

Transcript of BBC World News 06/01/2012 interview with Miriam Barbooram and Holly Combe (app. 17:00-22:50)

BBC: The poster child—girl—for the American athletics team Lori “Lolo” Jones has created a bit of a stir by announcing that at the age of 29, she is still a virgin and she intends to remain one until she gets married. On the HBO show, *Real Sports with Bryant Gumble*, she said how much of a challenge it had been to remain chaste.

JONES: Virgins out there, I want to let them know, it’s the hardest thing I’ve ever done in my life—harder than training for the Olympics, harder than graduating from college, has been staying a virgin before marriage. I’ve been tempted. I’ve had plenty of opportunities (laughs). [BREAK]

JONES (cont’d): Well, I’m one year out from turning 30, so it was cute, like when I was 22, 24, it was cute, like, “Aw, I’m a virgin,” and you know, that’s cute. 24 through 29, it’s not cute. Like, you get judged a lot.

BBC: Well someone who might understand those challenges is the actress Miriam Babooram. She also believes in sexual abstinence before marriage, and she joined me here in the studio earlier on.

MIRIAM: When you’re a virgin and your under 25—there’s it’s a lot different to be an over 25. So I’m, I’m 33 now, and the way people view me is a lot different to how they would 10 years ago.

BBC: Thank you for not getting me to ask a lady how old she was on there. (laughter) How do they view you differently?

MIRIAM: I think it’s more of an oddity now, and people go, “Oh, is there something a bit weird about her?” I think people expect virgins to, um, look like trolls and have the personality of a snail, and I’m, I’m, I’m not like that, I don’t think. I think I’m different to what you would expect a virgin to be like.

BBC: Yeah, well how do you think people would expect—is that how you think people expect virgins—33-year-old virgins to be?

MIRIAM: (Laughter) Yes, boring, not very interesting, not have much of a personality. Like, there’s—people expect there to be some type of massive flaw or massive fault with you.

BBC: What about boyfriends? How do they react?

MIRIAM: Um, yeah, with surprise, I think, and it—because it is such an accepted thing in society to have sex before you’re married, and to have sex in a relationship that when you say, “I’ve not done that,” it kind of sets people back a bit.

BBC: Has that led to relationships breaking up?

MIRIAM: Yeah, it has, yeah. People won't date me because I've not—I won't have sex until I'm married.

BBC: That must be tough, if you've lost relationships through it. It must be a tough thing to keep up.

MIRIAM: Yeah, it is a tough thing to keep up. But obviously, if someone's value system is different to mine, then maybe it's, we're not suited anyway, you know?

BBC: Yeah. Well, let me bring in this point, someone with a slightly different view about this. She's a writer for the feminist blog, "The F Word," Holly Combe. Holly, I know you believe every woman has her own choice, and Miriam has made her choice, but what are your thoughts about remaining a virgin?

HOLLY: Um, I don't really believe in virginity. I think it's a social construct. And as you quite rightly pointed out, anybody has the right to label themselves or identify however they choose, but I find it odd that we still have the concept in this day and age.

BBC: Is there a physical concept?

HOLLY: Um, well very often, people use it to refer to one particular sex act, so if you're heterosexual, you're expected that that is the milestone. Of course, it will be different things to different people, so I sort of think, why not do away with the concept all together?

BBC: What would that achieve?

HOLLY: I think one thing it could achieve—and I'm just theorizing, cause I'm not in education—but I think sex education, the concept was sort of taken out of teaching, and if it wasn't about abstinence or retaining virginity or some sort of object or commodity to be given away, it would just be, you do what you feel comfortable with. You have sex in the way you feel comfortable sort of when it suits you. And I think that would be much healthier, and I think possibly, it might even—there might be less teenage pregnancies, because people wouldn't have virginity as a shackle that they want to lose. They can just do things when they want to.

BBC: Miriam, is it a shackle?

MIRIAM: I don't, I don't feel it is a shackle. It's a bit of a label, but I think as well, because Holly was talking about sex education, there is as well—she didn't really mention love. And I think love is a really important thing to have before, before you sleep with someone, before you have sex with them.

BBC: Where does love figure in your world view, Holly?

HOLLY: Love *can* be important, and it is important, but I think you can see love as important without sort of having virginity as a concept. You have this thing that you lose or hold on to properly—

BBC: Or give away to someone you love, and that's—

HOLLY: Yeah, but why—

BBC: And that's, Miriam, I guess that's the point of it all for you, isn't it?

MIRIAM: Yes, it is, yeah.

BBC: You don't, you don't believe it can—virginity can't be a gift, then, Holly?

HOLLY: Well, I think if the person wants it to be a gift, then it is. I mean, this is the thing: virginity exists if people *make* it exist. So I think if that's the system that works for someone, then I respect that. But for me, I think it's an entirely social construct, and I think it probably does more harm than good.

BBC: Miriam, the reason we're talking about this, this high-profile American athlete has come out and said, I mean that, she's a virgin at 29. Is there something wrong with society that it, it has become such a big thing?

MIRIAM: I just think that society has changed, hasn't it? And the way people view sex has changed, like in the last 50, 60 years. And think it's strange that I'm made to feel unusual about it, like it's something extraordinary. It shouldn't be seen as something extraordinary. I don't think it should just be—

BBC: Do you feel as though in certain circumstances you need to raise the issue, to talk about it, when perhaps you don't feel you *should* have to?

MIRIAM: Sometimes I feel I have to justify myself, like I used to work in a bar in my 20s, and all the people that would come in and be like, "Oh, you're not a virgin! How can you be a virgin?" It's almost like it's putting you on the back foot, and you have to go, "Oh, it's because of this..." and it should just be this is how I am, and that's fine. You don't see people who have sex having to justify why they have sex.

BBC: And that was Miriam Babooram. I was also speaking to Holly Combe.