

'Everyone wants a vagina* that looks less like a vagina': Australian women's views on dissatisfaction with genital appearance

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Introduction

Increasing numbers of women in Western countries are seeking genital cosmetic surgery, principally labiaplasty. Aesthetic concerns are the most common reason for requesting surgery, amongst both adult women and adolescents.

Within contemporary neoliberal and postfeminist culture, there is an intense focus on the regulation and beautification of women's bodies, which now under greater scrutiny and judged against narrower standards than ever before. This regulation and scrutiny has extended to women's genitals.

Method

Ninety-one women aged from 19 to 31 ($m = 25$) provided written responses to an open-ended question: 'Research has shown that many women today are dissatisfied with how their genitals look. We would love to hear any thoughts you have about why this might be the case'.

Results

Theme 1: From natural to normal

Discusses the ways in which the natural female body and vagina are constructed as inadequate, with normality only achievable through modification. This construction is informed by dominant constructions of femininity, as well as postfeminist and neoliberal discourses.

The body:

- The natural female body is never 'good enough'
- Acceptability can only be achieved through consumption (e.g., cosmetic products, surgery)
- The body is a 'project' requiring constant improvement, transformation and reinvention
- These constraints are obscured by an empty rhetoric of 'freedom' an 'choice'

The vagina:

- The natural vagina is positioned as unacceptable and requiring improvement, to an even greater extent than women's bodies in general
- There is a cultural imperative – evident in spoken language, the media, 'educational' textual illustrations and soft core pornography – that the vagina should represent absence and should not be visible
- This 'absent' vagina was unanimously understood as the most desirable vagina

Theme 2: The challenge of resistance

This theme examines the difficulty of rejecting the construction of the natural vagina as inadequate. Discourses that position women's genitals as unpleasant and taboo were central here:

- Pervasiveness of negative constructions of the vagina – dirty, smelly, disgusting
- Jokes / slang terms typically depict women's genitals negatively
- Women's genitals remain taboo and not talked about. This is reinforced by the use of euphemisms, and creates a sense of secrecy and shame

The women also found it almost impossible to resist the construction of a single type of genital appearance as normal:

- Many women never see other adult women's genitals
- There is a lack of awareness of the normal range of genital diversity (e.g., normal labia range from 2-10cm in length)
- There is a general perception that there is one type of 'normal' vagina

Conclusion

- Genital dissatisfaction is socially and culturally produced but has numerous negative sexual health implications
- This dissatisfaction has provided the perfect conditions for female genital cosmetic surgery to emerge
- Surgery is positioned as the solution to a problem that is grounded in the cultural, rather than the medical

Where to from here?

- There needs to be much greater education and awareness of genital diversity
- People need the tools to challenge cultural norms – e.g., of women's sexuality as passive and receptive
- The taboo surrounding women's genitals frequently begins in childhood. Girls should be taught the correct terminology for their anatomy, free from embarrassment and shame
- The widespread positioning of genital cosmetic surgery as beneficial, safe and straightforward needs to be challenged with evidence based reporting

*We use the term 'vagina' in this poster when referring to female genitalia. Although the term 'vulva' is anatomically correct, 'vagina' is widely used colloquially and has been used by the women participating this study to refer to the external genital organs including the labia and clitoris.