

The Birth of Freedom

"I cannot refrain from saying that women must come to recognize there is some function of womanhood other than being a child-bearing machine" (Sanger). These powerful words exploded from the mouth of Margaret Sanger as she bravely fought the compelling battle of reproductive rights and freedom. Born in the early 1880s, Sanger witnessed firsthand how the world around her was treating and viewing the women of her time. This ignited the passion for equality inside of her as she burned a fire through the hearts and minds of millions, changing the lives of many women who would come after her.

In an attempt to control when and how they had children, many women practiced abortion throughout the history of mankind. Around the early 1900s, women of the lower class were quickly bearing children, more than they had the means to provide for or even the strength to convey. This resulted in an increase of back alley abortions, or in other words, unsafe and in several instances, fatal procedures. In one of their many articles, the Our Bodies Ourselves (OBOS) Abortion Contributors were found discussing the popular topic as they stated,

Because many deaths were not officially attributed to unsafe, illegal abortion, it's impossible to know the exact number of lives lost. However, thousands of women a year were treated for health complications due to botched, unsanitary, or self-induced abortions, and many died. Others were left infertile or with chronic illness and pain (History of Abortion).

In the midst of this confusion, Margaret Sanger pushed through the Reproductive Rights barrier under heavy criticism and social discrimination. Not only was she able to give women the right to live, but also the freedom to choose.

Right to Live

Born the oldest of eleven, Sanger sat by as her late mother suffered through many painful labors and several miscarriages, eventually resulting in her death at the young age of forty. This slow, agonizing departure laid the foundation for Sanger's hatred, aimed directly towards her father as she held him responsible for her mother's passing. She was later addressed this issue as she stated, "Deaths mostly occurred as the result of neglect, poverty, drink, over-fatigue of mothers when pregnant, coupled with underfeeding as a result of low economic conditions" (The Woman Rebel Collection: 1914).

Still affected by her mother's painful passing, Sanger dedicated her early life to nursing and helping those in need. Her primary patients were women among the lower class who had suffered from botched and unsanitary abortions. These horrifying incidents haunted Sanger and ignited her passion as she retold their stories:

During fourteen years experience as a trained nurse, I found that a great percentage of women's diseases were due to ignorance of the means to prevent conception. I found that quackery was thriving on this ignorance, and that thousands of abortions were being performed each year-- principally upon the women of the working class. Since the laws deter reliable and expert surgeons from performing abortions, working women have always been thrown into the hands of the incompetent, with fatal results. The deaths from abortions mount very high (The Fight for Birth Control).

The last step in sparking Sanger's passion for birth control, was the death of her patient, Sadie Sachs. Mrs. Sachs and her husband Jake had once again found themselves expecting another child. Sachs, weakened by her physical state, quickly grew ill as she contracted septicemia and was told by her doctor that another pregnancy could prove fatal. Sanger had been called in to look after the frail patient when she overheard the doctor's response as to how to stop conception, "Simply make Jake sleep on the roof." The devastated couple showed little reaction compared to the storm in Sanger's mind. Something had to be done about this.

Just a short time later, Sanger was once again called to the Sachs humble home. Upon learning she would conceive once more, Mrs. Sachs had performed her own self induced abortion, resulting in her death just moments before Sanger's arrival. Taking in the horrifying scene of despair, and heartache, Sanger came to realize her purpose on this earth. These unsung events of mistreatment and pain steered Sanger down a new road, towards a far greater goal. Upon opening her eyes, she was able to see the injustice breeding throughout the world and sought an immediate way to stop it.

With a new direction in mind, Sanger shifted her overall plan from helping the afflicted, to ensuring they would never suffer again. "Sanger objected to the unnecessary suffering endured by these women, and she fought to make birth control information and contraceptives available" (Margaret Sanger Biography). Because of her increased involvement in the Reproductive Rights issue, Sanger is looked upon today as a popular promoter of abortion and homicide. Many believe she is responsible for the deaths of millions,

preventing the births of countless generations. “Abortion is a billion dollar industry that escapes any mainstream scrutiny as it pawns off birth control and the deliberate killing of unborn children as the false resolve to poverty” (The Mother of Planned Parenthood). This argument, however, while wholly illogical, is also completely false.

Sanger's main goal in the birth control act was to *save* the lives of poor mothers, thus helping to prevent starving children, and struggling families. Amongst countless abortion related deaths and illnesses, lay abandoned mothers and lost children. Society had let these lower class citizens scrape their way along, having no one to defend them but themselves. Sanger's dream simply involved reducing the need of abortions by stopping unwanted pregnancies. Women knew when and whether they had the means to bear children, she simply sought to provide them that freedom of control.

Freedom to Decide

"No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother" (Margaret Sanger Biography). In her quest for equality, Margaret Sanger observed the lives of hundreds of women as they were either abandoned by their partner upon pregnancy, or left defenseless whilst their lives were altered forever. Alongside the views of Alice Paul, Sanger strongly believed in the empowerment of women and had much to contribute to the Suffrage Movement. Continually she fought for what she knew women rightfully deserved: The simple freedom to control their own bodies and lives, similar to the freedoms men were given. In her own words, Sanger expressed her passion for this issue in her public newspaper, *The Woman Rebel*. Among its passages, feminist Esther Katz, evaluated one article, stating, "Sanger used the journal to assert that every woman had a right to be "the absolute mistress of her own body," including the right to practice birth control, a term coined for *The Woman Rebel*" (Katz).

Sanger openly discussed reproductive rights in public as a means to educate the lower class and was even indicted in 1915 for sending diaphragms to needy women. She was later arrested for opening the first birth control clinic only a year afterwards. Nothing, however, could slow her down. Upon her founding of the American Birth Control League (Later evolving to Planned Parenthood), Sanger dreamed of a much simpler use of contraceptives. In a segment provided by PBS, it states, "She sought someone to realize her vision of a contraceptive pill as easy to take as an aspirin. She wanted a pill that could provide women with cheap, safe,

effective and female-controlled contraception” (PBS).

Sanger began her research with high goals, all in the hopes of bringing women the option of choosing when to bear children. Though this seemed a simple freedom at the time, the impact of her discovery would change the lives of women forever. After fleeing the country in self defense, Sanger was able to publish birth control pamphlets in several languages, feeling the need to inform the ignorant on her worthy cause. She was even bombarded with multiple requests to continue publishing her newspaper, *The Woman Rebel*. This she thought needless however, as she believed it had already served its purpose in informing and rallying the the public. “Now more constructive work is needed, in meeting the people directly and interesting them in establishing free clinics in those sections where women are overburdened with large families”(The Fight for Birth Control).

In 1951, Sanger was able to meet with Gregory Pincus, a medical expert on human reproduction. The pair instantly bonded and together were able to bring Sanger's dream to life. A few short years later, the first ever oral contraceptive could be found on the shelves of every drug store in America. After being approved by the FDA, *Enovid* became the little magic pill Sanger had been fighting for.

Only four short years after her discovery was brought to light, Margaret Sanger was able to witness the Comstock Laws (Laws prohibiting the circulating of anything considered immoral or obscene), being brought to an end. In 1965, she was a witness as the Supreme Court ruled for the private use of contraceptives to not only be legalized, but also a constitutional right. One year later, Sanger died knowing she had won her battle, all her efforts preserved towards female empowerment and freedom.

Despite her many accomplishments in helping the human race, Sanger is still looked upon today as a radical, due to her belief in the Eugenics Movement. Sir Francis Galton is considered the Father of Eugenics, as it spurred from his research in the late 1800's.

Galton assembled biographical information from obituaries and other sources and constructed pedigrees of leading English families, concluding that superior intelligence and abilities were inherited with an efficiency of 20%. From this work, he coined the term "eugenics," meaning "well born," and theorized that humanity could be improved by encouraging the fittest members of society to have more children (Norrgard).

Sanger's involvement in eugenics began with her belief of helping the working class, as many could not adequately provide for the amount children they were having. Today it is thought she simply wanted to exterminate those who had no livelihood or were unable to help themselves. This could not be more untrue. Sanger's main goal and focus was towards the poor and how she could make life better for them. Children born into the lower class often went hungry or were abandoned. This is the kind of practice she wanted to eliminate.

Throughout her life, Sanger selflessly fought for the women of her time and the generations that would come after. Because of her tremendous campaign, the world would never again be the same. This work not only provided women with the right to choose when and whether they had children, but also prevented numberless abortions and deaths.

Sanger's impact on the world today has altered the lives of every single woman on the planet. Women now have the right to control their own bodies with the decision of how and when to bring their children into the world. With this freedom, women have been able to obtain higher jobs and levels of authority. Abortion related deaths have gone down immensely, and the female gender is no longer looked upon as child bearing machines. "It is bad business to mark a woman, a man, a nation or a race out for the vengeance of Man. But it is a thing to which the specialized man or the professional man can grow accustomed" (The Woman Rebel Collection: 1914).

Sanger's legacy is now burned into the hearts of women everywhere. Upon breaking the slave bands, Sanger became the unsung hero of the 20th Century. Today, every successful woman, every provided for child, and every bright-eyed young girl is free, due to the heralding sacrifices made by Margaret Sanger. Her work continues to inspire and impact the world, constantly changing and leveling out the battlefields of life and war.