

OBJECTS OF CHOICE

Another History of Planned Parenthood
Bodies, Intimacy, Politics

Museum of feminisms



Introductory panel

Speculum, the pill, catheter, hanger... From contraceptive or abortive devices to tools for understanding the body, these objects lie at the heart of the major social transformation that is access to the freedom to make choices about one's own body.

Conceived to mark the seventieth anniversary of the French "Planning familial" (Planned Parenthood), this exhibition sets out to recount seven decades of struggle and to situate them within the longer history of the fight for sexual freedom. The objects on display—which visitors can see and touch—mark a sensitive and sensory journey that bridges the past and the present, addressing major contemporary issues such as the burden of contraception, access to abortion, sex education, gender-based and sexual violence and medical controversies. These artefacts connect us to the everyday nature of practices on the verge of being forgotten and of actions that remain part of daily life, reminding us just how much they shape – both yesterday and today – our political and intimate relationship with the body.

KEY DATES

1798: The birth of Malthusianism. The Anglican economist Malthus publishes *An Essay on the Principle of Population*. In it, he asserts that the population is growing faster than resources and calls for birth control through abstinence.

1896: Founding of the League for Human Regeneration and the journal "Régénération" by Paul Robin, a libertarian educator. This marked the birth of the French neo-Malthusian movement, which also advocated fertility control, but through the distribution of contraceptives.

1908: Foundation of the newspaper "Génération consciente" by Eugène Humbert, who called for the emancipation of the working class through voluntary motherhood. Among those associated with him were his partner Jeanne, the anarchist Gabriel Giroud and the feminist Nelly Roussel.

1913: Publication of the essay "Le Droit à l'avortement" by Madeleine Pelletier. She was the first French feminist to publicly defend abortion.

1939: The French Family and Birth Code tightens repressive measures against anti-natalist practices.

1953–1956: The Bac couple affair. In the midst of the baby boom, whilst pro-natalism persisted, the Bac couple allowed their fourth child to die. This affair reignited the debate on birth control.

1956: Foundation of “La Maternité heureuse” (Happy motherhood) by the gynaecologist Marie-Andrée Lagroua Weill-Hallé, the sociologist Evelyn Sullerot and other women. The organisation advocated spacing out births in the interests of family harmony, at a time when anti-contraceptive propaganda remained banned.

1960: “Maternité heureuse” becomes the “Mouvement Français pour le Planning familial” (MFPF) (French Movement for Planned Parenthood), after joining the International Planned Parenthood Federation in 1959. It opens counselling centres throughout France, drawing on departmental associations and the expertise of healthcare professionals. The organisation had 32,000 members by the end of 1963.

1967: The Neuwirth Act is passed after a decade of campaigning. This law authorises contraception, but with restrictions: it is available only on prescription and requires parental consent for minors. In the same year, the Planned Parenthood Movement declares itself a movement for popular and lifelong education.

1973: The “Planning familial” committed itself to the right to abortion (and no longer merely to the distribution of contraceptives). Simone Iff, a ‘receptionist’ since the 1960s and co-founder of the “Mouvement pour la liberté, l’avortement et la contraception” (MLAC), Movement for Freedom of Abortion and Contraception, became the first non-gynaecologist to be elected president of the movement.

1975: The Veil Act legalises abortion. It was initially introduced for a period of just five years. It was made permanent by a new vote in 1979.

1983: The Planned Parenthood Association officially declared itself feminist at a conference and committed to combating violence against women. Some of its activists founded the “Collectif féministe contre le viol” (CFCV), Feminist Collective Against Rape in 1985.

1987: HIV/AIDS was discussed for the first time at a Planned Parenthood congress. Three years later, a law allowed MFPF branches to become centres for

screening for sexually transmitted infections (STIs).

2000s: The Planned Parenthood organisation restructured to allow for a governance model that gave greater scope to the 63 departmental associations.

2015: Introduction of the national freephone helpline “Sexuality, Contraception, Abortion” and launch of the “Young Activists” program to better involve young people in the governance of Planned Parenthood.

2022: Planned Parenthood officially declared itself an intersectional organisation at its congress, to take account of the specific forms of discrimination experienced by women of colour.

EXHIBITS

Postcard depicting Eugène Humbert (seated at the table), his partner Jeanne Humbert (seated on the table to the right) and Eugénie de Bast (standing, on the left) in front of the headquarters of the neo-Malthusian newspaper “Génération Consciente”, Paris

1909, photograph

Collection of the International Institute of Social History (Amsterdam)

A former member of the League for Human Regeneration, Eugène Humbert (seated at the table) founded the newspaper “Génération Consciente” in 1908 at 27 Rue de la Duée – premises where contraceptives were also available. Also pictured are his wife Jeanne (seated on the table, on the right) and Eugénie de Bast (standing, on the left).

Photograph of Paul Robin, 1893

Archives of the Paris Police Headquarters

This photograph of the founder of the League for Human Regeneration, taken by the police, bears witness to the close surveillance of neo-Malthusian activism.

Portrait of the feminist Nelly Roussel reproduced in her book “Trois conférences”, Paris

Marcel Giard

1930

photograph, albumen print

099 B 154 / City of Paris / Marguerite Durand Library

Poster for a conference on neo-Malthusianism and the revolution chaired by

Nelly Roussel

League for Human Regeneration, Paris
1903, photomechanical print, 64 × 44 cm
International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

Portrait of Marie-Andrée Lagroua Weill-Hallé, one of the founders of the “Maternité heureuse”

Janine Niépce
Late 1970s, gelatin-silver photograph
Janine Niépce / Marguerite Durand Library

A child... if I want one... when I want one

French Movement for Planned Parenthood (MFPP)
1978, poster
A 0090 AVO – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

At the Planned Parenthood Centre, we welcome trans minors or those questioning their gender, whether they come alone or with their families

Planned Parenthood campaign on inclusive sexual health
Laurier the Fox
2024, poster
A 1311 SEX, Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT

Excerpt from the film “Listen to Jeanne Humbert, Neo-Malthusian Activist”

Directed by: Bernard Baissat and Francis Ronsin
1981
Duration: 1’40”
Simone de Beauvoir Audiovisual Centre

Excerpt from the documentary “Planned Parenthood: 10 Years of Experience”

French National Radio and Television Broadcasting Authority
Journalist: Claude Désiré
Participants: François Jacob, Catherine Valabrègue, Marie Andrée Lagroua Weill Halle
1966
Duration: 4’49” / 3’46”
National Audiovisual Institute, Paris

Excerpt from the film “Simone Iff”

Directed by: Les Yeux d'IZO
Isabelle Taveneau, Zoé Liénard, Odile Magniez
2014
Running time: 6'11"

Excerpt from the film "SOS"

Directed by: AROF (Réunion Family Guidance Association)
1971
Duration: 2'57"
RUNDOK archive collection

Part 1: Contraceptive devices

For a long time, birth control relied on methods requiring male participation (withdrawal, abstinence, and alternatives to sexual intercourse). In the second half of the 19th century, advances in the rubber industry led to the rise of condoms, but also to the emergence of new female contraceptives: pessaries, vaginal injectors and insufflators, spermicidal ovules, etc. The neo-Malthusian movement saw this as the key to women's emancipation, but the distribution of these devices (which, incidentally, were not very effective) was banned. The only form of "contraception" accepted by the Catholic Church, the Ogino method – developed in the 1920s – was based on abstinence during ovulation, but it was hardly reliable. Until the 1960s, therefore, the withdrawal method undoubtedly remained the most widely used.

With the invention (1956) and legalisation (1967) of the pill, the roles were reversed and contraception became a woman's responsibility, subject to medical supervision. Whilst the pill was hailed as a symbol of women's liberation, its side effects are now criticised, as is the unequal distribution of the burden of contraception that it embodies. Since 2023, the pill has no longer been the most widely used method in France, but the gender dynamics of contraception have not changed as a result: it is now the intrauterine device (known as the 'coil') that dominates. Male-centred methods, meanwhile, remain in the minority.

EXHIBITS

A neo-Malthusian poster showcasing the female contraceptives available at the dawn of the 20th century.

Published by Génération consciente

Paris, c. 1910, poster

Eugène Humbert Collection, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

Poster from the History of Contraception Museum. At Ortho Pharmaceutical (Canada) LDT

Toronto

1980, poster

A 0202 CONT, Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Contraception display case:

This display case presents the contraceptive methods currently used in France, the vast majority of which are female methods (in pink). Among these, the pill (in the centre) was, until recently, the most widely used form of contraception. On the male side (in blue), only condoms and vasectomies are relatively widespread, whilst thermal contraception remains very much in the minority.

EXHIBITS

Sterilisation clips

Angers University Hospital

This simplified surgical sterilisation method, invented in the 1970s, involves blocking the fallopian tubes with clips to prevent the passage of sperm. Widely used by Planned Parenthood programmes in the Global South, it is the most commonly used method worldwide. Only authorised in France since 2001, vasectomy and sterilisation were, in 2023, the method of contraception used by 5.6 per cent of French women.

Contraceptive patch

Evra

2010s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

This oestrogen-progestogen method involves applying the patch to the skin yourself each week. The first patch was developed by Ortho-McNeil Pharmaceutical in the United States, where it was granted marketing authorisation in 2001. In 2023, the patch, ring and injectable were used by only 0.4 per cent of French women.

Vaginal ring

Nuvaring

2010s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Developed by Organon in the 1990s and authorised in France since 2003, the oestrogen-progestogen ring is inserted into the vagina for a period of 21 days and prevents ovulation.

Contraceptive implant

Implanon

2010s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

In the 1960s, research was carried out to develop a contraceptive whose effectiveness would not depend on the user; the first implant was marketed in 1983 by a Finnish company.

Inserted under the skin of the arm for three years, Nexplanon – the only model authorised in France – prevents ovulation by releasing progestogens. In 2023, 4.4 per cent of French women were using it.

Injectable progestogens

3D reconstruction of a vial of injectable contraceptive
2024

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Progestogens administered intravenously prevent ovulation for three months. The first injectable was developed by Upjohn in the early 1960s in the United States, but was not authorised there as a contraceptive until 1992. It has, however, been used in other parts of the world – in 2012, it was the most widely used method in South Africa.

Morning-after pill

Biogaran

In 1980, two North American doctors demonstrated the effectiveness of synthetic hormones as emergency contraception, but it was not until the 1990s that the 'morning-after pill' was brought to market. Authorised in France in 1999, it helps to delay ovulation following unprotected sex (alternatively, a copper IUD can be fitted to prevent implantation).

Pack of 28 tablets containing d-Norgestel "8153 CB", manufactured by Clin-Byla.

1960s

Pierre Simon Collection – 17 AF 67 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives

A hormonal method, the pill, taken daily at a fixed time, prevents ovulation. It was developed in 1956 in the United States by the endocrinologist Gregory Pincus, with the encouragement of the activist Margaret Sanger and funding from the biologist Katherine McCormick. Initially tested in Puerto Rico, it was launched on the US market in 1960 under the name Enovid. The first French pill was produced in the 1960s by the Byla laboratory. Taken by 56.4 per cent of French women at risk of an unplanned pregnancy in 2000, it is now used by only 26.8 per cent of them.

Hormonal intrauterine device (IUD, commonly known as a 'coil')

Unknown brand

2000s–2010s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

It was developed in the 1960s following the invention of the pill, to address the side effects of the copper IUD (which causes heavier periods). By releasing progestogens to prevent ovulation, it can remain in place for 3 to 6 years. In 2023, IUDs (hormonal or copper) were used by 27.7 per cent of French women.

Copper intrauterine device (IUD, commonly known as a 'coil') of the Copper-T

type

Unknown brand

2000s–2010s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Inspired by the rod-shaped pessaries used to treat uterine malpositions, the intrauterine device, which prevents implantation, was developed in the late 19th century. In the late 1960s, copper (which has spermicidal properties) was added to it. It can remain in place for between 5 and 10 years.

Spermicidal ovule

Pharmatex

July 2025

Available in a wide variety of forms (creams, gels, tablets, liquids, powders or pessaries), spermicides have been on the market since the late 19th century. The pessary is inserted into the vagina before sexual intercourse and kills the sperm.

Illustration of a mobile app for tracking the menstrual cycle

AFéMuse

2026

These apps are sometimes used for contraceptive purposes (by avoiding penile-vaginal intercourse during the fertile window). They have brought the Ogino method, which was popularised in the 1930s, back into favour. In 2023, 'natural' methods and the diaphragm were used by 7.6 per cent of French women of childbearing age.

Internal condom (known as the female condom)

Female Health Company

2020s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

It was probably invented in the late 19th century (at that time it was made of rubber). Now made of nitrile or polyurethane and fitted with two flexible rings, it is inserted into the vagina (or the anus) before sexual intercourse and also protects against STIs.

Caya diaphragm (demonstration model)

Medintim

2020s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Designed to block sperm, this device – invented in the 19th century – is inserted into the back of the vagina alongside a spermicide and must be kept in place for at least 6 hours after sexual intercourse.

External condom (known as a male condom)

United Colors of Benetton

2000s

Once made of paper or rubber, now made of latex or polyurethane, the condom is the oldest method of contraception still in use. It is placed over an erect penis before penetration to contain semen. It also protects against STIs and, in 2023, was the method used by 18.5 per cent of French women of childbearing age.

Andro-switch

Thoreme

2025

Developed by Maxime Labrit and on the market since 2019, this thermal method – which has not yet been granted marketing authorisation – works by raising the testicles to warm them and prevent spermatogenesis (the process of sperm development).

Surgical scissors for performing vasectomies

Angers University Hospital

Vasectomy, which involves severing the vas deferens to prevent the passage of sperm, has long been very rare in France. It has recently become more widespread: over the past 12 years, the number of vasectomies has increased fifteen-fold, reaching over 30,000 in 2022 – to the point where it has overtaken female sterilisation procedures.

Injector

Adolphe Rainal, the eldest son

First half of the 20th century, metal, rubber, bone, wood, cardboard, paper

Endowment Fund for the Management and Promotion of Pharmaceutical Heritage

Injectors were used after sexual intercourse to administer spermicidal vaginal injections.

Gyr vaginal douche

1930s, 'moulded material', rubber, nickel

C-2012.530, Rennes Hospital Conservatory

This vaginal douche with a rotating jet was used to perform a vaginal douche after sexual intercourse and could be used for contraceptive purposes.

Gyraldose

Laboratoires de la Gyraldose, Courbevoie

First half of the 20th century

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

An antiseptic used for 'female intimate hygiene', sold from the early 20th century until the 1950s. Boris Vian mentions it in a poem from the collection "Cantilènes en gelée" : 'In the morning, I shall take my dose, and you, my love, shall take your ration of Gyraldose in return.'

Alpagelle spermicide

Grenoble Planned Parenthood

Early 1960s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

After illegally importing spermicides from England, the Grenoble Planned Parenthood Association decided to develop its own formula for the spermicidal cream Alpagelle. Also known as “Chartreux cream”, it was sold as a “moisturising and softening cream” or “sun protection beauty product” by a cooperative set up between 1962 and 1964.

Ogino method

Médecis Publishers

1930s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

This calendar enabled women to track their menstrual cycle to determine when they were ovulating and thus identify the days on which pregnancy was possible.

Margulies' IUDs

1960s

Pierre Simon Collection – 17 AF 50 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives

Invented by the American gynaecologist Lazar Margulies in 1960, the coil was one of the first intrauterine devices made of thermoplastic; it prevents implantation.

Lippes loop

1960s

Pierre Simon Collection – 17 AF 52 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives

The double-S coil is a flexible plastic intrauterine device developed by the American gynaecologist Jack Lippes in 1961. Its trapezoidal shape was designed to prevent rotation and to conform to the shape of the uterus, thereby preventing implantation. It was mass-produced and sold in the 1960s in the United States, as well as in India and South Korea.

Satin Finish Diaphragm

Durex

1992

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

The diaphragm was a barrier device that was placed at the back of the vagina and rested against the vaginal walls. Circles help you choose the correct diameter.

The Vimule Pessary

Lamberts Ltd.

1960s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

The cervical cap was a rubber device that was inserted into the vagina, over the cervix. It was available in several sizes to accommodate anatomical differences.

Thermometer

Angers University Hospital

Symptothermal contraception involves monitoring one's body temperature daily in order to identify ovulation by detecting the temperature spike that precedes it.

BROCHURE

Fraud in the performance of reproductive functions

Louis-François-Étienne Bergeret, J.-B. Baillière et fils, Paris

1870 (1st edition 1868), book cover

BnF, Paris

This work, written by a pro-natalist doctor, condemns 'marital fraud', that is to say, the practice of coitus interruptus or other sexual practices (such as masturbation, oral-genital contact or sodomy) to prevent conception.

Catalogue page for 'devices for intimate use'

Maison Claverie

Circa 1897

D2U6 110, Delbret Collection, Paris Archives

These models of male condoms sold in Paris in the late 19th century were made either from baudruche (a material derived from sheep's intestines) or from rubber. Some were available in several sizes; others were presented in fanciful packaging; the 'American tip' was a model covering only the glans of the penis. There were also models featuring a reservoir tip, or raised nubs designed to provide 'greater pleasure for the woman'. Sold for between 2 and 6 francs for a dozen, they were all reusable.

Page from the catalogue of 'condoms for both sexes'

Maison Guérin (published following the book "Philtres magiques triomphateurs de l'amour et de la femme", Paris, Guérin, 1911)

1911

BnF, Paris

To extol the virtues of this "recently invented" rubber female condom, costing 5 francs, the seller emphasises that it "preserves the illusion of naturalness and heightens sensations". Just as today, these female models are much rarer than their male equivalents.

Advertising leaflet for Dr Hartmann's device, or 'Protector of Women'

Circa 1897

D2U6 110, Delbret Collection, Paris Archives

Invented in the late 19th century, insufflators were used to spray spermicidal powders into the vagina before intercourse. They consist of a metal or hardened rubber cannula and a rubber bulb which must be squeezed to expel the powder.

Advertisement for the spermicide Aseptinol

Le Rire, p. 15

29 November 1904, advertisement

La Contemporaine Collections / LC_4P_0029_1904_10

During the “Belle Époque”, advertisements for feminine hygiene products became increasingly common in the press. Behind often ambiguous phrasing (“sexual hygiene”, “to avoid all risks”, “destroys all germs”), these adverts in reality often referred to spermicides. The use of such euphemisms helped to avoid the legal proceedings that regularly befell companies promoting products designed to prevent conception too openly.

Patent No. 779136 filed by Louis-Albert Terrier for a perpetual physiological calendar

1 October 1934

2BE779136, Archives of the National Institute of Industrial Property

Based on the discoveries of Drs Ogino and Knaus regarding the menstrual cycle and ovulation, this calendar enables users to identify the fertile period, the date of the next period and the due date in the event of pregnancy. In the 1930s, numerous similar calendars were touted in the press. To avoid legal action, they were generally presented as being intended to aid conception rather than to prevent it.

Additional panel:

Does contraception have a gender?

Feminist voices are now speaking out against the feminisation of the burden of contraception brought about by the widespread use of the pill. What role did contraceptive manufacturers play in assigning a gender to contraception?

EXHIBITS

Catalogue page from the condom manufacturer Ch. Frédéric

Ch. Frédéric

Circa 1897

D2U6 110, Delbret Collection, Paris Archives

From the end of the 19th century onwards, much condom packaging was aimed exclusively at men (cigarette packets, matchboxes or labels depicting sexualised female bodies). Whilst this marketing remains gendered in many cases today, within heterosexual couples it is often women who take responsibility for buying condoms.

Page from the American-Hygien catalogue

American-Hygien

1906

Private collection

Whilst the sharing of contraceptive responsibility may seem like a new demand, certain objects from the past are surprising in that they appear to allow for greater flexibility in their use. At the dawn of the 20th century, a few Parisian shops offered dual-purpose devices that could be used either as male condoms or as cervical caps to be placed over the cervix.

Belara pill box

Grunenthal

2010s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

The marketing of certain pill packs plays on stereotypical symbols of femininity (flowers, butterflies, etc.). In doing so, it reinforces the idea that contraception is 'a woman's business'.

Double-page spread by Frédéric Krivine

Combat socialiste, no. 42, pp. 10–11

23 April 1981, articles

Jean-Jaurès Foundation Collection

À pas de tortue [At a Snail's Pace]

Alex Lévesque

Dessine Bandé

2024

This comic strip by comedian Alex Lévesque, which highlights the lack of research into male contraception, is part of the "Dessine Bandé" project, a series of ten panels. They were drawn as part of "Partage la charge", a campaign led by Sylvie Lévesque, a lecturer in the Department of Sexology at the University of Quebec in Montreal (UQAM).

Part 2: Abortion Instruments

Several abortion practices coexisted prior to the Veil Act. Plants that induce uterine contractions or hormonal imbalances provided a significant arsenal of abortifacients, although they were difficult to use. Taken as infusions or decoctions, they were administered vaginally (in the form of a pessary) or via enemas. To avoid poisoning or ineffectiveness, the dosage had to be strictly adhered to.

Surgical techniques involving the insertion of an object into the cervix first appeared in France in 17th century. The spread of this procedure during the 19th century made abortions more effective, but also brought them more to the attention of the law.

After the Second World War, the 'probe' method became widespread. It involved inserting a plastic or rubber tube into the cervix and leaving it in place until a miscarriage was induced. There were numerous risks (perforation, haemorrhage, septicaemia) and failures were common. Women were then forced to go to hospital, where they sometimes underwent a curettage performed without anaesthesia by hostile medical staff, who sought to punish them for their actions. In the early 1970s, the Karman suction method appeared in France. It was used in an activist context to campaign for free and unrestricted abortion. Suction became widespread following the legalisation of abortion in 1975, before medical abortion became possible from the 1980s onwards.

EXHIBITS

“Chez la faiseuse d’anges” [At the angel-maker’s], a press cartoon depicting a woman handing an abortifacient to another

Le Rire, p. 7

28 April 1906

La Contemporaine Collections / LC_4P_0029_1906_04

Advertisements against “delays”

Le Petit Journal

9 July 1908

BnF, Paris

In the newspapers of the “Belle Époque”, advertisements by midwives, chemists and herbalists relating to abortion were becoming increasingly common. To avoid prosecution, they generally confined themselves to referring to ‘delays’ in menstruation.

Je me retrouve à devoir partir à l’étranger alors que j’ai l’impression d’avoir tout bien fait [I find myself having to go abroad even though I feel I’ve done everything right]

Louise Damiano, Alice Dorbes

Paris, 2018, poster

A 1266 AVO, Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre

In France, voluntary termination of pregnancy (VTP) has been permitted up to 14 weeks' amenorrhoea since 2022. Beyond that, the Planned Parenthood Association helps women to travel abroad for an abortion, to countries where the time limit is longer.

Goose quill

In late 17th-century Paris, a woman named "Vaution" performed surgical abortions using a quill and a tube.

Laminaria No. 1-2

First half of the 20th century, glass, cork, paper

2010.1.45 – Endowment Fund for the Management and Promotion of Pharmaceutical Heritage

Dried laminaria swells considerably once rehydrated. It was used to aid the dilation of the cervix.

Jar of sabine and jar of ergot

Menier chemist's shop

Circa 1840, glass, cork, metal, paper

1997.2.606 and 1997.2.648 – Endowment Fund for the Management and Promotion of Pharmaceutical Heritage

Sabine juniper, a plant found in the Alps and Central Europe, is a well-known abortifacient in France. It causes uterine contractions but is also highly toxic in high doses. As for rye ergot, it is a fungus that grows on certain cereals. The toxin contained in ergot-infected rye can cause miscarriages.

Curette

Gyneas

2020s

Private collection

In the 19th century, with the development of gynaecology, new instruments were used to perform abortions by dilation and curettage: the speculum and the curette, developed by Joseph Récamier to scrape out the contents of the uterus after dilating the cervix.

Braun uterine syringe

Maison Charrière - Collin & Co

Circa 1869, glass, metal, Bakelite

CPHR - 2017.101, Conservatoire du patrimoine hospitalier de Rennes

Designed to inject medicinal remedies into the uterine cavity, this type of syringe could also be used to induce an abortion by causing the embryo to detach through the action of the injected liquid.

Abortion pills, Misoprostol / Mifepristone

2020s

Medical abortion was developed in the 1980s. Produced by Roussel Uclaf for the French market in 1988, RU 486 (mifepristone) blocks the action of progesterone and terminates pregnancy. It is now used in combination with another compound, synthetic prostaglandin (misoprostol), which complements its action by inducing contractions and softening the cervix, thereby enabling expulsion. Initially carried out in hospital settings, it was subsequently authorised in doctors' surgeries, then in Planned Parenthood centres, and finally at home. Performed within the first nine weeks of pregnancy, it is now the most widely used method in France.

Abortion is a fundamental right

Planned Parenthood

Paris, 2025, leaflet

B 0566 AVO – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Case and equipment for performing abortions

1970s and 1980s

MLAC Place des Fêtes (Paris)

This case, preserved in its original condition, contains the equipment used by activists from the Movement for Freedom of Abortion and Contraception (MLAC) at Place des Fêtes to carry out collective abortions, outside the legal framework, between 1977 and 1980. It is a valuable record of the Karman method, which was learnt here by non-medical professionals (the doctor's name listed is a cover). Suction is achieved using a bicycle pump fitted in reverse, which creates a vacuum in a glass jar connected to a flexible cannula inserted into the uterus. The case contains everything needed: a mixture of medical items (dilatation candles, plastic specula, suction cannulae, compresses, disinfectant, medicines, etc.) and household items (woollen socks for comfort, a lamp and a mirror for self-examination of the vagina and cervix). The procedure, carried out at home, was designed to be a warm and friendly experience.

Additional panel:

Key players in the abortion debate

The figure of the professional, mercenary abortionist – the 'angel-maker' – emerged in the 19th century, shaping popular perceptions of clandestine abortion and its suppression. Portrayed as a woman from the working classes with an unattractive appearance, she epitomised the dangers of home-based abortion practices.

EXHIBITS

La faiseuse d'anges, [The angel-maker]

L'Assiette au beurre,

Charles Lucien Léandre

4 October 1902, lithograph on Chinese paper

1967.2.380 Endowment Fund for the Management and Promotion of Pharmaceutical Heritage

Court reports, like literature and cinema, have helped to construct and reinforce this stereotype. Marie-Louise Giraud, sentenced to death and executed in 1943 under the Vichy regime, which had made abortion a crime against state security. She is portrayed in Claude Chabrol's film *Une affaire de femmes* (1988) as a fickle and unscrupulous woman, which is emblematic of this phenomenon.

Article: "La doctoresse Madeleine Pelletier inculpée d'avortements", [Dr Madeleine Pelletier charged with performing abortions]

Le Petit Parisien

26 April 1939

BnF, Paris

Article "Une avorteuse condamnée à mort", [A woman who performed abortions sentenced to death]

Le Progrès de la Somme

10 June 1943

BnF, Paris

These stereotypes persist to this day, obscuring the wide variety of people involved in clandestine abortions. Medical and paramedical professions are significantly over-represented, going beyond the simplistic dichotomy of lay 'angel-makers' versus professional doctors. Self-induced abortions are also very common.

Article: "On arrête, à Sartrouville, un médecin avorteur", [A doctor performing abortions arrested in Sartrouville]

Le Petit Parisien

24 April 1920

BnF, Paris

Abortion in the Constitution

Coco

Libération

4 March 2024, cartoon

Libération

This cartoon, published to mark the enshrinement of the right to abortion in the French Constitution, illustrates the enduring nature of the image of the 'angel-maker' even in contemporary depictions of abortion.

Activist practice of the Karman abortion method

Choisir Grenoble Group

c. 1973

Private collection

Against the backdrop of feminist campaigns for unrestricted abortion in the 1970s, new figures emerged: committed individuals, both women and men, whether healthcare professionals or not, who helped women to have abortions free of charge as an act of activism. Members of the Movement for Freedom of Abortion and Contraception (MLAC), Choisir or Planned Parenthood organisations, throughout France, openly defied the law by organising group trips abroad or by performing abortions using the Karman method in order to campaign for free and unrestricted abortion.

PLANTS

Rue (*Ruta graveolens* L.): Rue is a common plant in Europe and Asia. Its abortive properties are recognised in ancient and medieval sources. In the 19th century in Haute-Garonne, it was still used for its abortive properties.

Wormwood (*Artemisia absinthium*): This is also a common plant and is among the most frequently mentioned abortifacients. It is rarely used on its own but rather in combination with other plants possessing similar properties. As it has contraceptive properties, it was mainly used to induce menstruation or expel the placenta.

Pennyroyal (*Mentha pulegium* L.): Despite its rather unpleasant taste, pennyroyal is grown in gardens for its medicinal properties, particularly its abortive properties, which have been known since ancient times.

Thyme, parsley, sage, rosemary and hyssop are aromatic plants of the Lamiaceae family and all possess abortive and/or emmenagogue properties. The active ingredient often needs to be heated in order to be released. Apiol, found in parsley essential oil, for example, or thymol in thyme, induce abortion.

Table with objects used for abortions

'Mrs P.-R. had prepared everything. I saw a saucepan of boiling water on the gas hob, which must have contained the instruments. She led me into the bedroom; she seemed in a hurry to get started. At the foot of the bed, she had set up a table, covered with a white towel. I took off my tights and my knickers; I think I kept my black skirt on because it was flared. [...] She made me lie with my upper body on the bed, my head on a pillow, and my lower back and legs, bent, on the table, in a raised position. She kept talking as she went about her business, emphasising once again that she was simply inserting the catheter, nothing else. She told me about the case of a mother who'd been found dead the week before, left on the dining table by a woman who'd injected her with bleach. [...]. For years, I saw that room and those curtains just as I had seen them from the bed where I lay. [...] nothing can shake my certainty that she still remembers the girls and women who came there to have a catheter

inserted. There was excruciating pain. She would say, 'Stop screaming, my dear,' and 'I have to do my job,' or perhaps other words too, which meant only one thing: the obligation to see it through to the end. Words that I later came across in accounts by women who had clandestine abortions, as if, at that moment, there could be nothing but those words of necessity and, at times, of compassion."

Annie Ernaux, "L'Événement", Paris, Éditions Gallimard, 2000.

Part 3: Do it yourself?

Encouragements to 'do it yourself' have punctuated the history of contraception and abortion. They aim to provide the means to control one's own fertility in a context of semi-illegality or stem from an awareness of the medical establishment's power over women's bodies. At the dawn of the 20th century, neo-Malthusian pamphlets, keen to make contraception accessible to the working classes, suggested methods for making one's own condoms, vaginal sponges or even liquids for injections.

In the 1970s, feminist self-help encouraged women to combat ignorance about their own bodies by collectively reclaiming medical knowledge, exploring their anatomy and performing certain procedures themselves. Originating initially from a few collectives in the United States – such as the Feminist Women's Health Clinic in Los Angeles, which promoted self-examination of the cervix using a speculum, a mirror and a torch, or the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, which published the pamphlet *Our Bodies, Ourselves* – this self-help movement then spread widely thanks to the publications and travels of its advocates. In various forms, it continues to this day within groups that share knowledge and generate insights about the body and sexuality, outside any medical framework.

EXHIBITS

Photograph taken from the book “Notre corps, nous-mêmes” [Our Bodies, Ourselves]

Paris, Albin Michel, 1977 (1st French edition), p. 239 [reprinted in 2020]

Patent No. 233382 filed by Mauritius Wertheimer for a reflector for a vaginal speculum

13 October 1893

1BB233382, Archives of the National Institute of Industrial Property

This device, patented by a German doctor, combines a speculum with a mirror, enabling “a woman to insert the speculum into her own vagina and to examine it herself, as well as the cervix”. A self-help tool ahead of its time?

Plastic speculum

2020s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Invented in the early 19th century, the modern speculum – initially made of metal – is used to spread the walls of the vagina to reveal the cervix. In the 1970s, the plastic speculum, which was more practical (available in different sizes and disposable) and felt less cold to the touch, became widespread. Feminist self-help groups have reclaimed this symbol of medical power.

Oval hand mirror

Mid 20th century, wood, enamels
Private collection

Wonder brand torch

France, 1970s
Private collection

Photograph of a cervix

French Society of Colposcopy and Cervico-Vaginal Pathology

This device is inspired by an installation created by the Museum of Contraception and Abortion, located on the premises of the Planned Parenthood Centre in Vienna (Austria). It recreates a scenario in which the cervix is being examined. Self-examination, promoted by self-help groups, aims to highlight the diversity of women's bodies and to identify the different phases of the menstrual cycle through changes in cervical mucus. This enables a pregnancy to be confirmed if periods stop.

“Notre corps, nous-mêmes”

Paris, Albin Michel, 1977 [trans. of Our Bodies, Ourselves]
3 098706 – University of Angers, Belle-Beille University Library

First published as a small booklet by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective (1971), “Our Bodies, Ourselves” quickly became a global bestseller, adapted by feminist collectives into numerous languages. In the 1970s and 1980s, it was published in Western Europe and Japan. It then spread to the Middle East and South America, and finally, in the 1990s and 2000s, it was translated in Asia, Africa and Eastern Europe.

NEO-MALTHUSIAN ADVICE

G. Hardy [Gabriel Giroud]

Paris, published by the author, 1908
BnF, Paris

Mindful of ensuring access to contraception for those on the lowest incomes, the neo-Malthusian movement explains how to reuse or repurpose certain products, or even how to make one's own contraceptives. However, these DIY methods may pose health risks, be uncomfortable to use and reduce effectiveness, which highlights the socio-economic inequalities in access to contraception.

Additional panel:

Thermal contraception: a form of self-help for men?

As early as the 1930s, a number of activists opted for vasectomy to play their part in fertility control.

In the 1970s, faced with the pharmaceutical industry's lack of interest in male contraception and keen to share the burden of contraception more equitably, men's collectives proposed thermal devices. As a member of Ardecom (the Association for Research and Development of Male Contraception, founded in 1979), the andrologist Roger Mieusset refined a jockstrap developed by a group in Toulouse, which lifts the testicles up into the inguinal canals. More recently, the Breton collective Thomas Bouloù (founded in 2015) and the Marseille-based group Treizeticules (2022) have been running workshops on how to sew your own 'ball-lifter'. Various versions exist, made from briefs, a jockstrap or even a bra.

EXHIBITS

Handmade jockstrap and instructional diagram

Thomas Bouloù collective

2020s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Contraceptive briefs (also known as 'ball-lifters') designed for thermal testicular contraception. They must be worn for 15 hours a day. Various versions exist, made from briefs, a jockstrap or even a bra.

Andro-swatch

Thoreme

2023, silicone

Thoreme

Developed by Maxime Labrit, the Andro-swatch is an adjustable silicone wristband designed for thermal contraception.

3D model of the Andro-swatch

Thoreme

2023

Thoreme, available online at thoreme.com

The open-source model for the Andro-swatch, which allows you to 3D-print it yourself, is also available online. In 2023, the "Make Your Own Ring" project won an innovation award from UNESCO's Chair in Sexual Health and Human Rights, which highlights the symbolic benefits enjoyed by men committed to male contraception. Other groups, such as Otoko, also organise workshops to make these rings using more traditional methods. These methods are described as "male-centred", even though women often play an important role in seeking out information and putting them into practice. They are receiving increasing media coverage, but are currently used by only a tiny minority of men.

AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT

Excerpt from the film “Annie colère”

Directed by: Blandine Lenoir

2022

Running time: 2'37"

Diaphana Distribution

Excerpt from the film "Anatomie Autonomie"

Directed by: Nina Faure

2022

Duration: 2'13"

Planned Parenthood

Ball-Lifting Tutorial: Bra Model

Directed by: Thomas Bouloù and Camille Chaumereuil collective

2019

Duration: 1'54"

Excerpt from an interview with Louise Guibert

Directed by: Marine Gilis

2020

Duration: 2'25"

'Testimonies for Feminism' collection – 24 AF 51 / Centre for Feminist Archives, University of Angers

Excerpt from the interview with Micheline Raoul

Directed by: Marine Gilis

2020

Duration: 7'3"

'Testimonies for Feminism' Collection – 24 AF 66 / Centre for Feminist Archives, University of Angers

Part 4: We are not objects! Fighting against violence

“The personal is political”: this feminist slogan from the 1970s highlights the oppression suffered by women even in their private lives. Sexual and domestic violence are therefore no longer seen as mere individual tragedies, but as the result of a system of domination. Keen to help victims, activists also set up shelters; their campaigning led to the strengthening of the law on rape in 1980. Planned Parenthood advisers were confronted with accounts of violence, which prompted the movement to take up the issue. Established in 1985, the Feminist Collective Against Rape launched the first national helpline on 8 March 1986, with the support of the Minister for Women’s Rights, Yvette Roudy. Three years later, a television advert on domestic violence was broadcast on the initiative of Michèle André, Secretary of State for Women’s Rights.

In 2003, the first National Survey on Violence against Women in France revealed that nearly one in ten women experience violence within their relationship. It highlighted the urgent need to raise public awareness, support victims and call on the authorities to improve the response to verbal, psychological, physical and sexual violence.

With the #MeToo movement in 2017, there has been a surge in public discourse on the diverse forms of sexist and sexual violence, ranging from harassment to femicide, including gynaecological violence.

EXHIBITS

Feminist demonstration in Angers

Anne Lepont
Paris, 8 March 2025
Private collection

A shovel full

@lesconnasses
2016, poster
Feminist Collective Against Rape

Stickers produced by the “Collectif féministe contre le viol” [Feminist Collective Against Rape]

1980s–1990s
Josiane Céret Collection – 30 AF 6 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives

“Shame must change sides”

Dare to be Feminist
November 2010, poster

Campaign by the Rhône Planned Parenthood Association against violence against women

Margot Giacinti

25 November 2019, photograph

Stickers promoting the prevention of violence at parties

Young activists from the Rhône Planned Parenthood Association

2022, stickers

B 0537 VIO – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

These are intended for distribution at social events (stands, festivals, etc.) to combat gender-based and sexual violence and to promote prevention and risk reduction.

Ecocup, straws and sanitary protection

Planned Parenthood

2025

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

A symbol of the fight against chemical subjugation, this 'glass condom' protects your drink at parties to prevent substances (such as GHB, known as the 'date rape drug') from being slipped into it without your knowledge.

Cycle of violence, extract from the guide "Domestic (cyber)violence"

Interministerial Mission for the Protection of Women against Violence and the Fight against Human Trafficking / Hubertine Auclert Centre

2024

French version of the 'violence meter'

City of Paris / Observatory on Violence against Women of the Seine-Saint-Denis Departmental Council / En avant toute(s)

2018

Devised in 2009 by the Mexican researcher Martha Alicia Tronco Rosas, the 'violentometer' catalogues the full spectrum of psychological, economic and physical violence that can occur within intimate relationships, and demonstrates that these forms of violence exist on a continuum. It has been produced in several formats (bookmarks, bread bags) and adapted to contexts beyond intimate relationships: the 'validistometer' by the organization Les Dévalideuses, which addresses disability-related discrimination, and the 'medical fatphobia violentometer' designed by the organization Gras Politique.

Yellow plastic whistle

Donated by Planned Parenthood

2000s

Private collection

Worn in particular by female joggers, the whistle is used to raise the alarm in the event of an attack whilst out running.

Torch

2026, stick and fabric

Since the 1970s, feminists have been organising marches to 'reclaim the night' and highlight the lack of safety for women in public spaces. On these occasions, they make torches, which serve both to dispel the darkness and to symbolise the struggles they are waging.

Additional panel

Gynecological violence

The institutionalisation of gynaecology in the 19th century led to the invention of new instruments designed for the examination of the genitalia, which have now become symbols of the medical violence inflicted on women's bodies.

Jacques-Pierre Maygrier, New Demonstrations of Childbirth

Drawing by A. Chazal, engraving by Forestier

1822, plate XXIX

BnF, Paris

Speculum

Favre (distributor)

First half of the 19th century, pewter

2007.7.1, Endowment Fund for the Management and Promotion of Pharmaceutical Heritage

In modern times, the care of pregnancy and childbirth was mainly provided by women (midwives). The 19th century saw the rise of the profession of gynaecologist, practised predominantly by men. The institutionalisation of this new medical speciality was accompanied by specific examination techniques. Whilst at the end of the 18th century, vaginal examination was still carried out blindly and through clothing, during the 19th century, the supine position became the norm.

The use of a metal speculum (initially tube-shaped, then with spreadable flanges) to examine the cervix also became widespread. The gynaecological examination thus became much more invasive for patients. Whilst the procedure itself changed little in the 20th century, the recent outcry over gynaecological and obstetric abuse has led to a rethinking of how it is carried out, with the rise of more comfortable plastic speculums, alternative gynaecological positions (on one's side) and the replacement of stirrups with leg straps

GYNAECOLOGICAL CHAIR

Take a seat!

Take a seat in this gynaecological chair and experience, for a few moments, the position of a patient undergoing a consultation.

Familiar to some, unfamiliar to others, this chair is used to carry out a medical examination. Trust? Discomfort? How do you feel?

AUDIOVISUAL CONTENT

Excerpt from the film “Annie Colère”

Directed by: Blandine Lenoir

2022

Running time: 1'58"

Diaphana Distribution

Excerpt from the documentary “Femmes battues et spot”, [Battered Women and the Spotlight]

A2 Le Journal 8pm

1989

Duration: 2'37"

National Audiovisual Institute, Paris

Excerpt from an interview with Marie-Madeleine Grangé

Directed by: Marine Gilis

2020

Duration: 6'33"

'Testimonies for Feminism' collection – 24 AF 50 / Centre for Feminist Archives, University of Angers

Excerpt from the interview with Anne-Marie Giffo-Levasseur

Directed by: Marine Gilis

2020

Duration: 4'

'Testimonies for Feminism' Collection – 24 AF 48 / Centre for Feminist Archives, University of Angers

TELEPHONE

Excerpts from testimonies by callers to the national Planned Parenthood helpline

Duration: extract 1: 1'50" / extract 2: 1'41" / extract 3: 2'17" / extract 4: 1'29" / extract 5: 1'57" / extract 6: 1'34" / extract 7: 40" / extract 8: 8"

Date: 2026

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Part 5: Educating through objects

In its early days, the Planned Parenthood Centre educated doctors on contraceptive methods and welcomed couples seeking information on birth control and sexual 'harmony'. It also carried out outreach work in schools and, in 1967, claimed the status of a movement for popular and lifelong education.

In 1971, the Carpentier scandal (named after the doctor who wrote the leaflet "Let's Learn to Make Love", distributed in a secondary school) put sex education for young people on the political agenda. In 1972, the Higher Council for Sexual Information, Birth Control and Family Education was established. The following year, the Fontanet circular announced the introduction (on an optional basis) of sex education in schools. In the 1980s, the AIDS epidemic brought the prevention of sexually transmitted infections back into the spotlight. In 2001, a law made 'health and sexuality education' compulsory for pupils, but it was scarcely enforced. In 2023, Planning, Sidaction and SOS Homophobia launched the campaign "A textbook case: the State isn't doing its homework", which led in 2025 to the official acknowledgement of a failure and the launch of the new programmes on emotional, relational and sexual education (EVARS).

Today, the Planned Parenthood Association continues to develop and distribute resources designed to promote a better understanding of the body and sexuality, adopting an inclusive approach towards sexual and gender minorities.

EXHIBITS

Anatomical chart showing a cross-section of the female pelvis

Éditions de Génération consciente, Paris

Circa 1910

Eugène Humbert Collection, International Institute of Social History, Amsterdam

Cross-section of the female reproductive system intended for the training of doctors and receptionists (or to inform patients)

1960s–1970s

Pierre Simon Collection – 17AF 71–74 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives

Slide showing a cross-section of the female reproductive system, used in training sessions delivered by doctors to receptionists at Planned Parenthood clinics

Circa 1970, slide

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

3D model of the clitoris

Print produced from the open-access file created by Odile Fillod

Cité des Sciences Fab Lab

2017

M 0425 SEX – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Recent research has shown that the clitoris is in fact a much more developed and complex organ than anatomy textbooks have long suggested, as they only depicted its external part. This 3D model therefore provides an educational aid that more accurately reflects the reality of female anatomy.

Foam vulva

Prototype donated by Chrystel Grosso, created during an introductory workshop at the 'Ovaires et contre tous' festival

Forcalquier, 2017

M 0252 SEX – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

The "foam vulva" is an educational tool created in 2015 by Raphaëlle Morel d'Arleux, an activist at the Marseille Planned Parenthood Centre, in collaboration with Marion Lalauze, a puppeteer. The National Planned Parenthood Organisation, through the GSS (Gender and Sexual Health) programme, subsequently developed it to help women, and trans and intersex people whose anatomy is close to the 'female' anatomical norm, to better understand their gender and, consequently, their sexual health.

Gendered dolls

Created by Matassa

2021

M 0302 SEX – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

These gendered dolls, depicting an adult woman, a young boy and an intersex person, form part of a set of 12 dolls created by Matassa in 2021, based on an original idea from the Planned Parenthood Association. They are used in activities with people with disabilities, as well as with children, to encourage them to speak out in cases of domestic violence.

Disposable sanitary towel and menstrual cup

2020s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

As familiar objects used by the Planned Parenthood Association during sex education sessions, sanitary products enable discussions about periods – and, by extension, the functioning and dysfunction of the menstrual cycle – as well as introducing conversations about contraception.

Magnetic anatomical chart with captions in French and Guadeloupean Creole, produced by the Planned Parenthood Centre

Illustrations by Camille Florin

2017

M 0150 SEX – Planning Familial Documentation Centre, Paris

Translations are essential for making knowledge about sexuality accessible to non-French-speaking populations, both in mainland France and in the overseas departments and regions. This chart is also available in Réunion Creole and Mahoran.

“At the Planned Parenthood Centre, we know that men can get pregnant too”

Laurier the Fox

2022, poster

A 1286 EGA – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

This poster is part of a series of four posters designed for the waiting rooms of departmental Planned Parenthood associations. Highlighting Planned Parenthood’s inclusivity towards trans people, it sparked a furore from the far right on social media.

Spot them all

Planned Parenthood Young Activists Group

2023, poster

A 1305 STIs – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre

This poster was produced in 2023 for a Planned Parenthood information and prevention campaign on sexually transmitted infections, against a backdrop of a resurgence in infections amongst 16–25-year-olds.

“Everyone’s done it except me – am I weird?”

The Sex Education Hotline

2023, poster

A 1309 SEX – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris / Gaze / Netflix

The Planned Parenthood Centre has partnered with the “Sex Education Hotline” campaign to mark the release of the fourth and final series of Sex Education on 21 September 2023. A huge success, the series – which has been streaming on Netflix since 2019 – echoes the Planned Parenthood Centre’s messages to young people.

Mrs du Coudray’s educational childbirth model

18th century (or 1714–1789), facsimile

National Museum of Natural History, Paris

Even before the 19th century, objects could serve as teaching aids. In 1759, the midwife Angélique Le Boursier du Coudray was granted a royal charter authorising her to train midwives and surgeons who would in turn become instructors. She embarked on a tour of France that lasted until 1783. Her method was based not only on theoretical teaching but also – and this was the truly original aspect of her training – on practical application, using a life-size, flexible mannequin that allowed each student to practise the manoeuvres involved in childbirth.

Part 6: Controversial Issues

The history of women's sexual health has been marked by medical controversies that are invariably political as well. In the 19th century, pro-natalist doctors accused coitus interruptus of causing nervous disorders, and in 1937, Dr Barbe devoted an entire book to the 'pathological consequences' of contraceptive methods. With the advent of hormonal contraceptives in the 1950s, these controversies persisted. As for feminists, such as Barbara Seaman, they were concerned about side effects (thrombosis, cancers) that were downplayed by pharmaceutical companies and medical authorities.

In France, the rhetoric of women's liberation prevailed, and it was not until 2012–2013 that the 'contraceptive pill crisis' reignited these concerns. Other methods of contraception or sterilisation (such as the Dalkon Shield or the Essure implant) have also been the subject of health scandals.

These medical controversies are very often linked to social and racial discrimination. Since the 19th century, eugenic movements have encouraged birth control amongst certain sections of the population (migrants, people with disabilities or those in precarious circumstances). Furthermore, as part of policies to combat 'overpopulation' targeting the 'Third World', the pro-birth France of the 1960s – which still banned contraception and abortion – actively promoted a reduction in births in its overseas departments.

EXHIBITS

The doctor's case against the pill

Barbara Seaman

Peter Wyden

1980 [1969 for the 1st edition]

Distilbène box

Borne Laboratories

1970s, metal

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Launched in 1948, Distilbène is a synthetic oestrogen-based medicine intended to prevent miscarriages. 200,000 French women took this endocrine disruptor, which had harmful consequences not only for them but also for their children – particularly their daughters – who were exposed in utero, as well as for their grandchildren (infertility, birth defects, cancers). It was withdrawn from the market in 1977, and compensation funds for victims were set up in several countries.

Dalkon Shield IUD

A. H. Robins

Early 1970s

Pierre Simon Collection – 17 AF 54 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives
An intrauterine contraceptive device marketed by the US company A. H. Robins in 1971, the Dalkon Shield caused serious complications (genital infections, infertility, deaths). Its global marketing was halted in 1975. More than 400,000 claims were filed and the company was ordered to pay \$3 billion in damages.

Awareness leaflet on the effects of Essure sterilisation

Support network, advice and information on tubal sterilisation (R.E.S.I.S.T.)

2020s

R.E.S.I.S.T. Association

The Essure implant is a sterilisation device marketed from 2002 onwards by Conceptus and subsequently by Bayer. It was fitted to 200,000 French women before being withdrawn from the market in 2017, after numerous women reported adverse side effects (fatigue, chronic pain, allergic reactions, perforations, etc.). Founded in 2016, the R.E.S.I.S.T. association publishes information leaflets to support the women affected.

Jasminelle Continua, 0.02 mg/3 mg, film-coated tablet

Bayer

2020s

Private collection

By the end of 2012, reports and complaints about the side effects of the pill (which was accused, in particular, of causing strokes) were on the rise. In March 2013, the French government began withdrawing reimbursement for 48 third- and fourth-generation contraceptive pills.

Sanitary tampon

2020s

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Many disposable sanitary products nowadays contain carcinogens or endocrine disruptors (heavy metals, bleaching agents, etc.) that may have serious effects on the health of their users. Prolonged use of internal sanitary products can also lead to toxic shock syndrome, which can sometimes have very serious consequences (amputations, death).

Additional panel

Contraception, abortion and racial discrimination

Whilst the birth rate was encouraged in mainland France, in the former colonies that became overseas departments in 1946, the fight against 'overpopulation' led to racialised women being forced to use dangerous contraceptives, undergo abortions, and even be subjected to forced sterilisation.

EXHIBITS

“Outre-mères, Le scandale des avortements forcés à La Réunion“, [The scandal of forced abortions in Réunion] (excerpt)

Sophie Adriansen, Anjale

Vuibert, Paris, 2024

Depo-Provera, 150 mg/3 mL, injectable suspension

Pfizer

2020s

Private collection

This US-made injectable progestogen, developed by Upjohn in 1960, was initially used to treat endometriosis. It was not granted marketing authorisation in the United States as a contraceptive until 1992, but the drug was sold (under the name Depo-Prodnasone) to various Planned Parenthood programmes in the Global South. A single injection prevents pregnancy for three to six months. Between 1969 and 1977, it was prescribed to 7,000 women in Réunion, sometimes without their knowledge, even though it caused severe side effects (heavy periods, foetal malformations in the event of pregnancy, etc.) and had not been authorised for sale in France.

'Small families, happy families' – Campaign by the Réunion Planned Parenthood Association

La Gazette de l'île de La Réunion

24 February 1969

BnF, Paris

Poster promoting birth control on the island of Réunion

1960s

Reproduced in Daniel Vaxelaire, *Le Grand Livre de l'histoire de La Réunion*, vol. 2 (1948–2012), Saint-Denis, Éditions Orphie, 2012, p. 629.

AUDIO CONTENT

Statement by Mrs Jacqueline Manicom, née Letourneur. Midwife at the Paris hospitals. Extract from *Le procès de Bobigny*, 2006, *Choisir la cause des femmes*, Gallimard.

Read aloud by Corinne Belet.

2026

Part 7: Issues of Struggle

When it was founded in 1956, the Planned Parenthood Association was an organisation that actively promoted social and political change by calling for the repeal of the 1920 law and demanding access to contraception for married women. Its work at that time focused primarily on a media campaign and lobbying politicians.

In 1973, Simone Iff became the organisation's first president who was not a doctor. The movement became involved in feminist campaigns for free and unrestricted access to abortion. Since then, in addition to its grassroots work, it has played a central role in campaigns for sexual and reproductive health, and for the rights of women and minorities. From the streets to Parliament, its activities are varied, ranging from dialogue with institutions to protest (demonstrations, awareness-raising campaigns, petitions). Stickers, banners, badges, posters and leaflets bear witness to this activist commitment.

Throughout its history, the Planned Parenthood has faced numerous, sometimes violent, attacks concerning contraception, abortion, gender, feminism and so on. Historically led by ecclesiastical authorities and pro-birth movements, this opposition now comes mainly from fundamentalist Catholics, the far right, and anti-feminist and masculinist movements. After seventy years of struggle, the fight continues for the Planning.

EXHIBITS

'6 October 1979' badge

1979

Annick Coupé Collection – 59 AF 37 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives

This badge was produced to mark the major women's march on 6 October 1979. The march called for free and unrestricted access to abortion for all, on the eve of the debate on Monique Pelletier's bill aimed at extending the 1975 Veil Act (originally passed for a five-year period).

Film reel from Histoire d'A,

Planned Parenthood

1973

Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Directed by Charles Belmont and Marielle Issartel with financial support from Planned Parenthood, this feature-length film shows an abortion performed using the Karman method (by suction), prior to the legalisation of abortion. Despite censorship, it was screened widely throughout France via activist networks. An expanded DVD version was released in 2022.

Metal coat hanger

2020s

Private collection

The coat hanger has become a symbol of the pro-abortion movement since the 1970s – although there is no evidence of its actual use. As an everyday object, it embodies, much like knitting needles, the artisanal, domestic yet also dangerous nature of clandestine abortions

Image from the digital campaign “#ThisIsNotAHanger” organised by Planned Parenthood

September 2016

140 PLA w – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

This campaign was launched to mark the International Day for the Right to Abortion (28 September), to denounce the restrictions on this right in many countries, which lead to deaths resulting from clandestine abortions (47,000 women a year worldwide in the mid-2010s).

Sticker produced as part of a Planned Parenthood information campaign on abortion for World Abortion Day on 28 September

Planned Parenthood

2019, sticker

B 0526 AVO – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

A version of this sticker without the logo is available, to cover up anti-abortion posters in public spaces.

Sticker from the “My Voice, My Choice” campaign in support of abortion access for all in Europe

Planned Parenthood

2024, sticker

B 0788 AVO – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

The Massacre of the Innocents

National Alliance Against Depopulation

1935, leaflet

BB18 6176, 44BL397, National Archives

Anti-abortion and pro-choice campaign posters stuck onto Paris’s public bike-share scheme (Vélib)

Mathilde Larrère

May 2023, photographs

In May 2023, the anti-abortion group “Les Survivants” carried out a campaign of unauthorised stickers on Vélib bikes. Activists from Planning familial, #NousToutes,

Solidaires and Sud then responded with stickers in support of the right to abortion.

Plastic skull

1978

Josie Céret Collection – 30 AF 6 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives

This plastic skull was sent on 3 February 1978 to the home of Josiane Céret, a member of the MLAC (Movement for Freedom of Abortion and Contraception).

The Silent Scream

Film by Jack Dabner and Bernard Nathanson

1984, VHS

V 062 AVO – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

This anti-abortion film, compiled from ultrasound images, shows the procedure of a suction abortion and the supposed reaction of the foetus.

Petition addressed by the Tenon Hospital Defence Collective to the Ministers for the Home, Justice, Health and Women's Rights

2012

53 AF 2 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives

In July 2009, the abortion clinic at Tenon Hospital (Paris) was among the facilities closed following the Bachelot Act on the reorganisation of health services. The IVG Tenon collective was formed at that time and campaigned for its reopening, which was granted in April 2011. This was followed by regular demonstrations outside the hospital by anti-abortion campaigners. For its part, the Tenon Abortion Rights Collective circulated a petition in 2012 to secure dedicated premises for the centre – which had previously been housed within the maternity ward.

Freedom to make choices about our own bodies: sexuality, abortion, contraception

Toulouse Planned Parenthood Centre

1980, poster

A 0017 SOC – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

Freedom Takes Shape: sexuality, contraception, abortion

Planned Parenthood poster

Photograph by Pascal Valu

1980, poster

A0073 SEX – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

I don't have to feel GUILTY

Sarah DRAY

Planned Parenthood poster

2014, poster

A 1302 FEM – Planned Parenthood Documentation Centre, Paris

At the Planned Parenthood Centre, we know that abortion also affects transgender people

Laurier the Fox

Planned Parenthood poster

2024, poster

A 1312 AVO – Planning Familial Documentation Centre, Paris

Banner protesting the closure of abortion clinics: “Reopen the Tenon abortion clinic”

Circa 2009–2014

Tenon CIVG Collection – 53 AF 6 / University of Angers, Centre for Feminist Archives