Introduction

Fertility Decline
• Widespread and drastic decline in birth rate in Western Europe during the nineteenth century
• Between 1850 and 1914, fertility rates nearly halved

Ignorance about Sex and Bodies
• Ignorance about sexuality was abundant at this time
• Lack of knowledge about sex, pregnancy, and certain anatomical parts of the body

Marie Stopes and her Correspondence
• Marie Stopes (1880-1958) was a British scholar, writer, and birth control advocate
• After two years of marriage, she realized her marriage had never been consummated.
• Wrote Married Love in 1918 to spread sexual knowledge and to help others to have happy, healthy marriages
• Wrote Wise Parenthood in 1918 to address her readers’ questions about contraception
• In 1921 she opened up the first birth control clinic in Britain
• Between 1918 and 1944, she received letters from approximately 5,000 people across all social classes and from all over the world

Methods
  • A sample of 246 letters from series A, "M[arried] L[ove] letters and other general correspondence, c. 1915-1957."
  • Secondary sources

Research Objectives

This project investigates:
• The extent to which ordinary people used contraceptive devices in addition to or instead of traditional birth control methods during the early-twentieth century
• Which types of birth control were used
• The challenges ordinary people faced with certain methods of birth control
• How the spread of knowledge about sex, the human body, and birth control may have influenced ordinary people in Western Europe in the early-twentieth century

Conclusions
• People used contraceptive devices in addition to traditional birth control methods
• Despite many challenges to various methods of contraception, people actively sought out information about contraceptive devices
• Conversations between spouses about birth control took place, and challenges were seen as mutual problems that spouses worked together to solve

 References
• Holtzman, Ellen M. "The Pursuit of Married Love: Women’s Attitudes toward Sexuality and Marriage in Great Britain, 1918-1939" (The Journal of Social History, 1982).
• Marie Stopes International Australia.
• Wellcome Trust (wellcomeimages.org and wellcomelibrary.org).