

Redefining Reproductive Rights in an Age of Cultural Revolution

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Abstract

Since this country's founding, women of color have had little control over their reproductive freedom. In 1973 two young African American girls, ages fourteen and twelve, were forcibly sterilized in the state of Mississippi. The lawsuit that followed brought national attention to the issue of coercive sterilization in the United States. This paper explores the development of the definition of reproductive rights and pays particular attention to black women's experience of reproductive rights starting with the introduction of birth control into the national discourse by Margaret Sanger and contamination of this discourse by theories of eugenics and decisions of the national government in cases such as *Buck vs. Bell*. With the introduction of coercive sterilization into national tactics for population control, birth control became a dubious topic for African Americans and negatively impacted black women's experience of birth control. I explain how these policies affected black organizations' views of birth control and women's roles within the civil rights and nationalist movements. This paper centers on the discussion and policies of organizations such as the Nation of Islam, NAACP, Black Panthers, SNCC and black women's responses to these attitudes. The infringement upon black women's reproductive rights ultimately led to the creation of a more comprehensive definition of reproductive rights by black feminist organizations and a demand for policies and attitudes that would take black women's unique perspectives into consideration.

Author's Note

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1. Introduction

Over the course of the twentieth century, white government officials and male-dominated black organizations have regulated black women's sexuality and reproductive freedom in various ways. Black women's sexuality and reproduction has been exploited since their arrival to the Americas when they were used as breeding instruments during the age of slavery. Motivated by racism and enabled through the discussion of racial betterment and language coded by welfare, white legislators and doctors throughout the country were able to legally and coercively sterilize hundreds of thousands of women in the twentieth century.

Birth control was not originally intended to be a tool of oppression. In the early twentieth century, birth control was introduced to women as a means of liberation and opportunity; it aimed to free them from a life of pregnancy and motherhood. Through birth control, it was proposed that women would be able to lift themselves and their families out of poverty. This message was soon overwhelmed by the national discussion of eugenics, and undercut by racist policies aimed to limit the population of undesirables. The implementation of coerced sterilizations in place of voluntary birth control services provided by the government greatly affected black women's experiences of reproductive freedom and adversely affected the black community's endorsement of birth control as a means of black female liberation. Throughout the twentieth century the message of birth control has been continuously confounded by racist attitudes and policies and undermined black women's bids for liberation.

By tracing the development of reproductive politics over the course of the twentieth century, one can gain a better understanding of how and why black women's experiences differed from white women's and how this necessitated a separate movement for black women from feminism and civil rights. Unlike their white counterparts, black women's understanding of reproductive freedom has been further complicated by various black organizations' claims that birth control was genocidal in the 1960s and 1970s. This discourse around birth control became increasingly racialized as the United States incorporated a plan for population control based on racist eugenic theory. Tensions arose within the black community regarding the advocacy of birth control. Many of these black communal organizations viewed the US government's efforts to create and maintain family planning services as racist. Similarly, the Nation of Islam opposed the governmental campaign for birth control, thus joining other organizations including: the Black Panthers, the NAACP and SNCC. These organizations claimed that family planning services offered to black women were genocidal. Their arguments, however, were far more nuanced and contributed to the development of a black women's redefinition of reproductive rights.¹

Frustrated by misunderstandings of black female reproductive needs by male-dominated black organizations and the mainstream feminist movement, black women were compelled to create

¹ Writers on sterilization abuse and the experience of black women in reproductive politics each discuss the Nation of Islam's views on birth control as genocidal and point to the negative effects this characterization has had on black women's ability to access family planning services. For more information on these views and discussion of other black organizations' views of birth control, see Jennifer Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003) 85-111 and Martha Ward, *Poor Women, Powerful Men* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1986), 91-94.

organizations and movements separate from the traditional civil rights and feminist movements. They created black feminist organizations. As the discussion of reproductive rights developed in the 1970s, black women's experiences created a more comprehensive understanding of reproductive rights. In her book, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, Jennifer Nelson claims that black women have especially expanded the definition of reproductive rights to include safe access to contraception and abortion as well as the economic means to have children.² For the purposes of my analysis I will adopt Nelson's definition and expand it to include protection from coerced sterilizations.

While the history of reproductive rights and birth control is well-covered territory, studies on sterilization and the black female experience within reproductive politics has not been adequately researched. By discussing the policies of prominent male-led black organizations in conjunction with the history of reproductive politics a decade before the creation of black feminist organizations, I hope to address one complex aspect of the black women's reproductive history and freedom. This narrative seeks to explain how black male dominated organizations arrived at their conclusions about female reproductive rights and how this voice contributed to the development of the black women's definition of reproductive rights and the emergence of black feminist organizations.

Tensions between the liberal discussion of birth control and the eventual use of sterilization to facilitate a racist agenda left black women struggling to balance their black identity with their female identity. This account of reproductive politics aims to highlight how those tensions affected the black community's response to birth control and how black women's reproductive liberty was restricted on all sides. Not all black organizations banned women's access to birth control. In fact, in some instances they facilitated it. To understand this apparent contradiction we must understand how the discussion of birth control became racialized, gendered, and class based. Women of all ethnicities and economic backgrounds have strived to attain reproductive rights, which are cited as a key factor in the liberation of women. The leadership of black women has created a more comprehensive understanding of the racialized, gendered, and class based dimensions of the politics of reproductive rights.

2. Why Reproductive Rights Matter

²In her book, Nelson insisted that reproductive control meant having access to legal abortions and contraceptives, as well as access to economic means to bear and raise healthy wanted children. Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 4.

Sanger and the Birth Control Movement

In the nineteenth century, middle class white women in America adhered to Victorian ideals of modesty, morality, and respectability. During this era the role of the mother was romanticized and women who deviated from the Victorian standard were seen as immoral and improper. Society viewed motherhood as the divine duty of the white woman.³ Consequently, the practice of birth control by middle class white women was construed as immoral and socially deviant. Black women, however, remained outside of this cult of domesticity and respectability. Blacks were not perceived as feminine, but rather as less than human. Despite this difference, birth control was also thought unfathomable for the black woman because it was her duty as a slave to produce more slaves.

In 1873, Congress passed the Comstock Law⁴ which banned the distribution of obscene material, which included material related to sex and contraceptive devices. Women were shielded from information about sex while simultaneously being told that motherhood was their chief social contribution.⁵ The Victorian model of morality set white women up for a life defined by motherhood and, in doing so, set them up for a lifetime of economic dependence.

In the early twentieth century, the birth control movement sought to redefine women's social role and question this Victorian model. It focused on liberating women from roles dictated by differences in anatomy and argued that a woman's primary social function was not reproduction. Margaret Sanger, the pioneer and key spokeswoman of the birth control movement in the United States, repeatedly argued that women's control over reproduction was crucial to achieving social and political equality to men.⁶ For some early feminists, control of reproduction was a fundamental liberty; it represented women's freedom from conscripted motherhood and dependence. In 1920, the 19th Amendment granted women suffrage, but for Sanger and other members of the birth

³ Linda Gordon. *Women's Body, Woman's Right: a Social History of Birth Control in America*, (New York, NY: Grossman Publishing Incorporated, 1976), 16.

⁴ Anthony Comstock was an unlikely powerful figure in the late nineteenth century. He held very rigid standards of morality; the Comstock law was not primarily directed at prohibiting the use of contraceptives per se, but more generally aimed at refining the morality of Americans. The law banned any distribution of pornographic material or anything that was sex-related. Comstock was most zealous proponent of his own law and frequently arrested breakers of the law himself. For more information on Comstock and his law, see Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: a History of Contraceptives in America*, (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2001), 3-24.

⁵ For more information about the myths perpetuated in the 18th century about motherhood and sexuality see: David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America*, (New Haven: Yale Press, 1970), 53-57.

⁶ Carole McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States: 1916-1945*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 39.

control movement this was not enough. Women who advocated for the availability of birth control believed it would give them just as much individual freedom and opportunity as the 19th Amendment.

The limitations set forth by the Comstock Law made it difficult for all women—but especially for poor women—to prevent pregnancy. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Margret Sanger recounted her own experience with the harm created by ignorance of contraception. In 1912, she met Sadie Sachs while employed as a midwife. Sachs was young, poor, had no knowledge of contraception, and died from a self-induced abortion.⁷ Sanger’s commitment to making birth control available was heavily influenced by her encounter with Sachs. Her key tenets of birth control are as follows:

1. The freedom of all women to have agency over their reproductive lives and plan pregnancies.
2. The necessity for women of all social and economic backgrounds to have access to contraceptive information.

Sanger positioned birth control as an issue of health and poverty. Access to birth control was more often limited by a woman’s class than her race, though the two often intersected. Poor women commonly believed that women of the upper and middle classes had access to contraceptive information and therefore viewed birth control as a remedy for poverty. Black and white advocates of birth control also shared this view and were influenced by the values set forth by Thomas Malthus’s economic ethic of fertility.⁸ It was believed that through child spacing, families would be able to pull themselves out of poverty. Sanger proposed that birth control would also protect poor women from seeking cheap, illegal and potentially fatal abortions.⁹ This emphasis on class positioned birth control as a racially inclusive movement that would address the reproductive needs of both black and white women.

At the turn of the 20th century, the birth control debate included black women. Black women’s demand for access followed a similar pattern as white women’s, which demonstrated that initially birth control was more an issue of gender and class than a matter of race.¹⁰ In 1930,

⁷ Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*, (New York, NY: Farrar and Rinehart Inc, 1931), 53.

⁸ McCann describes blacks’ views of birth control, “As with white Sangerists, the ideal of racial progress articulated by African-American birth control advocates dovetailed with an economic ethic of fertility.” McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States*, 143, An explanation of the economic ethic of fertility can be found on page 9.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 139-140.

¹⁰ McCann points to the differences of fertility rates among black Americans; middle class families had significantly lower rates than poor families. McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States*, 137.

members of the Harlem community along with Margret Sanger and the American Birth Control League operated the Harlem Branch of the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau.¹¹ The Harlem Advisory Council, which ran the Harlem Clinic, was an interracial coalition of nurses, doctors and clergymen.¹² Birth control had the strong support of prominent figures in the black community such as W.E.B. DuBois. Only with the injection of eugenic rhetoric was birth control made a controversial issue among black Americans.

Eugenics, Race Suicide and Racial Betterment

In the early twentieth century, white nationalist hysteria over the threat of race suicide made birth control a contested issue among many white Americans. Race suicide references the concern of white males over the declining birthrates among white middle class women. In fact, it was President Roosevelt himself who accused white women of committing race suicide when practicing birth control.¹³ The looming threat of race suicide led to one of the most powerful arguments leveraged against the champions of birth control.

White Americans worried that the immigrant population would soon overwhelm the Anglo-Saxon population in America. U.S. officials feared that the rising immigrant population would increase the number of immigrant voters and thus wrest governmental control from Anglo-Saxon Americans.¹⁴ The federal and state government decided that in the best interest of the nation, women's reproduction should be controlled and regulated to determine the racial makeup of the U.S. population. There were two forms of regulation for women's fertility: (1) increased fertility for Anglo-Saxon white women through positive eugenics and (2) limited fertility for immigrant white women through negative eugenics.

Thomas Malthus' view of economic ethic of fertility posited that limiting fertility served as a means to produce better quality children. With fewer children, parents could expend more resources to ensure that they either achieved or retained middle class status later in life.¹⁵ Through

¹¹ Ibid., 139.

¹² Ibid., 142.

¹³ David Kennedy succinctly describes this trend, "The birthrate of American women had been falling steadily since at least 1820. While 1,000 mothers had 1,300 children under five years of age, the same number of mothers in 1900 had fewer than 200 such children. The trend indicated said President Roosevelt, that the American people were committing 'race suicide'. With that utterance in 1903, Roosevelt minted the phrase which for the next forty years was a frequent rallying cry for the opponents of birth control." Kennedy, *Birth control in America*, 42.

¹⁴ McCann, *Birth Control Politics*, 115,

¹⁵ Ibid., 13.

control of fertility, women had the power to uplift or hold back their race. Sanger and the American Birth Control League adopted this view as part of their argument for birth control. In Sanger's book, *The Pivot of Civilization*, she makes the connection overt: "As a social program, Birth Control is not merely concerned with population questions. In this respect, it is a distinct step in advance of earlier Malthusian doctrines."¹⁶ For Sanger, eugenic rhetoric provided a palatable means of presenting birth control as a social good. The logic went as follows: if women could control the number and spacing of childbirths, they would be able to rise above poverty and society as a whole would benefit. In this manner, birth control was presented as a panacea for the problems of social and economic inequality.

In her quest to make information on contraceptives available, Sanger was caught in a tangle of eugenic rhetoric and justifications. She utilized this rhetoric to justify the use of birth control. This line of thinking made birth control a social policy issue. Sanger writes:

The lack of balance between the birth rate of the 'unfit' and 'fit,' admittedly the greatest menace to civilization, can never be rectified by the inauguration of a cradle competition between these two classes...On the contrary, the most urgent problem to-day is how to limit and discourage the over-fertility of the mentally and physically defective. Possibly drastic and Spartan methods may be forced upon American society if it continues complacently to encourage chance and chaotic breeding that has resulted from our stupid, cruel sentimentalism.¹⁷

Unfortunately Sanger's prediction at the end of the statement became all too true. National concern of the growing population of "undesirables" invariably led to the use of birth control and sterilization to control the population.¹⁸ It was generally believed that black people, whose reproduction whites wished to limit, were too ignorant to independently practice birth control properly. The government deemed it necessary to force birth control onto this undesirable population. By limiting the reproduction of the undesirables, the United States would be able to preserve its rightful ruling class. Challengers of birth control gradually accepted the governmental policy as they realized that contraception could be utilized to restrict the poor, minority, immigrant population.

Buck vs. Bell: The Establishment of Coercive Sterilization

¹⁶ Sanger, Margaret. *The Pivot of Civilization*, (Reprinted, New York: Humanities books, 2003. Originally published by New York: Bretano's, 1922), 58.

¹⁷ Ibid., 64.

¹⁸ McCann writes, "Eugenicists also proposed to weed out the unfit through restrictive marriage laws, sex-segregated custodial care and compulsory sterilization." Carole McCann, *Birth Control Politics*, 114.

Negative eugenic language legitimized the use of coerced and compulsory sterilizations to regulate the population of undesirables. In the 1920s, twenty-four states adopted sterilization laws.¹⁹ The court case of *Buck v. Bell* set a legal precedent for the use of compulsory sterilizations to allow the state the right to regulate fertility. Virginia had passed its first sterilization law in 1924 and, in that same year, the Lynchburg State Colony for the Epileptic sterilized eighteen-year-old Carrie Buck.²⁰ Her adoptive family committed her to an asylum when they discovered that Carrie was pregnant. Unbeknownst to the family, Carrie had been raped.²¹ The doctors at the colony quickly diagnosed her as having the mental capacity of a nine-year-old and motioned to have her sterilized with the permission of her guardians. Instead, the colony's superintendent asked that Carrie's guardians challenge the order for sterilization, so that the courts could formally approve the law endorsing coerced sterilizations.²² The opinion by Supreme Court Justice Holmes clarifies, "the attack is not upon the procedure but upon the sustentative law."²³ By attacking the law and not the procedure, Carrie's guardian's effectively set the stage for Virginia's law and similar laws nationwide to have the Supreme Court's support.

Buck v. Bell made its way to the Supreme Court in 1926. The Supreme Court argued that compulsory sterilizations were not unconstitutional on the grounds that cleansing the gene pool was for the public good. In the overview the Court wrote: "the state could properly sterilize those determined to be feeble minded to prevent the birth of feeble minded children who might lead lives of crime or indecency."²⁴ The Court proposed that criminality and feeble-mindedness were inherited traits. The suspicion that a woman may give birth to a child who would lead a life of crime was enough ground for sterilization by the state.²⁵ The Court's justification and legitimization of states' rights to sterilize undesirables was heavily influenced by the language of eugenicists and ideas of racial betterment that had permeated deeply into the national understanding of fertility limitation. Compulsory sterilization was seen as a preventative measure and cure-all for many of America's social ills. As the ideology behind the pathology of poverty developed over the mid-twentieth

¹⁹ For a complete list of laws refer to *Sterilization Laws: Compilation of the Sterilization Laws of the Twenty-four states* (Des Moines, Iowa: Wendell Huston Co.)

²⁰ For more information on *Buck v. Bell*, and the development of sterilization laws, see , Mark Largent, *Breeding Contempt: The History of Coerced Sterilizations in the United States*, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 100.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ *Buck v. Bell*, 274 U.S. 200 (1927). Accessed November 15, 2011.

[http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/?](http://www.lexisnexis.com.proxy.uchicago.edu/hottopics/lnacademic/)

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

century, *Buck v. Bell* opened the door for states to target black women in particular for compulsory sterilization.

The Moynihan Report: Setting up the Discussion of the Black Family

In the thirty years following the *Buck v. Bell* decision, state sterilization laws remained in effect. During this same time civil rights agitators successfully forced the United States government to confront racial inequality head on. Months before congress passed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, however, sociologist and Assistant Secretary of Labor, Daniel Moynihan published his infamous report, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*. Originally intended for an audience of less than ten members of the White House staff, Moynihan wrote the report to define the source of racial inequality in America so that the government could take legislative action to rectify the inconsistency. In the report, Moynihan investigated the structure of the black family and its relationship to black poverty, effectively establishing black poverty as an illness. His methods involved looking into the disparities between the employment of black men and women and its adverse effect on the black family structure.²⁶ The report, however, gained national attention and publicity and negatively altered perceptions of the black family and motherhood.

In his introduction Moynihan situated family structure as the chief source of social mobility. Moynihan held that racial inequality could be solved through stabilizing the black family.²⁷ Moynihan labeled the black family as matriarchal and by doing so claimed that matriarchal pattern of the black family was the root cause of racial inequality. Moynihan situated the black family as a public concern, setting it up to be scrutinized by anyone concerned with issues of racial inequality, whether they be civil rights agitators or white conservatives. With its publication, the report gave evidence to the belief that the black family was socially defective and in need of government regulation.

The publication of the report drew unnecessary attention to the black family, especially black mothers. By focusing on the matriarchal structure of the black family, Moynihan pointed to black women as the source of pathology among black youth. He stated that the degradation of the family

²⁶For a complete analysis of the publication and reception of the Daniel Moynihan's report see: Lee Rainwater and William. L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1976).

²⁷ In his introduction he wrote, "The fundamental problem, in which this is most clearly the case, is that of the family structure... So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself." He later suggested, "A national effort is required that will give a unity of purpose to the many activities of the Federal government in this area, directed to a new kind of national goal: the establishment of a stable Negro family." Daniel Moynihan, *The Negro Family: A Case for National Action*, (Washington D.C., U.S. Department of Labor, 1965), Introduction.

begins with “the entry of the wife into the labor force. The father is no longer the provider and the elder children become resentful.”²⁸ In this way, the black mother was demonized; she was seen as emasculating black men and depriving them of their proper role in the household.²⁹ Black women were thus seen as already liberated. This claim weakened black women’s ability to effectively mobilize and defend themselves from the injustices they suffered from the government, private white organizations, and even black organizations.³⁰

Aside from pointing to black women as the source of black pathology, Moynihan points to the matriarchal black family structure as the source of welfare’s increase. With rising welfare expenditure going to black families in the 1960s, the federal and state government had more incentive to be concerned with the black family structure. The data presented illustrated that black women were taking advantage of welfare and state aid agencies.³¹ By linking the deterioration of the black family to welfare dependency, Moynihan presented stabilization of the black family and decrease of rates of illegitimate childbirth among black women as means to cut welfare spending. Thus, black women’s private reproductive decisions became a public cause for state concern.

3. Questions of Genocide: Black Organizations’ Views on Reproductive Politics

Black organizations had varied understandings of birth control as genocidal in the 1960s and 1970s. Each organization attacked birth control from slightly differing angles and thus contributed to the development and awareness of reproductive rights for black women across the board. Understanding the context of each organization’s definition helps to better understand how claims of birth control as genocidal affected black women’s eventual redefinition of reproductive freedom.

The Nation of Islam

The Nation of Islam (NOI) led the earliest crusade against birth control, claiming that all birth control was a genocidal plot by the “white devils” to exterminate the black family. To combat

²⁸ Moynihan, *The Negro Family*, 19.

²⁹ See, “Department of Labor Employment As of December 31, 1964” chart. *Ibid.*, 33.

³⁰ For a more in depth analysis of the Moynihan Report on black women’s ability to participate in women’s liberation or civil rights movements, see her Kimberly Springer’s “Black Matriarchy Theory and Social Policy” in *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations, 1968-1980* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 37-40.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 12.

this extermination, the NOI sought to reconstruct black family life similar to Victorian ideals of respectability. The organization defined black women's role as a wife and mother. It was her duty to repopulate the race and be a faithful wife.

The Nation of Islam viewed the stabilization of the black family as a key component in achieving racial uplift. The role prescribed to women within the NOI was one of dependence.³² The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, stated, "The woman is man's field to produce his nation."³³ Muhammad made it very clear that he envisioned reproduction to be the primary role of black women. His thoughts concerning the dangers of birth control rang similar to the white men's argument in the early twentieth century.³⁴ Instead of the white male fear of race suicide, the Nation of Islam feared genocide. By framing contraceptive use in this manner, birth control ceased to be a private decision. To use it was to fall victim to the white man's plot and betray the race.

By tying racial uplift to the patriarchal family structure and reproductive politics, the Nation of Islam positioned black women's private decisions on sexuality and reproduction at the forefront of their national agenda for racial improvement. Their views of family were reflective of those shared in Moynihan's report. Only through stabilization of the black family could blacks within the NOI be uplifted. The Nation of Islam believed that black women had become too powerful in the home and sinful in their sexual encounters. They argued that this behavior had consequently damaged the black family and was in need of control.³⁵

The writings of the Nation of Islam and its teachings reinforced the Jezebel image of black women among blacks. Elijah Muhammad wrote that:

Our women are allowed to walk or ride the streets all night long, with any strange man they desire. They are allowed to frequent any tavern or dance hall that they like, whenever they like. They are

³² Political scientist, Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd explains the relationship between black nationalism and white conservatism: "Black Nationalisms are shaped by the theoretical foundations of white nationalisms in the United States." She goes on, "At the same time, however, their rhetoric, theorizing and activities often traded on the same ideas propagated by White nationalists about appropriate gender roles for men and women." See Nikol G. Alexander-Floyd, *Gender, Race and Nationalism in Contemporary Black Politics*, (Basingtroke, UK: Macmillan Palgrave, 2007), 30.

³³ Martha F. Lee, *The Nation of Islam*, (New York, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1996), 58.

³⁴ For more information on the race-suicide argument refer to McCann, *Birth Control Politics in the United States*, 16-17.

³⁵ According to religious scholar Edward Curtis IV, "Members frequently framed the NOI's [Nation of Islam's] program for moral renewal, clean living and bodily discipline in decidedly gendered terms. For women in the NOI, these articulations of Islamic faith often expressed a belief that 'respectability'-defined as female modesty, etiquette and sexual restraint-was synonymous with moral righteousness." Edward E. Curtis, *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam: 1960-1975*, (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 28.

allowed to fill our homes with children and other than our own. Children often fathered by the very devil himself.³⁶

In his book, *Message to the Blackman in America*, Elijah Muhammad reinforced the view of black women as promiscuous and declared that they often consorted with the devil: white men. He argued that black women needed to be restrained from these desires and only through a black man's control would women be able to reach the path to salvation.

In the same book, Elijah Muhammad tied the salvation of the race to black women's behavior. He writes, "The first step [to returning to our land] is control and the protection of our own women. There is no nation on earth that has less respect for and as little control of their woman as we so-called Negroes here in America."³⁷ The threat of the uncontrollable black woman loomed large in this respect, as it had the potential to topple the NOI's hopes for a separate nation and recognition. By pinning the hopes for salvation of the black race on the control of black women, Elijah Muhammad framed black women as the source of the degeneration of black men and of the race entirely. This belief resulted in the control of black women's bodies.

Despite this, the Nation of Islam also presented black women with an opportunity to embrace the roles that had historically been denied to them. Many women within the Nation embraced their new role as a wife and mother. In the widely read official news publication of the NOI, *Muhammad Speaks*, many women spoke positively of the lifestyle and marital benefits of the NOI. Under the section, "What Islam has done for me" one woman, Sister Rose X, wrote an article describing her experience as part of the Nation.³⁸ She stated: "Before this I was trying to raise a family of three children without the help of a mate...My only source of income was ADC (Aid to Dependent Children)."³⁹ As a single mother reliant on government aid Sister Rose X exemplified the type of black women that Elijah Muhammad blamed for the degradation of the race. Elijah Muhammad wrote, "We must stop relying upon the white man to care for us. We must become an independent people."⁴⁰ He did not want women to be supported by the government but rather dependent upon a husband. For women of the Nation, liberation came in the form of motherhood,

³⁶ Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*, (Chicago: Mosque of Islam No. 2, 1965), 59-60.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

³⁸ According to Edward Curtis, "Hundreds of Muslim followers contributed letters to the editor of *Muhammad Speaks*" for the section, "What Islam has done for me". The views represented in this section were fairly reflective of the conversion experience of many followers. Curtis provides numerous examples of stories similar to Miss Rose X's account of her marital experience, to read a few of these refer to the chapter entitled, "What Islam has done for me: Finding Religion in the Nation of Islam" in *Black Muslim Religion in the Nation of Islam*, 15-34.

³⁹ Sister Rose X. "Islam Enters Her Life and Opens Bright Horizons" *Muhammad Speaks*, February 14, 1964.

⁴⁰ Muhammad, *Message to the Blackman in America*, 170

a patriarchal family, and femininity, conventions that the Victorian model had denied to black women.

Though many women in the NOI embraced this new role, women outside of it felt pulled between two conflicting desires: racial uplift and personal autonomy. These women found the NOI's overemphasis on the patriarchal family structure constricting. Barbara Smith, the co-founder of the black feminist organization, the Combahee River Collective, reflected:

I think one of the things that I was so happy about is that I had thought that I would never be involved in political work after I graduated from college because that was the height of Black Nationalism and I felt I wasn't permitted to be the kind of person I was in that context. I was supposed to marry someone or not marry them...but my job was to have babies for the nation and to walk seven paces behind a man and...be a maidservant.⁴¹

The Nation of Islam condemned all birth control as genocidal and encouraged its female followers to hold to a strict code of sexual respectability. This ethic presented obstacles for women searching for both gender and racial equality and consequently alienated the women who would later proclaim themselves black feminists.

The Black Panther Party

While the Nation of Islam's views on birth control remained consistent throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Panther Party grew increasingly aware of the power and presence of the women's movement in the 1970s and, at least discursively, began to recognize the needs of women, recalibrating its initial condemnation of birth control. The Panthers viewed themselves as part of a Marxist revolution, and in that frame of reference their movement was able to cross color and gender boundaries in ways the Nation of Islam could not.⁴² Though the Black Panthers worked to eradicate male chauvinism from their ranks, they failed to recognize the specific needs of black women. These failings stemmed from their mistaken understanding that all women's needs were derived from the mainstream feminist movement.

At first, the Panthers declared birth control to be a genocidal plot by whites to exterminate minorities. Similar to other black organizations during the period, the Black Panthers perceived whites to be the enemy and distrusted agencies and services that were government-sponsored.

⁴¹ As quoted in an interview conducted by Duchess Harris. Duchess Harris, *Black Feminist Politics from Kennedy to Clinton*, (New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan, 2009), 8-9.

⁴² Robert Weisbord writes of the Panthers, "Contrary to popular opinion, the Black Panthers are self-described Marxist revolutionaries, not black nationalists." Robert G. Weisbord, *Genocide? Birth Control and the Black American* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1975) 95.

Though the Panthers viewed birth control as genocidal, they did not relegate black women to a strictly reproductive role like the Nation of Islam. The Panthers' concern with birth control stemmed from the frequent threat and reality of sterilizations.⁴³ In their early history, the Black Panthers warned black women about the danger of clinics and services provided by whites. In 1971, the Tennessee state government proposed a bill to curb illegitimacy. According to the Panthers, the bill stipulated that, "If the mother does not 'volunteer' to be sterilized, her welfare payments would be cut off and each 'illegitimate child born after would be declared 'dependent,' 'destitute' or 'orphaned.'"⁴⁴ Their knowledge of sterilization and distrust of government sponsored clinics prevented them from endorsing birth control use holistically. This limited women's access to birth control and other reproductive health services.

The Black Panthers understood that white regulation of sexual interaction between men and women, blacks and whites, served as an underlying reason for the effectiveness of white male supremacy.⁴⁵ White men had been able, in part, to establish their power by regulating sexual access to white women. In doing this they reinforced a gendered and racial hierarchy. The connections made between sexual politics, regulation and freedom fostered in the group an anti-chauvinist attitude. Bobby Seale co-founder of the Black Panthers criticized black nationalist groups when he declared "cultural nationalists...are male chauvinists as well. What they do is oppress the black woman. Their black racism leads them to theories of male domination as well. Thus black racists come to the same conclusions that white racists do with respect to their women. The party says no to this."⁴⁶ The Panthers were revolutionary in that they not only recognized the role of sexual politics in American society, but also its role in Black Nationalist ideology. To them, black nationalists were as damning of black women as white men were. For the Panthers, black women were as equally capable as men taking part in the revolution and were not to be relegated to the role

⁴³ Nelson, *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*, 106.

⁴⁴ Anonymous Author, "Sterilize Welfare Mothers?" *Black Panther*, May 1, 1971.
<http://Solomon.bltc.anferonstreet.com/cgi-bin/asp/philo//contextualize.pl?p.7097.bltc.841>

⁴⁵ Bobby Seale explains, "The fight against male chauvinism is a class struggle-that's hard for people to understand. To understand male chauvinism one has to understand that it is interlocked with racism. Male chauvinism is directly related to male domination and it is perpetuated as such by the ruling class in America." "An Interview" originally published in *The Black Panther*, January 3,

⁴⁶ "Bobby Seale explains Panther Politics: An Interview" originally published in *The Black Panther*, January 3, 1970, Reprinted in *The Black Panthers Speak*, ed. Philip S. Foner, (New York: De Capo Press, 1995), 86.

of the supportive housewife.⁴⁷ By recognizing the political capabilities of black women as equal to men, the Black Panthers saw themselves as progressive.

Despite this view of black women, the Black Panthers at this point still had not acknowledged that access to birth control and abortions were crucial to black women's freedom. Black women were *black* revolutionaries first and foremost; gender was not a part of this identity. Even for female members of the party, identifying as a revolutionary was a non-gendered self-identification. Before she was appointed as chairman of the Black Panthers, Elaine Brown described her experience in childbirth. She wrote, "I was, after all, a revolutionary. There were bullets or prisons waiting to take me. There was the grave ultimately. Surely I could have a baby."⁴⁸ The Panthers' failure to acknowledge the significance of black women's gender handicapped the movement.

In 1973, the Minister of Defense, Huey Newton, went into self-imposed exile in Cuba leaving an opening in party leadership. Elaine Brown filled the position and remained the leader of the party until Newton's return in 1976. Elaine Brown's rise to leadership caused waves because it forced the Panthers to confront issues of male chauvinism within the party directly. Brown wrote,

It was a given that the entire Black Power movement was handicapped by the limited roles the Brothers allowed the Sisters and by the outright oppressive behavior of men to women... And because of Huey-and now Larry-I had been able to deflect most of the chauvinism of Black Panthers men. My leadership was secure. Thus, in installing Sisters in key positions, I had not considered this business. I had only considered the issue of merit, which has no gender.⁴⁹

Unfortunately for Brown and the women whom she promoted, the Black Panthers thrived when discussing the eradication of male chauvinism, but failed when trying to actually eliminate it. Brown's leadership was met with much hostility.

As Brown matured in her position as director of the Black Panthers, she came to realize that "the feminists were right. The value of [her] life had been obliterated as much by being female as by being black and poor. Racism and sexism in America were equal partners in [her] oppression."⁵⁰ She went on, "I would support every assertion of human rights by women-from the right to abortion to the right of equality with men as laborers and leaders. I would declare that the agenda of the Black Panther Party and our revolution to free black people from the oppression specifically included

⁴⁷ Message to Sister Erica Huggins of the Black Panther Party: excerpt from Tape of Eldridge Breaking His Silence from Somewhere in the Third World. Originally published in *the Black Panther*, March 23, 1969. Reprinted in *The Black Panther's Speak*, ed. Philip S. Foner, 98-99.

⁴⁸ Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1992), 215.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 363.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 367

black women.”⁵¹ Elaine Brown’s rise to power resulted in a brief change in the party’s position on birth control, abortion and gender equality. As black women became more involved in the quest for gender and racial equality, the Black Panthers changed their stance towards birth control practice and use. Though the Party began to support a more comprehensive approach to reproductive rights that addressed issues specific to black women, it required a black woman to be in a position of power for this recognition to occur.

Unfortunately, after Huey Newton returned to the US and to his post as head of the organization many of Brown’s changes were overturned. When he returned, Newton quickly reestablished male power by physically beating a Sister of the Party named Regina. Elaine recalls the atmosphere, “the women were feeling the change, I noted. The beating of Regina would be taken as a clear signal that the words ‘Panther’ and ‘comrade had taken on’ gender connotations, denoting an inferiority in the female half of us.”⁵² The gains made by black women within the party were soon lost.

National Association for the Advancement of Colored People

In the 1960s and 70s, the concern over the threat of genocide permeated even the views of birth control held by the more moderate National Association for Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Formed in the early twentieth century, the NAACP had been involved in issues of birth control since the rise of the birth control movement in the 1920s. The NAACP had first supported birth control as a means of racial betterment, a position influenced by Malthus’s economic ethic of fertility. It later changed its stance in the 1960s and 1970s as mistrust in government services came to dominate black political discourse.⁵³

Members of the NAACP grew concerned with the proliferation of birth control clinics in poor, black neighborhoods and believed that the dissemination of birth control information and contraceptive devices by Planned Parenthood was part of a genocidal plot. The most notable of these condemnations came from Dr. Charles Greenlee, chairman of the NAACP’s Health committee in 1967. Although Dr. Greenlee later retracted his criticism of Planned Parenthood, his

⁵¹ Ibid., 368

⁵² Ibid., 445.

⁵³ Dorothy Roberts provides a few examples of mainstream organizations such as the NAACP withdrawing their support of birth control. Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the meaning of Liberty*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 99.

denunciation illuminated some of the chief fallacies of the services provided by the clinic.⁵⁴ He submitted a paper condemning the practices of Planned Parenthood in Pittsburgh in 1967, calling the organization genocidal. Dr. Greenlee was alarmed by the unequal distribution of Planned Parenthood clinics set up in the urban poor areas of Pittsburgh and he accused Planned Parenthood of targeting the black population.⁵⁵ The observations made by Greenlee coincided with claims made by both the Nation of Islam and the Black Panthers. According to the NAACP, even supposed liberal organizations, like Planned Parenthood, were not trustworthy when involved in issues of black fertility. The intentions of family planning clinics and services were under close scrutiny by all types of black organizations.

In an interview with Planned Parenthood board member Mrs. Kinney, interviewer Anthony Brown attempted to make sense of the proliferation of birth control clinics in black neighborhoods. Brown pointed out that the neighborhoods with higher concentrations of black Americans received birth control services while those with higher concentrations of whites did not. He asked about this disparity, specifically asking if clinics were sent to any of the mostly white neighborhoods, such as Mt. Lebanon, Highland Park, or North Hills. Mrs. Kinney replied that they had not. Mr. Brown then questioned the intention of the board, "Then why make a special effort to send clinics to black neighborhoods?" Mrs. Kinney and other members of the board had no answer.⁵⁶ Over the course of the interview, Brown probed Mrs. Kinney further about the board, revealing that Planned Parenthood did not incorporate members of the community into their board, despite a legal requirement for them to do so. Mr. Brown alerted the board that they "were not in step with the requirements that community people be on the board of agencies in administering O.E.O. funds."⁵⁷ The NAACP's underlying critique of Planned Parenthood was not only that birth control clinics were more numerous in black neighborhoods, but also that there was no representation for these people in the clinics. Whether or not the board of Planned Parenthood actively targeted the black population as part of a genocidal plot is not discernable from this interview, but the evidence suggests that services provided by Planned Parenthood were not necessarily in line with black

⁵⁴ Nicole Rousseau, *Black Women's Burden: Commodifying Black Reproduction*, (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 127.

⁵⁵ "According to Dr. Greenlee, 'on the Northside is a heavy concentration of white poor population along the river and one other concentration which probably would need birth control. These two groups of whites have no birth control clinics in their area, but the Negro areas in the Northside are saturated with three birth control clinics. "Greenlee Holds Position on Birth Control Charge." *New Pittsburgh Courier* (1966-1981), Dec 23, 1967. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/202491643?accountid=14657>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

women's needs, as decisions regarding the placement of new family planning clinics and the nature of services were determined by an all-white board.

The services provided by Planned Parenthood clinics to black women were extremely limited; the organization completely ignored black women's other reproductive health needs. Continuing his criticism of Planned Parenthood, Dr. Greenlee identified that the clinic had offered only one type of service to black women. He stated, "this one service is birth control...what about the data offered on infertility studies, marriage counseling, and pre-marital counseling. These are not part of the organization's programs in the ghetto".⁵⁸ Greenlee's observations once again point to the fault of Planned Parenthood, which failed to offer a comprehensive set of services to black women. For Greenlee and the NAACP, Planned Parenthood's efforts were genocidal in that the organization targeted the black community for birth control. In his criticism of Planned Parenthood, Greenlee and the NAACP supported black women's right to have a family. Though their argument was not framed against sterilizations, it did embody some of the issues that black women faced in having fair access to reproductive health services. The NAACP understood that black women's reproductive needs were not limited to access to birth control but included a wide range of services to assist women in family planning. This understanding of birth control contributed to Black Feminism's evolving definition of reproductive rights.

Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee

The Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was one of the few organizations to take action against the injustices that compromised black women's reproductive freedom. In 1964, SNCC published a pamphlet entitled, "Genocide in Mississippi," openly condemning the practice of coerced sterilizations in Mississippi in opposition to a sterilization bill proposed by Republican Representative David H. Glass. Throughout the pamphlet, the SNCC categorized only coerced sterilization as genocidal, not birth control as a whole. The SNCC's nuanced definition of genocide gave women space to practice birth control voluntarily. Throughout the 1960s, however, the SNCC struggled to effectively incorporate black women's needs into the organization's platform by deemphasizing the importance of gender equality.

⁵⁸ "Greenlee Holds Position on Birth Control Charge." *New Pittsburgh Courier (1966-1981)*, Dec 23, 1967. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/202491643?accountid=14657>.

In 1958 Mississippi State Representative Glass introduced a bill making it illegal for women to have an illegitimate child in the state of Mississippi. The bill stipulated that any person becoming a parent out of wedlock would be imprisoned or sterilized. The bill underwent several revisions and passed in the Mississippi House of Representatives in 1964. In a pamphlet the SNCC explained the alterations in the punishment part of the bill: “As originally introduced, the bill would have penalized the birth of an illegitimate child by imposing a prison sentence of 1 to 3 years on the parents. During floor debate the bill was amended to permit one illegitimate birth before the penalty provisions apply. Another floor amendment provided for sterilization in lieu of the prison sentence.”⁵⁹ This pamphlet condemned the bill as a genocidal tact of white men to eliminate the black population in Mississippi. The SNCC’s reaction to the proposed legislation illustrated the organization’s awareness and willingness to take action against state measures that allowed for coercive sterilization.

The SNCC’s aforementioned pamphlet also defined genocide in five parts, one of which was: “(d) IMPOSING MEASURES INTENDED TO PREVENT BIRTHS WITHIN THE GROUP.”⁶⁰ The legislation proposed by Mississippi’s state legislature fell into this category as it promoted coerced sterilization and was aimed at poor, mostly black, women.⁶¹ The SNCC wrote, “on the surface the legislation is designed to discourage illegitimacy...The arguments of the legislators who supported the bill indicate that the intent of the measure is to eliminate the population of Negroes from Mississippi.”⁶² For the SNCC, the fact that the state government was able to frame sterilizations as a social remedy was most troubling. In the conclusion of the pamphlet the SNCC wrote, “whether or not HB 18 reaches final passage in the Senate during the current session, the fact that a substantial majority of the elected representatives in the Mississippi House favored such a measure is an ominous portent for the future of the state, and of the Negroes who make up 40% of its population.”⁶³ Negative press coverage contributed to the bill’s defeat in the

⁵⁹ Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, “Genocide in Mississippi”, (Atlanta, Georgia, 1964) in Civil Rights Digital Library, Constance Curry papers. Manuscript, Archives, and Rare Book Library Robert W. Woodruff Library, Emory University. <http://larson.library.emory.edu/marbl/DigProjects/swh/images/Curry%20818/0818-053.pdf>, 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid.,2.

⁶¹A text of the bill as it was passed in the Mississippi House in 1964 has been reprinted in the SNCC pamphlet. Ibid., 7.

⁶² Ibid.,4.

⁶³ Ibid.,5.

Mississippi state Senate.⁶⁴ The SNCC's protest against this bill demonstrates that the group took an early interest in protecting black women from mandated sterilizations.

This SNCC organization was one of the few black civil rights groups to later endorse the practice of birth control as a right of black women in the 1960s. Julius Lester, a member of SNCC, formally endorsed the practice of birth control as the right of all women. He denounced the gender inequality existent in black homes and the views of the Nation of Islam. Lester quite succinctly defined revolution:

It is not enough to love black people and hate white people. That is therapy, not revolution. It is incumbent upon the revolutionary that he does not do to someone else what has been done to him. It is all too easy for the oppressed to become the oppressor. No matter how delicious it may feel, it is a feeling the oppressed have to deny themselves. The revolutionary is he who loves humanity and hates injustice.⁶⁵

Like the Black Panthers, Lester pointed out a major flaw that existed in black organizations: the desire to oppress. In his definition of revolution, there was no space for oppression and thus women within the organization were given equal status to men.

Unlike the Black Panther understanding of gender equality, the SNCC acknowledged that revolutionary women are women and have different needs than revolutionary men. Lester writes, "those black militants who stand up and tell women, 'Produce black babies!', are telling black women to be slaves."⁶⁶ Lester's condemnation of black militants proves he recognized reproductive freedom as part of black women's freedom. He further acknowledged the demands of motherhood. He stated, "if one is revolutionary, than he is concerned, above all, with the success of that revolution and all those involved."⁶⁷ By mentioning "all those involved", Lester included women's issues as part of the black struggle. He then pointed out the successes of black mothers. He said, "undeniably, black mothers have done a fantastic job under incredible circumstances, but because black mothers have made a good showing of a bad thing, that doesn't mean it's desirable."⁶⁸ Since the Moynihan Report, people examined black motherhood with a critical lens. Lester exalts black motherhood without romanticizing it. Whereas women in other organizations were confronted with two allegiances: one to their black-ness and the other to their womanhood, Lester seemingly offered a solution.

⁶⁴ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 94.

⁶⁵ Julius Lester, *Revolutionary Notes*, (New York, NY: Richard W. Baron, 1969), 108.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 141.

Although Lester argued that black women must be free to decide when to have children and thus endorsed the practice of birth control long before other black organizations, he still argued that racial equality was the top priority.⁶⁹ He stated, “if blacks within the movement are seriously concerned about revolution, then they should be urging women to postpone having children, because women need to be free for the fullest participation in the struggle.”⁷⁰ Lester’s statement illustrated that birth control was indeed acceptable as an alternative to forced motherhood. Forced motherhood denied women their freedom while simultaneously preventing them from joining in the “struggle” for racial equality.

In 1968, Frances Beale submitted a petition to the SNCC’s meeting in New York, requesting that a separate committee be formed to address gender equality within the organization. As a result, the Black Women’s Liberation Caucus was formed as an appendage of SNCC.⁷¹ In 1969, the caucus broke away from the SNCC and formed one of the earliest black feminist organizations in the United States, renaming itself the Black Women’s Alliance.⁷² Although the SNCC’s endorsement of birth control and condemnation of forced sterilizations highlighted some of the important reproductive rights issues affecting black women, the women’s caucus went further and addressed the issue holistically and offered more solutions.

4. Relf Sisters: The Arrival of Sterilization Abuse into National Consciousness

In 1973, fourteen-year-old Minnie Lee Relf and her twelve-year-old sister Mary Alice Relf, were forcibly sterilized by the Montgomery Community Action Agency in Alabama.⁷³ The resulting lawsuit, *Relf vs. Weinberger*, made national news and exposed the dark reality already recognized by black organizations: the government, doctors, and hospitals violated the reproductive rights and

⁶⁹ Lester’s statements on birth control were made in 1968 before the Black Panthers’ endorsement of it in the 1970s. Other groups, like the Nation of Islam would never endorse its use.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

⁷¹ Kimberly Springer describes SNCC’s decline and the formation of the Black Women’s Alliance, “Few SNCC members opposed the formation of the caucus, because the organization was in its final years of decline. SNCC’s destabilization due to the loss of popular financial support, failing Northern antipoverty campaigns, and increased militancy created an opening for women for the women who formed the Black Women’s Liberation Caucus.” Kimberly Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 47.

⁷² The Black Women’s Alliance would later rename itself the Third World Women’s alliance, embracing the struggle and fighting for protection of all women of color. *Ibid.*, 48-49.

⁷³ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 93.

choices of black women, especially those on welfare. The case heightened and legitimized the fear of genocide for many black organizations. The fact that a federally funded agency committed the sterilizations illustrated that these abuses had been taking place throughout the country. As sterilization abuse victims, the Relf sisters represented the real threat of genocide and the depth of racism that existed in America. Essentially, the court case revealed genocide as a reality and not just a crazed accusation launched at white organizations by black nationalist organizations.

By the 1970s, the sterilization laws that were passed in mostly southern states were reworked so women who received federal aid were threatened with the elimination of welfare benefits and were thus coerced to undergo sterilization.⁷⁴ This was partly because many white legislators and even the general public, equated welfare with black women.⁷⁵ After the Moynihan Report, most Americans also began to associate social degradation with the black race, especially black females. According to American Studies scholar, Duchess Harris, “The chaotic political climate of the late 1960s was perfect for exploitation based on racially coded words and symbols. With rising urban violence, crimes in major cities, and burgeoning public assistance rolls, crime and welfare dependence were permanently racialized and deemed ‘Black’ within the mainstream political culture, but they were also deemed ‘female,’ with the image of the Black welfare queen increasingly prominent in the American imagination.”⁷⁶ By connecting sterilization legislation to perceptions of promiscuity and welfare dependency, legislators and doctors racialized the issue. Consequently, black women’s reproductive rights looked radically different from those of white women’s during this time. Though the sterilizations of these young sisters was no unique case, the publicity it garnered demonstrated how new welfare legislation had provided states with a new language to enact racist legislation.

Following their daughter’s sterilization, Mr. and Mrs. Relf went to the poverty law center, which filed a million dollar law suit against the White House and demanded a ban on the use of federal funds for sterilizations.⁷⁷ The suit subsequently revealed shocking numbers of oversights by the federal government. According to investigations, the federal government had not made any provisions to ensure that the sterilizations they funded were for consenting adults. Further

⁷⁴ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 214.

⁷⁵ Duchess Harris. *Black Feminists Politics from Kennedy to Clinton*, 6.

⁷⁶ Ibid, 6.

⁷⁷ For a full description of Relf’s case and other sterilizations, see Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.

investigation revealed that an estimated 100,000 to 150,000 women had been sterilized through federally funded clinics.⁷⁸

Four black congresswomen, Yvonne Burke, Shirley Chisholm, Cardiss Collins and Barbara Jordan, launched the most notable attacks against the sterilization of the Relf sisters.⁷⁹ According to contemporary political writer Robert Weisbord, these women argued that birth control must be made available to, but not imposed upon, all women.⁸⁰ They proposed to the department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) that stricter guidelines be set for sterilizations. The response of these black congresswomen to the sterilization of the Relf sisters revealed that black women were becoming more involved in addressing the rights and injustices that affected them and had gained a much stronger political voice. For these women, issues of reproductive rights in the 1970s were but one aspect to be addressed in the quest for equality.

5. The Rise of Black Feminist: Redefining Reproductive Rights

With their black male and white female counterparts making impressive gains in the struggle for equality throughout the 1960s, black women continued to voice their dissatisfaction with the status quo in the 1970s. Dr. Eudora Pettigrew, Professor of Educational Psychology at Michigan State University, addressed this representation problem at a national conference on the status of black women in 1974, where she stated, “The formation of a black woman’s group...would probably annoy some members of presently existing movements, but probably the ones who would be disturbed are the ones who insist that the black woman’s problems are adequately answered by the presently existing movements. The more honest elements would recognize our complaint.”⁸¹ Unfairly or underrepresented in the struggle for racial and gender equality, black women formed their own organizations separate from existing black and mainstream feminist ones. By the end of 1974, prominent black and women of color-focused feminist organizations, such as the Third World Women’s Alliance (TWWA, 1968 on the East Coast and 1971 on the West Coast), the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO, 1973), Combahee River Collective (CRC, 1974), Black

⁷⁸ Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body*, 93.

⁷⁹ Weisbord, *Genocide?*, 170.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 170-171.

⁸¹ "Are Black Women Left in the Kitchens?" *Los Angeles Sentinel (1934-2005)*, Mar 21, 1974. <http://search.proquest.com/docview/565136447?accountid=14657>.

Women Organized for Action (BWOA, 1973), and Committee to End Sterilization Abuse (CESA, 1974), had been formed.⁸²

Each of these organizations was influenced by the structure, style, and promise of equality present in existing black organizations like the SNCC, NAACP and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE).⁸³ To varying degrees, the black and women of color groups dealt with the issues of sexuality, reproduction, classism, and racism. One organization whose aims specifically and explicitly addressed issues of sterilization abuse and reproductive freedom was CESA. Other black feminist organizations, such as TWWA, dealt with issues of welfare and poverty while also contributing to the expansion of the definition of reproductive rights in the 1970s.

These organizations did not dismiss black power or black nationalists' opinions on birth control out of hand, and they recognized for themselves that the threat of genocide was real. Frances Beale of TWWA wrote of sterilization and birth control services in the United States in her paper, "Double Jeopardy":

These tactics are but another example of the many devious schemes that the ruling elite attempt to perpetrate on the black population in order to keep itself in control. It has recently come to our attention that a massive campaign for so-called "birth control" is presently being promoted not only in the underdeveloped non-white areas of the world, but also in black communities here in the United States. However, what the authorities in charge of these programs refer to as "birth control" is in fact nothing but a method of outright surgical genocide.⁸⁴

Similar to the Black Panthers, the Nation of Islam, and most closely the SNCC, Beale framed the connection between sterilization and genocide in terms of race. Beale's paper articulated that black women faced a double challenge because they were as much the victims of racism as sexism. She questioned the motivation behind the women's movement, "Are white women asking to be equal to white men in their pernicious treatment of third world peoples? What assurances have black women that white women will be any less racist and exploitative if they had the power and were in a position to do so?"⁸⁵ Following in the footsteps of male dominated black organizations, black feminist organizations distrusted whites and the so-called liberation brought to them by the mainstream

⁸² Kimberly Springer's book discusses the formation and decline of TWWA, NBFO, CRC and BWOA in her book: *Living for the Revolution: Black Feminist Organizations 1968-1980*, and Jennifer Nelson talks specifically about CESA and CARASA in her book: *Women of Color and the Reproductive Rights Movement*.

⁸³ Springer charts the influence of black organizations of the development of black feminist organizations. Springer, Kimberly. *Living for the Revolution*, 66. NOTE: Wording in this footnote is unclear.

⁸⁴ Frances Beale, "Double Jeopardy," in *Third World Women's Alliance: Black Women's Manifesto* (New York, NY: Third World Women's Alliance, 1970) in Chicago Women's Liberation Union Online Archive: Health University of Illinois at Chicago, <http://library.duke.edu/rubenstein/scriptorium/wlm/blkmanif/#double>

⁸⁵ Ibid.

feminist movement. It was clear to TWWA as well as other black feminist organizations that the women's movement was at best inadequate and, at worst, harmful.

The women's movement even admitted to its limited experience. In the introduction to its book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, the Boston's Women's Collective wrote:

We are white middle class women, and as such can describe only what life has been for us. But we do realize that poor women and non-white women have suffered far more from the kinds of misinformation and maltreatment that we are describing in this book.⁸⁶

The actual content of the book revealed that the true aims of the women's movement were aims of a white middle class population. They touch on sterilization:

It is legal in all states, although many hospitals are conservative about it and require that the person be a certain age, with a certain number of children, and so on, and that he or she have the spouse's signed consent. (Other hospitals, notably in the ghetto area, tend to do too many, and not entirely voluntary, sterilizations. Black women in the South are all too familiar with the "Mississippi Appendectomy", in which their fallopian tubes are tied or their uterus is removed without their knowing it.)⁸⁷

The mainstream feminist movement recognized coerced sterilization as a problem for black women, but continued to argue for easier access to sterilizations and abortions for themselves. Their demands directly and negatively impacted black women as they failed to take into account the needs of black women for protection from hospitals and government officials who would otherwise force black women to limit their reproduction.

Eight years after Beale's publication of "Double Jeopardy," the Chicago chapter of CESA defined sterilization abuse in its paper addressed to the women's movement at large, *Sterilization Abuse: A task for the Women's Movement*:

Sterilization abuse, however, can occur on many different levels, and it will take much more than a federal order to prevent it from occurring again. When a woman does not know she had been sterilized or is knocked out and sterilized against her will, this is sterilization abuse in its most blatant form. However, more subtle forms of coercion or deception are often used. Misinformation is one tool of abuse--women are not told that the operation is permanent and irreversible, or are not counseled about other methods of birth control. Or women are wrongly told that if they don't consent, their welfare benefits will be cut off...The issue of informed consent is particularly important when hysterectomies are encouraged for reasons not medically justifiable.⁸⁸

By specifying the various and subtle infringements enacted upon black women's reproductive rights, CESA defined the complexity of the problem. It proved that existing governmental guidelines put

⁸⁶ The Boston Women's Collective, *Our Bodies, Ourselves: a Book by and for Women*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1971), 2.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁸⁸ *Sterilization Abuse: A Task for the Women's Movement*. (Chicago, IL: Chicago Committee to end Sterilization Abuse, 1977) in Chicago Women's Liberation Union Online Archive: Health, University of Illinois at Chicago <http://www.cwluherstory.org/sterilization-abuse-a-task-for-the-womens-movement.html>

forth by HEW were not comprehensive enough to prevent abuse. It showed that rather than guidelines, black women needed an effective means to enforce protective laws.

According to legal scholar Dorothy Roberts, reproductive rights for black women were not limited to protection from sterilization abuse, but also included the right to bear and raise healthy children. She claimed that the choices of black women were “limited not only by direct government interference in their decisions, but also by government’s failure to facilitate them.”⁸⁹ For black women, protection from sterilization was not enough. Safe access to pre-natal services had been compromised because of the government and hospital’s insistence on sterilization. In the TWWA newsletter an article entitled “Sterilization of Black Women is Common in the U.S.” described how black women in Mississippi were routinely denied pre-natal care unless they agreed to undergo sterilization. The author, Margo Jefferson, claimed that “health care [had] become a political and social weapon of abuse.”⁹⁰ Coercive sterilization was not only genocidal; it restricted women’s access to proper reproductive health services.

Though many black women did not agree with the aims of the mainstream feminist movement, they still endorsed a woman’s right to practice family planning. In “Double Jeopardy,” Beale wrote and underlined, “It is also her right and responsibility to determine when it is in her own best interests to have children, how many she will have, and how far apart and this right must not be relinquished to anyone.”⁹¹ CESA expanded upon this in its second bullet point. CESA listed that it was working “to demand that families and all women of childbearing age have free access to methods of birth control within high quality, comprehensive health care so that people may exercise choices.”⁹² Though TWWA and CESA’s stances on sterilization were informed by the experiences of women of their race, they still actively supported the mainstream feminist movement’s principle that women have the right to access the necessary birth control information.

By addressing issues of genocide and coerced sterilization, while still supporting black women’s right to have *safe* and *affordable* access to birth control information, CESA and TWWA refined and incorporated two competing views of family planning. By arguing for the option to have safe and affordable access to pre-natal and post-natal care as well as contraceptives and protection

⁸⁹ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 300.

⁹⁰ Margo Jefferson, “Sterilization of Black Women is Common in the U.S.,” *Triple Jeopardy*, vol 3, no. 1 (September-October 1971) <http://www.flickr.com/photos/27628370@N08/2570005584/sizes/l/in/set-72157605547626040/>

⁹¹ Beale, “Double Jeopardy”. *Third World Women’s Alliance*.

⁹² Committee to End Sterilization Abuse, *Statement of Purpose*. (1977) Chicago Women’s Liberation Union Online Archive, University of Illinois at Chicago <http://www.uic.edu/orgs/cwluherstory/CWLUArchive/cesapurpose.html>

from coerced sterilization, black feminists established a definition of reproductive rights that was holistic and became a movement that committed itself to tackling the needs of women marginalized by society. Black feminist organizations worked in the 1970s to better articulate their needs, readdress social stereotyping, and, reflecting the sentiment given by Dr. Pettigrew, demand their rights.

In 1978, five years after the Relf case, HEW adopted measures that restricted the sterilizations performed under programs receiving federal funds.⁹³ It stipulated that no permanent sterilizations were to be performed on minors or the mentally incompetent and implemented a 30-day waiting period. For the most part, these measures have prevented women of color from becoming the victims of permanent coerced sterilizations.

By the 1980s, however, most black feminist organizations were either dysfunctional or obsolete as a result of declining finances and membership, internal disputes, and the loss of national sympathy towards issues of civil rights.⁹⁴ That these black feminist organizations failed to effectively remove all trace of sexism or racism does not mark the black feminist movement as a failure. The black feminist movement in itself revealed that freedom and equality cannot be understood in either strictly gendered or racial terms. Such limiting terms excluded black women from the rights that black men and white women had gained. These organizations created a space for women of color to voice their needs and assert their rights.

6. Conclusion

Throughout the twentieth century, the discussion of birth control has been racialized. It is important to understand how and why this discussion became racialized in order to better understand how racism was able to undercut the core values of feminism and reproductive rights: equality and liberation for *all*. Because birth control was transformed into an oppressive tool used by white racists against blacks, black women's experience of reproductive rights had radically departed from the early feminist promise of birth control as a means for opportunity and liberation. Black women's reproductive freedom was controlled and manipulated in two ways. First, and perhaps most dangerously, through the use of coerced sterilizations, and secondly, by denial of access to

⁹³ Springer, *Living for the Revolution*, 97.

⁹⁴ Springer explains the decline of TWWA, Combahee River Collective, NBFO, NABF and BWOA. Springer, "War Weary Warriors" in *Living for the Revolution*, 139-167.

birth control by civil rights and black nationalist groups. The problems of racism and sexism, as they were in the 1960s and 1970s, have yet to be adequately addressed. By ignoring the problematic aspects of reproductive rights history, we suffer from historical amnesia and have a skewed perception of present reality, often times glossing over the inadequacy of the social movements of the 1960s to address all issues of race and gender, preferring instead a progressive history of America. This prevents the distribution of just retribution to the victims of coerced sterilizations (most of whom are living) and perpetuates racist and sexist attitudes. Only by understanding this past and taking responsibility where responsibility is due can we move beyond this chapter and work towards a more comprehensive and fair definition and realization of reproductive rights.

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