

Stigmatization of the Human Body: The Consequences of Gender in Healthcare

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After the first world war, American citizens by and large saw the highest standards of living in the world. There were many factors that contributed to this, from regulations on food and drug safety, to the professionalization of medicine, to a growing diversity in diet, to a general understanding of hygiene.¹ One of the biggest factors in this improvement in living standards was a shifting view of human sexuality and preventative sexual healthcare. As the human body became increasingly less stigmatized in the 1920s and 1930s, many people saw major improvements in both standards of living and overall health through increased sex education and access to contraception. However, because of rigidly held gender divides that stemmed from growing religious fundamentalism, this destigmatization largely excluded women and to this day, keeps women from achieving the same standards of reproductive health as men.

Religious fundamentalism follows the idea that the Bible should be taken literally, and with a growing collectivism through radio and popular media in the 1920s, this idea became a nationwide movement.² This concept also arose as a challenge to the ideas of the New Woman in the 1920s, when women began to take on a more activist role in the public and professional arena.³ The bible contains a number of passages regarding gender roles and modesty, many of which solely apply to women. Because of this, and in the context of literal interpretation, legislation (or lack thereof) that was based on religious readings and beliefs often limited or crippled reproductive healthcare for women.

One of the most prevalent examples of this kind of selective health improvement lies in attitudes towards sexual education. During and after World War I, the military and

¹ Redman, Samuel. "Legacies of the Great War." Lecture, UMass Amherst, September 10, 2018.

² Redman, Samuel. "Religious Fundamentalism." Lecture, UMass Amherst, September 19, 2018.

³ Lamberts Bendroth, Margaret. *Fundamentalism and Gender: 1875 to the Present*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993.

government were shocked by the huge numbers of soldiers returning home from overseas with sexually transmitted infections. This was immediately seen as a public health crisis, and was investigated on the basis that the general population was widely uneducated on safe sex.⁴ To address this, soldiers were given basic, but not entirely ineffective sex education by the military before heading out to the front. While this was indeed a sound reaction and a relatively beneficial response, the same attention was not given by those higher powers to educate women on their own bodies. In the early 1900s, a Boston survey reported that roughly 60% of girls and 25% of college-aged women felt unprepared for their first period, but it was not the government that stepped in to address this problem as it did with the soldiers of WWI. Instead, it was the Girl Scouts of America that began to teach young women about their bodies.⁴ This is especially notable because while the government felt it necessary to teach men about the choices they made as a benefit to their health, it was not deemed necessary to educate women about female reproductive health. Here, there is a clear distinction between what is considered acceptable and unacceptable to teach to young people in 1920s America, and that divide falls directly on the line of gender.

Family planning is another issue that has been classified on the basis of gender throughout American history, and was especially prevalent during the early twentieth century. Although still widely stigmatized, the atmosphere surrounding casual relationships, dating, and sex became far more relaxed following WWI. In the 1920s, the Trojan brand began to mass produce latex condoms, making them much more widely available to consumers. Although roughly 60% of these ultimately failed when a batch of over 2,000 was tested, men specifically could still have the general ability to protect themselves in a more liberal dating environment.⁵ At the same time however, female activists in particular were demonized and persecuted for distributing information on any form of birth control, as well as for spreading the idea that women should be able to control the size of their families.⁴ While some forms of birth control were being mass produced and seen as staples in a changing society, women's ability to control their own sexual health was continually marred by cultural stigma and societal gender roles. This

⁴ Redman, Samuel. "Sex and Pornography." Lecture, UMass Amherst, December 3, 2018.

⁵ Redman, Samuel. "Food, Drink, and Medicine." Lecture, UMass Amherst, October 22, 2018.

was taken a step further for women who did not belong to the white, Protestant majority - while activists like Margaret Sanger did further women's rights movements, they did so not necessarily for the benefit of those on the fringes of society. Birth control (and even information on birth control) did not become more widely available to women of color or Catholic women until long after it had reached wealthy, white, Protestant women.⁴

It would be comforting to say that the United States has moved unequivocally forward in terms of providing equal access to healthy and safe lifestyles for all Americans today, but that argument would be disingenuous to many who are still fighting for their right to reproductive healthcare. Although more diverse representation in government has resulted enormous legislative strides for women's reproductive health, such as *Eisenstadt v. Baird* and *Roe v. Wade*, there are many people who still hold religion in higher regard than science or medicine. Although it's been proven time and again that abstinence-based sexual education is ineffective at preventing unwanted pregnancies and STIs, many schools still don't provide any information on birth control, STIs, or abortion to students, on the basis of religious freedom.⁶⁷ On top of this, many policy makers are actively working to roll back legislation that helps provide women with affordable birth control, as well as to reduce the ability of poor women to access reproductive healthcare providers, also in the name of religious freedom.⁸⁹ Through all of this, and ironically reflective of the U.S. of nearly a century ago, male forms of contraception continue to remain available for cheap prices in millions of locations across the country. Though access to information on women's reproductive health has seen improvement through the years – likely aided by an increase in female doctors, researchers, and legislators – the United States as a whole still conceptualizes the bodies of men and women differently based on religious beliefs and a resulting unbalanced stigmatization.

⁶ Stanger-Hall, Kathrin F and David W. Hall. "Abstinence-only education and teen pregnancy rates: why we need comprehensive sex education in the U.S." *National Institutes of Health*, 2011.

⁷ Guttmacher Institute. "American Adolescents' Sources of Sexual Health Information." December 2017, (accessed December 15, 2018).

⁸ Pear, Robert. "Trump Proposes a New Way Around Birth Control Mandate: Religious Exemptions and Title X." *New York Times*, November 12, 2018.

⁹ Liptak, Adam. "Supreme Court Won't Hear Planned Parenthood Cases, and 3 Court Conservatives Aren't Happy." *New York Times*, December 10, 2018.

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