

Crystal Eastman, “Birth Control in the Feminist Program,” 1918, excerpt

In the following article, originally published in the Birth Control Review in 1918, Eastman (a prominent suffragist, lawyer, and peace activist) contended that birth control was a fundamental right for women and must be available if they were to participate fully in the modern world.

Feminism means different things to different people, I suppose. To women with a taste for politics and reform it means the right to vote and hold office. To women physically strong and adventuresome it means freedom to enter all kinds of athletic contests and games, to compete with men in aviation, to drive racing cars,... to enter dangerous trades, etc. To many it means social and sex freedom, doing away with exclusively feminine virtues. To most of all it means economic freedom,—not the ideal economic freedom dreamed of by revolutionary socialism, but such economic freedom as it is possible for a human being to achieve under the existing system of competitive production and distribution,—in short such freedom to choose one's way of making a living as men now enjoy, and definite economic rewards for one's work when it happens to be “home-making.” This is to me the central fact of feminism. Until women learn to want economic independence, i.e., the ability to earn their own living independently of husbands, fathers, brothers or lovers,—and until they work out a way to get this independence without denying themselves the joys of love and motherhood, it seems to me feminism has no roots. Its manifestations are often delightful and stimulating but they are sporadic, they effect no lasting change in the attitude of men to women, or of women to themselves.

Whether other feminists would agree with me that the economic is the fundamental aspect of feminism, I don't know. But on this we are surely agreed, that Birth Control is an elementary essential in all aspects of feminism. Whether we are the special followers of Alice Paul [founder of the National Woman's Party] or Ruth Law, or Ellen Key, or Olive Schreiner [South African author known for her pro-women's rights and pacifist writings], we must all be followers of Margaret Sanger [pioneer in the birth control movement]. Feminists are not nuns. That should be established. We want to love and to be loved, and most of us want children, one or two at least. But we want our love to be joyous and free—not clouded with ignorance and fear. And we want our children to be deliberately, eagerly called into being, when we are at our best, not crowded upon us in times of poverty and weakness. We want this precious sex knowledge not just for ourselves, the conscious feminists; we want it for all the millions of unconscious feminists that swarm the earth,—we want it for all women.

Life is a big battle for the complete feminist even when she can regulate the size of her family. Women who are creative, or who have administrative gifts, or business ability, and who are ambitious to achieve and fulfill themselves in these lines, if they also have the normal desire to be mothers, must make up their minds to be a sort of supermen, I think. They must develop greater powers of concentration, a stronger will to “keep at it,” a more determined ambition than men of equal gifts, in order to make up for the time and energy and thought and devotion that child-bearing, even in the most “advanced” families, seems inexorably to demand of the mother. But if we add to this handicap complete uncertainty as to when children may come, how often they come or how many there shall be, the thing becomes impossible. I would almost say that the whole structure of the feminist's dream of society rests upon the rapid extension of scientific knowledge about birth control....

It is a reform absolutely vital to the progress of woman and one which the war does not interfere with. While American men are fighting to rid the old world of autocracy let American women set to and rid the new world of this intolerable old burden of sex ignorance. It should not be a difficult task. I don't believe there is one woman within the confines of this state who does not believe in birth control. I never met one. That is, I never met one who thought that she should be kept in ignorance of contraceptive methods....

SOURCE: Eastman, Crystal. "Birth Control in the Feminist Program." In *Crystal Eastman on Women and Revolution*, Blanche Wiesen Cook. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.