

Reproductive Violence Against Black People and Indigenous Americans

Definitions

Convict leasing: In the aftermath of the Civil War, incarcerated individuals throughout the American south were loaned to private corporations and plantations as unpaid laborers by states seeking to increase their revenue.

Eugenics: A pseudoscientific field of study that seeks to eliminate “undesirable” (nonwhite, non-abled, etc.) characteristics within the population in favor of other inherited traits. This is accomplished through control of a society’s reproductive patterns.

Gynocracy: A social system across different Indigenous American tribes that values women as leaders and institutional pillars.

Reproductive healthcare: Any form of medical care that addresses illness, conditions, or safety of someone’s reproductive system (organs that help humans create offspring). This can look like screenings at a checkup, preventative care, birth control, hysterectomy/vasectomy, abortion, cancer treatment, surgery, etc.

Sterilization: A medical procedure that makes a person unable to reproduce.

Roe v. Wade

On June 24, 2022, the United States Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade. This court decision protected the right to privacy when undergoing the medical procedure of an abortion, along with other preventive acts of *reproductive healthcare*. The decision was made in 1973, during the American reproductive rights movement. Black people and Indigenous Americans were also fighting for different dreams of reproductive rights. Unlike white women, they were advocating for the freedom to give birth, in addition to the freedom from unwanted pregnancy.

Reproductive Violence Against Enslaved Black People

The beginning of gynecology, the study of reproductive issues of the female reproductive system, was created to monitor the reproductive ability of enslaved Black women. From the 18th and 19th centuries to today, the Black woman’s womb has been a source of capital extraction. What do we mean by this? Well, as long as enslaved people were having more children, there was another generation of forced laborers—slaves—to exploit.

So, when slave owners and doctors noticed the physical and mental health issues that impacted Black women’s ability to have kids, they created an invasive and violent form of “treatment.” This is where we get the field of gynecology. The conditions of enslavement and the realities they created decades later have measurable impacts on the reproductive health of Black people. Dr. Robert C Carroll from Jackson Street Hospital in Georgia referred to these conditions as “menstrual dearrangement.”

In today’s medical terms, conditions were likely:

- Endometriosis
- Ovarian cysts
- Irregular menstruation
- Post-partum depression
- PTSD from sexual assault

Many of these conditions are manifestations of the intergenerational transmission of trauma (See our text on [intergenerational trauma and mental health](#)).

Because of the way Black women were hyper-masculinized, it was believed they had a higher pain tolerance. When white women experienced reproductive health issues, it was typically attended to in a less invasive and dehumanizing way than in the case of Black women. It wasn't until a reproductive health issue prevented Black women from working that slave owners and doctors would give it attention. The decisions about Black women's reproductive health would be made by slave owners and white doctors, and would often end in *sterilization*.

Fast forward to prisons being introduced as another source of labor. It worked in combination with the still present yet legally abolished plantation slavery. Now, Black people are targeted by the legal system to enter prisons at a disproportionate rate and work for no money. Black women's reproductive capability was exploited to perpetuate these systems. *Convict leasing* was a significant culprit in extracting Black women's labor through the legal system.

Black women within the carceral system, both during and after slavery, would perform abortions for a number of reasons:

- Keeping children from having their labor exploited for free
- Protecting them from the realities of growing up in conditions created by the prison system
- They experienced health issues that made pregnancy unbearable or potentially fatal
- Pregnancy was a result of "forced breeding" with male slaves or sexual assault from slave owners

White society weaponized Black motherhood to dehumanize Black people and criminalize "poorly bred" Black children. Black children were depicted by white society as violent, unkempt, and animal-like. This created a criminalized generation of laborers that could continue to uphold the carceral state. This ideology continues to be reflected in modern representations of Black motherhood.

The criminalization of Black mothers would go on to help justify the forced sterilization of all Black women. These decisions would be seen as "protecting" a child and in turn perpetuated white supremacist ideas that Black people are naturally unfit parents. Black women's wombs have been understood as a site of violence, criminal activity, and capital for centuries. This led to their systematic sterilization across the country, in prisons and in medical offices.

Forced sterilization was an extension of *eugenics*. From 1937 to 1966, Black women in North Carolina were the most forcibly sterilized group in the state. Even outside of the South, controlling Black reproduction via sterilization was a tool to maintain power dynamics of racial inequality.

Reproductive Violence Against Indigenous Americans

The United States, guided by eugenicist principles, forcibly sterilized not only enslaved Black people but Indigenous peoples across the Americas as well. Federal agencies such as the Indian Health Service, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, and the Bureau of Indian Affairs developed similar ideologies that depicted Indigenous people as animal-like, unintelligent, and violent in order to justify their forced sterilization.

People who lived on reservations faced poverty, targeted incarceration, and criminalization. These conditions generated a class of workers whose humanity and right to agency over their health were decided by the state. Black and Indigenous people both had their rights to choose whether and how to give birth taken by the state for centuries. Federal services such as the “Plan Your Family” initiative from the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare reflected these attitudes.

In the 1970s, the Plan Your Family initiative distributed pamphlets to Indigenous Americans that encouraged them to have fewer children and instead purchase more livestock and invest in agriculture. Across various tribal identities, the violence committed against Indigenous women's reproductive health was painful for culturally significant reasons. Referred to as a *gynocracy*, various indigenous cultures hold deep connections with the spiritual power of Woman and the connection between the womb. These ideas show up in different folklore such as:

- Spider Woman
- Thought/Thinking Woman
- Corn Mother

It is worth noting that expressions of these cultural figures in Western knowledge have been processed through the lens of colonialism and Christian imperialism. Nonetheless, the reproductive health of Indigenous people held significance beyond Western comprehension, and was violently disrespected through invasive and non-consensual medical procedures like sterilization.

Fighting Back

In the 1970s, the world was witnessing a reproductive rights movement led by middle and upper-class white women. White women, who were notably supported by the LGBT+ community, were fighting for the constitutionally protected right to an abortion. Similar to the women's suffrage movement of the early 1900s, Black people and people of color more generally were excluded from all mainstream advocacy.

Also during the 1970s, thousands of poor working women of color, namely Puerto Rican, Black, Mexican, and Indigenous women in America were sterilized without full knowledge of the procedures being performed on them. Just like a century before them, doctors and the federal government used language barriers, perceived criminality, or plain eugenics to justify sterilizing women of color en masse.

Because Black and Indigenous women were erased from reproductive rights organizing, they mobilized within and for their own communities. WARN, Women of All Red Nations, was an organization designed to fight the federal government's oppression of Indigenous women's bodily autonomy. Their protests in the 1970s revealed that the federal government, namely the Indian Health Service, was involuntarily sterilizing Indigenous women.

White Earth Ojibwe, whose Western name is Pat Bellanger, was a co-founder of the American Indian Movement and an active member of Women of All Red Nations. She fought against the reproductive harms committed against Indigenous women, advocating for an improved standard of living for Indigenous children in Minneapolis.

Black women organized in the 1970s as well. The National Council of Negro Women, which is still very active today, wrote the infamous statement “We Remember: African American Women are for

Reproductive Freedom.” In this statement they called on the right for Black women to choose, a demand rooted in the history of reproductive violence against enslaved women.

Organizations currently advocating for the protection of the reproductive health and agency of Black and Indigenous people include:

- Sister Song (Atlanta)
- The Afiya Center (Northern Texas)
- Indigenous Women Rising (US and Canada)

Key Takeaways

Overall, it is important to remember that Black and Indigenous women were valued not because of their humanity, but for their capacity to reproduce or give birth. Their ability to reproduce was seen either as an asset or as a threat to political and economic power. The state responded to this by supporting the emergence of gynecology, where Black women were invasively and violently inspected like animals.

Black women historically performed abortions while enslaved, either on plantations as chattel or within the convict leasing system. Their reproductive systems were never in their own control, and this tradition continued well past the 1970s. Forced sterilization was one of the main tools to rob Black and Indigenous women of control over their own reproductive health. This country's long history of forced sterilization demonstrates that reproductive choice has never been available to Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color.

Sterilization was justified using racist and eugenicist beliefs that Black and Indigenous women were responsible for the conditions they were forced to raise children in. Conditions such as:

- Intense poverty
- Inadequate access to food
- Below-livable wages/unemployment

Overall, the white feminist movements in the 1970s and 2020s never prioritized non-white women. Black and Indigenous people, especially those who are LGBT+, did not benefit from the abortion rights movement. At the time white women won *Roe v. Wade* and were celebrating their right to choose, thousands of Black women, Indigenous women, and women of color were being forcibly sterilized.

Exploratory Questions

1. How can the experience of Black and Indigenous women be incorporated into reproductive health movements?
2. What intrigues you the most about the reproductive violence against Black, Indigenous, and women of color?
3. How are white supremacist frameworks represented in mainstream reproductive rights movements?

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