

SOJOURNERS

Thanks, Birth Control! How Birth Control Can Be an Instrument of Justice and Liberation

“A man doesn’t have a worry in the world, while I’ve got a baby hanging over my head like a big stick, to keep me in line.”

So says Esther Greenwood, the deeply conflicted protagonist in Sylvia Plath’s *The Bell Jar*. When, at her psychiatrist’s recommendation, Esther visits a gynecologist for a diaphragm fitting, she ascends the examination table, thinking:

“I am climbing to freedom, freedom from fear, freedom from marrying the wrong person [...] just because of sex, freedom from the Florence Crittenden Homes where all the poor girls go who should have been fitted out like me, because they did, they would do anyway, regardless...”

Readers familiar with the book will know that Esther’s sexual liberation—like that of so many young women and men—did not, in fact, offer the rapturous freedom she had envisioned. Still, the sense of relief conferred by reliable access to birth control evoked in this scene rings true for many women.

It’s still not quite socially acceptable for women to express the desire to use birth control. To do so is to run the risk of being labeled a ‘slut’—or worse. Forget all the sexual exploitation and objectification of women that’s all over the Internet and the entertainment industry—what’s really offensive in some quarters is the idea that women desire to have sex without having babies.

For more than 25 years, the federal government has funded abstinence-only sex education programs that have mostly proven ineffective (and even misleading). The United States has a rate of teenage pregnancy that’s significantly higher than other developed countries, and roughly half of all American pregnancies are unplanned.

That figure soars to nearly 70 percent when we’re talking about unmarried women under the age of thirty—and these numbers, too, are significantly higher than those in other developed countries.

By some estimates, 40 percent of unintended pregnancies are ended with an abortion.

It’s ironic, then, that birth control has become a partisan issue in recent years. Free birth control has been shown to dramatically cut abortion rates; one important study found that making birth control free could prevent up to 70 percent of U.S. abortions. Yet the same people who tend to oppose abortion tend also to oppose the kind of policy—free, highly effective birth control—that may offer the best chance of reducing abortion.

Some of the resistance to the contraceptive provisions of the Affordable Care Act was (and is) political posturing, but perhaps some of it is rooted in an unspoken impulse to see women ‘pay’ for the consequences of their actions—to hang babies over our heads like big sticks, to keep us in line.

Increasingly—and not without certain political reasons—American evangelicals have voiced doubts about the morality of using birth control even within marriage. When it comes to sex outside marriage, the thought that one would sinfully premeditate the act by planning to use birth control was anathema — a “hill to die on” for at least one conservative blogger, who felt that “principles and ideals of Biblical anthropology” could not and should not be sacrificed to “a pragmatic streak,” even one that would, pragmatically, reduce abortion.

By reducing unplanned pregnancies, we can also reduce poverty, child abuse, paternal absence, low birth weight, and school failure.

But reducing unplanned pregnancy isn't just about reducing abortion. Two years ago, in Malawi, I spent several long, hot days in the women's clinic at the local government hospital, where women waited hours—after having walked for hours—to get a pack of birth control pills or an injection of Depo-Provera. They grinned with relief after they grimaced at the pinch of the shot: another three months without worry.

Research from the National Campaign to Reduce Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy—a bipartisan group supporting comprehensive education and policies that strengthen and support a culture of personal responsibility around sex and children — suggests that by reducing unplanned pregnancies, we can also reduce poverty; child abuse and neglect; paternal absence; low birth weight; and school failure or low educational attainment (for mother and child alike).

Annually, American taxpayers spend \$12 billion on publicly financed medical care for unplanned pregnancies — the kinds of pregnancies typically associated with inadequate early maternity care and less-than-ideal nutrition and, therefore, with poorer health outcomes than planned pregnancies. It's with good reason that organizations like the National Campaign stress the practice of always using contraception (unless you're actively trying to conceive).

"...Girls who should have been fitted out like me, because they did, they would do anyway, regardless..."

They would do anyway, regardless, and the consequences are real.

The language of hospitality is sometimes invoked in Christian discussions of sex, marriage, and contraception, with the idea being that the holiest type of womb is the hospitable, non-contraceptive womb, the womb that's ready to receive and nurture whatever's planted there. It's a lovely idea, and one that's in harmony with Mary's radical hospitality in consenting to host the Son of God. But it becomes exploitative and harsh when it's set down as gospel—pregnancy as an occupation, rather than hospitality freely given.

With contraception, it's time to leave behind models of guilt, and learn what it means to serve the cause of mercy.

This is not to say that we cannot and should not strive to be hospitable to unexpected babies—but rather, that we can and should support a culture that allows women to, like Mary, give consent. Birth control is an instrument that allows us to do just that.

I put out a call for women to share stories about why they're grateful for contraception. One woman replied, "Who wouldn't be?," as if the benefits were so obvious that no further explanation should be necessary.

One woman, B., was raised in a Quiverfull family, and gave birth to six children before deciding to use birth control. If it weren't for birth control, she said, she'd probably have yet another newborn and would be unable to work to provide for her already cash-strapped family.

Several other women told me stories of serious, even life-threatening illnesses exacerbated by pregnancy; without birth control, they'd probably be dead. Still others told stories of terrible postpartum depression and repeated miscarriages.

And another woman, D., a married mother, told me that she's grateful for birth control because she most desires sex when she's ovulating, and likes enjoying sex without having baby after baby.

Nearly every woman spoke of their gratitude toward birth control as a tool that allows them to conserve time and resources to nurture the children that they already have, or the children they hope to have.

The "freedom" Esther Greenwood envisioned her birth control offering was illusory; false, even. But the chains of poverty, injustice, illness, abuse, and even death that can be loosed by birth control both domestically and abroad are very real. It's time to leave behind models of guilt and punishment and learn what it means to serve the cause of mercy, not sacrifice.