

Clitoridectomy and female circumcision in America

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Clitoridectomy and female circumcision, practices often labeled as female genital mutilations, are not just controversial cultural rites performed in foreign countries.

Provided by Northwestern University

A new book from a Northwestern Medicine® medical historian reports that American physicians treated women and girls for masturbation by removing the clitoris from the mid-19th century through the mid-20th century. And physicians continue to perform female circumcision (removal of the clitoral hood) to enable women to reach orgasm, although the procedure is controversial and can result in lasting problems such as painful intercourse for some women.

In her new book "Female Circumcision and Clitoridectomy in the United States: A History of a Medical Treatment" (University of Rochester Press, 2014), Sarah Rodriguez, a lecturer in medical humanities and bioethics at Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, examines this largely unexplored history of clitoral surgeries and how they reflect medical and cultural views of 'appropriate' female sexuality through the last century and a half.

"The medical view was to change the female body to treat a girl or woman's 'faulty' [sexual behavior](#), such as masturbation or difficulty having an orgasm, rather than questioning the narrowness of what counted as culturally appropriate behavior," said Rodriguez, who also is a lecturer in global health studies at Northwestern's Weinberg College of Arts and Sciences. "This practice is still alive and well in the United States as part of the trend in female cosmetic genital surgery."

In her book, Rodriguez explores how these procedures were meant to normalize girls and women into a particular heterosexual ideal with the underlying goal of directing their sexual behavior to married, heterosexual and vaginal intercourse.

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