I indicate those young women who engaged into sexual activity based on their own desire and consent. By dividing my analytical part in two subdivisions and contrasting them I want to emphasize an attention on the diversity of cases and circumstances under which women might lose their virginity prior getting married. Thus, I stand against universalization of all women's first premarital sexual experiences by highlighting the possible different situations in their given context.

Context: Gender, Religion and Society in the context of Kyrgyzstan

Kyrgyzstan was the first Central Asian Republic to declare its independence on 31 August 1991, before the official collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 (Tchoroev, 2002). Its extraordinary history has been shaped and heavily influenced by the Soviet rule and its socialist ideology; followed up by re-traditionalization, religious revival, and rapidly increasing Western influence that emerged in the country in the late 1990s with the flow of international and non-governmental organizations. Human Rights Watch stated that “Kyrgyzstan signed on to numerous international human rights instruments and joined the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE), as well as other bodies aimed at regional cooperation” (Human Rights Watch, 2006).

The Soviet impact on gender inequality in Central Asia significantly transformed the lifestyle of Kyrgyz people and women in particular. In general, the Soviet Union (SU) policies granted Central Asian women an equal access to education – the opportunity they did not have before. Moreover, the Soviet state ensured women’s inclusion in the labour force; improved women’s social standing in the society by enhancing their legal and political rights; introduced to women the benefits of social welfare system such as the support of the motherhood which included paid maternity leave and childcare at workplace (Ismailbekova, 2014; Kamp, 2014; Tlostanova, 2006; Werner, 2009). However, along with the newly opened up opportunities and resources, Kyrgyz women found themselves encumbered with combining the responsibilities of a ‘traditional’ expectations of their patriarchal families as well as the image of ‘progressive’ emancipated Soviet woman. A scholar and researcher on Central Asia, Deniz Kandiyoti analyses the ‘paradoxical consequences’ of Soviet policies:

“I examine the gendered effects of Soviet economic, demographic and anti-religious policies and suggest that their combination with socialist measures for the protection of women gave rise to the Soviet paradox—high literacy and labour force participation rates against the background of high fertility rates, large families and relatively untransformed domestic divisions of labour.” (Kandiyoti, 2007, p. 607)

Despite, I fully agree with Kandiyoti and recognize that the brand new policies and regulations of the Soviet state both uplifted and weighed down women’s position in the society, I intend to focus on a legal aspect of the policies that advanced women’s rights and choices regarding their own bodies. One of the most substantial transformations that the Soviet policies

had on Kyrgyz women's lives was the criminalization of bride kidnapping practice. If before the Soviet rule Kyrgyz people used to get married either through the arranged marriages involving underage girls mostly or by kidnapping a bride, with the Soviet policies the newly introduced laws prohibited and criminalized any forms of the marriages such as non-consensual as well as consensual bride-kidnapping, arranged marriages of underage girls and polygamy (Ismailbekova, 2014; Kamp, 2014; Kandiyoti, 2007; Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007; Werner, 2009). In addition, different forms of economic incentives such as payment of the kalym² for the bride were prohibited by the law. According to the criminal code of the USSR, crimes against the 'freedom and equality of women' were categorized into following groups:

- “(1) Crimes committed against woman's equality in marital relationships;
 - (2) Crimes committed against woman's equality at work, her cultural and social life;
 - (3) Crimes committed against a woman's life, health, and honor/dignity;
 - (4) Other crimes committed based on the old local traditions.”
- (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007, p. 226)

Thus, any form of bride-kidnapping was criminalized, and an abductor would either pay a big fine or go to jail. In my opinion, the Soviet policies still made a great contribution to Kyrgyz and Central Asian women's rights and freedom. The issue of bride kidnapping is not the central one in my thesis, nevertheless it is extremely helpful for better understanding of women's sexual choices, embodied selves and practices. With the dissolution of the USSR, however, the traditional practices such as bride-kidnapping have revived with the renewed vigor. Multiple scholars noted that the practice of bride abduction has increased since the Kyrgyz Republic gained its independence (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007; O'Neill Borbieva, 2012). The old customs that were suppressed during the Soviet rule, were seen as a way of nation-building and gaining back the cultural identity of Kyrgyz people, therefore the revival of all pre-Soviet traditions and customs not only took a fast pace, but also faced a societal approval. In this rapidly changing circumstance, women found themselves in the most vulnerable and marginalized position. According to Tabyshalieva “Central Asian women were ‘caught up in three rings of discrimination, influenced by traditions of patriarchy, Soviet ideals, and images from the West’” (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 318 referring to Tabyshalieva, 2000).

² Kalym is a payment by groom's family to bride's family (father), indicates women's dependency by turning them into some sort of a commodity. Kalym has a latent function of 'purchasing a woman' (Markov, 1901)

Cease of social welfare benefits provided by the state to support working mothers has played another important role in obstructing women's everyday lives and lowering their position within their families and society in general. Thus, since the independence of Kyrgyz Republic and the economic recession in the country, women have strongly experienced the heavy burden of their own responsibilities. They still had to work in order to provide for the family, take care of their children, family and household duties and at the same time follow social norms and traditions of Kyrgyz society (Heyat, 2004; Ismailbekova, 2014; Tchorev, 2002).

The newly established government has encountered not only increasing re-traditionalization, but also revival of Islamic ideology parallel with the flow of western influence in the region (Abašin, 2004; Heyat, 2004; Ro'i & Wainer, 2009; Tlostanova, 2006). According to the State Commission for Religious Affairs (SCRA), the number of mosques in the country has increased 60 times since the country gained its sovereignty. (Galdini, 2015) Even though the vast majority of the country, 5.7 million people, identify themselves as Muslims (Galdini, 2015), the practice of Islam in Kyrgyz Republic takes much more 'moderate' version in comparison to other Central Asian states. As scholars state: "The bulk of the population in the five new states of post-Soviet Central Asia lives its own version of Islam" (Ro'i & Wainer, 2009, p. 303). Thus, it would be misleading to homogenize and unify the entire Central Asian region in terms of people's religious beliefs and practices of Islam. It would also be inaccurate to say that Islam in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries is the same as in other Muslim countries in the Middle East, South-East Asia or Africa (Abašin, 2004; Ro'i & Wainer, 2009). Such differences might be explained not only by the ethnical and linguistic origins of Central Asians (Turkic roots in case of Kyrgyzstan), but also because Islam in Central Asia had gone through many transformations during the Soviet rule and its atheist ideology (Abašin, 2004). While majority of Kyrgyz populations, mostly intelligentsia, had to give up on their religious views in terms of Islam since the Soviet government denied all the access for religious practices and knowledge, in fact they only appeared to do so and managed to preserve its 'certain components that now have become an integral part of their lives' (Ro'i & Wainer, 2009, pp. 308–309). That is why it is important to see the timeline of Kyrgyz history and trace the religious revival along with re-traditionalization in Kyrgyz society. Both took the similar path after the country gained its independence, and it was mainly done in accordance with the nation-building initiative. As Beyer and Finke discuss, re-traditionalization became an extremely useful instrument for "meaning-making", thus creating a solid foundation for elite to "promote tradition as a marker of identity and political reconstruction" (Beyer & Finke,

2019, p. 310). With the revival of Islam as well as with pre-Soviet traditions of Kyrgyz society, it was easier to integrate religious rule and societal norms in terms of gender realm: woman's role in the family, society and control of female sexuality in particular. In Islam as well as in other religions such as Judaism, Hinduism and certain forms of Christianity, state of female premarital virginity has always been associated with having an intact hymen (van Moorst et al., 2012, p. 94). Although holy books such as the Quran do not mention the necessity of blood on the sheets after the first marital intercourse as a proof of woman's purity and chastity, blood became a true and important indicator of female virginity among Kyrgyz society as well as other Muslim societies worldwide. Thus, by measuring the nation's and family's honour through women's virginity and presence of intact hymen, Kyrgyz people have put the strongest emphasis on woman's chastity and sexual purity prior marriage.

Construction of Femininity and Female Embodiment

Being raised in a patriarchal society means to constantly learn how to be a proper woman: daughter at first and later a proper wife and mother. Many scholars have written on the sexual and gendered embodiment of women in different countries, cultures and societies (Ahmed, 2017; Blank, 2008; Bordo, 1997; Mason, 2018; Valenti, 2010; Young, 2005). As Simone de Beauvoir famously stated more than a half century ago: "One is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman" (Beauvoir, 1989, p. 271), and gendered expectations not only shape our own bodily experiences but also our vision and expectations of the bodies of others. She was among the first scholars who raised people's attention to the difference between sex and gender. Beauvoir pointed out the different ways in which men and women are raised and treated starting from the early childhood by primarily focusing on how girls were trained in regards of their own bodies, which had further result on their daily actions and habits to appear as 'naturally occurring'. According to her, women's bodily experiences and practices are the result of the internalization processes that are happening in their given socio-cultural settings. Thus, the construction of femininity is a woman's lived experience that accumulates and repeats itself during her entire life and depending on the social specificities of her surrounding society.

One of the examples of such construction was discussed by feminist philosopher Young (2005) in her analysis of women lived bodily experiences, and how body is shaped in accordance with society's gendered expectations. Through bringing an example of basic

activities such as throwing, Young illustrates how girls are learning to take less space and throw things in a specific way which is shaped and constructed by the social expectations, not anatomy or biology. And this refers not only to throwing things, but also running, hitting, climbing and many other ways of doing as a girl. But in fact there is no general style of moving as a girl and as Young puts in ‘the general feminine style of body comportment’(Young, 2005, p. 35). However, as a woman in a patriarchal society you will grow up by constantly learning how to behave and do things in a special ‘feminine’ way that fits your society. By ‘femininity’ I mean not the quality deriving from being biologically female, but in solidarity with Young and Beauvoir, I prefer the following definition: “a set of structures and conditions that delimit the typical situation of being a woman in a particular society, as well as the typical way in which this situation is lived by the women themselves.”(Young, 2005, p. 31). She continues: “If feminine embodiment is characterized by being both subject and object, masculine embodiment strives toward pure subjectivity” (Mason referring to Young, 2018, p. 96). Indeed, being a woman, paradoxically, is to combine a rational and ‘free subject who participates in transcendence’ , and nevertheless remaining a woman denying ‘her own subjectivity and transcendence’ (Young, 2005, p. 32) in the patriarchal society. Similar to Young, Sara Ahmed also wrote on the female embodiment and its relation to space. “Being a girl is a way of being taught what it is to have a body and how you experience your body in relations to space” says the author (Ahmed, 2017, p. 25). Thus, gendered embodiment deeply affects not only the way we use our bodies and experience things, but also the way we treat other bodies.

Another ground-breaking work on female embodiment was written by Susan Bordo : *Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body*. In her book, the author states that ‘through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is "inner" and what is "outer," which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies’ (Bordo, 1997, p. 16) and so on. She further continues by admitting that gendered dualities are not just a product of construction on a cultural level, but more importantly on institutional level. The deconstruction of those ‘gendered dualities’ can only be achieved “through concrete transformation of the institutions and practices that sustain it”(Bordo, 1997, pp. 13–14). The author proceeds by stating that “women and girls frequently internalize this ideology, holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assaults”. This is the ideology that has been shaping the conscience of both men and women, by allowing men to enjoy their sexual freedom by not feeling shame or guilt, while at the same time denying women same choices. It further leads us to the realization of the existing double standards

regarding the freedom of male and female sexuality, and within this thesis to the understanding of how psychological idea of virginity became equated with the notion of integral hymen, which is a physical part of female body.

Construction of Kyrgyz womanhood: raising a daughter of quality

Drawing from the aforementioned scholars, it is not a surprise that not a biology or anatomical differences, but society and so-called cultural norms plays a foremost role in constructing and shaping our gendered subjectivities. The process of becoming a woman, becoming a ‘proper Kyrgyz daughter’ is a long process that requires involvement of the entire community: mothers, brothers, fathers, relatives, peer groups, state institutions and society as whole. One of the most fundamental factors in raising daughters for traditional Kyrgyz families is to preserve girls’ honour and chastity by controlling their sexuality and correcting their body choices. This way the men can preserve their patrilineal descent and paternal authority (Abu-Lughod, Lila, 1989). It can be achieved through making sure your daughter or wife-to-be preserves her virginity until the day she gets married. Marriage is considered one of the most essential institution Kyrgyz people, especially when it comes to women. According to CEDAW the social status of married women stands significantly higher than that of divorced or unmarried women (Farha, 2009). When it comes to the institute of family and marriage, one of the key components for the happy marriage is bride’s virginity which is proved by the bleeding during the first sexual intercourse on the first night after the wedding. According to the UN Women in Kyrgyzstan, 89% of survey respondents agree that virginity of girls is the key to her happy family life (UN Women, 2017). Despite existing pool of information that not all hymens bleed and that presence of hymen is not always an indicator of women’s virginity and lack of previous sexual relationship (Abder Rahman, 2009; Kaivanara, 2016; van Moorst et al., 2012), the bleeding thin membrane remains a major and principal factor proving woman’s virginal state. Hence, lack of blood during the first wedding night can lead to serious consequences such as immediate divorce, physical assault or abuse by husband and his family, demanding of *kalym* back or raising a big scandal out of this. All of these outcomes are the least desirable for women and their families, because the culture of public shaming is quite strong in Kyrgyz society (O’Neill Borbieva, 2012; Sataeva, 2017; Werner, 2009).

Even in the cases when a woman was abducted for marriage purpose and as a result experienced sexual violence, the vast majority believe that girl should marry the abductor.

According to UNFPA ‘this fact is largely due to the widely spread gender stereotype that virginity of girls is the key to her successful family life’(UNFPA Kyrgyzstan, 2016). In Kyrgyz society, the raped woman is usually a subject of discrimination and social condemnation. And this is again happening because of the equation of women’s virginity to the thin membrane that should remain intact prior getting married and bleed during the first night. The prevailing opinion is that rape is a girl’s fault and she should feel guilty because of what happened to her. This factor helps to understand why it is not accurate to rely on the official statistics of rape in Kyrgyzstan and why victims of sexual violence do not report to police. In general, there is a social demarcation between ‘respectable’ woman who is associated with belonging to one man and ‘irrespectable’ woman who is associated with multiple partners and being engaged in sexual relationship prior getting married (USAID, 2010). Therefore, in order to raise their daughter’s ‘respectable’ women, Kyrgyz families and particularly mothers pay a big attention to the upbringing of girls and teaching them values of ‘proper Kyrgyz daughter’. Being Kyrgyz daughter myself and raised in a comparatively traditional family I can list the general rules for the girl’s behaviour, however they have also been discussed in Zhanabayeva’s work (2018).

First of all, a ‘proper Kyrgyz daughter’ avoids public places and always rushes home; while late comings for daughters are not acceptable and appropriate the same does not apply for sons. At home she takes care of household, helps her mother and takes care of younger siblings if there are some. Secondly, dating guys is allowed either after the girl turns 18y.o. or with the approval of parents (mostly father). Thirdly, the dress code for girls remains one of the most crucial aspects: hijab or veiling was never a part of Kyrgyz culture; therefore it is not a requirement. However, no vulgar clothing or too short or too open is considered acceptable. Otherwise it attracts too much attention which might lead to undesirable sexual consequences in future, for instance being raped or kidnapped. If men look at you or catcall in public it is your fault – meaning that you are probably dressed too open, too naked. It is never men’s fault though because woman is considered to provoke men’s gaze. This reminds me of what Bordo(1997) writes about how women’s bodies embody certain social impositions regarding their own bodies:

“Walk down a city street. Pay a lot of attention to your clothing: make sure your pants are zipped, shirt tucked in, buttons done. Look straight ahead. Every time a man walks past you, avert your eyes and make your face expressionless. Most women learn to go through this act each time we leave our houses. It's a way to avoid at least some of the encounters we've all had with strange men who decided we looked available” (Bordo, 1997, p. 19)

This type of existing double standards applies not only to the dress code, but also to sexual life and choices of young girls and women. While women's sexuality and activity in public is constantly controlled, men enjoy their free time by going out any time they want despite late evenings and nights (Sataeva, 2017; Zhanabayeva, 2018). While no one questions men's sexual life and number of sexual partners before getting married, young girls have to remain untouched and pure by default. If she did violate from a decent behaviour, then she is not a 'good' Kyrgyz daughter, and marrying this type of woman is not for man or family of honour. Moreover, it is considered shameful and unacceptable for the girl's family and reputation. Thus, from example of Kyrgyz society it could be observed how women's sexuality is treated as a 'regulated commodity' (Ortner, 2006) controlled by family, school and other institutions of socialization and society in general. The repetitive performance of these gendered norms and practices leads to the internalization of these values and considering them as 'naturally' occurring or biologically driven.

As the brightest example of many Kyrgyz men's efforts to regulate the female sexuality and choices regarding choosing their partners, I will introduce the so-called 'patriotic-nationalist' organization in Kyrgyzstan existing within the last decade. 'Kyrk Choro' which translates from Kyrgyz language as 'Forty Knights' is a nationalist organization that became notorious for their attempts to control women's sexual choices by using the nationalist 'concern' for the future of Kyrgyz culture (Lelik, 2015; Suyarkulova, 2020). The group of these self-proclaimed nationalists emerged approximately in 2010 in Moscow where they started tracking down Kyrgyz women who were dating men of any other ethnicity than Kyrgyz. Not only these 'patriotic' men punched them in face and insulted physically, but also recorded the entire process of beating and questioning women on video that afterwards was posted on YouTube, so that other Kyrgyz women will know what awaits them if they decide to date foreigners and violate 'traditions' of Kyrgyz culture. Thereby, these men from 'Kyrk Choro' attempted to demonstrate their male superiority over women's bodies and their choices regarding their private life and sexual choices. In 2015, members of 'Kyrk Choro' raided a club in Bishkek, capital city of Kyrgyzstan, and recorded all the women on video by accusing them of being prostitutes and selling their bodies to Chinese men (RFE/RL's Kyrgyz Service, 2019). Members of 'Kyrk Choro' also threatened participants of the peaceful march on International Women's day, March 8 2019 for holding the LGBTQIA flags among other posters supporting women and other minority groups.

Another event when men exercised their power and violence over women happened on International Women's day in 2020 when the members of 'Kyrk Choro' attacked women-activists. In addition to that, the police did not arrest aggressive group of approximately 100 men wearing kalpaks³ and attacking women, but it brutally took to the police station all women and journalists who hold posters on gender equality and against male violence and femicides. It is important to understand that there is a problem with conceptualization of the term gender which is conventionally used to refer to women only. The term itself is not popular or prevalent in daily lexicon of Kyrgyz people. Sometimes, it can also be negatively associated with "Western influence and feminism" and emphasize a threat for the values of traditional Kyrgyz family (Tlostanova, 2006; USAID, 2010, p. 29). Gender equality, feminism, LGBTQIA, freedom – all these words do not just sound foreign and Western, they also cause feelings of rage and aggressive emotions/behavior among the traditional Kyrgyz men. Therefore, the term gender itself is not a popular one; on the contrary, it is often avoided in daily usage.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I firstly provided a historical background on Kyrgyzstan before and after the country gained its independence and sovereignty. The Soviet policies brought tremendous changes on the social, economic and legal realms of Kyrgyz people and their lifestyle. The most important impact on gender aspect was an improvement of women's position within the society. Women were introduced to the benefits of the state social welfare system, their social, political and legal rights were improved, they equally gained an access to both education and workforce. So-called tradition such as bride-kidnapping was criminalized, and women's social and sexual choices were ensured. However, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union the revival of religion, old traditions, and lifestyle took a fast pace in order to re-build the nation and to regain the lost cultural identity of Kyrgyz people. In these circumstances, women became the ones who got mostly affected and marginalized by the overburden of responsibilities driven from both public and private domains of their society.

Further, I provided the detailed overview of how the socio-cultural norms and traditions construct woman's consciousness and values, thereby shaping her actions and defining her behaviour. In the second part I accentuated the cult of female virginity and societal actions in order to regulate and control female sexuality from the early ages of socialization. The virginity

³ Kalpak is a Kyrgyz national hat that Kyrgyz men (usually older ones) wear on the holidays or cultural events.

cult is deeply embedded in Kyrgyz people's daily routine, behaviour and actions. Men are mostly seen as guards and protectors of nation's and family honour, but at the same time they are allowed to enjoy their own sexuality and gain as much experience as they can. The aggressive-possessive behaviour that can be observed from the certain nationalist patriotic groups such as 'Kyrk Choro' highlights the dominant role of men in Kyrgyz society, and their attempts to regulate and control female sexuality and choices. In the meantime, women are expected to deeply internalize the values regarding their own bodies and importance of intact hymen which became not just a symbol, but the only true indicator of female virginity in Kyrgyz culture.

Methodology

As the primary goal of this study was to explore the phenomenon of hymenoplasty in Kyrgyzstan and young women's personal experiences of hymen restoration procedure, I employed an exploratory qualitative research method. This method is usually described being a "naturalistic, interpretive approach, concerned with exploring phenomena 'from the interior' with understanding the meanings which people attach to phenomena their social worlds" (Snape and Spencer, 2003; Ritchie, Lewis, Nicholls, & Ormston, 2013, p. 3).

The primary instrument for data collection will be semi-structured in-depth interviews since this particular method can provide an opportunity for more detailed exploration of respondent's personal perspectives and in-depth understanding of the personal context within which the research phenomenon is located (Snape and Spencer, 2003, p. 36). Moreover, in-depth interviews are indispensably helpful for understanding a delicate issue such as hymenoplasty. As for the sampling technique I employed a mixture of purposive and snowball sampling strategies. According to Ritchie and Lewis (2013) this sampling method allows to identify potential respondents through people who already have been interviewed, moreover it is well suited for smaller populations considering the sensitivity of the topic.

Due to extremely high sensitivity of the topic and Covid19 pandemic, the number of potential interviewees was small. The initial pool of prospective informants consisted of 10 people overall, however only five out of ten have expressed their desire and consent to participate in the research. Interviewees were found, connected and contacted to me through my friends and colleagues. Five interviews were conducted online: via WhatsApp and Telegram audio calls. In addition, I used the anonymously shared posts on Instagram social media known as "babckii blog"⁴. The blog was created as a platform for people to (non)anonymously share their stories, leave comments and engage in the discussion in the comments below the publication. The reason I chose this particular blog is that it is the biggest one in terms of its audience (more than 300 000 followers) and the activity of followers based on the number of daily published posts. Major part of the audience following and writing their stories are adolescents and young women from different parts of the country. Regarding the age, based on the statistics shared by the admin of the blog, followers' age range varies from

⁴ [Babckii blog](#) is a blog on Instagram social media where people can write and share their stories both anonymously and non-anonymously.

14 to 45, but the most active segment of population are between 18 and 30. The posts shared within the blog are written on many different topics, but mostly about marriage, relationship between couple, sex and virginity issues. Focusing on the last topic allowed me to trace several posts written on hymenoplasty procedure in particular. Some of the authors were seeking for help and advice on where to undergo the hymenoplasty in Bishkek (capital city of Kyrgyzstan), others seemed to have no knowledge about hymen restoration surgery at all and were asking a public advice on what to do if they lost their virginity by engaging in premarital sexual intercourse. There were few authors who shared their own experiences of how and where they underwent the hymen restoration surgery. Others told some information on the expected price and qualifications of the physician performing the surgery. And some others some just gave some tips: for example, the best time to undergo the surgery or warnings about possible complications after the procedure. The active involvement of women in the anonymous discussions on social media can be explained by high sensitivity of the topic and its taboo character. Generally women do not talk openly about sex related topics with their families, friends or even partners. But with the development of social media and popularity of Instagram in particular since 2010, the youth in Kyrgyzstan became more and more active on this particular social media platform.

Position as a Researcher

Although the topic of the study was very sensitive and private, representation of myself as a female student of Kyrgyz ethnicity pursuing her master's degree in Gender Studies, born and raised in a traditional Kyrgyz family helped me a lot in gaining the trust of my informants. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985) "trustworthiness" is a measure of a qualitative study's rigor. Positioning myself as both an insider and outsider (Abu-Lughod, 1989; Atkins & Wallace, 2012; Behar, 1996) and growing up in a similar socio-cultural background, eased the process of communication and data collection. My personal sensitivity towards this particular topic and desire to contribute to the academic research related to my own country have been incredibly motivating me throughout the research.

Ethical Considerations

Anonymity meaning that my research participants' identity and responses will not be identified was guaranteed to my informants. In qualitative research, anonymity can "facilitate disclosure of sensitive information while also protecting the privacy and safety interests" of

research participants (Given, 2008). Moreover, the consent of the respondents to participate in this research was obtained. and all the names that were used in this thesis to refer to the respondents are pseudonyms.

Limitations of the Research

The findings of this research cannot be generalized to experiences of all Kyrgyz women who underwent the hymen restoration surgery since the sample used in this research is not representative of the entire population of the country. Such a small number of informants is due to extreme sensitivity of the topic: several young women whose contacts were shared to me by my close friends (through their recommendation) refused to participate after they found out about the nature of the research (related to academia). The small number of participants is also the result of the COVID19 pandemic that has cancelled my planned fieldwork trip to my homeland.

Another important limitation of this research is the language. All interviews were conducted in Russian language and sometimes involving Kyrgyz words and phrases, with particular dialect and slang, therefore the translation that was used for this thesis might not convey all the information in its original and initial way. I do admit that the process of translation can alter the original use and, sometimes, the structure of the participant's use of language. Nevertheless, as a Native Russian and advanced English speaker, I put my best efforts in translating the data as much accurately as I possibly could.

Literature review

In this section I will discuss and analyze what has been already written on topics related to hymenoplasty, importance of virginity and related practices such as bride kidnapping which is widely spread in Kyrgyz society.

What is known about hymenoplasty?

Several researches have been done on the subject of hymenoplasty and importance of virginity in different countries such as Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Netherlands, Canada (Abder Rahman, 2009; Ahmadi, 2016; Amy, 2008; Kaivanara, 2016, 2016; Shalhoub-Kevorkian, 2005; Vojvodic et al., 2018). While some studies provide a general information about the hymen and virginity myth; ideology of shame and honour; ethical aspects of hymenoplasty and legal issues behind it; cultural and social specificities of different Muslim countries in relation to the practise (mostly focusing on Arab countries) ; and the hymenoplasty procedure in general (Amy, 2008; Cook & Dickens, 2009; Hegazy & Al-Rukban, 2012), there are few other studies that took more an ‘in-depth’ perspective on hymenoplasty phenomenon through raising voices of women, which allows to have a view from the inside on the given topic.

One of the most ground-breaking researches on hymen restoration surgery was carried out by researcher Azal Ahmadi in Iran. In his research Ahmadi explores hymenoplasty in Tehran through conducting in-depth interviews with ‘affluent northern Tehrani women’ who had premarital sexual relationship and later underwent the hymen restoration procedure. Hymenoplasty is defined by author as an extraordinarily ‘unique and pragmatic form of resistance’ performed by northern Tehrani women (Ahmadi, 2016, p. 233). According to the findings, through hymenoplasty procedure northern Tehrani women “...collectively resist stoic gendered categorizations, which the prevailing medical and sociocultural discourses proclaim as natural in the construction of a woman’s feminine identity” (Ahmadi, 2016, p. 222). The research reveals that due to hymen reconstruction surgery, some Iranian women are able to apply their own strategic ways to handle the existing discourses on their sexual freedom and choices. (Ahmadi, 2016, p. 234). However, it is important to note that Ahmadi in her research interviewed only women from a certain social class – those from economically ‘affluent’ families, moreover she focused only on a Northern part of Iran’s capital city. This study provides truly great findings and information that helped me to map out my own research, however it does not include women from other social classes, thus cannot fully represent the

rest of the population of Iranian women, who underwent hymenoplasty but have a different social position in the socio-economic hierarchy of Iran. In my research I do not aim to interview women from a specific social class or position in the society since I will be using a different sampling technique which is more likely to gather different women with different backgrounds.

Similar research about the hymenoplasty in Iran was carried out by Marzieh Kaivanara. According to the author, gender in Iran as well as in many patriarchal countries is considered a ‘fixed attribute of personhood’ that should not even be questioned (Kaivanara, 2016, p. 71). More importantly by studying the history of Iran, the author states that the present time value of virginity in the country started long time before the spread and influence of Islam, therefore the importance of virginity should not be monolithically bound to religion only, instead it should be seen in a wider socio-cultural and historical context. (Kaivanara, 2016, p. 76). This is an important data since it allows to analyse the interconnection that is in most of the cases automatically presumed when it comes to the value of virginity in many patriarchal countries. In Kyrgyzstan with its ‘own version of Islam’ and vast majority of the population being Muslims, the significance of virginity has emerged long time before the spread of Islamic influence in the region. Through using an anthropological approach and ‘interpretive listening and reflexivity’ (p.72) the author examines how some young Tehrani girls resist to the socially constructed norms regarding female virginity in Iran by engaging in premarital sexual activity. In the meantime, author reveals there are other women who extensively care about meeting the societal expectations to be ‘virgin’ during the first wedding night, therefore they undergo the hymenoplasty. The research shows that younger Tehrani girls are more resistant to existing dominant structures and believe that hymen restoration surgery only ‘reinforces the existing power relations’ (Kaivanara, 2016, p. 82). Thus, hymenoplasty and other related procedures, according to the scholar do not help to eradicate the existing pressure and socio-cultural requirements on female premarital virginity. On the contrary, through undergoing hymenoplasty Iranian women are believed to strengthen and facilitate already ‘prevailing patriarchal discourse’ around female virginity (Kaivanara, 2016). The research done by Kaivanara made me think of the same discourse in the context of Kyrgyzstan and explore whether the hymenoplasty reinforces the women’s subordinate position in the patriarchal context of Kyrgyzstan or empowers them.

The findings of both Kaivanara and Ahmadi are indispensable in my research because they draw attention to the similar phenomenon happening in Kyrgyzstan. The notion and understanding of gender as a “fixed” characteristics and the female embodiment practices help to understand how the social norms are constructed with its own specificity within each country

and society. Considering the difference of a cultural and historical context in Kyrgyzstan as well as a unique and specific own version of religion in the country, I intent to analyse not only the experiences of women including their motives and circumstances regarding the hymen restoration surgery, but also the surgery itself and its impact at whole in the country.

Few other studies were conducted on the topic of hymenoplasty in Netherlands, Turkey, and Canada. In *Backgrounds of women applying for hymen reconstruction, the effects of counselling on myths and misunderstandings about virginity, and the results of hymen reconstruction* Bianca van Moorst and her colleagues examine the backgrounds of women who decided to undergo the hymen restoration surgery in Amsterdam, Netherlands. The main question was related to the motives of women applying for the surgical procedure; the previous knowledge of women regarding female virginity and their decisions after being informed on the most common myths and misunderstandings of the female virginity and hymen. One of the important questions that researchers tried to find an answer was: “Does hymenal (re)construction result in bleeding during the wedding night?”(van Moorst et al., 2012, p. 96). Results revealed that seventeen respondents who underwent the hymen reconstruction surgery reported they did not bleed during the first sexual intercourse; therefore, research indicates that blood is not a guaranteed factor after the surgery and that most of the operated women do not bleed. Thus, the scholars disclosed the predominantly existing myth about the correlation of the integral hymen and blood on the sheets, so called ‘myth of an intact hymen’.

In Turkey the value of virginity is indispensable part of discourses on hymenoplasty and female sexuality. Several authors have contributed on the topics of importance of female virginity, examinations done by state and state institutions (Aygunes, 2017; Güzel, H., 2020; Kandiyoti, 1987; Parla, 2001). Turkey is a transcontinental country located in both Europe and Asia, therefore women often find themselves between two cultures: “a traditional culture, prescribing the virtue of being a virgin, and the Western culture, promoting ideals of agency and individuality” (Aygunes, 2017, p. 6) The enforcement of ‘social’ norms on women’s sexuality and their bodies through state apparatuses is very powerful and effective. Parla in her article “The ‘Honor’ of the State: Virginity Examinations in Turkey” explores the discourses on mandatory virginity examinations in the country. Virginity examinations at high schools are one of the most popular ways to check girls’ virginity and ensure female sexual purity. According to Human Rights Watch report (1997) the doctor who conducts an examination has a list where he/she marks whether the girl is virgin or not (Parla, 2001, p. 67). While the minister of women’s affairs considers virginity examinations an ‘effective means of ensuring good upbringing in girls’, the image of sexually emancipated woman is considered ‘too

westernized' and going against the traditions and culture of Turkish people. Parla argues that these 'deeply-seated' virginity examinations are not only reinforcing the 'deep-seated values' and beliefs constraining women's sexuality, but more importantly serve as the mechanism of surveillance introduced by modern state in the name of the nation and its integrity (Parla, 2001, p. 66). The author examines how the discourses of 'traditionalness' are manipulated by the state agents such as 'minister of custom and tradition' in creating the nationalist sentiments and ideology. Moreover, the family itself serves as agent of upbringing girls in a manner respecting honor of the family through self-discipline and sexual abstinence. Parla discusses 'the family honor' and how the woman's sexual purity is essential to the reputation and status of the traditional Turkish family. As a result, anything compromising it is considered as 'staining' the family's honor. (Parla, 2001, p. 77). Thus, the scholar describes how the state with its institutions uses two opposed images and discourses: one is 'immoral and loose' woman and the other one a 'patriotic woman' putting her strongest emphasis on her 'virtue and chastity' (p.75). She concludes by emphasizing the importance of going beyond 'the liberal discourse of modernity' and considering the historically 'incomplete modernization' of Turkey in charge of the current state violence aimed towards women's virginity. (Parla, 2001, p. 83)

The overview of Turkish cases and perspectives regarding the importance of female virginity, except for virginity examinations enforced by state⁵, can be found in Kyrgyzstani context as well. It is important to note that there is a common history between Turkey and Kyrgyzstan not only in terms of Islam and religious practices, but also linguistically: Kyrgyz people have Turkic roots and belong to the Turkic language group (Kolpakov, 2001; Tchorev, 2002). The cultural similarity appears not only in terms of value of female virginity and control of women's sexuality, but also in similar attitudes towards the institution of marriage, morality and respectability. It provides a better cultural and contextual background, however, cannot be considered completely the same. For example, the practice of bride-kidnapping is not prevalent in Turkish society as it is in Kyrgyzstan, however there is a high percentage of Turkish women (50.8% according to the WWHR report) who were married against their will "although the consent of both the woman and the man is a precondition for marriage according to Turkish Law (Apr. 2002)" (Research Directorate, immigration and Refugee Board, 2004)

⁵ Virginity examinations are not common in Kyrgyzstan, this type of examinations are enforced by state only in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan among Central Asian countries.

Bride-kidnapping and discourses of shame in Kyrgyzstan

While hymenoplasty in Kyrgyzstani context remains yet unexplored topic, plethora of studies was conducted on the practice of bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan. The practice of bride abduction or *ala kachuu*⁶ has been considered as a long-time tradition of Kyrgyz people (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007; O'Neill Borbieva, 2012; Sataeva, 2017; Werner, 2009). The *ala kachuu* can be traced in Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries long time before the Soviet period. According to the definition in the Kyrgyz dictionary by Karataev and Eraliev, translated by Kleinbach and Salimjanova (2007):

“Kyz ala kachuu— ‘Bride kidnapping’—is getting married by abducting a young woman. There are three different kinds of custom: the first kind of bride kidnapping is abducting a woman without her consent and with the protest of her parents. The second kind of bride kidnapping is abducting a woman with her consent, but against her parents’ agreement. The third one is the false bride kidnapping, when the parents of both sides agree to the wedding party, but for the avoidance of spending much money, the young man kidnaps his future wife” (Kleinbach & Salimjanova, 2007, p. 218)

The practice of bride-kidnapping, especially the ones done without woman’s consent, not only show the assertive dominant behaviour of men and their selfish attempts and desire to take a decision on behalf of other women’s choices and bodies, but it can also provide a better understanding of how the notion of female virginity and the practice of bride abduction are closely interconnected. In many cases, mostly unreported ones, the abducted woman gets exposed to the sexual assault by her abductor. This is primarily done with an intention of leaving no choice to kidnapped woman and make her stay because after the so-called ‘first night’ with her abductor woman is no longer considered virgin. According to the UN and Women Support Center in Kyrgyzstan, every year there are at least 11, 800 cases of non-consensual bride kidnapping of women with more than 2,000 of those girls and women reported being raped⁷. The number of unreported cases is unknown because most of the kidnapped women at the end remain silent. Only few cases report to the police, which is already considered as a traumatic and shameful experience. As a result some of the women feel deeply traumatized, ‘damaged’ and decide to undergo hymen restoration surgery. That is why I believe it is necessary to include researches done on bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan in order to provide a better idea of socio-cultural context on women’s sexuality and their possible

⁶ Kyz ala kachuu is the name of the tradition in Kyrgyz language

⁷ [New law in Kyrgyzstan toughens penalties for bride kidnapping](#)

motives to undergo hymen restoration surgery. In this thesis, I focus on the non-consensual form of bride-kidnapping that in most of the cases leads to sexual violence against women such as rape, which further results in woman's self-blaming and fear of public shame. In order to avoid the possible stigma and re-appear virgin at the first wedding night in the future, women may choose to act creatively and undergo hymenoplasty in order to protect their own interests and dignity as well as that of their families.

Several authors have written about bride-kidnapping practice as perpetuating the gender inequality and serving an oppressive mechanism to assert men's power over women (Amsler and Klienbach 1999; Kleinbach and Salimjanova 2007; Werner 2009). A completely different perspective have been expressed by the scholar O-Neil Borbieva who viewed the previous common explanations of bride-kidnapping as 'incomplete' and lacking historical context. In her ethnographic fieldwork in Kyrgyzstan, the author explores the discourses of emotion and social change and argues against the one-directional function of bride-kidnapping. O-Neil Borbieva sees the practice of bride-kidnapping not through the lens of straightforward processes of domination and binary theorization of power, but more of a self being an active agent of change. As an example, she talks about those young couples who benefited from this practice by reaching their 'romantic desires' and acted against the dominant discourses on marriage in the Kyrgyz society. (O'Neill Borbieva, 2012, pp. 161–162). She further argues that bride-kidnapping practice is still widely employed and approved by men and women of different ages due to its well-functioning in both socio-economic and romantic aspects.

"Kidnapping not only serves important economic and social functions, it also is a compelling ritual and a manifestation of male dominance... kidnapping's popularity is a response to tension over changing structures of feeling that have emerged in an era of rapid social and economic changes"(O'Neill Borbieva, 2012, p. 163)

O-Neil Borbieva's work is indeed distinctive because it includes the cases of bride-kidnapping based on mutual consent of groom and bride or 'arranged marriages' as she calls them; however. not all the cases of bride abduction go along with women's agreement. The recent cases of kidnapping that resulted in death of young women (murder or more commonly suicide) have been actively discussed not only in Kyrgyzstan, but worldwide and received a lot of condemnation from international and human rights organizations⁸.

Few other researches have been recently conducted on discourses of shame and gendered construction of women in Kyrgyzstan (Sataeva, 2017; Werner, 2009). Through

⁸ More information is available at [hrw.org](https://www.hrw.org) [case of Burulai](#): "Woman's Murder in Kyrgyzstan Shows Cost of 'Tradition'. Government Should Do More to End 'Bride Kidnapping,' Protect Victims"

qualitative research and in-depth interviews authors examine the culture of shame, which has been strongly prevalent in Kyrgyz society and in certain cases even being considered worse than death. Werner (2009) in “Bride abduction in post-Soviet Central Asia: marking a shift towards patriarchy through local discourses of shame and tradition” examines the revival of bride-kidnapping in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. By focusing on non-consensual form of the practice, the author explores how women’s decisions and choices are heavily shaped by a social expectations and local traditions. By providing the examples of women, who agreed to stay and marry the abductor against their will, the research highlights the power of cultural pressure in the Kyrgyzstan (Werner, 2009, p. 322). Through questioning the ‘historical authenticity’ of the bride-kidnapping, she compares and analyses the modern marriages with those during the Soviet period and highlights the importance of consent at that time. By comparing the modern times practice, author emphasizes the influence of political factors and interference such as discussions of the bride abducting practise on a political level “where state actors have fostered a sense of pride in national ‘traditions’” (Werner, 2009, p. 328).

Similar to Werner, Sataeva in her dissertation “Public Shaming and Resistance in the Context of the Bride Kidnapping Phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan” examines Kyrgyz women’s personal experiences. She applies Foucault’s theory on disciplinary power and analyses the power of public opinion in Kyrgyz society as a mechanism of regulating people’s actions and attitudes. Through comparing the public opinion to the concept of surveillance, Sataeva analyses Kyrgyz society as a “cultural and social prison that oppresses women not only psychologically, but often leads to the physical restriction of freedom” (Sataeva, 2017, p. 10). She connects public shaming to the discourse of emotion and reveals that public shaming among kidnapped women is a diverse combination of different emotions such as “guilt, fear and self-loathing” (p.43). Sataeva further examines the act of bride’s refusal to stay in kidnapper’s family as an ‘act of openly questioning social normative power’ which is considered utterly intolerable in women’s position. As she further continues, due to their lowest social ranking, women’s refusal to go along with the so-called traditions of bride-kidnapping and normalization of the practice is perceived as a threat for the dominating power relations in the society (Sataeva, 2017, pp. 41–42). Thus, public shaming is used both as the mechanism of punishment for those “challenging the social normative power” (p.43), and the warning for others through exposing an example of the punished ones to the public.

Both researches by Werner and Sataeva are indispensable for my work since they lay a foundation for the understanding of hymen restoration procedure done by women under the dominant social pressure of public condemnation. Authors depict how women are stigmatized

and treated as 'second-hand' or 'others' in case they deviate from the cultural norms towards their premarital state of virginity in Kyrgyz society, and how the discourse of shame operates as the main instrument of oppression in the society. However, in my research I attempt to show not only the 'oppressed' angle of women's lives, but also the creative and innovative perspective in certain cases. Those Kyrgyz women who choose to undergo hymenoplasty as a result of forced sexual intercourse do not merely and passively accept their situation, instead they choose to find a quick fix in accordance with the societal norms and requirements. If the female virginity is equated with the integrity of woman's hymen and is considered an important factor of her successful marriage, then recreating that hymen through the surgical means in order to avoid any harm, shame or disrespect on woman and her family can be seen as a creative solution. Institute of marriage is considered one of the most important one in Kyrgyz society, therefore, most of the young women in Kyrgyz society strive for the marriage. Not only a status of a married woman takes a higher standing in a social hierarchy, but it also brings happiness and peace to the parents of the women

For that purposes, I will employ the work of Zhanabayeva (2018) "Restrained by Uyat [Shame]: culture of dating and romantic relationship among Urban Kyrgyz Youth". The author examines the peculiarities of dating culture in Kyrgyz society through conducting focus group discussions and face-to-face interviews with young people. Her argument states that "dating and romantic relationships are socially approved practices in Kyrgyz society mainly because they are viewed as precursors to marriage" (Zhanabayeva, 2018). However, the approval can be only achieved if the couple does not engage in premarital sexual activity. Interestingly, this rule against premarital sex in most of the cases applies only to girls and women. Paradoxically, Zhanabayeva shows how Kyrgyz men 'allegedly enjoy' their sexual freedom while the young women are expected to strictly obey the rule of sexual abstinence before marriage. (Zhanabayeva, 2018, p. 1, 26) She further explores how Kyrgyz adolescents and youngsters are managing to both: choose their partners and fulfil their physical desires but at the same time meeting the societal expectations. The role of parents in explaining the topics of sex is very minimal since Kyrgyz parents consider the sex topic a taboo one - it is *uyat* (Kyrgyz: "shame") – therefore, they are reluctant to talk about sex, contraception, abortions and other related issues with their adolescent children.

Along with the aforementioned authors, the author explores the mechanism of public shaming used to correct gender performance of Kyrgyz youth and girls in particular. Through the theoretical framework of honour and shame by Abu-Lughod, Zhanabayeva defines honour as "a social concept entailing a perceived quality of respectability and worthiness that affects

social standing and self-respect of an individual and family” (Zhanabayeva, 2018, p. 26). She further utilizes the discourses of shame discussed in Sataeva’s work and their functioning in Central Asian countries. The most important finding for my research in work of Zhanabayeva is that she briefly mentions hymenoplasty procedure in her analysis of how women cope with the social norms regarding their sexual choices. She considers hymen restoration surgery a way to “secure women from possible negative implications in their private lives” and to have better chances to get married (Zhanabayeva, 2018, pp. 40–41). Moreover, she states that some women get engaged in other than vaginal sexual relationships because the hymen is a symbol of virginity and thus they are able to both satisfy their needs and meet the socio-cultural requirements (Zhanabayeva, 2018, p. 41). However, her work did not intend to interview women who underwent the hymen restoration surgery, therefore can not accurately depict the emotions and experiences regarding the surgical procedure. Nevertheless, her findings and analysis are one of the most relevant to my own research and analysis since it clearly depicts that not all women give up on their sexuality and sexual choices, but instead find new ways to combine both personal and cultural desires.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter, I provided the literature written on the hymenoplasty worldwide, particularly focusing on studies carried out in Iran, Turkey and Netherlands. The studies showed that hymenoplasty serves as an extraordinarily ‘unique and pragmatic form of resistance’ that helps some women to apply their own ways to negotiate in their given circumstances (Ahmadi, 2016), but they also illustrated how in fact the hymenoplasty and related practices do not help to combat existing double standards, patriarchal norms and societal preconditions on female premarital state of virginity. On the contrary, through undergoing hymen restoration some women are believed to reinforce the prevailing discourse on female virginity measured through the presence of intact hymen. Since there are no studies done in Kyrgyzstan regarding this phenomenon, I introduced the researches on bride kidnapping practices, focusing on the non-consensual form of the practice in particular. Moreover, I included the recent studies that explored the culture of dating among Kyrgyz youth and the overview of the public shaming and stigma, an instrument used to regulate the (sexual) behaviour of young dating couples in Kyrgyz society. The aforementioned studies not only provide a better understanding of the socio-cultural and gender context in Kyrgyz society, but they also highlight an extreme importance of the institution of marriage among Kyrgyz people

and portray the dating culture of young people. It allows us to see how women strive towards fulfilling their parent's expectations along with their own desires and at the same time following the societal norms. This gives us an important precondition for understanding agency and negotiation performed by Kyrgyz women in their society.

Theoretical Framework

Subjectification, embodied agency and bargaining with patriarchy

In order to examine the phenomenon of hymenoplasty and women's experiences with this procedure in Kyrgyzstan, this thesis will employ concept of subjectification by Michel Foucault; concept of embodied agency by Saba Mahmood; and theory of the 'patriarchal bargain' by Deniz Kandiyoti. Through bringing these theories together I intend to explore and analyze how Kyrgyz women, constructed and influenced by existing socio-cultural norms of their society that constrain women's sexual freedom, manage to find their own creative ways to perform their agency. By agency I do not solely imply undergoing hymenoplasty procedure, but more importantly women's ability to negotiate the values and traditions of patriarchal Kyrgyz society by doing less or no harm to themselves.

First of all, this thesis will encompass the theoretical concept of patriarchal bargain' in order to highlight the peculiarities of patriarchal structure in Kyrgyzstan. When discussing a role of patriarchy in reinforcing gender inequality it is important to recognize that patriarchy is not a fixed unitary concept that holds the same meaning and practices for all patriarchal societies in the world (Kandiyoti, 1988). The author compares and contrasts two systems of male dominance - each with its own specificities; moreover, she illustrates how women in two different societies employ their own strategies to deal with the patriarchal systems and gain more power. This is what author calls the 'patriarchal bargain' and uses to analyze how the specificities of each systems form and construct women's gendered subjectivity (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 275).

"Patriarchal bargains do not merely inform women's rational choices but also shape the more unconscious aspects of their gendered subjectivity, since they permeate the context of their early socialization, as well as their adult cultural milieu" (Kandiyoti, 1988, p. 285)

The model of 'classic patriarchy' presented by the author can be found in the Middle East, North Africa and South-East Asia, as well as in Central Asian countries. The 'classic patriarchy' can be best characterized through the 'operations of the patrilocally extended household and family' that allows the oldest man in the family to act and decide over the entire

family, including younger men as well (1988, p. 278). Thus, according to her theoretical conception, women in a classic patriarchal societies do not simply reject the norms they have to conform, rather they try to find the new ways to negotiate the constraints within their structures in order to gain more benefits and advance their position in the family. The concept is closely connected with theories of subjectification and embodied agency that will be utilized further in order to perform an accurate analysis of this research.

One of the most fundamental works on power, sexuality and body was written by Michel Foucault (Foucault, 1978). To provide a better understanding of how power operates within the society, he defines power as being everywhere, and “not because it embraces everything, but because it comes from everywhere” (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). Power in Foucault’s view is decentralized, productive rather than inherently repressive, shifting and mobile, and is exercised rather than owned. It does not operate through the top-down model, but instead “Power comes from below; that is, there is no binary and all-encompassing opposition between rulers and ruled at the root of power relations”(Foucault, 1978, p. 94) and continually reproduces itself. As discussed by Foucault, power should neither be seen as a particular institution or a structure, nor as a system of domination of one group of people over another (Foucault, 1978, p. 98). Author argues against negative characterization of power creating prohibitions, but rather sees power in capacity to create our structures and discourses; construct and shape our personalities and self-understanding. For Foucault, power can be found at various micro levels of our social life and exists in every relation. It is not just a thing, but a complex relation that is omnipresent at every level of human’s lives; it is created within a certain moment and lives in that moment (Foucault, 1978, p. 93). Thus, he was among the first to reveal and disclose sexuality and body as a cultural construct. By studying sexuality, he examines the historical specificities of the human body that became a subject of formation under various regimes of bio-power, which he defines as “diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations”(Foucault, 1978, p. 140).

Further, in his *History of Sexuality*, Foucault states that:

“The purpose of the present study is in fact to show how deployments of power are directly connected to the body – to bodies, functions, physiological processes, sensations, and pleasures; far from the body having to be effaced, what is needed is to make it visible through an analysis in which the biological and the historical are not consecutive to one another ... but are bound together in an increasingly complex fashion in accordance with the development of the modern technologies of power that take life as their objective” (Foucault, 1978, pp. 151–152)

His main idea is to portray sexuality not as oppressed by/opposed to the power relations, on the contrary, Foucault believes the dominant power relations are creating sexuality in the given socio-historical context. The body and sexuality are not as ‘naturally occurring’ as it might appear to us; rather they are a socio-historically constructed phenomenon. Foucault analyses how the sexuality and embodiment of certain sex related practices became crucial sites of power relations. For Foucault, bio-power is closely tied to the social discourses on sex and sexuality that has extremely prospered and developed during these centuries. The main goal and focus of these social discourses were describing and presenting sex as something ‘natural’ and biological. This is where the normalization and ‘pervertization’ of sexual behavior and preferences came from. The category of normality was established, and every person who was acting differently was considered ‘abnormal’. That helps to understand the current discourses on normal and abnormal bodies that are nothing more but the social construct.

Following the concepts of (bio)power and sexuality, my thesis further utilizes Foucauldian concept of subjectification. This concept is central to my theoretical framework since it allows to examine how women who undergo hymenoplasty in Kyrgyz society can be seen through prism of both subjection and resistance at the same time. Subjectification or subjectivation is a process by which we become subjects we are today. As put by Foucault: “Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization. And not only do individuals circulate between its threads; they are always in the position of simultaneously undergoing and exercising this power” (Foucault, 1980, p. 98). And if according to the author, society itself acts as specific regime of power-knowledge, it thereby defines its subjects in terms of the norms by which human beings live and in terms of techniques they employ in doing so (Foucault, 1980). Simply put, the society we live in shapes our actions and our mentality through the ‘naturally’ appearing norms, and in return we construct not only ourselves but a social world around us. For Foucault, we, human beings are not just socially constructed subjects, but both “the subjects and the objects of power”. To understand his concept of subject means to understand that there are two definitions of the term: 1) “subject to someone by control and dependence; 2) subject tied to his own identity by a conscience or self-knowledge. Both definitions imply a form of power which subjugates and makes subject to” (Foucault, 1982, p. 781). Social context surrounding us indeed has a strong impact on our actions, behavior and formation of our personalities (who we are? and how we become who we are?) All the institutions such as family, kindergarten, school and university including peer groups and surrounding society continually shape and impact our consciousness, behavior, mind and

actions by making sure we do not deviate from a socio-cultural script integral to our society. However, even though the society and social context play an important role in shaping our ways of thinking and behavior, we as subjects (meaning conscious human beings) still have a capacity to act even though it might seem that our actions are already determined by the existing social powers, and that gives an important ground for agency. That is what Foucault calls subjectification, and this theoretical conception will be used to illustrate how dominant power regimes in the society are not able to fully define the experiences and actions of its subjects.

However, no power relation can be understood without understanding resistance. To comprehend the power relations in a given context, the author in his article “The Subject and Power” argues it is important to explore various forms of resistance and investigate ‘attempts made to dissociate these relations’ (Foucault, 1982, p. 780). According to the author, different forms of power that are present in our society continually encounter resistances, thus relations of power without resistances and resistance without power simply do not exist (Foucault, 1980). Thus, it follows that in every power relation there is a room for resistance meaning that latter is never external to the former. But how can we read, locate and interpret resistance in the fields where resistance seems almost impossible?

Interpretation of resistance was carried out not only by Foucault. Feminist scholar, Lila Abu-Lughod in her study of Bedouin women criticized prevailing assumptions among feminist scholarship regarding the definition and interpretation of resistance. The author argues instead of ‘romanticizing resistance’ it should be used ‘as a diagnostic of power’ (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 41). For that, she believes that “... we should learn to read in various local and everyday resistances the existence of a range of specific strategies and structures of power” (Abu-Lughod, 1990, p. 53). Realizing that there is a room for multiple ways of expressing resistance that do not necessarily indicate opposition to the patriarchal power structures, feminist scholar offers to surpass the dualistic model of ‘resistance/subordination’ model. As Abu-Lughod suggests in order to be able to read those various forms of resistance “they need to be located within fields of power rather than outside of them” (ibid, p.47). When Egyptian government set the rules that put Bedouin women into the position of integrating, Bedouin women did not protest but adhered to the rules. However, they did so by still preserving their freedom by being silent where it was beneficial for them or keeping secrets from men and having each other’s back in a difficult endangering circumstances (Abu-Lughod, 1989). Another example brought by Abu-Lughod in her *Veiled Sentiments* (1986) describes how poetry was used by women to

share their feelings and sentiments that otherwise would not be considered as ‘appropriate’ for the moral code of the Egyptian society. Last but not the least, the author criticized much of Western media and feminist theory for portraying veiled women as being ‘oppressed’ by the structures of male domination in their society. Instead Abu-Lughod argued that veil for Bedouin women was a voluntary act, not something they were forced to do or were afraid to be punished. As author puts in her *Fieldwork of dutiful daughter* “it became an automatic response to embarrassment, both a sign of it and a way of coping with it” (Abu-Lughod, Lila, 1989, p. 155). Hence, we can see that power and resistance should not be seen on the opposite poles, instead they are strongly intertwined elements constituting each other. Resistance constitutes a part of the dominant power structures, and the sites of resistances can vary and differ from the common way of thinking about resistance as expressing ‘direct confrontation’.

Following Abu-Lughod’s interpretation of resistance, I believe that genuine understanding of experiences of Kyrgyz women who undergo hymenoplasty can only be possible if they are located within the specific context and power structures of their society. When analysing phenomenon of hymenoplasty among the informants of my research, I believe it is essential to abstain from utilizing the lens of victimization and characterising women as ‘others’ in need of salvation because if we see the patriarchal systems as ultimately oppressive and depriving of freedom and capacity to choose/act, we automatically erase any possibility for women’s action and deprive their agency. By embodying certain practices women learn not only to protect their interests and rights, but to empower themselves and their close people (usually family members).

Understanding Foucauldian concepts of subject and subjectification leads us to further understanding of human agency. The concept of ‘agency’ is brilliantly used, explained and applied in Saba Mahmood’s work. The author defines agency as the “capacity to realize one’s own interests against the weight of custom, tradition, transcendental will, or other obstacles (whether individual or collective)”. (Mahmood, 2006, p. 38)

In her book “Politics of Piety”, the author analyses the women’s mosque movement in Egypt, which is the part of a larger Islamic Revival, where women from a different socioeconomic background come together to learn studying and teaching Islamic practices (Mahmood, 2005, p. 2). Mahmood builds on Abu-Lughod stating that much of Western feminism and media, represents the image of Muslim women as being subjugated and oppressed by patriarchal structures, stuck in a cultural conservatism and backwardness, however this kind of portrait of Muslim women is not accurate. Such a superficial approach defies any possibility for women’s

voices within the feminist movement and disregards their motives and perspectives (Mahmood, 2005, pp. 6–7). By diving deeper into the relationship between subject and social norms, between woman and the religious code of piety Mahmood discovers what truly constitutes human nature and agency. Through introducing her own alternative comprehension of ‘agency’ the author invokes readers to think of a concept ‘not as a synonym to resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically specific relations of subordination enable and create’ (Mahmood, 2006, pp. 33–34). Mahmood questions the concept of freedom and its ‘naturally’ appearing meaning that we take for granted in our daily life. She further suggests looking for “expressions and moments of resistance” that might pose a challenge to patriarchal structures, even when it seems there is no such (Mahmood, 2006, p. 38). By putting an emphasis on the ‘conscious’ subject, she believes that norms can be inhabited and performed, searched, consumed and aspired. Similar to Abu-Lughod, Mahmood does not consider human agency being strictly on the binary terms of resistance and subordination and believes, there is always a room for negotiation between two poles:

“what may appear to be a case of deplorable passivity and docility from a progressivist point of view, may actually be a form of agency – but one that can be understood only from within the discourses and structures of subordination that create the conditions of its enactment. In this sense, agential capacity is entailed not only in those acts that resist norms but also in the multiple ways in which one inhabits norms” (Mahmood, 2005, p. 15)

Individual choices are not completely autonomous, as Mahmood puts in, decisions and choices are made with influences by the present societal conditions. Thus, choices are the way individuals express themselves while managing the existing expectations of the society they live in. Choices that even seem as they are going against the social norms are complicated because the choices are the result of the societal current conditions. Hence, author’s argument allows us to think of human agency in a new creative way that goes beyond the binary classification of resistance and subordination. As Mahmood reveals the inner side of piety movement in Egypt along with women’s conscious creating of their selves through bodily practices, intentions and experiences, I will explore the complex strategic actions taken by Kyrgyz women who decide to undergo the hymen restoration procedure, that in secular-liberal discourses might seem to suppress women’s freedom and sexuality interest, however according to Mahmood’s conception it makes a totally different sense and helps for a more accurate interpretation.

Chapter Conclusion

My argument states that hymenoplasty is a complex phenomenon, that embraces various goals, reasons and perspectives underlying the motives and actions of women. First of all, the surgical procedure is aimed at restoring female hymen – a thin membrane that has been proved to have no anatomical purpose (Amy, 2008; Hegazy & Al-Rukban, 2012; Valenti, 2010). Secondly, it shows how different ‘normalizing’ discourses are used by the various regimes of bio-power for the purpose of regulating and maintaining existing dominant patriarchal ideology on female sexuality. Thus, the integrity of female hymen is automatically presumed as an important quality of women as something ‘natural’, the way it should be. The hymen restoration procedure allows to see the elusive way utilized by women in Kyrgyz society to both follow their own desires and at the same time abide by the socio-cultural norms regarding their premarital state of virginity. Foucauldian conceptions of power and subjectification allow us to see how power operates in more subtle and dispersed ways coming from below, and how Kyrgyz women should not be depicted as ‘victims’ oppressed by the existing socio-cultural norms in the dominant structures of male domination. Neither they should be portrayed as deprived of decision making and action. Mahmood’s theory of human agency allows to read multiple forms of both resistance and subordination in women’s decision to undergo hymenoplasty. Bringing together these theoretical concepts is essential for the analysis of my research since it strongly demonstrates agentive capacity of Kyrgyz women who undergo the hymenoplasty in their given socio-cultural context. Despite being ‘constructed’ and influenced by the predominant social norms and ideologies regarding their own bodies and sexualities, Kyrgyz women exercise their agency and express their own techniques of negotiation within their given reality in order to gain a better position for themselves and for their families within their society.

Analyzing hymenoplasty among Kyrgyz women

“I was happy to regain my virginity as if it was never taken away from me against my own will... It made me feel whole again... and of course it saved my relationship with my own parents, husband... it gave me a second chance for having a happy future that I deserved”

Lira

“If he or his family would find out that I am not virgin, they would definitely not allow him to marry me. I loved him and I lied him to save our relationship... So did I, and I do not regret”

Bermet

“The fact that I sewed up (meaning underwent hymenoplasty) not only made my marriage possible, but it also did not destroy my mother’s reputation... I think it even uplifted her status from a ‘widow’ to a ‘respectful Kyrgyz woman’ who managed to raise a dutiful daughter like me without her husband being alive”

Jibek

Factors and circumstances pushing women to seek for the restoration of their virginity through surgical operation differ from one another based on the story and given context of each woman. Therefore, it is inaccurate to categorize all women undergoing this procedure into one particular group. The same way it is inaccurate to consider women in other patriarchal countries undergoing hymen restoration being in the same situation and under the same pressure as Kyrgyz women. Women’s decisions to do certain things or not to do massively depend on the socio-cultural context they are coming from and their personal reasons relying on that context. Therefore, in the following sub-chapters, I will first introduce a brief summary of my respondents’ stories shared during our interviews; then I will present and analyze their motives and reasons that are central to the decision of each of five women to undergo the hymenoplasty. Based on the findings of this research, the reasons and circumstances for hymenoplasty in Kyrgyzstan will be divided into two major groups: 1) Kyrgyz women who lost their virginity as a result of rape or sexual assault (against their own will) 2) women who got engaged in premarital sexual activity based on their own desires and sexual choices.

Before presenting and analyzing the findings of this research, I would like to highlight that for the sake of anonymity all the names used to identify and refer to my respondents are fictional. Due to the sensitivity of the topic there is no age reveal for each

of my informants. I will only provide a short demographic information about my respondents. All of the respondents are young women of Kyrgyz ethnicity, coming from different parts of the country such as Bishkek -capital city, Osh – second biggest city located in the South, Issyk-Kul and Naryn regions, both located in the North of the Kyrgyzstan. Generally, when people talk about where they come from they refer to South or North. All of the respondents are married at the moment, some of them even have children. The age of my respondents varies between 22y.o. and 30y.o. All of the women have a higher education: one of them holds master's degree while the rest of respondents (4 of them) have a Bachelor diploma. All the women except for Bermet (who belongs to upper-middle class) believe they belong to the middle-class. All the women except for Jibek were employed at the moment of conducting interviews.

Meeting the Respondents

Bermet – a young Kyrgyz girl, originally from Bishkek, who admits she did not “deeply internalize imposed norms” regarding her sexual life and choices. Bermet admitted her own consent and desire to have a premarital sex long time before getting married. However, the guy whom she lost her virginity with, broke up with her “couple of months after” they “started having a sex”. Bermet believed her ex-boyfriend would marry her after deflowering her, but he disappeared after all. After that Bermet said she had couple of other boyfriends and “enjoyed” her sexual life. She did not want to lie her partners and could not imagine repairing her hymen because she thought it was unnecessary for a true feeling. However, later on when she met her current husband, she could not tell him she was not a virgin because she was afraid. The main reason why she was so afraid is that his family was from Southern part of Kyrgyzstan, and it is considered as “much more conservative and traditional”. That’s why factors of strong religiosity of his family have heavily influenced her decision to undergo the hymen restoration. Otherwise, Bermet says, his family would simply reject her in case she would not bleed during the first night. By the means of hymenoplasty, Bermet believes she was able to secure her chances to be accepted by her groom’s family.

Lira – young woman from the North (Issuk-Kul region) who underwent hymenoplasty before getting married. Lira was raped when she was freshman student at the university. Due to living in the city far from her parents (who lived in the village), she never told her parents what happened to her because they would not handle it. She told me that either her “mother would commit suicide” or her “dad will beat her mother and after that divorce with her. Lira never reported to the police because she knew it is 'useless' and 'the one to blame is always woman'. Gradually, she was able to overcome this traumatic experience, because she had a good friend, who was with her since childhood. Lira started seeing the psychiatrist to work on her trauma, thus she realized she is not the only one in this situation and gradually she got over her trauma. After graduating from the university, she returned back to her village. By the time her parents found her a ‘match’, thus she started seeing the guy based on her parents' will. However, they had a lot in common and soon she felt "butterflies in the belly and things like that" - as she told me. After few months her boyfriend came to her parents asking permission to get married, and her parents agreed. Lira and her parents agreed. Later on, using the reason of “getting a better wedding beauty services such as manicure, waxing and etc” Lira arrived to the city and underwent hymenoplasty while her friend helped to cover her back in front of her

parents. Three days before the wedding, Lira got her hymen restored. The gynecologist promised that the groom will not feel it differently and he will not find out, so she should stop worrying and be confident. Her husband did not find out because as doctor promised Lira bled during the first wedding night. Moreover, she also bled the following night once again.

Diana – born in Naryn city but grew up in Bishkek. She was 4 years in a relationship that her parents did not approve, because they did not like the guy and where he was coming from (southern part of the country). But she did not give up on her relationship and kept dating. Based on her words the guy promised he will make his parents to like Diana and also will do his best to make her parents like him as well. Based on Diana's words they were having their sexual life as a 'normal couple', travelled together and have been for a long period. After 4 years they broke up because she found out he cheated on her multiple times. Soon after that he changed his plans and left the country. Diana was very depressed and started seeing the psychiatrist in order to get over the situation. Her biggest fear was that she lost her virginity with this guy, and now they are not getting married. Later on, her parents by matchmaking, introduced a 'potential groom' to her. The guy turned out to be very good and after half year of relationship he proposed her through her parents. When he proposed Diana admits she was not that happy. She came home and told the truth to her mother. Her mother said that Diana should not to say a word about her prior sexual life to her groom, and that she got a plan. A week prior the wedding day, her mother booked the doctor she knew for Diana to undergo hymenoplasty. Diana said the doctor recommended the easiest form of hymenoplasty for which she only paid around 50 euros, and it would last maximum for 10-14 days on condition that she should not exercise or lift heavy things. After they got married, her husband did not find out. She bled for three nights in a row and it was a "proof proof" - said Diana. Currently she is happy and pregnant. She believes that hymenoplasty gives women not only second chance for the mistakes they did before, but also gives a confidence when they get married, because woman will bleed during first (after the surgery) sexual intercourse and this is important to prove your virginity in Kyrgyz society. Moreover, Diana admits her mother is now respected more than ever before and treated so well. Her dad constantly says that she is a proud mother and wife because she managed to "raise her daughter in a right way - a good Kyrgyz daughter" that did not put her family into "mud and shame".

Eliza - worked as an escort lady ⁹ abroad for relatively long period (2,5 years). Originally from the South (Osh city) she was the main breadwinner in her family and managed to “strongly improve” her family’s financial situation. When she finished working, she came back to Kyrgyzstan, she met a ‘perfect man she always dreamed about’ (also from her city) and after some time they got married. Since the beginning she was afraid to tell him about her past, because she thought he will reject her and end the relationship. When I asked her why he would do that, she responded “you know how much our culture puts in men's heads about an importance of girls virginity and chastity”. Eliza said her groom was not ‘that religious’, but he was quite traditional and conservative man who wanted a ‘pure untouched girl’. So, she never told him the truth, even though she said she wanted to. Approximately a week before wedding night she got a hymenoplasty. Eliza believes she fulfilled her role as a ‘good daughter’ and did not become a reason of shame for her family. She particularly expressed her concerns about her mother by indicating that if she (meaning Eliza herself) would fail her mother would fail automatically. And she never wanted to put her mother in a situation like this after all.

Jibek – originally from Issuk-Kul, was first kidnapped and the following night raped by the guy who according to her was interested in her for the long time, however she never paid attention to him. The guy tried to ask her out multiple times, but Jibke never liked him, so she always refused to go out with him. One day it happened and Jibek was kidnapped. Following the tradition of the first night despite being married, the guy forced her into sexual intercourse, thus he was confident that she would stay. Jibek was raised only by her mother because her father died when she was a child. When the groom’s parents called her mother to inform about kidnapping Jibek, her mother was furious and did not agree with the fact that her daughter has to stay in the family of unknown guy. Then parents of the groom asked to talk to the head of the family, and when mother responded that the head of the family (meaning her husband and Jibek’s father) died long time ago, the groom’s part just hang up. That night Jibek was raped by the kidnapper without her consent. However, it did not stop Jibek from leaving this family and she did so at night when everyone was sleeping. Jibek did not report to police and has never seen that guy again. She did not even tell her closest friends because she was afraid “the word will spread out” and she will have “no chance to keep up her reputation”. After she finished the undergraduate school, she left for Turkey. There, while working, she met her current husband (who is originally from Turkey) and fell in love. When it came to marriage,

⁹ As defined by my respondent being an escort means to be a companion or in some cases an entertainer for someone that hires her services. In this case, the escort does not need to have sex.

she underwent hymenoplasty in Istanbul and got married. Currently, she is happily married to her husband and lives in Turkey. Her husband never found out about hymenoplasty. Jibek says that hymenoplasty not only allowed her marriage to happen, but it also did not destroy her mother's reputation and even uplifted her social position from a "widow to a good Kyrgyz mother who managed to raise a dutiful daughter even without her husband being alive".

Non-consensual Sexual Intercourse: a chance that was taken away

According to the media, news, and anonymous reports published on social media platforms such as public and personal blogs ¹⁰, a lot of young underage girls experience involuntary sexual assaults such as rape, fingering and other forms of sexual violence. By undergoing traumatic experiences while being raised to fit the image of 'proper Kyrgyz daughter', the young girls and women seek for hymen restoration surgery or other related practices in order to present themselves as 'virgins' and correspond to the normalized sexual discourses. According to the reports, sexual violence is considered one the most common form of violence against women in Kyrgyzstan¹¹(Human Rights Watch, 2006; UNFPA Kyrgyzstan, 2016) and in most of the cases it is done by close family members or relatives. However, due to sensitivity of the issue, only few cases get highlighted on media while the majority of the cases remain underreported, ignored or resolved quietly within the family without telling it to anyone, including law enforcement agencies.

"My father-in-law told me he will give me a ride. When I noticed that we are moving in a completely different direction, I asked him where he is driving. He told me he forgot his wallet back home and needs to stop by. I did not say a word because I could not even imagine what happens further... We arrived at the abandoned ruined house and he raped me right inside of the car. Then he told me if I tell anyone he will kill me and my mother. And since that I never told anyone about what happened in the car – I feel so ashamed. Two years later I moved out from the village and started a new life in the city¹²." (Instagram post anonymously shared in the public blog 'Babckii Blog')

¹⁰ It is quite common to post your stories anonymously and read stories of others in public blogs such as "Babckii Blog" which means "women's blog" or another popular blog on Instagram "Molodye mamochki KG" which means "young mothers of Kyrgyzstan". The first blog has more than 300 000 followers and the second one around 150 000 followers.

¹¹ [Domestic Violence in Kyrgyzstan Human Rights Watch Memorandum, September 2008](#)

¹² Instagram [post](#) on babckii blog

“My father used to finger me when I was little. At that time, I did not understand what he was doing, but now I realize and feel so disgusted by what he did. Now he behaves like nothing happened. For me it is a nightmare that I cannot and do not want to talk about.”¹³(Instagram post anonymously shared in the public blog ‘Babckii Blog’)

These two stories have been posted on one of the most popular public blogs on Instagram. A lot of similar stories quite often get published on various social media blogs. As authors indicate (anonymously) in their posts they are afraid to talk about the things that happened to them to their parents and anyone else. Being raped or sexually harassed by your family member is beyond imaginable feeling of shame. Therefore, almost no one goes to report to police. According to the UN Women report (2017) most of such cases remain unreported and unknown. A research in Netherlands showed that 48% of respondents indicated the sexual assault as a reason for hymenoplasty (van Moorst et al., 2012). Usually girls feel guilty and deeply ashamed for any sexual misbehavior that happened to them. Overburdened by their own fear of social condemnation and stigma, girls leave the sexual assault as if nothing happened. Due to the existing discourses on shame and stigma, young girls start seeking for alternative solutions that would help them to restore their chastity. They deeply internalize the perspective that by being deflowered they can not be considered ‘true’ daughters of their nation. Thus, either through talking to their close’s friends, engaging in online anonymous chats or finding the information on internet, young women find the hymen restoration being the only solution. As the Human Rights Watch state in their research done in 2015 and later in 2019: “According to the Interior Ministry, of nearly 6,145 domestic violence cases registered by the police in 2019, only 649 resulted in criminal cases...Those who do seek help and justice often do not receive needed support or protection.”

Using the data from media and blogs is not enough to fully and deeply illustrate what is happening in a real social context and what drives women to undergo the hymenoplasty. One of my respondents Lira shared her story about how her first sexual intercourse happened against her will – she was raped on her way back home from a birthday party at night. Since she was a student, who came from the village to study for her bachelor’s degree in the city, Lira lived in the dormitory in the city. Her parents could not control the time she comes back, and as a student she wanted to ‘have fun’ and constantly lied to her mother on the phone that she was home and not going to the parties. The night when it happened, she did not tell her mother

¹³ Instagram [post](#) on babckii blog

again that she went out. Therefore, she felt guilty and decided not to tell her parents about what happened to her. The next morning, she tried to go to police and report, but stopped on her way to the station and changed her mind.

“I knew they will not find a rapist, not even mentioning punishing him. Girls like me either do not report because you understand me well how much shame it is to go and tell this arrogant man that another man raped you last night... They will start asking weird questions about what I was doing at night all alone? How was I dressed, and was it actually my fault that I attracted attention of the rapist? It would cause much more pain and humiliation, so I stopped myself from reporting. I did not have even a witness to support my words plus I was slightly drunk” (personal communication with Lira)

The similar story happened to Jibek, who was first kidnapped and then raped by her kidnapper, who hoped she would stay after being ‘deflowered’:

“I will never forget how right after that disgusting act his mother and aunts came in the room and took the bedsheet and excitedly shouted: Our son brought a virgin! Does not matter that she does not have a father – she is still ‘good’!” (personal online communication with Jibek)

According to Jibek, that day everyone was happily celebrating the arrival of bride in the family and no one expected her to leave the kidnapper’s family after being deflowered. Next morning, early before the sunrise when everyone was sleeping Jibek left the house. When Jibek came home, her mother looked ‘very depressed’ like she saw the ghost. She was crying realizing that her daughter was humiliated and raped, her mother felt so desperate. Jibek said they could not do anything and “reporting to police was not even considered as a way out” because that would inflict so much “shame and bad reputation on our family”. Since Jibek only had a mother and was considered ‘fatherless’, it already put a lot of burden on her shoulders because in Kyrgyz society man is considered the head of the family and families without man in charge are considered as of lower social position. Jibek was not going to marry the guy who kidnapped and raped her, however she was also not planning to report.

In order to understand why sexually assaulted girls, remain silent and do not report (based on what the informants shared) it is important to understand the way Kyrgyz society operates in terms of raising daughters. For Kyrgyz culture virginity is associated with intact hymen that has to bleed during the first sexual intercourse which has to happen after the woman gets married. Moreover, it is not only woman’s pride and chastity, but it represents the honour and dignity of the entire family (Abder Rahman, 2009; Abu-Lughod, 1989; Ahmadi, 2016)

.Thus girls not only left out without a proper knowledge about sex and their own sexuality, but when it actually happens they feel intimidated and guilty and do not want to share it with any family members.

Overcoming the trauma: undergoing hymenoplasty=agentive capacity

Lira overgrew the trauma as she puts in and learnt how to live with that. Lira never dated anyone after that “terrible incident”, not even talking about having sex. It has been three years already when she finished her undergraduate school and returned home. By the time she came back to her parent’s home, her parents already arranged her a meeting with a guy they knew for a long time. Lira said something that after meeting with that guy her heart clicked. 4 months later the guy proposed, and the couple started preparations for the wedding. Lira never told him the truth because she was afraid it will lead to an immediate breakup. So, her boyfriend was thinking she was a virgin. Next thing Lira did was to talk to her best friend (the only person she told the truth) on what to do in her situation. As Lira told me, hymenoplasty was her best friend’s idea that she heard about from another girl and her story of undergoing the surgery, Thus, Lira’s best friend found a doctor’s phone number and made an appointment. Together they headed to the city, where Lira “successfully” underwent the hymenoplasty. Using the occasion of getting beauty services such as manicure, waxing and etc., Lira arrived to the city and under the support of her friend underwent hymen restoration procedure. Couple of days before the wedding Lira got her hymen restored. The gynecologist reassured that no one can find out, but she should behave accurately and not do any sport activities before the first wedding night. So, Lira stopped worrying. The night she got married, Lira was nervous, but she said she "felt she was a virgin" because "in fact it was her real first sexual intercourse. Her husband did not find out because as doctor promised Lira bled during the first wedding night and also the following night.

When I asked her, what does the hymenoplasty mean to her, she responded:

“Yes, I sewed up, and it saved my sense of dignity. That night I felt very special – I genuinely felt like I was a virgin because I knew the doctor made everything possible to make me bleed during my first sexual intercourse. Indeed, it was my first sex with the first man in my life and based on my consent and desire...I was happy to regain my virginity as if it was never taken away from me against my own will... It made me feel

whole again...and of course it saved my relationship with my own parents, husband... it gave me a second chance for having a happy future that I deserved” (personal communication with Lira)

By undergoing hymenoplasty, Lira not only felt as if she was given her virginity back again, but thus was able to overcome her traumatic experience. She believes that hymenoplasty gave her another chance, a chance she was deprived of violently and against her own consent. Having a reliable friend not only helped her to find a good doctor, but also provided Lira with support and back up while going through the entire process.

Similarly, Jibek’s story, when she was only 18 when she got kidnapped and raped. Jibek admits it really affected the way of dating and seeing other guys. She developed a fear, phobia that the next moment they guy will start sexually assaulting her. After she finished the undergraduate school, she left to Turkey. There, while working, she met her current husband and fell in love. Since he was strongly religious, after a certain time in relationship, she put on a headscarf and became religious as well. They came back together, and he asked her mother’s permission to get married. But Jibek was afraid to tell her groom is that she was not virgin because he repeatedly said how much important it was for a woman to be virgin and belong to one man only. Jibek and her mother came to conclusion to keep it in secret and to get hymenoplasty as soon as possible. Gynecologist suggested to undergo the long term¹⁴hymenoplasty which would give a “long lasting and maximally natural result - the hymen will be repaired in such way that it will be preserved until defloration” – said Jibek. Also, she was informed about short term hymenoplasty which lasts around two weeks only, involves no injury to the vaginal tissue during the operation and has minimal blood loss with a shorter recovery period. Since Jibek did not know when they might get married, but wanted to be prepared, she chose the long lasting hymenoplasty and underwent it in Istanbul. She paid much more money for the procedure than she could pay in Kyrgyzstan, but the reason she underwent it in Turkey was because she was afraid that “in Kyrgyzstan someone would eventually find out”

The factor of woman bleeding during the first sexual intercourse is a socio-cultural construct that became an essential and necessary prove of women’s state of virginity. Similarly

¹⁴ ‘Long term’ or *dolgosrochnaya gimenoplastika* from Russian translation means that the ‘repaired hymen’ tissues can remain integral for indefinite period of time. Unlike ‘short term’ hymenoplasty that can only keep tissues integral for no longer than two weeks, long term surgery costs significantly more, however lasts longer (as I was told by respondents the long term hymenoplasty can last up to several years depending on every woman)

to the countries such as Iran, Egypt where the phenomenon of hymenoplasty was explored by various researchers, the hymen in Kyrgyz society serves as a sufficient element to prove virgin state of a woman in sociocultural discourses (Ahmadi, 2016, p. 233; Kaivanara, 2016). The association of virginity with intact hymen that has to bleed after penetration describes not only the socially-constructed imaginary vision of women's vagina and hymen; but more importantly it excludes any possibility for the different types and shapes of hymen such as imperforate, annular, crescentic, septate or cribriform (Amy, 2008, p.111).

As discussed by Foucault, the dominant power relations and discourses construct and impact subject's conscience and actions, but nevertheless subject still has a capacity to choose and act even though being heavily influenced by the existing socio-cultural order and moral codes. On the example of Lira and Jibek, two Kyrgyz women who experienced sexual assault and were 'deflowered' against their will, it is possible to see how they both were subjected to the dominant social forces (by feeling ashamed to report or tell anyone including family members), but at the same time they still express the resistance by undergoing the hymen restoration surgery – resistance to the 'social stigma and condemnation' that might await them if they fail to fit to the image of 'proper Kyrgyz daughter'.

"I don't regret, I will never regret. Sometimes I close my eyes and imagine what would have happened if I would tell the truth to my husband and if I would not do the hymenoplasty. Well, it is hard to say, but if I would have a choice, I would do this again. As long as it makes my family and my husband happy, and keeps my face and honor up there, I am happy with my choices and decisions." Lira

Thus, by undergoing seemingly controversial practice Jibek and Lira have strong armed themselves in order to gain respect and recognition from their families and society. They exercise their agency by 'finding creative ways' to reach their desires (for instance in the given cases of Lira and Jibek the desire was to get over the lost virginity by sewing their hymens up). As a result, by having a hymenoplasty these women manage to save their chastity and reputation, moreover, despite the sexual assault that happened to them, they also gain a chance to feel 'virgin' again (on a moral and psychological level) – a chance they were deprived against their own will. Women's agentic capacity is not only about getting over the sexual incident without inflicting a shame on herself and to preserve a reputation/image of the 'good Kyrgyz daughter'; it also allows women to 'reappear as virgin' or feel 'as virgin' and deal with the

traumatic experience both on moral and physical level. The theoretical concepts by Foucault and Mahmood are essential in my analysis since they explain how the dominant power relations produce new discourses and lead to new actions; and how resistance should not be seen as something opposite to power domains. Process of subjectification in Kyrgyz society is happening not only through constructing a self-conscious identity of women by the dominant power discourses, but also by promoting an agentic capacity of the women in their given socio-cultural context.

Bargaining with patriarchy

When I asked Lira about her family and relationship with parents, she responded that if she would have not done hymenoplasty, she would not be “just abandoned” by her family. Lira confidently said, “it would put my mother in a vulnerable position”. Further she explained by saying that in case she would turn out to be non-virgin, her mother would either “commit suicide” or her “dad will hurt (beat) mother and then give her three ‘talak¹⁵’”. By giving talak three times Muslim men express their undisputable and final decision to divorce. For Muslim women that would equal to ‘apocalypses’ – that’s what Lira said it would mean to her mother. If because of her the divorce between her parents would happen, Lira believes she would not be able to live with it at all. By having Lira’s story about the possible consequences and impact on her parents, it can be concluded that virginity is important not only for groom and his family, but also for the bride’s family and it particularly affects the relationship of father to mother of the girl.

Lira still remembers how the old woman came the very next morning to get the bed sheets with the blood stains and showed them to everyone with the great pride and satisfaction on her face. Since that day, Lira believes the relationship between her parents and parent-in-law became very warm and strong, and more importantly her mother-in-law treated her kindly and with respect.

“The morning they take the sheets is the most important one because either they see blood stains and delightfully show it or call every close relative to tell about it. For our culture it is a proof – a proof of a girl being really pure, innocent and untouched. After that they treat you with all respect and consider you part of their family.” (personal online communication with Lira)

¹⁵ ‘Talak’ means a unilateral divorce given by the husband within Islam (Rehman, 2007).

In the opposite case, “if there is no blood, husband and his family can kick a woman out of the house and drive her back to her parent’s home”, - said Lira. Moreover, they might tell about it to other families and relatives and also claim the *kalym* (*bride price*) back. “It is the nightmare for every Kyrgyz bride and for every Kyrgyz family having a daughter”, - said Lira.

In case with Jibek, her negotiating techniques can be seen through the support of her mother and sharing secrets between mother and daughter. When asked about her mother’s relationship with other relatives and her husband’s family, Jibek proudly responded that her mother is no longer ignored and neglected by their relatives (from Jibek’s father side). Since Jibek got married to a ‘successful man’ in terms of Kyrgyz society and already gave a birth to a child¹⁶ since she got married to a successful man and left abroad. If before, her relatives from father’s side treated her mother with “low respect and never invited her to social events and gatherings”, now she is a “welcomed and well-respected guest at all familygatherings” admits Jibek.

“The fact that I sewed up (meaning underwent hymenoplasty) not only made my marriage possible, but it also did not destroy my mother’s reputation... I think it even uplifted her status from a ‘widow’ to a ‘respectful Kyrgyz woman’ who managed to raise a dutiful daughter like me without her husband being alive”.

From what Jibek told me, it can be clearly seen how the status or social standing of mother in Kyrgyz society heavily depends on a social standing and reputation of her daughter. If daughter fails to present, herself as a ‘good Kyrgyz daughter’ than it automatically puts her mother in a lower social position with less respect and recognition. By avoiding the shame and dirty rumors, Jibek not only talked to her mother and shared her story, but she also managed to negotiate the dominating power relations within their circle of relatives and advance her mother’s standing in it. Marrying virgin in Kyrgyzstani context can be considered a rewarding in comparison to getting married as non-virgin. Not only it affects woman’s position in her husband’s family, but also places her entire family and kinship in a less respectable position. The theory of ‘patriarchal bargaining’ can be applied and analyzed in the cases of both Lira and Jibek as advancing woman’s and her family’s status in the eyes of her husband’s family and society in general.

¹⁶ For Kyrgyz society, the most important reason to get married is to have children (O’Neill Borbieva, 2012)

In both cases, young women Lira and Jibek showed a strong attachment to their mothers and their social standing in the given social context. Both Lira and Jibek emphasized how important was the hymenoplasty and what role did it play in gaining more powerful position for their mothers. Both women were at the same time ‘subjects and objects’ of the dominant power regimes. Both women took their own ways to operate in their given circumstances and both were able to negotiate the social constraints as well as constraints on their bodies, sexuality and sexual choices. Not only the status of mother changed within the family as it happened in Lira’s case when father’s attitude to mother became softer and much more respectful. It also affected the larger circle as it happened in case of Jibek, whose only parent was mother, however her social standing among the relatives definitely improved with Jibek’s successful marriage. As a result, the very fact of ‘Kyrgyz daughter’ getting married as pure and untouched virgin pays tribute to mothers because a child rearing is socially and culturally constructed as obligation and duty of mothers primarily. ‘Successfully’ raised daughter in Kyrgyz context grants her mother more recognition and respect from her husband, allows her to gain more authority within the family and in certain cases even within the entire kinship. Daughter-mother relationship explored on the example of my respondents allows to see how individuals deeply internalize the values of the society they live in and how they construct their own subjectivities based on the dominant socio-cultural discourses on prohibition of sexual freedom. By paying great attention to the dominating discourses on female sexuality operating in Kyrgyz society that act through the instrument of public shaming and might lead to the image of ‘irresectable woman’, my informants not only manage to advance their own social standing and secure the reputation, but also to avoid any shame and advance their parent(s)’ reputation through negotiating with the patriarchal rules in their social context. An important point is that power relations, as discussed by Foucault, are indeed complex and do not operate based on a top-down approach. There is always a way of exercising your power and expressing resistance that even if might not be seen as resistance in conventional understanding of the term. Thus, we can read various forms of resistance once we locate them within the reality of the subject.

Consensual Premarital Sex: Agency and Negotiation

“I actually enjoyed my sexual life. Why men can have a lot of sex before getting married and we cannot? I wish it would be less of taboo and more of joy and pleasure when it comes to sex, but unfortunately our mentality is not ready for that yet”

Bermet

Three out of five respondents in my research have emphasized that their first sexual intercourse happened voluntarily, based on their own desires and consent. During our conversation, Bermet, a young Kyrgyz girl, admitted that she was never a perfect dutiful daughter because she failed to “internalize the rules and norms that are important for our traditional society”. Bermet started her sexual lifelong time before she got married. She believes she internalized western ideals rather than Kyrgyz by growing up in different foreign countries and having elder friends and siblings. Moreover, she admits she was never a ‘fan of Kyrgyz traditions and waiting to have sex after getting married’. It started from her first boyfriend when she was 16 y.o., who “disappeared couple of months after” they started having sex. At the moment, she could not understand why he left, shared Bermet:

“I could not understand why he did it, because he knew he was my first, but he just did what other guys do – deceived to get sex and then ran away” (Personal online communication with Bermet).

After that unpleasant sexual experience Bermet had other relationships with other men and admits she “enjoyed” her sexual experiences. Later on, she met a guy, but she did not have the same relationship with him as with others. “He was different”, -said Bermet and emphasized that his family was from Southern part of Kyrgyzstan, which is considered as being more conservative and more religious than Northern part of the country, where Bermet was originally from.

“ If he or his family would find out that I am not virgin, they would definitely not allow him to marry me. I loved him and I lied him to save our relationship...So did I, and do not regret it” (Personal online communication with Bermet)

Bermet was afraid to be rejected by her boyfriend, therefore she decided to undergo hymenoplasty in order to ‘reappear’ as virgin, so that he would not find out. Bermet believes thus she saved her relationship by undertaking the secretive surgery and presenting herself as a ‘good Kyrgyz daughter’. In case of Bermet, we can observe that she not only failed to

internalize the constructed ideals in regards her sexual choices and freedom, but more importantly that despite she had a consensual premarital sex she decided to restore her hymen in order to be a ‘proper wife’ for her “traditional conservative” husband. By applying agency and concept of patriarchal bargaining it can be analyzed how Bermet is undertaking a creative approach in order to pursue her love and feelings, thereby giving a potential to her relationship by successfully turning it into marriage. Bermet is an example of being both “subject to the dominant ideology on the constructed ideal of woman in being pure and ‘untouched’”, as well she is subject tied to her conscience and self-knowledge by going beyond the restrictive rules and exploring her body and sexual desires. According to the Foucault’s definition, she is both subject and the object of power relations in her given context.

Another story describes the experience of Diana and her relationship that lasted for 4 years, however, did not end up with the marriage. The planned wedding did not come true when her boyfriend left abroad, and Diana felt “deeply ashamed”. This happened not because her boyfriend left and “broke her heart” said Diana, but because she let her parents down despite, they told her she should never be in a relationship with the guys like her ex-boyfriend. “All the wonderful plans just turned into pile of dust”, - admitted Diana. The time past and soon she was introduced to the very decent guy through her parents matchmaking¹⁷ actions, and after 6 months of relationship they guy proposed and both parties agreed (meaning both her and his families). However, Diana was not happy because she was worried about being non-virgin. After talking to her mother and sharing her deepest fears, Diana’s mother took an action: she called the doctor she knew and booked a day for hymen restoration surgery. Currently she is married to that guy, who did not find out she underwent hymenoplasty. Moreover, Diana believes that he would not marry her if she would not prove her virginity because as she said, “for his family virginity of the woman is the highest priority”.

“even when we have some small fights, usually chores and household things, when he is mad because of my cooking, but it does not last long. At the end of each fight he always repeats that I preserved my entire self for him and that he was my first man, so he will do his best not to make me disappointed and keep up our relationship” (personal online communication with Diana)

¹⁷ Meaning that parents introduce a potential partner to their sons/daughters. Usually, those people whom parents introduce to their children, are in a good relationship with the parents or the families know each other. There is a common belief that these type of ‘arranged’ by parents marriages based on a mutual sympathy and consent of two individuals tend to last longer and have more respect towards each other.

What is similar in both of the stories is that both young women had their sexual life before getting married. Their previous relationships involved sexual activities but did not lead to marriage. Finally, when they met their ‘best halves’, young women felt insecure and were afraid to tell the truth about their state of virginity and previous sexual experience. The fear illustrates the stigma attached to non-virgin girls and young women and how strong is public shaming in Kyrgyz society. Fear to talk does not necessarily mean deliberate deceit and lack of trust, it is more connected to the internal feelings of ‘incompleteness’ and ‘defect’ – the ideology that deeply embedded women’s minds. Therefore, by undergoing hymen restoration surgery these women were able to achieve their goals in marrying these guys, but at the same time they did not have to feel dishonored and ashamed by telling about the sexual freedom they enjoyed before. In this case, women cannot be considered as individuals who fully internalized the social norms of their society, instead they deviated from the norms, but through finding a creative way of undergoing hymen restoration surgery they managed to advance their position and pave the way for their future life with their husbands. What we can see is that power relations can be found on a various aspects and domains of these women’s lives, and it is not a top-down model of power functioning on the examples of Bermet and Diana. They did not negate their personal interest and sexual desires, thus being active subjects and instead enjoyed their rights and freedom, however at the same time they are never fully autonomous, and it can be proved on their experiences in undergoing the hymen restoration surgery. Undergoing hymenoplasty should not be considered as simply resistance or subordination because it was done by women in pursuit of their personal goals in the given socio-cultural settings which are complex. By resisting to the dominant discourse prohibiting sexual relations for women prior getting married, Bermet and Diana not only showed their agentic capacity, but they also showed the strategic usage of their position and power relations under their given circumstances by secretly undergoing hymenoplasty.

My fifth and final informant is Eliza, and she has a very unusual story for Kyrgyzstani context. Eliza worked as an escort lady abroad for more than 2 years.

“Everyone thinks I worked as a model, but this is not true. I worked in escort services for 2,5 years while telling my family that I was working on a modelling contract in Moscow. For our society escort implies prostitution, even though in reality it is not.” – that is how our conversation with Eliza started.

Eliza told me she worked as an accompanying person for ‘very important people’, who paid her quite well. She was receiving a monthly salary of her both parents in less than one day.

Thus, she managed to buy herself an apartment and a car in Bishkek, buy and renovate her parents apartment, purchase a good car for her father, and help with the tuition fee payment for her younger siblings.

After some time, Eliza realized that there were some people back in Kyrgyzstan who started spreading rumours about girls like her. “They think that we do not really work as models and that we in fact sell our bodies to make the money” – said Eliza. After those rumours her mother started calling and asking questions because she was deeply concerned by the words about her daughter.

“I made a fake contract on modelling and showed it to my mom. Moreover, I kept sending her professional pictures that I was doing anyways because as an escort you always have to have up to date fresh pictures of yours. Thus, I managed to calm her down a bit, because I did not want to let her down because of what I do and what others think I do. Moreover, my dad's heart was not the best - he already had one heart stroke, so I did not want to be the reason of the second one. All I wanted was to make my parents proud of me, make them financially independent because we were below average. And I managed to achieve my goal by working abroad and sending money home. After coming back to Kyrgyzstan, I actually started the career of model.”

After she returned to her home country, Eliza met her “perfect man” and right after 2 months of relationship he proposed her. Two months might seem too soon and cause many questions, but most of Kyrgyz families believe it is better to get married sooner because early marriages prevent many young couples from engaging in the sexual relationship during the dating period (O'Neill Borbieva, 2012, p. 155). That's why many Kyrgyz families encourage their dating sons or daughters to be faster when it comes to marriage. In case of Eliza, she was afraid to tell her groom the truth because it was “too risky” for her and she could “lose everything she has achieved so far”. When the wedding preparations started, Elisa got really nervous and could not put her mind to peace. “How can I live with this lie I thought?” – she told me. She decided to talk to her best friend who shared some stories she knew about other girls, who told the truth about their non-virginal state and how they were rejected by their boyfriends which led to the cancellation of weddings. Eliza listened to her friend and decided not to risk by telling him the truth. Almost one week before the wedding night she got a short-term hymenoplasty, so it would last maximum for two weeks.

“I felt indeed that doctor repaired my hymen well because it did hurt after the surgery and even slightly bled in the beginning. But on our first night the blood served as

indicator of my ‘purity’, and the relief that I saw in my mother's eyes next morning... that was enough for me not even to regret a little about doing that.”

By referring to the relief in her mother’s eyes, Eliza meant the previously mentioned rumours that reached her mother while Eliza was working abroad as an escort lady. Her biggest fear was that her parents will find out, and that in the first place it will inflict harm on her mother.

“I always knew that my father was concerned with me, his little girl, being abroad by myself, but my mother always repeated that he should trust me and think good of me. I would not handle putting a shame on them and ruining their reputation. What would have happened to my mother if she found out? She was always saying if I do something wrong, even after she dies, her bones in the coffin will turn over. Her words “People and your dad will say I failed as a mother and as a woman”. So, I always kept it in mind.”

As Eliza repeatedly said: “I fulfilled my role as a daughter, and never put a shame on my parents and family.” As of a primary concern she helped her family financially and managed to provide them a “secured future” with no financial worries. Eliza was the breadwinner and managed to buy apartments and cars for herself and her parents. Moreover, she keeps financially helping her family even now.

“My husband still cannot believe he got a wife like me, and I still cannot believe how lucky I am that he did not find out. But that lie - it bothers me quite often and I don’t think I will ever forget about it. Sometimes I think why I not told him all the truth, but then I realize that things would not be the way they are now if I would tell him everything. Nothing would be the same with my parents, with my husband and even with his family. My peace and respect that I have today is worth keeping certain things in secret.”

Eliza is the brightest example of ‘subjectification’ described by Foucault – she has been constantly in the position of undergoing and exercising the power at the same time (Foucault, 1980). Not only she is a socially constructed subject shaped by the socio-cultural values of her society, but she is also an individual tied to her own identity by her own conscience. Despite being heavily pressured by the norms restricting her sexuality and bodily experiences, Eliza did not develop a strong attachment to her virginity or the normalized discourse on female chastity that is interconnected with ‘virginity myth’. She never explicitly said that she engaged in sexual activity with her clients, however she mentioned several times that everything depends on personal sympathy and ‘sex can happen anytime, you never know’. Thus, I believe Eliza exercised her agentive capacity two times: at first by negating the dominant social

discourses on woman's position in the society (staying home, not traveling alone/abroad, not engaging in sexual relationships prior marriage); and secondly by working on a job that is socially condemned and heavily criticized by existing socio-cultural norms and sexual discourses of Kyrgyz society. By undergoing hymenoplasty she managed to keep her past experience in secret and not allow it to destroy her 'present happiness'. At the same time she deeply cared about her parents and their reputation, therefore through bargaining with the societal terms of the male domination culture she was part of, Eliza managed to secure her mother's reputation by creatively securing her own one – reappearing 'virgin' and getting married 'virgin'. Instead of simply rejecting the norms she has to conform, Eliza found a place in her heart to care about her parents, mother in particular. As I already previously mentioned, mothers are considered the ones in charge for daughters' behavior. The deviation of the daughter's behavior might lead to serious consequences such as domestic violence or divorce or social condemnation resulting in public shaming stigmatization. However, Eliza managed to find a creative solution through undergoing the hymenoplasty and conforming to the image of a 'good Kyrgyz daughter'. Her choices might seem as going against the socio-cultural norms at first, but in reality, they are much complicated because these choices are still the result of the social context, she is living in. Thus, decisions and choices undertaken by person can be seen as the way individuals express themselves while managing the existing expectations of the society they belong to.

The perspectives and unique experiences shared by Eliza, Bermet and Diana can be interpreted as a rebellion against existing patriarchal norms constraining female sexuality and their freedom to choose; however at the same time they can also be interpreted as acts of obedience and compliance with the male dominated system. Kyrgyz women who undergo hymenoplasty either fall in both categories simultaneously and they do not fit in either one. That is how some women in Kyrgyz society exercise their own agency by deliberately choosing an exploratory sexual lifestyle and fulfilling their sexual desires, but later on through undergoing hymen reconstruction surgery before getting married. As discussed by Mahmood, agency is not always about resistance, but it is about creative action within the given situation or the undertaken negotiation in order to gain more benefits and advantages in the socio-patriarchal hierarchy as put by Kandiyoti.

Conclusion

In this thesis I explored hymenoplasty phenomenon in Kyrgyzstan and young women's motives, reasons and goals to undergo this genital surgical procedure. By undergoing hymen restoration procedure Kyrgyz women not only act strategically and make sure they protect their own physical and moral well-beings, but thus they also pave a way for advancing their own power positions by exchanging their 'proved virginity' into future respect and recognition from their husbands, fathers and entire kinship. When it comes to the daughter-mother relationship, the concept of the patriarchal bargaining and the research revealed how mothers can advance their social standing within the family and earn more respect by fulfilling their role of 'good mothers' who managed to raise their daughters in a rightful way for Kyrgyz society. In their turn, daughters through employing their own means of agency and bargaining make sure that their mother's and family's social standing is not affected by the discourses of shame and stigma. Thus, through the hymen restoration procedure Kyrgyz women not only manage to meet the socio-cultural gendered expectations of their families and society, but they also empower themselves by advancing their status in a power interplay within the patriarchal structures. An example of a woman believing in the importance of hymen is an example of a living body which is both a subject and object to power. The power relations are, indeed, complex; and power does not repress the sexuality, but it is used to control the dominant ideologies on formation of subject's consciousness and bodies. Bargaining with the societal norms and preconditions as well as resistance and agency are not just about going against the norms or rejecting dominant discourses. It is about exploring and finding new techniques in mediating and handling the constraints of the given context. Thus, I conclude that hymenoplasty in Kyrgyz society is a complex phenomenon; and young women, who undertake the surgery do not separately fall in resistance or subservience categories. It is always both, beyond and between the models of dualistic classification.

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