



Infringement of bodily integrity: An act of reproductive violence against women

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Abstract

For feminists, denial of control and choice over one's own body has been one of the significant practices of violence against women. Feminists have confronted numerous struggles for assuring women's control and choice over their bodies especially in the context of India. In these struggles, among the other objectives, access to birth controls with informed choice to regulate one's own fertility has been one of the pivotal goals. In this context, this paper interrogates the idea of birth control and critically examines why its prevalence was so debatable in the colonial period. The paper probes how and why, feminists stand on birth control was different from the prevailing perceptions on the necessity or non-necessity of birth control in the colonial period. The paper highlights the debates in support and against of birth control and, argues why feminist's standpoint was different from others, and why did they uphold women's control and choice over their body along with their rights to reproductive health.

Keywords: feminists, birth control, reproductive violence, reproductive health, colonial period, motherhood, choice, control, gender, women

Introduction

Birth control involves contraceptives (both for men and women) which are used for preventing undesired unplanned pregnancies, thereby, should act as source of empowerment for the women in regulating their fertility and in avoiding unwanted pregnancies. If we conceive the birth control in this manner, then it is a tool for the upliftment of women and instrument for improvising their situation in the society. Moreover, birth control is not only a means of ensuring bodily control but also an important equipment for preventing marginalization of women's reproductive health, maternal mortality, or morbidity. As these often gets depreciate either because of continuous unplanned pregnancy or with frequent abortions.

On the contrary, when we see birth control as a device for controlling population or regulating the numbers, then this same source places women in a powerless situation because in that case women becomes the means and controlling population as the end. Acknowledging the fact that in the Indian context, it is family, the society, and majorly the husband, who are the decision makers whenever it comes to reproduction. It is the women's social position, context, role, and situations which plays a determinant role in regulating her fertility. In this manner, specifically targeting women or considering their fertility as the prime obstacle in the development of nation, reflects that we are assuming that it is women who wanted to go for increasing population and undermining the role of men who are equally responsible. This assumption points the biasness in ignoring the fact that sexual decisions are often not in the women's hands, and instead dependent on their husband.

In this context, when we intent to understand the usage of birth control for the regulation of women's fertility by state and not by women itself, then it portrays the violation of women's choice and control over their body. Since the understanding of birth control states that it is about choices in reproductive sphere. Then certainly, it brings forth the question on the idea of birth control conceived in colonial period, which is even being carried over in contemporary period: that is for the supposed need of *development of nation*. However, in the colonial period, birth control was assumed to be a solution for the fear of over population, need of development and modernization of nation and was given precedence over the rights of women over their bodies.

Moreover, the issue of birth control was far more provocative because of the emerging conflicting debates from the different segments of society. What is required to focus is on why some were in favor or against of birth control. This, consequently, brings to the question of interrogating what justifications were given in regard to rejection or acceptance of birth control. As for some, birth control was required for ensuring the nation's development by population control, while for some birth controls were objectionable because they endanger the maintenance of morality and survival of the race. And among these wide-ranging views, it is the feminists who stood for women, and their right and choice over their body, setting aside other claims of benefits and loss. Thereby, feminist's standpoint struggles against the violence which was being practiced either through usage of birth control for regulating women's fertility irrespective of her choice or through denying women the right to choose when she wants to use birth control and enforcing her to become a reproductive machine, whose only tasks is to ensure the maintenance and survival of communities. In this context, this paper seeks to critically analyses how feminists stand differs from other in regard to birth control and how either side whether enforced

use of birth control or denying of its usage as per women's choice has manifested practice of violence against women.

The paper is divided in three sections. Section one discusses the debates on birth control in colonial India and examines varied perspective taken on birth control in comparison with feminists' standpoint who supported the call for ensuring women's control and choice over their body. Section two bring forth the views of some of the early feminists on birth control expressing the rationale for their justification, and section three, examines the interlinkages between violence and feminists struggle for birth control. It critically examines the nature of reproductive violence which is crucially dependent on deprivation of women's choice and control over their body.

Debates on Birth Control in Colonial Period

The statement that birth control will promote sex without pregnancy and will be used to gratify lust (Manna 1988, 37) by a segment of people who were against it, itself carries the seeds of violence against women. The statement that it will encourage sex without pregnancy, itself states that for them sex and reproduction were linked, which in other ways not only deprives women of their sexual liberty but also makes women's body as an instrument which has to be used for serving the needs and greed whether it is for society, family, or state.

This where actually the feminist standpoint emerges as the voice of voiceless. Feminists such as Laxmibai Rajwade, Begum Hamid Ali, Margaret Sanger, Marie Stopes or Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, etc., they all stood for women's choice and control over their body. Feminists demanded separating sex from reproduction and struggled for women's claim over their body. While Stopes called for women's sexual freedom and liberty by urging separation of sex from procreation. Marie Stopes challenged the notion of submissive female sexuality and supported women's sexual desires. Therefore, they come up with different understanding of sex and especially of female sexuality on the subject of birth control (Ahluwalia 2008, 74). It is these feminists arguments which bring forth the notion of women's reproductive choice and rights in the debate.

While the arguments such as maintaining race survival as the ground of opposition to birth control points out that women body has always been considered as a means for producing the population which is required for the maintaining of the race of a community or group or a nation. Such group of people never considered the impact of such demands on women's reproductive health and the damage which this violence of unplanned breeding done not only on the physical health but also on the mental and emotional health of women. Accordingly, this implies that women bodies are violated without their consent and their choice is something not considered to be a question of worth considering or raising.

Margaret Sanger opines individual freedom the autonomy lies in controlling one's body and exercising one's reproductive choices. For her, no women can claim herself to be autonomous, self-governing, and free who could 'not control and owes her own body and can choose whether to be or not to be mother' (Ahluwalia 2008, 76-77). As Carole McCann argues that for Sanger, 'self-possession of the body and self-regulation of its processes were grounds of political autonomy' (quoted in Ahluwalia 2008, 76-77). Therefore, control over one's body is the basis of one's autonomous self. This autonomous self is being violated when women are deprived of informed consent, and choice of whether and when they want to go for birth control.

With this understanding, the advocacy for birth control for the sake of national development (Gupta 2000, 202-203) bring forth the question on the position of women. When curbing of numbers was the focus for which state monitoring and controlling of 'sexual practices and expressions within the intimate domain' was called (Ahluwalia 2008, 24). This implies, not only population was seen as numbers, but women bodies were also observers as objects which were now being focused for achieving the target of nation's development. Further, this phenomenon of reproduction was not taking place in a vacuum rather varied political, social, and cultural interests played an important role in controlling the discourse. Also, because the debate was not only on birth control, but also on which class or community needs to reduce their population, whom should be taking contraceptives, because somewhere the idea of which kind of population should be maintained and which should be reduced was the matter of concern (Ahluwalia 2008, 35). This itself points out that with an intersectional perspective as well women's body and their fertility was being regulated.

The assumed perception that less population is linked with more economic growth or vice versa was being used for designing the model of development. The regulation of fertility become the matter of debate with contradictory viewpoints as whether the relationship between 'population growth and economic growth' is constructive or obstructive and which is the source, and which is the result (Gupta 2000, 142). In that manner, the issues which were supposed to be the focus of concern has been relegated at the bottom and have proven detrimental for women's health. Therefore, 'women's health, well-being and integrity are compromised rather than improved' (Gupta 2000, 319). So, what is required is to question the relevance of contraceptives in promoting the women's autonomy, self-rule, and independence (Gupta 2000, 331).

Mahmoud F. Fathalla, argued that women have always sensed the need of regulating their fertility but even in the contemporary time, women suffer from the absence of lack of safe and effective means which reflects their lack of power and control over their life and body (Sen, Germain, Chen 1994, 223). The contraceptives which were expected as the means of liberating women have turned out to be mere instruments perpetuating political interest rather than empowering women (Sen, Germain, Chen 1994, 226). When the aim is to achieve the desired type of population growth, women's rights are sacrificed because it is the women's body that become the victim of such targets (Gupta 2000, 605). But despite this woman continue to be the prime target of population

management measures and this is the point where feminist stand differs because they 'strive for women's autonomy and empowerment as goals in themselves and enabling conditions for equitable gender relations' (Gupta 2000, 230).

The framework which interprets development as only economic growth will not consider that development is meant for people and women are also people (Krishnaraj 1998, 26). It is only through a gendered analysis one can see the prejudice the partiality of only focusing on women and excluding men for regulating the population growth and 'completely ignoring the fact that men are also implicated, when women get pregnant' (Krishnaraj 1998, 27).

While we see birth control as a tool for the development of nation by focusing on development of women and ignoring men then again, we are propagating the gender biasness. It is the fertility of women, but it is being controlled by men or the state for their ends, at the same time assuming women herself not so rational of controlling reflects the patriarchal nature of state itself. Women's choice and context is being totally neglected which marginalize their situation and position. What is required is to understand that men are equally responsible and should be considered equally responsible for increasing population and affecting the desired development (Krishnaraj 1998, 27-28).

Therefore, feminists took the task of advocating birth control for the liberation of women and assuring their emancipation from the compulsory bondages of enforced motherhood. Feminists have struggled to protect women's bodily integrity, and birth control is one of their struggles to enable women exercise their choice and control over their body and regulate their fertility. As to be in charge of their own bodies, birth control is particularly important to maintain and regulate their reproductive health and, is an achievement of feminists' struggles. What is essential is to acknowledge that within those varied voices which were raised with numerous purposes either in favor or against of birth control, it was feminists whose aim was to give voice to silent suffering of women, suppressed under the notions of nation's development, maintenance of race, or the glorification of motherhood. It was feminists who provided voice to the concept of female sexuality and urged for separation of sex from reproduction, hence, liberation of women from unplanned, undesired, and multiple pregnancies.

Some of the Early Feminists Stand on Birth Control

When we are comprehending the debate on birth control, it becomes far more essential to look into the views of early feminists who struggled for women's rights over their bodies. Some of the views of early feminists are:

The time period in which these feminists struggled and voice in favor of birth control for assuring women's control and choice over their body, is far more critical because this was a time frame when birth control was opposed on many grounds. Thereby, feminists took on this task to deal with it in a way where their point also get stated and opponents gets convinced on the exigency of birth control for women's reproductive health.

Begum Hamid Ali asserted that birth control will be a solution to many problems which emerges out of rapid pregnancies destroying women's health and often resulting in maternal and child mortality, thus, supported the call of dissemination and circulation of contraceptives (Ahluwalia 2008, 96). Lady Vidyagauri Nilkanth urged that birth control information should be provided in order to deal with the issues of 'infant mortality, women's health, or poverty,' along with opening the medical center for providing the medical advice and help to the people (Raina 1990, 92). Similarly, Laxmibai Rajwade had argued that it was the result of uncertain and continuous pregnancy that maternal and child mortality is increasing. It is the consequences of unwanted and repeated pregnancies that women health is getting suffered as women gets anemic and become prone to diseases which also often results in the form of maternal and child mortality (Ahluwalia 2008, 95). She emphasized the urgency of dealing with the consequences of unplanned pregnancies not only on women itself but also on child mortality. This way, attempt was made to convince the people by giving rationale of women's health and the necessity of addressing it with the required information and knowledge of birth control. Thereby, bring forth the exigency of catering to the reproductive health of women. In this manner, attempt was made to convince opponents on the requirement of understanding the interlinkages between reproductive health and reproductive violence.

Feminists such as Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, believed, birth control as 'the sacred and inalienable right of every woman to possess the means to control her body and no God or man can attempt to deprive her of that right without perpetrating an outrage on womanhood' (quoted in Gupta 2000, 204-205). She emphasized control over body is women's right and no women should be denied of such for any reason or purpose by anybody. She elucidates promoting birth control is not to prevent motherhood or child birth, instead to maintain it 'scientifically.' Women in a patriarchal society are seen as reproducer whose chief tasks is to procreate only and any attempt will be made to rescue women from uncertain and unwanted pregnancies, it is perceived as danger or challenge to the society. Therefore, considering the sensitivity of the situation it was required to handle the women's right over their bodies in a manner that their situation do not get worse in the wake of opposition by those who were in favor of keeping the patriarchal control and subjugation of women (Manna 1988, 49).

Annie Besant a prominent British socialist and women's rights activist, argued what is required is to broaden the scope for women outside the patriarchal boundaries of motherhood and wife. According to her, women need to be seen as human being and not only as mothers or wife and subjection of women to continuous pregnancies is the denial of their right as an individual. Consequently, she emphasized the need of moving beyond the social

perception which freeze women's identity to mother and closes the possibilities of choosing, whether they want to be mother or not (Ahluwalia 2008, 91-92).

Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi challenged 'the dominant sexual double standards within Indian society whereby only girls are taught and trained in the values and principles of self-control and boys were taught that sexual indulgence was not a sin' (Ahluwalia 2008, 103-104). She pointed, it is the gendered socialization where men and women are given different training often in which what is prohibited for women is allowed for men. From the childhood women are trained with virtue of silence, passivity, and patience while men are not given such trait. Women are socialized to inculcate the belief that self-control and especially sexual self-control is the parameter of judging their character, while such training is not given to men reflecting the gendered biasness of society.

Furthermore, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay stand was quite different from those who supported birth control 'on grounds of degeneration of national race, or Malthusian dread of overpopulation' (Ahluwalia 2008, 104). Moreover, she asserted, when women refuse to bear the burden of uncertain and unwanted motherhood it is taken as rejection of patriarchal societal system. A system which maintains rule over women body by subjecting her to repeated pregnancies without considering her choice or wish. As in hierarchical and unequal society, women's choice or desire of motherhood is never asked, rather it is just imposed. And in such circumstances when she refuses to be subjugated by such demands, she becomes the violator of system and danger to the patriarchal institution of marriage and motherhood. In this system, men through 'religious, legal, or social' restraints traps the women (Ahluwalia 2008, 104-105). In Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's opinion a woman who cannot regulate her fertility, who cannot control her body or cannot exercise her choice regarding her body cannot be called free (Ahluwalia 2008, 105).

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay embraced female sexuality while at the same time ensured that 'promoting women's rights over their own bodies and sexuality, not to be presented as denouncing motherhood' (Ahluwalia 2008, 105). As, the struggle of advocates of birth control was not free from challenges, they were often labelled as against motherhood and promoters of wickedness, particularly for widows and unmarried women. Though many attempts and efforts were made to assure that support to birth control does not entail being against motherhood, but despite all the efforts it was visible that even availability of birth control was not able to prevent the visiting and seeking help of imposters in situations of illegitimate pregnancies (Manna 1988, 49). Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay opined that motherhood should be only when women desires and the physically in a state to produce. Motherhood should not be accompanied by uncertainties and unwantedness. It should be planned and not result of one's ignorance (Ahluwalia 2008, 105).

Reproductive Violence Against Women

Reproductive violence is a phase when women's reproductive choices are being controlled and regulated by someone else. This is what exactly, lived experiential realities of Indian women point towards. Birth control, which is and could have been a source of empowerment, upliftment, and giver of women's control over their fertility, has been instead used as a mechanism of violence when their fertility their body their reproduction is being regulated by state or when they are denied the right of accessing birth control by society. Women have been through physical violence when they are either coerced for reproducing or denied from reproducing. They have witnessed mental violence when they always live with an uncertainty of their very next procreation. Women have experienced emotional violence, when their body is being encroached irrespective of their own consent, choice and get controlled by state or society. All these experiences of violence have brought forth the questions on the women's access and right to birth control as per their own choice, and consent.

Though many initiatives and voices have been raised on birth control but stand of each voice varies. While some were in favour for propagating the development of nation, and others opposed it to maintain race and morality. The feminists and women's organizations on the other hand, advocated the need of birth control for liberating women and reducing the maternal and infant mortality and morbidity. The feminist standpoint differs from those who advocated birth control for the national well-being and called for the closer inspection and regulation of sexual practices within the intimate domain for the sake of modernization and development of nation.

This brings to the question whether we are devising it just for the sake of state or else we are doing for improvising the health of women? All of these entails in one way or the other violence against women. A violence which deprives women of their own body. A violence which marginalizes the choice of women and curb the control of women over their body. In that sense, body becomes a mechanical instrument which is as per the need can be used whether it is for reducing population, increasing population, or to using it for maintaining the cultural belief system. Also, if sex is supposed to be only for reproduction, then question of women's sexual liberty also is at the edge. At the same time, it always keeps women on the edge of uncertainty where they do not know whether she will get pregnant or not; as an outcome of either unsafe sex or due to regulation of fertility by others.

What makes feminists stand a feminist is the lens the standpoint which locates the notion of choice when it comes to body, it questions women's control over her body, and argues for reproductive rights and justice for the women. Since it is her body thereby, it is she who should be the decision maker. It questions the existing gender inequality, gender biasness and patriarchal nature of the state and society. It questions the usage of women as a means, for the ends goals of state, society, or men. That is using of women bodies as an instrument for the serving their needs. It is this feminists concern, their voices, which bring forth the question of women's choice and rights over their body. They become voice of many whose voice has been marginalized or ignored.

Feminists bring forth the concept which often has been denied its due attention and urged for recognizing women as humans who have rights over their body. Thereby, making it a universal struggle for women's reproductive choice and rights

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