Our Bodies, Ourselves (1973), by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective

By: Pingolt, Maggie Keywords: Reproductive health

Our Bodies, Ourselves, a succession to a pamphlet of resources pulled from co-ops of women in and around Boston, Massachusetts, was published in New York in 1973 by Simon and Schuster. Retitled from the original Women and Their Bodies, Our Bodies, Ourselves was an effort by a group of educated, middle class women to reinforce women's ownership of their bodies. There have been eight editions of Our Bodies, Ourselves, as well as sequels such as Our Bodies, Ourselves: Pregnancy and Birth and Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause. Our Bodies, Ourselves has sold more than four million copies and been printed in twenty foreign-language editions.

The women who collaborated on Our Bodies, Ourselves met at a women's conference in Boston in the spring of 1969 in the midst of the feminist movement in the United States. They formed a group called the Doctors Group. In 1970, the group published Women and Their Bodies which compiled pamphlets and personal stories, studies, and research about women's health. Shortly after the initial publication of Women and Their Bodies in 1970, the authors formed the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, a non-profit group that promoted women's health and education. Their goals included producing medically accurate books about health, collaborating with organizations and individuals who generated change for women's health, and inspiring and empowering women to become engaged politically. In 1973, Simon and Schuster published the pamphlets as a book, Our Bodies, Ourselves. Subsequent publications under the name Our Bodies, Ourselves incorporated more information and details of issues and topics regarding women of many backgrounds. Since the formal establishment of the group in 1972 and the publication of Our Bodies, Ourselves in 1973, the group reported tremendous positive feedback about the mission of the group and about Our Bodies, Ourselves.

The Boston Women's Health Collective wrote Our Bodies, Ourselves to educate women about their own health and sexuality, topics rarely discussed openly at the time of its initial publication. The book examined women's reproductive health, including chapters on menstruation, birth control, pregnancy, stages, and challenges during pregnancy. Despite the fact that abortion was illegal in the United States, the chapter on abortion had been included since the original pamphlet-style publication. The book also delved into issues of contraception use, healthy relationships, nutrition, and sexually transmitted diseases.

The 1973 edition of Our Bodies, Ourselves has 276 pages and 15 chapters, six of which discuss reproduction and childbirth. This article will focus solely on the six chapters discussing reproductive anatomy and health, as well as childbirth and abortion, specifically Chapters 2, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 15.

Chapter 2, "The Anatomy and Physiology of Reproduction and Sexuality," details the anatomy of a woman and the stages of the female reproductive cycle through anatomical drawings, ovulation diagrams, and stories of menstruation. In Chapter 9, "Venereal Disease," the authors discuss syphilis, gonorrhea, other non-categorized sexually transmitted diseases, and the political and social implications of sexually transmitted diseases. Each section about a specific disease is broken up into sections about symptoms, diagnosis, treatments, and what a woman should do if she contracts a venereal disease while pregnant.

"Birth Control" is the title of Chapter 10. The authors' goal for the chapter is to enlighten women about effective, safe, low-cost birth control options, such as the birth control pill, intrauterine devices (IUDs), diaphragms, spermicidal creams and gels, and nonmedical birth control like the rhythm method. The authors also discuss the various societal pressures women may face when choosing to use birth control. These pressures include anti-sex attitudes in churches, various state laws against birth control, familial influences, misleading or inaccurate information, and the inaccessibility of birth control. Possible side effects, warning signs and availability are detailed, as is information on the popularity, safety, and success rates for each type of birth control.

Chapter 11 introduces abortion as an issue of women's rights and outlines the reasons for abortions, arguments against them, and the history of illegal and legal abortions. The authors begin the chapter with a history of anti-abortion campaigns, comparisons of abortion laws in other countries, and a review of abortion law reform in the United States. The second half of the chapter couples explanations of the abortion procedure and the complications that can arise from it with presentations of diagrams, drawings and anecdotal stories. One woman tells the story of her illegal abortion which took place in 1967. A friend had referred her to a nurse who did the procedure for 400 dollars. The narrator of the story explains that she felt a sense of total detachment while looking at the fetus. Years later, she feels an appreciation for the strength she exhibited, and does not feel any guilt or shame, as the authors suggested might happen as a result of the stigma regarding abortions. A second woman learned that she was pregnant while she was going back to school and managing a household of two kids and her husband. Her
Menstruation

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