

Historical Note

Margaret Louise Higgins Sanger (1879-1966) left home at twenty and entered into an accredited three-year nursing program at White Plains Hospital in White Plains, New York. Nursing was not respected then as it is today. It was considered equal to being a house servant—a job Margaret knew all too well.

As a visiting nurse on Manhattan's Lower East Side, Margaret witnessed the despair, sickness, and death brought on by unwanted pregnancy, self-induced abortion, child abandonment, and child labor. In essence, she saw aspects of her mother's life playing out over and over again inside the tenements, a life she had desperately tried to leave behind. It was here that Margaret realized her mission—not as a doctor in the service of her mother, but as an activist in the service of all women.

Margaret began her crusade by speaking, writing, and distributing pamphlets and information on female sexuality, sexual education, and contraception—actions not only considered obscene at the time, but also illegal. She was arrested in 1914 and fled the country to avoid prison, living in exile in Europe for a year.

She returned in 1915 to fight the charges against her. After coining the term “birth control,” she opened the first American birth-control clinic and began the long battle to make family planning and sexual education part of regular health care. For this, too, she was arrested. And this time, she served 30 days in prison.

But Margaret continued her work. She went on to launch the first legal family planning clinic, promote new contraception (notably the birth control pill), and to fight for a woman's

right to control her health and reproductive future—none of which was without controversy. It didn't help that Margaret remained the same person who thought it was a good idea to cross a train trestle high above the Chemung River. Margaret not only attempted to acknowledge a woman's sexuality, but proclaimed women had the right to have sex for pleasure, an absolutely unacceptable concept in early 1900s America—and an idea women still fight for today.

Margaret defied the conventions of society, and for doing so, she often paid with her reputation. Her refusal to live the socially conventional life expected of women brought harsh judgment from the society she rejected. This harsh judgment still follows her legacy today. Most of the vitriol aimed at Margaret personally stems from her advocacy of eugenics.

Eugenics was a widely held scientific belief in Margaret's lifetime that aimed to improve the genetic quality of the human population. Margaret was a eugenicist, as were Theodore Roosevelt and Helen Keller, among many others. In this time period, eugenics could be found in the high school science textbooks of more than half the states in the country. Today, we realize how wrong this thinking is. It is from eugenics that the horrendous idea of sterilizing certain women—namely women with disabilities and women of color—arose.

Margaret did advocate the sterilization of what was then medically termed the “mentally unfit.” She defined these as people who could not properly care for children due to disease or disability, citing alcoholism and severe mental illnesses such as schizophrenia. She was far from alone in this view: the majority of the medical community agreed with her, as did the U.S. Supreme Court, which ruled in favor of sterilization of the “unfit” in *Buck v. Bell* in 1927 with only one judge dissenting. A ruling both Robert Baldwin of the American Civil Liberties Union and W. E. B. DuBois of the NAACP agreed with. This view was partly due to ignorance at the

time about the nature of mental illness, and partly due to the lack of treatment options. There were few medications available for people with mental illness and often the solution was a lifetime of institutionalization.

Although it is true that Margaret did believe in sterilization of the “mentally unfit,” her detractors took this view—a view we realize today is unacceptable—one step further, stating that she also applied this idea of sterilization to races and religions, and thus deemed her a racist. This is false. As Margaret wrote in 1934, “if ‘unfit’ refers to race or religions, then that is another matter which I frankly deplore.”

Margaret was actually a progressive thinker on race for her time. She opened her clinics to both black and white families and would not hire any nurse or doctor who did not agree to treat patients of color. The power structure that wanted—and still wants—her reputation ruined constructed a racist version of Margaret, hoping it would damage her message. To this end, Margaret’s words were often taken out of context to purposely distort her racial views, and thereby detract from her mission. One quote used repeatedly to attack her came from a letter written to a donor about the Negro Project (a name that reflected how black Americans were commonly identified at the time).

The project was an effort to bring birth control and healthcare to black Americans in the South who were being neglected by the public healthcare system. It was supported by W. E. B. DuBois of the NAACP, as well as by Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of the National Council of Negro Women. In this letter, Margaret wrote about how she was encouraging more community involvement—by training black ministers in outreach so they might aid in the recruitment of black doctors and nurses for the project—because she feared the project might be misunderstood

if it was solely run by white people. She ended these thoughts with the sentence: “We do not want word to go out that we want to exterminate the Negro population and the minister is the man who can straighten out that idea if it ever occurs to any of their more rebellious members.”

What she meant was this: The last thing we want is for anyone to think our goal is to exterminate black Americans. She was worried that anti-birth control advocates would undermine the project, painting a sinister picture of it. Ironically, using the first half of this quote, they did just that.

Three more quotes wrongly attributed to Margaret are still used today to spread a false racist persona of her. The first is a quote from W. E. B. DuBois: “The mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among Whites, is from that part of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.” The last two are “more children from the fit, less from the unfit—that is the chief issue of birth control,” and “colored people are like human weeds and have to be exterminated.” Margaret simply never said either one.

Margaret’s personal and political faults were—and continue to be—exaggerated and misrepresented by those who wish to sabotage her message: that women should have the right to control their bodies, and therefore, their lives. This doesn’t mean her faults should be excused. However, just as with the work of men, her faults should be considered alongside her work and within the context of history.

Margaret Louise Higgins Sanger changed our world. Born a cheeky little girl in a factory town, she grew up to become a bold woman who led an extraordinary fight against the most powerful opponents in the world: Men, the United States government, and the Catholic Church. She succeeded not only in beginning discussions about women’s sexuality, sexual health

education, reproduction, family planning, and contraception, but also in influencing and affecting the laws to change and improve these basic human rights. The structures she built – the Planned Parenthood Federation of America and the International Planned Parenthood Federation—are still providing sexual and reproductive health care and education to almost five million women worldwide.

One hundred and forty years after her birth, Margaret’s ideas are still considered controversial. The societal debate over a woman's right to her own body continues to rage today. Choosing to have a baby is both an individual decision and a societal one, just as being human is experienced individually and societally. Each of us balances our individuality against our need to participate in a shared human experience. “Maggie” spent her life searching out this balance. And in doing so, she helped to move the scales—so weighted against women—a little closer to the center.