

Margaret Louise Higgins Sanger

Birth Control Advocate, Author
(1883-1966)

Margaret Sanger was educated as and worked as a nurse. In her work with poor women on the Lower East Side of New York, she was aware of the effects of unplanned pregnancies. Her mother's health had suffered as she bore eleven children and suffered seven miscarriages. Margaret came to believe that available "birth control" (a term she is credited with inventing) was essential to women's lives and women's health.

In 1912, Sanger gave up nursing work to dedicate herself to the distribution of birth control information. However, the Comstock Act of 1873 was used to forbid distribution of birth control devices and information. She wrote articles on health for the Socialist Party paper, the *Call* and collected and published articles, including *What Every Girl Should Know* (1916) and

What Every Mother Should Know (1917).

In 1913 she went to Europe, and founded a paper, *Woman Rebel*, on her return. She was indicted for "mailing obscenities" and fled to Europe; the indictment was later withdrawn. In 1914 she founded the National Birth Control League, which was taken over by Mary Ware Dennett and others while Sanger was in Europe.

In 1916 (1917 according to some sources), Sanger set up the first birth control clinic in the United States. The following year she was sent to the workhouse for "creating a public nuisance." Her many arrests and prosecutions, and the resulting outcries, helped lead to changes in laws giving doctors the right to give birth control advice (and later, birth control devices) to patients.

In 1927 Sanger helped organize the first World Population Conference in Geneva. In 1942, after several organizational mergers and name

changes, Planned Parenthood Federation came into being.

Sanger wrote many books and articles on birth control and marriage. In 1938 she wrote her autobiography.

Her first marriage, to William Sanger in 1900, ended in divorce in 1920; she was remarried in 1922 to J. Noah H. Slee, though she kept her by-then-famous (or infamous) name.

Today, organizations and individuals that oppose abortion and, sometimes, birth control, have charged Sanger with eugenicism and racism. However, the fact remains that Sanger was a pioneer in birth control, paving the way for millions of women to have access to reproductive freedom.

Some thoughts from Margaret Sanger:

"A free race cannot be born to slave mothers. A woman cannot choose but give a measure of that bondage to her sons and daughters."

“When motherhood becomes the fruit of a deep yearning, not the result of ignorance or accident, its children will become the foundation of a new race.”

“War, famine, poverty and oppression of the workers will continue while woman makes life cheap. They will cease only when she limits her reproductivity and human life is no longer a thing to be wasted.”

“Woman must have her freedom, the fundamental freedom of choosing whether or not she will be a mother and how many children she will have. Regardless of what man's attitude may be, that problem is hers -- and before it can be his, it is hers alone. She goes through the vale of death alone, each time a babe is born. As it is the right neither of man nor the state to coerce her into this ordeal, so it is her right to decide whether she will endure it.”

Other works by Margaret Sanger include:

My Fight for Birth Control Autobiography
Appeals from American Mothers
The Case for Birth Control: A Supplementary Brief and Statement of the Facts
Happiness in Marriage
Motherhood in Bondage
The New Motherhood
Pivot of Civilization (2003)
Sayings of Others on Birth Control
What Every Girl Should Know.
What Every Mother Should Know: Or How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth
Woman and the New Race

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“No woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body.”