

CONTRACEPTION

In the last 18 months contraception has become an issue for discussion amongst progressive health personnel and communities. It is an issue which appears to be very simple - All women have the right to contraception, to deciding if, when and how many children to have. Thus the government should provide contraception facilities for women, which they do. The complexities of the issue arise when one notes that behind this apparently helpful service to women, are a string of contradictions and health abuses.

Contraceptive services (so called Family Planning services) are provided separately from other health services. One frightening result of this is that women who do come into contact with health personnel through 'family planning' clinics are not examined properly or checked for other illnesses like cancer of the cervix or hypertension (common illnesses amongst South African women). This indicates a lack of concern for women's health, especially as this information is needed to help select the correct contraceptive for any particular woman. Also the 'family planning' clinic is often the only clinic visited by a woman, particularly in the rural areas.

The range of contraceptives provided are largely the more dangerous varieties like the injection and the pill. Intra-uterine devices (loop) are also used and the diaphragm which is least harmful to women's health is hardly used at all. Women are seldom given adequate information on the pro's and cons of each type of contraceptive, allowing them to make their own choice. For example, in a Department of Health book called 'Self Help in Health', the entire section on the contraceptive injection reads:

"This injection works in the same way as the pill but is given every three months only. This is a useful method of family planning for the woman who is inclined to forget to take the pill".

There is not a single reference to any of the side effects, known dangers and potential dangers of the injection. In the section on the loop there is no mention of increased cramps, heavy blood flow during menstruation or the increased possibility of pelvic infection which can lead to infertility. Nor is there any mention of the fact that it is possible to fall pregnant while using the loop.



Critical Health met with a group of Soweto women to discuss their feelings about contraception. Parts of the discussions have been transcribed because they reflect the complexity of the contraception issue, and begin to ask what type of service would be adequate.

PARTS OF A DISCUSSION ABOUT "FAMILY PLANNING" BY SOWETO WOMEN

1) Family Planning

-Who ever thought of this family planning I think was very broad minded ... in many ways. Firstly I think family planning has minimised the number of abortions that used to occur before; so that you don't find babies lying around in dustbins, some just left on doorsteps as was the case before. I mean, the young girls are concerned, they

use these contraceptives. The family planning with the married couples is also very good, because you're able to plan with your husband; to say I want so many children and in that way they are able to live within their means.

-I think the original reason for family planning as I understood it and as it was advertised was that it enabled the woman to space the pregnancies. You can decide if you want the babies after two years or after three years. But lately even the adverts are not saying that anymore, they are saying 'plan a smaller family for a bigger future' - which I think is not quite right. And like all the people I feel I must have only one child and that's it. I think if people want six children they must be encouraged to have six children as long as they can afford it.

-Some people believe that family planning is the answer ... because the adverts don't show the bad about family planning. At baby clinics there's always a lecture about how to look after your children and feed them. At the family planning clinics they don't give a lecture. The government is afraid that if they give a lecture, the people will run away from the family planning clinics and they'd lose their prey.

-All along I've been thinking maybe they're avoiding (the effects of) overpopulation, like building houses and paying us.

-The government wants to decrease the number of the population. The black nation is the majority, they're trying to lower us.

2) Men and Family Planning

-Some men are willing to co-operate, but then with the young ones, some don't co-operate at all. So that if the young women want to use these contraceptions they do it without the husband knowing it. I know of many cases.

-You see some of our men think that family planning, contraceptives, as far as they know, are encouraging women to

go on the loose because she could do exactly whatever she likes with whoever she likes.

-At school those boys which are a bit grown up do think about it, but the young ones, 17 or 18, they just take it as a joke. But the grown up boys they do think about it and sometimes they do advise their girlfriends - they usually ask them if they are taking them.

-Well I have boys and I must honestly confess I've never talked about it, except that at one time one of my little boys came with a girlfriend. When they went out, typical of black woman, instead of me talking to my son, I spoke to the girl because I think its easier for a woman to speak to another woman. But it was in my son's presence. I said, "... what I want to tell you here and now is that he is a boy and you are a girl and in our situation girls look after themselves. Don't make him a husband, because if you make him a husband, he's not going to marry you". I was schooled by my mother if you don't look after yourself, nobody will.

3) Side Effects of Family Planning

-Okay let me tell about me. I've got a four year old baby, a kid. The time he was two years I was using a pill. From there I forgot a pill one day, then I became pregnant. Then I commit an abortion. From there I use an injection. That injection condemned me until now. Since last November (1981) I've never seen a period until now. Then last month I was in a check-up. He's instructed me that I will stay another year not having a period. It's just a hell of a problem for me. The others are menstruating - just not me.

-But usually in a clinic they do explain that about an injection. They tell you it might stop your period. So we are not the same. I use it for the past five years. I never had any menstruation and I never had any headache or those veins or whatever the case may be. I was just right.

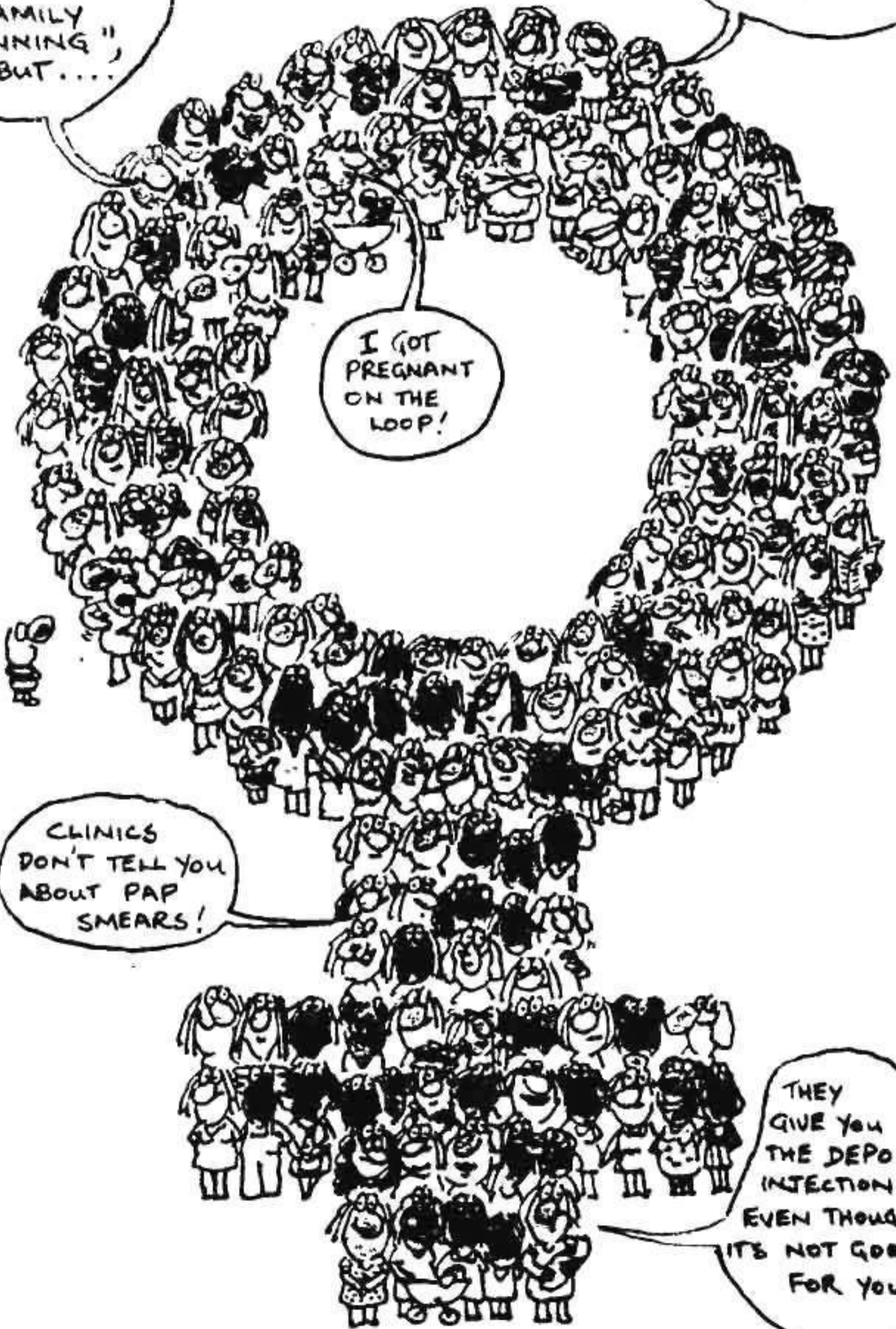
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-I usually have the giddiness almost every day from the pill. I got giddy and felt like vomiting. So I stopped that, then I took the loop. But the pill - I can't loose my weight now. I'm staying fat.

-I got pregnant on the loop.

-They should explain the side effects. They just want to limit the black people.

-Not all of us have gone to school. Had we gone to school we would ask the nurses about these things (pap smears, side effects) and the government would know that people in the townships are asking about these things.

4) Abortion

-And in my experience if you are pregnant and you have a loop introduced, it makes you have an abortion.

-If you want an abortion you ask your bosom friend confidentially to take you to somebody she knows.

-Depending on the months. If it's one month it's R10, two months R20, three months R30, etc.

-Some go to Bara hospital with sterility of some sort. But there are some of these backyard abortionists. I know of one woman who is just nobody but she specialises in that. She's very clever that girl. She starts it and then she says "When you see the signs, run to the hospital". I think that helps a lot of people because when it starts happening they are there - doctors never say its criminal if you come and you need help they help you.

5) Single Women with Children

-If you had a child when not married in the old days it was a disgrace. People would tell their daughter, "don't go near that one".

-Now today it's a common thing. No sun falls down, no heads grow horns!

6) School and Family Planning

We have nurses from the family planning go to school. They educate you how to go about it, the family planning, without your man knowing anything about or your sisters, you know its your secret. It's a blessing, you can finish off your school.

7) The Family Planning Clinic

-They are going to give you the DP (Depo provera injection) even though it's not good for you. They wont give you the contraceptive that you want.

-In the clinic, they are not concerned about your health. The only thing they are concerned about is that you don't get more kids. For example, many don't know about pap smears. I didn't till I went to a gynaecologist. If they cared they'd explain.

-I think it's important that people, if they go there (clinics), they go there knowing.

