

**Far Too Radical, Then and Now: An Examination of Women's Body Autonomy Through  
the Work of Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Margaret Sanger**

Scout Mercer

Susan Lewis

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**Abstract:**

In this paper, I plan on showing the extraordinary and radical lives to two progressive feminists, Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Margaret Sanger, and how their platforms for women's body autonomy are still valuable and necessary as women's bodies are continuously dragged into politics. This paper will explore just how politicized women's rights to their own bodies has been, through the necessity of combatting legal and social codes targeting women. I plan on comparing Stanton and Sanger, in their lives and activism, to see what aspects of their work made them valuable for the women's rights movement. I will also bring the history of women's reproductive rights into the present, and how similar Stanton and Sanger's arguments for autonomy to the modern political climate concerning women's autonomy.

**Keywords:**

History, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Margaret Sanger, Women's Rights, Birth Control, Body Autonomy, Women's History

**Far Too Radical, Then and Now: An Examination of Women’s Body Autonomy Through  
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On Monday, April 23 of this year, the “Sex Ed Sit Out” occurred across the country, during which parents kept their children home from school and took part in protests against the “radical, graphic, tax-payer funded, gender-bending sex education.”<sup>1</sup> A grassroots movement that began in Charlotte, North Carolina, “Sex Ed Sit Out” was presented by leaders as a “day to protest sex education that they say has become graphic, hedonistic and ideological under the influence of pro-choice and gay rights groups.”<sup>2</sup> The movement was sparked in part by the adoption of a Planned Parenthood sponsored sexual education curriculum in some states that has received massive backlash from parents and socially conservative groups, such as the Family Research Council, the American Life League and the Liberty Council, for material they feel is pornographic and obscene who have joined together in order to prevent the “sexualization” of children. Elizabeth Johnston, leader of the movement and proclaimed social conservative, tweeted on April 17, 2018, days before the sit out was scheduled to occur “Planned Parenthood is mad because girls might not be promiscuous and might not get pregnant and might not need abortions” in response to a sex education law promoting an abstinence based curriculum in Kentucky.<sup>3</sup> Johnston is continuing to articulate a mode of thought on sexual and reproductive health that has been hard to break within American society. Her discussion of girl’s promiscuity as a danger, a leading cause of pregnancy, speaks to a deeper history of conservative values with

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<sup>1</sup> Fox 46 Web Staff, “Parents keep kids home from school for ‘sex ed sit out,’ attend rally in Uptown.” Fox 46. April 24, 2018. <http://www.fox46charlotte.com/news/local-news/parents-keep-kids-home-from-school-for-sex-ed-sit-out>

<sup>2</sup> Bradford Richardson, “Parents to pull kids from public schools to protest ‘graphic, gender-bending’ sex ed.” Washington Times. April 11, 2018.

<https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2018/apr/11/sex-ed-sit-out-april-23-protest-graphic-gender-ben/>

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Johnston, Twitter post, April 17, 2018, 10:36 a.m., [http://twitter.com/activist\\_mommy](http://twitter.com/activist_mommy)

deep roots among all classes of American culture. Her movement uses rhetoric to attack an institution that was founded to fight the same type of stereotypical and conservative thinking perpetuated by the “Sex Ed Sit Out”. Just over one hundred years after the founding of Planned Parenthood, it is still facing many of the same battles, which attack women’s promiscuity, and the obscenity of education materials.

### **THEM:**

While many proponents of birth control and contraception argued using the “rationale of improving women’s health” as well as “for economic reasons or to avoid passing on a disease or deformity,” Stanton and Sanger believed in the pleasure and enjoyment of “sexual union without concern of pregnancy, regardless of whatever other reasons they may have had to limit childbearing.”<sup>4</sup> Radical social reformers, Stanton and Sanger saw the ill effects that legal codes and social structures played on a woman’s power to control her body. So much of Stanton’s work was ignored and overlooked during her lifetime since she was advocating on a platform that was simply too profound for women’s rights advocates to accept during any part of the nineteenth century. Her writing could be avoided when it didn’t specifically pertain to suffrage or certain aspects of legal reform, such as property and wage rights for married women. But her beliefs in divorce, types of birth control, abortion and sexual freedom were pushed aside by her contemporaries.

Stanton and Sanger’s views on women’s autonomy have infrequently been compared, but their arguments show similarities concerning why women deserved full control of their bodies while they approached the problem from different standpoints: Stanton wrote and philosophized

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<sup>4</sup> Peter Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 11.

on her ideal for women's freedom, while Sanger took up her cause in New York City, providing direct assistance to women. Their shared ideology of women's autonomy took root in women's sexuality and reproduction. Both women built upon the notion of "voluntary motherhood, the right to say no to a husband's sexual demands."<sup>5</sup> This was the first step in fighting a legal and social system that fixated on women's virginity and chastity in terms of her marriage value. Both Stanton and Sanger recognized "the social value placed on female chastity" and its relation to the institution of marriage and childbearing.<sup>6</sup> Stanton, from her revolutionary years following the Civil War, and Sanger, during her years as a nurse during the early 1900s, were fighting against a set of cultural values that determined the "proper setting and purpose" of sexual relations "as a duty and a joy within marriage, and for the purpose of procreation."<sup>7</sup> Despite the many improvements in women's rights during the nineteenth century, such as education and property reform, sexuality remained a taboo subject up until Sanger began circulating literature directly addressing birth control and opening clinics. These women were taking sex, something meant for the privacy of the home, and making it a public social issue in a much different way than it had previously been discussed. Stanton and Sanger were reshaping the terms and stipulations for which women could enjoy sex. The prevailing standpoint "emphasized marriage as the only suitable outlet for sexual desire and warned against both masturbation and premarital sex," thereby limiting women to the role of sexual fulfillment for their husbands, instead of individuals and sexual beings in their own right.<sup>8</sup> Stanton and Sanger tackled these issues head on in order to promote women's sovereignty and freedom of choice. While Stanton had a wide audience,

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<sup>5</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 232.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., 145.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 18.

Sanger took her work further by not only distributing information but opening clinics, starting in the poorest districts of New York City, where she saw the harshest effects of poverty and pregnancy wearing women down.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was the most radical woman of her time. Her beliefs were too radical for her contemporaries to accept, and her arguments for women's freedoms, rights and autonomy are still used today to fight for women's power of her own body. Stanton's ideals over a woman's most fundamental right to her body, and her constant work to reform social and legal inequalities moved continuously toward her desire for women's full and complete freedom of body and choice. Stanton's ideals, of a free woman, capable of living her life based on her own agency and sovereignty, with full control over her body and reproductive functions, were profound testimonies of individuality, which even today raise numerous arguments. Stanton's beliefs were revolutionary during her time, and continue to be controversial today, as somehow women's right to body and mind are questionable and women need to continue fighting for something men take for granted. Women's role as wife and mother calls into question a woman's body and the right to her own fertility and reproduction. Stanton was able to see this during a period when women were first testing their political strength, but were unable to fully realize that their most pressing issue was their right to body autonomy. Stanton's belief that body autonomy and self-rule came above all other social reforms, yet she also recognized that each of the social and legal codes standing in the way of women's autonomy needed to be dismantled. For these reasons, of radical feminism and a freeing of sexuality, Stanton's contributions were largely lost in the larger women's rights movement, which was steadfastly focused on suffrage for most of her years of activism. As strongly as Stanton advocated for women's suffrage, she recognized the

limitations of the vote. Her reform was centered around her pivotal goal of women's autonomy, fully and completely. She was a thinker and a writer, and her years spent in a small upstate New York town, raising her children while her husband continued to travel and pursue his passions lent themselves to her dedication to women's freedom.

It wasn't simply that Stanton felt trapped by her homelife; she loved being a mother and was determined to have a large family with no less than seven children. She felt trapped by a set of social codes that demanded all women submit to the will of men, that they become dutiful and obedient wives and mothers. She saw the extent of women's second class citizenry as an intellectual, physical and social problem. Stanton's commitment to legal reform came long before her marriage to Henry Stanton, and in many ways is astonishing. She was raised with all the social conventions available to a wealthy young woman during the early half of the nineteenth century, yet somehow she was able to cultivate the most revolutionary of ideas concerning women's rights, ideas that were unappreciated and ignored long into the twentieth century, past Stanton's death. What Stanton believed in has remained the foundation of women's rights arguments for nearly two centuries, despite the lack of credit given to her words. Her radicalism obscured the value of her words; no one was ready to hear them. Even today, there are those who would rather ignore a woman's fundamental rights to her own body, with a misguided assumption that the legal status of women has reached the same status as men. But how could women, and how can women, be equal to men when even the right to their bodies is continuously attacked. Stanton's argument can most clearly be seen in her *Solitude of Self*, her goodbye to the women's rights movement, and the solidification of her life long activism, where she said,

The strongest reason for giving woman all the opportunities for higher education, for the full development of her faculties, her forces of mind and body; for giving her the most enlarged freedom of thought and action; a complete emancipation from all forms of bondage, of custom, dependence, superstition; from all the crippling influences of fear—is the solitude and personal responsibility of her own individual life. The strongest reason why we ask for woman a voice in the government under which she lives; in the religion she is asked to believe; equality in social life, where she is the chief factor; a place in the trades and professions, where she may earn her bread, is because of her birthright to self-sovereignty; because, as an individual, she must rely on herself.<sup>9</sup>

Here, Stanton addressed each of the core impediments to women’s fulfillment of legal and social rights. She brought the argument from the political to the personal, ensuring that the most basic element of all her years of reform came down to her central and core belief that a woman, as an individual, had access to her body.

Stanton’s arguments ranged over a wide range of topics, all boiling down to her foundation of women’s body autonomy, while Sanger narrowed her argument to birth control and abortion access as the primary means for a woman to maintain control over her body and choices. Their shared belief in women’s body autonomy was achieved through two separate paths that joined together in the overlap of birth control, abortion and motherhood. Sanger adhered to her belief that women should not be burdened and forced into motherhood, without the proper education and information concerning their own reproduction. Women lacked control because they lacked information and reliable methods that would allow them to prevent or limit

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<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “The Solitude of Self,” in *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton - Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writing, Speeches*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 247.

pregnancies. Sanger, working as a nurse, was able to witness the ways in which pregnancies deteriorated women's health and quality of life. Being able to control their fertility would put their lives in their own hands, and allow women to be viewed as valuable individuals beyond a reproductive standpoint. Sanger viewed sexuality, freedom of sexual expression, and pregnancy as the central impediment to a woman's ability for autonomy. Pregnancy and the sexual rights of husbands stripped women of their freedom of choice, taking their most basic rights. Sanger's beliefs, which she put her own body out on the line for, and faced arrests and attacks for her controversial and radical opinions, upheld her stance that "no woman can call herself free can call herself free who does not own and control her body" (Sanger). There is no better way to define Sanger and each step she took, each pamphlet and article and letter she wrote all addressed a woman's right to her own body.

Stanton, much less direct in her assessment of women's body autonomy, focused her arguments more widely, attacking and dismantling the many oppressive features of American society that worked to keep women from realizing and accessing their full potential. Sanger used her childhood as motivation and source of contention for how she saw women's place in the world: witnessing pregnancies, miscarriages, births and deaths, all taking place in a family too large, with not enough money, and a father more concerned with social issues than keeping his children clothed and fed. The distribution of work within the family, the ways that everything in the end seemed to fall on women, fueled Sanger in her quest for a way that women would not be tied to the home and matronly duties, but more able to pursue their own lives, independent and free of men if they so choose.

For Stanton and Sanger, as well as contemporary feminists, the question of body autonomy fell to choice. Women have the right to choose their paths in life, and no one should have any say in the matter. Their right to choose, their right to their body, were interwoven with their rights as free and sovereign individuals. Women's right to choose her own path in life is consistently challenged because of her ability for reproduction and motherhood, which both Stanton and Sanger realized they needed to separate women from in order to achieve equality; the freeing of women from strictly reproductive roles, separating womb and woman, promoted their ideology of women as individuals to the same extent of men.

Stanton and Sanger advocated for family planning because women should have the power to control their own fertility, not simply because it would improve life within the family and society. Both women recognized that birth control and family planning could improve society, decrease poverty, prevent crime and create future generations of model citizens, but they first and foremost argued that women had the right to control their own fertility based on their status as individuals, and not on any of the multiple perceived benefits on society and culture. They promoted the belief that women were equal to men as individuals and equally deserving of individual liberties, rights and freedoms, first and foremost over their own bodies. Motherhood, they both concluded, should be a voluntary choice, and women should be able to enjoy sex for its intimacy and pleasure without the fear of pregnancy. Both Stanton and Sanger looked at sex beyond a reproductive standpoint, and believed in the right of women to enjoy sex for non-procreative reasons.

### Stanton: Background/Biography

Elizabeth Cady Stanton was the eighth of eleven children born into the Cady household in Johnstown, New York in 1815, although only five of those children, all girls, would survive through adulthood. The daughter of a lawyer, she became well versed in the legal codes that were skewed to prevent women from achieving full equality. Cady Stanton was part of the first generation of United States women to attend higher education, as it slowly became available through the opening of a select few all female seminaries. Part of the wealthy elite of Upstate New York, Cady Stanton attended Troy Seminary, which offered an education comparable to that of some college educated young men. While other female academies were concerned with educating girls in embroidery and other homemaking skills, the Troy Seminary included a full, academically rigorous course load in the sciences, history and literature, that “introduced these young women to a rigorous academic education” while “balancing intellectual achievement with a conventional approach to women’s domestic roles.”<sup>10</sup> Gendered education was prominent in Cady Stanton’s school years, when discussions surrounding female education rights focused on girls’ ability to learn, without it ruining their capacity to reproduce. She was well educated and from a wealthy background, yet her class standing still didn’t provide her with the same freedoms and status as men. Very rarely had Stanton been limited in her childhood. Her access to education and the relative freedom that came with her family’s wealth and father’s status within New York State Congress meant that Stanton had faced little opposition in most aspects of her upbringing. Stanton points to the night of her oldest surviving brother’s death when she was eleven years old as the moment she decided that she would not be limited or held back by her

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<sup>10</sup> Lori Ginzberg, *Elizabeth Cady Stanton: An American Life* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2009), 23.

sex. Her father's exclamation to Stanton while mourning the death of a son who was poised to inherit his father's legacy shows the ways in which a legal system favored sons through property and inheritance. Stanton admits that she and her sisters "early felt that this son filled a larger place in our father's affection and future plans than the five daughters together."<sup>11</sup> When Daniel Cady announced "oh, my daughter, I wish you were a boy!" he was expressing just how devastating the loss of a son should be in a society that favored men. With that being said, Stanton then resolved that she would "not give so much time as heretofore to play, but would study and strive to be at the head of all [her] classes and thus delight [her] father's heart."<sup>12</sup> Stanton decided overnight that in order to equal boys she would have to be "learned and courageous."<sup>13</sup> For a young Stanton craving the affection of a grieving father, she equated boyhood with studying Latin, Greek, and mathematics and learning to ride horses. Bringing home a prize for her accomplishments in Greek, Stanton eagerly showed her father, yet his exclamation that "ah, you should have been a boy" left her in tears.<sup>14</sup> Her father's disappointment that Stanton was a girl was not only in regards to her inability to inherit his law practice, finances or property, but that her intelligence, talents and skills should be wasted with the limited opportunities available to her gender. Stanton was always top in her class, yet where would her intellect get her as a woman? Her childhood and teenage years were full of fun, as she admits that not much labor was expected from her. Her family's wealth meant that unlike her contemporaries, such as Susan B. Anthony and Lucy Stone who had to support themselves with the few occupations open to women at the period, Stanton was never required to work more than

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<sup>11</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More (1815-1897): Reminiscences of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), 20.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

light housekeeping and tidying, but in her memoir explains that her time was “not wholly given to pleasure” and she and her sisters were “required to keep [their] rooms in order, mend and make [their] clothes, and do [their] own ironing.”<sup>15</sup> In comparison to other girls her age of a lower economic status, Stanton’s girlhood was for the most part comfortable and enjoyable. And once her schooling was completed, Stanton’s time was spent at parties, riding horses, and idle hours for reading and debate with her father’s law acquaintances. She also spent a considerable amount of time at the home of her Abolitionist and reformer cousin, Gerrit Smith. Stanton’s assessment of Smith determined “he was a reformer and was very radical in many of his ideas”, and in comparison to the relative conservatism and traditional values of her parents. The Smith household provided Stanton with an outlet to formulate some of her own more radical ideas and hone her skill for debate.<sup>16</sup> It was during her time surrounded by radical social reformers that Stanton “felt a new inspiration in life and was enthused with new ideas of individual rights and the basic principles of government” and was able to further “learn republican principles and ethics.”<sup>17</sup> It was during her visits to her cousin’s home that Stanton began to better contextualize what she had experienced growing up, knowing that hers was treated as the lesser sex. It was also where she was introduced to Henry Stanton, the man who would later become her husband despite the strong objections of her parents.

In her role as wife and mother, through her work for the Abolition movement, and her husband’s lack of support for women’s rights, Stanton faced the limitations of her gender that she was able to ignore during her childhood. Her wealth allowed her more freedom than most of

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<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More (1815-1897): Reminiscences of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), 47.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

her peers, but when recognizing her impediments, as a wealthy and educated woman, she saw how all women would be constrained by the laws preventing them from full political power, and control over their bodies.

### **Sanger: Background/Biography**

Margaret Sanger, born Margaret Higgins, was the sixth of eleven children in a large, poor family in Corning, New York. Growing up, she experienced first hand the tolls of pregnancy through the multiple births and miscarriages her mother underwent. Beyond the birth of eleven children, Margaret calculated that her mother had at least seven miscarriages, two of which were so severe the family feared she wouldn't live through the ordeal. Sanger's idea of motherhood was shaped through the ways in which her own mother sacrificed her very body for her children, and the physical demands it required of her to raise such a large family. Motherhood should not be a detriment to women's health, but that was what Sanger was continuously exposed to. As a child, Margaret Sanger saw the divide between rich and poor and began making the connections and associations that she would carry with her for the rest of her life. Sanger assessed that "very early in my childhood I associated poverty, toil, unemployment, drunkenness, cruelty, quarreling, fighting, debts, jails with large families" and she saw the pattern continued during her years as a nurse in the poorer parts of New York City.<sup>18</sup> Sanger, as part of the lower class, saw how "every poor family was burdened with many children" while the wealthy families had comparatively few children who were always well dressed, clean and cared for.<sup>19</sup> Sanger's upbringing encouraged her to approach birth control, a term she created to denote all forms of

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<sup>18</sup> Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1969), 5.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

contraception and family planning, as a form of reproductive health and education service to working class and immigrant women.

The social, economic and physical strain of raising children shaped Sanger's understanding of the world and influencing her later activism, having seen her parents, and her mother especially, struggle to financially support a large family. She saw the financial necessity that required "the older children of the family ... to go to work to help meet the rent, buy winter coal and pay grocery bills."<sup>20</sup> The financial burden of large families resulted in children dropping out of school early to help support their families, setting them up for lower paying jobs in the future due to a limited education. The cycle of poverty would be difficult to break out of. Sanger's early understanding of the relationship between education, poverty and family size pushed her to pursue a higher education with the dream of one day becoming a doctor, able to help alleviate the pain and suffering she witnessed throughout her child and early teen years. Sanger concedes that "it was a hard childhood, which compelled one to face the realities of life before one's time."<sup>21</sup> The poverty that Sanger was born into shaped her resolve to not only provide a better life for herself and own future children, but also for thousands of other women who's suffering could and should be prevented.

## **WHAT THEY WERE UP AGAINST:**

### **General Background**

The desire to control family size and spacing between births was not a new concept during the 19th century, but there was a greater social push for more reliable methods and devices by which to achieve a small, evenly spaced family. Prior to a commercial contraceptive

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<sup>20</sup> Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1969), 10.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

market, birth control and family planning was a more intimate, private matter that used natural and homeopathic methods, such as tinctures and douches made from herbs meant to bring on menstruation and periods of abstinence in order to prevent pregnancy. The industrialization of America during the later half of the 19th century encouraged much of what had been private and personal family planning into a commercialized and marketable part of the economy as couples continued to look for more effective ways to control fertility. The problem arose with a more publicly advertised and commercialized approach to birth control devices, as much of society was inclined to “view contraceptives as an inducement to promiscuity” and promoters of contraception were encouraging “the desirability of non-procreative sex” and the idea “that intercourse could be ‘just for fun.’”<sup>22</sup> Pre-industrial American couples utilized “prolonged lactation, male withdrawal, abstinence, suppositories, and douching solutions made out of common household ingredients” as their primary methods of birth control.<sup>23</sup> However, it was possible to purchase “condoms made from linen and the intestines of animals and fish” that were imported from more industrial parts of Europe.<sup>24</sup> Contraception use and family planning was widespread in America, yet somehow the social perception remained grounded in the fear that sexual promiscuity and licentiousness would run rampant with the use of products designed for pleasure that had the power to free “sex from marriage and childbearing.”<sup>25</sup> Even more prominent than condoms “were abortifacients, orally ingested compounds that induced miscarriage.”<sup>26</sup> These common herbs, such as savin and pennyroyal, often grew wild or in a

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<sup>22</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 17.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

small kitchen garden, and knowledge of their medical uses were shared among women and midwives. Antebellum America fostered a “public toleration of abortion, which retained common-law protection if done before quickening”, the medical term to denote fetal movement.

<sup>27</sup> The lure of abortion, or as it was referred to in advertisement as “pregnancy preventatives”, was that “abortion then carried less risk than childbirth.”<sup>28</sup> Women would utilize a wide variety of birth control practices, combining two or more common practices, in order to prevent pregnancy or dispell a newly fertilized egg.

The need for multiple approaches arose from the lack of a single, one hundred percent effective form of contraception besides abstinence. Before birth control and contraceptives were FDA approved and regulated, there was no standard for quality or safety. Birth control and contraceptive devices were illegal and part of a massive black market that utilized mail order catalogs and careful language in order to disguise the actual use of the object. Their effectiveness was rarely clinically tested, and almost anyone could sell their device and method if they were clever enough to market it discreetly.

Condoms, before their modern latex quality tested days, “had a short shelf life” and “deteriorated rapidly”, while also having a tendency to be “both uncomfortable and poor retainers of fluid.”<sup>29</sup> The consequences of an unregulated black market birth control industry meant that couples using condoms risked a frighteningly high risk of pregnancy, which was confirmed by “a 1924 study by physician and birth control advocate Robert Latou Dickinson” who “found a 50 percent failure rate among couples using skin and rubber condoms at three birth

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<sup>27</sup> Peter Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 10.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>29</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 70.

control clinics in New York and London.”<sup>30</sup> Compared to modern standards of birth control effectiveness, this seems abysmal, but when in regards to the most highly doctor recommended rhythm method, condoms appealed to much of the country for their effectiveness and affordability. The rhythm method, seen as the only truly moral form of family planning since it didn’t alter or impede the movement of sperm, encouraged couples to only engage in intercourse during the woman’s safe period, which was incorrectly targeted at the midpoint of her menstrual cycle. This is now known to be a woman’s most fertile time, which led to most couples realizing quickly either through their own experience or other close friends and family, that this method was highly ineffective and to look for more reliable alternatives. Another increasingly popular, free, easy to use and easy to learn method was male withdrawal, or coitus interruptus which “had a failure rate of about 20 percent”, which is remarkably better than most devices available during the mid to late 19th century.<sup>31</sup> The problem with this method, surprisingly so effective, was “doctors’ remonstrations against withdrawal, which linked it to insanity, impotence, blindness and a host of other ailments.”<sup>32</sup>

Despite sex remaining a relatively taboo subject, “the extent of one survey of the sexual habits of 19th-century women confirms that sexual intimacy and pleasure had become a cornerstone of marriage and that the regular use of birth control made this goal attainable.”<sup>33</sup> What Stanton and Sanger hoped to achieve was to promote the acceptance of birth control and family planning as one part of a woman’s right to control her body and fertility. These women believed that it always came down to the woman in her right to choose her role as mother. In

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>31</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 72.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>33</sup> Peter Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 11.

their personal home lives, Stanton and Sanger embraced their roles as mothers, while promoting the idea that each woman had the right to choose what was right for her. During Stanton's life and most of Sanger's life, there were really only two options for women: marry and bear children, risk dying during childbirth or early in life due to complications, or remain unmarried. Many women did choose to remain unmarried, since that option allowed them more freedom within their life choices. They wouldn't have to legally submit to a husband. For women that did marry, Stanton and Sanger witnessed how deeply pregnancy and childbirth shaped their lives. Sex could and should be something enjoyed by women without resulting in pregnancy, unless that was desired.

The root of Stanton and Sanger's arguments for birth control centered on the idea that women should have the right to choose the circumstances for if and when a woman was to become pregnant, relying on the notion of voluntary womanhood and the ways in which that principle "gave women the right to say no and to choose the circumstances under which they became pregnant."<sup>34</sup> Women's ability to have control over their bodies' ability to reproduce was a radical concept, as prior to this period and growth of the women's rights movement, there was very little thought given to a woman's claim to her body. The problem for women's lack of bodily autonomy centered on the view of women's primary role as mother and "opposition to family limitation was steeped in conservative values, centered on preserving a traditional concept of sexuality wed to reproduction, and focused on limiting female sexual independence and keeping women from taking control over their own reproductive lives."<sup>35</sup> The prevailing concept of sex as strictly for reproduction set the tone for the birth control movement as dirty and

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<sup>34</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 17.

<sup>35</sup> Peter Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 12.

immoral. Family planning was a common practice employed by families looking to monitor the spacing between births as well as the total amount of children and was responsible for the smaller family sizes found in middle class families during the 19th and early 20th centuries. What this meant, however, was a utilization of natural birth control practices, such as abstinence and the rhythm method, which focused on the frequency of sexual intercourse and the time during a woman's menstruation and ovulation cycle. **Social Expectations**

Societal preconceptions of women's status in relation to men was deeply ingrained in American culture, with little change up through the 19th century. Women's jobs and responsibilities may have shifted and evolved, but their status as secondary and supportive addendums to their husbands and families remained consistent. Women's roles as mothers and homemakers pigeonholed them into a sexual standard opposite that of men. Men and women's sexual expectations created a division within society of their capacities, and this sexual double standard made it difficult for reform and the expansion of women's rights. Women's virginity and purity was a commodity within American society, something to be utilized and controlled, based on the "feminine myth which told women they were purer, more generous and morally better than men."<sup>36</sup> On the opposite side of the spectrum, there was the accepted idea of "male sexuality as bestial, egocentric, antisocial instinct that must somehow be regulated."<sup>37</sup> This mentality and mode of thinking set women as saviors and moral guides, in charge of protecting and nurturing their children and providing a safe haven for their husbands. If women were

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<sup>36</sup> David Kennedy, *Birth Control in America: The Career of Margaret Sanger* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 60.

<https://quod-lib-umich-edu.libdatabase.newpaltz.edu/cgi/t/text/pageviewer-idx?c=acls;cc=acls;rgn=full%20text;idno=heb00663.0001.001;didno=heb00663.0001.001;view=image;seq=2;node=heb00663.0001.001%3A1;page=root;size=100>

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 60.

allowed to engage in sexual acts beyond its reproductive role, they would be engaging in the same types of bestial act they were supposed to be protecting their husbands from. Women who were sexually promiscuous, licentious or prostitutes were dangerous and corrupting; they could lure men from their virtuous wives and degrade the moral fabric of society, they could bring disease into their homes. The fault would always fall on the women, the wife for not better protecting, serving and honoring her husband, and the prostitute for luring him into depravity, but the blame would rarely, if ever, fall on the man. The sexual double standard, easily seen, was a major cause of contention among social reformers.

With the growth of the mainstream women's rights movement came equal growth in opposition to the movement and its many facets. The women's rights campaign featured a wide range of issues and goals, from equal political representation, legal reform, and reproductive freedom. As personal issues, these were all taken in different measures by different women and sectors of the movement. Some women chose to focus on the equal political representation as their single goal, hoping that voting rights would enable women to gain equality through political means. For women like Stanton and Sanger, the fight for equality needed to incorporate the many inequities women were facing as a whole. Each piece needed to be rectified to fix the whole. Women's rights to their own bodies, reproductive freedom and the ability to embrace sexuality played a major role in the many aspects of the entirety of the movement, since it was vital that women be autonomous over their own bodies and lives if they were to fight the inequities of a primarily patriarchal society.

### **Comstock**

Commonly known as the Comstock Act, named after the man behind its passage, the 1873 act, in addition to an early anti-obscenity law, was responsible for the “Suppression of Trade in, and Circulation of Obscene Literature and Articles of Immoral Use.”<sup>38</sup> Birth control and reproductive health was lumped into the same category as prostitution, pornography and gambling due to a growing social purity movement “linking contraceptives to sexual licentiousness, brothels, and bars that prompted Comstock to classify contraceptives as an obscenity in the first place.”<sup>39</sup> The act was in response to “increased contraceptive use and not necessarily as an effective deterrent to family limitation” since it was use of contraception that was immoral and not the actual conscious effort to control family size and the spacing of births.<sup>40</sup> The control of perceived vices in maintaining the moral and ethical standards of society became the central focus of many temperance and women’s rights groups, who saw sexual vices as a plight that tore apart families and led to a rise in venereal diseases. Contraceptives were linked to the fear of growing promiscuity in society, while the benefits they provided women in controlling their own fertility and sexuality were ignored. Instead of legalizing contraception, the government implemented more laws that made birth control and family planning resources even harder to obtain. The legal impediments to safe and effective birth control put many women, like Stanton and Sanger, up against the federal government. On multiple occasions, Stanton was arrested and put on trial for breaking the Comstock Act, starting with her attempts to publish her magazine *The Woman Rebel*, which covered, in great and medical detail, sexual health and reproduction for women.

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<sup>38</sup> Peter Engelman, *A History of the Birth Control Movement in America* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011), 15.

<sup>39</sup> Andrea Tone, *Devices and Desires: A History of Contraceptives in America* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2001), 28.

<sup>40</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 60.

## Religion

Elizabeth Cady Stanton determined that religion was the number one contributor to women's oppression. The Bible, she believed, had been interpreted in such a way that it denied women their basic freedoms, and her rewritten *Women's Bible* worked to break down the passages that had been used for so long to justify the second class status of women in the Western World. The Christian ideals and morals espoused by preachers condemned women for their sexuality and demanded that sex be confined to marriage solely for reproduction. Stanton breaks down each part of the Bible that speaks of women's oppression and argues with the contemporary interpretations and translations of the text, using her knowledge of religion that she was raised with to dismantle what she believes to be false assumptions.

Stanton saw the way in which religion was strongly tied to the morality and ethics of American social life. Christianity was a major part of American life, and as such preachers had a strong hold on shaping the morality and determining the way sexuality was viewed by the general population. Clergymen, more than doctors, had the greatest exposure and platform to promote the rules for controlling sexuality and sexual expression. The foundation of American sexual thought was rooted in colonial Puritan roots where "formal moral teaching confirmed what popular speech implied."<sup>41</sup> The collusion of Church and State created a society in which the morality of individuals was determined through sermon and law, where "clergy and lawmakers warned that sex ought to be limited to marriage and aimed at procreation rather than mere

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<sup>41</sup> John D'Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 16.

physical gratification.”<sup>42</sup> Stanton recognized the ways that “these moral authorities attempted to socialize youth to channel sexual desires toward marriage.”<sup>43</sup> The role of church began to deteriorate throughout the nineteenth century, “although ministers continued to offer sexual advice” and marriage, while being a state contract, was a religiously sanctioned one.<sup>44</sup> Stanton fought to further separate sexuality from control of the church and free women from religious constraints that denied them full individuality.

### **WHAT THEY WANTED TO DO:**

#### **Stanton: Motivation/Agenda**

Stanton’s devotion to women’s rights in many seems out of place. Coming from a wealthy family, attending a prestigious girls’ school, and in most ways, growing up with little to no limitations or obstacles. Yet she still became one of the most outspoken reformers of the nineteenth century, calling “attention to the legal disabilities under which” women labored.<sup>45</sup> The role of women as mothers was something Stanton understood and respected, but she saw the absurdity of laws that neglected to protect women and children, and stripped women of their guardianship once the child was born. The law favored men, which Stanton recognized as a gross injustice to women’s position as mother. Stanton was appalled by the laws which allowed for wife beating, as well as children. Women could not protect herself from her husband, let alone her children, who she had no legal right to. Stanton felt the oppression of women in society “that can not take in the idea that men and women are alike; and so long as the mass rest in this

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>43</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 16

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>45</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Address to the Legislature of New York on Women’s Rights, February 14, 1854” in *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton - Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writing, Speeches*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 45.

delusion, the public mind will not be so much startled by the revelations made of the injustice and degradation of woman's position."<sup>46</sup> The injustices that Stanton saw in American laws stripped a married woman of her rights, so that "her person, her time, her services are the property of another."<sup>47</sup> Married women had nothing that was truly theirs, not even their bodies. Stanton strove to dismantle the laws and social restrictions that she saw most closely associated with a woman's lack of freedom; dress reform, property rights, age of consent and marital rape. In a court decision that upheld both a father's rights to custody and wives as property, Stanton petitioned against the "old common law of the barbarous ages" that upholds "degrading statutes on marriage and divorce."<sup>48</sup> She demanded that there needed to be "an entire revision of our laws on marriage and divorce making man and woman in all respects equal partners."<sup>49</sup> The sexual mistreatment of married women was no less than legalized prostitution, something that Stanton devoted her life to, and was cast aside for. Women's rights to their bodies, both within and outside of marriage, was Stanton's strongest belief, and one that she was unable to see truly fulfilled in her lifetime.

### **Sanger: Motivation/Agenda**

Being the middle child in such a large family, Sanger recalls "as far back as I can remember, she was always pregnant or nursing a baby" when discussing her mother.<sup>50</sup> Sanger's memory of her mother was overshadowed by the constant care and attention to raising children,

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<sup>46</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Address to the Legislature of New York on Women's Rights, February 14, 1854" in *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton - Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writing, Speeches*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 50.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "Speech to the McFarland-Richardson Protest Meeting, May, 1869" in *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton - Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writing, Speeches*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 128.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 128.

<sup>50</sup> Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1969), 11.

as well as the physical drain that pregnancy, birth and nursing has on a woman's body.

Surrounded by a family that increased nearly every year, Sanger admits that "sex knowledge was a natural part of life. I had always known where babies come from."<sup>51</sup> But knowing where babies come from, and knowing reproductive health and prevention was another, which Sanger realized was "a curious twist of father's makeup that, advanced as he was in his attitude toward economic and social questions, free trade and women's suffrage, he never knew a thing about contraception until some years after Mother's death."<sup>52</sup> Sanger's "mother bore eleven children; she died at forty-eight" while her "father lived until he was eighty."<sup>53</sup> So blatant and easy to see is the ways in which childbirth, especially so frequently, ended women's life prematurely. And of these eleven pregnancies that resulted in successful births, Sanger recalls that her mother must have experienced close to seven miscarriages, two of which were so brutal they nearly killed her. Sanger's life was deeply shaped by her mother's experience, being called home from school as a teen to care for "Mother who had been growing thinner and frailer since the last baby was born."<sup>54</sup> Despite Sanger admitting to a closer relationship with her father, the effects of her mother's experience in the Higgins' household deeply impacted Sanger's outlook on motherhood and her own approach to raising a family later in life.

With an early life surrounded by the overlap of social and economic inequalities, exposure to the lasting physical effects of pregnancy and childbirth on the body and various health risks associated with frequent births, Sanger's goal to improve the lives of women through proper sexual and reproductive health education was a noble calling. Her desire to finish her

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<sup>51</sup> Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1969), 14.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

education while suffering through poverty, thanks in part to her older, unmarried sisters, showed a perseverance that would be part of her character for the rest of her life in her fight for women's rights to their bodies.

Sanger's education, like much of the family's financial situation, was a group effort. After a falling out at her previous school, it was decided that in order to continue her education she would be sent to a boarding school in Claverack, New York, which "took the place of high school and preparatory school" and there Sanger hoped to "prepare for Cornell College."<sup>55</sup> The entire family "jointly paid tuition" while Sanger worked part time to help pay for board.<sup>56</sup> Her older, unmarried sisters, Mary and Nan, provided her with "necessary clothes and books and other requirements", using their earnings as single working women to provide their younger sister with the means to pursue an education higher than what most members of the family had ever received.<sup>57</sup>

For her seemingly radical ideas of sexual freedom, Sanger upheld the principle that "marriage and motherhood were at that period, and still are, organically bound up with love and romance."<sup>58</sup> Sanger supported marriage and childbearing as an extension of a couple's love, but that didn't mean that sex should be bound up in the same requirements. Not every sexual encounter needed to result in pregnancy, which should be a choice a couple made together when they felt emotionally and financially ready. Sanger wholeheartedly believed in making sure every child was wanted and could be adequately cared for, as well as ensuring the health and safety of the mother.

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<sup>55</sup> Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1969), 23.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

## HOW THEY COMBATED IT

### Stanton: Activism

Elizabeth Cady Stanton earnestly and expressively began her journey into political activism at the Seneca Falls Convention in 1848 after years of petitioning for legal reform to the New York State Legislature, where she was responsible for leading the convention and delivering her *Declaration of Sentiments*. Her opening speech set the tone for the convention, and for the rest of her crusade against sexual inequality, when she proclaimed that “woman alone can understand the height, the depth, the length, and the breadth of her own degradation” and if fell to women to take up their fight against the injustices they faced.<sup>59</sup> Stanton professed in her opening address that,

We are assembled to protest against a form of government, existing without the consent of the governed -- to declare our right to be free as man is free, to be represented in the government which we are taxed to support, to have such disgraceful laws as give man the power to chastise and imprison his wife, to take the wages which she earns, the property which she inherits, and, in the case of separation, the children of her love.<sup>60</sup>

The grievances that Stanton highlighted in her Seneca Falls speech would be her battle cry for the rest of her life as she tackled property and wage reform, marriage and divorce reform and child custody, the right of women to sit on juries and their suffrage. Using her knowledge of laws of coverture that rendered married women legally invisible, Stanton set out to dismantle a system that dealt in a male rhetoric, both in language and application.

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<sup>59</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Address Delivered at Seneca Falls,” in *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton - Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writing, Speeches*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 28.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

Barely three months prior to the Seneca Falls Convention, New York state passed “the Married Woman’s Property Bill, which had given rise to some discussion on woman’s rights in New York” and “encouraged action on the part of women.”<sup>61</sup> Stanton “had spoken before committees of the legislature years before, demanding equal property rights for women” in addition to circulating “petitions for the Married Woman’s Property Bill for many years.”<sup>62</sup> She admits that the passage of the bill was due in part to the lobbying of men “who desired to see their life-long accumulations descend to their daughters and grandchildren rather than pass into the hands of dissipated, thriftless sons-in-law,” which included Stanton’s own father.<sup>63</sup> Following the passage of this bill, and the Seneca Falls Convention, that drew a surprising amount of support, Stanton turned to the other impediments denying women full autonomy to their bodies and lives.

Elizabeth Cady Stanton “drew parallels between prostitution and marriage. In both institutions, women engaged in sexual relations in return for economic support. Marriage and divorce laws trapped women in unhappy relationships” and “made it impossible for them to escape from drunken or sexually abusive husbands.”<sup>64</sup> Stanton lobbied for “more liberal divorce laws” in the hope that women would be able to gain back more control to their bodies.<sup>65</sup> Her platform advocating for women’s autonomy focused on attacking “all forms of male sexual privilege.”<sup>66</sup> She was well aware of the ways in which husband’s took advantage of their wives

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<sup>61</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, *Eighty Years and More (1815-1897): Reminiscences of Elizabeth Cady Stanton* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1898), 150.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>64</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 153.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

and bodies, including “wife beating and marital rape.”<sup>67</sup> Stanton threw herself into divorce reform in order “to open the doors of escape to those who dwell in continual antagonism, to the unhappy wives of drunkards, libertines, lunatics and tyrants.”<sup>68</sup> Divorce would provide women with the means to end a marriage that violated their rights to their bodies. By allowing divorce to end unhappy and abusive marriages, Stanton argued that marriages would be based more on mutual love and affection than power and oppression. Stanton did not wish to “embitter the relations of those who *are* contented and happy” but instead instill the idea that “freedom strengthens and purifies the bond of union” and that husbands if did not own wives as property “but are bound together only by affection, marriage will be a life long friendship.”<sup>69</sup> The legal codes surrounding marriage stipulated that women were appendages to their husbands and were legally required to submit in all aspects of the marriage. Not all husbands were abusive tyrants, but Stanton demanded that “if marriage is a civil contract, it should be subject to the laws of all other contracts” and that women had the right to leave such a contract if it violated their basic human rights and freedoms.<sup>70</sup>

Despite Stanton’s desire to have no less than seven children, she knew that large families were not for every woman, and it was up to each woman to control her fertility as she saw fit. Stanton, in her discussion of home and family life, mentions that “there is a good deal said rather deploringly about the small families of the American people” but asks her audience to “weigh the momentous consequences of bringing badly organized children into the world.”<sup>71</sup> The

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 154.

<sup>68</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, “Home Life,” in *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton - Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writing, Speeches*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 134.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 134-135.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 134.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 138.

benefits of small families meant that each child would be able to receive the care and love they needed to grow and develop, with a lessened economic strain on the family and low health impact on the mother. Stanton covered each topic that limited a woman's power and control of her body, including dress reform that forced women into constricting corsets and dresses. For every limitation to a woman's autonomy, Stanton tackled it with eloquence and power, while also striving toward the idea that women were equal to men and deserved the same social and political power. Stanton's argument during her decades of feminist work never wavered from her adherence to women's rights and "what belongs to her as an individual."<sup>72</sup> Stanton believed that each woman was "the arbiter of her own destiny" and as such must "use all her faculties for her own safety and happiness."<sup>73</sup> Stanton's convictions placed women in control of their own lives, so that "as a citizen, as a member of a great nation, she must have the same rights as all other members, according to the fundamental principles of our Government" but "viewed also as a woman, an equal factor in civilization, her rights and duties are the same - individual happiness and development."<sup>74</sup> Stanton preached from a platform of male and female equality and was rejected by the movement she helped to create. She saw the differences of men and women, but was not able to accept that these differences allowed for inequality. Stanton believed that men and women were only different in gender, and nothing more, and their rights were equal.

### **Sanger: Activism**

Margaret Sanger's nursing career, after giving up her aspirations of becoming a doctor, allowed her a much more intimate role in the lives of her patients. Working in poverty stricken

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<sup>72</sup> Elizabeth Cady Stanton, "The Solitude of Self," in *The Elizabeth Cady Stanton - Susan B. Anthony Reader: Correspondence, Writing, Speeches*, ed. Ellen Carol DuBois (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1992), 247.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

districts within New York City, Sanger describes how she constantly “saw the ill effects of childbearing on women of the poor. Mothers whose physical condition was inadequate to combat disease were made pregnant, through ignorance and love, and died. Children were left motherless, father left hopeless and desperate, often feeling like criminals, blaming themselves for the wife’s death - all because these mothers were denied by law knowledge to prevent conception.”<sup>75</sup> The reality of illegal birth control meant that women, regardless of their marital status, faced the high risk of pregnancy, the ensuing complications and possible death. Sanger’s ideals of love within a marriage should have included a healthy and happy sexual union, yet the fears of pregnancy often kept couples from physical expressions of affection, or simply the pleasure of sex. The limited resources available concerning sexual health and reproduction endangered the lives of countless women, which Sanger realized with painful clarity, as she watched beloved wives and mothers die from childbirth and complications. She witnessed marriages crumble as couples attempted to use the only ethical and moral mode of family planning as prescribed by doctors: abstinence. Instead of blaming those working class and poor families for their ignorance, as many of the doctors did on the house calls, Sanger “was appalled by the misery of working-class women who had virtually no control over their fertility, and bore child after child despite grinding poverty.”<sup>76</sup> Sanger was determined to break the cycle of poverty, childbearing and death that plagued working class women by providing materials for education concerning reproductive and sexual health. Her years abroad in Europe granted her the opportunity to gather information on public health and contraceptive devices, so that when she returned to New York she began publishing “her own magazine, *The Woman Rebel*” that covered

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<sup>75</sup> Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1969), 44.

<sup>76</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 232.

multiple topics but “made female autonomy, including control over one’s body and the right to sexual expression, the centerpiece of the magazine.”<sup>77</sup> Sanger was promoting ideals that “signaled a profound shift in the sexual norms that had reigned supreme among the middle class for half a century” by granting the same type of reproductive control to the lower and working classes.<sup>78</sup> Sanger recognized the class privilege and access to family planning techniques, as well as the middle class ideal of fewer children for a lessened economic and financial strain. She wanted to expand upon those ideals and provide the same option to working class women. Sanger, at the same time that she was campaigning for women’s access to contraception for health reasons, was simultaneously addressing the topic of female sexuality, which had for so long been repressed within American society, because of “the importance of chastity.”<sup>79</sup> Sanger’s crusade advocated for “fertility control for women through access to contraceptive devices rather than abstinence” which “implied an unequivocal acceptance of female sexual acceptance” and at the same time “weakened the link between sexual activity and procreation, altered the meaning of the marriage bond, and opened the way for more extensive premarital sexual behavior among women.”<sup>80</sup> Sanger’s work began the deterioration of “ideals of piety and purity” for women and encouraged their growth as fully sexual beings, with values and skills that deserved to grow in the same way as men, unhindered by forced motherhood through ignorance.<sup>81</sup> The growth in reproductive education allowed women to take control of their own lives by providing them with the knowledge and ability to control their fertility, while being able to enjoy sex on its own.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 232.

<sup>78</sup> John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, *Intimate Matters: A History of Sexuality in America* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 233.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 233.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 234.

In Margaret Sanger's quest for women's body autonomy, she also staunchly supported the suffrage movement, but recognized the shortcomings that political power held for women who did not control their bodies, admitting that "to secure for women the right to vote and be acknowledged as equals in a civilized community was truly a great and noble task, but it was not enough."<sup>82</sup> She was also impressed with the work of doctors to create a solution that would "relieve women of the pangs of childbirth ... but it was not enough."<sup>83</sup> While "both of these causes were necessary to our civilization and needed champions to espouse them ... neither of them went as deep in social evolution none were so necessary to woman's progress as the right to control her own generative functions and the right to obtain knowledge for this purpose."<sup>84</sup> But for Sanger, "neither of the tempting missions went deep enough to satisfy my prevailing desire to eradicate from the social system the negative attitude toward women and the exclusion of her fundamental right."<sup>85</sup> Her ultimate goal of opening Planned Parenthood Clinics for women and children was met with aggression and hostility from law enforcement, who saw them as a breach of social conduct and propriety, yet women would line up to wait for hours when a new clinic opened, eager to receive proper reproductive health care, child exams, and literature as well as contraception they could use to limit their future pregnancies.

### **LASTING LEGACY: WHY THEY MATTER**

Stanton and Sanger began fighting a battle for women's autonomy that today still faces a number of obstacles. Much of the arguments that Stanton and Sanger faced, concerning women's sexuality and reproductive education, still plague the contemporary debate surrounding women's

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<sup>82</sup> Margaret Sanger, *My Fight for Birth Control* (New York: Maxwell Reprint Company, 1969), 74.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 73 - 74.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

rights to her own reproductive functions. Movements that attack sexual education in school, the debate over healthcare coverage for birth control options and the question of Planned Parenthood's funding all center around the right of women to take control of their bodies, and not be subject to pregnancy without their decision and consent. Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Margaret Sanger were revolutionary women who refused to allow themselves to be subject to the laws and social expectations or to be content with their inferior role in comparison to men.

Both women faced opposition from father's who disapproved of their daughters' open and blatant discussion of sex. They broke down perceived barriers of social decorum in order to tackle the topic of women's bodies, and what it meant that women lacked control of their own fundamental right to freedom. They faced legal impediments and social structures they needed to dismantle in order to continue advocating for women's control of their bodies and independence.

Stanton's beliefs, as revolutionary and important as they are, were rejected during her lifetime, and forgotten to time. Her impact and impression on the women's rights movement has been narrowed down to her concrete wins; property and wage reform being the two distinct arenas that Stanton was able to use her legal knowledge to attack. Her constant attention to women's bodies, through marriage, divorce and age of consent reform, fell on an audience unwilling to see women as beings capable of sexual thoughts and feelings.

Sanger's contributions to women's autonomy are easier to measure and more concrete. Her legacy has been upheld by Planned Parenthood clinics which provide women with the resources to stay in control of their reproductive health and fertility, ensuring their ability to choose how their lives unfold. Sanger was radical and progressive, facing the consequences for blatantly breaking laws that prevented women's freedom of sexual choice and freedom. Her

campaign reached an audience of women looking for answers, despite the restrictions. She broke the rules because she was asked to, by a population of women looking to free themselves from unwanted childbearing, so that pregnancy was not a punishment or never ending cycle, but instead a conscious choice and decision.

The value of Stanton and Sanger's work also speaks to generations of women seeking control of their bodies, sexual freedom, power of consent and reproductive health and control. Their advocacy for women took a highly controversial and radical stance during their lives, and the arguments they employed are being continued by a new generation of women who see their limited freedom over their bodies. Religious and Conservative groups lead the opposition to birth control covered by health insurance, demanding that it goes against the morals and ethics of the Catholic church. Access to birth control is being fought in the same ways that it has in the past, with an adherence to conservative values that view birth control as the problem and not the solution.

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