

Now You See Her, Now You Don't: U.S. Women and the Current Battle Over Contraception



In this post, LSE MSc Gender, Media, and Culture student Kimberly Killen reviews the current debate over contraception in the U.S.A. and asks, "Where are the women?"

Something funny is happening in the USA.

In the past few months, and especially the last couple of weeks, women's health issues have re-emerged in the political realm with renewed passion and vitriol. However, women are edited out of the debates. Instead, rhetoric of constitutional liberties, religion, and economic expediency has been used to try to limit or extend contraception to women as well as curtail the services of Planned Parenthood. Slowly and dangerously, women are being erased from the public and media conversation on their own personal health, so its time to unpack the public conversation and find where women stand.

To get a grip on the events, it may be helpful to quickly review the issues at the centre of the political, cultural, and religious firestorm, beginning with one that has faded into the background of public memory in the current debate over contraception.

August 1, 2011 – U.S. Department of Health and Human Services announces that beginning August 12, 2012, women will have their **contraception covered by their insurance policies** without a co-pay. Later, a ruling regarding religious institutions would complicate this policy.

December 7, 2011 – U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary **Kathleen Sebelius overrules FDA**, refusing to allow **Plan B**, an emergency contraceptive commonly known as the "morning after pill", to be sold over the counter, citing the need to "protect" teenagers from excessive access to Plan B. **President Obama backed her decision**, noting his role as a father to two young daughters and his need to protect them from potential misuse of the medication.

January 1, 2012 – **Susan G. Komen for the Cure withdraws grants to Planned Parenthood** used for breast cancer screenings. Komen's divestment drew outrage from the blogosphere and social media, prompting allegations that the organization was playing politics with women's health. Since then, **Komen has reversed the decision** and reinstated Planned Parenthood's funding.

Late January/February– Conservatives, especially Republican presidential candidates and the Catholic Church, have **reignited the debate over** the Obama administrations summer 2011 ruling regarding contraception, scorning the policy and attacking the requirement that religious organizations participate in insurance schemes that would provide contraceptive coverage. **The Catholic Church decried** the policy, which compels religiously affiliated institutions to provide contraception coverage for free, as they claimed, it would violate a basic tenet of their church, **Recently, President Obama switched the onus** to insurance companies – a move he is reportedly not budging from.

When I heard about Obama's most recent decision – a compromise many suggest was appeal to Catholics during an election year – I had mixed feelings. My immediate reaction was to snarl a lip and say, "Ugh." But then when I realized it was still protecting and extending contraception to all women, my annoyance felt harder to justify. To explore my own ideas on the topic, I recently spoke with Daniela Ramirez, a fellow MSc student at the LSE. **Ramirez was recently published on The Huffington Post** detailing her experience attending Boston College, a Jesuit college that **does not supply students with contraception**.



Ramirez, when asked about Obama's decision, shared feelings similar to my own. "At the heart of it, I was still pretty disappointed," she explained. "It was a compromise. [...] It's like we're always going to give into the Catholic Church. It reminded me of the whole Komen thing in how women and people who are in support of women's health are slowly giving in, making compromises on women's health. And that scares me for the future of the U.S."

However, she went on to share a conversation she had with another individual who pointed out why Obama's compromise may have been a very smart call. She listed three reasons: (1) it ensures access to contraception for women (and isn't that the most important thing?), (2) it puts an end to the "crazy political football" game being played with the issue (or so we hoped), and (3) it reinforces the Catholic Church's leadership as out-of-touch with its congregation, especially as polls show Catholic support for the White House mandate. In fact, a poll by network news agency CBS reported that 61 per cent of self-professed Catholics are in favour of the mandate, with 8 per cent reporting they're unsure and only 31 per cent outright saying they're against it.

Yet while that is certainly hard to disagree with, it's still hard to get behind a decision done in the name of political expediency, especially when it's in the midst of an increasingly vitriolic debate over women's health. What should be an extremely serious subject is being tossed about to score votes. And while political manoeuvring may actually in some cases go hand-in-hand with certain individuals' moral views on the subject, it's hard for me to see the moral argument against keeping women healthy and lessening the number of abortions. Contraception is taken for many more reasons than just practicing safe sex – growing up I knew young women who were prescribed it to battle migraines, deal with acne, regulate menstrual cycles, or manage even more serious health matters.

Some analysts have suggested that politicians are using this issue in an attempt to dismantle Obama's sweeping healthcare reform. [Columnist Gail Collins for the New York Times](#) quotes Senator Mark Rubio as saying the whole issue "shows why must fully repeal ObamaCare." As Collins goes on to explain, conservatives are using bishops and the Catholic Church to undo healthcare reform, as to them and the increasingly powerful Tea Party this represents just one more government intrusion into the private sphere (despite an increasingly strong ethos in this debate to legislate morality – but that's not government intrusion; it's protecting national character and "family values"). It's times like this that I pine for old school, fiscal Republicans.

However, the danger doesn't end in rhetoric. In [a recent article for the Washington Post](#), [CNN host Rachel Maddow](#) worried that the reinvigorated anti-abortion spirit of the Republican Party, particularly in its opposition to the widening availability of contraception legislation, could spell trouble not for *Roe v. Wade* but for *Griswold v. Connecticut*. The latter decision occurred in 1965, protecting the right to marital privacy and effectively allowing women to access contraceptives. Yet it's facing contestation in 2012. However, as Ramirez pointed out, this is more than just a legal ruling that happened long ago to people generations and generations away from us. While the abortion could affect numerous of women, it's the fight over available contraception that brings the debate to the immediate for women – both pro-and anti-choice.

"That's why I keep using the words scary and terrifying because it keeps getting closer and closer to me," Ramirez told me over coffee. "It's getting closer and close to home for a lot of people. [...] It's getting more real for women. It's creating an opportunity to support women's health, but I don't know if that's actually happening because of all the politics that are involved."

The debate around contraception feels unreal at times. Like, I'm sorry, but are we really having this debate in 2012? Regardless, the framing of the issue needs to be refocused. We need to find the women. We need to see the intimate ways that contraception affects their lives. They are at the heart of the issue, but their vital voices are being drowned out by political rhetoric and intonations of religious freedom (the latter of which certainly presents complications). Contraception can no longer be represented by a pill or as a threat to family values/national morality – such propagandizing of the issue must end. I plead for reasoned discourse, for the



actors who will be most affected to stand up, and for the women whose bodily autonomy is being challenged to be heard.

Yet as evidenced by Congressional actions on Thursday, February 16, this is not happening. A [photograph is circulating](#) social networks and the Internet at large of a House Oversight Committee meeting on the White House contraception rule. The photograph features the five witnesses called by Republican chairman Representative Darrell Issa – all of which happen to be male: the Most Reverend William Lori, the Reverend Dr. Matthew Harrison, moral philosophy professor C. Benn Mitchell, Rabbi Meir Soloveichik, and ethics professor Craig Mitchell. All five men oppose the contraception rule on the grounds of religious freedom.

New York Congresswoman Carol Maloney challenged the panel, asking, “Where are the women?” However, this question and Issa’s prevention of Georgetown student Sandra Fluke from speaking was rebuffed by the congressman in a letter sent to Democrats. His office claimed, “As the hearing is not about reproductive rights but instead about the administration’s actions as they relate to freedom of religion and conscience, he believes that Ms. Fluke is not an appropriate witness.”

At this point in the “debate,” I’m losing my ability to be measured, calm, and rational – I feel like certain rights are slipping through my fingers and the voices of women are being silenced. How is this issue not about reproductive rights? How is this issue not about women’s health? Why must we excise these elements from the debate? Whether or not Congress decides the White Rule violates the freedom to religion for a *global institution* will have an effect on women and their access to contraception. It will create certain economic advantages or challenges; it will without a doubt affect women’s health. To think otherwise would be naïve at best and downright dangerous at worst.

We need to find the women. We need to start yelling, standing up, and saying, “No!” Let’s follow the example of Representative Mahoney, Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton, [Virginia State Senator Janet Howell](#), and many other advocates for women’s health (both men and women) and not allow our health and the wellbeing of others to be endangered by some political football. Let’s be heard.

But let’s not allow the discussion to end here. What do you think is going on? Is freedom of religion really what is going on Congress? Or is it a political move? And where are the women? What are effective measures to fight back? To protest?

Additionally, many thanks to Daniela Ramirez for her insightful quotes and a wonderful afternoon of coffee and conversation.

Kimberly Killen is an MSc student studying Gender, Media, and Culture. She has a particular interest in constructions of citizenship and nationalism, the construction and application of feminism as a political movement and how all of this operates in the political sphere, especially in the United States. Kimberly has a dual undergraduate degree in Political Science and English from Wellesley College, and is refusing treatment for her addiction to political gossip.

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