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Gender Timeline Element

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**The Opening of Margaret Sanger’s Clinic- 1916**

Before the birth control movement of the early 1900s, issues concerning women’s fertility, sexuality, reproductive health, and pregnancies were considered obscene and inappropriate. Margaret Sanger, an obstetric nurse, worked in the Lower East Side of New York City where high rates of poverty, infant mortality, maternal mortality, and home abortions existed.[[1]](#footnote-1) Because of lack of education and social welfare programs, many women were ill informed about women’s health and contraception; therefore, large numbers of women dealt with poor maternal health or unwanted pregnancy. Sanger was inspired to fight for women’s reproductive rights by Sadie Sachs, a woman who was told another pregnancy would kill her. When she became pregnant, she performed a self-induced abortion which caused a deadly blood infection. Although the validity of the story remains in question, Sanger claimed that Sachs was previously denied birth control information and supply by her doctor, as many other women were during this time.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Sanger strived to open clinics to supply women with information, contraceptives, and appropriate healthcare to ensure women had control over family size, their own bodies, and their health. She quit her nursing job and began researching birth control methods in hopes of finding a female controlled alternative to abstinence. She travelled to Europe and Asia researching and sharing her findings about contraceptive methods. Once she returned to the United States, she founded the National Birth Control League and circulated periodicals that advocated the use of birth control.[[3]](#footnote-3) She was convicted of violated the Comstock Law, which prohibited the distribution of obscene materials through the mail; however, her arrests and convictions catapulted her into the national spotlight and advanced her movement.

In October 1916, Sanger opened the first birth control clinic in Brooklyn, New York. With the help of her sister, 488 women were given information concerning contraception in ten days.[[4]](#footnote-4) Because of the potential lawsuits, no medical doctors were willing to staff the clinic.[[5]](#footnote-5) On opening day, the line for service became so long women waited in the street. Sanger gave talks to groups of women, instructions for using contraceptive methods, fitted women for diaphragms, and answered numerous questions. Furthermore, Sanger began compiling statistical data from the patients about their pregnancies.[[6]](#footnote-6) Ten days after opening, police invaded the clinic and arrested Sanger and her sister, Ethel Byrne, and seized the medical records. Sanger posted her bail the following morning and reopened the clinic. Police arrested her again, and she was charged with distributing indecent materials, running a public nuisance, and giving out contraceptive information. Following her second trial, Sanger was sentenced to thirty days in jail.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Sanger’s arrests brought more attention and support for her cause. Judge Crane, the judge from Sanger’s trial, decided that contraceptive information could be given to women if there was evidence of health need. Eventually, Sanger opened other clinics with medical doctors to provide health services to women. When compiling statistics, one of Sanger’s doctors found that out of 1, 655 female patients 1,434 had performed self-induced abortions, with one woman doing this forty times.[[8]](#footnote-8) In later years, the Comstock laws were abolished, which paved the way for substantial distribution of contraceptive information and materials. Sanger’s work shaped modern society as known today because there is adequate healthcare for women, prenatal care, free contraception, and ample amounts of material and educational opportunities for women in the United States.

1. Battaglia, Mary A. "Margaret Sanger: The Founder of the Birth Control Movement in the United States." The City University of New York. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Wardell, Dorothy. "Margaret Sanger: Birth Control's Successful Revolutionary." *American Journal of Public Health* 70, no. 7 (1980): 740. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)