



Women need to speak up about birth control Contraceptives have improved the everyday lives of millions

By Susan Reimer

All of them, so far as I can tell, are men. Men discussing the reproductive rights of women.

Where are the women?

Even Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius was silent as she stood next to President Barack Obama when he announced what he hoped would be a compromise in insurance coverage of contraceptives.

We can assume that she earned advanced degrees, was elected governor of Kansas and has served in a Cabinet-level office at least in part because she wasn't pregnant every 18 months. In fact, she has just two sons. Didn't she have any testimony to offer about what control of her reproductive life might have meant to her?

As the toxic mix of sex, religion and politics swirled around her these last few weeks, Sarah Brown, executive director of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies, was astonished at the silence of women.

"I am not an angry feminist," said Brown, the mother of three grown daughters. "I do not see sex discrimination behind every tree. But it was striking that all these men, some of whom say they are celibate, were expressing their opinion about whether women should have access to birth control.

"And there was no huge outcry from women. I thought it was truly shocking."

Brown asked this: Where are all the women in leadership in this country — from small-business owners to presidents of corporations to Cabinet officers? Why are they not stepping forward to say that because they could control their family size they were able to go to college, or law school, or campaign for office?

"Everywhere you look, women are themselves the personal beneficiaries of contraception. And so are their daughters," said Brown. "It is central for women to be able to achieve."

And for men, too, I dare say.

The girlfriend they did not get pregnant during their youth. The wife who was able to finish college or build a career and contribute to the family coffers. The 10 children they did not father and do not need to clothe, feed and educate.

Not to mention the women who are sexually available to them because they do not have to fear pregnancy.

Is there a reason, Brown asked, that in a time when we talk about everything else on television, from incest to orgasm, "we will not say that 'I used contraception and that's why I only have two children or why I was able to go to medical school'?"

"So much rides on a woman's ability to avoid repeated pregnancies. It is a linchpin. If you are pregnant every year and a half, you are not going to run a business, a campaign, a labor union or the American Association of University Women."

All the public polling shows that a large majority of women are in favor of easy and affordable access to birth control and that they use it regardless of their religious beliefs. Why the silence?

"The Centers for Disease Control considers it one of the 10 greatest public health advances of the last century, along with clean air, clean water and immunizations," said Brown. "Contraception is life-changing. Why aren't women speaking up for that?"

What are the men doing grabbing the microphone on this topic? And what do they think will happen if they succeed in reducing the availability of contraception at clinics or through health departments or reducing its affordability? Do they all plan to sleep on the couch from now on?

Let me step forward.

I have made a career for myself in journalism, and improved my family's standard of living in the bargain, because contraception allowed me to finish college, postpone marriage and have just two children.

Who's next?