

A C L O S E R L O O K

# History of Racism in Reproductive Health

Understanding and acknowledging the racist  
roots of contraception in the United States



# History of Racism in Contraception

Today, much of public health's focus on contraception revolves around **reproductive justice**.

Reproductive justice is defined by SisterSong as **"the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities."**

This term was coined by a group of Black women in 1994 (who later founded SisterSong), following a global summit relating to sexual and reproductive health in Cairo. This term was based on the UN's definition of **human rights**, and focuses on **access, not just the ability to choose**. This applies to abortion care and also to the **full spectrum of sexual and reproductive health care** including contraception, family planning, pregnancy care, and working to dismantle the structural barriers to accessing care.

# History of Racism in Contraception

**The Reproductive Justice Movement** was created in response to white middle-class feminists, which the founders understood could **not adequately represent the needs of all persons** seeking rights under the women's rights movement. The movement needed **more representation** for the most **marginalized**, including women of color and LGBTQ people, and especially those within the intersectionality of these and other oppressions.

As we continue to fight for Reproductive Justice in the US, whether it be for increased insurance coverage of abortion care, easier access to contraception, or comprehensive sex education in schools, it's important to **understand and remember the dark history and racism that surrounds sexual and reproductive health**, including forced sterilization of vulnerable populations through State run eugenics programs, and coercion for uptake of contraception among low-income and/or minority people.

# History of Racism in Contraception

**1787**

British doctor, Benjamin Moseley, published a treatise indicating that Black patients had a higher tolerance to pain, which was seized upon by the medical community and permeated medical practices for centuries.

**1845-1849**

Physician J. Marion Sims (the 'Father of Modern Gynecology') practiced painful surgical techniques on enslaved women without anesthesia under the guise that Black women felt less pain.

**1909-1979**

California's Eugenics Program made it legal to sterilize the "feeble-minded" and led the country with over 20,000 sterilizations over 70 years on unconsenting men and women.

**1927**

**Buck v. Bell**

A Supreme Court case regarding a poor white woman named Carrie Buck. Buck was sterilized under the premise that it would prevent the traits of "feeblemindedness" and "promiscuity" from being passed down from her mother to yet another generation. The Court ruled that that state can sterilize the unfit "for the protection of the state" and this ruling stands today.

# History of Racism in Contraception

**1933 - 1977**

North Carolina created a Eugenics Board to provide sterilizations for the "feebleminded, epileptic, and mentally diseased" which the Department of Public Welfare promoted as a way to address poverty and childbearing out of wedlock. At least 7,600 residents were sterilized. 2,000 were under the age of 18, the youngest being 10.

**1960-1980**

After an inquiry into the Indian Health Service areas across the US, it was determined that 25-50% of Native American women were sterilized under the false guise of appendectomies.

**1974**

**Relf v. Weinberger**

Following the sterilization of two young Black sisters, Mary Alice and Minnie, from Alabama at the ages of 14 and 12, under false consent of their mother who believed they were receiving birth control shots, a lawsuit was filed. After this suit it was found that 150,000 persons were being sterilized through federal funds annually.

**1978**

**Madrigal v. Quilligan**

After the forced and unknown sterilization of Latinx women who were giving birth at a Los Angeles hospital, a case was filed against the physicians performing the sterilizations. This case ruled in favor of the physicians who the court said were acting in the patient's best interest, but did result in improved informed consent procedures, especially for non-English speaking patients.

# History of Racism in Contraception

## 1990s

Following the approval of Norplant (implant) over 13 states enacted measures to provide incentives or mandates to obtain and retain the implant for persons on welfare. These measures resulted in an infringement on the right to choose contraception and cases of refusal to remove the method after insertion. Mandated contraception or sterilization have also been offered as conditions of plea bargains or sentencing even as recently as 2014.

## 2005-2013

An audit of California state prisons showed that state funds were used to sterilize 150 inmates under coercion without regard to informed consent practices or patient autonomy.

## 2013-2015

North Carolina and Virginia created eugenics compensation programs to pay the victims of their State eugenics programs. 31 states have yet to pass similar legislation. The US Senate also voted in 2016 to ensure these reconciliations were not counted as part of welfare eligibility.

# History of Racism in Contraception

While much of the modern focus of sexual and reproductive health is on an **individual's access** and **choice**, and not on contraception for societal good, these stories and countless others like them have a great effect, even **generationally**, on one's relationship with and trust in healthcare providers. **Understanding and acknowledging** these stories can help to ensure the creation policies and standards of care that **do not repeat these racist and coercive patterns.**