Margaret Sanger: A Pioneer in Women's Contraceptive and Reproductive Rights

Background

Margaret Sanger was born on September 14, 1879 in Corning, NY, one of 11 children, and grew up poor. Her mother died from fatigue after giving birth to 11 children. She died on September 6, 1966 in Tucson, Arizona, at 86.

(Margaret Sanger and Family, n.d., care-net.org.)

(Margaret Sanger with sons Stuart and Grant, 1916, Library of Congress.)

Comstock Act

On March 8, 1873, The United States Congress passed a law that made, among other things, contraceptives illegal, known as the Comstock Act.

"The statute defined contraceptives as obscene and illicit, making it a federal offense to disseminate birth control through the mail or across state lines." -(PBS, n.d., pbs.org.)

Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger

From 1920 to 1966, Margaret Sanger wrote over 50,000 documents describing her life and activities. These became known as the *Selected Papers of Margaret Sanger.*

"[Margaret Sanger's] papers also provide significant insight on the history of changing attitudes towards women's roles and sexuality, and have significant research value to the fields of women's history, social and intellectual history, medicine and public health, religion, and world economic development, among others." -(ProQuest, 2022, proquest.com.)

The "Pill"

Margaret Sanger convinced a close friend of hers, Katherine McCormick, to invest some of her fortune into a promising research study, about an oral contraceptive, led by Gregory Pincus. Pincus developed the pill, called Enovid, and clinical trials began, led by Dr. John Rock. The pill was approved on June 23, 1960.

"Writers have implied that [the] FDA was so swept up by international demand and was so impressed with the data showing the efficacy of an oral contraceptive [...] that the Pill was approved." -(Suzanne White Junod, 1998, *The Update*, FDA.)

"Until the marketing of the first anovulant birth control pill, she would channel a token amount of that money through Planned Parenthood as a tribute to Margaret, who reluctantly conceded that the organization's name might lend credibility to the project despite her utter contempt for its leadership." -(Ellen Chesler, 1992, *Women of Valor*.)

"These data demonstrate definitely the contraceptive ovulation-inhibiting activity of an oral progestin, and suggest that with proper dosage and regimen of administration control of ovulation may be effective."-(Gregory Pincus, 1952, *Report of Progress to PPFA*.)

Thesis

Despite the Congress-passed Comstock Act of 1873, which outlawed contraceptive use in the United States, Margaret Sanger succeeded in initiating the development and creation of the first oral contraceptive which changed women's reproductive rights forever, causing the repeal of the Comstock Act in 1873, as well as spreading women's rights to an international level.

(Margaret Sanger, 1910, Library of Congress.)

"Going to jail or staying out of it was of slight importance to me. My work-my Cause, is the cry of anguish which comes to me from the women of the cotton belt - the cry of working women tortured by the dread of child bearing." -(Margaret Sanger, 1916, *Mother Earth, Mother Earth*.)

Opening The Clinic

On October 16, 1916, Margaret Sanger, along with Ethel Byrnes and Fania Mindell, opened up the country's first birth control clinic in Brownsville, Brooklyn, NY. Women lined up to get advice and information about birth control.

"Looking back upon this period fraught with emotional distress, I have no regrets. But, looking ahead, I am grateful that there looms no necessity for repeating those passionate, dangerous, and menacing days." -(Margaret Sanger, 1971, *Margaret Sanger: an autobiography*.)

Margaret Sanger Arrested

In 1915, Margaret Sanger fled to Europe to avoid arrest. But, nine days after the clinic opened, Sanger, Byrnes, and Mindell were arrested for violating the Comstock Act of 1873.

"Out of the raid four separate cases resulted: Ethel was charged with violating Section 1142 of the Penal Code, designed to prevent dissemination of contraceptive information; Fania with having sold an allegedly indecent book entitled *What Every Girl Should Know;* I, first, with having conducted a clinic in violation of the same Section 1142, second, violating Section 1530 by maintaining a public nuisance." -(Margaret Sanger, 1971, *Margaret Sanger: an autobiography*.)

(Margaret Sanger, staff, and clients at the Brownsville clinic, 1916, California State University, Northridge Library.)

(Margaret Sanger and Fania Mindell working inside the Brownsville clinic, 1916, Library of Congress.)

Planned Parenthood

Margaret Sanger founded the American Birth Control League in 1921. The American Birth Control League was a parent foundation to the Birth Control Federation of America, which became Planned Parenthood in 1942.

(Secretarial Staff of the American Birth Control League, 1924-25, California State University, Northridge Library.)

"[...] [The] ABCL focused on disseminating birth control information to doctors, social workers, women's clubs, and the scientific community, as well as to thousands of individual women; fostering the development of state and local birth control leagues and clinics; and lobbying at the state and national level for birth control legislation." -(Margaret Sanger Papers Project, n.d., sanger.hosting.nyu.edu.)

Controversy

Sanger was suspected to have supported eugenics. In 2020, Planned Parenthood removed Margaret Sanger's name from their Manhattan Health Center.

"Birth control [...] is nothing more or less than the facilitation of the process of weeding out the unfit, or preventing the birth of defectives or of those who will become defectives." -(Margaret Sanger, 1971, *Margaret Sanger an autobiography*.)

"Birth control [...] is really the greatest and most truly eugenic method, and its adoption as part of the program of Eugenics would immediately give a concrete and realistic power to that science." -(Margaret Sanger, 1922, *The Pivot of Civilization*.)

International Work

Sanger traveled to Japan and India to promote her pill and became the first foreigner ever invited to address the Japanese Diet or Parliament.

(Margaret Sanger with Japanese Senator Shidzue Ishimoto Kato, 1955, wordpress.com.)

"With the cooperation of Japanese activists, Sanger helped spread the idea in Japan that women could decide whether or not to have children whenever they had sex. Legal and social restrictions often prevented the methods that Sanger actually advocated from reaching women in the wider public. The government took over the regulation and availability of certain contraceptive methods and technologies, but they could not prevent the spread of ideas and women's own determination to control their fertility."-(Stanford University Press Blog, 2018, stanfordpress.typepad.com.)

In 1948, Margaret Sanger helped create the International Committee on Planned Parenthood, which evolved into the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1952. This became the world's largest non-governmental international women's health, family planning and birth control organization.

"Sanger's goal was to have government public health and welfare departments provide sustained, affordable and effective birth control services. The IPPF continues to pursue the crux of her agenda today." -(Margaret Sanger Papers Project, n.d., sanger.hosting.nyu.edu.)

Impact

Margaret Sanger's creation of the oral contraceptive relieved women of the burden of having children and enabled them to be seen as more than a person meant to raise a family. Although she faced controversy from the public after her death, her role as founder of Planned Parenthood not only gave women a voice to speak but made sure everyone had a choice and was able to access birth control. She helped women redefine their lives and gave a whole new meaning to birth control. She is a true Frontier in History.

"Her cause, redeemed by her persistent, courageous, and often sacrificial efforts to publicize and legalize birth control and make it available to all women, lives on." -(Jean H. Baker, 2011, *Margaret Sanger: a Life of Passion*.)