

Margaret Sanger: Demonstrating Leadership and Legacy Through Her Crusade For Women's Reproductive Rights

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MARGARET SANGER was a crusader for female reproductive rights. Thanks to her tireless efforts, not only are contraceptives now legal, women can also control the size of their families, a basic right denied them until the 1960s. Throughout the better part of the twentieth century Sanger faced public outcry and even arrest in her campaign to make contraceptives known and legal for women around the world. In her lifelong quest, Margaret Sanger demonstrated impeccable leadership and brought about a tremendous legacy as she fought for women's reproductive rights.

Margaret Sanger was born in 1879 in Corning, NY to Irish immigrants Anne and Michael Higgins, the sixth of eleven children. Being from a large, impoverished family greatly influenced her views on reproductive rights.¹ Regarding this, she wrote: "Very early in my childhood I associated poverty, toil, unemployment, drunkenness, cruelty, quarreling, fighting, debts, [and] jails with large families."² Early on, she resolved that she would not suffer the same fate as her mother, who died at the age of forty-eight after eighteen pregnancies, seven resulting in miscarriages.³

As an adult, Sanger went on to become a nurse where she saw the ravages of poverty and large families firsthand. She would often visit the New York City slums and treat women suffering from the ailments that so often accompanied pregnancy in a time with inadequate medical care (especially for the poor) and the often lethal lengths women would go to relieve themselves of what they thought would grow up to be just another burden. "This state of things became a nightmare with me," wrote Sanger.⁴ "There seemed no sense to it all, no reason for such waste of mother life, no right to exhaust women's vitality and to throw them on the scrap-heap before the age of thirty-five."⁵

When speaking of the motivation behind her campaign, Sanger frequently told the story of Sadie Sachs, which she considered to be a turning point in her life.⁶ She was visiting the Sachs family residence to treat its matriarch, Sadie. Sadie had developed an infection from an illegal abortion and begged Sanger and the doctor to tell her how to prevent another child, thinking it would kill her. The doctor scoffed at her remark and promptly left, leaving Sachs with Sanger. She begged for her to tell her a way to prevent conception, but Sanger could not tell her anything, as it was illegal. Sanger felt powerless and angry and resolved to somehow share knowledge of contraception with the women who needed it.⁷

During her time as a nurse, Margaret Sanger met her future husband, William, with whom she had three children. William Sanger had many socialist views and through their relationship with the Socialist Party, Sanger became affiliated with *The New York Call*, a socialist newspaper for which she became a columnist on birth control.⁸

While working for *The New York Call*, Sanger created her own newspaper, *The Woman Rebel*, the first issue of which hit the streets in March 1914. In her paper, Sanger illustrated the need for contraceptives and urged women to use them, its aim being to “stimulate working women to think for themselves....”⁹ However, her paper did not provide what women wanted most of all: detailed insight into *how* these contraceptive methods worked.¹⁰ After several issues of each newspaper were published, the column came to the attention of enforcers of the Comstock Laws. She was indicted on charges of distributing material that was “obscene, lewd, lascivious and filthy” and “of an indecent character.”¹¹

The Comstock Laws, named for anti-obscenity crusader Anthony Comstock, were passed by Congress in 1873. These laws prohibited the distribution of any “obscene” material in the mail, which included information about means of contraception, thought to be amoral. This, combined with the prudish Victorian ideals that were still embodied at the time, made it so that knowledge of contraceptive methods was not widespread and any information on the subject was communicated via word of mouth or private doctors that could only be afforded by the wealthy.¹² As a result, another problem was created: the affluent, who had the means of taking care of large numbers of children, had access to family planning and other means of “birth control” (a term subsequently coined by Sanger), while the impoverished were not able to control the size of their family and then could not afford it.

Due to her pending prosecution under the Comstock Laws, Sanger knew she would likely spend a good deal of time in prison.¹³ Thus, she decided to depart for England under the alias “Bertha Watson” in October 1914. Before her departure, Sanger wrote a pamphlet titled *Family Limitation*

and printed 100,000 copies of it to be distributed during her exile. This pamphlet provided in-depth descriptions on how to prevent conception and was what women wanted most of all.¹⁴

Upon her arrival in England, Sanger was met by many British radicals, many of whom were members of the Neo-Malthusian Society, which supported population control and the belief that “passion between the sexes are both essential for human’s existence.”¹⁵ Members included Havelock Ellis, the famous sexologist whose views were similar to Sanger’s, writers H. G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, and Marie Stopes, who was also an advocate for birth control. Sanger’s cause had generated popularity and support around the world, and many of the aforementioned individuals were familiar with her work before meeting her. She was influenced greatly by them, especially Havelock Ellis.¹⁶

While in Europe, Sanger’s pamphlet *Family Limitation*, continued to be distributed, much to the dismay of Anthony Comstock. He sent an undercover agent to convince William Sanger to give him a pamphlet and did so successfully, leading to Sanger’s subsequent arrest and trial. In his trial, Sanger was able to garner further awareness for the cause, stating that he himself was not on trial but, rather, the Comstock Laws.¹⁷ He argued that information on contraceptives should be legal and that denying it was a violation of the right to free speech.¹⁸ “I would rather be in jail with my conviction than be free at a loss of my manhood and my self-respect,”¹⁹ said Sanger, who was sentenced to thirty days in prison. Hearing news of this overseas, Margaret Sanger decided it would be best to come back to the United States after close to a year of her self-inflicted exile.

A month after her return to the United States, Sanger’s youngest child, Peggy, died of pneumonia at five years old. Though the event was a tragedy, it helped to generate sympathy for Sanger and her trial continued to be delayed, despite three pending federal indictments from the previous year.²⁰ Eventually, her trial was set for January 1916.

Sanger hoped to use her trial as an attempt to draw awareness to her cause, hoping that it would pressure legislators to repeal the antiquated Comstock Laws and establish her position at the forefront of the contraceptive movement.²¹ “It is not so much Margaret Sanger who goes on trial, but rather [for women] it is your inherent right to own and control your bodies,”²² Sanger told reporters.

Three days after Sanger’s trial began in January of 1916, the charges against her were suddenly dropped because nobody wanted to make a martyr out of her, the indictment was close to two years old, Sanger was not harmful to the public,²³ and “the evidence [was] not of such a character as to establish the defendant’s guilt beyond all reasonable doubt.”²⁴

By this time, Sanger's movement had received lots of attention and public mindsets were beginning to change. She began to gain the support of the wealthy and influential, including a good number of British supporters who signed a petition asking President Woodrow Wilson to allow a pamphlet on birth control to circulate.²⁵

Following her trial, Sanger began a lecture tour around the United States telling about her personal experiences as a nurse, especially the Sadie Sachs story, often tinged with "eugenically suggestive" ideas, warning the public about the "feeble-minded" children born in alarmingly high numbers to families without access to proper contraceptives.²⁶

Now very much in the public eye, Sanger wished to do something bold, something more than just giving lectures or lobbying.²⁷ So, Sanger recruited her younger sister, Ethel Byrne, and a translator named Fania Mindell to open the first birth control clinic in America on October 16th, 1916 on Amboy Street in Brooklyn, NY. "Mothers: Can you afford to have a large family? Do you want any more children? If not, why do you have them?" read placards advertising the clinic. "Do not kill, do not take life, but prevent."²⁸

The clinic was an immediate success. On the first day alone, over 100 women and 20 men waited in line. By the time the clinic was shut down, there were over 500 registered clients.²⁹ According to Sanger, "Women of every race and...creed flocked to the clinic with the determination not to have any more children...."³⁰ Sanger had clients pay a ten cent fee and complete a slip containing information on previous pregnancies, number of children, and their husbands' salaries. Sanger later used this information to perform case studies and gather information. She also had women verify that they understood that any and all birth control they obtained was for their personal use, which differentiated her from those who performed illegal abortions.³¹

Ten days after the clinic opened, a woman by the name of Mrs. Whitehurst arrived at the clinic. It was subsequently revealed that she was part of an undercover sting operation and Sanger, Byrne, and Mindell were each arrested and the records and supplies in the clinic were confiscated. Sanger was furious at the actions of this woman, crying, "You are not a woman. You are a dog."³² Surrounded by reporters and the police, Sanger refused to ride to the police station in the wagon, but rather walked the mile to jail.³³ Sanger was indicted, facing two counts of violating the New York Penal Code.

Sanger's trial began in 1917, and despite her attorney Jonah Goldstein's claim that preventing the circulation of information about birth control was a violation of the right to freedom of expression in the First Amendment,³⁴ Sanger was sentenced to thirty days in prison.

Just a number of months after Sanger's release, she began to notice her efforts take effect; it was now legal for doctors to give contraceptive advice. However, World War I had just begun, and the necessity for more bodies became especially dire; people thought that contraceptive methods would lead to military weakness. Sanger pointed to countries like Germany and Russia, who each had rapidly growing populations, saying that the necessity for more land and resources led to the dilemmas they were in. However, attention was diverted from progressive movements as wartime propaganda set ablaze a patriotic sentiment in the heart of the nation and time was spent rolling bandages and planting wheat, rather than campaigning for social reform and, briefly, Sanger's case fell out of the public eye.³⁵

No longer focused on solely overturning the Comstock Laws, Sanger wanted to educate the greater public about birth control.³⁶ In 1917, Sanger began a magazine called *The Birth Control Review*, which proclaimed "no law is too sacred to break."³⁷ Sanger continued to be the editor of the magazine until 1928, when she gave it to her organization, the American Birth Control League, which she had established in 1923. This organization would later be known as the Planned Parenthood Federation of America, which is among the largest providers of contraceptive information in the U.S. today.³⁸ *The Birth Control Review* illustrated the necessity for contraceptives and provided ample justification for them, though it did not ever provide detailed information on how to prevent conception, since that was still highly illegal.³⁹

In the years to follow, Sanger continued to tour the country, giving lectures on the necessity for birth control. She visited many groups and even went around the world to countries such as Japan and India with rapidly growing populations to share her advice and knowledge about contraceptive methods.⁴⁰

As the years progressed, mindsets began to shift. The idea that contraceptives contradicted the word of God and the Church rapidly began to decline; family planning became more accepted.⁴¹ During World War II, women entered the workforce, taking over the jobs of the men fighting overseas, ideas about gender roles and morality were upturned. Despite the taboo that birth control carried, the idea of it was increasingly desirable. In 1950, Margaret Sanger approached a scientist called Gregory Pincus and asked him to develop an inexpensive oral contraceptive that would have a guaranteed success rate with minimal to no side effects. Sanger wanted to give women a way to control their bodies and their pregnancies and be equal partners with men, which is exactly what this pill would do.⁴²

In 1957, Enovid, the first oral contraceptive made its debut. Referred to simply as "the Pill" by Pincus, Enovid introduced a natural hormone that

inhibited the menstrual cycle, thus preventing pregnancy. Contraceptives were still technically illegal, and it would not be until 1960 that the Pill could be marketed as such. Rather, the pill was introduced as a means of treating menstrual disorders, a side effect of which was the inability to conceive children. On May 9, 1960, the FDA approved the sale of oral contraceptives, with an astounding 1.2 million women users just two years after its initial release.⁴³

In 1965, in the *Griswold v. Connecticut* case, the Supreme Court ruled in a 7-2 decision that a ban on birth control was unconstitutional, as it violated the right to marital privacy.⁴⁴ But while contraceptives were a major part of Margaret Sanger's legacy, there is much more than that. She also helped to bring about the idea that women are capable of making decisions about how large they wish their families to be and avoiding the consequences of unplanned pregnancies.

Margaret Sanger was a courageous leader. A crusader for female reproductive rights, she is not heralded as a brilliant feminist like the many other "radicals" of her day who fought for the right to vote or safer working conditions; rather, she and her legacy remain controversial. However, she demonstrated valor, passion, and resilience in her campaign for women's reproductive rights. She believed so fervently in her cause that she was willing to overlook laws that she thought to be punitive and risked imprisonment numerous times. Sanger did not allow any of the impending threats of being perceived as a radical deter her and because of her tireless efforts we are better off. Her legacy affects every one of us in some way, shape, or form, and has saved many the hardship that is unwanted children. Margaret Sanger brought about a new type of empowerment and in the process granted women a fundamental human right that should have been bestowed them long before: the right to control their own bodies and make decisions about the size of their families.

Notes

1. Baker, Jean. *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2011.
2. Sanger, Margaret. *My Fight For Birth Control*. Elmsford, NY: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1931, 5.
3. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
4. Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*
5. Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*

6. *Ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. Bagge, Peter. *Woman Rebel: The Margaret Sanger Story*. N.p.: Drawn and Quarterly, 2013. Sanger, Margaret. "To Mothers - Our Duty." *New York Call*, March 26, 1911. Sanger, Margaret. "What Every Girl Should Know." *The New York Call*, December 12, 1912. Sanger, Margaret. "How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth." *The New York Call*.
9. *The Woman Rebel* (New York, NY), March 1914, 1.
10. Baker, *Margaret Sanger; The Woman Rebel* (New York, NY), March 1914. "No Gods, No Masters." *The Woman Rebel*, March 1914.
11. State of New York, Indictment, 1914 (N.Y. 1914), 2.
12. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
13. *Ibid.*
14. Sanger, Margaret H. *Family Limitation : Revised : Sixth Edition*. N.p.: n.p., 1917.; *Magnetation Methods of Birth Control*. N.p.: n.p., 1915.
15. Abramitzky, Ran, and Fabio Braggion. "Malthusian and Neo-Malthusian Theories." Working paper, Stanford, n.d, 1.
16. Ellis had moderate views about eugenics and believed that spacing births and having fewer children would make them more robust and prevent large numbers of "feeble-minded" children. Sanger supported these views and would later be influenced by them, using them as a justification for her campaign.
17. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
18. *Ibid.* Fawcett, James Waldo. "Jailed for Birth Control: The Trial of William Sanger."
19. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*, 99.
20. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
21. "Not Guilty!" *Mother Earth*, January 1916. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
22. *The New York Call*, January 8, 1916.
23. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
24. *United States v. Margaret Sanger*
25. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
26. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*. Sanger, Margaret H. "The Morality of Birth Control." Speech, Park Theater, New York, NY, November 18, 1921.
27. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
28. Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control*
29. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
30. *Ibid.*, 115.
31. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
32. *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* (Brooklyn, NY), October 26, 1916.
33. Bagge, *Woman Rebel*
34. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
35. Baker, *Margaret Sanger*
36. Reed, Miriam. *Margaret Sanger: Her Life in Her Words*. Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2003.
37. *The Birth Control Review*, 1917, 1.

38. Planned Parenthood. Last modified 2014. Accessed January 1, 2015. <http://www.plannedparenthood.org>.
39. *Laws Concerning Birth Control in the United States*. New York: Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control, 1929.
40. Eig, Jonathan. *The Birth of the Pill: How Four Crusaders Reinvented Sex and Launched a Revolution*. N.p.: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.
41. Eig, *The Birth of the Pill*
42. *Ibid.*
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 S. Ct. 479 (1965).

Annotated Bibliography

Primary Sources

The Birth Control Review, 1917.

The Birth Control Review, founded by Margaret Sanger in 1917, detailed the need for contraceptives. By reading it, I was able to get a further understanding of Sanger's campaign, which helped me to better support my thesis.

Brooklyn Daily Eagle (Brooklyn, NY), October 26, 1916.

This article, published in the *Brooklyn Daily Eagle*, detailed one of Margaret Sanger's arrests. Her birth control clinic had been shut down, and she was furious at the female officer who took part in the undercover sting operation run by the police. By looking at this article, I was able to better understand how the events occurred and properly cite them in my paper.

Fawcett, James Waldo. "Jailed for Birth Control: The Trial of William Sanger." *Birth Control Review*, 1917.

This article, by James Waldo Fawcett, describes the trial of William Sanger, Margaret Sanger's husband, who had been tricked into giving the police a copy of one of Margaret Sanger's "obscene" pamphlets. This provided an interesting outlook on the situation, as it was not solely about Margaret Sanger, and was quite informative as well.

Griswold v. Connecticut, 381 S. Ct. 479 (1965).

Griswold v. Connecticut, a Supreme Court case in 1965 was the case that legalized contraceptives, overruling a law that was believed to violate marital privacy. This was a landmark case, protecting rights to privacy and allowing women to have greater control over their families. Margaret Sanger, unlike most activists, did leave to see the ruling.

Laws Concerning Birth Control in the United States. New York: Committee on Federal Legislation for Birth Control, 1929.

This document provides the laws concerning birth control and the Comstock laws in each individual state, as well as in the whole nation. It provided fascinating insight on that subject and really helped me to understand what circumstances Margaret Sanger and other birth control crusaders faced as well as how the idea of contraceptives was perceived in the nation at this time.

The New York Call, January 8, 1916.

The *New York Call* was a magazine that Margaret Sanger wrote for often. In this article, she speaks about her imminent arrest. This allowed me to gain knowledge about her viewpoint and what she thought versus what others believed.

Sanger, Margaret H. "Birth Control and Racial Betterment." *Birth Control Review*.

In this article, Margaret Sanger writes about how birth control can lead to the creation of a stronger and healthier race, since there would be fewer unwanted children. She speaks further on her beliefs of eugenics and how they tie into contraceptives.

———"Comstockery in America." *International Socialist Review*.

In this article, Margaret Sanger describes the effects of the Comstock Laws in the United States, which prohibited the distribution of "obscene" pamphlets except by doctors. Birth control and other contraceptive methods were considered to be "obscene" and Sanger worked to change such.

———*Family Limitation : Revised : Sixth Edition*. N.p.: n.p., 1917.

Family Limitation was written, published, and distributed by Margaret Sanger, which described many means of contraceptives that were easy for women to do. This pamphlet was highly controversial and Sanger was indicted and arrested for distributing it, since it violated the Comstock laws. By reading *Family Limitation* and familiarizing myself with it, I was able to better understand Sanger's efforts and the "obscenities" that were once prohibited.

———"The Fight for Birth Control." *Birth Control News*, July 1916.

Margaret Sanger here describes the difficulties that accompany her fight for birth control. She further highlights in this article the number of children born each year that suffer due to the fact that they are unable to be provided for.

———"How Six Little Children Were Taught the Truth." *The New York Call*.

In this article, Margaret Sanger tells one example of how to teach young children about sex education. By reading this, I was able to learn about large components of Sanger's campaign and different areas she reached that are often not spoken about.

———*Magnetation Methods of Birth Control*. N.p.: n.p., 1915.

This pamphlet, following Sanger's well-known *Family Limitation* speaks

further about contraceptive methods. This provided unique insight into just how Sanger reached her audiences, and what was considered to be illegal long ago.

———“The Morality of Birth Control.” Speech, The Park Theatre, New York City, NY, November 18, 1921.

This source allowed me to get a good look at Margaret Sanger’s beliefs about eugenics. This is an important and controversial part of her history and it was important that I have a good understanding of it.

——— *My Fight For Birth Control*. Elmsford, NY: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1931.

In Margaret Sanger’s book, *My Fight For Birth Control*, she extensively details what her crusade was like and the obstacles she had to overcome in order to achieve reproductive rights for women. By reading this, I was able to gain unique, personal insight which helped me to form my thesis and support it well.

———“No Gods, No Masters.” *The Woman Rebel*, March 1914.

In this piece, written by Margaret Sanger for her newspaper, *The Woman Rebel*, she describes her opinions on birth control and what she stands for in her fight. This source shone light on her beliefs and allowed me to understand what a great leader she was.

———“Not Guilty!” *Mother Earth*, January 1916.

In this article, published in *Mother Earth*, Margaret Sanger explains the circumstances of her indictment and explains she should not be guilty for the “crimes” she has committed. This was a wonderful primary source that allowed me to better understand Sanger and how she viewed events regarding herself.

———“To Mothers - Our Duty.” *New York Call*, March 26, 1911.

In this article, Margaret Sanger stresses the importance of making sure one is able to have the size family they wish to have. She describes it as the duty of a mother to try and make sure she does not bring unwanted children into this world that will ultimately suffer due to the fact that they cannot be cared for.

———“What Every Girl Should Know.” *The New York Call*, December 12, 1912.

What Every Girl Should Know was one of Margaret Sanger’s most controversial and popular pamphlets. By reading it, I was able to better understand Sanger’s views and have more information regarding her actions.

State of New York, Indictment, 1914 (N.Y. 1914).

This document features Margaret Sanger’s court indictment for distributing “obscene” pamphlets. It was incredibly useful to have this document because it allowed me to further understand why Sanger and her actions were so controversial. It also allowed me to look at this issue from the eyes of the government and those who supported the Comstock Laws.

The Woman Rebel (New York, NY), March 1914.

The Woman Rebel was the newspaper that Margaret Sanger published her controversial views on birth control and contraceptives. This newspaper eventually led to further conflicts, but was highly influential in spreading Sanger and other birth control crusaders' views.

Secondary Sources

Abramitzky, Ran, and Fabio Braggion. "Malthusian and Neo-Malthusian Theories." Working paper, Stanford, n.d.

This paper provided insight into Neo-Malthusian theories. Margaret Sanger had involvement with the Neo-Malthusians, so it was important to understand their views.

Bagge, Peter. *Woman Rebel: The Margaret Sanger Story*. N.p.: Drawn and Quarterly, 2013.

This graphic novel by Peter Bagge illustrates Margaret Sanger's trials and triumphs in her fight for women's reproductive rights. Bagge's creative take on this influential story provided me further insight on my topic.

Baker, Jean H. *Margaret Sanger: A Life of Passion*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2011.

This biography of Margaret Sanger provided deep insight into her leadership in fighting for female reproductive rights and also her influence today. I was able to gain great insight from this detailed source.

Eig, Jonathan. *The Birth of the Pill: How Four Crusaders Reinvented Sex and Launched a Revolution*. N.p.: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014.

This book, by Jonathan Eig, speaks about Margaret Sanger's tireless efforts to promote and legalize the birth control pill. He also describes the science behind developing the pill and others who worked alongside Sanger. This source provided insight into not only how activism for the pill to be legal occurred, but also the science behind developing one of the most significant industries today.

The Margaret Sanger Papers. Accessed January 1, 2015. <http://www.nyu.edu/projects/sanger/>.

This source is a website with a huge compilation of documents and photographs pertaining to Margaret Sanger in an effort to preserve her examples of leadership and further illustrate her legacy. From here, I was able to access many primary source documents, such as writings and publications by Sanger, which were incredibly useful for my project.

National Archives. "Anti-Contraception Campaign." Records of Rights. Accessed December 31, 2014. <http://recordsofrights.org/events/24/anti-contraception-campaign>.

Margaret Sanger's legacy of Planned Parenthood and contraceptives was, and still is, extremely controversial. This source, from a branch of the National

Archives, provided much insight into the Comstock Laws and those who did and still do oppose Sanger. From here, I was able to find documents such as Sanger's court indictment which was quite useful.

The Pill. Last modified 1999. Accessed January 1, 2015. http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/pill/peoplevents/p_sanger.html.

This source, from PBS, gave me insight into a huge aspect of Margaret Sanger's legacy: the birth control pill. Through this source, I was able to learn about the controversy behind developing the pill as well as the means it was created. This source was informative and useful.

Planned Parenthood. Last modified 2014. Accessed January 1, 2015. <http://www.plannedparenthood.org>.

The Planned Parenthood Federation of America was initially founded by Margaret Sanger. Their current website is a wonderful example of how her legacy affects us today. Through this source, I was able to learn lots about Planned Parenthood's efforts that are quite relevant, and widely accepted, today.

Reed, Miriam. *Margaret Sanger: Her Life in Her Words*. Fort Lee, NJ: Barricade Books, 2003.

This book provided an in depth description of Margaret Sanger and her fight for birth control. This was incredibly useful in not only giving me a timeline of how things played out, but this source also delved deeply into topics significant to Sanger and the reproductive rights movement that were quite useful in developing my project.