

## LIFE ISSUES FORUM - Speaking for Myself

By *Erin Stoyell-Mulholland*

The Obama Administration has branded the HHS contraceptive mandate as a huge advancement for women's equality. In a 2012 presidential debate, when President Obama was asked how he was going to promote women's equality in the workplace, he responded by talking about the mandate and his efforts to ensure that all women have access to contraception. According to such statements, contraception leads to women's equality. The subtext is that if a woman wants to be successful or equal in the workforce, she must suppress her fertility, which is viewed as a hindrance to her goals and her fulfillment. Women are sent the message – that there is something wrong with their bodies that needs *correcting* if they are to be equal. To be equal to men, they must become like men.

This view is demeaning to women. We are being told that if we want to achieve equality, we should be contracepting. We are told that if we do become pregnant, whether planned or unplanned, somehow we are unsuccessful, in effect we have failed. If we choose to pursue motherhood, we are clearly not pursuing success – at least not as the government defines it.

If the government truly saw the choices for and against motherhood as equal, there would be more support for women who become pregnant. Contraception and abortion-inducing drugs and devices are offered for free through the HHS mandate, but not all pregnancy-related costs are covered. By only offering full coverage of options promoting the prevention or interruption of pregnancy, the government is sending a subtle but clear message about what it means to be a woman and what a woman's success looks like – and it doesn't include her fertility.

The Catholic Church's teaching reflects a much more beautiful and pro-woman view, upholding the dignity of women. The Church endorses Natural Family Planning or NFP, which allows couples to plan to avoid or achieve pregnancy. Natural Family Planning also helps identify women's health issues, helping them to find real healing and health management. NFP teaches women to understand their own bodies and to identify times of fertility. It does not require women to ingest potentially harmful hormones, risking their health, in order to attain so-called women's equality. The Catholic Church supports and upholds an authentic understanding and appreciation of women's whole being. The HHS mandate, by contrast, reduces and limits the healthy functioning of women's bodies, redefining fertility as a kind of disease.

To claim that contraception is key to women's success is demeaning to all women. We need to promote real resources to support women who are pregnant or parenting. Our efforts need to be focused on providing mandatory paid maternity leave, better prenatal care, better financial aid and medical care for women and children, and better, more affordable childcare. Those avenues support all women's success in the workplace.

The government claims to speak for all women and women's needs, but on this issue it does not speak for me. I am a woman, and I support the more than 300 plaintiffs that have filed suit against the HHS mandate. Rather than telling me that my success is contingent upon rejecting a part of my femininity, I wish the government would respect me for who I am and how my body naturally functions. All women deserve that respect.

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