

Opposition Claims About Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger gained worldwide renown for founding the American birth control movement and, later, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America.

Her work helped begin the movement for reproductive rights, the invention of the birth control pill, and brought about the reversal of federal and state “Comstock laws” that prohibited publication and distribution of information about sex, sexuality, contraception, and human reproduction.

Sanger also believed in eugenics – an inherently racist and ableist ideology that labeled certain people unfit to have children. Eugenics is the theory that society can be improved through planned breeding for “desirable traits” like intelligence and industriousness.

Margaret Sanger was so intent on her mission to advocate for birth control that she chose to align herself with ideologies and organizations that were explicitly ableist and white supremacist. In doing so, she undermined reproductive freedom and caused irreparable damage to the health and lives of generations of Black people, Latino people, Indigenous people, immigrants, people with disabilities, people with low incomes, and many others.

Her beliefs opened the door for people opposed to reproductive freedom, including safe and legal abortion, to make false and unfounded claims that Planned Parenthood today has a racist agenda.

Planned Parenthood denounces Margaret Sanger’s belief in eugenics. Planned Parenthood believes that all people – of every race, religion, gender identity, ability, immigration status, and geography – are full human beings with the right to determine their own future and decide, without coercion or judgement, whether and when to have children.

We also believe that we can better fulfill our mission as a provider of high-quality, compassionate health care for all by understanding Sanger’s beliefs and confronting the ways she caused harm.

Sanger's Outreach to the Black Community

Harlem – 1930

In 1930, Sanger opened a family planning clinic in Harlem that sought to enlist support for contraceptive use and to bring the benefits of family planning to women who were denied access to their city's health and social services. Staffed by a Black physician and Black social worker, the clinic was endorsed by *The Amsterdam News* (a powerful local Black newspaper), the Abyssinian Baptist Church, the Urban League, and W.E.B. DuBois (Chesler, 1992).

Negro Project – 1939-1942

Sanger began what was called the "Negro Project" in 1939 – alongside Black leaders like W.E.B. DuBois, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Rev. Adam Clayton Powell – to bring access to birth control to Black communities in the South. The advisory council called it a "unique experiment in race-building and humanitarian service to a race subjected to discrimination, hardship, and segregation (Chesler, 1992)."

In a letter to philanthropist Albert Lasker, from whom she hoped to raise funds for the project, Sanger wrote that she wanted to help

"a group notoriously underprivileged and handicapped to a large measure by a 'caste' system that operates as an added weight upon their efforts to get a fair share of the better things in life. To give them the means of helping themselves is perhaps the richest gift of all. We believe birth control knowledge brought to this group, is the most direct, constructive aid that can be given them to improve their immediate situation" (Sanger, 1939, July).

In 1942, she wrote again to Lasker, saying

"I think it is magnificent that we are in on the ground floor, helping Negroes to control their birth rate, to reduce their high infant and maternal death rate, to maintain better standards of health and living for those already born, and to create better opportunities for those who will be born" (Sanger, 1942).

The Negro Project was also endorsed by prominent white Americans who were involved in social justice efforts at this time, including Eleanor Roosevelt and medical philanthropists, Albert and Mary Lasker, whose financial support made the project possible (Chesler, 1992).

The mission of the Negro Project was to put Black doctors and nurses in charge of birth control clinics to reduce mistrust of a racist health care system. However, Sanger lost control of the project, and Black women were sent to white doctors for birth control and follow-up appointments, deepening the racist and paternalistic problems of health care in the South ("Birth Control or Race Control," 2001).

Division of Negro Service – 1940-43

Sanger's Birth Control Federation of America, which became Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1942, established a Division of Negro Service to oversee the Negro Project and to implement Sanger's educational outreach to Black communities nationally. Sponsored by Sanger's fundraising efforts and directed by Florence Rose, the division provided Black organizations across the country with Planned Parenthood literature, set up local educational exhibits, facilitated local and national public relations, and employed a Black doctor, Mae McCarroll, to lobby medical groups and teach contraceptive techniques to other Black doctors.

Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1966, the year Sanger died, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“There is a striking kinship between our movement and Margaret Sanger’s early efforts ... Our sure beginning in the struggle for equality by nonviolent direct action may not have been so resolute without the tradition established by Margaret Sanger and people like her” (King, 1966).

Was Sanger Racist?

Arguments continue about whether or not her outreach to the Black community was racist. We know that Sanger was conscious of race, and that she was capable of revolutionary thinking that defied sexism of the time. She did not apply that revolutionary thinking to race and class, choosing instead to follow the paternalistic attitudes of the time and willfully ignoring how Black people were harmed by her movement. However, there is no evidence that Sanger, or the Federation, intended to coerce Black women into using birth control:

“The fundamental belief, underscored at every meeting, mentioned in much of the behind-the-scenes correspondence, and evident in all the printed material put out by the Division of Negro Service, was that uncontrolled fertility presented the greatest burden to the poor, and Southern blacks were among the poorest Americans. In fact, the Negro Project did not differ very much from the earlier birth control campaigns in the rural South...it would have been more racist, in Sanger’s mind, to ignore African

Americans in the South than to fail at trying to raise the health and economic standards of their communities” (“Birth Control or Race Control,” 2001).

However, it is true that Margaret Sanger made a speech on birth control to a women’s auxiliary branch of the Ku Klux Klan in Silver Lake, New Jersey, in 1926 (Sanger, 1938, 366). Sanger was so intent on her mission to advocate for birth control that she chose to align herself with ideologies and organizations that were explicitly ableist and white supremacist. In doing so, she undermined reproductive freedom Black people, Latino people, Indigenous people, immigrants, people with disabilities, people with low incomes, and many others.

However, there is no evidence to support the claim that Sanger supported “black genocide.” ReWire’s Imani Gandy wrote an exhaustive piece debunking the false narratives around Margaret Sanger (further information can be found on the Suggested Reading/Watching List).

Sanger and Eugenics

Eugenics is the theory that society can be improved through planned breeding for “desirable traits” like intelligence and industriousness. In the early 20th century eugenic ideas were popular among highly educated, privileged, and mostly white Americans. Margaret Sanger pronounced her belief in and alignment with the eugenics movement in her writings, especially in the scientific journal *Birth Control Review*. At times, Sanger tried to argue for a eugenics that was not applied based on race or religion (Katz, 1995, 47). But in a society built on the belief of white supremacy, physical and mental fitness are always judged based on race. Eugenics, therefore, is inherently racist.

Sanger also argued that reproductive choices should be made by each woman, not by the state.

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“Eugenists imply or insist that a woman’s first duty is to the state; we contend that her duty to herself is her first duty to the state. We maintain that a woman possessing an adequate knowledge of her reproductive functions is the best judge of the time and conditions under which her child should be brought into the world. We further maintain that it is her right, regardless of all other considerations, to determine whether she shall bear children or not, and how many children she shall bear if she chooses to become a mother. ... Only upon a free, self-determining motherhood can rest any unshakable structure of racial betterment” (Sanger, 1919a).

Yet Sanger’s points of disagreement did not prohibit her from embracing harmful eugenic ideas. For example, she endorsed the 1927 *Buck v. Bell* decision, in which the Supreme Court ruled that states could forcibly sterilize people deemed “unfit” without their consent and sometimes without their knowledge. The acceptance of this decision by Sanger and other thought leaders laid the foundation for tens of thousands of people to be sterilized, often against their will. (Chesler, 1992, 485)

A majority of states would go on to adopt involuntary sterilization policies, leading to more than 60,000 people being sterilized by the states in the 20th century. These policies targeted people with disabilities and people broadly labeled “feeble-minded” or “mentally defective” by the state. Sterilization policies were violently ableist, and

were applied in deeply racist ways. In the South, so many Black women were given unnecessary hysterectomies that it gave rise to the euphemism “Mississippi appendectomy.” In California, 20,000 people were sterilized between 1909 and 1979, among them a disproportionate number of Black, Mexican American, and Asian American people. In the 1970s and 80s, Indigenous women were sterilized at staggering rates, without their consent: At least 25% of Native American women were sterilized between 1970 and 1976. The ripples of the *Buck v. Bell* decision are still felt today. In 2020 at Irwin County Detention Center in Georgia, immigrant detainees were sterilized against their will.

Sterilization policies in the U.S. in the 1930s would ultimately inspire some of the worst human rights atrocities in the history of the world, including the Nazi regime’s eugenics laws. While Sanger was not associated with Nazism – her books were among the first burned by Nazis in their campaign against family planning (“Sanger on Exhibit,” 1999/2000), and she helped several Jewish women and men and others escape the Nazi regime in Germany (“Margaret Sanger and the ‘Refugee Department,’” 1993) – she is not absolved of her endorsement of *Buck v. Bell* and the harm it caused.

Sanger’s belief in eugenics undermined reproductive freedom and caused irreparable damage to the health and lives of generations of Black people, Latino people, Indigenous people, immigrants, people with disabilities, people with low incomes, and many others. Planned Parenthood denounces Margaret Sanger’s belief in eugenics.

Published Statements that Distort or Misquote Margaret Sanger

Through the years, a number of allegations surrounding Margaret Sanger, including falsely attributed quotations, have surfaced with regularity in anti-reproductive health publications:

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“More children from the fit, less from the unfit – that is the chief issue in birth control.”

A quotation falsely attributed to Margaret Sanger, this statement was made by the editors of American Medicine in a review of an article by Sanger. The editorial from which this appeared, as well as Sanger’s article, “Why Not Birth Control Clinics in America?” were reprinted side-by-side in the May 1919 *Birth Control Review* (Sanger, 1919b).

<http://p.ppfa.org/2dE8tHD>

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“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 portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.”

Another quotation falsely attributed to Margaret Sanger, this was actually written for the June 1932 issue of the *Birth Control Review* by W.E.B. DuBois, founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). However, Dubois’ language in his discussion about the effects of birth control on the balance between quality-of-life considerations and race-survival issues for Black families is racially insensitive.

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“Blacks, soldiers, and Jews are a menace to the race.”

This fabricated quotation, falsely attributed to Sanger, was concocted in the late 1980s. The alleged source is the April 1933 *Birth Control Review* (Sanger ceased editing the *Review* in 1929). That issue contains no article or letter by Sanger.

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“To create a race of thoroughbreds . . .”

This remark, again falsely attributed to Sanger, was made by Dr. Edward A. Kempf and has been cited out of context and with distorted meaning. Dr. Kempf, a progressive physician, was actually arguing for state endowment of maternal and infant care clinics. In her book *The Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger quoted Dr. Kempf’s argument about how environment may improve human excellence:

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“Society must make life worth the living and the refining for the individual by conditioning him to love and to seek the love-object in a manner that reflects a constructive effect upon his fellow-men and by giving him suitable opportunities. The virility of the automatic apparatus is destroyed by excessive gormandizing or hunger, by excessive wealth or poverty, by excessive work or idleness, by sexual abuse or intolerant prudishness. The noblest and most difficult art of all is the raising of human thoroughbreds” (Sanger, 1922 [1969]).

It was in this spirit that Sanger used the phrase “Birth Control: To Create a Race of Thoroughbreds” as a banner on the November 1921 issue of the *Birth Control Review*. (Differing slogans on the theme of voluntary family planning sometimes appeared under the title of the *Review*, e.g., “Dedicated to the Cause of Voluntary Motherhood,” January 1928.)

“The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it.”

Deaths During First Year

1st born children	23%
2nd born children	20%
3rd born children	21%
4th born children	23%
5th born children	26%
6th born children	31%
7th born children	31%
8th born children	33%
9th born children	35%
10th born children	41%
11th born children	51%
12th born children	60%

This statement is taken out of context from Margaret Sanger’s *Woman and the New Race* (Sanger, 1920). Sanger was making an ironic comment – not a prescriptive one – about the horrifying rate of infant mortality among large families without the means to provide a safe home, adequate nutrition, and medical access that were typical of early 20th-century urban America. The statement, as grim as the conditions that prompted Sanger to make it, accompanied this chart, illustrating the infant death rate in 1920:

“We do not want word to get out that we want to exterminate the Negro population.”

Sanger was aware of concerns, passionately argued by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, that birth control was a threat to the survival of the Black race. This statement, which acknowledges those fears, is taken from a letter to Clarence J. Gamble, M.D., a champion of the birth control movement. In that letter, Sanger describes her strategy to allay such apprehensions – because exterminating an entire population was not her goal. A larger portion of the letter makes Sanger’s meaning clear:

“It seems to me from my experience . . . in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas, that while the colored Negroes have great respect for white doctors, they can get closer to their own members and more or less lay their cards on the table. . . . They do not do this with the white people, and if we can train the Negro doctor at the clinic, he can go among them with enthusiasm and with knowledge, which, I believe, will have far-reaching results. . . . His work, in my opinion, should be entirely with the Negro profession and the nurses, hospital, social workers, as well as the County’s white doctors. His success will depend upon his personality and his training by us.

The minister’s work is also important, and also he should be trained, perhaps by the Federation, as to our ideals and the goal that we hope to reach. 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” (Sanger, 1939, December).

■■■■■
"As early as 1914 Margaret Sanger was promoting abortion, not for white middle-class women, but against 'inferior races' – black people, poor people, Slavs, Latins, and Hebrews were 'human weeds.'"

This allegation about Margaret Sanger appears in an anonymous flyer, "Facts About Planned Parenthood," that is circulated by anti-reproductive health activists. Margaret Sanger never "promoted" abortion because it was illegal and dangerous throughout her lifetime. She often said that seeing women die because of unsafe abortion was a catalyst for her work promoting birth control. She urged women to use contraceptives so that they would not be at risk for the dangers of illegal, unsafe abortion. Sanger never described any ethnic community as an "inferior race" or as "human weeds."

The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy

This is the title of a book falsely attributed to Sanger. It was written by Lothrop Stoddard and reviewed by Havelock Ellis in the October 1920 issue of the *Birth Control Review*. Its general topic, the international politics of race relations in the first decades of the century, is one in which Sanger was not involved. Her interest, insofar as she allowed a review of Stoddard's book to be published in the *Birth Control Review*, was in the overall health and quality of life of all races and not in tensions between them. Ellis's review was critical of the Stoddard book and of distinctions based on race or ethnicity alone.

For Further Reading:

[How False Narratives of Margaret Sanger Are Being Used to Shame Black Women](#), Imani Gandy, 8/20/2015

[Trust Black Women: Stand with us for Reproductive Justice](#), Trust Black Women Partnership

[Mississippi Appendectomies: Reliving Our Pro-Eugenics Past](#), Jessica Pearce, 10/28/20

[The Margaret Sanger Papers Project](#)

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Published by Planned Parenthood
Federation of America
123 William Street, New York, NY 10028
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Current as of October, 2016

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