The Woman Rebel (1914) [1]

By: Horwitz, Rainey Keywords: Margaret Sanger [2] Comstock Act [3]

In the early twentieth century, birth control [4] advocate Margaret Sanger published eight issues of a feminist magazine called The Woman Rebel. During this time, discussion of sex education, birth control [4], and abortion [5] were illegal. The magazine featured literary pieces on topics like women’s rights, love and marriage, women in the workplace, reproductive and sexual education, and contraception [6]. The Woman Rebel was one of the first magazines that discussed issues that working class American women faced. Through the magazine, Sanger sought to convince female readers to reject their oppression and become what she called women rebels. The Woman Rebel generated attention and controversy around the birth control [4] and feminist movements in the United States during the twentieth century, advancing those movements and creating a community of women with the common intent to rebel against apparent injustice.

Sanger was a writer, nurse, sex educator, and birth control [4] advocate in New York City, New York, during the early twentieth century. During her life, Sanger promoted women’s health, birth control [4], and feminist education. Historians credit Sanger for inventing the term birth control [4] and establishing the first birth control [4] clinic in the US in Brooklyn, New York in 1916. She also established the American Birth Control League, which later became Planned Parenthood Federation of America [7]. While working as a nurse, Sanger witnessed the outcomes of unsafe, illegal abortions, also called back-alley abortions. Sanger stated that the majority of women’s health issues were caused because women were uninformed about their reproductive health and were unable to control their fertility.

According to historian Esther Katz, Sanger published the monthly journal, The Woman Rebel, early in her career in order to bring attention issues relevant to American working class women. During the early 1900s, most women were not eligible to work the same jobs as men. If women did work the same jobs as men, they were paid significantly less. Women’s primary duties were to their families at home. Abortion and birth control [4] were not legal and the use, discussion, or advertisement of either was a criminal act punishable by fines or prison sentences. Many women were not provided much, if any reproductive health information by their primary care doctors and reported feeling embarrassed and unable to communicate their reproductive health issues with their doctors. Not only did the magazine discuss relevant women’s issues during the early 1900s, but it also established Sanger as a dominant historical voice for women’s issues and birth control [4].

While planning the magazine’s first issues, Sanger received input from her husband, William Sanger, about strategies for public outreach and publication growth. Sanger’s husband wrote that the publication would likely receive scrutiny and face setbacks. He advised Sanger to distribute The Woman Rebel in England, France, and Germany to keep it relevant in the European women’s movement. Sanger’s husband also wrote that having women from European countries contribute content would give The Woman Rebel distinction. While Sanger’s husband’s suggestions are present in the letters he wrote, Sanger credits herself for editing, financing, and circulating the publication.

Sanger published the first issue of The Woman Rebel in March 1914. Each issue of the magazine was eight pages long and printed on newspaper. Each issue featured articles and other literary contributions from a variety of authors concerned with women’s issues. Subsequent issues of the magazine featured topics including birth control [4], prostitution, and life as a mother and wife. In one issue, a contributor offered strategies for women planning on attending women’s rights and suffrage protests. Other articles in multiple issues offered advice to young girls from the ages fourteen to eighteen about maturing into a woman, addressing some of their questions and concerns. Articles detailed methods to prevent pregnancy [8], ideas on love and marriage, as well as calls to arms to fight back against oppression. Sanger wrote in the magazine that her goal was to inspire women to take action in the form of becoming woman rebels themselves. The magazine also featured poems, short stories, religious excerpts, and pieces of history and mythology pertaining to the feminism from various sources. For example, in the first issue of the magazine, Sanger featured an article by a contributor detailing the history of the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra and her influence as an ancient woman rebel.

According to Sanger, she intended that the magazine serve as a means for women to take ownership of their gender in a patriarchal society and develop skills and motivation to think for themselves. Sanger printed the slogan “No Gods, No Masters” on the front page of each magazine. According to Katz, the phrase exemplified the angry tone of the magazine. In the first issue, Sanger stated a woman’s duty was to think independently, form ideas, and respond in defiance to convention. Historian Emily Winderman claims that Sanger used anger as a public emotion in order to unite and motivate readers. The Woman Rebel
featured articles about Sanger’s claim that political institutions supported themselves by taking advantage of working-class women. As a result, Sanger furthered the message that women had the ability to rise together and reclaim themselves.

According to Winderman, *The Woman Rebel* made readers angry and motivated by using techniques like metaphors and repeating words. Articles in *The Woman Rebel* defined the collective enemy of women as the government, the church, oppressive men, and the wealthy and privileged. In later issues, the magazine featured letters from inspired readers who were calling for others to join the movement. The magazine received subscription support from many socialist, trade union, and anarchist organizations. Self-proclaimed members of groups that were also involved in women’s rights issues, like Emma Goldman, helped spread the magazine and contributed articles and other literary pieces to the magazine as well.

Following the publication of the first issue of *The Woman Rebel* in 1914, the magazine received public attention for its controversial content. Critics claimed that the magazine exposed the hysterical and unstable nature of women and that the publication itself was poorly written. Statements from the magazine that directly or indirectly alluded to the use of birth control and abortion violated the Federal Comstock Act. The Federal Comstock Act was a federal law that prevented the publication of any literature or information that was deemed obscene, including discussions of sex, birth control, and abortion. The Comstock Act required that the US Postal Service prevent the circulation of obscene material. In her autobiography, Sanger wrote that information about motherhood being classified under the same obscenity restrictions as pornography was paradoxical. After being notified in April of 1914 that *The Woman Rebel* had violated the Comstock Act, Sanger released a statement that she and the magazine would continue to publish information about birth control until the magazine had accomplished its goals.

Three months later, Sanger was formally charged with violating the Comstock Act and risked up to twenty years in prison if she continued to publish the magazine.

In October 1914, following the charges for publishing *The Woman Rebel*, Sanger used a false passport and fled to England under the alias Bertha Watson. During her time abroad, Sanger worked on several other sexual education pamphlets which she sent back to the US to be distributed by her supporters. Though Sanger stopped publishing *The Woman Rebel*, she developed a following of readers by the time she returned to New York for her trial in November 1915. During her trial, Sanger’s supporters sent her monetary donations. They also wrote letters to then president Woodrow Wilson, affirming their support for Sanger and petitioning for her charges to be dropped. They also petitioned for the continuation of the publication of *The Woman Rebel*.

After the trial, *The Woman Rebel* was not reinstated. *The Woman Rebel* gained significant media coverage for publishing obscene information and protesting the Comstock Act. That media coverage attracted national attention to the growing the birth control and feminist movement as well as the judicial system. According to Katz, the United States District Court of New York dropped Sanger’s charges and dismissed the case because of the publicity generated by the magazine. In 1916, following the dismissal of charges, Sanger wrote that many people had begged her to resume publication of the monthly magazine. She declined, stating that the goal of the publication had been to garner public attention and interest about women’s issues and that she believed the goal had been accomplished.

Sources


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- Feminism and education--United States
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