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Structural Racism

Sterilization of Black Women

Coerced sterilization tends to get left out of America's history, although one does not have to go back too far in time to find cases of it. Sterilization was used as a means of controlling "undesirable" populations, those being immigrants, people of color, poor people, unmarried mothers, people with disabilities, and those with mental illnesses. While sterilization was aimed at reducing all of these ostracized minorities, Black women were a prime target. Throughout history, women of color have existed at the intersection of many marginalized identities: being Black, female, and, most of the time, poor.

Federally-funded sterilization programs and policies took place in over 30 states throughout the 20th century. While sterilization is a medical procedure, the process of becoming sterilized was often done without the knowledge or consent of the victim. If a woman was being put through another procedure, they might often also be sterilized while being treated for the original procedure. The message that is indirectly sent to someone who is sterilized is that your possible offspring are not wanted and that society does not want to deal with it. The nonconsensual sterilization of Black women over the course of over four decades was the consequence of a racist and eugenicist ideology in the United States.

Documented cases of sterilization of Black women can be found dating back to the 1930s. By January 1935, estimates are that over twenty thousand people had been sterilized, and those who were most affected black women (Sterilization, 1936). The Great Depression resulted in Roosevelt's New Deal, which was put in place to aid American citizens through the Depression. Welfare was one program put into place, though Black people were stopped from fully accessing it, and those who got to use it often faced backlash from white society. In California, a case that was brought to a grand jury focused on women living in Contra Costa County, who were urged to undergo sterilization operations by the welfare department. The Welfare office reported that the only crimes "committed" by these women were unemployment and poverty, but they were nonetheless sterilized by the welfare director's order (Sterilization, 1935). The Welfare department justified the decision by claiming that the women were promiscuous and having large numbers of children. California was not the only state during this time to sterilize women under orders and policies, either. Sterilization in North Carolina started in the 30s and this state alone sterilized over 7,600 individuals between the 1930 and 1970s (Unfair Sterilization). Documentation of these cases has only been recorded since the 30s, so a large number of cases are undocumented, leaving lots of victim's stories untold.

Many states in the U.S. had established policies that gave them the right to sterilize unwilling and unwitting people. These sterilization policies listed the "insane," the "feeble-minded," the "diseased," and the "promiscuous" as targets,

based on the grounds that they were "incapable of regulating their own reproductive abilities, justifying government-forced sterilizations." The Senator of Mississippi in 1964 was implementing a program of genocide against the "negroes of the state" (Genocide in Mississippi, 1930). To the state, genocide was defined as killing members of a group, causing serious bodily or mental harm, physical destruction of a group, preventing births within the group, or transferring children from the group to another. It was clear that the bill being passed specifically targeted Black people in an attempt to reduce the number of African Americans in Mississippi. The bill focused on illegitimate children being born and made it a felony to be a parent of one. After the birth of an illegitimate child, the state mandated that the mother go to Planned Parenthood to discuss birth control options. The bill used Planned Parenthood clinics to go after black women, despite rhetoric that sterilization was to be strictly voluntary. In fact, the state pressured Planned Parenthood to heavily enforce sterilization (Genocide in Mississippi). During the 1960s, 60% of black women living in Sunflower County, Mississippi were sterilized without their permission, and a majority of them were under the age of 20 (Nti-Asare). This bill proves how the government used sterilization as a form of genocide to get rid of the black population and erase their existence.

Besides Mississippi, North Carolina was no stranger to the cruel and punishing coercion of black women. The North Carolina Eugenics Board (NCEB) oversaw the practice of sterilization of inmates, medical patients, and the mentally ill, although the board often stepped outside of their jurisdiction and coerced people to unwillingly consent to being sterilized. However, the policies did more harm than good, especially to women of color. Many black women, like Nial Ruth Cox, were pressured into sterilization. Cox was sterilized as a child in North Carolina on the "terms" that she was "mentally retarded," despite the fact she was not disabled but was just a black girl from a poor family. At the time of the procedure, Cox was living with her mother. Cox had just given birth to a 10-week-old girl and was on welfare (Carmon). A social worker threatened to take away the family's welfare unless Cox's mother consented to the sterilization of her daughter. This is how the state obtained consent for the procedure. Cox and her mother were lied to by the state, and they were under the impression that the sterilization was temporary, but years later her gynecologist told her that she could never bear children again. North Carolina, along with a number of other states, especially in the south, put these policies in place to perform a kind of eugenics. Many stories of victims have surfaced about the terrible situations they were forced into by the government of North Carolina.

Another horror story of sterilization is that of Elaine Riddick, one of the brave souls who continues to speak out about the harassment she went through by the NCEB. At the age of 14, Reddick was raped by a 20-year-old, which resulted in an unplanned pregnancy. Social workers threatened to take away Reddick's grandmother's welfare. Afraid of not being able to live without the help of welfare, her grandmother gave consent to have Reddick sterilized (Curb Sterilization). As she was in labor, Reddick was put under and also sterilized. She woke up, unaware of what

had happened, with bandages on her stomach and her one and only baby. Reddick herself was never informed that the sterilization was going to be conducted; all she thought was that she was giving birth. After being raped at the age of 14, giving birth, and being sterilized without being informed, Reddick was traumatized, and she was not the only black girl that this happened to.

In most cases of unwilling sterilization, the affected women go on with their lives feeling as if they are less than. One arguable exception to this occurs with the case of two young sisters, Mary and Minnie Relf, both of whom were both mentally disabled and sterilized involuntarily by the local hospital. Later, parents went on to sue (Stokes). The Relf family was living on welfare, as they were very poor, and both Mr. and Mrs. Relf were illiterate. To obtain "consent" from the girl's parents, the nurses gave Mrs. Relf papers to sign, knowing that she was illiterate and could neither read nor understand them. As they were talking to her, they were discussing methods of birth control, which placed Mrs. Relf under the impression that her daughters would be receiving birth control shots as they had in the past. After the procedure, the girl's dad tried to visit them, and the nurses told him he was not allowed as visiting hours were over. The next day, the girls were released from the hospital. Once home, their mother noticed scar tissue was starting to form on the girls' bodies. The parents asked their social workers to find out what actually happened to their daughters, leading to the revelation of the sterilizations. The girl's parents were livid once they found this out, and immediately filed a law suit with the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in Montgomery, Alabama (Stokes).

Mr. and Mrs. Relf knew that with their status and background, they would need extra help to get the justice deserved for their daughters. They obtained help from attorneys at the Montgomery Southern Poverty Law Center. The Relf family asked for \$1 million in damages, a reversal of the operation, and a stop to any other operations like this nationwide. This turned into *Relf v. Weinberger*, the lawsuit that ultimately overturned the use of federal dollars for involuntary sterilization. Throughout the lawsuit, the number of sterilizations that had happened and were continuing to happen was continuing to surface, and the final number (almost certainly underestimated, due to the difficulties in collecting accurate data) was that approximately 150,000 people were sterilized annually under federally-funded programs (Stokes). The judge ruled that this practice should not threaten women on welfare and that their benefits should be protected if they refuse to comply with sterilization. Another outcome was that doctors were compelled to obtain informed consent, taking the requisite steps to make sure that the patients and their family were well aware of what they were consenting to. One of the attorneys for the Relf's said, "I have never heard of a sterilization case before, I had no idea of anything like this going on. I don't think anyone knew this was going on" (Stokes). This further proves just how pervasive racism was and how little valued women of color were.

The involuntary sterilizations that took place in the U.S. constitute a bleak spot in our country's history. History can be haunting and evil, but those moments are important. Learning about the outrages of our past can teach us what to do in the future, how to be better. Racism is still pervasive, and the targeting of black people as "less than" and "diseased" that needed to be "cured" by eugenics was, and still is, disgusting, so it is up to us as a society to learn from this unjust ugliness and create light. It is our job as an informed society to acknowledge the past to act now in the present and reshape the future. The women who never had the chance to tell their story must not be forgotten. Society tried to diminish the presence of African Americans and erase them through sterilization. Though the stories told and the lawsuits filed spoke for thousands of women across America who were experiencing this oppression, too many voices were not heard. We must take time to learn about the horrors of the past so they are not repeated.

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