#ThanksBirthControl Day

There is so much for which to thank birth control, which came out in articles and social media on November 15. A study by the University of Michigan Institute of Healthcare Policy and Innovation (U-M IHPI) synthesizes the issue: When women have access to family planning, income rises and poverty drops.

A campaign in the Comoros promotes contraception “for healthier mothers and children.” In Ethiopia, “an innovative program – going door-to-door – helps young adults educate their peers about the benefits of delaying marriage and childbirth.” Senegal “has practically eliminated contraceptive shortages”, thanks to “integrated private-sector approaches into last-mile distribution to make the full range of modern methods of contraception accessible to all.” It’s also about changing attitudes, which Senegalese Imam Mousse Fall is trying to achieve. Expanding access to contraception – and abortion – is called “a best-buy for South Africa,” as a law to regulate the rights of doctors and nurses to recuse themselves from the services is debated. A major initiative in Nigeria by TCI aims to raise the contraceptive prevalence rate in five states to 36 percent, which will “have transformative impacts on communities and countries to promote health and prosperity.” The government of Zimbabwe is “committed to family planning services,” and is concerned about “low uptake of contraceptives is rural areas.” In Sierra Leone’s budget announcement, “providing uninhibited access to quality family planning information especially to adolescent girls” is a priority, “to empower girls to make free and informed decisions in all aspects of their lives. They can stay in school longer, earn a degree or establish a business which will ultimately lead to making their families, communities and country prosper.”

The Philippines is implementing a major family planning initiative, in part financed by a Canadian investment of $17.8M. Another $6.4M project will support family planning in Vietnam. There is also a nice story about a Haitian midwife serving new mothers with post-partum contraception knowledge and advice.

The Canadian government announced important changes that should go a long way to making medication abortion easier to manage for health-care providers, so why can’t the US follow suit? While birth control may be treated as a controversial item, an overwhelming majority of Americans actually support birth control. According to a poll of over 2,000 adults, 85 percent of Americans believe that birth control should be treated as an essential aspect of health care. Even in conservative Utah, “family planning coverage is good for taxpayers and families.”

Care launched a campaign to “oppose any cuts to international family planning programs;” By simply providing women the tools and education to plan and space their pregnancies, over a
third of deaths from pregnancy-related complications can be averted, saving thousands of lives every year.

Many people continue to consider easy access to contraception an invitation to bad behavior. In Malawi, the government stopped reproductive health NGOs from distributing condoms in schools, despite the country’s high HIV infection and teen pregnancy rates. South Sudanese refugees are shunning family planning efforts in camps, based on traditional beliefs in the value of having a large family. Groups in Uganda are balking at the health ministry’s proposal to lower the age of purchase of contraceptives to 15, “because it may harm their health and undermine cultural ideals.”

Something to look forward to: The 2018 International Conference on Family Planning in Kigali (12-15 November) announced its theme: “Investing for a Lifetime of Returns.”

**World Vasectomy Day**

November 17 marked the fifth World Vasectomy Day, “The world’s largest male-centric family planning movement.” Thousands of men took part in a global “vasectomy-thon”, including “1,000 medical providers in over 50 countries carrying out some 10,000 vasectomies.”

The day is only a part of a general movement to increase male participation in family planning, for which “for the first time ever, the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) and United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) have released a comprehensive service package focused on men’s sexual and reproductive health.” FP2020 released testimonials from men in DRC, Nepal, Kenya (2), and Bangladesh who are at the “forefront of efforts to expand family planning to members of their own gender.”

*Deve* column notes, “There is a gap in funding and research to engage men in family planning, which not only makes overall family planning objectives more elusive, but puts even greater stress and pressure on women to shoulder the burden of contraception on their own.” Another columnist affirmed, though, that “if the men were the biological carriers, the ones who in most every case have to adjust their lives, careers, mental and physical health and all financial responsibilities if circumstances demand – reproductive rights would be sacrosanct.”

**The Contraception Effect on Abortion Rates**

Access to contraception is tied to a reduction in the abortion rate. Another U-M IHPI study concludes Access to birth control through the Affordable Care Act (ACA) drives down the abortion rate. IPAS released a video re-affirming that Safe abortion saves lives. One in four cisgender women in the United States will have an abortion by the age of 45, but somehow the subject remains taboo. That silence can have deadly consequences, with the fear of returning to a pre-Roe v. Wade world in the US, and more restrictions elsewhere. Clearly, making abortions illegal does not stop them from happening. That hasn’t stopped anti-abortion campaigners from trying to close the last abortion clinic in the state of Kentucky.

Swaziland is trying to adopt laws allowing voluntary abortion, especially for women who have been raped or with children with birth defects and is finding resistance from some major church groups. In Malawi, “mainstream religious communities have endorsed the proposed Termination of Pregnancy Bill,” and the government is being urged to comply with the African Charter on the Rights of Women. Nairobi abortion providers complain of police harassment. In South Africa “stigma endangers women seeking legal abortions.”
The UN has called on El Salvador to stop jailing women for abortion. In Brazil, thousands hit the streets to protest a proposal for a total abortion ban. The Irish campaign to legalize abortion continues to gather support. Italian law allows abortion, yet “seven out of 10 gynecologists in Italy won’t terminate a pregnancy.” Abortion is also legal in India, but because of complex laws and stigma, “women seeking abortions are vulnerable to exploitation.”

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