

MALE CONTRACEPTION AS A STEP TOWARDS GENDER JUSTICE

Gender justice will only be achieved when women are finally free from all the big and small elements that have for long subjected them to a mere reproductive position. Male contraception is, thus, a vital step forward.

The 60's might have been one of the most important decades in human history. Far from what you will probably be thinking, such importance is not attributed to the Cold War events, the independence of old colonies or the landing of Apollo 11. These events were meaningful, there is no doubt about it. However, they pale in comparison to a concrete fact that revolutionized human life in an unprecedented way: the arrival of the first contraceptive pill.

Birth control has always been there. In its most primitive shape, we have natural remedies consisting in a mixture of herbs and leaves, but also pessaries made of bronze or other metals. These were used in order to block the cervix from inside, and by the way they were made, these could be painful or dangerous to women's health. It was not until a bit more forward in time that condoms

appeared, then elaborated by all kinds of different animals' parts.

Even though many of the old preventive methods were harmful or dangerous, women took that risk because, as it happens today, birth control makes women able to decide over their body, and thus, capable of pursuing different aspirations to the ones that have been for long attributed to femininity.

The spread of the use of condoms and its generalisation during the 19th and 20th century was an important step, but it had three main problems. First, they were not that reliable. Second, they were not a long-term method. And third, they made birth control reliant on men's willingness to use a condom, which is unfortunately not always the case. There was no such thing for

women to have full control over their bodies, until 1960, when the first contraceptive pills were born.

ENOVID, as they were called, were the first contraceptive pills to appear in the market. These were hormonal solutions, as the majority of them today, and were able to 'hack' women's reproductive system with the artificial introduction of hormones, altering the level of them up to the point that the ovulation halts.

Once in the market, they constituted a tremendous revolution in birth planning, but most importantly, they constituted a landmark for the women's liberation movement. Since their first appearance in the 60's, many brands have manufactured different models of pills, and other more advanced contraceptive methods have emerged too: such as the contraceptive injection, the ring, IUD or implants.

Several studies show that contraceptive methods have helped to improve women's lives significantly.

A report from the Guttmacher Institute that interviewed over two thousand women concluded that birth control helped half of those to have a better financial situation, complete their education or keep their jobs. But birth control does not only ameliorate women's socioeconomic situation, it brings health benefits as well. According to a study published in the US National Library of Medicine, contraceptive methods increase health-related quality of life amongst young girls.

These benefits are clearly noticed in Bangladesh, a place where contraceptives have been a total success. Not long ago, the majority of the Bangladeshi population lived in rural and poor areas, a scenario that negatively affected women, who had it difficult to get access to birth control methods and who were also ashamed to try because of cultural customs. Thus, most of them were early mothers, and devoted their life to domestic duties, something that also made them susceptible to health problems and low life



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expectancy. This changed during the 70's and 80's, when a door-step delivery of contraceptives program started. Making birth control methods accessible for women, and normalising their conversations, has had a very beneficial impact on Bangladeshi women's health, and it has also allowed them to engage in other activities like education -states a report by the World Bank.

Having seen the benefits of family planning, there is something that still looks bizarre. The technological and scientific advances that have brought long term and comfortable contraceptive methods have been only addressed to women. Whereas there are at least 8 long term methods for women in the market, there is only one suitable for men, vasectomy, which is not ideal due to its permanent effects.

Some lines above, it was exposed that contraceptives for women were necessary in order to give full control to women over their bodies. While this is true, it is also concerning that 60 years after the launching of the first modern contraceptive method, no laboratory has successfully produced any item for men. The burden of birth control is yet only carried by women, whether they want it or not. But, why is it a burden? And why should this burden be shared?

First of all, we must bear in mind that these products have a cost. In the majority of the countries, birth control methods are not covered by social security or state funding, and therefore have a high price for middle- and low-income women. A 2012 report from the Center for American Progress exposed that women spent on average a thousand dollars a year on the most popular contraceptive items, the pills and the ring. Moreover, the Guttmacher Institute, in another

conducted study, found that 29% of women had tried to save money by using their method inconsistently, which can have serious health consequences. This shows that birth control has a real impact on the financial situation of women, way more than it does on men.

Furthermore, these artificial tactics can have a big impact on human's health. In the past, when these kinds of technology were not that developed, it was a lot more risky. The alteration of the hormonal levels can result in nausea, acne, mood changes, weight gain and, in the worst of the cases, even blood clots and other cardiac problems. In fact, some years ago, there was a big controversy over the Bayer birth control pills 'YAZ', which received more than 20,000 lawsuits from women who claimed to have suffered from serious symptoms after taking them. From this and similar experiences in the past, companies have learnt to reduce the dose of hormones while keeping the same contraceptive effects, but some side effects remain inevitable.

Unlike what most people think, side effects are not just associated with hormonal methods, those who do not use hormones, like IUDs, can also have some downsides, although they are much fewer. Nowadays, there is almost no risk of major health issues, but not so long ago, there were some products that raised concerns. This is the case for the 'Dalkon Shields', a design of IUD that was commercialised during the 70s and 80's, and that was later linked to severe pelvic infections, causing at least four deaths.

Today we can say that serious effects are almost out of the question, but we cannot forget that to attain such a level of accuracy in birth control methods, women have had to be the guinea pigs of contraceptive science, paying a high price.

However, the fact that side effects are lighter today does not mean they have vanished. They, as I already mentioned above, still dictate women's lives now, and in some cases, they can be better or worse. Everybody is different, and there are some that suffer contraceptives' consequences more heavily. It is therefore essential for women's health that men are also capable of directly engaging in family planning, assuming birth control if their partner's body suffers with it.

All these burdens being exposed, it is extremely worrying that only one gender is alluded to by them considering that pregnancy is a phenomenon that involves both sexes. Not having birth control methods for men is one of the underlying reasons why our society often disregards men's responsibility in childbearing, a misconception that chains women to obsolete gender roles, and that therefore, must be combatted. Nevertheless, what is preventing laboratories worldwide from developing male contraceptives?

Although the official response is that the conducted trials have not been conclusive enough when it comes to the safety of men, the truth is that if the studies have not found the best technology yet it is because of lack of investment.

Companies and investors have not provided enough funding for intensive investigations to be carried out. José Ramón Serrano, president of the Spanish Contraceptive Foundation, said to InfoSalus that 15 years ago, two big companies decided to conduct the necessary studies to obtain a male contraception method. However, both ended up withdrawing from the task after initial market studies did not give them the commercial incentive they were looking for. Professor Richard Anderson, from the University of Edinburgh, told

BBC that the ongoing research has had to rely on charitable or academic funding, which explains why it is taking so long to get a result.

All in all, it is perceived by society that most men would be reluctant to purchase these products, mainly because they might think they are not responsible for birth control, or because it might decrease their 'manhood'. In spite of the fact that these trends do exist, as polls show that the majority of men would not consider contraceptive methods, they are progressively becoming more unpopular.

Another issue in the commercialisation of such products, which is also attributed to the unwillingness of most men to be actively involved in birth control, is the mistrust of women. A survey by Anglia Ruskin University exposed that 70 out of 134 interviewed women would worry that their partner could forget to properly use the method. It is understandable that this concern exists, as it is the woman who will be most affected by the consequences, but it is also true that in stable relationships, in which trust should not be an obstacle, male contraceptives could be very helpful.

With this, we see that apart from needing more resources devoted to the study of contraceptive technology for men, we need more awareness and education on the shared responsibility of contraception and childbearing. Gender justice will only be achieved when women are finally free from all the big and small elements that have for long subjected them to a mere reproductive position. Male contraception is, thus, a vital step forward.

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