



“COSMETIC SURGERY ON GENITALS HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH GENITAL MUTILATION”

We know that girls and women are exposed to numerous images of “what a woman should be”. Society’s norms and expectations include habits and behaviour, but different societies also have different expectations about the anatomy of genital organs, which do not always correspond to real/natural anatomy.

In order to be able to live up to these expectations, women and girls sometimes decide to subject themselves to cosmetic surgery to modify their genitals. These include labioplasty (reduction of outer or inner labia, clitoral-hood reduction), hymenoplasty (reconstruction of the hymen) which allows women to have a “second virginity”, as well as operations to narrow the opening of the vagina.

These forms of plastic surgery can be compared to FGM in different ways, as they are generally practised for non-medical reasons. Women themselves may ask for this cosmetic surgery, encouraged by the social pressure brought on by the image of the “ideal vulva” or the obligation to be a virgin before marriage, which can weigh heavily on women. These aesthetic reasons and societal pressure can play a role in choosing cosmetic surgery, as is the case for female genital mutilation. Surgical interventions on genitals can lead to complications such as bleeding, infection and pain.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) describes FGM as “all procedures involving partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for non-medical reasons”. Cosmetic surgery can very easily fall into this category. The strategy of medicalising “traditional forms of FGM” comes up against strong resistance. Surgical interventions on the vulva for purely aesthetic reasons are legal and are becoming more commonplace in Europe. We could question why is the WHO remaining silent on the issue of labioplasty, whilst vehemently opposing female genital mutilation. Why are these practices acceptable in some contexts, but considered mutilation in other contexts?

We could go a step further and say that “FGM laws in European countries” on FGM are based on a double standard: can an adult woman or a surgeon be punished based on their ethnicity or the origin of the patient? Why do Western women have the freedom of individual choice, but women of other origins cannot consent to the same type of intervention? Can an adult woman from an FGM-practising region go through a medical intervention on her genitals for cosmetic reasons, in the same way that her neighbour can? Or would one be called plastic surgery and the other a form of genital mutilation?

“Female Genital Cosmetic Surgeries such as labiaplasty is becoming increasingly popular in Europe. There is some confusion that such surgery for non-medical reasons may or should, as per the WHO definition, be considered as a form of FGM. This raises questions of double standards applied for different communities. This is a complex issue and one that deserves urgent attention from feminist, psychological, clinical and ethical perspectives”

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