Sterilized in the name of public health: Race, immigration and reproductive control in California in the twentieth century

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Objectives: To explore the intersection between the factors of race, sex, immigration, sterilization and health policy, tracing the chronology and context of involuntary sterilization in the state of California, USA.

Methodology: Historical review.

Results: To the author, the history of 20,000 forced sterilizations on patients in California state institutions between 1909 and 1979 is a clear example of the abuse of which many women, mainly immigrants, were victims. Social, legal and medical factors conjoined to limit their reproductive freedom until the early 1970s. The eugenic discourse of the era was one of the main factors inciting laws in favor of compulsory sterilization, under the pretext of protecting public health from the hereditary deficiencies carried by some sectors of the population. The author points out that practices violating women’s reproductive rights are also common in Latin American countries. These include not only compulsory sterilization but also multiple barriers to contraception and lack of access to birth control methods, including sterilization. The example of Argentina is cited, where not only abortion, but also tubal ligation, is illegal in the majority of cases.

Conclusions: The author suggests that further comparative historical analysis of race, reproduction and policy could be useful for collective health initiatives and human rights.