

What You've Been Calling Your Vagina is Not Your Vagina

by Lydia Varcoe-Wolfson

I've always found that personal essays and op-eds like this one are the most meaningful to me as a writer. In this assignment, I really enjoyed the opportunity to write about a topic of my choice, something that is personally meaningful as well as being an important issue in society at large. As an aspiring midwife, I believe that all people have the right to make the choices that are best for them when it comes to reproductive health. This starts with sex education. So many people in the world do not have complete and correct information about how their bodies work due to the stigma surrounding human sexuality, and especially female sexuality. I believe that by respecting the inherent value of female bodies in our language, we are better equipped to change the sexist messages surrounding female sexuality in society, giving women the opportunity to make more informed choices about their sexual health.

—Lydia Varcoe-Wolfson

My tenth grade health teacher's voice dripped with boredom as he declared, "And as we all know, this is a vagina." My friend and I exchanged an eye roll. I raised my hand, "But that's not a vagina. That's a vulva." The boys in the back of the class snickered. "Okay, whatever, that's a technicality," my teacher said.

Really? I thought to myself, *what gives this man the authority to stand in front of a class and declare that my body is not valuable enough for specificity?*

According to the [Merriam-Webster Medical Dictionary](#), the vagina is "a canal in a female mammal that leads from the uterus to the external orifice opening into the vestibule between the labia minora." It is an entirely internal canal and cannot be seen from outside the body. The vulva, on the other hand, is defined as "the external parts of the female genital organs comprising the mons pubis, labia majora, labia minora, clitoris, vestibule of the vagina, bulb of the vestibule, and Bartholin's glands." The vagina is the part of the female body necessary for vaginal intercourse, childbirth, and is the canal through which menstrual fluid exits the body—all functions related to reproduction and penetrative sex. A [2017 study](#) found that only 18.4% of women are able to orgasm from vaginal penetration alone, indicating that penetration is not a major source of pleasure for most women. On the contrary, the part of female genitalia most sensitive to stimulation, and therefore most likely to evoke sexual pleasure, is the tip of the

clitoris, which is easily accessible from the outside. Thus, when we only talk about vaginas and never vulvas in the context of sex, we minimize the importance of and women's capacity for sexual pleasure.

Apart from sexual functions, other components of the vulva are critical for a woman's health: the labia prevents unwanted bacteria from entering the body, and the urethral opening is necessary for urination. Why, then, is it more common to use the word "vagina" for both internal and external genitalia, when in reality they are clearly distinct from one another and have separate functions?

As Kenyan author Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o writes in *Decolonizing the Mind*, "Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture" (343). In this sense, language reflects not only our individual values but the values of the culture in which we live. When discussing the female body, word choice is not just a 'technicality,' it is indicative of the importance, or lack thereof, we attribute to female bodies. Using the word "vagina" when we really mean "vulva," we send the message that the female body does not deserve the respect of specificity, and that its value lies only in its reproductive roles. Our pleasure, our health, our choices, all become trivial in the face of what our bodies can do for other people, never for ourselves.

When we limit the value of female bodies to reproduction, we not only perpetuate traditional gender roles—insinuating that a woman's sole purpose in life is to be a mother—but furthermore, we validate her worth as a person only in the context of other people. Her body is valuable not because *every* body is valuable, but because of what hers has to offer someone else. She is not a woman in her own right, but is made a woman only through her role as a mother, wife, girlfriend, or hookup.

This is not to devalue the ability to give birth, to mother, or to have penetrative sex of any kind. As an aspiring midwife, I believe there is remarkable power and beauty in reproduction. But this is not what makes a female body valuable or what makes someone a woman. Although the feminist movement has made great strides in proving that women are much more than their reproductive or sexual capabilities, our language still does not reflect this reality. How can we say that we are truly transforming society when we do not believe it enough to change the way we speak? When we talk about female bodies, the language we use—especially in education—should reflect their inherent worth as *human* bodies above all else, respectable enough by their very existence to warrant specificity.

Works Cited

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