

Similarities in Attitudes and Misconceptions about Infant Male Circumcision in North America and Ritual Female Genital Mutilation in Africa.

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Clitoridectomy and Infibulation	Infant Male Circumcision
“She loses only a little piece of the clitoris, just the part that protrudes. The girl does not miss it. She can still feel after all. There is hardly any pain. Women’s pain thresholds are so much higher than men’s.”	“It’s only a little piece of skin. The baby does not feel any pain because his nervous system is not developed yet.”
“The parts that are cut away are disgusting and hideous to look at. It is done for the beauty of the suture.”	“An uncircumcised penis is a real turnoff. It’s disgusting. It looks like the penis of an animal.”
“Female circumcision protects the health of a woman. Infibulation prevents the uterus from falling out [uterine prolapse]. It keeps her smelling sweet so that her husband will be pleased. If it is not done, she will stink and get worms in her vagina.”	“An uncircumcised penis causes urinary infections and penile cancer. It generates smegma and smegma stinks. A circumcised penis is more hygienic and oral sex with an uncircumcised penis is disgusting to women.”
“An uncircumcised vulva is unclean and only the lowest prostitute would leave her daughter uncircumcised. No man would dream of marrying an unclean woman. He would be laughed at by everyone.”	“An uncircumcised penis is dirty and only the lowest class of people with no concept of hygiene leave their boys uncircumcised.”
“Leaving a girl uncircumcised endangers both her husband and her baby. If the baby’s head touches the uncut clitoris during birth, the baby will be born hydrocephalic [excess cranial fluid]. The milk of the mother will become poisonous. If a man’s penis touches a woman’s clitoris he will become impotent.”	“Men have an obligation to their wives to give up their foreskin. An uncircumcised penis will cause cervical cancer in women. It also spreads disease.”
“A circumcised woman is sexually more pleasing to her husband. The tighter she is sewn, the more pleasure he has.”	“Circumcised men make better lovers because they have more staying power than uncircumcised men.”
“All the women in the world are circumcised. It is something that must be done. If there is pain, then that is part of a woman’s lot in life.”	“Men in all of the ‘civilized’ world are circumcised.”
“Doctors do it, so it must be a good thing.”	“Doctors do it, so it must be a good thing.”
Sudanese grandmother: “In some countries they only cut out the clitoris, but here we do it properly. We scrape our girls clean. If it is properly done, nothing is left other than a scar. Everything has to be cut away.”	My own father, a physician, speaking of a ritual circumcision inflicted upon my son: “It is a good thing that I was here to preside. He had quite a long foreskin. I made sure that we gave him a good tight circumcision.”
35-year-old Sudanese woman: “Yes, I have suffered from chronic pelvic infections and terrible pain for years now. You say that all of this is the result of my circumcision? But I was circumcised over 30 years ago! How can something that was done for me when I was four years old have anything to do with my health now?”	35-year-old American male: “I have lost nearly all interest in sex. You might say that I’m becoming impotent. I don’t seem to have much sensation in my penis anymore, and it is becoming more and more difficult for me to reach orgasm. You say that this is the result of my circumcision? That doesn’t make any sense. I was circumcised 35 years ago, when I was a little baby. How can that affect me in any way now?”

RECENT LITERATURE ON THE COMPARISONS BETWEEN MALE AND FEMALE GENITAL CUTTING

Bell K. Genital Cutting and Western Discourses on Sexuality. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. 2005;19(2):125-48.

Abstract: This article explores dominant discourses surrounding male and female genital cutting. Over a similar period of time, these genital operations have separately been subjected to scrutiny and criticism. However, although critiques of female circumcision have been widely taken up, general public opinion toward male circumcision remains indifferent. This difference cannot merely be explained by the natural attributes and effects of these practices. Rather, attitudes toward genital cutting reflect historically and culturally specific understandings of the human body. In particular, I suggest that certain problematic understandings of male and female sexuality are deeply implicated in the dominant Western discourses on genital surgery. <http://www.cirp.org/library/anthropology/bell1/>

Solomon LM, Noll RC. Male versus female genital alternation: differences in legal, medical, and socioethical responses. *Gender Medicine*. 2007;4:89-96.

Abstract: The different legal, social, and medical approaches to ritually based male and female genital circumcision in the United States are highlighted in this article. The religious and historical origins of these practices are briefly examined, as well as the effect of changing policy statements by American medical associations on the number of circumcisions performed. Currently, no state or federal laws single out male circumcision for regulation. The tolerant attitudes toward male circumcision in law, medicine, and societal opinion stand in striking contrast to the attitudes of those disciplines toward even the least invasive form of female genital alternation. US law tacitly condones male circumcision by providing exemptions that are not available for other medical procedures, while criminalizing any similar or even less extensive procedures in females. The increase in immigration, over the past few decades, of people from countries in which female genital alternation is a cultural tradition has brought the issue to the United States. The medical profession's changing approach over time toward male circumcision is primarily responsible for such different legal and societal reactions toward female genital alteration.

Darby R, Svoboda JS. A rose by any other name? Rethinking the similarities and differences between male and female genital cutting. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. 2007;21(3):301-323.

Abstract: In this article, we offer a critical examination of the tendency to segregate discussion of surgical alterations to the male and female genitals into separate compartments – the first known as circumcision, the second as genital mutilation. We argue that this fundamental problem of definition underlies the considerable controversy surrounding these procedures when carried out on minors, and that it hinders objective discussion of the alleged benefits, harms, and risks. We explore the variable effects of male and female genital surgeries, and we propose a scale of damage for male circumcision to complement the World Health Organization's categorization of female genital mutilation. The origins of the double standard identified are placed in historical perspective, and in a brief conclusion we make a plea for greater gender neutrality in the approach to this contentious issue.

Narulla R. Circumscribing circumcision: Traversing the moral and legal ground around a hidden human rights violation. *Australian Journal of Human Rights*. 2007;12(2):89-118.

Abstract: Male circumcision is an accepted practice within Australian society, despite the fact that female circumcision is widely reviled in the Western developed world. This article will consider why society and the law treat the circumcision of males and females differently. Analysis will focus upon the circumcision of male children in Australia with reference to the United Kingdom and the United States of America. The similar social history of the practice within these jurisdictions is instructive when critically analyzing the Australian context. The discussion will encompass the circumcision of all male children, as the issues of lack of consent and the imposition of a parent's religious and cultural norms upon the child are consistent for all minors, with specific focus on neonatal children where such extreme youth creates additional vulnerability. The absence of domestic law in Australia dealing with the circumcision of male children invites analysis of the protection afforded under international human rights instruments to which Australia is legally bound. This article deconstructs the medical myths that surround the circumcision of male children, and in doing so makes a strong argument for the need to recognize male circumcision of minors as a human rights violation.