

The Pill Is Not Good for Women

By Erika Bachiochi & Catherine R. Pakaluk

[February 21, 2012 4:00 A.M.](#)

The recent Health and Human Services mandate and the ensuing debate appear to have pitted religious-liberty claims against women's health. But because religious leaders (rightly) focused on the need for a religious exemption, it may appear to some observers that they are unable to articulate a reasoned and weighty response to the administration's claim that contraceptives are essential to women's health and well-being.

The Obama administration is wrong on this score as well, and the substantive case needs to be made: The contraceptive revolution has failed to be the unmitigated boon to women or to society that it was hyped up to be.

For the past 50 years, the Pill has demonstrably assisted women — especially



college-educated, career-minded women — in the timing of pregnancies and the delay of marriage. But the Pill also ushered in an era of unprecedented (and, as things turned out, unwarranted) confidence that sex could be pursued without risk — most notably, outside of long-term committed relationships.

The Pill, together with abortion as backup, appeared to provide full insurance against pregnancy risks. But as economists well know, full insurance tends to induce greater risk-taking: As people perceive sex to be safer, they pursue more of it. This applies especially to people who would otherwise be most vulnerable to the risks of unwanted pregnancy: the young, the unmarried, and those unable to care for a child. While a tight causal argument is difficult to make, correlations alone do not augur in favor of the Pill: The rapidly increasing sexual activity of the Pill era correlates with a staggering increase in non-marital births — less than 5 percent of births in 1960 were to unmarried mothers, compared with roughly 40 percent today. A counterintuitive result, perhaps, but a fairly human one nonetheless.

And this points to an unresolved difficulty with the contraceptive revolution, which was supposed to serve women above all: Women on the whole disproportionately bear the burden of the new sexual regime. They are expected to dose themselves

with a [Group 1 carcinogen](#) for approximately two-thirds of their fertile years. They sustain greater emotional costs from casual sex. They are at [greater risk of contracting STDs](#) and disproportionately suffer from their long-term consequences, such as [cervical cancer](#) and [fertility loss](#). And even after 50 years with the Pill, as many as half of all pregnancies are still unintended. Women, not men, must make the heart-wrenching choice between abortion, reckoned a tragic outcome even by its supporters, and bearing a child with little to no paternal support. After all, since children were negotiated out of the bargain by the availability of contraception and abortion, men have secured a strong rationale to simply ignore or reject pregnancies that result from uncommitted sexual relations. Nobel-laureate economist George Akerlof predicted nearly two decades ago that this would lead directly to the feminization of poverty, as it ruefully has.

These traumas take their toll. A stunning paper by leading labor economists Betsey Stevenson and Justin Wolfers documented recently that women's self-reported happiness has declined both overall, and relative to that of men, since the early 1970s. Where women used to report higher happiness than men, they now report less. Stevenson and Wolfers ask, "Did men garner a disproportionate share of the benefits of the women's movement?" Good question indeed. One may well wonder if the bargain advocated by the feminist elites has made much sense in the end: Were gains for elite women purchased with the currency of a new sexual ethic that has damaged women more generally?

Contrary to a popular misconception, the alternative to the contraceptive revolution is not to roll back the clock on women's advancement, and certainly not to promote a physically and emotionally taxing outcome in which women have as many children as biologically possible. Rather, the alternative to contraception is to respect biological asymmetry, heal the wound between the sexes, and expect more from men.

Authentic sexual equality requires that men understand with their bodies (as women do) the procreative potential of the sexual act. And this is exactly what natural methods of family planning do. By frequenting sex only during infertile times when a child is unwanted, men learn to coordinate their desires for intimacy with the natural rhythms of the female body. Feminist scholar and theologian Angela Franks notes that "[this] is unheard of in a society in which male desire appears to set the guidelines — especially in the 'hook-up' culture. Indeed, such a reorientation of desire is more revolutionary than any secular feminist project." Those who practice this approach to family planning report that its use tends to make husbands more sensitive to the sexual and emotional needs of their wives —

a sensitivity that many women have long found wanting.

And while the Catholic Church is a leading promoter of natural family planning, this isn't just good for Catholic women. Non-Catholics are increasingly discovering the advantages of a more organic, pharmaceutical-free method of family planning, as evidenced by the success of Toni Weschler's [Taking Charge of Your Fertility](#). Not only are natural methods becoming easier to use with the help of fertility monitors, online tools, and even apps, such methods help properly [trained physicians](#) to successfully detect and treat PMS, polycystic ovarian syndrome, infertility, and other medical conditions. Practiced faithfully — a caveat that applies to all methods of family planning — natural methods are just as effective as the Pill. As advocates often remark, this isn't your grandmother's rhythm method.

The feminist movement asked men for very little. We should ask them for much more. Though religious leaders can (and should) win the conscience-exemption argument on its own terms, we ought not hesitate to confront the administration's spurious public-health claim. The suffering borne by women and children in the wake of the contraceptive revolution should make us impatient to articulate that Catholic teaching is not against reason, modernity, or women. It's prophetic, pro-woman — and about time.

— [Erika Bachiochi](#) is an author whose most recent publications include [Women, Sex & the Church: A Case for Catholic Teaching](#) (2010). Catherine R. Pakaluk is an economist at the [Stein Center for Social Research](#) at [Ave Maria University](#).