

Planned Parenthood to remove Margaret Sanger's name from N.Y. clinic over views on eugenics

[washingtonpost.com/history/2020/07/21/margaret-sanger-planned-parenthood-eugenics/](https://www.washingtonpost.com/history/2020/07/21/margaret-sanger-planned-parenthood-eugenics/)

By Samantha
Schmidt



Margaret Sanger speaks before a Senate committee in Washington on March 1, 1934, to advocate for federal birth-control legislation. (AP) (AP)

Planned Parenthood of Greater New York will remove the name of the national organization's founder, Margaret Sanger, from a Manhattan clinic in an attempt to reckon with her ties to the eugenics movement, the organization announced Tuesday.

An early feminist activist, Sanger is widely regarded as a pioneer in American reproductive rights. She opened the first birth control clinic in the United States more than a century ago, and helped create access to birth control for low-income, minority and immigrant women. But she was also a vocal supporter of the now-discredited eugenics movement, which aimed to improve the human race through planned breeding based on genetic traits.

"The removal of Margaret Sanger's name from our building is both a necessary and overdue step to reckon with our legacy and acknowledge Planned Parenthood's contributions to historical reproductive harm within communities of color," Karen Seltzer, chair of the board at Planned Parenthood of Greater New York, said in a statement. "Margaret Sanger's concerns and advocacy for reproductive health have been clearly documented, but so too has her racist legacy."

The New York chapter, which is one of the largest affiliates of Planned Parenthood, also announced it is working to change an honorary street sign that marks “Margaret Sanger Square” at Bleecker and Mott streets in Manhattan.

The efforts are the first of many “organizational shifts” to confront Sanger’s legacy and institutional racism more broadly, the chapter said in a statement. Last month, the chapter’s chief executive, Laura McQuade, was ousted from her job after hundreds of former and current employees signed public letters accusing McQuade, who is white, of abusive behavior and a failure to address complaints about systemic racism, pay inequity and a lack of upward mobility for black employees — allegations McQuade denied.

The chapter’s decision on Sanger also comes amid nationwide calls to rename institutions and remove other tributes to racist historical figures in the aftermath of the deaths of George Floyd and other black Americans at the hands of police.

“Planned Parenthood, like many other organizations that have existed for a century or more, is reckoning with our history, and working to address historical inequities to better serve patients and our mission,” Melanie Roussell Newman, senior vice president for communications and culture at Planned Parenthood Federation of America, said in a statement, commending the New York chapter for its decision.

The announcement about Sanger marks a dramatic shift in the organization’s relationship with its founder, even as it has long acknowledged that Sanger’s views were problematic. In 2016, Planned Parenthood’s 100th anniversary, the organization published a lengthy fact sheet about Sanger, outlining her views on eugenics and describing her as “layered and complex” while defending her contributions.

Like many of her contemporaries at the time, Sanger supported the belief that it was possible to biologically create a better human race, said Esther Katz, a retired associate professor of history at New York University and founder of the Margaret Sanger Papers Project. “But by better, she meant healthier, not morally better,” Katz said.

Sanger supported the sterilization of some people with mental illnesses, Katz said. She also believed that if a woman gave birth to a large number of children, the latter children would be weaker. And to advance the birth control movement, she spoke with the Ku Klux Klan. But her views and actions have also often been taken out of context to claim Sanger wanted to “erase the black race,” Katz said.

“Margaret Sanger has been used as a tool for the anti-reproductive rights movement,” Katz said. “She was not trying to eliminate the African American race from this country.”

Sanger worked with black leaders and ministers to give black women the same access to birth control as white women, Katz said. She was single-mindedly focused on making birth control cheap and accessible to everybody.

“The problem with Sanger was she was so single-minded that she was willing to align herself with anybody,” Katz said. “These are problematic positions. She did speak to the Klan. But I think obliterating her ... doesn’t allow us to discuss this in any way or debate it.”

In recent years, antiabortion activists and conservatives have often brought up Sanger’s views on eugenics to criticize Planned Parenthood and the abortion rights movement, even though Sanger did not advocate for abortion rights. In 2015, a group of conservatives and antiabortion activists unsuccessfully called for a bust of Sanger to be removed from the National Portrait Gallery in Washington, D.C.

In an opinion last year, Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas emphasized Sanger’s eugenicist views and the fact that she opened a birth-control clinic in then-majority black Harlem. He implied that Sanger wanted to restrict the growth of the black community, which multiple scholars said was misleading. Ben Carson, now U.S. secretary of housing and urban development, has made similar claims.

Planned Parenthood and its founder have often become inaccurately intertwined in conversations about sterilization abuse that occurred in hospitals in the 1960s and later, abuse that disproportionately affected black and indigenous women, said Ayah Nuriddin, a PhD candidate in the department of the history of medicine at Johns Hopkins University who is writing her thesis on eugenics and the African American community. Nuriddin said it’s important to distinguish between Sanger’s work and views and later state-sponsored sterilization.

“She’s racist, she’s eugenicist,” Nuriddin said. “That does not make her unique among her contemporaries in this period. I think there’s sometimes this notion that she’s somehow superlative in her racism, and that’s simply not the case.”

Merle McGee, chief equity and engagement officer for Planned Parenthood of Greater New York, said the organization has been having public conversations about Sanger’s complicated legacy for many years, and particularly since 2014.

“The Sanger legacy unchecked or unmet with a reckoning has been weaponized against women of color, and has effectively hampered our ability to be in a right relationship with women of color,” McGee said. “And we have left women of color to grapple with the totality of Sanger’s legacy.”

But taking Sanger’s name off a building does not mean the organization is completely disconnecting itself from its founder, she said.

“What we are saying is we are not going to center and essentialize Margaret Sanger as all good or all bad,” McGee said.

Nuriddin agreed it was important not to consider Sanger as either “a hero or a villain.”

“I think it’s also important to recognize that taking a name off or taking a statue down is not the whole story,” Nuriddin added, “and it’s not a substitute for reckoning with a complicated history.”

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La Verne Tolbert 1 month ago

Margaret Sanger's goal, as attested with her own words, was to limit the growth of the Black population. Read any of Sanger's autobiographies. She considered blacks and other "minorities" as inferior. Birth control and abortion are not gratuitously designed to help African Americans. Abortion is to reduce the Black population, which has been very effective. By promoting equal access to birth control—birth control is not the same as contraceptives; the former controls the birth of a child once it is conceived (IUD's); the latter prevents conception (condoms)—as a necessary right for Black women, African Americans have been victims of slick public relations. This article is an example of spinning the narrative that Sanger wasn't all bad. How else will Planned Parenthood continue to convince Black women that they must have the right to abortion? Clinics in the inner-city, along with school-based and school-linked clinics, specifically target black women and teens.

My dissertation research details the racist, eugenic history of Planned Parenthood: Condom Availability Through School-Based Clinics and Teenagers Attitudes Regarding Premarital Sexual Activity (1996). Note: Planned Parenthood would never have succeeded without the financial investment of the US government through Title X along with generous donations of individuals/organizations. Limiting the growth of the Black population is a national agenda. As an African American woman, I dedicated my efforts to uncovering this truth because my eyes were opened during the years I served as a volunteer Board Member of Planned Parenthood NYC (1975-1980). ~ La Verne Powlis Tolbert, Ph.D. ~ See white paper, "Over 20 Million Aborted: Why Planned Parenthood Targets the Inner City." https://www.issues4life.org/pdfs/20100200_dr Tolbert.pdf

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