

Women, Sex & Those Busting Vagina Myths

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Women's bodies are the source of enormous scrutiny in our society. We are immersed in a sea of images of perfection in the media. To reach this high-tech, airbrushed ideal we have a wealth of potions and lotions, fad diets, and surgical promises that can help us look more attractive to others and feel younger. Many women feel they aren't good enough unless they have the ideal face, a tauter bottom, bigger boobs, whiter teeth and shinier hair - the list goes on.

Until recently, no part of a woman's body was saved from the spotlight except the genitals. These dark recesses have long been a source of secret shame in society's eyes. It is almost as though if we do not speak about this vital part of a woman's being, if it remains a mystery, women will not be able to unlock their full feminine power. In fact even the word most commonly used to describe women's genitals - vagina - is an old English word that means "sheath for a sword" - and it is inaccurate (1). Vagina only describes

one part of a woman's sexual organs and interestingly it is the part that is more associated with birth and penetration than a woman's pleasure.

In Sanskrit, the word for women's genitals is yoni, which broadly means divine passage or temple of sexual energy. I will use this term as it speaks about women's genitals as a whole. The silence on women's yonis stems from a longer history of repression of sexuality. French philosopher Michel Foucault spoke of repression as "an injunction to silence, an affirmation of nonexistence, and, by implication, an admission that there was nothing to say about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (2).

The interesting thing about repression is that it hasn't stopped people from talking about sexuality, but it has got them talking about it in a prescribed way. Our society has an obsession with people's bodies and sex, but talk of yonis is still usually limited to tales of shock and awe from the birthing suite, or in terms of disease and dysfunction. We are becoming impotent to intimacy, possibly feeling insecure as we compare ourselves to the people we see on TV, in ads and in Hollywood, subliminally telling us all the time that we are not good enough as we are. As a tantric sexuality coach, I often see women concerned about the way they feel about their bodies, their yonis and their sexuality.

Is it any wonder that women have issues with their genitals when one of the world's most well-known thinkers on sexuality, psychiatrist Dr Sigmund Freud, referred to vaginas as "mutilated males, biologically inferior because they lacked penises" (3)?

Many women are unaware of their anatomy, such as where the G Spot is or where they actually urinate from, and of mysterious concepts like female ejaculation.

In our performance-oriented, sex-saturated culture, women are increasingly accessing erotica and pornography, and for many, this might be their only opportunity to see other women's yonis in detail. Inevitably, comparisons arise. Just as male porn stars are selected for their penis size, most women in porn must have an

idealised yoni — commonly called the clamshell or the Barbie look — and some have likely had surgery to look that way. Also, in some countries, like Australia, censorship laws dictate that it is only acceptable to show a certain amount of inner labia in images, thus obliging editors of R-rated and mainstream magazines to airbrush photos so these parts can barely be seen. There is a clear correlation between the increase in women starting to watch porn and erotica in the past decade and the rise in labioplasty — surgery that cuts the labia to reduce its size. An article in the British Medical Journal (4) reported that labial reductions in the UK had doubled in a five-year period. This is despite the fact that cosmetic genital surgery carries with it risks of altered sexual sensation, infection, scarring or permanent disfigurement (5).

The authors, consultant clinical psychologist Liao and consultant gynaecologist Creighton, say their patients "uniformly wanted their vulvas to be flat with no protrusion beyond the labia majora, similar to the prepubescent aesthetic featured in advertisements" (4). Liao and Creighton attribute this trend to women having an idealised view of genitalia from pornography, as well as to articles in magazines about designer vaginas and a rise in advertising about labioplasty (4).

A simple Google search on labioplasty or genital cosmetic surgery will yield hundreds of thousands of results. Many of these are pages advertising the services of cosmetic surgeons who are benefiting from women's insecurity. Yet, current research has proved there is far greater variance than previously documented in size, shape, colour and symmetry of yonis.

Other doctors have likened labioplasty to female genital mutilation (7) and in 2008 the Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists issued a position statement on the trend, labelling it "dangerous, expensive (costing up to Au\$10,000) and unwarranted" (5). Dr Ted Weaver from the college said "we feel these operations might prey on people with insecurities and fears who actually need psychological help" (5).

Changing our bodies to improve their perceived imperfections or to please others can see us trapped in a never-ending cycle. An alternative option is not to change our bodies - but rather to change the way we feel about them.

This article does not seek to judge women who have had cosmetic surgery or are considering it, but merely to bring an awareness of the issues that play a part in people's decision-making so that they can be fully informed and empowered.

Introduction:

- 1 Muscio I. Cunt: a declaration of independence. CA: Seal Press; 2002.
- 2 Foucault M. The history of sexuality: an introduction. NY: Random House; 1978. (volume one).
- 3 Pertot S. Perfectly normal: living and loving with low libido. Australia: Emmaus, Rodale Books; 2005.
- 4 Liao L, Creighton S. Requests for cosmetic genitoplasty: how should healthcare providers respond? BMJ 2007;334:1090-1.
- 5 McLean T. Designer Vaginas Blacklisted by Gynos. 9MSN [Online]. August 2008 [cited 2009 January 5]; [two screens]. Available from: URL: <http://news.ninemsn.com.au/article.aspx?id=607410>.
- 7 Conroy R. Female genital mutilation: whose problem, whose solution? BMJ 2006; 333:106-7.

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