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History of the Racism with Birth Control

Birth control began as a racist ideology denied to women of color. It was first accessible to only white women and women of color had no knowledge of its existence or accessibility. When it was first introduced in the early 1900s, there was a decline in the rate of fertility for white women. Although contraception had been around for many years before the 20th century, it was just starting to gain popularity with the public. As Angela Davis states in her article “Racism, Birth Control, and Reproductive Rights,” “it was not until the issue of women's rights in general became the focus of an organized movement that reproductive rights could emerge as a legitimate demand” (356). Once the topic of woman’s rights became a conversation, women began to make claim to their own bodies. They started fighting for the “right...to decide when she shall become a mother, how often and under what circumstances” (Davis 356). When this idea of an “enforced motherhood” began to be seen as a violation of women’s natural rights, Margaret Sanger, the author of *The Birth Control Review*, coined the term “birth control” in 1914 (Kennedy 1). When contraceptive techniques were first published by Sanger, they were controversial and deemed illegal. After multiple arrests for Sanger and a court trial, birth control was deemed legal in 1918.

Although contraception became accessible, women of color were denied knowledge of birth control. Black women were not advised to use contraceptive measures leading to poor families with a lot of children as seen in “They That Sit in Darkness” by Mary P. Burrill. Having multiple children was seen as a financial burden as depicted in Marie Carmichael Stopes’ image

on the cover of her book “Babies and Unrest.” In this image, a white family is depicted sitting at a dinner table under a banner saying “unemployment” with the words “a bare living” on the table and “another baby is coming” is written under the image (Stopes). Although white women were told about the consequences of bearing many children, women of color were not allowed to obtain the knowledge until years later. The first public lecture on birth control for women of color was given by the Women’s Political Association of Harlem in 1918 (Baker). Contraception in America was a “racist ideology that operated at the national level among white advocates of birth control” (Rodrique 6). Preventing women of color from having the knowledge of birth control kept them in the cycle of poverty and bad health. Bearing multiple children damages a woman’s health, and childbirth was a common cause of death for women of color in the early 1900s.

The first birth control clinic was established in 1921, and by 1939 there were 400 birth control clinics across the United States. Women of color began to stand up for the right to birth control, and “the National Council of Negro Women [became] the first national women’s organization to officially endorse the practice of contraception” in 1941 (Baker). Although it started as a “racist ideology” (Rodrique) when it began to gain popularity, the knowledge of birth control later became accessible to all races. However, physical accessibility to birth control techniques is still a topic of conversation in politics today.

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