

# Our Bodies, Ourselves (1973), by the Boston Women's Health Book Collective

Our Bodies, Ourselves, a succession to a pamphlet of resources pulled from co-ops of women in and around Boston, Massachusetts, was published in New York in 1973 by Simon and Schuster. Retitled from the original Women and Their Bodies, Our Bodies, Ourselves was an effort by a group of educated, middle class women to reinforce women's ownership of their bodies. There have been eight editions of Our Bodies, Ourselves, as well as sequels such as Our Bodies, Ourselves: Pregnancy and Birth and Our Bodies, Ourselves: Menopause. Our Bodies, Ourselves has sold more than four million copies and been printed in twenty foreign-language editions.

The women who collaborated on Our Bodies, Ourselves met at a women's conference in Boston in the spring of 1969 in the midst of the feminist movement in the United States. They formed a group called the Doctors Group. In 1970, the group published Women and Their Bodies which compiled pamphlets and personal stories, studies, and research about women's health. Shortly after the initial publication of Women and Their Bodies in 1970, the authors formed the Boston Women's Health Book Collective, a non-profit group that promoted women's health and education. Their goals included producing medically accurate books about health, collaborating with organizations and individuals who generated change for women's health, and inspiring and empowering women to become engaged politically. In 1973, Simon and Schuster published the pamphlets as a book, Our Bodies, Ourselves. Subsequent publications under the name Our Bodies, Ourselves incorporated more information and details of issues and topics regarding women of many backgrounds. Since the formal establishment of the group in 1972 and the publication of Our Bodies, Ourselves in 1973, the group reported tremendous positive feedback about the mission of the group and about Our Bodies, Ourselves.

The Boston Women's Health Collective wrote Our Bodies, Ourselves to educate women about their own health and sexuality, topics rarely discussed openly at the time of its initial publication. The book examined women's reproductive health, including chapters on menstruation, birth control, pregnancy stages, and challenges during pregnancy. Despite the fact that abortion was illegal in the United States, the chapter on abortion had been included since the original pamphlet-style publication. The book also delved into issues of contraception use, healthy relationships, nutrition, and sexually transmitted diseases.

The 1973 edition of Our Bodies, Ourselves has 276 pages and 15 chapters, six of which discuss reproduction and childbirth. This article will focus solely on the six chapters discussing reproductive anatomy and health, as well as childbirth and abortion, specifically Chapters 2, 9, 10, 11, 13, and 15.

Chapter 2, "The Anatomy and Physiology of Reproduction and Sexuality," details the anatomy of a woman and the stages of the female reproductive cycle through anatomical drawings, ovulation diagrams, and stories of menstruation. In Chapter 9, "Venereal Disease," the authors discuss syphilis, gonorrhea, other non-categorized sexually transmitted diseases, and the political and social implications of sexually transmitted diseases. Each section about a specific disease is broken up into sections about symptoms, diagnosis, treatments, and what a woman should do if she contracts a venereal disease while pregnant.

"Birth Control" is the title of Chapter 10. The authors' goal for the chapter is to enlighten women about effective, safe, low-cost birth control options, such as the birth control pill, intrauterine devices (IUDs), diaphragms, spermicidal creams and gels, and nonmedical birth control like the

rhythm method. The authors also discuss the various societal pressures women may face when choosing to use birth control. These pressures include anti-sex attitudes in churches, various state laws against birth control, familial influences, misleading or inaccurate information, and the inaccessibility of birth control. Possible side effects, warning signs and availability are detailed, as is information on the popularity, safety, and success rates for each type of birth control.

Chapter 11 introduces abortion as an issue of women's rights and outlines the reasons for abortions, arguments against them, and the history of illegal and legal abortions. The authors begin the chapter with a history of anti-abortion campaigns, comparisons of abortion laws in other countries, and a review of abortion law reform in the United States. The second half of the chapter couples explanations of the abortion procedure and the complications that can arise from it with presentations of diagrams, drawings and anecdotal stories. One woman tells the story of her illegal abortion which took place in 1967. A friend had referred her to a nurse who did the procedure for 400 dollars. The narrator of the story explains that she felt a sense of total detachment while looking at the fetus. Years later, she feels an appreciation for the strength she exhibited, and does not feel any guilt or shame, as the authors suggested might happen as a result of the stigma regarding abortions. A second woman learned that she was pregnant while she was going back to school and managing a household of two kids and her husband. Her explanation was not as detailed as the first, but portrayed a similar guilt-free, successful experience with her abortion.

The next chapter, "Childbearing," chapter 13 in the book, includes sixty-eight pages of what to expect before, during, and after pregnancy. The authors challenge the then common relationship between doctors and expectant mothers. The authors exhort women to learn about pregnancy, childbirth, and mother and child care. The rest of the chapter provides information on those topics with sections about pregnancy, preparing for childbirth, and a mother's life after the infant's birth. Each section has anecdotes from the authors about their experiences. The chapter also has diagrams to detail the dilatation of the cervix, possible complications during birth, and the process of birthing. The chapter also describes some of the psychological factors of pregnancy through retelling other women's feelings during each stage of childbearing.

The fifteenth chapter in the book is "Women and Health Care." The chapter discusses doctor and patient relationships, preconceived notions among researchers and scientists, and the obstacles women may face obtaining healthcare.

Throughout the book, the authors highlight 4 themes. The first theme is that individual experiences told in personal stories are just as important as books and physicians as resources for understanding women's health and reproductive lives. The second theme is to teach women to make use of their knowledge as they deal with healthcare. The third theme is that knowledge about one's body can dispel many mysteries that may lead to health complications. According to the authors, some major consequences of ignorance are sexually transmitted diseases and some pregnancies. The fourth theme emphasized by the authors is that a woman's physical health is just as important as her mental health—and that by understanding both, a woman can ensure that her body is in good health.

Reviewers of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* complained that the book contained writings of only white, middle-class women. The goal of the authors of the 1973 edition was to unite women in a quest for knowledge about their bodies, instill acceptance of their differences from men, and bolster empowerment in self-advocacy. They introduced this mission with an understanding that their knowledge and anecdotal evidence may not reach all types of women. The authors acknowledged that risk and said that they wanted for women reading the book to see past the differences of socio-economic status or race, and instead to see the similarity in experiences that all women face.

Reviews of more recent editions of *Our Bodies, Ourselves* reflect on the impact of the 1973 edition. An article in the *National Women's Studies Association Journal* praised the 1973 edition and said it was a bible for women's health. A review by *The Atlantic Monthly* on the 2005 edition notes the importance of the 1973 book's impact on society at the time of publication, but argues that the 2005 edition is overtly feminist and that such commentary is outdated and inaccurate.

## Sources

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