



Review

A LITERATURE REVIEW ON GENITAL SELF IMAGE IN WOMEN AND AFFECTING FACTORS

Ayşe Nur Yılmaz¹  Sinan İrteğün²  Özlem Doğan Yüksekol^{3*} 

¹ Firat University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Midwifery Department, Elazığ, Turkey :
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0489-7639>

² Ardahan University, Vocational School of Health Services, Department of Medical Services and Techniques, Ardahan, Turkey <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6828-9419>

³ Firat University, Faculty of Health Sciences, Midwifery Department, Elazığ, Turkey
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1761-1479>

* **Corresponding author:** ozlem193523@gmail.com

Abstract: Genital self image, which is an important factor for women's health, has been defined as the self-attitude resulting from special interactions and experiences involving the genital organs directly or indirectly, and the following emotion. The purpose of this review is to give general information about female genital self image and the factors affecting it and to draw attention to this issue.

This study is a literature review. PUBMED, Ovid-MEDLINE, Cochrane Library, Scopus, EBSCO, ProQuest, ULAKBİM and Turkey Citation Index database were searched. Various Turkish and English combinations of the keywords "genital self, genital self image, genital self-perception" were used in the literature review. Genital self image; body image, organ loss, sexual functions, genital hygiene practices, vaginal infections, culture, obesity, developmental periods, and media. When we look at the literature, body image studies mostly focused on women's attitudes towards weight, skin color, and beauty leaving the issue of genital self image in the background. Genital self-image has an important place in the development of sexual health and body image. Recently, it has been found that women have an increasing desire to undergo genital cosmetic/plastic surgery operations and change the appearance and functions of their vulva and vagina due to their negative views on their genital self image.

It is important to examine all the factors affecting the genital self image, which is of great importance for women's health, and to provide the necessary care by taking a holistic approach in terms of body perception and sexuality. Nurses/midwives should adopt approaches to increase the body and genital image of women and to increase the quality of life of individuals. Nurses / Midwives are healthcare professionals in the most appropriate position to provide the necessary support in developing a new genital self image and positive lifestyle.

Keywords woman, genital self image, health, nursing, midwifery

1. Introduction

Self-concept is a social, deep, and broad concept. This concept starts in the family and takes shape within society [1,2]. The genital self-perception includes subjective thoughts and feelings against the genital appearance and function of the person and forms the basis of the genital self image. A subfield of body image studies is genital self-image and expresses individuals' attitudes, subjective feelings, and experiences towards their genital organs [3,4]. In another definition, it is a part of the behavioral and psychological aspects of physical health perceived from the genital organs. [5].

The concept of genital self image emerged with genital identity for the first time. Waltner expressed genital identity as “ego attitude and subsequent emotion arising directly or indirectly from special interactions and experiences involving the genital organs” [1]. It has been suggested that genital identity and sexual identity are related to the term genital self image. The term image was found by Berman et al to express women's genital perceptions in terms of emotions and behaviors [6].

It is not surprising that women are not familiar with certain anatomical features of their genital organs. This issue is still seen as a taboo that cannot be discussed. However, many women today find the appearance of their genital organs very important and are more concerned with their appearance. Genital self image has an important place in both sexual functions and the appearance of women. Recent studies show that women's genital self-perception is associated with sexual health [7]. The positive genital self image was found to be strongly associated with sexual functioning and satisfaction [8]. It is also considered to be the determinant of other behaviors, including genital examination behaviors [7,9].

Despite women and men express negative genital self image thoughts, studies mostly found that men have more positive genital self images than women. [10]. While most of the research on men's genital self image focuses on satisfaction with size, studies on the female genital self image have examined both appearance and function perceptions from an early period. [11].

Genital self image can be expressed as a common concern among women. It is important to consider all the factors that affect the genital self image, which is of great importance for women's health. The purpose of this review is to provide general information about female genital self-image and the factors affecting it and to draw attention to this issue.

The questions of the research are;

- What is female genital self-image?
- What are the factors affecting genital self-image in women?

2. Materials and Methods

This study is conducted in the literature review. In this literature review, article selection, data extraction, and evaluation of article quality were performed independently by the first and second researchers in order to reduce the risk of bias. Each stage was checked in a session attended by the third researcher and a consensus was established. PUBMED Ovid-MEDLINE, Cochrane Library, Scopus, EBSCO, ProQuest, ULAKBİM, and Turkey Citation Index database were searched for literature.

Scanning Strategy

Screenings for this review were conducted between 1 September 2020 - 14 October 2020. The searches were made on Ulakbim, Google Academic, and National Thesis Center search engines with the keywords "genital self, genital self image, genital self perception" to reach publications at the national level. International publications were reached by using the keywords "genital self, genital self-

image, genital self-perception" and by scanning through PubMed, Cochrane Library, Ovid-MEDLINE, Scopus, ProQuest, and EBSCO databases. Studies conducted between 2000 and 2020 were scanned from databases.

Studies with women, whose full text can be accessed, whose method is clear, without validity and reliability studies, were included in the study. The exclusion criteria from the study consisted of studies whose method was not clear, whose full text could not be reached, validity and reliability studies, and studies with men.

Studies dealing with female genital self-image and influencing factors were selected for this systematic review. The determination and selection of the studies were made independently by the first and second researchers in accordance with the inclusion criteria. After the repetitive studies were removed from the searches, the selection was made according to the title, abstract, and full text, respectively.

As a result of the screening, 92 records were reached at the beginning and were found from other records in one study. After the repeated studies were removed, 42 records were examined to make a selection in the title and abstract. As a result of this review, 30 studies were selected to be analyzed in the full text. Later, 30 articles, whose full text was accessed, were examined according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and 16 studies reporting results on genital self-image and affecting factors in women were analyzed.

Factors Affecting Genital Self Image

There are many factors affecting genital self image. Some of these factors are; body image, organ loss, sexual functions, genital hygiene practices, vaginal infections, culture, obesity, developmental stages, and media.

2.1. Body image

Our bodies have always been a powerful and important source of self-confidence, and the link between the two has been a subject of research for decades. The concept of "body image", which is an important part of our lives, is gaining importance day by day. Body image includes how a person sees and perceives himself when compared to standards set by society. This concept is used in many disciplines, including psychology, psychiatry, medicine, psychoanalysis, cultural philosophy, and feminist studies; the media often use this term. There is no unified definition of consensus among these disciplines, but body image in a broad sense consists of the way people look at themselves. The way an individual perceives his body affects his relationship with his body and self. Although many people think that body image has little effect on their lives, actually people's feelings and thoughts about their bodies are attitudes towards life [12].

Body image; It is shaped by the individual's values, personality, and relationships with his environment. Although it is generally based on a physiological basis, it is also affected by psychological, environmental, and social factors. Therefore, body image is not only limited to the personality structure of the individual but also creates a sociological meaning socially [13].

Body image dissatisfaction of women is not a new concept in the psychological field, but its links with genital self-esteem have recently been explained. Body image studies mostly focused on women's attitudes towards weight, beauty, and skin color, leaving the issue of genital self image in the background [14]. Genital self image is rarely included in such body image discussions, and although it actually falls under the umbrella of body image, it is often considered a completely separate concept.

Genital self image can be expressed as the perception, attitude, and feelings that a person has about her genital organs [4]. Women's genitals are traditionally seen as more of a taboo and therefore may appear 'unknown' or 'foreign' to women. In a study conducted on women's attitudes towards their genital organs, it was stated that the participants tend to focus their concerns about their sexuality and body on their genital organs [14]. During their lifetime, many women are unhappy with their genitals, generally or in one or more specific aspects. Genital self image is the aspect in which sexual body image emerges [11,15]. Considering the relationship between individuals' satisfaction with their appearance and their sexual behavior, this situation can reduce the sexual interest of the person, as they are more prone to focus on themselves and their bodies during sexual intercourse [15]. In recent years, the thought of having surgery to improve the external physical appearance of the genital organs has also increased among some women.

2.2. Organ Loss

Diseases and injuries such as traumatic situation for any changes occurring in the body, usually depending on the loss of an organ for the individuals, such as loss of physical function and loss of control of the body brings about various physical losses. However, the losses experienced by the individual are often not limited to these, but also cause various social losses such as job loss, loss of status, role loss, loss of beauty and attractiveness.

Surgical operations such as hysterectomy and mastectomy cause a change in women's feelings of motherhood, femininity or attraction. While these surgical operations pose a threat to women's self-esteem and body image, they indirectly affect the genital self image. Surgical operations that directly affect the appearance of the female genital organs, such as vulvectomy, directly affect the genital self image [13]. Roberts (1978) "For the female patient, the loss of the breast or uterus indicates the loss of femininity and sexuality to society. In the loss of femininity and integrity, the person experiences social loss rather than physical loss." [16].

The American Aesthetic Plastic Surgery Association (ASAPS) found that the number of cosmetic surgeries performed has increased significantly in recent years. Ten million surgical and non-surgical operations were performed in 2014, 90% of which were on women. Also, since most of the elective genital aesthetic procedures are in private clinics, the number of procedures performed annually is unknown. Most women do not have precise information about the normal condition and physical appearance of their vulva. In a study, it was found that the exposure of young women to natural vulva pictures has a positive effect on the genital self image and affects the positive genital self image [17].

2.3. Sexual Functions

Genital self-image has important effects on sexual health. Sexuality is a complex process associated with the vascular, endocrine systems, and neurological. It also affects the quality of life and general health of the woman. There are many factors that affect sexual function, such as psychological trauma, surgical operations, relationship dynamics, and drug side effects [18]. When examining the relationship dynamics that cause women to experience sexual dysfunction, harmony with sexual partners comes to the fore [19]. It is seen that women who are compatible with their sexual partner/partner and have high self-confidence have positive genital self image [11,18,20]. On the other hand, the frequency of sexual intercourse decreased sexual arousal, and the presence of surgical and aesthetic operations has been found to negatively affect women's sexual functions [21]. It is also known that female genital self

image is effective on sexual satisfaction and sexual function. Studies have shown that women's genital self image is a determinant of sexual functions such as sexual self image, sexual satisfaction, and sexual experience [11,18,20]. Deep anxiety of being negatively evaluated by others is thought to cause dissatisfaction with genital self image [22]

In their study on the relationship between genital self image and sexual functioning, Berman et al. (2003) found that positive genital self image was negatively associated with sexual dysfunction. Also, they found that positive genital self image was positively associated with sexual desire. [6]

2.4. Genital Hygiene Practices

One of the most important factors in protecting women's health is genital hygiene. When genital hygiene is not observed, susceptibility to genital infections increases [23].

The important step of correct genital hygiene behavior is the improvement of the reproductive health of individuals and protection from urogenital system infections. In many studies on this subject, it has been determined that genital hygiene insufficiency causes genital and urinary system infections. This situation negatively affects the sexual and family life of the woman, decreasing the quality of life, and even causing social isolation.

Genital hygiene practices are one of the important factors that increase genital self image. Genital hygiene practices that are not done completely and correctly may cause infection in women and as a result, women's health and genital self image may be negatively affected [24]. In some societies, many women are raised with the belief that their genitals are dirty. As a result, a "feminine hygienic crisis" may occur during menstruation. How women perceive their genital organs is important because the behaviors and choices made towards it can affect behaviors related to genital hygiene as they are often socially and culturally influenced [4]

2.5. Vaginal Infections

Approximately one million women in the world encounter urogenital infections every year, and at least 75% of women have a history of vaginal infection [25]. When we examine the literature, urogenital infections are one of the most common reasons women present in gynecology outpatient clinics. The presence of vaginal infection can adversely affect a woman's genital self image and overall body image. Also, they may cause a decrease in sexual functions, an increase in odor, a negative impact on sexual functions, aversion to sexual intercourse, and physical and mental fatigue [8]. It is stated that vaginal infection is an important health problem and, if not prevented, it will reduce the genital self image of the woman and negatively affect the standard of living [24]. Discharge, malodour, etc. in women with vaginal infections. Such situations affect the genital self image negatively. The suspicion of a worse disease in women also affects the rate of going to gynecological examination due to conditions such as fear of cancer [24].

2.6. Culture

Culture, which is intertwined with life, is one of the concepts that is constantly changing and developing socially with the human being and is important for the individual. Today, a healthy body depends on cultural and social factors rather than medical or biological factors. Body image is both a physiological and a cultural self, and the body exhibits an indicative quality [26].

The importance is given to appearance and the evaluations about appearance may change according to the time lived and the cultural characteristics of the societies. While it was important for women to be fat in the old times, today women are encouraged to have a slim and harmonious body structure. As a result, individuals' feelings and attitudes towards their bodies develop according to the ideal measures provided to them. In case of deviation from the ideal measurements, there may be changes in the self-concept of the individual and therefore in the body and genital self image. Individuals also have a body image and image in their minds. Whether he is satisfied or not shows his self-worth. It has been stated in the literature that culture plays an important role in the formation of appearance ideals and that these differ for women from different cultures. The values of society change over time and with the influence of other societies.

In a study conducted with Turkish women, it was found that the concepts of the beautiful face, thin body, and tall height were adopted by the influence of media organs and culture [27]. Since genital self image differs globally, culturally, and situationally, genital perceptions are largely dependent on a particular situation. Although the genital self image has been researched in international settings, this situation remains uncertain among culturally different women. Anatomy and physiology and one's cultural attitude and perception play an important and influential role in genital self image.

2.7. Obesity

One of the important public health problems of today is obesity. In recent years, the relationship between body and self-concept has been studied frequently in most obesity studies. It has been observed in most studies that body dissatisfaction is more common in obese individuals [28]. It is not clear whether obesity is the cause or the result of low self-esteem and negative body image [27]. Generally, women experience more dissatisfaction than men. Ideal weight negatively affects women's body images and genital self images by making comparisons with others through social interaction. High genital self image is thought to be related to the low BMI of women [29]. Being overweight among women causes negative genital self image.

2.8. Developmental Periods

The development of body and genital self image that begins in the first years of life occurs through the integration of various perceptions over time. When the baby is born, he does not have a physical body and genital self image, as the baby grows up, his attention increases, and begins to examine various parts of his body. With the development of the child, the body and genital self image also constantly changes. Motor skills develop, the environment and relationships with other individuals affect the child's body and genital self image.

Adolescence is the most intense period of changes in the body and genital self image. Many researchers state that adolescence is the most important period with the effect of rapid development and changes in the body. In this period, the body and genital self image of the adolescent are shaped by the peer group, people who are important to the individual, the value judgments of the society, and cultural events other than the parents. Changes occur in the body and genital self images of women as they transition from adolescence to adulthood [30].

It is stated that, with culture, makeup, clothes, jewelry, and ornaments, plastic surgery affects the body and genital self image of the individual temporarily or permanently during adulthood. Aging, which is the last phase of the growth-development process, causes a significant change in the individual's

self-concept and body image. During this period, as the body goes through the aging process, the functionality of the genital organs decreases, and physical and mental changes occur [31].

Women may experience negative body image, low genital self image, and inadequate sexual function [32].

2.9. Media

With the developing technology, the power of the media in society is increasing. When talking about media today; Especially newspapers, magazines, videos, theater, radio, cinema, television, and the internet come to mind. The fastest developing and the newest among these tools is the internet [33]. Women's body image and genital self image are seen as two inseparable concepts. Therefore, while the media affects the body image of women, it indirectly affects the genital self image. It was observed that women made social comparisons with the media [34]. It is known that women follow the models shown in fashion magazines [29, 34]. This false status promised by the media negatively affects the genital self image of women by comparing themselves with unrealistic images [35]. Exposure to genital images displayed on the Internet, particularly the vulva, has particularly affected women's interest in genital surgery [36].

Kubic and Chory found a positive relationship between the increase in the frequency of genital self image in television programs, and women's perfectionism and genital dissatisfaction [37]. In another study, they stated that women who watch make-up programs more frequently affect their genital self image and sexual functions associated with body image.

3. Studies Concerning Genital Self Image

In the study of Herbenick et al. (2011), they stated that most of the participants in the USA felt positive about their genitals. It was found that female genital self image was associated with women's sexual function, sexual behavior, sexual and genital health care behaviors [38].

DeMaria et al. (2012) interviewed four hundred and fifty undergraduate students in their study to determine the validity and reliability of the Female Genital Self-Image Scale in a sample of female university students and to examine the relationship between gynecological examination behaviors. It was found that women who had at least one gynecological examination in the last two years had a significantly more positive genital self image than those who did not [9].

Pazmany et al. (2013) examined body image and genital self image in premenopausal women with dyspareunia. As a result of the study, it was found that women with dyspareunia have more trouble with their body image and have a negative genital self image. [39].

Fahs (2014) conducted a qualitative study with twenty women to determine pubic hair care, genital attitudes about genital/vaginal self-image, and their views on sex during menstruation. It has been determined that women mostly use emotional language when talking about their genitals, and they generally feel anxiety, excessive and need for control. It has been observed that the perceptions of sexuality, health and body image of women experiencing genital panic are affected [14].

In a study conducted by Jawed-Wessel et al. (2017) on primiparous mothers, the relationship between body image, genital self image and sexual function was examined. Poor genital self image and body image concerns in 39.9% of the participants; It has been determined that it is affected by birth, breastfeeding, sexual experiences, and changes in body weight [40].

Fudge and Byers (2017) conducted a qualitative study with 20 women to understand women's genital self-perceptions and their feelings and thoughts about their genitals. As a result of the study, it was determined that women have a moderately positive attitude about their sexual organs. Also, it was determined from the qualitative data analysis that women's global genital self-perceptions are different, each woman has a special genital self-perception, women's genital self-perceptions change in people and situations, women's genital self-perceptions develop over time, and negative genital self-perceptions can be an important problem for women [13].

In a study by Smith et al. (2017), the relationship between genital self image and Elective Genital Surgery thought was investigated. It was determined that only 98 of the 1100 participants seriously considered elective genital surgery [10].

In a study conducted by Laan et al. (2017), it was evaluated whether exposure to natural vulva pictures of women with university education affects their genital self image. One group was shown pictures of natural vulvas (n = 29), in the other group pictures of neutral objects (n = 14). Genital self image was measured 2 weeks after pictures were shown and shown. Most of the participants felt positive about their genitals in general. It has been determined that women exposed to natural vulva pictures positively affect the genital self image [17].

In the study of Handelzalts et al. (2017), which examined the effect of genital self image on sexual function in women with pelvic floor disorder, low genital self image was observed in women with pelvic floor disorder [41].

Sabbağhan et al. (2017) investigated the effect of the training package on genital self image and sexual function in health centers in Iran. As a result of the study, it was found that the training given had no effect on genital self image and sexual function in women [22].

Marvi et al. (2018) investigated the relationship between genital self-image and sex in infertile women in Iran. It has been found that sexual satisfaction and genital self-image are very important in infertile individuals. [19].

DeMaria et al. (2019) conducted individual interviews with forty-six women in their study to determine the attitudes of Italian women towards their genitals, their relationship with reproductive and sexual health behaviors, and genital self-image. It was observed that the participants were ashamed when talking about their genitals and equated this with social taboos. Women's concerns about how their genitals might look were found to stem from limited information [4].

In the study conducted by Komarnicky et al. (2019) to examine the relationship between body image, sexuality, and genital self image, 3,222 women and 3,006 men were reached online. Participants were administered a questionnaire evaluating genital self image, sexual satisfaction body image, and sexual function. In female participants, it was found that as the genital self image increased, sexual satisfaction increased [11].

In the study conducted by Hodges et al. (2019) to evaluate the genital self image in women with vulvar lichen sclerosis, it was found that women with vulvar lichen sclerosis got a lower score on the female genital self image scale compared to the control group [42].

In the study conducted by Fernando and Keskin (2020), they investigated the effectiveness of a very short video aimed at increasing the knowledge of adolescent girls about normal female genitalia and improving their attitudes towards their own genitals. As a result of the research, it was determined that the education video significantly increased the knowledge of girls about female genital anatomy and genital appearance satisfaction. Also, it was found that the thoughts of having labiaplasty or

cosmetic genital surgery in the future decreased. It was determined that the participants who watched the training video trained other young people about female genital anatomy [30].

Fudge and Byers (2020) examined psychosocial factors associated with the female genital self image in their study. It has been stated that psychosocial factors play an important role in forming and maintaining women's genital self image [43].

4. The Importance of Genital Self image for Nurses / Midwives

It is known that genital self image has an important role in improving body image and sexual health. Nurses /midwives should adopt approaches to increase the body and genital image of women and to increase the quality of life of individuals. Today, due to the negative perceptions of women regarding their genital self image, it has been found that their desire to undergo genital plastic/cosmetic surgery and to change the appearance and functions of their vulva and vagina has increased [7].

Nurses / Midwives are healthcare professionals in the most appropriate position to provide the necessary support in developing a new genital self image and positive lifestyle. During the counseling process, nurses/midwives are expected to experience a therapeutic process based on trust and respect. In cases where the genital self image is negative, sexual health, sexual satisfaction, and sexual functions may be affected. The nurse/midwife should evaluate physiological and psychological problems for complications that may develop in terms of women's health and provide the necessary care [44].

Suggestions for increasing genital self-perception;

- Implementing initiatives for women to be satisfied with their bodies,
- Providing consultancy services to improve sexual health
- Teaching correct genital hygiene habits to protect women from infections.
- Providing psychological support for women in surgical operations that change genital perception such as hysterectomy and vulvectomy
- Teaching healthy lifestyle behaviors to women to prevent obesity
- Ensuring that women use media and mass communication correctly,
- It is recommended to avoid situations that may negatively affect body image in developmental periods (adolescence, adulthood, and old age).

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this systematic review, the importance of examining all factors affecting the genital self-image, which is of great importance for women's health, and taking the necessary care in terms of body perception and sexuality was emphasized. Nurses/midwives should adopt approaches to increase the body and genital image of women and to increase the quality of life of individuals. Also, nurses/midwives are healthcare professionals in the most appropriate position to provide the necessary support in developing a new genital self-image and positive lifestyle. Based on the results of such studies, they can rearrange the scope of their education programs, taking into account the individual and cultural characteristics of women. As a result, the body and genital image of women can be increased, unnecessary surgical operations can be avoided and the quality of life of individuals can be increased. More experimental studies and qualitative studies that can reveal the individual views and experiences of our women on the subject may be recommended.

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