

Margaret Sanger

1879 - 1966

American social activist

Margaret Sanger dedicated her life to making birth control available to all women in the world and thereby increased the quality and length of women's and children's lives.

Introduction

Margaret Louise Higgins was born on September 11, 1879, in Corning, New York. The sixth of eleven children born to Anne Purcell and Michael Hennessey Higgins, Margaret grew up in a bustling household in the woods on the outskirts of town. While her mother took care of the large family, her father worked as a sculptor, chiseling headstones for local cemeteries. His work was unsteady, and with so many mouths to feed the family usually struggled to make ends meet.

Though poor themselves, the Higginses believed in helping others and taught Margaret to do the same. Her father often told her: "You have no right to material comforts without giving back to society the benefits of your honest experience" (Sanger, p. 23). Margaret greatly admired her father, who was known as somewhat of a rebel in town, and took his words to heart.

Rebel influence

A "freethinker" who was active in the cause of labor reform and social equality, Michael Higgins was no stranger to controversy. He often arranged for labor leaders and social reformers to speak in Corning and made his overcrowded house a center for political activity. His efforts were usually greeted with scorn from the townspeople, and as a result, Margaret and her siblings grew up being called "children of the devil" (Sanger, p. 21). But Margaret paid little attention to the name-calling. In fact, she rather liked being the daughter of a rebel and living amid controversy. The young girl developed a defiant spirit akin to her father's that would last a lifetime.

Education

Margaret attended public school through the eighth grade and then boarding school at the Claverick College and Hudson River Institute. (Her expenses were paid by two of her sisters.) Away from home for the first time in her life, Margaret flourished and began developing her leadership abilities. She became active in theater groups and for a time had an ambition to become a professional actress. However, when she learned that in order to get an acting job



she would have to write down her leg measurements, she defiantly refused and "turned to other fields where something besides legs was to count" (Sanger, p. 38).

Awareness of the women's issue

The leg episode proved to be an important experience for Margaret. It alerted her to the ongoing debate about women's rights and illustrated for her the discrimination women faced. She developed a strong interest in women's rights and began studying the great female leaders in history. While researching women such as Helen of Troy, Ruth, Poppaea, and Cleopatra VII, Margaret became greatly inspired and wrote an essay on women's equality, which she read aloud to her class. She was filled with youthful optimism and wanted not only to help women, but to make the world a better place. Exactly how she could achieve this, she did not yet know.

Nursing sparks medical interest

After graduating from the Institute, Margaret worked as a teacher for a year and then was called home to take care of her mother, who was dying from tuberculosis. Her mother had been severely weakened by having so many children, and within a few months of Margaret's return home, she died.

Though it had been a sad time in her life, Margaret gained new direction from the experience of nursing her mother. She had always wanted to help society and she realized that working as a nurse was a way to do that. Shortly after her mother's death, she entered the nursing program at White Plains Hospital. She completed the year-long program then finished her training at the Manhattan Eye and Ear clinic in New York City in 1900 at the age of twenty-one.

Marriage

While working in New York, Margaret met a young architect, much like her father, named William Sanger. Sanger was politically active and had the same "artist's temperament" as Margaret's father. Her attraction to him led to their getting married shortly after Margaret's graduation from nursing school. They were soon expecting their first son, Stuart, who was followed by a second son, Grant, and a daughter, Peggy. Margaret quit nursing to be a full-time mother until after Peggy was born.

Sees connection between social ills and birth control

When Sanger returned to nursing, she worked as a visiting nurse in some of the worst slums in New York City. She most often was called upon to help deliver babies or nurse desperately weak mothers back to health. Some of these mothers suffered from bearing too many



children. Others nearly bled to death because of unsafe abortions, operations that were performed on them to end their pregnancies. With each visit, the women, most of whom had more than ten children, desperately begged Sanger: "Tell me something to keep from having another baby. We cannot afford another yet" (Sanger, p. 87). But by law, Sanger was forbidden from teaching the knowledge they so eagerly sought.

Hearing the desperate cries for birth control on a daily basis, Sanger grew very depressed. Visions of weak and dying mothers - women who could never pull themselves from the depths of poverty because of their fragile health and burdens of their ever-growing families - haunted her sleep. "One by one worried, sad, pensive, and aging faces marshaled themselves before me in my dreams, sometimes appealingly, sometimes accusingly," Sanger said (Sanger, p. 89). She not only felt sad and angry about the condition of these masses of women but felt guilty because there was nothing she could do to help them. Finally, when a young mother who had begged Margaret months before for some means of birth control died from giving birth to yet another child, Sanger snapped. Convinced that the woman had only sought "the knowledge which was her right" and died from lack of that knowledge, Sanger vowed from that moment on "to do something to change the destiny of mothers whose miseries [are] as vast as the sky" (Sanger, p. 92). Sanger had found her cause and was ready to take on the world to fight for it.

Population growth

Sanger became convinced that the overall improvement of women's lives and society in general rested on controlling population growth. With this in mind, she quit nursing and spent the next year researching birth control at the library. Sanger then traveled with her family to Europe to learn family planning techniques. She returned to New York in 1914, armed with knowledge and eager to pass it along to the mothers of New York. Sanger was ready to take direct action, even if it meant breaking the laws she considered unconstitutional. She decided to take a three-pronged approach to promoting birth control in the United States - education, organization, and legislation. First she would educate the public on birth control using the information she had gathered. Then she would form a birth control organization that would help raise awareness and money for the cause. And finally she would seek to get the Comstock Law, which restricted the sending of birth control information through the mail, overturned. She would also lobby, or pressure, Congress for federal legislation allowing doctors to prescribe birth control devices. At the time, it was illegal even for married couples to use most forms of birth control, except in the case of medical emergency. While most wealthy women could afford reliable - and illegal - forms of birth control or safe abortions, poor women could only continue to have children or risk death due to unsafe, illegal abortions. Sanger had seen enough women, including her own mother, die due to lack of



birth control information and access, and she was determined to bring both to the poor women of the world.

Woman Rebel

As the first step in that process, Sanger started her own magazine, the Woman Rebel. Working with friends who volunteered their services and funding it through subscriptions paid in advance, she produced and mailed the first issue of the Woman Rebel in March 1914 from her small New York City apartment.

As publisher, Sanger had complete control over the magazine's content. She wrote her articles for mothers and adolescent young women, announcing in the first issue that the goal was to "stimulate women to think for themselves and to build up a conscious fighting character" (Gray, p. 67). Further, she invited all readers to contribute articles on any subject and promised to back the idea of birth control and convey any knowledge that would help achieve that end.

Not one to back down from controversy, Sanger had a highly combative style, which both helped promote her cause and earned her many enemies. The Catholic Church, opposed to any form of birth control, became one of her fiercest opponents from the outset. Also, she made enemies of politicians and even among many women's groups who thought she should be focusing her attention on women's suffrage (right to vote) instead of family planning. But true to her family background and magazine title, Sanger was proud to be a "woman rebel" and never balked in the face of opposition.

Opposition

There was plenty of opposition. Under the Comstock Law, several issues of the Woman Rebel were banned by the U.S. Postal Service, which had sole authority to refuse the mailing of any material it termed "obscene." Rather than tone down her editorial content, however, Sanger wrote in capital letters on the front page of her next issue: "THE WOMAN REBEL FEELS PROUD THAT THE POST OFFICE AUTHORITIES DID NOT APPROVE OF HER. SHE SHALL BLUSH WITH SHAME IF EVER SHE BE APPROVED BY OFFICIALISM OR 'COMSTOCKISM'" (Sanger in Gray, p. 69).

When the postal authorities realized they were not going to stop Sanger's efforts, the government stepped in and charged her with nine counts of breaking obscenity laws, which carried a maximum sentence of forty-five years in prison. As a result, Sanger was forced to flee to London for two years, leaving behind her children and husband.



Though the years apart from her home and family were trying for Sanger, she used the time to increase her knowledge and political connections. She gathered information both to strengthen her argument in favor of birth control and to mount a defense against the charges that faced her in the United States. She became familiar with the theory by Thomas Robert Malthus that advocated birth control as a means of world stability and peace and with similar arguments by John Stuart Mill and other birth control advocates. Sanger began working such arguments, which were gaining popularity throughout Europe at the time, into her own philosophy.

Starts clinic

In 1915, after repeated attempts through her attorneys in the United States, Sanger was finally able to get the charges against her dropped. She returned to New York, reclaimed her children, and resumed her birth control fight where she had left off. Ready to mount the second and third phases of her plan, organization and legislation, Sanger founded the National Birth Control League (now the Planned Parenthood Federation of America) and began lecturing across the country and gathering supporters and funds to aid her efforts. Having seen the successful operation of birth control clinics in the Netherlands, Sanger decided she must "challenge the law directly" in the United States and open a birth control clinic in New York City (Sanger, p. 211).

Clinic and jail

Sanger chose the poor Brownsville section of Brooklyn as the site of the first birth control clinic in the United States because she knew it was the poor and middle class women who most needed birth control information. Run by three registered nurses - Sanger, her sister Ethel Higgins, and Fania Mindell - the clinic opened on October 16, 1916, and hundreds of women lined up for blocks to get inside. The nurses distributed to all the patients' pamphlets printed in English, Yiddish, and Italian titled What Every Girl Should Know. The nurses also conducted general checkups, recording details about economic status and number of children to establish case histories. The histories would be used to prove the benefits of birth control on the physical, emotional, and economic well-being of women and their families.

The clinic proved overwhelmingly popular but, as expected, within a few weeks the police conducted a raid and shut it down. Sanger, Higgins, and Mindell were all arrested as hundreds of women poured into the streets of Brooklyn to protest. One woman, who had just arrived as Sanger was being led away by police, chased the police car for blocks and shouted - "Come back! Come back and save me!" (Rossi, p. 532). Sanger was so moved by this woman's plea for help that she became more determined than ever to fight for her clinic. The following day, when the judge told her he was willing to dismiss the charges if she agreed



to respect the law and close her clinic, Sanger recalled the woman's desperate words and refused the judge's offer. "I cannot respect the law as it stands today," she said (Sanger, p. 237). She was sentenced to thirty days in a workhouse

It's only just begun

Unmoved by her second brush with the law, Sanger reopened the clinic upon her release, but this time operated it out of her home. This second clinic employed a female doctor and was funded by an English contributor whom she had met while abroad. Though she was helping women in New York, Sanger felt the need for something to be done on a national level. So she began a national publication to advocate birth control and lectured throughout the country.

Sanger started *The Birth Control Review* in 1921, and during the first five years of publication she received more than one million letters from mothers throughout the nation. On a regular basis, the letters detailed personal horror stories of poverty, dying children, and mothers, sisters, and friends bleeding to death. Women described how they could never get an education or a decent job because they were continually pregnant. Many told of not being able to afford one child yet having ten or more simply because they were not allowed to legally plan the size of their families. Most of the women were poor and could not afford to deliver their babies at hospitals. All the women, no matter what their story, age, or income level, requested birth control information and pleaded for answers to their medical questions.

Hearing such an overwhelming national outcry for birth control, Sanger realized that if federal legislators could read these letters they would see the tremendous need for birth control on the part of the general population. With that in mind, Sanger assembled the best 500 letters into a book titled *Mothers in Bondage*, which she published in 1928. The book proved to be highly influential, and Sanger used it to rally her cause through the next decade.

A million projects

The 1920s and 1930s brought with them not only tremendous political turmoil but great personal turbulence for Sanger. In 1923 she divorced William Sanger and married an older man named Noah Slee. Her daughter, Peggy, died suddenly of tuberculosis, and her two sons entered college.

After Peggy's tragic death, Sanger buried herself in her work. She traveled throughout the world spreading her message of birth control but spent the bulk of her time in America lobbying legislators and the American Medical Association (AMA) in addition to lecturing and publishing her newspaper. She founded a lobbyist group in Washington, D.C, called the National Committee and set up the Clinical Research Bureau of the American Birth Control



League to invent cheaper and more effective means of birth control. She organized the first national and international birth control conferences in the world and wrote extensively on the subject, publishing eleven books and pamphlets through 1938.

Sanger attacked birth control opponents on all fronts, and after numerous defeats of birth control legislation in Congress she focused her attention on persuading the AMA to allow doctors to distribute birth control devices. Finally in 1936, after the Supreme Court issued a decision permitting the mailing of birth control information (striking down the Comstock Law), the AMA reversed its position and decided that doctors had the right to distribute birth control devices to their patients. For Sanger, now fifty-seven, the victory could not have been sweeter. A lifetime of effort had finally paid off, and birth control in America became a reality.

Final years

After 1936 Sanger continued to work for affordable and efficient means of birth control and to push for worldwide acceptance of family planning. In 1943 her second husband died and she contracted leukemia. She moved to Tucson, Arizona, and died there on September 6, 1966, at age eighty-seven.

As her son, Grant, said at her death, Sanger was a dedicated woman who nearly single-handedly brought about the legalization of birth control in the United States: "One thing about my mother that to me was most impressive was her utmost concentration on the [birth control] problem. From the time she started this business until she finished, she never deviated" (Coigney, p, 167).

Impact

Sanger did more than make birth control a reality in the United States. She demonstrated that dedication to a cause could be rewarded in one's lifetime and that there were several ways, from writing a magazine to lobbying Congress, that women in America could effect change.

For Women's Well-Being

While men in Europe called for birth control because of economics and world peace, Sanger declared that birth control was necessary because of the personal tragedies of women. She argued that women were denied the right to fulfill themselves as human beings because they were often pregnant and died early deaths on account of too many pregnancies or illegal abortions. Also, children suffered from being born into large, poverty-stricken families. Sanger viewed birth control as basic to freedom: "no woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother" (Sanger in Rossi, p. 533).

FURTHER READING



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