

Opposition Claims About Margaret Sanger

Margaret Sanger gained worldwide renown, respect, and admiration for founding the American birth control movement and, later, the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, as well as for developing and encouraging family planning efforts throughout the international community.

Among her many visionary accomplishments as a social reformer, Sanger

- established these principles:
 - A woman’s right to control her body is the foundation of her human rights;
 - Every person should be able to decide when and whether to have a child;
 - Every child should be wanted and loved; and
 - Women are entitled to sexual pleasure and fulfillment.
- helped to bring about the reversal of federal and state “Comstock laws” that prohibited publication and distribution of information about sex, sexuality, contraception, and human reproduction
- furthered the contemporary American model for the protection of civil rights through nonviolent civil disobedience
- created access to birth control for low-income, minority, and immigrant women
- expanded the American concept of volunteerism and grassroots organizing by setting up a network of volunteer-driven family planning centers across the U.S.

Sanger also had some beliefs, practices, and associations that we acknowledge and denounce, and that we work to rectify today.

This fact sheet is designed to separate fact from fiction and to further explain Sanger’s views and the background against which they must be judged. We hope that this information will encourage open conversations and serve as a way to address racism and ableism wherever they exist.

Sanger’s Outreach to the African American Community

Harlem – 1930

In 1930, Sanger opened a family planning clinic in Harlem that sought to enlist support for contraceptive use and to bring the benefits of family planning to women who were denied access to their city’s health and social services. Staffed by a black physician and black social worker, the clinic was endorsed by *The Amsterdam News* (a powerful local newspaper), the Abyssinian Baptist Church, the Urban League, and the black community’s elder statesman, W.E.B. DuBois (Chesler, 1992, 2007).

Negro Project – 1939-1942

Beginning in 1939, DuBois served on the advisory council for Sanger’s “Negro Project,” which was

designed to serve African Americans in the rural South. The advisory council called it a “unique experiment in race-building and humanitarian service to a race subjected to discrimination, hardship, and segregation (Chesler, 1992, 2007).”

In a letter to philanthropist Albert Lasker, from whom she hoped to raise funds for the project, Sanger wrote that she wanted to help

“*a group notoriously underprivileged and handicapped to a large measure by a ‘caste’ system that operates as an added weight upon their efforts to get a fair share of the better things in life. To give them the means of helping themselves is perhaps the richest gift of all. We believe birth control knowledge brought to this group, is the most direct, constructive aid that can be given them to improve their immediate situation*” (Sanger, 1939, July).

In 1942, she wrote again to Lasker, saying

“*I think it is magnificent that we are in on the ground floor, helping Negroes to control their birth rate, to reduce their high infant and maternal death rate, to maintain better standards of health and living for those already born, and to create better opportunities for those who will be born*” (Sanger, 1942).

Other leaders of the African American community who were involved in the project included Mary McLeod Bethune, founder of the National Council of Negro Women, and Adam Clayton Powell Jr., pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem.

The Negro Project was also endorsed by prominent white Americans who were involved in social justice efforts at this time, including Eleanor Roosevelt and medical philanthropists, Albert and Mary Lasker, whose financial support made the project possible (Chesler, 1992, 2007).

Division of Negro Service – 1940-43

Sanger’s Birth Control Federation of America, which became Planned Parenthood Federation of America in 1942, established a Division of Negro Service to oversee the Negro Project and to implement Sanger’s educational outreach to African Americans nationally. Sponsored by Sanger’s fundraising efforts and directed by Florence Rose, the division provided black organizations across the country with Planned Parenthood literature, set up local educational exhibits, facilitated local and national public relations, and employed an African American doctor, Mae McCarroll, to lobby medical groups and teach contraceptive techniques to other black doctors.

Martin Luther King Jr.

In 1966, the year Sanger died, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said:

“*There is a striking kinship between our movement and Margaret Sanger’s early efforts. . . . Our sure beginning in the struggle for equality by nonviolent direct action may not have been so resolute without the tradition established by Margaret Sanger and people like her*” (King, 1966).

Was Sanger Racially Motivated?

Despite the admiration that African American heroes like DuBois, Powell, and King held for Sanger, arguments continue about whether or not her outreach to the black community was racially motivated. The racism of social policy at the time and the prevalent paternalistic attitudes that caused some philanthropists to try to metaphorically “lift up” the voices of African Americans may have influenced Sanger. But there is no evidence that Sanger, or the Federation, intended to coerce black women into using birth control:

“The fundamental belief, underscored at every meeting, mentioned in much of the behind-the-scenes correspondence, and evident in all the printed material put out by the Division of Negro Service, was that uncontrolled fertility presented the greatest burden to the poor, and Southern Blacks were among the poorest Americans. In fact, the Negro Project did not differ very much from the earlier birth control campaigns in the rural South ... it would have been more racist, in Sanger’s mind, to ignore African Americans in the South than to fail at trying to raise the health and economic standards of their communities” (“Birth Control or Race Control,” 2001).

However, it is true that Margaret Sanger made a speech on birth control to a women’s auxiliary branch of the Ku Klux Klan in Silver Lake, New Jersey, in 1926. Sanger’s passion to spread and mainstream birth control led her to speak to any group interested in learning how to plan their reproduction. Planned Parenthood strongly disagrees with Sanger’s decision to address an organization that spreads hatred (Sanger, 1938, 366).

Sanger and Eugenics

Eugenics is a theory of improving hereditary qualities by socially controlling human reproduction. Eugenicians, including the Nazis, were opposed to the use of contraception or abortion by healthy and “fit” women (Grossmann, 1995). In fact, Sanger’s books were among the very first burned by the Nazis in their campaign against family planning (“Sanger on Exhibit,” 1999/2000). (Sanger helped several Jewish women and men and others escape the Nazi regime in Germany (“Margaret Sanger and the ‘Refugee Department,’” 1993).)

Sanger, however, clearly identified with the broader issues of health and fitness that concerned the early 20th-century eugenics movement, which was enormously popular and well-respected by doctors, physicians, political leaders, and educators during the 1920s and ‘30s – decades in which treatments for many hereditary and disabling conditions were unknown. But Sanger believed that reproductive decisions should be made on an individual and not a social or cultural basis (although she did sometimes exempt those women whom she saw as incompetent in her writing), and she consistently and firmly repudiated any strictly racial application of eugenics principles. For example, Sanger vocally opposed the racial stereotyping that effected passage of the Immigration Act of 1924, on the grounds that intelligence and other inherited traits vary by individual and not by group (Chesler, 1992, 2007).

Though she tried for years, Sanger was unable to convince the leaders of the eugenics movement to accept her credo that “No woman can be free who does not own and control her body (Sanger, 1920).” Her ongoing disagreement with the eugenicians of her day is clear from her remarks in *The Birth Control Review* of February 1919:

“Eugenists imply or insist that a woman’s first duty is to the state; we contend that her duty to herself is her first duty to the state. We maintain that a woman possessing an adequate knowledge of her reproductive functions is the best judge of the time and conditions under which her child should be brought into the world. We further maintain that it is her right, regardless of all other considerations, to determine whether she shall bear children or not, and how many children she shall bear if she chooses to become a mother. ... Only upon a free, self-determining motherhood can rest any unshakable structure of racial betterment” (Sanger, 1919a).

Although Sanger uniformly repudiated the racist exploitation of eugenics principles, she agreed with the “progressives” of her day who favored

- incentives for the voluntary hospitalization and/or sterilization of people with untreatable, disabling, hereditary conditions
- the adoption and enforcement of stringent regulations to prevent the immigration of the diseased and “feebleminded” into the U.S.
- placing so-called illiterates, paupers, unemployables, criminals, prostitutes, and dope fiends on farms and in open spaces as long as necessary for the strengthening and development of moral conduct

In addition, Sanger endorsed the 1927 *Buck v. Bell* decision, written by Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., in

which the Supreme Court ruled that compulsory sterilization of the “unfit” was allowable under the Constitution. This decision enabled states to sterilize citizens deemed unfit, without the consent and sometimes even the knowledge of those affected. (A majority of states adopted involuntary sterilization policies, leading to over 60,000 sterilizations by 1967.) (Chesler, 1992, 2007, 485)

Planned Parenthood acknowledges these major flaws in Sanger’s views – and we believe that they are wrong. Furthermore, we hope that this acknowledgment fosters an open conversation on racism and ableism – both inside and out of our organization.

Published Statements that Distort or Misquote Margaret Sanger

Through the years, a number of allegations surrounding Margaret Sanger, including falsely attributed quotations, have surfaced with regularity in anti-family planning publications:

“More children from the fit, less from the unfit – that is the chief issue in birth control.”

A quotation falsely attributed to Margaret Sanger, this statement was made by the editors of *American Medicine* in a review of an article by Sanger. The editorial from which this appeared, as well as Sanger’s article, “Why Not Birth Control Clinics in America?” were reprinted side-by-side in the May 1919 *Birth Control Review* (Sanger, 1919b).

“The mass of ignorant Negroes still breed carelessly and disastrously, so that the increase among Negroes, even more than the increase among whites, is from that portion of the population least intelligent and fit, and least able to rear their children properly.”

Another quotation falsely attributed to Margaret Sanger, this was actually written for the June 1932 issue of the *Birth Control Review* by W.E.B. DuBois, founder of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). However, Dubois’ language in his discussion about the effects of birth control on the balance between quality-of-life considerations and race-survival issues for African Americans is racially insensitive.

“Blacks, soldiers, and Jews are a menace to the race.”

This fabricated quotation, falsely attributed to Sanger, was concocted in the late 1980s. The alleged source is the April 1933 *Birth Control Review* (Sanger ceased editing the *Review* in 1929). That issue contains no article or letter by Sanger.

“To create a race of thoroughbreds . . .”

This remark, again falsely attributed to Sanger, was made by Dr. Edward A. Kempf and has been cited out of context and with distorted meaning. Dr. Kempf, a progressive physician, was actually arguing for state endowment of maternal and infant care clinics. In her book *The Pivot of Civilization*, Sanger quoted Dr. Kempf’s argument about how environment may improve human excellence:

“Society must make life worth the living and the refining for the individual by conditioning him to love and to seek the love-object in a manner that reflects a constructive effect upon his fellow-men and by giving him suitable opportunities. The virility of the automatic apparatus is destroyed by excessive gormandizing or hunger, by excessive wealth or poverty, by excessive work or idleness, by sexual abuse or intolerant prudishness. The noblest and most difficult art of all is the raising of human thoroughbreds” (Sanger, 1922 [1969]).

It was in this spirit that Sanger used the phrase “Birth Control: To Create a Race of Thoroughbreds” as a banner on the November 1921 issue of the *Birth Control Review*. (Differing slogans on the theme of voluntary family planning sometimes appeared under the title of the *Review*, e.g., “Dedicated to the Cause of Voluntary Motherhood,” January 1928.)

“The most merciful thing that the large family does to one of its infant members is to kill it.”

This statement is taken out of context from Margaret Sanger’s *Woman and the New Race* (Sanger, 1920). Sanger was making an ironic comment – not a prescriptive one – about the horrifying rate of infant mortality among large families without the means to provide a safe home, adequate nutrition, and medical access that were typical of early 20th-century urban America. The statement, as grim as the conditions that prompted Sanger to make it, accompanied this chart, illustrating the infant death rate in 1920:

Deaths During First Year

1st born children	23%
2nd born children	20%
3rd born children	21%
4th born children	23%
5th born children	26%
6th born children	31%
7th born children	31%
8th born children	33%
9th born children	35%
10th born children	41%
11th born children	51%
12th born children	60%

“We do not want word to get out that we want to exterminate the Negro population.”

Sanger was aware of African American concerns, passionately argued by Marcus Garvey in the 1920s, that birth control was a threat to the survival of the black race. This statement, which acknowledges those fears, is taken from a letter to Clarence J. Gamble, M.D., a champion of the birth control movement. In that letter, Sanger describes her strategy to allay such apprehensions – because exterminating an entire population was not her goal. A larger portion of the letter makes Sanger’s meaning clear:

“It seems to me from my experience . . . in North Carolina, Georgia, Tennessee, and Texas, that while the colored Negroes have great respect for white doctors, they can get closer to their own members and more or less lay their cards on the table. . . . They do not do this with the white people, and if we can train the Negro doctor at the clinic, he can go among them with enthusiasm and with knowledge, which, I believe, will have far-reaching results. . . . His work, in my opinion, should be entirely with the Negro profession and the nurses, hospital, social workers, as well as the County’s white doctors. His success will depend upon his personality and his training by us.

The minister’s work is also important, and also he should be trained, perhaps by the Federation, as to our ideals and the goal that we hope to reach. 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” (Sanger, 1939, December).

“As early as 1914 Margaret Sanger was promoting abortion, not for white middle-class women, but against ‘inferior races’ – black people, poor people, Slavs, Latins, and Hebrews were ‘human weeds.’”

This allegation about Margaret Sanger appears in an anonymous flyer, “Facts About Planned Parenthood,” that is circulated by anti-family planning activists. Margaret Sanger, who passionately believed in a woman’s right to control her body, never “promoted” abortion because it was illegal and dangerous throughout her lifetime. She urged women to use contraceptives so that they would not be at risk for the dangers of illegal, back-alley abortion. Sanger never described any ethnic community as an “inferior race” or as “human weeds.”

In her lifetime, Sanger won the respect of international figures of all races, including the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr.; Mahatma Gandhi; Shidzue Kato, the foremost family planning advocate in Japan; and Lady Dhanvanthi Rama Rau of India, a leader in family planning – all of whom were sensitive to issues of race.

The Rising Tide of Color Against White World Supremacy

This is the title of a book falsely attributed to Sanger. It was written by Lothrop Stoddard and reviewed by Havelock Ellis in the October 1920 issue of the *Birth Control Review*. Its general topic, the international politics of race relations in the first decades of the century, is one in which Sanger was not involved. Her interest, insofar as she allowed a review of Stoddard’s book to be published in the *Birth Control Review*, was in the overall health and quality of life of all races and not in tensions between them. Ellis’s review was critical of the Stoddard book and of distinctions based on race or ethnicity alone.

For Further Reading:

[How False Narratives of Margaret Sanger Are Being Used to Shame Black Women](#), Imani Gandy, 8/20/2015

[Trust Black Women: Stand with us for Reproductive Justice](#), Trust Black Women Partnership

[The Margaret Sanger Papers Project](#)

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