AFRICAN AMERICAN WOMEN
SEED A MOVEMENT

The reproductive history of African American women has been shaped by coercion, cruelty, and brutality. Reproductive tyranny has taken many forms over time, including rape, forced marriages between slaves, the breakup of slave families, sterilization abuse and the promotion of long-acting contraceptives to control fertility, and current state welfare policies that seek to control black women’s efforts to freely determine the number of children they will bear.

Twenty-first-century efforts to control black women’s fertility are rooted in stereotypes of black women that were originally created and employed to help justify slavery. Slave women were classified as “breeders” rather than “mothers.” Angela Davis notes a South Carolina court ruling that stated that slaves had no legal claims whatsoever on their children, who could be sold away from their mothers at any age because “the young of slaves...stand on the same footing as animals.” Women slaves were branded as sexually promiscuous Jezebels procreating with abandon, mirroring the current stereotypes imposed on black mothers receiving welfare. At no time has value been placed on black women mothering their own children.

Slavery ended in 1865, but the myths about black women’s fertility, sexuality, and inability to appropriately mother persisted and gave way to other oppressive racist and misogynist ideologies. Throughout the 20th century, black women have been blamed for the social and economic problems of African American families. This accusation was first articulated in the 1920s. It resurfaced in the 1930s, during debates around the establishment of the first federal assistance program for mothers and children, and recirculated in the 1960s through the belief that, in order to reduce the number of
“undeserving poor” dependent on welfare, government had the right and responsibility to control black female fertility. From the 1965 Moynihan Report, “The Negro Family: The Case for National Action,” to current policies that push marriage as the answer to poverty and a host of measures in between, the scapegoating of single black mothers has been a consistent feature of the debates on welfare and has been institutionalized in public policy.6

The history of racial discrimination against African Americans, including its impact on black women and their reproductive health, has been well documented.7 African American spokespeople have long recognized that racism compromises African Americans’ well-being. Poverty, as a central by-product of racism, serves as the driving force behind much of the disparity between black and white Americans. In 2000, 30 percent of all black Americans lived in poverty, and nearly 32 percent of all black women were poor.8 The black poverty rate was three times greater than the white poverty rate in 2002.9

Poverty is only one manifestation of institutionalized racism. Racism also contributes, directly and indirectly, to disparities in physical health between African American and white populations. Black women are often employed in administrative support and service occupations in health care, food service, cleaning, and maintenance. These jobs tend to be low-wage and without health benefits, and women who hold them receive little or no preventive medical care. Black women’s overall lack of adequate medical care reflects multiple issues: nonexistent or inadequate health insurance, a paucity of neighborhood health facilities, and racial discrimination in diagnoses and treatment.

Other indicators underscore the distinctly different health statuses of black and white women. Black infants are almost two and a half times as likely as white infants to die before age one. The 2001 mortality rate was 14 deaths per 1,000 live births for black infants and 5.7 per 1,000 for white infants,10 a significant differential. HIV/AIDS is another serious reproductive health concern for many black women. In 1999, women represented 18 percent of all reported AIDS cases in the United States, and black women accounted for 61 percent of those cases.11 As these differentials indicate, health disparities between black and white Americans persist. Furthermore, public policies like the “War on Drugs” disproportionately target women of color and undermine their rights and health status. Low-income women dependent on public facilities are disproportionately tested for drugs without their consent or knowledge during prenatal exams. Often, their newborns are also tested. If the tests are positive, they are arrested and charged with drug possession, child neglect, or distribution of drugs to a minor.12 In South Carolina in 1989, all of the women ar-
rested under these charges were black, with one exception—a white woman with a black boyfriend.\textsuperscript{13}

But African American women have not just been victims of institutional racism in its many forms, they also have a rich and complex legacy of activism in the struggle to control their own bodies and reproductive lives. Contemporary leadership by African American women in the field of reproductive health and rights comes from a long history of their political organizing to challenge racism and poverty.

**Resistance and Organizing**

Slave women drew on African folk knowledge about contraception and abortion as forms of resistance to the oppressive conditions of slavery.\textsuperscript{14} They were so successful that entire plantations of slaves failed to have children, frustrating slave owners’ plans for profit. In an 1856 essay, Dr. E.M. Pendleton claimed that planters regularly complained of women who failed to have children. He believed that “blacks are possessed of a secret by which they destroy the foetus at an early age of gestation.”\textsuperscript{15}

After slavery officially ended, the African American women’s club movement provided black women in the late 19th century with the opportunity to develop their political voices and speak out to “uplift their race.”\textsuperscript{16} The club movement was started in the 1890s by elite African American women to provide forums in which they could meet and speak on their own behalf about issues of “race leadership, negative stereotypes, women’s suffrage and women’s rights, and civil rights and civil liberties.”\textsuperscript{17} Women also carried out a range of educational and service projects in black communities through the clubs. By the 1916 convention of the National Association of Colored Women, there were 1,500 affiliate clubs.\textsuperscript{18}

The women involved in this movement were keenly aware of their double oppression as women and as blacks. The ideology of racial uplift, developed by well-educated African Americans, responded to continuing racism and segregation, as well as to discrimination against women. Its creators believed that they were obligated to represent and “lift up” less privileged African Americans through moral rectitude and hard work. The issue of birth control was part of the “uplift” agenda, due to the belief that a woman could provide a better quality of life and education to her children if she could determine how many children she wished to have and rear. In her 1892 volume of essays, *A Voice from the South*, Anna Julia Cooper endorsed uplift ideology and the inseparability of race and gender for black women.\textsuperscript{19}
Though birth control was illegal, in 1918 the Women’s Political Association of Harlem responded to the call of birth control pioneer Margaret Sanger and was the first African American women’s club to schedule lectures on birth control. Other clubs were quick to follow this lead. They demanded that Sanger’s American Birth Control League (ABCL) place birth control clinics in African American communities so that African American women could control their fertility and “improve” their race. National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) co-founder W.E.B. DuBois wrote in 1919 that “the future [African American] woman...must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion.”

Some African American ministers held discussions about birth control in their churches and others, like the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell of the Abyssinian Baptist Church, who spoke at public meetings in 1932 in favor of family planning. Leading African American organizations such as the NAACP and the National Urban League, as well as the black press, promoted birth control as part of the agenda for uplifting the race. The black press also championed the cause of black doctors who were arrested for performing illegal abortions and decried the mortality rates resulting from septic abortions.

The broad-based African American support for family planning was challenged by Marcus Garvey’s public opposition to birth control. Garvey, a black Nationalist, opposed the integrationist goals of the NAACP. He criticized proponents of racial uplift for their elitist ideology, for their practice of favoritism toward lighter-skinned blacks, and for being too accommodating to white supremacy. Garvey argued that birth control used by African Americans was a form of genocide. His organization, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, unanimously passed a resolution opposing birth control in 1934. Many African American leaders, women and men alike, however, resisted Garvey’s opposition, and stood firm in their support for birth control.

By 1949, approximately 2.5 million African American women were organized in social and political clubs and organizations. Many of their organizations supported access to birth control and abortion while critiquing the eugenicist policies and programs often espoused by those organizations that supported birth control. Despite their fear and distrust of the proponents of birth control, black women sought access to contraception when and where clinics were available to them. The birth control methods available to them included abstinence, infrequency of coitus, the withdrawal method, spermicidal douching, diaphragms, rhythm, and underground abortions provided by doctors and midwives operating illegally when other methods failed.
Birth Control for Some, Population Control for Others

Whereas African American women were generally supportive of birth control, they were aware of attempts to use it to assert white supremacy. The early feminists of the birth control movement, symbolized by Emma Goldman and Margaret Sanger, emphasized that reproductive control for all women, regardless of race and class, was essential if women were to control their lives. However, eugenicists were also proponents of birth control, and instead of promoting a woman’s right to control her fertility, they seized upon birth control as a tool for promoting “better breeding.” They thought that birth control could help to weed out society’s “undesirables.” While definitions of who was fit and unfit varied, blacks, alcoholics, the handicapped, and the poor generally fell within their purview of who should be eliminated.

Loretta Ross notes that by 1919, the American Birth Control League began to rely heavily for legitimacy on the growing eugenics movement, which provided pseudoscientific and authoritative language that legitimated women’s right to contraception.27

Despite the protests of African Americans, the eugenicists were successful in their efforts to promote the sterilization of the “unfit.” The US became the first country to permit mass sterilization to “purify the race.”28 By the mid-1930s, 20,000 Americans, mostly African American and Native American, had been sterilized against their will and eugenics laws had been passed in over 20 states.29 According to estimates, a total of over 70,000 persons were involuntarily sterilized under those statutes.30 Ross comments on how the legacy of the ABCL, tainted by eugenicist philosophy and practice, continues to spawn distrust between white birth control advocates and people of color: “It is extremely likely that the racism of the birth control organizers, coupled with the genocidal assumptions of eugenics supporters, increased black distrust of the public health system and has fueled black opposition to family planning up to the present time.”31

During World War II, eugenics philosophies and techniques were discredited by their association with and use in Nazi Germany, and subsequently white birth control advocates tried to distance themselves from the philosophy of white supremacy. In 1941, the ABCL was renamed the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Planned Parenthood stressed the importance of birth control in social planning and established a Negro Advisory Council to strengthen its efforts to reach black populations.32
In the 1950s and 60s, the ideology of population control was again used by policy-makers in the US to justify disseminating birth control internationally. They claimed that controlling the fertility of poor women, especially in the “developing” world, was necessary to avert poverty, prevent the spread of communism, and increase the ability of the United States to govern world affairs. In the mid-1950s, the population control establishment also intervened in domestic policies to reduce the population growth rates of poor blacks in the US, especially in urban areas.

In the 1960s, the federal government funded family planning programs to “eliminate poverty.” President Johnson relied on the population control movement, led by the Population Council, the Population Crisis Committee, Planned Parenthood, and the Ford Foundation to raise public consciousness about the “threat of over-population” through a steady flow of books, pamphlets, magazines, and newsletters. The rhetoric of these organizations and concurrent policies and programs made some sections of the African American community feel that they were being specifically targeted for fertility control. For example, a Mississippi state representative, David Glass, introduced a bill in 1958 mandating sterilization for any unmarried mother who gave birth to an illegitimate child. He justified the bill with the myth that, “the negro woman, because of child welfare assistance, [is] making it a business...of giving birth to illegitimate children...The purpose of my bill was to try to stop, or slow down, such traffic at its source.”

Black Women Lead

The civil rights movement brought attention to issues of race and inequality and mobilized African Americans and others to take action to reduce inequalities based on race. As the civil rights movement gained ground in the 1960s, proponents of family planning and birth control reframed their message to reflect the politics of the time. For many civil rights activists, access to family planning services became “synonymous with the civil right of poor women to medical care.” In addition, Martin Luther King Jr. and the NAACP reiterated their support for “dissemination of information and materials concerning family health and family planning to all who deserved it.” African American women also played pivotal roles in promoting their right to control their own bodies. Dr. Dorothy Brown, a surgeon from Tennessee, was one of the first state legislators to introduce a bill to legalize abortion in 1967, despite the fact that black Nationalist radicals and black Muslims had assailed family planning as a plot against black communities.
Frances Beal, who headed the Black Women’s Liberation Committee of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), articulated the right of individual women in the struggle to decide whether or not to have children in 1970.41 Her position was echoed by other women leaders in the civil rights movement, even when distrust of white motives to provide birth control to black populations reached a peak in the 1970s and despite the public rhetoric of many black Nationalist male leaders who attempted to close clinics.42 Women often resisted these attempts, for example the National Welfare Rights Organization in Pittsburgh “declared they would not tolerate male expression of territorial rights over women’s bodies.”43 Their declaration was supported by African American women across the country. Black women leaders like Shirley Chisholm and Toni Cade Bambara insisted that black women’s liberation from welfare, poverty, and oppression would begin with their “seizing control of their bodies though contraception and legalized abortion.”44

Despite opposition from black women leaders, the attacks launched by black Nationalists45 resulted in a few mainstream African American organizations, such as the Urban League and the NAACP, reversing their positions on birth control. Marvin Davies, head of the Florida NAACP, stated: “Our women need to produce more babies, not less....and until we comprise 30 to 35 percent of the population, we won’t really be able to affect the power structure in this country.”46 Despite these reversals it is important to note that many church members who supported birth control in the 1940s and 50s held on to their position even when birth control came under siege in many parts of the black community.47

During the 1960s and the early 1970s, black women were active in the women’s rights and women’s health movements, tailoring agendas to meet their community needs. Shirley Chisholm, Pauli Murray, Anna Arnold Hedgeman, and Aileen Hernandez were African American women involved in founding the predominantly white National Organization for Women (NOW) in 1966. Among others, Frances Beal and Toni Cade Bambara spoke in support of birth control, abortion, and sexuality when it was difficult to do so because of opposition from some portions of the black community. They combined their support for birth control and safe and legal abortion with their opposition to sterilization abuse. In so doing, they negotiated a space that at once distanced them from white feminists who prioritized legal abortion and birth control to the exclusion of other reproductive rights issues and those black Nationalists who declared all contraception and abortion genocidal. A number of black women, including Bylye Avery, founder of the National Black Women’s Health Project
(NBWHP), participated in organizations that referred women to abortion practitioners when the practice was still illegal.

Under the leadership of Dorothy Height, the National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) broadened its agenda in the 1970s to speak out more broadly on civil rights issues and worked to ensure that civil rights organizations understood women’s issues as race issues. The NCNW spoke out in support of birth control, took a pro-choice stance in the 1970s, and continues to this day to serve as a voice for African American women on a broad range of issues.

Black feminist thinking and organizing were crucial for reframing the issue of birth control and abortion in the black community. A variety of black feminist grassroots organizations sprang up in cities across the country in the early 1970s. Though many of these groups only lasted for a few years, their critique of the limitations and scope of both the black liberation and women’s liberation movements laid the foundation upon which contemporary black women’s reproductive rights activism is based. The Sisterhood of Black Single Mothers, founded in 1972 in New York by Safiya Bandele to help meet the survival needs of teenage mothers, built on the principles of both the feminist and the civil rights movements. Three African American women—Faye Williams, Linda Leaks, and Mary Lisbon—formed the Black Women’s Self-Help Collective of Washington, DC, in 1981. These activists were the first black women to popularize the use of cervical self-exam in the African American community.

In 1973, Margaret Sloan and Flo Kennedy formed the National Black Feminist Organization (NBFO) in New York. This group, which existed for only three years, carefully defined the terms under which it would support family planning and birth control. Its members organized against sterilization abuse and for abortion rights and pledged to address the availability of child care centers, unemployment, job training, domestic worker rights, black female addiction, welfare rights, and black women’s health care. The group also supported the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment and the rights of black lesbians. Members discussed issues of sexism that they were not able to address adequately in the broader women’s movement or in the civil rights movement. The NBFO was not afraid to criticize black Nationalists for refusing to confront the sexism that it believed was destroying the black community from within. They reminded the black Nationalists that liberation for half the race was not liberation at all.

Some members felt that NBFO was not incorporating issues of classism and heterosexism adequately and broke from the group to establish the Combahee River Collective in 1974. The collective set forth its manifesto—a rallying cry for black feminist activists—critiquing
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racism, sexism, poverty, and heterosexism and providing black feminists with ideological cohesion. Like the NBFO, the Combahee River Collective worked on issues of abortion rights, sterilization abuse, and health care. Barbara Smith, one of the co-founders of the Combahee Collective, helped organize a forum in support of abortion rights in 1974 for black women in Boston. Collective members conducted workshops on college campuses and politicized hundreds of young black women. However, the activism and theoretical insights of these new black feminists were not widely accepted in the black community. The collective was criticized for placing the needs of women above the needs of the community, which was considered divisive. Black feminists challenged this characterization and insisted that they were an arm of the civil rights struggle. They consciously celebrated their links to a history of black protest and played a crucial role as they "lifted the veil and broke the silence on a variety of black women's issues."52

As these black feminist organizations developed their agendas, other black women, like Faye Wattleton, were working for change within mainstream organizations. Wattleton was the first African American president of Planned Parenthood, serving from 1978 to 1992, and the first woman to head the organization since Margaret Sanger founded it in 1916. Wattleton was a role model for many black women and played a crucial role in getting more black women to work at Planned Parenthood. For many years, Wattleton was the face of diversity within the mainstream pro-choice movement. "I felt that my being African American was a vital aspect of my leadership; that it provided insights and experiences that I am certain would have been missing if I had not been black,"53 writes Wattleton in her account of her tenure as president of Planned Parenthood. "I believed that my ethnic identity gave me firsthand experience with those who suffered the most from the oppression of illegal birth control and abortion."54

Other African American women also rose to prominence in reproductive health professions. Jocelyn Elders, later appointed surgeon general under President Clinton, managed a statewide health department in Arkansas. Similarly, Joan Smith headed a statewide program in Louisiana. Their significant contributions notwithstanding, women like Wattleton, Elders, and Smith have sometimes been described as "leaders without a constituency"55 because the majority of African American women distrusted the white pro-choice organizations. They perceived the organizations, even when they had visible black leadership, to be largely middle-class, racist, and irrelevant to the lives of African American women.56
The socioeconomic changes of the 1960s and 70s—the increased opportunities in education and employment for black women—enhanced the prospect of self-determined life choices for many middle-class and working-class black women.\textsuperscript{57} By the early 1980s, significant numbers of black women were going to college, and the black middle class was growing. Increased numbers of professional black women, a long history of political and social organizing, the engagement of black feminists on issues of health and empowerment, and the existence of a few well-placed black women leaders who were outspoken on issues of family planning, provided fertile ground for the emergence of the NBWHP.
NOTES

1 Dorothy Roberts provides a detailed account of how and why black fertility was controlled during slavery. She shows how black procreation helped to sustain slavery and gave slave owners the economic rationale to control women’s reproductive lives. Essentially, black women, by bearing children, reproduced the slave labor force. Black women were forced to bear children who belonged to the slave owner, and from the outset were marked “as objects whose decisions about reproduction should be subject to social regulation rather than to their own will.” Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 22–55.


3 Ibid.


10 Ibid.


White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 16.

Ibid., 33.

Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 132–133.


Some women in Garvey’s movement fought for an equal role in shaping black Nationalism, and a few women held important positions in his Universal Negro Improvement Association. Garvey, however, rejected the ideas put forth by the women’s clubs that black women should shape the direction and thoughts of their age and become the leaders of the race. He equated manliness with militancy and called on black men to play this leadership role. White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 121.


Ibid., 171.

Ibid., 170.


Ibid., 342–349.

36 Littlewood, The Politics of Population Control, 60.
39 Ibid.
40 Critchlow, Intended Consequences, 60.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 182.
45 The Black Panthers were the only black Nationalist group to support free abortion and contraceptives on demand. Though this issue was controversial among the Panthers, many party women supported it.
46 Littlewood, The Politics of Population Control, 75.
48 Ibid.
50 For more on information on the National Black Feminist Organization, see White, Too Heavy a Load, 242–246.
52 Darlene Hine quoted in White, Too Heavy a Load, 256.
54 Ibid., 188.
56 Ibid.
57 Petchesky, Abortion and Woman’s Choice, 153.