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A History of Eugenics

Background

- There was a major eugenics movement in the United States before and after World War II that sought to “rid the country of the feeble-minded.” By the 1930s, over 30 states had passed laws allowing for coercive sterilization.

- Between 1909 and 1979, California sterilized over 20,000 people, more than any other U.S. state (one third of all 60,000 sterilizations).

- Nazi leaders came to California to study the state’s sterilization program and then used the lessons to create their Eugenics program in Germany.

- After World War II, population control, enacted through welfare and birth control policies targeted at women of color, became the new version of eugenics.

- There were government-sponsored campaigns to sterilize Indigenous, Puerto Rican, Chicana, and Black women.

- In the decades after World War II, doctors around the country performed hysterectomies on Black women simply to practice the surgeries.

- In 1979, the 1909 California law that authorized the use of sterilization by state homes and hospitals for those deemed “unfit for reproduction” was repealed.

- Many women who had C-sections performed by CDCR between 2006 and 2009 also received “tubal ligation add-ons.”

- When incarcerated individuals speak out about abuses, they often fear retaliation.

- Despite a federal ban, correctional facilities across the U.S. still sterilize people for birth control purposes. The full extent of the problem is unknown.

Advocacy and Policy Change

Background

- In 2013, Corey Johnson of the Center for Investigative Reporting began researching the history of eugenics in California. Johnson worked with Justice Now to get access to data and individuals inside the prisons.

- The Center for Investigative Reporting reported that 150 tubal ligations occurred in California prisons between 2006-2010.

- Following the Center for Investigative Reporting’s article and as a result of the hearings in the California legislature, the state audited Prison Health Care Services.
CDCR officials used a cost-benefit analysis as a justification for sterilization procedures, arguing that the end of saving tax dollars justified the means.

The whistleblower who sent the minutes from a CDCR committee meeting to Justice Now aided the passage of the Prison Anti-Sterilization Bill (SB 1135).

Senator Hannah-Beth Jackson sponsored SB 1135 with the intent of making it clear that sterilization was illegal. This “sunshine bill” highlighted existing law and legal precedent banning sterilization for the purpose of birth control in correctional facilities - already illegal under state, federal, and international law.

The state audit of CDCR and prison records reveal that nearly 1,400 sterilizations occurred between 1997-2013.

In 2014, SB 1135 passed with bi-partisan support and was signed into law by California Governor Jerry Brown, bringing an end to forced sterilization.

After the passage of SB 1135, people in prison began experiencing retaliation through denial of medical care and removal of visitation rights. None of the CDCR doctors or officials faced consequences for their actions.

In 2019, California legislators introduced a bill to provide reparations for people who were involuntarily sterilized under California’s previous Eugenics laws from 1909 to present day.

**DEOLVE DEEPER**

- Read about The Hyde Amendment on p. 34 in the *Reproductive Justice Briefing Book: A Primer on Reproductive Justice and Social Change* and *Abortion Matters to Reproductive Justice!* on p. 79 in the same book. Research the term ‘reproductive justice’ and explore how abortion and sterilization are both issues of reproductive justice.

- In the film, after the passage of SB 1135, we learn that CDCR began blocking advocates from coming in to visit with incarcerated individuals. This backlash grew after the COVID-19 pandemic revealed problems with healthcare in California’s prison system and the prison officials blamed the insufficiencies on Kelli’s lawsuit. Listen to this [Democracy Now! episode](https://www.democracynow.org/2020/6/12/controversy_over_medicare_for_prisoners) to learn more. Research how activist initiatives are frequently met with backlash.

- Research the reparations bills that have been passed in North Carolina and Virginia to compensate survivors of forced sterilization. Decide what worked well about these bills and what needs to be added or removed.
Delve Deeper Continued

- Research the history of forced sterilization in the United States. Be sure to research which populations have historically been subject to sterilization and what laws have been passed to allow for or prohibit the practice. What do your findings tell you about who is valued and who is not valued in U.S. law and culture?

- Read the academic articles The New Eugenics: Black Hyper-Incarceration and Human Abatement by James C. Oleson and Reproductive Justice Disrupted: Mass Incarceration as a Driver of Reproductive Oppression by Crystal M. Hayes, Carolyn Sufrin, and Jamila B. Perritt, and watch this lecture with Dorothy Roberts from 52:25 – 54.34. Then have a discussion with peers about mass incarceration and reproductive oppression. Record the discussion and write a reflection about your own thoughts.

- Read the decision in the Supreme Court case of Buck v. Bell and the article The Supreme Court Ruling that Led to 70,000 Forced Sterilizations. Conduct additional research on Buck v. Bell. Organize a discussion with your peers about the precedent-setting role of Buck v. Bell in the country's history of forced sterilization.

- Research the connections between the Prison Industrial Complex and slavery. Read 5 Ways America's Prison System Mimics Slavery and History Is a Weapon: Slavery and Prison – Understanding the Connections. Discuss your findings with your colleagues.

- Read Policing the Womb: Invisible Women and the Criminalization of Motherhood by Michelle Goodwin. Research local organizations that are working to end the criminalization of motherhood in communities of color and identify their theory of change. Volunteer if you are interested in supporting the work.

- Read about the Relf sisters, African-American women who were forcibly sterilized at the ages of 12 and 14. Watch the video. The Southern Poverty Law Center filed a lawsuit on their behalf, exposing widespread abuse. Engage in discussion with your peers about its legislative and policy impact.

**ADDITIONAL RESOURCES**

**Background Statistics**

- Between 1980 and 2017, the number of incarcerated women increased by more than 750% (The Sentencing Project).

- Although many more men are in prison than women, the rate of growth for female imprisonment has been twice as high as that of men since 1980 (The Sentencing Project).

- Nearly 80% of incarcerated women are mothers (Vera Institute of Justice).

- Three quarters of incarcerated women are of childbearing age (between 18-44 years) (Bureau of Justice Statistics).

- 92% of people in California’s women’s prisons are survivors of abuse (ACLU). The demographics in women’s jails are: 44% African American, 36% White, 15% Hispanic, 5% other (Vera Institute of Justice).

- The majority of women who are incarcerated are non-violent offenders and imprisoned for crimes of survival (Prison Policy Initiative).
Background Statistics Continued

- An estimated 92% of women in California prisons have been “battered and abused” in their lifetimes (ACLU).

- The US has the largest prison population in the world at 2.3 million incarcerated people, the highest per-capita incarceration rate, and the highest incarceration rate for women across the globe (Prison Policy Initiative).

- There are 231,000 women currently incarcerated in the U.S. and 1.3 million women under the supervision of the criminal justice system, including those on probation and parole (Prison Policy Initiative and The Sentencing Project).

- The vast majority of women (82%) are in jail for nonviolent offenses: Property Offenses 32%, Drug Offenses 29%, Public order offenses 21% (Vera Institute of Justice).

- The filmmaking team sent Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests to states across the country, which confirmed that at least 8 states still perform sterilizations under certain circumstances. The full extent of the problem is unknown. (*Belly of the Beast*)

- Between 2006 and 2009, CDCR performed 222 cesarean sections (or C-Section, an invasive surgical operation for delivering a child by cutting through the wall of the mother’s abdomen) out of 393 births, a rate of 56%. Comparatively, in 2009, the C-section rate was 32.9% in the general U.S. population. (*Belly of the Beast*)

Terminology

As you participate in conversations around the carceral system, try shifting your terminology when referring to system-impacted individuals and aiming to put “people” first. For example, “people who are incarcerated” is a much more respectful term than “prisoners” or “inmate.” A list of appropriate terminology is listed below.

**Try Saying:**
- people in prison
- women in prison
- people who are incarcerated
- imprisoned women
- incarcerated people

**Avoid Saying**
- prisoners
- inmates
- criminal
- convict

**Definitions**

*Carceral* - related to prison or imprisonment

*Eugenics* - Advocates for reproduction by populations deemed “desirable” and works to stymie reproduction by those deemed “undesirable”

*Hysterectomy* - a surgery involved in sterilizations in which a person’s uterus is removed

*Informed consent* - permission granted by a person having full knowledge of the possible consequences, typically that which is given by a patient to a doctor for treatment with an understanding of the possible risks and benefits
Definitions (continued)

**Medical Racism** - the systematic and wide-spread racism against people of color within the medical system; includes both the racism in our society that makes Black people less healthy, the disparity in health coverage by race, and the biases held by healthcare workers against people of color in their care (as defined by the YWCA).

**Reproductive justice** - the human right to maintain personal bodily autonomy, have children, not have children, and parent the children we have in safe and sustainable communities (as defined by the nonprofit SisterSong).

**Reproductive rights** - rights that rest on the recognition of the basic right of all couples and individuals to decide freely and responsibly the number, spacing and timing of their children and to have the information and means to do so, and the right to attain the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health; also includes the right of all to make decisions concerning reproduction free of discrimination, coercion, and violence (as defined by the World Health Organization).

**Reparations** - a state remedy to repair a harm, such as serious human rights abuse suffered by a population or group of victims; in legal terms, the act of making amends, offering expiation, or giving satisfaction for a wrong or injury; types include restitution, compensation, rehabilitation, satisfaction, and/or guarantees of non-repetition.

**Tubal ligation** - a medical procedure involving the closing of the fallopian tubes, either by burning a small section of each tube (electrocauterization) or by placing a band or clip on each tub.

Books, Papers, and Films

- Goodwin, Michele. *Policing the Womb: Invisible Women and the Criminalization of Motherhood*.
- Levi, Robin and Waldman, Ayelet (Ed.). *Inside This Place, Not Of It: Narratives from Women's Prisons*.
- Reproductive Justice Briefing Book: A Primer on Reproductive Justice and Social Change.
- Roberts, Dorothy. *Killing the Black Body*.
Books, Papers, and Films (continued)

- Washington, Harriet A. *Medical Apartheid: The Dark History of Medical History Medical Experimentation on Black Americans from Colonial Times to the Present*

- Oleson, James C. *The New Eugenics: Black Hyper-Incarceration and Human Abatement*

- Perritt, Jamila B. *Reproductive Justice Disrupted: Mass Incarceration as a Driver of Reproductive Oppression*

- Crenshaw, K. W., Ocen, P., Nanda, J. *Black Girls Matter: Pushed Out, Overpoliced, and Underprotected*

PARTNER ORGANIZATIONS

POC Led Organizations Focused on Reproductive Justice

**BLACK WOMEN FOR WELLNESS**
Black Women for Wellness is committed to the health and well-being of Black women and girls through health education, empowerment and advocacy.

**BLACK WOMEN'S HEALTH IMPERATIVE**
BWHI targets the most pressing health issues that affect Black women and girls in the U.S. through investments in evidence-based strategies, bold programs and advocacy outreach on health policies.

**CALIFORNIA LATINAS FOR REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE**
California Latinas for Reproductive Justice (CLRJ) is a statewide organization committed to honoring the experiences of Latinas/xs to uphold our dignity, our bodies, sexuality, and families. We build Latinas’/xs’ power and cultivate leadership through community education, policy advocacy, and community-informed research to achieve reproductive justice.

**NATIVE AMERICAN WOMEN’S HEALTH EDUCATION RESOURCE CENTER (NAWHERC)**
**REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE PROGRAM**
Through the Reproductive Justice Program, NAWHERC works with a national, broad-based, and diverse coalition of Native American, women’s health, and civil liberties organizations to move forward in an agenda to protect our health and human rights.

**SISTERREACH**
SisterReach is an advocate for the reproductive autonomy of women & teens of color, poor & rural women, LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming people.

**SISTERSONG**
SisterSong is a Southern-based, national membership organization; our purpose is to build an effective network of individuals and organizations to improve institutional policies and systems that impact the reproductive lives of marginalized communities.

**SPARK REPRODUCTIVE JUSTICE NOW!**
SPARK Reproductive Justice Now! is an organization dedicated to building new leadership, changing culture, and advancing knowledge in Georgia and the South to ensure individuals and communities have resources and power to make sustainable and liberatory decisions about their bodies, gender, sexualities, and lives.
POC Led Organizations Working to Support and Advocate for Women, Transgender Non Conforming People and People of Color Impacted by Incarceration

CALIFORNIA COALITION FOR WOMEN PRISONERS
CCWP is a grassroots social justice organization, with members inside and outside prison, that challenges the institutional violence imposed on women, transgender people, and communities of color by the prison industrial complex (PIC). We see the struggle for racial and gender justice as central to dismantling the PIC and we prioritize the leadership of the people, families, and communities most impacted in building this movement.

CALIFORNIANS UNITED FOR A RESPONSIBLE BUDGET
Californians United for a Responsible Budget (CURB) is a statewide coalition of over 75 grassroots organizations that is reducing the number of people in prisons and jails, shrinking the imprisonment system, and shifting public spending from corrections and policing to human services.

THE PROMISE OF JUSTICE INITIATIVE
The Promise of Justice Initiative is a non-profit organization that advocates for criminal justice reform, civil rights protections, the abolition of the death penalty, and ending other excessive inhumane punishments. PJI works alongside impacted men and women seeking fair and just treatment under the law.

THE WOMEN & JUSTICE PROJECT
The Women & Justice Project (WJP) advances the leadership and builds the power of women directly impacted by incarceration to transform the criminal legal system.

YOUNG WOMEN’S FREEDOM CENTER
Young Women’s Freedom Center (YWFC) is a leadership and advocacy organization led by systems-involved young and adult women and transgender gender non-conforming (TGNC) people of color who have grown up in poverty, worked in the underground street economy, and have been criminalized by social services such as foster care, welfare, and the mental health systems. By offering safety, sisterhood, economic opportunities, accessible education and healing, we build self-determination, confidence and self-worth.

Organizations Working to Establish Community Resources and Advance Freedoms for POC within the U.S.

BACK TO THE BASICS
Founded by Kelli Dillon, Back to the Basics’ Mission is to rebuild and restore community empowerment, safety, and economic wellness by providing education and resources that are accessible and offered to all members. We offer life education and management workshops that will assist to rebuild and re-empower lives.

PROJECT SOUTH
Project South was founded as the Institute to Eliminate Poverty & Genocide in 1986. Our work is rooted in the legacy of the Southern Freedom Movement, and four primary work areas achieve our mission of cultivating strong social movements in the South powerful enough to contend with some of the most pressing and complicated social, economic, and political problems we face today.
TAKE ACTION

Sign the Petition
Sign the petition to provide reparations for California forced sterilization survivors.

Host a screening
Interested in hosting a screening or discussion of Belly of the Beast for your community? After filling out a form with some details about your event, our team will follow-up to share resources and details with you on how to make it happen. Sign up here.

Support an Organization
Join an organization in your local community working on issues of reproductive justice, racial justice and human rights. Not sure where to start? Look at our partner list above.

Spread the Word about the Film
The world needs to know about these abuses. Get the word out to your community via social media by using our toolkit here.

Advocate
If you are moved by the issues in the film, contact your state representatives and local advocacy organizations for ways to support.

HOW TO ACCESS THE FILM

Belly of the Beast
The official website for Belly of the Beast where you will find information on upcoming screenings, how to host screenings in your own community, opportunities to take action, and more.

Women Make Movies
Visit our educational distributor for licensing information and to purchase a copy of the film with public performance rights.