Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger

Sanger in 1922

Born
Margaret Higgins
September 14, 1879
Corning, New York,
United States

Died
September 6, 1966 (aged 86)
Tucson, Arizona,
United States

Occupation
Social reformer, sex educator, nurse

Spouse(s)
William Sanger (1902–1921) [note 1]
James Noah H. Slee (1922–1943)
Margaret Higgins Sanger (September 14, 1879 – September 6, 1966) was an American birth control activist, sex educator, and nurse. Sanger popularized the term birth control, opened the first birth control clinic in the United States, and established Planned Parenthood. Sanger's efforts contributed to the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case which legalized contraception in the United States. Sanger is a frequent target of criticism by opponents of birth control and has also been criticized for supporting eugenics, but remains an iconic figure in the American reproductive rights movement.

Sanger's early years were spent in New York City. In 1914, prompted by suffering she witnessed due to frequent pregnancies and self-induced abortions, she started a monthly newsletter, The Woman Rebel. Sanger's activism was influenced by the conditions of her youth—her mother had 18 pregnancies in 22 years, and died at age 50 of tuberculosis and cervical cancer.

In 1916, Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in the United States, which led to her arrest for distributing information on contraception. Her subsequent trial and appeal generated enormous support for her cause. Sanger felt that in order for women to have a more equal footing in society and to lead healthier lives, they needed to be able to determine when to bear children. She also wanted to prevent back-alley abortions, which were dangerous and usually illegal at that time.

In 1921, Sanger founded the American Birth Control League, which later became the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. In New York, Sanger organized the first birth control clinic staffed by all-female doctors, as well as a clinic in Harlem with an entirely African-American staff. In 1929, she formed the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control, which served as the focal point of her lobbying efforts to legalize contraception in the United States. From 1952 to 1959, Sanger served as president of the International Planned Parenthood Federation. She died in 1966, and is widely regarded as a founder of the modern birth control movement.

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Life

Early life

Margaret Sanger was born as Margaret Higgins in Corning, New York. Her mother, Anne (Purcell) Higgins, was a devout Catholic who went through 18 pregnancies (with 11 live births) in 22 years before dying at age 50 of tuberculosis and cervical cancer. Margaret's father, Michael Hennessy Higgins, was a Catholic who became an atheist and an activist for women's suffrage and free public education.

Sanger's father was born in Ireland. His parents and he emigrated to Canada when he was a child due to the Potato Famine. At fourteen he emigrated to the USA to serve in the U.S. Army during the Civil War, although he had to wait until he was fifteen to serve in the Twelfth New York Volunteer Cavalry, where he was a drummer. After leaving the army he studied medicine and phrenology, but ultimately chose to become a stonemason, making stone angels, saints, and tombstones. Sanger was the sixth of eleven children, and spent much of her youth assisting with household chores and caring for her younger siblings.

Sanger's sisters paid the tuition for her to attend Claverack College, a boarding school in Claverack, New York, for two years. She returned home in 1896 following her father's request that she come home to nurse her mother, who died three years later in 1899. Toward the end of
the century, the mother of one of her Claverack friends arranged for Sanger to enroll in a nursing program at a hospital in White Plains, an affluent New York City suburb.[10]

**[edit] Social activism**

In 1912, after a fire destroyed their home in Hastings-on-Hudson, the Sanger family moved back to New York City, where Margaret began working as a nurse in the East Side slums of Manhattan. Margaret and William became immersed in the radical bohemian culture that was then flourishing in Greenwich Village.[11] They became involved with local intellectuals, artists, socialists, and activists for political reform, including John Reed, Upton Sinclair, Mabel Dodge, and Emma Goldman.[12] Starting in 1911, Sanger wrote a series of articles about sexual education entitled "What Every Mother Should Know" and "What Every Girl Should Know" for the socialist magazine New York Call.[note 2][14] By her days' standards, the articles were extremely frank in their discussion of sexuality, and many New York Call readers were outraged by them, at least one of them wrote a letter in response canceling her subscription. Other readers, however, praised the series for its candor, one stated that the series contained "a purer morality than whole libraries full of hypocritical cant about modesty.[15]

![The first issue of The Woman Rebel](image)

The first issue of The Woman Rebel, March 1914.

In 1913, Sanger worked as a nurse at Henry Street Settlement in New York's Lower East Side, often with poor women who were suffering due to frequent childbirth and self-induced abortions. Searching for something that would help these women, Sanger visited public libraries, but was unable to find information on contraception.[16] These problems were epitomized in a story that Sanger would later recount in her speeches: while Sanger was working as a nurse, she was called to Sadie Sachs' apartment after Sachs had become extremely ill due to a self-induced abortion. Afterward, Sadie begged the attending doctor to tell her how she could prevent this from happening again, to which the doctor simply gave the advice to remain abstinent. A few months later, Sanger was once again called back to the Sachs' apartment — only this time, Sadie was found dead after yet another self-induced abortion.[17][18] Sanger would sometimes end the story by saying, "I threw my nursing bag in the corner and announced ... that I would never take another case until I had made it possible for working women in America to have the knowledge
to control birth." Although Sadie Sachs was possibly a fictional composite of several women Sanger had known, this story marks the time when Sanger began to devote her life to help desperate women before they were driven to pursue dangerous and illegal abortions.\[18][19]

In 1914, Sanger launched *The Woman Rebel*, an eight-page monthly newsletter which promoted contraception using the slogan "*No Gods, No Masters*.\[20][note 3]\[21] Sanger, collaborating with anarchist friends, popularized the term "birth control" as a more candid alternative to euphemisms such as "family limitation"\[22] and proclaimed that each woman should be "the absolute mistress of her own body."\[23] In these early years of Sanger's activism, she viewed birth control as a free-speech issue, and when she started publishing *The Woman Rebel*, one of her goals was to provoke a legal challenge to the federal anti-obscenity laws which banned dissemination of information about contraception.\[24] Sanger also wanted to publish a book that directly described contraceptive options (in contrast to the articles in *The Woman Rebel* which only indirectly discussed contraception), so she gathered information, much of it from Europe, and published the pamphlet *Family Limitation*, in direct violation of the Comstock Law.\[25]

Sanger was indicted in August 1914 on three counts of violating obscenity laws and a fourth count of "inciting murder and assassination".\[26] The incitement charge was based on an article in *The Woman Rebel*. Afraid that prosecutors might focus on the incitement charge, and that she might be sent to prison without an opportunity to argue for birth control in court, she fled to England under the alias "Bertha Watson" to avoid arrest.\[27] While she was in Europe, Sanger's husband distributed a copy of *Family Limitation* to an undercover postal worker, resulting in a 30 day jail sentence.\[11] Sanger's ally Upton Sinclair wrote an open letter of support for Sanger and her husband in *The Masses*\[28] and during her absence, a groundswell of support grew in the United States, and Margaret returned to the United States in October 1915.\[29] Noted attorney Clarence Darrow offered to defend Sanger free of charge, but, bowing to public pressure, the government dropped the charges in early 1916.\[30]

[edit] Birth control movement

*Main article: Birth control movement in the United States*

This page from Sanger's *Family Limitation*, 1917 edition, describes a cervical cap.
Some countries in northwestern Europe had more liberal policies towards contraception than the United States at the time, and when Sanger visited a Dutch birth control clinic in 1915, she learned about diaphragms and became convinced that they were a more effective means of contraception than the suppositories and douches that she had been distributing back in the United States. Diaphragms were generally unavailable in the United States, so Sanger and others began importing them from Europe, in defiance of United States law.[11]

In 1917, she started publishing the monthly periodical *The Birth Control Review*. [note 4]

On October 16, 1916, Sanger opened a family planning and birth control clinic at 46 Amboy St. in the Brownsville neighborhood of Brooklyn, the first of its kind in the United States. [21] Nine days after the clinic opened, Sanger was arrested for breaking a New York state law that prohibited distribution of contraceptives, and went to trial in January 1917. [32] Sanger was convicted; the trial judge held that women did not have "the right to copulate with a feeling of security that there will be no resulting conception." [33] Sanger was offered a more lenient sentence if she promised to not break the law again, but she replied: "I cannot respect the law as it exists today." [34] For this, she was sentenced to 30 days in a workhouse. [34] An initial appeal was rejected, but in a subsequent court proceeding in 1918, the birth control movement won a victory when Judge Frederick E. Crane of the New York Court of Appeals issued a ruling which allowed doctors to prescribe contraception. [35] The publicity surrounding Sanger's arrest, trial, and appeal sparked birth control activism across the United States, and earned the support of numerous donors who would provide her with funding and support for future endeavors. [36]

Sanger became estranged from her husband in 1913, and the couple's divorce was finalized in 1921. [37] She had been involved in relationships with Havelock Ellis and H. G. Wells during this period of estrangement.[38]

[edit] American Birth Control League
Sanger published the Birth Control Review from 1917 to 1929.\footnote{5}

After World War I, Sanger shifted away from radical politics, and she founded the American Birth Control League (ABCL) in 1921 to enlarge her base of supporters to include the middle class.\footnote{39} The founding principles of the ABCL were as follows: \footnote{40}

We hold that children should be (1) Conceived in love; (2) Born of the mother's conscious desire; (3) And only begotten under conditions which render possible the heritage of health. Therefore we hold that every woman must possess the power and freedom to prevent conception except when these conditions can be satisfied.

After Sanger discovered that physicians were exempt from the law that prohibited the distribution of contraceptive information to women—provided it was prescribed for medical reasons—she established the Clinical Research Bureau (CRB) in 1923 to exploit this loophole.\footnote{41}\footnote{41} The CRB was the first legal birth control clinic in the United States, and it was staffed entirely by female doctors and social workers.\footnote{42} The clinic received a large amount of funding from John D. Rockefeller Jr. and his family, which continued to make donations to Sanger's causes in future decades, but generally made them anonymously to avoid public exposure of the family name,\footnote{43} and to protect family member Nelson Rockefeller's political career since openly advocating birth control could have led to the Catholic Church opposing him politically.\footnote{44} John D. Rockefeller Jr. donated five thousand dollars to her American Birth Control League in 1924 and a second time in 1925.\footnote{45} In 1922, she traveled to China, Korea, and Japan. In China she observed that the primary method of family planning was female infanticide, and she later worked with Pearl Buck to establish a family planning clinic in Shanghai.\footnote{46} Sanger visited Japan six times, working with Japanese feminist Kato Shidzue to promote birth control.\footnote{47} This was ironic since ten years earlier Sanger had accused Katō of murder and praised an attempt to kill her.\footnote{48}

In 1926, Sanger gave a lecture on birth control to the women's auxiliary of the Ku Klux Klan in Silver Lake, New Jersey.\footnote{49} She described it as "one of the weirdest experiences I had in lecturing," and added that she had to use only "the most elementary terms, as though I were trying to make children understand."\footnote{49} Sanger's talk was well received by the group, and as a result, "a dozen invitations to similar groups were proffered."\footnote{49}

In 1928, conflict within the birth control movement leadership led Sanger to resign as the president of the ABCL and take full control of the CRB, renaming it the Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau (BCCRB), marking the beginning of a schism in the movement that would last until 1938.\footnote{50}

Sanger invested a great deal of effort communicating with the general public. From 1916 onward, she frequently lectured—in churches, women's clubs, homes, and theaters—to workers, churchmen, liberals, socialists, scientists, and upper-class women.\footnote{51} She wrote several books in the 1920s which had a nationwide impact in promoting the cause of birth control. Between 1920 and 1926, 567,000 copies of Woman and the New Race and The Pivot of Civilization were sold.\footnote{52} During the 1920s, Sanger received hundreds of thousands of letters, many of them written in desperation by women begging for information on how to prevent unwanted
pregnancies. Five hundred of these letters were compiled into the 1928 book, *Motherhood in Bondage*.

[edit] Planned Parenthood era

*Main article: Planned Parenthood*


In 1929, Sanger formed the National Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control in order to lobby for legislation to overturn restrictions on contraception. That effort failed to achieve success, so Sanger ordered a diaphragm from Japan in 1932, in order to provoke a decisive battle in the courts. The diaphragm was confiscated by the United States government, and Sanger's subsequent legal challenge led to a [1936 court decision](#) which overturned an important provision of the Comstock laws which prohibited physicians from obtaining contraceptives. This court victory motivated the American Medical Association in 1937 to adopt contraception as a normal medical service and a key component of medical school curriculums.

This 1936 contraception court victory was the culmination of Sanger's birth control efforts, and she took the opportunity, now in her late 50s, to move to Tucson, Arizona, intending to play a less critical role in the birth control movement. In spite of her original intentions, she remained active in the movement through the 1950s.

In 1937, Sanger became chairman of the newly formed Birth Control Council of America, and attempted to resolve the schism between the ABCL and the BCCRB. Her efforts were successful, and the two organizations merged in 1939 as the Birth Control Federation of America. Although Sanger continued in the role of president, she no longer wielded the same power as she had in the early years of the movement, and in 1942, more conservative forces within the organization changed the name to Planned Parenthood Federation of America, a name Sanger objected to because she considered it too euphemistic.

In 1946, Sanger helped found the International Committee on Planned Parenthood, which evolved into the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1952, and soon became the world's largest non-governmental international family planning organization. Sanger was the organization's first president and served in that role until she was 80 years old. In the early
1950s, Sanger encouraged philanthropist Katharine McCormick to provide funding for biologist Gregory Pincus to develop the birth control pill.\[62\]

[edit] Death

Margaret Sanger Square, at the intersection of Mott Street and Bleecker Street

Sanger died of congestive heart failure in 1966 in Tucson, Arizona, age 86, about a year after the event that marked the climax of her 50-year career: the landmark U.S. Supreme Court case Griswold v. Connecticut, which legalized birth control in the United States.\[note 7\] Sanger is buried in Fishkill, New York next to her sister Nan Higgins and her second husband Noah Slee.\[63\]

[edit] Legacy

Long after her death, Sanger has continued to be regarded as a leading figure in the battle for American women's rights. Sanger's story has been the subject of several biographies, including an award-winning biography published in 1970 by David Kennedy, and is also the subject of several films, including Choices of the Heart: The Margaret Sanger Story.\[64\] Sanger's writings are curated by two universities: New York University's history department maintains the Margaret Sanger Papers Project,\[65\] and Smith College's Sophia Smith Collection maintains the Margaret Sanger Papers collection.\[66\]

Sanger has been recognized with many important honors. In 1957, the American Humanist Association named her Humanist of the Year. Government authorities and other institutions have memorialized Sanger by dedicating several landmarks in her name, including a residential building on the Stony Brook University campus, a room in Wellesley College's library,\[67\] and Margaret Sanger Square in New York City's Greenwich Village.\[68\] In 1993, the Margaret Sanger Clinic — where she provided birth control services in New York in the mid twentieth century — was designated as a National Historic Landmark by the National Park Service.\[69\] In 1966, Planned Parenthood began issuing its Margaret Sanger Awards annually to honor "individuals of distinction in recognition of excellence and leadership in furthering reproductive health and reproductive rights."\[70\]

Many who are opposed to the legalization of abortion frequently condemn Sanger by questioning her fitness as a mother and criticizing her views on race, abortion, and eugenics.\[71\]\[72\][note 8]
spite of such attacks, Sanger continues to be regarded as an icon for the American reproductive rights movement and woman's rights movement.

[edit] Views and opinions

[edit] Sexuality

While researching information on contraception Sanger read various treatises on sexuality in order to find information about birth control. She read The Psychology of Sex by the English psychologist Havelock Ellis and was heavily influenced by it. While traveling in Europe in 1914, Sanger met Ellis. Influenced by Ellis, Sanger adopted his view of sexuality as a powerful, liberating force. This view provided another argument in favor of birth control, as it would enable women to fully enjoy sexual relations without the fear of an unwanted pregnancy. Sanger also believed that sexuality, along with birth control, should be discussed with more candor.

However, Sanger was opposed to excessive sexual indulgence. She stated "every normal man and woman has the power to control and direct his sexual impulse. Men and women who have it in control and constantly use their brain cells thinking deeply, are never sensual." Sanger said that birth control would elevate women away from a position of being an object of lust and elevate sex away from purely being for satisfying lust, saying that birth control "denies that sex should be reduced to the position of sensual lust, or that woman should permit herself to be the instrument of its satisfaction." Sanger wrote that masturbation was dangerous. She stated "In my personal experience as a trained nurse while attending persons afflicted with various and often revolting diseases, no matter what their ailments, I never found any one so repulsive as the chronic masturbator. It would not be difficult to fill page upon page of heart-rending confessions made by young girls, whose lives were blighted by this pernicious habit, always begun so innocently." She believed that women had the ability to control their sexual impulses, and should utilize that control to avoid sex outside of relationships marked by "confidence and respect." She believed that exercising such control would lead to the "strongest and most sacred passion."

However, Sanger was not opposed to homosexuality and praised Ellis for clarifying "the question of homosexuals... making the thing a—not exactly a perverted thing, but a thing that a person is born with different kinds of eyes, different kinds of structures and so forth... that he didn't make all homosexuals perverts—and I thought he helped clarify that to the medical profession and to the scientists of the world as perhaps one of the first ones to do that." Sanger believed sex should be discussed with more candor, and praised Ellis for his efforts in this direction. She also blamed the suppression of discussion about it on Christianity.

[edit] Eugenics
Sanger’s 1920 book endorsed eugenics.

As part of her efforts to promote birth control, Sanger found common cause with proponents of eugenics, believing that they both sought to “assist the race toward the elimination of the unfit.”[83] Sanger was a proponent of negative eugenics, which aims to improve human hereditary traits through social intervention by reducing reproduction by those considered unfit. Sanger's eugenic policies included an exclusionary immigration policy, free access to birth control methods and full family planning autonomy for the able-minded, and compulsory segregation or sterilization for the profoundly retarded.[84][85] In her book The Pivot of Civilization, she advocated coercion to prevent the "undeniably feeble-minded" from procreating.[86] Although Sanger supported negative eugenics, she asserted that eugenics alone was not sufficient, and that birth control was essential to achieve her goals.[87][88][89]

In contrast with eugenicists who advocated euthanasia for the unfit,[note 9] Sanger wrote, "we [do not] believe that the community could or should send to the lethal chamber the defective progeny resulting from irresponsible and unintelligent breeding."[90] Similarly, Sanger denounced the aggressive and lethal Nazi eugenics program.[85] In addition, Sanger believed the responsibility for birth control should remain in the hands of able-minded individual parents rather than the state, and that self-determining motherhood was the only unshakable foundation for racial betterment.[87][91]
Sanger also supported restrictive immigration policies. In "A Plan for Peace", a 1932 essay, she proposed a congressional department to address population problems. She also recommended that immigration exclude those "whose condition is known to be detrimental to the stamina of the race," and that sterilization and segregation be applied to those with incurable, hereditary disabilities. [84][85][92]

[edit] Race

W. E. B. Du Bois served on the board of Sanger's Harlem clinic. [93]

Sanger believed that lighter-skinned races were superior to darker-skinned races, but would not tolerate bigotry among her staff, nor any refusal to work within interracial projects. [94] Her contemporaries in the African-American community supported her efforts. In 1929, James H. Hubert, a black social worker and leader of New York's Urban League, asked Sanger to open a clinic in Harlem. [95] Sanger secured funding from the Julius Rosenwald Fund and opened the clinic, staffed with African-American doctors, in 1930. The clinic was directed by a 15-member advisory board consisting of African-American doctors, nurses, clergy, journalists, and social workers. The clinic was publicized in the African-American press and African-American churches, and received the approval of W. E. B. Du Bois, founder of the NAACP. [96] Sanger's work with minorities earned praise from Martin Luther King, Jr., in his 1966 acceptance speech for the Margaret Sanger award. [97]

From 1939 to 1942 Sanger was an honorary delegate of the Birth Control Federation of America, which included a supervisory role — alongside Mary Lasker and Clarence Gamble — in the Negro Project, an effort to deliver birth control to poor African Americans. [98] Sanger wanted the Negro Project to include black ministers in leadership roles, but other supervisors did not. To emphasize the benefits of involving black community leaders, she wrote to Gamble "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." This quote has been mistakenly used by Angela Davis, to support her claims that Sanger wanted to exterminate black people. [99] However, New York University's Margaret Sanger Papers Project, clarifies that Sanger, in writing that letter, "recognized that elements within the black community might mistakenly associate the Negro Project with racist sterilization campaigns in
the Jim Crow South, unless clergy and other community leaders spread the word that the Project had a humanitarian aim.”[100]

[edit] Freedom of speech

Sanger opposed censorship throughout her career, with a zeal comparable to her support for birth control. Sanger grew up in a home where iconoclastic orator Robert Ingersoll was admired.[101] During the early years of her activism, Sanger viewed birth control primarily as a free-speech issue, rather than a feminist issue, and when she started publishing The Woman Rebel in 1914, she did so with the express goal of provoking a legal challenge to the Comstock laws banning dissemination of information about contraception.[24] In New York, Emma Goldman introduced Sanger to members of the Free Speech League, such as Edward Bliss Foote and Theodore Schroeder, and subsequently the League provided funding and advice to help Sanger with legal battles.[102]

Over the course of her career, Sanger was arrested at least eight times for expressing her views during an era in which speaking publicly about contraception was illegal.[103] Numerous times in her career, local government officials prevented Sanger from speaking by shuttering a facility or threatening her hosts.[104] In Boston in 1929, city officials under the leadership of James Curley threatened to arrest her if she spoke — so she turned the threat to her advantage and stood on stage, silent, with a gag over her mouth, while her speech was read by Arthur M. Schlesinger, Sr.[105]

[edit] Abortion

Sanger’s family planning advocacy always focused on contraception, rather than abortion.[106][note 10] It was not until the mid-1960s, after Sanger’s death, that the reproductive rights movement expanded its scope to include abortion rights as well as contraception.[note 11] Sanger was opposed to abortions, both because they were dangerous for the mother in the early 20th century and because she believed that life should not be terminated after conception. In her book Woman and the New Race, she wrote, “while there are cases where even the law recognizes an abortion as justifiable if recommended by a physician, I assert that the hundreds of thousands of abortions performed in America each year are a disgrace to civilization.”[109]

Historian Rodger Streitmatter concluded that Sanger’s opposition to abortion stemmed from concerns for the dangers to the mother, rather than moral concerns.[110] However, in her 1938 autobiography, Sanger noted that her opposition to abortion was based on the taking of life: “[In 1916] we explained what contraception was; that abortion was the wrong way no matter how early it was performed it was taking life; that contraception was the better way, the safer way—it took a little time, a little trouble, but was well worth while in the long run, because life had not yet begun.”[111] And in her book Family Limitation, Sanger wrote that “no one can doubt that there are times when an abortion is justifiable but they will become unnecessary when care is taken to prevent conception. This is the only cure for abortions.”[112]

[edit] Works