

Forced Sterilization

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Historical Context

- This country has a long history of conducting medical experiments.
- Not all of these government approved medical experiments or research projects would pass today's human subject protection standards.
- Many of these medical/research projects were conducted with minority populations or with economically disadvantaged groups.

Medical Exploitation

- Pre Civil War, Dr. Hamilton experimented on slaves to test remedies for heatstroke.
- Dr. J. Marion Sims, known as the father of modern gynecology, used slave women to develop an operation to repair vaginal fistulas.

Compulsory Sterilization

- From the passage of the first compulsory sterilization law in 1907 until the 1960s, the U.S. permitted the compulsory sterilization of more than 60,000 people characterized as mentally deficient, insane, or epileptic.

Why did sterilization programs increasingly focus upon women?

- The gendered rhetoric of the eugenics movement powerfully illustrates the criminalization of certain classes of women.
- Eugenics as “the study of the agencies under social control that may improve or impair the racial qualities of future generation either physically or mentally” (Francis Galton).

Activists: Helping or hindering?

- In creating an image of the virtuous woman and mother deserving of rights, assistance and protection from the government, activists also created a polar opposite image which could be stigmatized—the unfit mother.
- The Birth Control Movement

The Law

- The first wave of sterilization laws had disappeared almost as quickly as they sprung up due to constitutional challenges.
- The 1927 Supreme Court decision in *Buck v. Bell*
- 1978 passage of Federal Sterilization Guidelines

Issues of Consent

- Women's status as dependents
- Medical and social work professionals' role in improper consent procedures
- Parole made sterilization a standard "choice" for women

Limited Access to Contraception

- Until the 1960s, couples' choice of contraceptives were mostly limited to diaphragms, douches, foam powders and condoms.
- Introduction of the birth control pill and Intra-Uterine Device (IUD)

Reproductive Health and Sterilization

- 1960s – 1970s: An estimated 100,000 to 150,000 poor women were sterilized annually under federally funded programs.
- Various studies revealed that the Indian Health Services sterilized between 25 and 50 percent of Native American women between 1970 and 1976.
- Between the 1930s and 1970s approximately one-third of Puerto Rico's female population of childbearing age had undergone sterilization. The US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) provided partial funding to Puerto Rico's sterilization program.

Why are these examples of history important?

- They provide us with the background knowledge needed to understand why some groups may not be receptive to participating in research.
- It also provides a timeline to show that these medical/research practices happened during our lifetime or that of our relatives.

Collective Memory and Historical Trauma

- Historical trauma captures the collective emotional and psychological injury (both over the life span and across generations) that is the product of a cataclysmic history of genocide.
- Often used to describe Holocaust survivors and their offspring and has been used to describe Native American tribal nations.

Have forced sterilizations ended?

- U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

Additional Sterilization

Articles/Resources

- Carey, A.C. (1998). Gender and compulsory sterilization programs in America: 1907-1950. *Journal of Historical Sociology*, 11(1), 74-105.
- Rutecki, G.W. (2011). Forced sterilization on Native Americans: Later twentieth century physician cooperation with national eugenic policies? *Ethics & Medicine*, 27(1), 33-42.
- Schoen, J. (2001). Between choice and coercion: Women and the politics of sterilization in North Carolina, 1929-1975. *Journal of Women's History*, 13(1), 132-156.

Additional Sterilization Articles/Resources

- Torphy, S.L. (2000). Native American women and coerced sterilizations: On the Trail of Tears in the 1970s. *American Indian Culture & Research Journal*, 24(2), 1-22.
- La Operación- a documentary by Ana Maria Garcia explores the controversial use of sterilization as a means of population control in Puerto Rico.

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