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The Forced Sterilization of Black Women as Reproductive Injustice

Reproductive justice has been a topic long discussed since the start of the women's rights movement and continues to be discussed to this day. However, the fight to gain such justice was, and is, an easier battle for white women than for Black women. Historically and presently, the experiences of Black women and reproductive justice, or injustice, have been devastating and difficult. There are many forms of reproductive injustice that Black women have faced, and still face, and one of those forms is forced sterilization. With roots in slavery and as a lead part of the eugenics movement, forced sterilization has been a reproductive injustice for Black women for years. Focusing on forced sterilization through the experiences of Black women will allow us to gather a fuller understanding of their oppressions and exploitations throughout history and into the present day. What I aim to find is a look into the experiences of Black women in terms of forced sterilization and its effects through the lens of reproductive justice.

To frame this paper, I will be using the idea of reproductive justice. It will be the main focus and will work alongside the issue of forced sterilization. Reproductive justice was not always an idea that was used throughout history and is a term that is relatively young. Reproductive justice was first coined at a pro-choice convention in 1994, only 25 years ago, and although Black women throughout most of history did not use this term, they were still fighting for reproductive justice. Reproductive justice was coined by an assembly of Black feminists and was created through activism. This idea is not only the right for women to not have children, but the right for women to have children and raise them safely and with dignity (Roberts). The framework is intersectional through gender, class oppression, and race, and when coupled with forced sterilization, poor Black women will be the center of the process.

Reproductive justice will allow me to view the issue of forced sterilization as injustice towards Black women and their bodies. It will help me to explain things such as why Black women possess the least amount of power over their bodies, the exploitation that comes with sterilization, its roots in slavery, and its role in the eugenics movement. The reproductive justice framework will aid in the historical and present contexts of my paper and lend me the tools to create strong and substantial research. I will be looking at multiple types of sources including those that connect reproductive justice with birth control, racism, slavery, and so on, along with personal experiences of victims of reproductive injustice through forced sterilization.

Before getting into forced sterilization, we must address what came before. The battle for reproductive justice and freedom for Black women does not begin with the rise of the women's rights movement as broad culture leads people to think. It begins as soon as slavery begins. It does not begin as a modern idea where forced sterilization controls who can reproduce. It begins with forced reproduction in slave breeding. Black women slaves, as many people know, were exploited for their manual labor, as were all slaves. What is not as commonly known is that they were exploited for their sexual labor as well. Female slaves were prized for their bodies, their sex, their wombs, and their ability to reproduce. They were advertised and sold the same way farmers advertised and sold female cattle (Wypijewski).

Slaver owners relied on women to reproduce so labor would never run thin. Owners would lock slave men and women in rooms together to mate like they were in a bullpen. Even owners themselves or their sons would engage in forced intercourse with women slaves. Let this not be light - these women were raped to create more bodies to be used for labor that would only benefit slave owners. They had no say in who they would reproduce with, or when, and after

mothers were often separated from their children, most likely due to being sold to someone else (Wypijewski).

Slavery very much depended on the control over bodies and thus the control over reproduction. Without an endless supply of forced labor, slave owners had no means of production because women slaves were the “reproducible raw material” needed to keep the system going (Wypijewski). This led many women to turn to self-imposed abortions during the time of slavery. Black women did not want to bring children under the conditions of slavery and into a life that would only be miserable and exploitative. They did not want to feed into the system of slavery (Davis 118).

However, the end of slavery did not result in the end of the control over black women’s bodies. As we move away from slavery and move towards the first wave of the Civil Rights Movement that is seen in the 1950s and 1960s, we still see the lack of reproductive freedom for Black women, but within a different context. Since white people no longer had a “use” for Black people, due to the outlawing of slave ownership, society shifted from forcing the reproduction of the Black population to trying to stop their reproduction altogether. This then leads to eugenics where we see forced sterilization arising.

The eugenics movement started towards the last half of the 19th century and lasted until around World War II, however, there are still traces of it around to this day. The movement worked towards the creation of a “perfect race” and to eliminate all bad traits in humans. To quote Margaret Sanger, a woman whose involvement in the movement has been questioned, “more children from the fit, less from the unfit” (Nti-Asare). The movement began solely with the idea to improve the genetic makeup of humans. This meant the elimination of genes that

carried diseases, impurities, and even behavioral characteristics such as alcoholism and rebelliousness (Waweru).

What began as targeting things such as diseases in individuals turned into targeting groups of people. Soon the movement turned towards the erasure of all negative traits. Those who were criminals, those who were considered less intelligent¹, those who had poor mental health conditions, poor physical health conditions, even immigrants were sought out to be sterilized. The claim to keep the population healthy was to mask the true reason behind the movement. When Black communities and other communities of color began to be targeted and sterilized, the fight to maintain power in the white community became the real reason behind the movement (Beal 171). The ruling elite, which comprised of wealthy white men and even women, aimed to perpetuate control over minority groups, the same control they had during slavery. Except this time around, they wanted to limit and erase the populations rather than grow them.

The campaign to fight for “voluntary motherhood” and birth control was also present during this time. Women wanted a choice. A choice to have children or to not have children². Women no longer wanted to succumb to their husband’s sexual urges and wanted the right to refuse the act of having sex, likely to avoid having a child (Sanger). The idea of birth control and voluntary motherhood was considered outlandish and caused an uproar. However, many women backed it, wanting the choice and the methods to have safe sex because it was a step towards emancipation (Davis 117). This idea of the right to birth control, often called family limitation,

¹ This was typically due to little access to education based many circumstances like race, class and gender (Darling-Hammond).

² Keep in mind that coverture laws are a prominent reason behind why married women had extraordinarily little if no rights. They insured that women had no real legal rights separate from her husband; her husband essentially owned her (Women).

would seem to be something women of all races and classes would unite and fight for; however, that was not the case. This was a right more winnable for white, upper-class women, which made up most of the leaders of this movement. These leaders did not seem to bring in the concerns of the working-class when campaigning for this right. (117).

Looking back to this time of the campaign for voluntary motherhood and birth control, there is no trace of actual challenges being made to racism and classism. In fact, some of the arguments made for birth control were made with racist principles (Davis 117). Birth control during this movement did not mean what it means today. When we think of birth control in the modern world, we typically think of the oral contraceptive pill, something individuals willingly take daily, typically to prevent pregnancy. However, during the period of the voluntary motherhood campaign and the eugenics movement, these racist principles lead to “birth control” being a “method of surgical genocide” to eliminate and control the growth of populations of color, and mostly the Black population (Beal 172). This method of surgical genocide would, in fact, be the surgical process of sterilization.

Sterilization is the act of removing one’s ability to reproduce. *Forced* sterilization is the act of removing one’s ability to reproduce without consent to do so. This was one of the first means to limit population growth during the eugenics movement and was often referred to as “birth control.” The process can be completed in numerous ways. The most common way was a hysterectomy, which is the removal of the uterus, and tubal ligation, the blocking of a woman’s fallopian tubes through either cutting, burning, or tying (Nti-Asare). As can be imagined, these are not pleasant procedures. However, that did not stop the government from making forced sterilization a lawful practice and procedure.

By 1907 the United States allowed the creation of public policies in individual state legislations that gave the right to sterilize anyone who was “unwilling and unwitting.”³ These policies were part of the eugenics movement and focused on the idea that people of color were the inferior group of society and needed to be contained and kept from reproducing (Nti-Asare). So, the idea behind it was simple - if Black women were sterilized, then the population would be contained and eventually erased. This would leave white people to remain the more powerful and dominant race. Now, no Black woman would have agreed to have such a procedure knowing the real reason behind it, so the government did not require the consent of these women. This lack of consent put the power right into the hands of those wanting to limit certain populations from expanding any further.

In many states, Black women were sterilized against their will and often unbeknownst to them, since consent was not required to do so. Black women were often being sterilized in the hospital after giving birth to a child. Some were even lied to by their doctors saying that they have a reproductive condition that can only be fixed with surgery. These women believed their doctors and thus had their perfectly healthy reproductive organs taken away from them, for no good reason (Nti-Asare). This is where we start to see the injustice in the forced sterilization of Black women. The lies told, and acts of manipulation, make this one of the most oppressive acts towards Black women. All to maintain power in the elite community (Beal 171).

By the 1930s, 33 states had laws that allowed the sterilization of those who were seen as the “unwanted” members of society. Those members, as stated previously, were primarily those

³ For example, the 1907 Indiana Eugenics Law (<https://eugenics.iupui.edu/>)

The second website provides state by state information on the number of Eugenics victims, groups identified and targeted in the law, periods when sterilization occurred, and so on. (<https://www.uvm.edu/~lkaelber/eugenics/NH/NH.html>)

of Black communities and other communities of color (Waweru). So, roughly 65 years after the abolishment of slavery, Black women were still fighting a battle for reproductive justice and rights over their bodies. Even to this day, there are accounts of forced sterilization in women. One of the most known accounts is that of a Black woman by the name of Elaine Riddick.

Elaine Riddick's story begins in 1968 and is ongoing. Riddick grew up in North Carolina. She lived in an area riddled with crime, violence, and poverty. At the age of 14, she was kidnapped and became a victim of rape. Her rape resulted in pregnancy and she gave birth to her son on March 5, 1968. Immediately following the birth, the North Carolina Eugenics Board (NCEB) ordered a physician to perform a sterilization procedure on Riddick. Without her knowledge, Riddick's grandmother, an illiterate woman, was forced to consent for Riddick at the risk of having her state assistance taken away (Threadcraft 1). The reasoning for her sterilization was due to her being "feebleminded and promiscuous." This reasoning made her a contender for sterilization under the sterilization program and law (Waweru). The incident of her kidnap and rape were never considered. It was not until after a failed marriage, due to not being able to conceive a child, that Riddick found out what had been done to her body without her consent years before (Threadcraft 1).

The NCEB was created in 1933, and during the 1930's era only 23 percent of the sterilizations performed were on Black women. However, during the 1950s, there was a shift in who the NCEB targeted. Anxieties from the white communities arose regarding Black people and their receiving of welfare. Programs sought out the sterilization of Black people to reduce welfare costs as a possible solution to these white anxieties. By the 1960s, the percentage of Black women sterilized shot up to 64 and eventually to 68 percent by 1974, when the organization closed operation (NPR). Though, just because the organization stopped performing

operations does not take back the fact that those women had their reproductive rights taken away from them. Their abilities to reproduce, or even have a choice to reproduce, were gone. All because of wanting to keep power and privilege in the white community.

In 2011 Riddick finally sought justice years after she found out she was sterilized without her consent. However, the justice she received was not the justice she wanted or needed after years of pain. Riddick, and other victims with similar stories, were offered money as a way of compensation. Riddick was granted \$50,000 and her response to that was, “Is that what they think my life is worth? How much are the kids I never had worth? \$50,000 is not enough to bury my pain” (Threadcraft 3).

Riddick made it clear that the justice she was given was not nearly enough. She was a victim of reproductive injustice and she would not have a cash settlement glaze over that fact. She chose to tackle the issue head-on and has become an advocate for Black women’s reproductive rights. Currently, she acts as the Executive Director of the Rebecca Project for Justice. An organization that “advocates protecting life, dignity, and freedom for people in Africa and the United States” and that believes “vulnerable women, girls, and their families possess the right to live free of environmental, medical, physical and sexual violence” (Rebecca).

Elaine Riddick is not the first or even the last Black woman to be a victim of forced sterilization. She is not the only Black woman to have lost her reproductive rights and suffered through the injustice brought about by racism, sexism, and classism. Although it may be seen as a past issue that has been resolved, forced sterilization is still an ongoing practice in the United States, though illegal. The practice can mostly be found in women’s prisons, which typically have a large population of Black women and other women of color. A report from the state of California found that over 150 female prisoners were forcibly sterilized illegally between 2006

and 2010 in California (United States). Despite laws being passed to stop forced sterilization, it still has its ways of lingering today, still targeting those deemed as “unwanted” or “unfit” for society.

Although traces of forced sterilization still exist in the United States today, it is not nearly as commonly practiced as it once was. However, just because it is not a common practice does not change its roots in modern forms of birth control, like the pill. The Black community has raised up politics surrounding the pill and its links to forced sterilization, often being conflicted with its purpose. The attitudes of Black women surrounding the pill are complex. They are formed by a history of racism, sexism and reproductive injustice. So, when the pill was released in the 1960s, Black women were nervous, and those nerves still linger in the present day (Roberts Forum).

With the creation of the oral contraceptive pill, Black women were, and still are, faced with the conflict and question of “is the pill a way for Black women to gain bodily autonomy, or a tool used by white society to limit Black fertility?” (Roberts Forum). This conflict is due to the historical and social context of Black women and their reproductive freedom, rights and justice. Due to this social context, concerns about whether or not the pill would be another tool the white elite would use to limit the population sprung up. They have every right to spring up too. Just because forced sterilization is no longer a common tool, does not mean other tools are not taking its place.

Today, there are efforts for inner-city Black women to use long lasting contraceptives, such as implants. This may seem like an effort to help these women out, so they do not have to go into financial struggle because of a child. However, it still brings up the debate about race and birth control (Roberts Forum). It’s possible that this debate will never go away either, especially

with the long and devastating history that the Black community has with reproductive restrictions. The white community needs to step aside and stop this “savior complex” it has. It needs to allow the Black community to advocate for birth control and reproductive rights on their own. Doing so will put the process in their own hands and let them start to heal. They will not be forced by a community that does not share their struggles or experiences, or by a community that is trying to maintain power and control.

Forced sterilization is reproductive injustice in Black women through and through. It takes away the woman’s control over her own body. It limits her choice in whether or not she can bring children into this world. As I have gathered, reproductive injustice has deep roots in slavery that started with the forced breeding of Black female slaves. Then, with the abolishment of slavery, it turned into the forced sterilization of Black women. Both points in history all surround the same idea. That idea was simply to control the Black population and keep the power within the white population. Through this idea, we see how terribly Black women suffered in regards to their reproductive rights and freedom. For much of history, Black women had no reproductive justice. They had no language of choice and they had limited resources to gain that choice. However, that did not stop them from putting up years and years of fighting. Forced sterilization took the choice of reproductive freedom away from so many Black women and that alone *is* reproductive injustice. Even today, nerves and anxieties surrounding modern contraceptives and efforts of white communities and organizations to put Black women on these contraceptives rides a thin line with what people think society has moved passed. But society has not moved passed the history of discrimination and control over Black women. Forced sterilization and efforts to put Black women on contraceptives does not scream helping and

freeing these women. It screams taking away their choice, taking away their reproductive justice, and taking away the voice that they fought for years to have.

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