

Economist: Contraceptive Culture Shifts Economic Power away from Women

By Kathleen Gilbert

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The contraception revolution has, contrary to its image, shifted wealth and power away from women and is in effect “deeply sexist,” according to one economist’s analysis.

In the essay, entitled “Bitter Pill” and appearing in the latest edition of *First Things* magazine, economist Timothy Reichert argues that the case against contraception can be effectively articulated “using the language of social science, which is the language of the mainstream.” Rather than framing the debate as “a case of faith and reason talking past each other,” those who oppose contraception can frame the debate in terms of the objective societal damage contraception causes.

According to Reichert, a major source of the problem is that contraception separates the traditional mating “market” into two separate markets: a market for marriage, and a market for free sex, created thanks to the significant cost reduction of sex uncoupled from pregnancy. But, he says, while this situation is not intrinsically bad from an economic standpoint, if there are “imbalances” in the two markets then “the ‘price’ of either marriage or sex tilts in favor of one or the other gender.”

Whereas in the past, he says, “the marriage market was, by definition, populated by roughly the same number of men as women, there is no guarantee that once it has been separated into two markets, men and women will sort themselves into the sex and marriage markets in such a way that roughly equal numbers of each gender will inhabit each market.”

As it turns out, Reichert maintains, women end up entering the marriage market in greater numbers than men, due to their natural interest in raising children in a stable household. Meanwhile, the economist notes that men, who can reproduce much later in life than women and are required by nature to invest much less in the childbearing process, face far fewer incentives to move from one market to the next.

“The result is easy to see,” writes Reichert. While women have higher bargaining power in the sex market as the “scarce commodity,” he writes, “the picture is very different once these same women make the switch to the marriage market”: “The relative scarcity of marriageable men means that the competition among women for marriageable men is far fiercer than that faced by prior generations of women.

“Over time, this means that the ‘deals they cut’ become worse for them and better for men.”

Marriage as an institution, he writes, subsequently loses its contractual character to foster women and their children, becoming instead something that is “more frail and resembles a spot market exchange.” The result is that “men take more and more of the ‘gains from trade’ that marriage creates, and women take fewer and fewer.”

Reichert enumerates some of the damaging fallout of this redistribution, including higher divorce rates, a housing market driven up by two-earner households, easier infidelity, and an increased demand for abortion.

Regarding the abortion increase, Reichert says that women who have invested in a future career will predictably “demand abortions” if contraception happens to fail. “The cost today of an unwanted pregnancy is not a shotgun wedding,” he writes. “Rather, the cost is the loss of tremendous investments in human capital geared toward labor-market participation during the early phases of one’s life. This increases the demand for abortions (which prevent the loss of that human capital).”

The impact on children, he contends, inevitably mirrors the impact on their mothers: “Given that women’s welfare largely determines the welfare of children, this redistribution has in part been ‘funded’ by a loss of welfare from children,” writes the economist. “In other words, the worse off are women, the worse off are the children they support. On net, women and children are the big losers in the contraceptive society.”

Reichert concludes that contraception’s redistribution of welfare is “profound—and alarming.”

“Societies are structured around many objectives, but one of their chief reasons to be is the protection of the weak,” he writes. “This means the old, the young, and childbearing and childrearing women. Contraception undermines this fundamental imperative, and, in so doing, undermines the legitimacy of the social contract.

“When the social fabric of a society is geared to move welfare from the weak to the strong, rather than the other way around, it cannot survive in the long run.”

<http://www.firstthings.com/feature-archive> or
<http://www.lifesitenews.com/ldn/2010/apr/10041510.html>