Panel ABSTRACT

Panel 37: Genital Expectations: A Cross-Cultural Exploration of Gendered Meanings, Norms, and Practices Surrounding Genitalia (V3 Part I)
Organizer: Hannelore Van Bavel, Vivien Lou and Lula Maris

Abstract: Genitalia are often treated as taboo – hidden from view and avoided in conversation. Yet, paradoxically, they hold profound socio-cultural significance. Societies ascribe a range of meanings, norms, and expectations to genitalia, shaping how they are perceived and understood in relation to broader ideas about gender and sexuality and their intersection with other aspects of identity, including race, class, religion, and disability.

This panel explores the meanings attributed to genitalia, alongside the norms and expectations surrounding them. It investigates how these meanings and norms vary across cultural and historical contexts, while also considering points of similarity and continuity. The panel is particularly interested in how these cultural meanings, norms, and expectations shape people's perceptions of, relationships to, and engagement with genitalia – whether their own or others'. Engagement might encompass practices such as body modification, including hair removal or genital surgeries, which may reflect efforts to align with cultural ideals but can also serve as acts of self-expression, bodily autonomy, or a way to forge new meanings. It can also involve celebrating and reimagining genitalia – through vulva-positive art or by embracing body parts that deviate from societal norms – as a means of fostering self-acceptance or celebrating diversity.

We welcome papers from diverse disciplines and perspectives, including anthropology, gender studies, sociology, history, art, and activism. Submissions that highlight intersectional perspectives or draw on marginalised or non-Western experiences are especially welcome.

SESSION SCHEDULE

18.09.2025 | Slot 2 | 2-0-1

Federica Manfredi: Neglected Vulvas. An anthropological research-actions about vulvar

health, taboo and social invisibility

Myriam Raboldt: »...gesellschaftlich gesehen ist man nach so einer OP halt niemand mehr.« -- Eine qualitative Studie zu cis Männern mit Genitalverletzungen

Divya Rai: Absent Flesh, Present Claims: Genitalia, Recognition, and State Intervention in Hijra Lives in Uttar Pradesh, India

SESSION PAPERS

Neglected Vulvas. An anthropological research-actions about vulvar health, taboo and social invisibility

Federica Manfredi

In Italian society, individuals suffering from vulvar pain are not recognized as patients experiencing legitimate discomfort. This condition remains unsupported by the national healthcare system, largely unexplored from a medical standpoint, and socially marginalized. Many patients do not perceive themselves as deserving of care until their sexual experience is significantly impacted. Awareness of vulva health typically arises when feminine sexual performance deviates from heteronormative standards and expectations around intercourse.

From a feminist and gendered perspective, this paper introduces the artistic and scientific exhibition ""Vulvar Pain,"" which draws on anthropological research to examine the lived experiences of vulvar pain through qualitative, participatory methods. Collaborators in the research co-produced symbolic crafts that express the challenges of being recognized as bodies worthy of care. This effort seeks to communicate scientific findings through a public engagement initiative, featuring art, workshops, and discussions with health professionals and patient advocacy groups.

The ""Vulvar Pain"" exhibition calls for a broader understanding of genital pain that transcends the cultural taboos surrounding sexuality. By prioritizing visual narratives, the exhibition fosters dialogue between biomedical perspectives, social sciences, and the lived experiences of those affected. Through a multi-dimensional approach, the paper showcases collaborations among ethnographers, artists, and designers in the co-creation of new forms of knowledge that are tangible, sensory, and capable of breaking the silence surrounding vulvar taboos.

»...gesellschaftlich gesehen ist man nach so einer OP halt niemand mehr.« -- Eine qualitative Studie zu cis Männern mit Genitalverletzungen

Myriam Raboldt

Im Zuge meines Dissertationsprojektes habe ich qualitative Interviews mit cis Männern geführt, die Genitalverletzungen oder -amputationen erfahren haben. Wie erleben sie diesen materiellen und/oder funktionalen Verlust? Wie werden dadurch ihr Selbstbild

und ihr (Sexual-)leben beeinflusst?
In der Forschung findet sich bisher nichts darüber und auch im gesellschaftlichen Diskurs taucht dieses Thema nicht auf. Kein Wunder also, dass sich auch mein Feldeinstieg äußerst schwierig gestaltete. Ich hatte große Schwierigkeiten, überhaupt Interviewpartner zu finden, teilweise habe ich anonyme Chatinterviews geführt. Auch insgesamt war mein Forschungsprozess gekennzeichnet von Umwegen, Sackgassen, Irritation, Gelächter, Verlegenheit und Schweigen. Dies führte dazu, dass sich mein Forschungsfokus von der Frage nach dem konkreten Erleben meiner Interviewpartner verschob zur Frage danach, warum Genitalverletzungen bei cis Männern ein so großes Tabu darstellen, warum ein normalisiertes Sprechen darüber kaum möglich scheint. Einige meiner Gesprächspartner hatten außer mir noch nie jemandem davon erzählt, ein anderer wäre buchstäblich fast gestorben, weil er sich nicht getraut hatte, mit dem wachsenden Karzinom an seinem Penis zum Arzt zu gehen. Dies führt auf methodologischer Ebene zu Fragen danach, wie solche ""Tabu-Themen"" überhaupt beforscht werden können, inwiefern auch das eigenes methodische Vorgehen immer wieder reflektiert und auch angepasst werden muss. Am Ende ist eine Studie darüber entstanden, wie sehr Schweigen, Scham, verletzliche Körper und Männlichkeit zusammenspielen.

Absent Flesh, Present Claims: Genitalia, Recognition, and State Intervention in Hijra Lives in Uttar Pradesh, India

Divya Rai

This paper examines how genital absence—rather than presence—functions as a pivotal axis of gendered recognition for Hijra and Kinnar communities in Uttar Pradesh, India. Moving beyond exoticized narratives of nirvana (sacred rebirth through ritualistic castration), I argue that the deliberate absence of genitalia enables belonging within gharana (a discipleship- lineage system within the Hijra community of Uttar Pradesh), spiritual traditions, and everyday sociality, while also becoming a site of structural violence. Through ethnographic fieldwork, I trace how genital absence while operating as both a cultural signifier of authenticity and a refusal of binary norms, forces communities into dangerous dependencies—on informal kinship networks for operations, on debt-bondage for survival, and on a state that simultaneously denies and demands anatomical conformity. The Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Act, 2019 with its paradoxical stance—neither banning nor safely regulating castration—exacerbates these tensions, as public hospitals are mostly ill- equipped for care while private clinics commodify such anatomical interventions. Young, caste-marginalized Hijras bear the brunt of this precarity, navigating between the risks of underground procedures and the violence of state-recognition systems that privilege either binary-conforming surgeries or perpetual uncertainty of documentation. The paper by centring the polyvocal accounts of the Hijra community, ultimately argues that genital absence, far from being a mere physical characteristic, operates as a dynamic site where state power, medical authority, and Hijra self-determination intersect, with profound consequences for transgender citizenship in contemporary India.