The Creation of the Birth Control Pill: A Turning Point for American Women's Education, Economics, and Role in Society

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> *Science must make woman the owner, the mistress of herself. Science, the only possible savior of mankind, must put it in the power of woman to decide for herself whether she will or will not become a mother.*[1]
>
> –Margaret Sanger, 1920

THE FOOD AND DRUG Administration's approval of the birth control pill on June 23, 1960, was a turning point for women's education, economics, and role in American society.[2] Before the development of the pill, the primary occupation for most American women was being a housewife.[3] That mindset changed once women had access to the pill, which allowed them to achieve higher education and thus obtain well-paying jobs that once seemed out of reach. The pill gave women the opportunity to question their role in society and existing institutions. Most importantly, American women finally had control over when to start a family and their life direction.

Before the Pill

Women have used various forms of contraception for thousands of years, including animal parts, ointments, and withdrawal to prevent pregnancies.[4] Between 1873 and 1965, when America was under the Comstock Law, which prohibited birth control from being sent through the mail, women continued to use contraceptives.[5] In the late 1800s, when birth control clinics were not available, women relied on people like Sarah Chase, a woman who illegally sold contraceptives to women.[6] Eventually, women became more informed about their birth control options, leading to the decrease of the average American woman's birth rate from eight children in 1800 to four in 1900.[7]

In Minnesota, birth control was discussed publicly as early as 1916. On December 11, 1916, the *Minneapolis Morning Tribune* reported, "The Minnesota State Birth Control league has announced a public hearing on birth control."[8] What was taking place in Minnesota was also happening across the country in a nation-wide movement led by Margaret Sanger. Sanger was a women's rights activist who developed the term "birth control" a year earlier in 1915 and advocated for it throughout her life.[9] Sanger created the Birth Control Federation of America in 1921, which later changed its name to the Planned Parenthood Federation of America. The number of birth control clinics in America rose from 55 in 1930 to more than 800 in 1942.[10] These clinics provided access to barrier methods of contraception such as the condom and diaphragm. Part of this was due to Margaret Sanger's work to educate women about their birth control options.

Despite the thousands helped by these clinics, there weren't enough to help everyone. For example, in 1931, the first clinic in Minnesota opened in Minneapolis. By 1937, it had served over 3,000 women. However, almost 500 Minneapolis women were hospitalized every year after trying to perform their own abortions using dangerous home methods. Dorothy Atkinson, president of the Minneapolis Birth Control League, told the *Minneapolis Star* that "none of it is necessary had physicians given these mothers birth control information so that they could plan their families."[11] Although birth control was becoming more available in America, accessibility was still an issue that needed to be addressed.

Before the creation of the pill, the world for women was small and limited. The cultural expectation for American women was to become an ideal housewife: cook, clean, raise children, and support her husband. Most women didn't consider education beyond high school to be an option. This belief was due to cultural standards and financial realities.[12] During World War II, women briefly had greater participation rates in the workforce and higher education, but that changed after the war ended.[13] By 1950, only 5.2% of women had college degrees.[14]

The Creation

In 1950, Margaret Sanger paired up with Katherine McCormick, a wealthy women's rights activist, to locate a doctor who would be willing to research a female birth control pill. Along with Gregory Pincus, a biologist who had a background in reproductive health, the trio discovered a hormonal compound that prevented ovulation.[15] Then, they collaborated with the obstetrician and gynecologist, John Rock, to help test the new medicine. Pincus and Rock conducted the first trial of this medicine by forcing twelve female and sixteen male psychiatric patients at Worcester

State Hospital to take it. Under today's human drug trial standards, these tests would be unethical because regulations now require proof of drug safety and informed consent.[16] In 1956, the duo conducted their first large-scale trial on women in Puerto Rico, which had no laws banning contraception and plenty of impoverished women willing to participate.[17] On June 23, 1960, the FDA approved the birth control pill, Enovid, and it was put on the mainstream market.[18] After two years, 1.2 million American married women took the pill daily, and by 1964, 6.5 million women were on the pill, making it the most popular contraceptive in America.[19]

Despite the pill's effectiveness and popularity, access continued to be an issue for some women. In 1965, the case *Griswold v. Connecticut*[20] helped improve access by permitting married couples to obtain the pill. The pill allowed women to be intentional about when to have children. One woman later recalled, "we had actually, emotionally and intellectually, gotten to the point where we really desired to have children."[21] Many unmarried American women relied on Early Legal Access, which were state laws that lowered the age and marital restrictions on the pill. It wasn't until 1972 with the Supreme Court ruling of *Eisenstadt v. Baird* that unmarried women had legal access to the pill.[22] In subsequent years, other factors such as family planning programs and Title X of the Public Health Service Act helped make the pill available to all women, regardless of economic status, and provided low-cost contraception and educational materials to federally funded families. These laws became a major turning point in women's reproductive health, as women who benefited from Early Legal Access saw improvements in job opportunities and wages, reduction in poverty levels, and greater educational options.[23] Other research has found that the pill permitted women the time and freedom to pursue careers that required advanced graduate degrees.[24]

Criticism Post Release

Despite the widespread use of the pill in the first four years after its approval, some groups in America were critical of the pill. For example, historically oppressed racial groups, feminists, and the Catholic Church did not immediately accept the pill. While they had differing reasons for their opposition, all three groups made the use of the pill more controversial.

Some people of color were skeptical of the birth control movement's motives because of the traditional view of a woman's role as a mother and for several other reasons. For example, Mexican American women were wary of the pill because they viewed their ability to have a large family as a cultural strength.[25] In addition, Black Americans had a long history of reproductive injustice. Due to racism, some believed Whites

were genetically superior to Blacks. This belief was so widespread that a disproportionate number of sterilizations became common for impoverished Black women in the South and occasionally the North.[26] In many cases, Black women were forced to undergo sterilization in order to keep federally funded assistance.[27] This history also impacted Black men's opinions on the pill, as they assumed it was another method by Whites to control Black women and reduce the number of Black people overall. Nevertheless, not all Black people objected to the pill. Many Black women still utilized the birth control clinics available to them and saw it as part of their reproductive freedom. The pill's popularity with Blacks was exemplified in a 1970 study in Chicago that found 80% of Black women there approved of birth control and 75% used contraception.[28] Prominent Black intellectuals such as W. E. B. Dubois also promoted birth control and saw the pill as a way to improve Black women's health.[29]

Another unlikely group that was against the pill were feminists. As the women's liberation movement advanced in the 1960s, some feminists began questioning why they still needed their physician's permission to control their fertility on their own.[30] The book *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, published in 1973 by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, added to the growing backlash due to health concerns about the pill that were noted in the book.[31] Furthermore, the pill was marketed with the promise of light side effects, but many women started complaining about illnesses they experienced while on the pill. Inspired by Barbara Seaman, a women's health advocate who wrote the book *The Doctors' Case Against the Pill*, many women began demanding more information about the potential side effects of the pill. Seaman's book included facts about bodily harm from the pill, and led to an FDA rule requiring an information sheet warning of adverse health risks in pill packages. After the book was published in 1969, there was a U.S. Senate hearing on the safety of the pill.[32] Women's health advocates were glad for Senate recognition of the issue, but were upset that no women testified.[33]

Finally, an influential group that opposed the birth control pill was the Roman Catholic Church. John Rock, one of the inventors of the pill, and a practicing Catholic, assumed that the Church would share his view that the pill was important to women's reproductive health and a solution to the world's growing population.[34] Instead, the Church published the encyclical letter *Humanae Vitae*, which stated that the use of birth control was a sin and violation of natural law.[35] The Church only allowed the use of the birth control pill among its followers for medical purposes, not to prevent pregnancies. For example, lifelong Minnesota resident Margaret Kearns remembered being allowed to use the pill for menstrual cramps as a teen living in a predominantly Catholic community during the 1960s in rural

Minnesota. She recalled that her parents and doctor didn't disclose that she was taking the birth control pill because they were a strict Catholic family and feared they would be judged by other church members.[36] Although the Church formally opposed the pill, some Catholics disagreed with this position and seventy-six priests even sent a letter of opposition.[37] Shortly after the encyclical in 1970, 28% of American Catholic women were on the pill and two-thirds were using contraception.[38] By the 1980s, nearly 80% of American Catholic women used contraceptives.[39] Catholics' interpretation of their religion's rules left them conflicted about which was more important: their faith or their reproductive freedom.

Lasting Impacts

Since the pill's debut in 1960, oral contraceptives have been the most prescribed medications among U.S. women aged 18-44.[40] Women are prescribed oral contraceptives for a variety of medical reasons; including menstrual cycle regulation, reduction in PMS symptoms, treatment of endometriosis, and to lower the risk of ovarian and uterine cancers.[41] The World Health Organization recognized its significant health benefits and deemed the pill as an "essential medicine because of its public health relevance, evidence on efficacy and safety, and comparative cost-effectiveness."[42]

One of the greatest impacts of the pill on American women's lives has been their ability to pursue higher education and, therefore, hold higher paying jobs. For instance, as of 2022, women outnumbered men in the U.S. college-educated labor force and undergraduate college enrollment, which was primarily due to the pill.[43] Research strongly suggests the pill has allowed women to prevent births at an early age so that they can pursue their education.[44] Women who have children later earn 88 more college credits than women who had a child right after high school.[45] In addition, the age that women have their first child has increased. For example, in 1960, most women had their first child at the age of 20-24, compared to the age of 25-29 in 2018.[46] Moreover, American women now have an average of 1.6 children, a stark contrast from 3 in 1950.[47] Around 1970, women's enrollment in professional programs in law, medicine, and other advanced fields dramatically increased due to the pill, and continued for decades.[48] Research at Harvard has connected the pill directly to women becoming doctors, lawyers, and other professionals.[49]

There have been many advancements in improving access to birth control in America. The Affordable Care Act of 2010 provided around 63 million American women with an inexpensive way to access birth control, saving women and girls $1.4 billion on birth control pills.[50] Recently, on July 13, 2023, the FDA made the pill even more accessible by approving

Opill, the first birth control pill that does not require a prescription.[51] However, some women still have trouble accessing it. Currently, 19 million women live in "contraceptive deserts" in the U.S., meaning that access to birth control is limited in their area.[52] There are a variety of reasons for this. The 2014 Supreme court ruling in *Burwell v. Hobby Lobby* allowed certain employers the right to restrict access to the pill for their employees.[53] In addition, the 2020 court case *Little Sisters of the Poor Saints Peter and Paul Home v. Pennsylvania* permitted the U.S. government to issue rules exempting any private employer from requiring insurance to cover the pill.[54] The Trump Administration relied on this case to weaken the Affordable Care Act, which allowed some insurance companies to refuse coverage of contraception.[55]

To quote Elaine Tyler May, author of *America and the Pill*, "the politics surrounding reproductive rights, which appeared to be settled in 1973 with the *Roe v. Wade* decision, has continued to be volatile."[56] In the past ten years, contraception access has been threatened, and with the overturn of *Roe v. Wade* in 2022, many other contraceptives, including the pill, could face restrictions in the future.[57] Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas indicated that the U.S. Supreme Court should reconsider other rulings, including *Griswold v. Connecticut*, the case that provided married women access to the pill.[58] Some current Supreme Court Justices disagree with Thomas, siding with the late Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who believed that "contraceptive protection is something every woman must have access to control her own destiny," which echoed Margaret Sanger, the mother of the pill.[59] This ongoing disagreement means that American women could lose the reproductive rights they have benefited from since the approval of the pill. Although limitations have been made to the birth control pill, its scientific discovery has continued to dramatically change women's autonomy and ability to achieve educational and economic opportunities.

Women's roles in society began shifting in 1960, and are still changing today. Shortly after the creation of the pill, it became clear to feminists that "the patriarchy controlled the dissemination, production, and quality of the pill, and also hid its harmful side effects at the time."[60] This questioning of the status quo made room for the Sexual Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s.[61] Due to this, American women finally had power over their sexual freedom. After sixty years, the pill has become nearly universally accepted with 92% of Americans stating that birth control is morally acceptable.[62] The pill gave women the opportunity to question their traditional roles, government, doctors, and religious leaders, giving women the power over their education, careers, and lives.

Notes

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The information in this court case helped me discuss legal changes long after the pill's invention that impacted women's ability to access birth control.

Alito, Samuel A., and the Supreme Court of the United States. *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, 597 U.S. 2022. Reprint. Retrieved from https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/21pdf/19-1392_6j37.pdf.

This court case helped me discuss legal changes long after the pill's invention that impacted women's ability to access abortion.

"Birth Control Ban Criticized by 76 Priests." 1968. *Minneapolis Tribune*. August 9, 1968. https://www.newspapers.com/image/185106165/.

I used this newspaper article at the time of the Catholic Encyclical, *Humanae Vitae*, demonstrating that there was opposition to banning birth control among Catholics, even Catholic priests.

"Birth Control League Will Begin Ninth Year of Activity in Minneapolis." 1937. *Minneapolis Star*. May 1, 1937. https://www.newspapers.com/image/187599037/.

This newspaper article helped me describe what birth control options were available before the pill and the health consequences of not having access to effective birth control. This article also described the beginnings of Planned Parenthood in Minnesota.

"Birth Control Topic of Minnesota League." 1916. *Minneapolis Star*. December 11, 1916. https://www.newspapers.com/image/181430904/.

I used this newspaper article to demonstrate that the topic of birth control took place as early as 1916 in Minnesota.

Brennan, William J., Jr., and Supreme Court of The United States. U.S. Reports: *Eisenstadt v. Baird*, 405 U.S. 438. 1971. Periodical. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep405438/.

This Supreme Court case document taught me about unmarried women's access to the birth control pill.

Douglas, William Orville, and Supreme Court of The United States. U.S. Reports: *Griswold v. Connecticut*, 381 U.S. 479. 1964. Periodical. Retrieved from the Library of Congress, https://www.loc.gov/item/usrep381479/.

I used this Supreme Court case document to show the availability of the pill for married women.

Flores, Kathy. "Chicano Attitudes Towards Birth Control." *CFMN Publications External, Imagenes de la Chicana*. n.d. MS Comisión Femenil Mexicana Nacional Archives: Series IX: Publications Box 56, Folder 20. University of California, Santa Barbara. N.d. Retrieved from Women's Studies Archive, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/HGHEYN170495063/WMNS?u=webdemo&sid=WMNS&xid=bf9ec8a4.

I used this newspaper article to show Mexican American women's views on the pill.

May, Elaine Tyler. 2024. Interview about May's book, *America and the Pill*.
I interviewed Elaine May to better understand her book and the points she makes about its impacts on American women's lives. We also discussed the current politics surrounding women's reproductive rights after the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

McCammon, Sarah. "How the Approval of the Birth Control Pill 60 Years Ago Helped Change Lives." NPR. May 9, 2020. https://www.npr.org/2020/05/09/852807455/how-the-approval-of-the-birth-control-pill-60-years-ago-helped-change-lives.
I used this newspaper article to show how the pill changed opinions on when to start a family.

Mead, Margaret. 1969. "American Women Are Dreaming the Impossible Dream." *Minneapolis Star*. October 26, 1969. https://www.newspapers.com/article/star-tribune-american-women-are-dreaming/135799313/.
This newspaper article was helpful because it outlined social changes for American women following the invention of the birth control pill.

Kearns, Margaret. 2023. Birth Control Pill Interview by Zania Hierlmaier.
I personally interviewed Margaret Kearns about her experiences taking the birth control pill in the early 1960s. This conversation helped me understand Catholic views on birth control.

Kornfield, Meryl, Timothy Bella, and Amy Wang. 2022. "Biden, Other Critics Fear Thomas's 'Extreme' Position on Contraception." *Washington Post*. June 24, 2022. https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2022/06/24/contraception-supreme-court-clarence-thomas-griswold/.
I used this newspaper article to highlight why birth control is still a controversial topic today.

Pam, Eleanor. "'I Was a Feminist Activist in the '70s When the Pill Was Legalized for All Women.'" *Newsweek*. March 9, 2020. https://www.newsweek.com/birth-control-pill-70s-america-womens-rights-1502522.
I used this magazine article to quote Eleanor Pam, a feminist activist and professor, on her views on the pill.

Thomas, Clarence J., and the Supreme Court of the United States. *Little Sisters of the Poor Saints Peter and Paul Home v. Pennsylvania*, 591 U.S. 2020. Reprint. Retrieved from https://www.supremecourt.gov/opinions/19pdf/19-431_5i36.pdf.
This court case helped me discuss legal changes long after the pill's invention that impacted women's ability to access the pill.

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