



The Promise of Birth Control

The U.S. Supreme Court heard arguments last week about the Affordable Care Act's requirement that employers of a certain size provide health care plans that pay for birth control for women.

One of the plaintiffs, Hobby Lobby, a chain of craft stores in the South owned by a religious family, does not object to providing all forms of birth control. The family objects only to the IUD and two drugs commonly known as "the morning after pill" and "the week after pill" because, they believe, this device and these drugs would prevent a fertilized egg from attaching to a woman's uterus.

Complying with the ACA, they argued, would violate their religious conviction that life begins at fertilization. Those in support of the provision argued that this puts an unfair financial burden on women employees and limits their access to the birth control method best suited to them.

Although this case is about birth control and not about abortion, there is no question that it is part of the unrelenting effort by conservatives and the religious right to limit a woman's control over her own reproductive life. *Roe v. Wade* is firmly in place, but there is always the back door.

Lost in the fog of this culture war are the remarkable benefits — to women, their children, families and society — that birth control has bestowed since it became readily available.

Birth control has meant fewer unplanned pregnancies, and therefore, fewer abortions. It has meant advancements in education and economic opportunities for women — and improved the economic health of families. Being able to plan for a pregnancy and create time and space between children has improved maternal and infant health.

And, let's not put too fine a point on it, birth control has reduced the public burden of unwanted kids.

In fact, the Centers for Disease Control calls modern contraception one of the top 10 greatest public health achievements of the 20th century. Right up there with the polio vaccine.

"I look around and I see that Americans have lost their common understanding of the track record, promise and impact of birth control," said Sarah Brown, CEO of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. Like me, she remembers when birth control was flat out unavailable.

"Ninety-nine percent of women in this country have used birth control at one time or another," she said. "Catholic women in the same proportion as non-Catholics. All of us have benefited from its role in family planning, and it has profoundly changed America."

We are conflating prevention and intervention. The arguments about abortion have drawn in contraception. "There has been a possibly deliberate blurring of the lines," said Ms. Brown.

As she works the halls of the Capitol lobbying for her cause, she finds herself pointing out the very plain fact that there wouldn't be many women elected to office if they were having another child every year. Public service would not be very attractive for a man, either, if he had six or seven or eight children to support and educate and his wife wasn't a financial partner.

"People lower their eyes," when she tries to talk to them, she said. And they mutter under their breath that birth control is just too hot a topic to touch.

Three-quarters of those between the ages of 18 and 24 say they have had sex in the past year. Where would they be without birth control? Probably not in college, not beginning their careers, not building their earnings. Not maturing into the kind of adult who can be a good parent.

I would not be where I am without birth control. Whatever my children think of the value of a working — and often harried — mother, there is no doubt that they have benefited from my paycheck and the mobility my education and my job have provided me.

More important, my son and my daughter wouldn't be where they are if an unintended pregnancy had stopped them in their tracks, derailing their educations and their goals.

I have no doubt about the sincerity of the religious beliefs of the owners of Hobby Lobby. They made their business plan around those beliefs.

But I have no doubt that they are false targets, set before us by people who want nothing better than to roll back time and contain the freedoms and achievements of women. It is their hypocrisy that I despise.

