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Why Aren't Faith Leaders Top Advocates for Birth Control an Op-Ed by Sarah Brown

In a country that is supposedly deeply concerned about jobs and the economy, to say nothing about the Middle East and Afghanistan, note that last week was devoted to the abortion wars. Although the argument had a somewhat new twist -- major sums of money involved -- little new ground was broken.

Which raises the questions: Is there any way to make progress in this area? And can faith leaders help point the way?

A true child of the 60s, I remember the great excitement that surrounded the early days of modern contraception in America. We all saw that being able to plan, space and limit pregnancies would be a game changer for women, allowing more to complete college, hold down full time jobs, and excel in countless areas and careers.

And today? The recent unpleasantness in Washington shows that the basic concept--and promise--of planning and controlling conception through the use of birth control is now so poorly understood that people who should (and probably do) know better routinely lump pregnancy prevention together with abortion. Clearly and obviously, they are not the same. Using birth control to avoid pregnancy in the first place is not the same as obtaining an abortion for an established pregnancy. They differ in timing, intent, and action, and to willfully blur the line between them is grossly inaccurate and unconscionable.

Yet elected officials and other national leaders do so repeatedly, with few challengers, as shown in last week's Congressional struggle over the Title X national family planning program--a 40 year old effort that has always focused on pregnancy planning/prevention and never on abortion. C-SPAN broadcast hours of many congressmen and some congresswomen cynically conflating pregnancy prevention with abortion. As I watched them debate defunding Title X, a cost saving program that has changed the lives of thousands of low-income women especially, I could only think how few of them would be where they now are had they--or their parents, spouses, staff and donors--been unable to control the number and spacing of their pregnancies through modern birth control.

The spectacle was all the more bizarre because those who oppose abortion should be the most ardent supporters of pregnancy planning and prevention--a stance that a few courageous pro-life Democrats are taking in the midst of the budget debates. But they are the exception. Well over 90 percent of abortions in this country are to women who themselves say that at the time they became pregnant, they did not want to. The lesson is obvious: help women prevent unplanned, unwanted pregnancy and the number of abortions drops. Immediately.

And here is where faith leaders have a major role to play. Many faiths actively oppose abortion, but far fewer oppose contraception, including the Mormon Church and many Evangelical communities as well. For example, in a 2009 Gallup of 1,000 evangelicals, 65% said that increasing access to contraception would help to reduce the number of abortions, and 90% said that the pill and condoms are "personally acceptable" methods of birth control. Yet very few faith leaders openly express support for modern contraception, even though that is one of the most powerful ways to reduce abortion.

Of course, some faith leaders, parents and others fear that making contraception widely available will encourage non-marital sexual activity, especially among teenagers (even though strong research in recent years has shown just the opposite). But to this exact point, recall a carefully crafted sentence from E.J. Dionne in the Washington Post a decade ago: "It is better for unmarried teens to avoid premature sex than to use contraception, but it's better to use contraception than to get pregnant." Amen, E.J., although note that last week the House also voted to zero out all funding for an evidence-based, cost-saving initiative to prevent teen pregnancy that stresses both delaying sex and providing good information and services.

In another sign of regression, basic understanding of birth control's effectiveness has also fallen on hard times. A recent survey that our group conducted found that 44 percent of single young adults ages 18 to 29 agreed that, "It doesn't matter whether you use birth control or not, when it's your time to get pregnant, you will." This surely qualifies as flat earth thinking. Fact free and simply wrong.

So, here we are: birth control and abortion are the same, contraception doesn't even work, and we'd rather have pregnant teens than a cost effective initiative to prevent teen pregnancy in the first place. How, for heaven's sake, does all this square with CDC's recent declaration that modern contraception is among the top ten public health advances of the entire 20th century - on a par with antibiotics, clean water and modern sanitation?

And in particular, why aren't faith leaders who oppose abortion the leading advocates for birth control? I ask them: Isn't your dislike of abortion greater than your dislike of contraception? Which is worse: sex with contraception, or sex with no contraception resulting in an unplanned pregnancy ending in abortion?