

Alexander Sanger Speech

Santa Fe, New Mexico - January 28, 2016

Let me acknowledge and thank my friend and colleague Vicki Cowart for her leadership in these difficult times. And my congratulations to our award winners Sue Steketee and Senator Sanchez.

What our colleagues endured in Colorado Springs is testimony to the sacrifices our movement has always made, and will continue to make. Sacrifices we make willingly-the giving of time, energy, passion, resources -for example, the dedication of our Board members, the bravery and calm of our volunteer escorts-the extraordinary patience and tact demanded of our clinic staffers on the phones and at the front desk-and further inside the clinics by counselors, nurses, doctors, social workers and everyone else. Every day, you do a professionally difficult, emotionally taxing, sometimes rewarding but sometimes thankless job-helping clients cope with everything from unintended pregnancies, to battering and abuse, to receiving the news that they are HIV -positive. For that I salute you.

20 years ago, after the murders of three of our Planned Parenthood colleagues in Boston, my colleagues and I at PPNYC sounded the alarm with a full-page ad we wrote in the New York Times with the headline “Words Kill.” It called on public figures to cease and desist the inflammatory rhetoric that destabilized far right wing activists whose attachment to reality was tenuous, at best. Considering the lies we heard hypnotically repeated over the last year, should we be surprised that the Colorado Springs killer - an angry, unstable man, repeated the Boston attack, echoing those very lies when he was apprehended?

Given today’s climate of negativity and distortions I reflect on what we need to do better - how we might help turn this around? What lies barely beneath the surface of this conflict--between right and left, between prochoice and anti-choice Americans—is, as Vicki Cowart said, really deep-seated anger toward women and their fundamental rights to control their own lives - make their own choices and enjoy their sexuality.

This is an old conflict, seemingly intractable, but we must make progress to end it. I certainly don’t want my grandchildren to have to continue

this work. My grandmother was extraordinary. She started from nothing - shanty Irish, no high school diploma, no nursing diploma. You may have heard of the book, *The Secret History of Wonder Woman*, where it is revealed that my grandmother was the inspiration for Wonder Woman - now I can handle being the grandson of Margaret Sanger but I'm less sure about being the grandson of Wonder Woman.

Margaret Sanger helped establish Planned Parenthood here in New Mexico in 1935 in Albuquerque, Santa Fe and Taos, where she met with Mabel Dodge. Mabel called my grandmother a "Madonna type of woman" who "was the first person I ever knew who was openly an ardent propagandist for the joys of the flesh." Previously in 1916 Mabel Dodge brought in Walter Lippmann to discuss my grandmother's idea of a birth control clinic after my grandmother had asked her, unsuccessfully, to fund it - he thought the idea dubious, and he added, "Besides, Margaret Sanger is not the person to do it."

A reporter in Denver in 1916 wrote, "Margaret Sanger looks more interested in darning socks than in defying the government."

Well, she was the person to do it and she did. Here in Santa Fe, New Mexico with the local women who joined her - Katherine Woodson in Albuquerque in 1935 and Florence Davenport and Faith Meem and others in Santa Fe in 1937 Planned Parenthood put down its local roots.

What my grandmother saw 100 years ago when she was working as a nurse on the Lower East Side was an endless parade of horrors: maternal deaths, unsafe abortions, infant deaths and rampant disease. The maternal and infant mortality statistics for the United States back then were the equivalent of the least developed country in the world today. 700 women died out of every 100,000 live births, the equivalent of the Sudan today. The infant mortality ratio of 100 per 1000 live births is the equivalent of Afghanistan today. To her, and to us, these deaths were an affront to civilization and decency, and preventable. Her solution, birth control, to enable women to time, space, delay and reduce her births contributed to the massive improvement in the public's health that we are witnessing today in countries that have embraced these changes.

But still: worldwide the challenge is enormous. About 300,000 women die annually from pregnancy related causes, that is 800 a day, including over 40,000 from unsafe abortions, and over 5 million babies die before age 5. This is an affront to decency and civilization.

And, no surprise, there are those today as there were 100 years ago who oppose our efforts to save these lives. How could anyone call themselves “pro-life” and not be working to get birth control into the hands of all those who want and need it worldwide?

With the Zika Virus we are faced with new challenges. Women need long-acting reversible contraceptives. But, at the moment, there aren't enough IUDs and implants made, nor the staff trained to insert them. Therapeutic abortion, or any abortion, is largely illegal in Latin America and the Caribbean. This must change. The Catholic's Church's response? Abstinence.

The root of Planned Parenthood's opposition -then and now-- is really about discomfort with sexual expression and their downright opposition to

women enjoying their sexuality. 100 years ago, Anthony Comstock, the government's enforcer of Puritan morality, proclaimed that sexual pleasure within marriage was "bestial and base". The judge who sentenced my grandmother to jail in 1917 for opening America's first birth control clinic said, "A woman has no right to copulate without fear of pregnancy."

My grandmother thought that women should have that right, but she didn't often say so publicly, fearing, rightly, that her supporters, Mabel Dodge excepted, would run for cover.

One hundred years ago, opponents of legal birth control had succeeded in passing laws outlawing all methods to prevent conception, as well as any speech advocating the legalization thereof. These laws, called the Comstock Laws were enacted in 1873 before my grandmother coined the term, 'birth control' in 1914 in her newspaper, *The Woman Rebel*.

By the way the only state that did not have a Comstock law was New Mexico.

Her anarchist paper, *The Woman Rebel*, for a variety of reasons, raised the ire of the authorities, and in October 1914 she was indicted, among other counts, for violating the nation's Comstock Laws for advocating the legalization of birth control. She never actually gave any birth control information in the paper, which was more of a screed attacking religion, capitalism, John D. Rockefeller and the YMCA, but, before fleeing to Europe to avoid being railroaded to jail for her advocacy (and leaving my father age 6 with a neighbor), she penned a 16-page pamphlet, *Family Limitation*, which gave information on various douches, suppositories and other rudimentary methods of the day.

Anthony Comstock was not amused. In January 1915, he sent an undercover police officer to the architectural office of my grandfather, William Sanger, who was estranged from, but still legally married to, my grandmother. The officer, claiming to be a Mr. Heller and a colleague of my grandmother, asked for one of her pamphlets in order to translate it into several languages to distribute among the poor. My grandfather believed this tale and, rummaging through my grandmother's belongings,

which she had left behind in her hasty departure, found a copy of *Family Limitation*, delivered it to Mr. Heller and was arrested for violating the Comstock Laws. Entrapping us is not new.

The New York Comstock Law prohibited: “uttering an advertisement purporting to give information where, how, when, of who, and by what means an article purporting to be for immoral use, could be obtained.” Contraception was “immoral” under the law, and thus illegal. Not surprisingly, condoms were not illegal, since they could be used by men for the prevention of venereal diseases; only women-controlled methods were illegal. Does this sound familiar?

Comstock offered my grandfather a deal: I’ll drop the charges if you tell me where your wife is. Even though estranged, my grandfather was ever hopeful of reconciliation and refused to turn his wife in.

Before trial William Sanger made a prescient statement: “I deny the right of the state any longer to encroach on the privacy of the individual by invading it with this statute. I deny the right of the state to exercise

dominion over the souls and bodies of our women by compelling them to go into unwilling motherhood.” Those are New York values!

On September 10, 1915, my grandfather went to trial before a three-judge criminal court, having been denied a jury trial. He freely admitted handing over the pamphlet but then declared that the law, and not he, was on trial. He went on to call Comstock a “religious and pornographic fanatic” and “the victim of incurable sexophobia.” No one had ever taken on Anthony Comstock in public before. It created a sensation. He continued, “I deny the right of the state to encroach on the rights of the individual by invading the most private and fundamental relations of men and women.” Fifty years later, the US Supreme Court in *Griswold v. Connecticut* would use similar language to overturn the last of the nation’s Comstock Laws. Justice Douglas said, “Would we allow the police to search the sacred precincts of marital bedrooms for telltale signs of the use of contraceptives? The very idea is repulsive to the notions of privacy surrounding the marriage relationship.” My grandfather was the first to proclaim a right to privacy in reproduction.

But my grandfather was way ahead of his time and was found guilty. My grandfather was given a choice of \$150 fine or 30 days in jail. He chose jail. “I will never pay that fine. I would rather be in jail for my conviction than to be free at a loss of my manhood and my self-respect.” My grandfather’s supporters erupted in protest and the court was cleared. Thus the first person put in jail in my grandmother’s birth control crusade was not my grandmother, it was my grandfather. More importantly, the trial and sentence aroused the conscience of the nation, Anthony Comstock became a laughing stock, and his laws were doomed to be ignored, repealed or overturned. But it took 50 years.

Family Limitation was translated into Spanish and distributed in the Yucatan. Imprisonment seemed likely for the translators, printers and publishers of *La Brujula del Hogar* in 1922. The pamphlet fell into the hands of birth control opponents in Merida, the Knights of Columbus, who drew up a petition seeking the prosecution of the publishers. Newspapers took both sides, cartoonists got busy, public became aroused and Birth Control became the most discussed topic of the hour. The first edition of

the pamphlet, all 5,000 copies, was exhausted in one day, and a second edition of 10,000 copies was immediately re-printed.

The Knights of Columbus petition to the District Attorney, Arturo Cisneros Canto, was forwarded to his boss, the Governor of Yucatan, Felipe Carrillo Puerto, who at once ordered the District Attorney to deny the petition. Incidentally, Carrillo, a Socialist, was one of 14 children. In compliance, District Attorney Canto issued a statement published in the March 14 *Diario Oficial*, which was reprinted in Meridá newspapers, which said, in part:

“The Attorney General’s Office cannot shape its manner of proceedings to the narrow-minded and antiquated criteria of morality, the result of deep-rooted religious prejudices, which crops out in your petition. The Executive of the State wishes to have it made clear that forever have gone the prosecutions, which have no other cause than moral fanaticism, which filled with horror the vast period of clerical domination of the Middle Ages. As long as the present socialist government directs public destiny, the Attorney

General's office will not undertake any prosecutions for futile ideas of morality, since prosecutions in the name of morality have at all times been the most odious pretext of which religion made use so as to destroy its enemies.”

This is the type of public servant we need.

While Comstock may have faded from view, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and other fundamentalists have not. There are still many other men who, like Comstock and the Knights of Columbus, want to keep women inferior to men in every way. BTW, this Pope is no different from his predecessors.

I would remind you of a few examples over the past year:

- The male President of Turkey said that women would never be equal to men, and that they should stay at home and have 3, preferably 5, children.

- The male Minister of Education in Russia said that sex ed would never be taught in Russia's classrooms.
- ISIS banned birth control and made sex slaves out of hundreds of women.
- And a Bishop in Poland declared that "The ideology of gender presents a greater threat worse than Nazism and Communism combined."
- And then there is, of course, the Texas Legislature.

What our opponents want is for the USA to become a cultural part of Latin America, where abortion is illegal and machismo rules. Take Mexico. Domestic violence is epidemic. Abortion is illegal except in Mexico City. Nirvana for our opponents.

But is it? The rate of abortion is far higher than in this country - three times as high - even though modern family planning is more widespread. This is because the most vulnerable women do not have access to family planning or are forced by their male partners not to use it or use it sporadically. What you get where information and services are

restricted are the young and poor not getting served, higher teen births, higher single births. And complications from back alley or self-induced abortions is higher in the Mexico than the US, resulting in infertility among women, a tragedy and a counter-productive result for the men who want women to have their children on command.

This is not what we want. I suspect it is not what our opponents truly want.

Is reproductive and sexual freedom a male versus female thing? A zero sum game, where women win and men lose? No, it isn't. Are women universally in favor of reproductive rights and men universally opposed? In this country, not even close.

In the USA, women favor reproductive freedom only slightly more than men do. But we have majorities of both.

Just to cite one recent poll from Quinnipiac:

61% of women want abortion legal in all or most cases. But so do 53% of men. 8% point difference, hardly a vast gulf in opinion. Over a third of women and men are opposed, and they show up and vote the issue. There has been no change in these numbers since 1975.

Part of the responsibility lies with us, I think. In this heated climate of polarization have we given up on trying to convince the convincible to build our base of support? We may be in a feedback loop with our most ardent supporters. I fear we aren't speaking effectively to all women and men, about the necessity of reproductive freedom—its critical links to health and social justice for everyone. My grandmother said to her colleagues in 1952, when they founded the International Planned Parenthood, that “we won't get anywhere without the men”. Quite simply, reproductive freedom, and the liberation of women from enforced childbearing, are in everyone's best interests, both men and women.

For many today, the changing status of women in the world is creating a backlash to that very change and we get caught in the crossfire.

Worldwide in industrial nations, women are beginning to out-earn men, have fewer children and have them without the benefit of matrimony. Here in the U.S. the economic and educational status of males is declining relative to females. Four in ten women now out-earn their partners, and by age 27, 130 women will have a college degree for every 100 men. This is a big reversal. The age of marriage and first birth are climbing, too - in the US, 40% of births are to single women (it is 70% in Iceland and much of Latin America). Almost half of women ages 15-44 do not have children, a historically unprecedented number.

So in addition to not getting married (there is much episodic cohabitation), men are struggling educationally, economically and in terms of their health, and they feel like they are falling behind in a rapidly changing world. Mortality rates for white men in the USA without a college degree are rising, where the mortality rates for all other income, race and educational groups are falling. The causes - alcohol, drugs, suicide -i.e. despair. If this continues, white males of all ages in the US will begin to die off like Russian males.

One academic has posited, paraphrasing Marx, that males are alienated from the means of reproduction. Women control birth control, privately, without the male partner knowing, and have access to a legal abortion on their own. When women get pregnant, men often walk. The shotgun marriage is as rare as Academy Awards for minority actors. Men are walking from marriage, believing that a pregnancy and childbearing are a woman's choices, given the Pill and legal abortion. Some cohabit but many women are nonetheless reproducing on their own after the man splits. The fact that men believe they can split without consequences hurts these women. Women are left to bring up a child alone. And they are left to their own resources or government support. Thus some women, and men, mainly lower income, don't see reproductive rights as being in their interest.

Men - too many feel like losers and are loners and are angry. Who to vent against? The government, women, and us.

Now, clearly, the reduced status of males in modern America is due to more than legal abortion and the Pill --- the modern post-industrial

economy is not the average man's friend. But our mission is part of the package of things that are not viewed as being in their interest.

We aren't going to solve this problem on our own, but we can't ignore it either. We aren't going to give up the Pill or injectables or implants, or legal abortion, but we need to figure out how to include males in our work, in our vision, in our mission. We need to fight for reproductive rights for women, all the while understanding that reproduction usually takes two and that males have reproductive interests as well - men want to have children just as women do. Figuring out how to de-escalate the battle of the sexes will take all of us. What are some of the things Planned Parenthood could do to be more encompassing of men?

- Should we add a full array of male health services, not just the treatment for STDs when their partners are infected?
- Do we become primary health clinics for all? You already offer blood pressure screening and diabetes screening.

What else could be changed and what would that mean for us identity-wise and financially? Our name and culture would have to change. This

may be beyond us, but we need to think about how we can be part of the solution to address these disparities between the sexes since we are seeing the morbidity caused by men in the women we see in our clinics.

I'm giving my grandmother apoplexy now. My grandmother pulled her funding for the nascent clinic in Santa Fe in 1938 after 6 months because it was offering primary care - she just wanted birth control, period. Her model is the one we still follow by and large nationally. Maybe that no longer serves us. Some Planned Parenthood affiliates have explored primary care.

Internationally, in many nations, you may be surprised to find out, our affiliates' health centers provide primary care and especially pediatrics - for women, children, and men. In El Salvador we operate a hospital. And overseas few Planned Parenthoods use the name Planned Parenthood. Thailand does, as well as Lesotho, Grenada and Zambia. Family Planning Association is the most common. Mexfam is our name in Mexico. And Mexfam offers general health care for men and women and children.

In general, this country is the only one where there is violence against our clinics and the only country by and large where men are not served. A connection? No one shoots up a Mexfam clinic.

What is the right path? Men need to see us as being in their vital best interest. There must be more for men in our clinics, beyond having healthy children.

I reflect on the words of my grandmother's great friend, and sometime lover, H.G. Wells, who wrote, in the introduction to one of my grandmother's books, that "Civilization is in a race between education and catastrophe." His prescription, and hers, was birth control, the term she invented almost 100 years ago.

Because of a small cadre of incredible volunteers, Planned Parenthood here and abroad was founded to stave off catastrophe. Because of our volunteers worldwide, we have been the greatest social movement of the

20th Century and are poised, and the world needs us to be, the most effective social movement of the 21st.

Failure is not an option. Women, girls and children depend on us, not just for healthy productive, and reproductive, lives, but for their very survival. Improving the status of women will not happen without us.

Prevention of HIV and other STIs will not happen without us. A proper balance between population size and the environment will not happen without us. The ability of nations to live within their borders and to refrain from poaching on or invading their neighbors will not happen without us.

Our volunteer founders came from a 19th Century world without family planning - they saw maternal and child mortality, with women as slaves to reproduction, disease rampant, and back alley abortion the norm. Our opponents, those self-righteous forces of Fundamentalism, Orthodoxy and Puritanism, want to return women to the 19th Century, to the World of the Rhythm Method, which is a game of Ovarian Roulette, where women lose. Sexual and Reproductive Freedom threatens the very foundations of

those who would control our lives. The only thing that stands in their way is us, or more properly, you, our volunteers.

My grandmother and her colleagues did this in the Spirit of Civilization, to win the race against Catastrophe. They suffered ostracism and abuse for bringing things out into the open that weren't even discussed in bedrooms. They broke the prevailing rules of decency, taste and decorum. Sometimes we are an embarrassment to our children.

They were fearless. And blunt. My grandmother delivered herself of statements like, "Women are not meant to be brood animals for the masculine civilizations of the world."

Maybe the time for tough talk is again upon us? Maybe we need to loudly call the question about the roots causes of this conflict, which masquerades as abortion, but is really about something much more fundamental. Maybe we can also re-think who we are and what we do and consider offering new services?

If we embrace change and offer a bright new vision for the world and relations between men and women, maybe, just maybe, we can move on to win the race against catastrophe and if not relegate the battle of the sexes to the ash heap of history, perhaps come to an uneasy truce.

Thank you.