

The Vagina Museum transitioned from an idea to a reality in 2017.

Battling the stigma

The world's first Vagina Museum

- The Vagina Museum in Camden, London is the first of its kind in the world.
- It is a vital educational resource that promotes respect, integrity, empowerment, and inclusivity.
- Founder Florence Schechter explains how she realised her vision and what the future holds for the museum.

Launched in 2017 in the UK, the [Vagina Museum](#) is the first museum in the world dedicated to the vagina, vulva, clitoris, and gynaecological anatomy. So, what will you find inside? The selection of permanent and temporary exhibitions will take you from vagina basics (health, anatomy, trans and

intersex rights, reproductive justice, female genital mutilation, sex work, and periods) to the fabulous 'vulva wall', a photographic showcase of vulva diversity.

Research Features caught up with founder Florence Schechter at the [Cheltenham](#)



Florence Schechter, founder and director.

[Science Festival](#), where she promoted her new book, *V: An empowering celebration of the vulva and vagina*. In this interview, *Research Features* found out why a safe, inclusive space like this is needed, for both those with and without a vagina.

Hi Florence! Could you tell us a bit about yourself and how you got to where you are today?

I am the founder and director of the world's first brick-and-mortar museum dedicated to the vagina, vulva, clitoris, and gynaecological anatomy. My background before this, however, is in science communication (sci-comm). I came up with the idea for the museum when I was making

a series of sci-comm videos, including one about my top ten animal penises (because animal sex is a bit of a special interest of mine!). As a follow-up to the top ten penises video, I was going to do the top ten vaginas, but I discovered that there is very little research into animal vaginas. There's a statistical bias against it. I then found out that there is a penis museum in Iceland, but there was no vagina equivalent. So, I thought we should make one! That was six years ago, and here I am today.

How did this transition from an idea to real life?

I had never worked in a museum before, and this ended up working to my advantage. For the first few months, I simply spoke to anyone I could think of, asking how I would go about making this a reality. Everyone I spoke to from the museum sector told me not to do it. They said museums were hard, there's no money, that they were all overworked. But I ignored them! I did some market research across a few industries (science, research, medicine), and everyone except those from museums thought that it was a great idea.

I investigated how museums 'start', and it turns out that most of the museums in the UK were started by aristocrats and collectors who often stole the objects in their collections. Then, I examined new

museums. The [Migration Museum Project](#) was started because Barbara Roche (former Immigration Minister) observed that most narratives surrounding migration in museums were negative. Migration can be a very positive thing for a country, and s Barbara wanted to see that represented. I emulated her business plan, and ran pop-up exhibitions in small-scale buildings. This included a lot of science festivals because I had many contacts. In fact, our first pop-up exhibition was at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and I learnt a lot!

Next, I got in contact with my local councillor, discussing the Vagina Museum and the prospect of finding a permanent building. The councillor replied to me very quickly, and I ended up getting a discounted lease at Camden Market for two years. This was in October 2019, and we were open for about six months before we had to close due to the COVID-19 pandemic. We then went into a property guardianship for about a year, and now we are about to move into a semi-permanent home in Bethnal Green, on a six year lease. I'm so excited!

It's been a fascinating journey. Did you do this all on your own?

I came up with the idea on my own, but quickly I went to all my friends and onto the internet. I asked those who showed interest if anyone wanted to volunteer. The first volunteer training was in my living room! It

was really fun. After a year, the organisation was registered as a charity, and the following year we recruited trustees. In 2019, we were about to move to Camden, and through a crowdfunding project we were able to hire two members of staff. When we opened, we recruited even more staff and volunteers, and now we have ten people on the payroll, 70 volunteers on the books, and we are about to have eight trustees!

Do you find that there's a difference in how responsive people are to the sort of work that you do?

We've been everywhere from Hull, to Edinburgh, to Devon. London is exceptionally diverse but that doesn't necessarily mean that everyone's liberal. I have loads of pushback from people in London who don't like the museum, and there's plenty of liberal people outside of London.

Everyone wants to talk about this because vaginas are a big part of people's lives; half of the population have them, and many of the other half want to interact with them. The nice thing about the Vagina Museum is that because of the way we work, when we create spaces, they tend to be very welcoming, open, warm, and safe. People get that as soon as they walk in, and the floodgates open before your very eyes. People tell me things they wouldn't tell their best friend! People tell me traumatic stories or ask me intimate questions



An exhibit of a model tampon and two menstrual cups.

and we only met three minutes ago, but it's because they've been looking for the space to have these conversations.

What sort of teaching materials do you use?

We have so many teaching materials, so I'll give you an example. One object that we have in our collection is a textbook for forensic science students, and there's a chapter about how to investigate sexual crimes. There's a table in it on how to tell the difference between a 'true virgin' and a 'false virgin', where a false virgin is a woman who says that she hasn't had sex, or hasn't been raped or assaulted, when she has. The table says that a true virgin will have a small and narrow vagina that you can barely admit one finger to, but a false virgin will have a capacious vagina that will admit many fingers. It's insane but this is a textbook that is still used in universities. It was published in 2012. I bought it on Amazon. When people say, Haven't we already debunked this? I say, no.

Much of your work is focused on educating and raising awareness. Could you share your

As the world is changing, so should the current version of our sex education curriculum.

thoughts on the current relationships, sex, and health education (RSHE) in the UK?

Relationships education is compulsory in UK primary schools, and relationships, sex, and health education (RSHE) is mandatory in secondary schools. Although mandatory, parents can opt out. Some children today get a comprehensive sex education, covering a range of issues including consent, pornography and how to be safe online, and LGBTQ+ awareness. What is important, however, is that children receive a parity of experience when it comes to their sex education, because the lack of regulation in this area has meant that many children can miss out in receiving a thorough understanding. Moreover, we need to ensure that when we do teach RSHE in schools, children are given the most accurate, up-to-

date resources. As the world is changing, so should the current version of our sex education curriculum.

At the museum, we've collaborated with several charities who provide sex education, which has been really exciting. In the summer of 2022 for example, we hosted a charity pop-up scheme where we invited a different charity to freely access our space, once a week. We had the Terence Higgins Trust, Queer Parenting Partnership, Eve Appeal, Endometriosis UK, as well as a lots of other great charities attend.

How can museums and culture in general be more representative?

Hiring the people who are affected is the easiest and quickest way to make museums

and culture more representative. Our core audience is generally women aged 18 to 34, and other museums ask us, how do you have so many 18- to 34-year-old visitors? How do we get the young people in? It is because that's the demographic who work for us, for our management, and most of our trustee board. We are attracting those people because we do the work that they find important.

Are there any upcoming projects you're working on at the moment?

The new museum venue is the big one. We will be opening later this year. Our first exhibition is going to be about endometriosis. Lots of people ask us about the condition; one in 10 people with a uterus have it. It's so common but very under-funded and under-researched.

I'd also really like to write another book. I already know what my third book is going to be, but I need a book in between because that one will be very research heavy and is going to take me a while to do properly. My recent book *V: An empowering celebration*

of the vulva and vagina is for 14- to 16-year-olds, with crossover appeal to adults. It was a culmination of all the things that we've been doing at the Vagina Museum and is beautifully illustrated by Nadia Akingbule.

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VAGINA MUSEUM

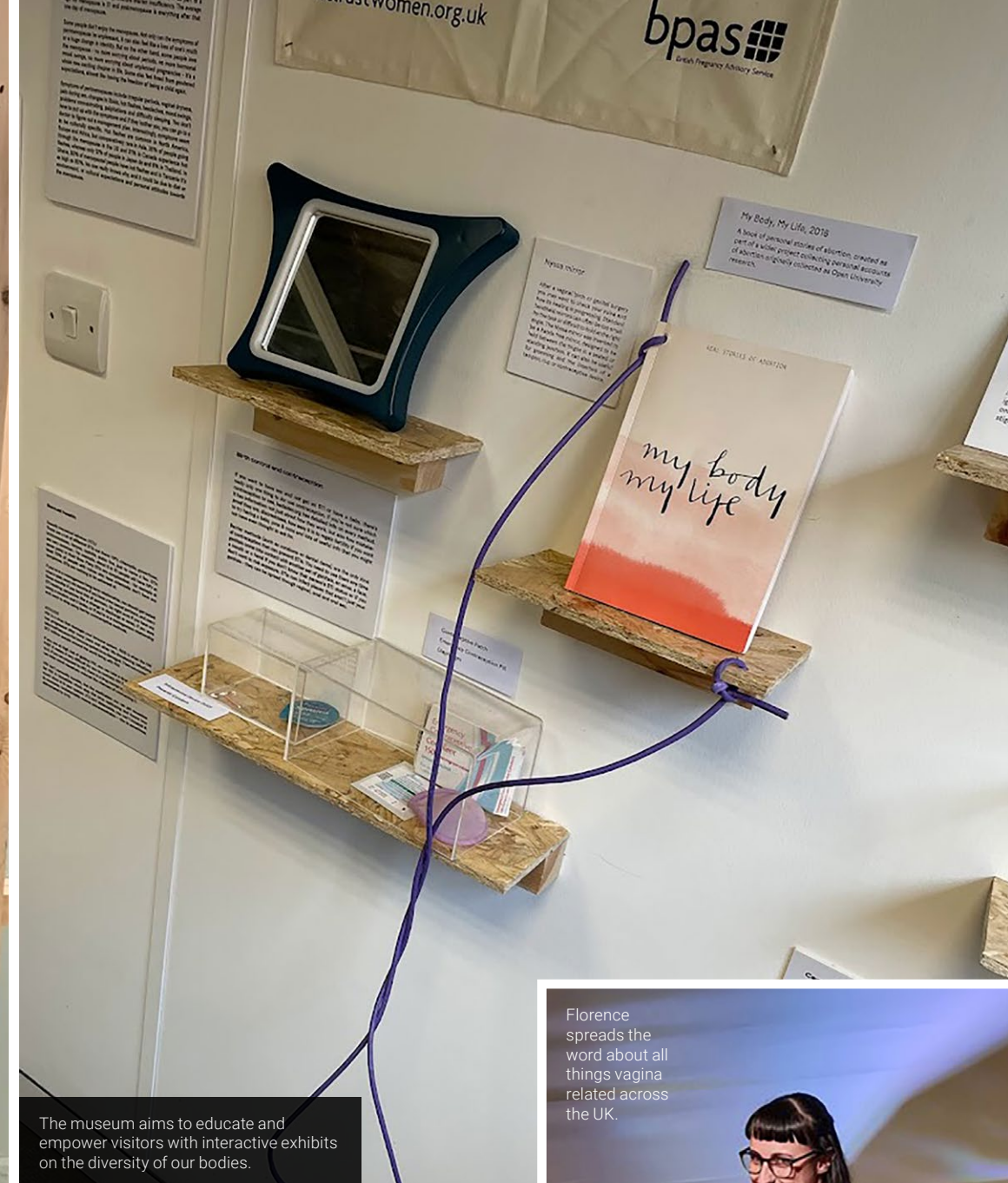
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For more information on Florence's latest book, [click here](#).



The museum aims to educate and empower visitors with interactive exhibits on the diversity of our bodies.

Florence spreads the word about all things vagina related across the UK.

