

# America's Dark and Forgotten History of Female Circumcision: An Interview with a Survivor

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Despite history's potential for helping us avoid past mistakes, it is often a culture's darkest chapters that slip from collective memory and become buried the deepest. Few Americans today know that a practice now widely condemned as harmful and oppressive—cutting the genitals of young girls—was once promoted within the United States. This practice, called female circumcision, gained traction in the United States alongside male circumcision during the Victorian era. Both were misguided “cures” for masturbation, intended to suppress sexual pleasure and inflict pain on children.<sup>1</sup>

This forgotten history challenges the common notion that female circumcision, also known as female genital cutting or female genital mutilation (FGM), has always been confined to under-developed cultures, often those associated with Africa. Instead, it reveals ethical blind spots in the American medical system and compels us to scrutinize other harmful medical practices that still persist today.

In this article, I unveil this overlooked past by sitting down with Patricia Robinett, a survivor of circumcision and the author of *The Rape of Innocence: Female Genital Mutilation & Circumcision in the USA*. Her story sheds light on this dark legacy and its continuing implications for medical ethics.

## A Brief Background of Female Circumcision in the United States

Though female circumcision never reached the prevalence that male circumcision holds today, it was medically recognized in the United States for over a century and was covered by Blue Cross Blue Shield Health Insurance until 1977.<sup>2</sup> Like its male counterpart, its origins in the United



Patricia Robinett at age four.

States trace back to when masturbation was blamed for a wide range of societal ills. The intense pain of the cutting, coupled with the removal of sexually sensitive tissue, were believed to suppress the desire to masturbate in children—an act thought to cause insanity, criminal tendencies, and numerous other ailments.<sup>3</sup> Over time, the justifications for both male and female circumcision shifted to align with evolving narratives, adapting to whatever medical or cultural pretexts made them seem justifiable at the time.

Today, however, most Americans have never heard the term *female circumcision*. This is because it would later come to be supplanted by its presently recognizable term *female genital mutilation*, before the practice was federally banned in 1997.<sup>4</sup> But despite its absence from history

1. Sarah B. Rodriguez, *Female Circumcision and Clitoridectomy in the United States: A History of a Medical Treatment*. Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2014, chap. 2; Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 165, 172–173.

2. Sara Webber and Toby L. Schonfeld, “Cutting History, Cutting Culture: Female Circumcision in the United States.” *The American Journal of Bioethics* vol. 3, no. 2 (Spring 2003), pp. 65–66. Available online at <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/12859826/>.

3. Sarah B. Rodriguez, *Female Circumcision and Clitoridectomy in the United States: A History of a Medical Treatment* and Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America*.

4. United States Congress, Federal Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act of 1996. Public Law 104–208, § 645. Available online at <https://www.congress.gov>.

books, there is value in learning from this overlooked past. Recognizing that a practice now regarded as an illegal human rights abuse was normalized medicine a few short decades ago calls to question the ethics of present-day surgeries and can highlight human rights abuses that might otherwise be overlooked.

## An Interview with a Survivor: Patricia Robinett

In her personal book and memoir, Patricia Robinett recounts growing up in Kansas City, Kansas, with her two brothers, a World War II veteran father, and an English mother. After having been caught at various times for “sins” such as playing doctor, pushing children, and masturbation, she believes her mother chose to have her circumcised around the age of seven to ensure she would become a “proper lady.” Though it wouldn't be until decades later that she came to realize what had been done to her, the trauma, while consciously suppressed, had nonetheless created an immediate and enduring impact on her psyche, leaving her with an unresolved anger of unknown origins. As she describes in her book, the word *circumcision* lived a life of its own underneath her conscious radar, even before she knew what it meant. It eventually drove her to find that not only is it a major source of unresolved trauma and anger in the lives of American boys and men but also to subsequently discover that it had been inflicted upon her as well.

Today Robinett sees the ethical failings of the American medical community and the suffering caused by unnecessary surgeries such as episiotomies, male and female circumcision, and intersex genital normalization. She remains a staunch advocate against these medical transgressions.

**Daniel N. MacClymont:** Thank you for taking the time to meet with me and talk about such a sensitive but important part of our history. I'd like to start by asking how you came to find out that you had been circumcised and what age you were when you finally made the realization.

**Patricia Robinett:** You're welcome, thank you for coming all this way to sit down with me. And, it is a long story. I first learned about male circumcision before even realizing that I had been circumcised myself. It started with me growing up, at which time the word *circumcision*, even though I didn't know what it meant, always made me shudder. Somehow there was a connection between that word and my subconscious memories.

It wasn't until I was in my fifties, though, that I finally felt compelled to look it up. It was the early days of the internet, and I stumbled on a website that I don't believe exists anymore, John Erickson's SexuallyMutilatedChild.org I think it was. Then an image filled the screen that I never forgot: it was a baby boy screaming while being circumcised. I then somehow got involved with the people who



Patricia Robinett at four months old.

call themselves intactivists, or advocates against circumcision, including John Erickson and Marilyn Milos. And these intactivists were all just wonderful people because they all just *really* care about children; they are some of the kindest, most loving people I'd ever met. So, I ended up becoming involved with their email-based mailing lists at the time, and I learned more and more about this trauma.

At one point, I wanted to understand the anatomy of the penis better, so I asked around in those mailing list groups. They explained that male and female genitalia are quite similar in structure and that I could learn a lot just by examining my own body. Because it had been so effectively impressed on my child's mind that I was not to “touch myself,” it felt like I was entering forbidden territory. Yet it was through this self-exploration that I discovered that many of the parts that were supposed to be there were missing. I told the men on the list that I thought I'd been circumcised, and they were furious, aghast, and some even cried. Still, I was not sure.

Later, when I was attending one of the early intactivist conferences in Berkeley, California, I met a nurse who specialized in teaching female genital exams to medical students. I explained to her my confusion over my genitals, and after performing an exam on me, she confirmed my circumcised status.

**MacClymont:** Anatomically speaking, what specifically constitutes the female circumcision/mutilation that was done to you back in the 1950s in Kansas City? What type of setting was it performed in?

**Robinett:** Well, on me, there is basically nothing there, as in the externally visible clitoris; as well as the clitoral hood, or foreskin as it is also called, was cut off. There is no inner

or outer labia either. I do not know for sure if it was performed in a hospital or if it was performed at our house by a doctor, as I have heard from men that they were cut at home. Whether in a doctor's office or in the hospital, I do not remember; my impression is of a larger white room with my mother standing to the left, a few feet away, and I was screaming at her to help me. I believe that this was when I decided she was not my friend and began to hate her.

**MacClymont:** Given that the most common form of female genital mutilation globally, as classified by the World Health Organization (WHO), involves partial to complete removal of the clitoral hood and/or the external clitoris (FGM Type 1), what was done to you is more severe, falling under FGM Type 2c.<sup>5</sup> Does that sound right?

**Robinett:** Yes, I believe that's right. A lot of people don't know there are many forms of FGM, ranging from a comparatively minor pin-prick on the clitoris to extremely severe and sexually debilitating forms. Mine was somewhere in between. But there are a minority of cultures where they sew the girl's vaginal opening shut. This is called Type 3 FGM or infibulation; it's about 10–15 percent of female genital cutting worldwide and is the most severe. I am glad that did not happen to me.

**MacClymont:** They are certainly horrendous acts to inflict on children, and I'm glad we are exposing this history. On that note, I noticed in your book that you use the terms *circumcision* and *mutilation* interchangeably, but the two have nearly opposite connotations. One is considered medicalized and healthy, and the other oppressive and harmful. Can you explain whether there is a difference between *female circumcision* and *female genital mutilation*?

**Robinett:** They do evoke different emotions, but there is no difference between the two, and both words are used to describe identical practices in different parts of the world. Also, they are both used as catchall terms to describe a large span of different degrees of cutting and invasiveness, everything from a pinprick to amputating significant amounts of tissue.

When it comes to what words are used, it's all about public perception. If you are a doctor and you want to profit from a certain procedure, then you would want to make it seem scientific, legitimate. *Circumcision* is a euphemism that carries with it a certain medical credibility; it suggests that it is performed by someone who knows what they are doing and that it has benefits. *Mutilation*, on the other hand, implies a primitive cutting that creates harm and damage. A third term, *genital cutting*, is meant to be more neutral.

5. World Health Organization, "Female Genital Mutilation: Overview." Available online at <https://web.archive.org/web/20140114180518/http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/topics/fgm/overview/en/>.

As far as marketing circumcision goes, I believe that the techniques pioneered by a man named Edward Bernays played a major role. I'm not aware that he himself was involved in marketing it, but his methods seem eerily reflected in how circumcision became normalized in the United States. Bernays was a master of shaping public opinion. Known as the Father of Public Relations, he wrote books used all over the world, including by the Nazi propaganda machine, in advertisements, political elections, and, more pertinently, medicine. He was big on marketing cigarettes to women, branding them as slimming and stylish. It was around the same time male and female circumcision were being pushed, and the field of medicine was using similar tactics to what Bernays pioneered. I personally believe this is where the sales tactics for circumcision came along that became so common such as "Oh it's cleaner," "It's neater," "It doesn't hurt; it's just a little snip!" or for boys, specifically, "He'll be made fun of in the locker room if you don't do it!" and "He needs to look like dad!"

**MacClymont:** So, in short, are you saying that you consider female genital mutilation and female circumcision the same thing and they just use different words to cast them in a different light?

**Robinett:** Right, and you know once they start calling male circumcision "mutilation," people might start catching on to that too.

**MacClymont:** In that regard, I've noticed that among Western health organizations, universities, and the general public, the prevailing opinion is that male circumcision and female genital mutilation just can't be compared in terms of how much bodily damage they cause. Many American men say that they are circumcised and have no issues with it. What is your take? Do you feel that male and female genital cutting are comparable in the harm they inflict? And where do intersex children fit in?

**Robinett:** My stance is that any unnecessary body modification without the person's fully informed consent is a traumatic assault. As for if one is worse than another, it is irrelevant. Child genital cutting, whether its of male, female, or intersex, is like a spectrum of practices that range in severity, and the results and physical impact on the person can vary widely. There is little regulation with male circumcision, sometimes doctors take more skin, or less, and sometimes they botch it and make it even worse. The same can be said for female and intersex. Sometimes it is worse for one; sometimes it is worse for the other, but they are all harmful. For those who are okay with being cut no matter what sex they are, I am glad they are at peace. I don't try to change their mind.

**MacClymont:** Switching gears a bit, what were your par-

ents' motives in doing to a little girl what would be considered such a heinous act of oppression today in having you circumcised?

**Robinett:** Well, I don't have much conscious memory of it being done to me given how young I was at the time, so I can only speculate, but I think that it was motivated solely by my mom. I don't believe my dad wanted it done, but my mother I think really looked up to doctors and people of authority. She thought it was okay that my brothers were cut because that's just what you do, and she was quite religious. She considered me a miniature version of her, and she wanted me to be very lady-like even though that's not who I am. I was a rambunctious and wild child, and she didn't like that. She was also deathly afraid of me masturbating, probably having heard of the "dangers." I remember her screaming, "Don't touch yourself!" on multiple occasions. So, I believe that at some point in the early 1950s when I was around seven, she took me to the doctor, and I'm sure he exclaimed authoritatively, "Oh, I know what to do." Because at that time some still thought you should circumcise boys to prevent masturbation, they likely did the same to me with some expectation that it would solve my mother's problem and tame me.

**MacClymont:** So your mom never told you or talked to you about it?

**Robinett:** No, she didn't. At one point when I was nearing forty, my mom said, "You never were the same after your surgery." At the time, I didn't know what she meant by that. I replied, "You mean my tonsillectomy?" because that was the only surgery I was aware of, but later in life of course, I figured it out. I look back at the pictures of me in my childhood, and right around the age of seven, the big happy smile seemed to have disappeared from my face. It makes sense if I lost an important part of my body and the ability to comfort myself. All that was left after that was the mother-daughter conflict, criticism, judgment, anger, blame, shame, and guilt—on both sides.

By the time I was nearing fifty, my mother and I had become friends, and shortly before she died, there was a time I believe she tried to talk to me. She asked her husband, my brother, and his family to go to dinner without her and asked me to stay with her. I suspect now that she wanted to tell me what she'd meant by "your surgery," but she never was good at talking about important things, so nothing was said. It took another ten years for me to discover on my own that I'd been circumcised.

I could tell that there was guilt on her part. She felt guilty, and she wanted to tell me about it, but she never could bring out the words. She tried to tell me; she wanted to, but she never did.

**MacClymont:** How did your circumcision affect you

throughout life, and how did you feel when you came to find out what had been done to you?

**Robinett:** Well, most people expect that when I found out I had been cut I would have been angry ...

**MacClymont:** And you weren't?

**Robinett:** No, I was angry *until* I found out. I felt relieved instead to discover that my feelings weren't irrational. I suddenly had an explanation for why I had felt the way I had my whole life. Why I had all the pent-up anger. My mom had always said that my anger was "uncalled for," and for decades I had been poisoned by negative feelings stemming from an unrecognized, overwhelming event in my life where I had been made to feel powerless. You know, speaking of angry, there is something that just enrages somebody when you cut them. I believe anger is an attempt to reclaim your power. And as for how it affected me, I was traumatized; trauma has repercussions. For one thing, you don't trust people; you're afraid they're going to betray you, be mean to you.

**MacClymont:** Is that how you were?

**Robinett:** Very much so, but I was more open to male friendship, though, I think because we shared trauma. I joked that I was an honorary guy because of the circumcision trauma.

**MacClymont:** You said it happened to you at around age seven. Why do you think it is that you don't remember it or much about it?

**Robinett:** You know, I was just so young and that was so long ago, but even so, this is not unusual; we usually suppress what was extremely difficult for us, whether physical, mental, or emotional. Not too long ago, I had a visceral memory of fury, aware that a woman was to the left of me, beyond me, over there ... and I figured it was my mother, observing the circumcision. I was crying out for her to help me, and she just stood there. Made sense to me that I was so angry most of my life.

**MacClymont:** What was sex and masturbation like for you having been circumcised?

**Robinett:** Well, I was not—I was just not aware of what was possible, so when I started being sexual, the song "I Can't Get No Satisfaction" was popular at that point, and I think that was my theme song. I didn't know what it was supposed to be like, and everyone said it's really wonderful or something, but it didn't seem like it was anything. I thought I was normal and that others who felt sex was incredible were the abnormal ones.

**MacClymont:** So, you think circumcision was a big part of that?

**Robinett:** Oh yeah, because my sensation was not there, and like I said, I would think, it's that guy's fault because he doesn't know how to do it right, and I never thought that there was anything wrong with me. I just thought that other women were not normal and that I was.

**MacClymont:** Was this common back then? Did you know of other girls who had been circumcised?

**Robinett:** At the time I didn't know how common it was because I didn't even know it had been done to me, and it was something that nobody talked about. I had heard of female genital mutilation in Africa, but that was it. However, after I learned about my own circumcision and wrote my book, other women started telling me about their circumcision stories.

**MacClymont:** It is certainly revealing that others came out once you published your book. How many other American women came out of the woodwork about having been circumcised? What were their stories?

**Robinett:** Well one time, after I published my book, I was in Oregon riding my bike when I got a phone call from a woman in St. Louis, I think it was. She said, "I am a circumcised woman!" I fell off my bike, right there in the street, in traffic (laughs). She was married to a psychiatrist, ironically, and was equally angry about her circumcision, only she remembered it. She was around my age, raised in Kansas too. She said that her doctor did it to her when she was a teen, and she was furious. I think it was fortunate she had a psychiatrist in the family; perhaps he helped her heal.

There was also a woman who lived in Eugene, Oregon, who said her husband had conspired with a surgeon to circumcise her while she was under anesthesia for an unrelated surgery. Her husband told her he wanted to ensure her fidelity. They divorced shortly after that episode.

Then there was also a woman in Canada whose mother had it done to her because she thought it would make her "prettier down there," much like the common aesthetic reason they give for circumcising boys today.

It's highly possible that many more women were also cut but were unaware of it and just thought they were normal or were labeled "frigid." The problem is, it's not obvious due to its location on the body and due to people's fear to communicate about bodies, so there are likely many other circumcised women out there who are unaware that it was done to them.

**MacClymont:** Why do you think the history and prevalence of female circumcision in the United States has been so forgotten?

**Robinett:** I think it's convenient to forget it. It helps keep the narrative alive that we are better than those other cultures that cut girls. It's also a taboo subject, and that certainly has an effect. Even though sex is now slathered everywhere, anatomy is still taboo.

**MacClymont:** What lessons do you feel should be taken from this forgotten history?

**Robinett:** Don't blindly trust the medical establishment. There are a lot of medically unnecessary surgeries going on that aren't in the best interest of the patient.

Children born with intersex traits, or ambiguous sex characteristics, are often subjected to surgical sex assignment or sterilization before they are old enough to consent. During vaginal births, many women undergo episiotomies, a procedure that involves cutting from the vaginal opening to the anus. I once met a woman who was deeply traumatized after having this procedure done to her despite asking not to have it done.

Others include the premature cutting of umbilical cords, cheating the newborn of essential oxygen and blood from the placenta, which is then sold by hospitals without compensating the mother or child. And of course, baby boys' genitals are also routinely cut, like they did to me. Their foreskins, once again, sold without compensation.<sup>6</sup>

There is even still likely some female genital cutting going on underground in our hospitals,<sup>7</sup> despite it being made illegal in the United States.

**MacClymont:** And what do you say to those who claim that circumcision, whether it be of boys, girls, or intersex children, is a religious right for parents to do upon their children?

**Robinett:** Well, there's this book titled *The Book of J* by Howard Bloom, and according to his analysis, the circumcision covenant was not in the original Jewish bible; it was added later. So, I don't believe that circumcision is part of the original Jewish faith. At any rate, circumcising children actually violates a religious right—the right of the child to self-determine his or her own religion or beliefs. Circumcision forcibly marks the child's body with an irreversible imprint of the parents' religious beliefs. One person's religious rights end where another person's body begins. A child's genitals must be left alone so that they can choose to make decisions as a fully informed, consenting adult.

6. See <https://regenexx.com/blog/do-you-want-to-buy-a-placenta/>, <https://www.allohealth.com/blog/sexual-education/sex-facts-and-myths/do-hospitals-sell-foreskin>, <https://www.vice.com/en/article/the-beauty-industry-is-part-of-a-baby-foreskin-flesh-trade-anti-circumcision-activists-warn/>, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/why-human-foreskin-is-a-hot-commodity-in-science-42709>.

7. <https://www.justice.gov/archives/opa/pr/detroit-doctor-and-wife-arrested-and-charged-conspiring-perform-female-genital-mutilation>.



**MacClymont:** As you know, there are laws that protect females from genital cutting, but not male or intersex children. Some organizations, such as GALDEF and Intact Global, are presently supporting ongoing equal rights litigation in the state of Oregon to protect all children, regardless of their sex, from genital cutting. What are your thoughts on such initiatives?

**Robinett:** I think it's a very good thing to do, especially to bring it to the public's awareness, because it's going to be another nail in the corrupt medical community's coffin, and it can't come soon enough given how many people they have hurt. A law like that has the potential to bring a lot of desperately needed awareness to this issue. Equal rights, equal protection; it just makes sense. It's the right thing to do. All children who experience genital cutting, regardless of their sex, are hurt by it; it's abuse.

**MacClymont:** Some argue that pursuing equal rights litigation to protect all children from genital cutting harms girls by detracting from the issue of female genital cutting or minimizing its severity. How do you respond to that?

**Robinett:** It's actually contradictory to have laws that protect girls from genital cutting while still allowing it for boys and intersex children. You have to ask yourself: Would it be acceptable if someone argued to legalize female genital mutilation because, for example, many Muslims believe it's part of their religious practice or claim it has similar

health benefits to male circumcision? Would we be willing to reverse our laws and start allowing the mutilation of girls for these reasons?

To truly protect girls, and all children, from genital cutting, we need to eliminate the double standard. We often condemn what happens "over there" in other cultures while turning a blind eye to our own practices. If we viewed genital cutting rationally, it would be clear that circumcision is a form of child abuse and torture, regardless of the child's sex.

To take a quote from my book: "If our society could see genital cutting from a rational perspective, it certainly would consider circumcision child abuse and torture. But no, we clearly see what people do 'over there' in other countries, as primitive and wrong, but are we without sin?" 

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Daniel N. MacClymont is a cofounder of the Genital Autonomy Legal Defense and Education Fund (GALDEF.org), a non-profit organization that pursues precedent-setting impact litigation to protect all children from the harms of medically unnecessary genital cutting customs, such as circumcision. He has been an active voice in the genital autonomy (intactivist) movement since 2014 and, as a member of the Kansas City Intactivists, is known for employing humor-based street and educational campaigns to reach the hearts and minds of young people.