How Eugenics Legislated Sterilization Around the World
Hakeem Smith, Medium, January 12, 2017

In his 1883 work, *Inquiries into Human Faculty and its Development*, Francis Galton coined the term, eugenics. Galton defines the term as deriving from “Greek, eugenæs namely, good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities”\(^1\). Galton subsequently established the first research fellowships in *Eugenics at University College London*, the first eugenics laboratory at the *Eugenics Record Office*, inspired the German Society for Racial Hygiene in Berlin (*Deutsche Gesellschaft für Rassenhygiene*), and popularized the phrase “nature versus nurture”. However, Galton’s colleagues and peers disagreed on methodology and philosophy, and various eugenics theories gained popularity throughout Europe—promoting diverging eugenics ideals.

![A 1913 eugenics cartoon by Louis M. Glacken.](image)

Although eugenics theories and practices have existed since Ancient Greece, Galton’s theories established a (pseudo-)scientific foundation for the *modern eugenics movement*. The first modern eugenics theories proposed limiting childbearing and marriages between “inferior” and impoverished people; negative eugenics. Galton’s research eventually shifted toward a different field that promoted and encouraged breeding and marriage of the intellectually and physically “superior” to improve

\(^1\)“That is, with questions bearing on what is termed in Greek, eugenæs namely, good in stock, hereditarily endowed with noble qualities. This, and the allied words, eugeneia, etc., are equally applicable to men, brutes, and plants. We greatly want a brief word to express the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had. The word eugenics would sufficiently express the idea; it is at least a neater word and a more generalised one than viriculture which I once ventured to use.” (Galton, 1883, p.17)
humanity through reproduction; positive eugenics. Eugenics propaganda alternated between negative and positive as eugenics societies spread internationally from the UK and Germany.

Advertisement for The Black Stork, a 1917 film promoting negative eugenics. South Bend News-Times, November 9, 1917

As the twentieth century progressed, eugenics societies became more prevalent and politically active. The proliferation of eugenics as a science continued throughout World War One and “by the 1920s eugenics societies could be found in the Soviet Union…Mexico, Scandinavia, Brazil, Japan, and many other countries”\(^2\). Most national eugenics societies converged on negative eugenics theories and focused on preventing the mentally handicapped, criminal, impoverished and otherwise unfit from breeding. In the United States, the Eugenics Research Association—employing both positive and negative eugenics—successfully influenced Congress to pass the Immigration Act of 1924 that excluded U.S. immigration from Asia while increasing the number of immigrants from Western Europe.

\(^2\) “Anxiety about the social effects of bad heredity led to the formation of eugenics societies in a considerable number of countries. These included the Eugenics Education Society of London in 1907, the German Society for Race Hygiene in 1905, the American Eugenics Society in 1912, and, in the same year, the French Eugenics Society. By the 1920s eugenics societies could be found in the Soviet Union (a legacy from Tsarist times), Mexico, Scandinavia, Brazil, Japan, and many other countries.” (Jones, 1992, p.81)
After World War One, the work of eugenics societies soon became the legislation of states. The United States proves an excellent case study for this interwar period as well. By 1930, punitive forced sterilization laws existed in three US states—California, Nebraska, and Washington, and eugenic sterilization laws were enacted in 24 states. That number increased to 32 just seven years later. In that interwar period, California performed more forced forced sterilizations than any other US state.

Forced sterilization programs in the United States mainly targeted the mentally ill, physically handicapped, minorities, women, and criminals; sterilizing over 60,000 people by 1936. However Germany, under the Nazi regime, implemented forced sterilization laws that resulted in an estimated 300,000–400,000 sterilizations. Under Hitler, German forced sterilization laws primarily targeted mental patients and Asoziale (asocial) Roma, but forced sterilizations were also practiced on Jews in concentration camps, and secretly, on mixed race Afro-Germans. Though not nearly at the same scale, forced sterilizations continued globally after World War II.

3 “Specifically, by 1936 when both England and the U.S. genetic scientific communities finally condemned eugenic sterilization, over 60,000 forced sterilizations were already performed in the United States on mostly poor (and often African-American) people confined to mental hospitals. The practice of forced sterilizations for the “unfit” was almost unanimously supported by eugenicists. The American Eugenics Society had hoped, in time, to sterilize one-tenth of the U.S. population, or millions of Americans.” (Farber, 2008, p.244)
An important distinction of forced sterilization legislation following World War II, is that the policies usually posit a focus on demographic factors and state welfare, rather than negative eugenics. Nonetheless, forced sterilization laws to prevent undesired peoples—e.g., mentally disabled or diseased—from breeding continue to exist despite a steady decline in the 1960s and 1970s. Yet, the stated intent of most forced sterilization policies is for bureaucratic population control or to limit diseases, not to preserve an idealized racial superiority—though perhaps, a national one.

Another important factor is that the targets of forced sterilizations often shift from a strict adherence of the law to include additional victims using a more nuanced interpretation. For example, “feebleminded women sterilized in North Carolina between 1950 and 1968 were less and less likely to be mentally ill or handicapped. Instead, they were increasingly likely to be single women who were sexually active or who were feared to become so in the future”4. In recent years, forced sterilization legislation has shifted again to target transgender people.

4 “A second trend makes clear that mental illness was no longer the primary reason a woman was singled out for sterilization. Of the people sterilized between 1950 and 1968, a growing proportion were women deemed to be feebleminded. In 1954–56, 111 sterilized women had been diagnosed as mentally diseased and 392 as feebleminded. By 1966–68, when as many as 250 sterilized women were still characterized as feebleminded, only sixteen were diagnosed with a mental illness. Even in the 1920s, many eugenicists acknowledged that feeblemindedness was not a biological concept but rather a catchall term applied to behaviors seen to be antisocial or immoral. By the 1950s, the scientific validity of “feeblemindedness” would have been even more in doubt. The feebleminded women sterilized in
The 1927 U.S. Supreme Court opinion, *Buck v. Bell*, upheld the state of Virginia’s legal right to forced sterilization; effectively legitimizing the practice throughout the United States. The United Kingdom, despite being the birthplace of eugenics, enacted no enforced sterilization policies. The *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, in 1948, codified fundamental human rights for all people. Internationally, forced sterilization policies are losing any legal foundation as newer international agreements and charters continue to identify protections and violations of human rights: UN

North Carolina between 1950 and 1968 were less and less likely to be mentally ill or handicapped. Instead, they were increasingly likely to be single women who were sexually active or who were feared to become so in the future. In 1954–1956, there were *348 139* married sterilization patients in North Carolina and 364 unmarried patients. By 1966–68, there were only 27 female married patients, and the number of unmarried female patients remained as high as 244. Doctors could sterilize a disproportionate number of unmarried women who were not obviously handicapped or ill by claiming that the women themselves wanted to be sterilized. It is worth asking whether these sterilizations were truly voluntary.” (Ziegler, 2008, p.16)

Most countries have reformed their forced sterilization policies, but many continue to impose the practice on marginalized groups. Moreover, so-called voluntary sterilizations are often coercive (or forced) by the use of incentives such as food, money, or housing. In order to address the practice directly, several UN agencies—OHCHR, UN Women, UNAIDS, UNDP, UNFPA, UNICEF, WHO—issued a joint statement deriding forced sterilizations and calling for countries to end any legal protections. International and national NGOs continually work toward exposing the forced sterilization history in the regions they operate, identifying the victims, ensuring the practice is banned, and fighting for compensation.

Forced sterilizations have historically affected marginalized and disenfranchised groups, but recently have lost many of the undertones of negative eugenics that popularized the practice in the early 20th Century. States are banning forced sterilization policies and issuing apologies to victims, yet few are compensating those victims for the human rights abuses. Those states still practicing forced sterilizations are, generally, focusing on population control or targeting specialized groups—e.g., transgender, HIV positive. This short essay seeks to contribute to original research on forced sterilizations, provide resources as an informal annotated bibliography, and encourage researchers, human rights practitioners, and civil society activists to pursue an end to forced sterilization in all its forms.
Resources


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