

Publication

A cross cultural study of vaginal practices and sexuality : implications for sexual health

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Author(s) Martin Hilber, Adriane; Hull, Terence H; Preston-Whyte, Eleanor; Bagnol, Brigitte; Smit, Jenni; Wacharasin, Chintana; Widyanoro, Ninuk; WHO GSVP Study Group

Author(s) at UniBasel [Martin Hilber](#), [Adriane](#) ;

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Between 2005 and 2006, we investigated vaginal practices in Yogyakarta, Indonesia; Tete, Mozambique; KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa; and Bangkok and Chonburi, Thailand. We sought to understand women's practices, their motivations for use and the role vaginal practices play in women's health, sexuality and sense of wellbeing. The study was carried out among adult women and men who were identified as using, having knowledge or being involved in trade in products. Further contacts were made using snowball sampling. Across the sites, individual interviews were conducted with 229 people and 265 others participated in focus group discussions. We found that women in all four countries have a variety of reasons for carrying out vaginal practices whose aim is to not simply 'dry' the vagina but rather decrease moisture that may have other associated meanings, and that they are exclusively 'intravaginal' in operation. Practices, products and frequency vary. Motivations generally relate to personal hygiene, genital health or sexuality. Hygiene practices involve external washing and intravaginal cleansing or douching and ingestion of substances. Health practices include intravaginal cleansing, traditional cutting, insertion of herbal preparations, and application of substances to soothe irritated vaginal tissue. Practices related to sexuality can involve any of these practices with specific products that warm, dry, and/or tighten the vagina to increase pleasure for the man and sometimes for the woman. Hygiene and health are expressions of femininity connected to sexuality even if not always explicitly expressed as such. We found their effects may have unexpected and even undesired consequences. This study demonstrates that women in the four countries actively use a variety of practices to achieve a desired vaginal state. The results provide the basis for a classification framework that can be used for future study of this complex topic

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