

'I've had people look down on me, put me down because I didn't look like them — I look stronger.' SERENA WILLIAMS



Saddle op: the rise of vaginal surgery for female cyclists

According to cosmetic surgeons, increasing numbers of women are going under the knife – in order to sit on a saddle. *Corinne Redfern reports*

It's raining outside, but Moira*, 39, doesn't care. Grabbing her waterproof jacket from the hook in the hallway, she wheels her bicycle out into the street. It's a 45-minute commute to the school where she works, but she'd still rather not take the bus. For her, cycling represents freedom. It's almost ironic, then, that last year she underwent an invasive labiaplasty to reshape her vulva, just so she could sit on the saddle.

'I've had a bike for years, but in the past, whenever I tried to cycle for more than ten minutes, my labia pinched against the saddle and quickly became swollen and bruised,' Moira explains. 'I tried everything – I would wrap a towel around

the seat, or put two or three sanitary pads in my knickers to cushion everything, but it just made me feel self-conscious. You don't really want to cycle to the shops if you've then got to waddle around the supermarket with bits of padding in your pants. Plus, I didn't feel it was making enough of a difference to be worth it.'

Moira is one of thousands of British women who are forking out thousands of pounds for cosmetic surgery in order to make their lives more active. 'I see between two and nine women every week who want labiaplasty specifically for cycling,' says leading female surgeon Angelica Kavouni. She explains that the hour-long, £3,800 procedure is very straightforward – cutting away the unwanted tissue with a scalpel and sewing it up with tiny, dissolvable stitches – and that patients can be back in the saddle within two weeks.

'Some of my patients are professional cyclists, but the ►

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Masturbation 80%

Penetration with clitoral stimulation 79%

majority are women in their 30s or 40s who just want to cycle to work. For them, this might be a last resort, but it's life-changing.'

But while Moira may be thrilled with the results ('I feel more confident,' she says excitedly. 'I've never been insecure about my body for aesthetic reasons, but physically, it felt like it was really holding me back'), it raises the question of why bike saddles are causing so much pain for so many women in the first place.

One factor may be childbirth – Moira reveals that the pain she experienced while cycling got considerably worse after giving birth. But when four out of five British women go on to become mothers, that's not an excuse.

'I absolutely love being able to help my patients,' says Kavouni. 'But I agree that it doesn't seem right that they're being forced to adapt their bodies rather than just adapting the saddles.'

Writer Donna Navarro, who runs the Ordinary Cycling Girl blog, agrees. 'It really saddens me to hear that women feel as though undertaking this kind of procedure is their only option,' she says. 'Cycling apparel companies should be investing in more appropriate clothing with suitable quality chamois padding to minimise the pain, and custom-made saddles should be affordable. Women have different needs and it's a specialist market – we need to be involved in the design process from start to finish.'