

# Boston Women's Health Book Collective, later Our Bodies Ourselves (1969-)

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective was a women's health organization headquartered in Boston, Massachusetts, that published the informational book *Our Bodies Ourselves*, which sold over 4.5 million copies. Initially called the Doctor's Group, the Collective formed in response to the insufficiency of women-specific health information during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Members of the organization participated in the women's liberation movement in Boston, Massachusetts, and conducted research on women's health using resources such as medical textbooks. They collectively created an original publication surrounding women's health concerns and offered educational courses for women to learn more about their bodies and to share their experiences. The Boston Women's Health Book Collective, later called *Our Bodies Ourselves*, expanded access to women's health information throughout the world with their publications, courses, and outreach.

During the women's liberation movement of the 1960s and 1970s, women campaigned across the US for solutions to gender inequalities. The women in the movement focused on issues such as employment inequality and the lack of reproductive health options and education. In the mid-twentieth century, abortion was illegal and punishable by law in the US. Contraception was legalized in the US in 1965. Few women had access to reproductive health specialists and those who did most likely saw a male physician. Women reported not receiving adequate reproductive health information from their primary care doctors. According to some women, they were embarrassed and unable to communicate their reproductive health issues to their doctors.

In May of 1969, twelve women met at a women's liberation conference held at Emmanuel College in Boston, Massachusetts, to discuss women's health issues. Specifically, the women met at a conference workshop titled "Women and Their Bodies." There, attendees shared stories about their experiences with medical doctors. After the conference, women who had attended the conference claimed to have realized how little they knew about their own bodies. According to the attendees, the conversations at the conference provoked the women to form a discussion group that they called the Doctor's Group. The members met in the basement of an Armenian church for group meetings and discussed their bodies and health.

Members of the Doctor's Group who attended the conference created a questionnaire for local women to determine the state of women's health care and how women felt about their bodies and their relationships with their doctors. The questionnaire results showed that many women believed that the doctors available to women did not adequately educate their patients on women-specific health issues. According to the founding members of the group, Judy Norsigian and Miriam Hawley, in the late 1960s, male doctors dominated the medical fields of obstetrics and gynecology. Norsigian and Hawley claimed that many doctors patronized their female patients and treated them condescendingly when women inquired about their bodies. In an interview, Norsigian and Hawley discussed how common it was for women to withhold medically relevant personal information from their doctors. Women often did not tell their physicians about contracting sexually transmitted infections because the physician would notify the woman's husband. The Doctor's Group decided that women would have to educate themselves and the group decided to design a course for women to learn about their bodies. The group designed the course by researching medical textbooks and corresponding with medical and non-medical health specialists.

Throughout 1969, the Doctor's Group published a course on women's health that addressed the inadequacies of women's health care. To create that publication, the group made a list of topics that their publication should address, including anatomy and physiology, sexuality, venereal disease,

later called sexually transmitted infections, birth control, abortion, pregnancy, childbirth, postpartum health, and myths about women and their health. Each member of the group took responsibility for a topic that they were most informed on and worked to produce a chapter on that topic. While writing the publication, the members met weekly to share what they had learned about their specific topic and gave each other constructive criticism and edits for the written material.

The members of the Doctor's Group referred to their publication as a laywoman's course on health. The members strove to use understandable language and make complicated medical concepts accessible to the everyday women who read the book. They intended to distribute the publication to women outside Boston. As the publication drafts spread, more women joined the Doctor's Group, took the course, and helped edit and revise the drafts. According to the members, many were nervous about how readers would react to the publication and felt that many readers would believe that women had no authority in medicine and health care. Prior to the release of the first publication, the members of the Doctor's Group informally renamed the organization the Boston Women's Health Book Collective.

In 1970, the Collective published the 193 page course booklet named *Women and Their Bodies*. The members printed the course booklet on newsprint and stapled it together with a handwritten table of contents. The course booklet cost \$0.75 and spread to areas beyond Boston. In the introduction section of *Women and Their Bodies*, the members clarify that although they intended the booklet to increase women's consciousness about their bodies and the women's liberation movement, the booklet was not final, and the authors intended the booklet to grow and develop further. The members also stated that the project taught them and other women how to become more autonomous human beings. According to the members, they used collective knowledge to change the women's health care system. The first publication emphasized that the real women's health education would come from conversations and shared experiences of women. Members noted that discussions during the courses usually involved women from different situations and backgrounds.

During the 1970s, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective offered the course they had created to members of the women's liberation movement in Boston. During the course, the organization gave presentations and answered questions from participants. They also broke into smaller groups to discuss topics that were especially relevant to specific women of the group.

In 1971, the organization published a revised edition of their original publication and changed the title to *Our Bodies Ourselves*. The book was published by the New England Free Press. As the publication expanded, the authors added topics including menopause, divorce, childcare, domestic violence, and diet and exercise to the list of chapters. The book was reviewed in magazines and sold over 250,000 copies in its first few years. According to the members, most women heard of the book and the organization through word of mouth. In 1972, the organization formally incorporated themselves as the Boston Women's Health Book Collective.

In 1973, the New England Free Press was unable to supply the demand for the book, and *Our Bodies Ourselves* was re-published commercially by Simon & Schuster. Simon & Schuster published a revised edition of *Our Bodies Ourselves* in 1976 and that edition became a national bestseller. The American Library Association's Young Adult Division, headquartered in Chicago, Illinois, also recognized *Our Bodies Ourselves* as one of the best books of the decade. During the next thirty years, the Boston Women's Health Book Collective continued to organize women's health education outreach throughout the US and update the book to address modern women's health concerns.

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective continued to provide educational resources for decades following their initial publication. After the 1973 edition, members updated the original *Our Bodies Ourselves* and reissued it every four to seven years. The Collective continued to publish more books about women's health, including *Ourselves and Our Children* in 1978, *Changing Bodies, Changing Lives: A Book for Teens on Sex and Relationships* in 1980, and *Ourselves, Growing Older: Women Aging with Knowledge and Power* in 1987. The members of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective continued to incorporate topics relevant to the changing times, such as plastic surgery, date rape, and body image. Date rape describes instances of rape in which there has been some form of romantic or potentially sexual relationship between the two parties. The members of the Boston Women's Health Book Collective traveled throughout the world, promoting access

to women's health resources and promoting their book. In 2001, the organization created the Our Bodies Ourselves Global Initiative to support women's groups around the world in adapting the Our Bodies Ourselves book to fit the needs of different regions and cultures.

The Boston Women's Health Book Collective continued activism throughout the early 2000s. In 2002, the Collective renamed their organization to Our Bodies Ourselves. In 2011, Boston University hosted a symposium honoring the members of Our Bodies Ourselves at Harvard University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. The exhibit featured photographs of the members from their initial meetings and old editions of the publication. The exhibit educated viewers on the history of Our Bodies Ourselves and women's reproductive health activism. As of 2016, Our Bodies Ourselves had been made available in thirty languages and sold over 4.5 million copies, increasing access to women's reproductive health knowledge beyond the US.

## Sources

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