



Single 18 year-old female. Desperately seeking affordable and accessible contraception.

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I have very fond, nostalgic memories of my undergraduate years at Fordham University. But a few days ago a friend of mine sent me a NYT article on the struggles women at Fordham are having today to get access to contraception, and it brought back some not-so-happy memories of my own contraceptive struggles and those of my friends from our years on the campus of that Catholic school. Looking back, I now realize that finding contraception at Fordham was kind of like trying to find a suitable mate through a wanted ad. Even though you know it's out there, you can't believe what you have to go through to get it!

With the hindsight that I've gained, what stands out to me is not just the shocking extent of the restrictions we faced but also our impressive ability to circumvent the rules and forge out on our own to find ways to protect ourselves and our bodies. As a freshman, I started experiencing irregular periods and being too far away from home to make an appointment with my own gynecologist, looked to what seemed to be the next safest and least intimidating option - the Fordham student health center. The nurse practitioner told me that it was nothing to worry about, probably stress. If I wanted, she said, I could go on birth control to regulate my periods BUT she couldn't prescribe it for me. I felt so stuck, but realizing what I needed for my body, reluctantly called my mother, mumbled something about irregular.. you know that time of the month and we managed to get a prescription for me.

My friends and I learned through trial and error and word of mouth how to get the contraceptives we needed to keep ourselves healthy. We banded together, and friends helped friends and friends of friends. A few months into our freshman year, I went with my scared roommate, by cab, to an unfamiliar part of the Bronx in search of the emergency contraception (EC) she needed, having already learned the lesson that it wouldn't be available on campus. After waiting for over an hour, we were told she wouldn't be getting EC at that hospital either "due to their policy." I cannot be certain what policy it was, we didn't have the courage to ask, but my guess is that it was also a Catholic hospital. She gave up and just waited anxiously through the following weeks to see what would happen, but we put the experience to good use, telling others not to go THERE for help. Like me, after that she turned to her mother for a more long-term solution. Too uncomfortable to say she was sexually active, she mumbled about cramps and was able to get her mom to send her birth control every month. I also vividly remember a girlfriend warning me that if I were ever sexually assaulted, I should tell the ambulance to bring me to the hospital farther away from campus and not the closer Catholic one.

It was also during my freshman year that I earned the nickname "the condom girl," after becoming known for having an unending supply of condoms that I picked up from the HIV/AIDS outreach organization I volunteered for. I knew my friends, thwarted by the university policy banning contraception, were having unprotected sex, so I kept the condoms in my room and word definitely got around. My friends and class mates would knock on my door, approach me after class or at a bar to ask

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for condoms, and I always made sure to have some. But I soon learned that the university would not tolerate even a slightly more public effort to give students access to this contraband contraception. During a notorious binge-drinking weekend I put a manila envelope filled with condoms on my door, with the simple message: "Stay Safe." Within hours, my R.A. had removed the envelope, telling me that distribution of condoms was against school policy.

During my time at Fordham, I became a trusted and sought-after source of sexual health education and advice. I urged my friends and classmates to get tested for HIV, to use condoms and told them how to find EC. At the time, I just saw the need and did what it took. But now I can see how shocking our experiences were and I am angry about it! Why should students who are struggling to adjust to life away from home for the first time and a challenging academic curriculum have to jump through all those hoops simply to get what they need to stay healthy and prevent pregnancies that they are in no way prepared to handle? How did I, an 18 year old freshman, become the trusted source? Why weren't our R.A.s or the student health center providing this information and the contraceptive access we needed? When the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) [announced that it would not expand the religious employer exemption for contraceptive coverage](#), but would require religiously affiliated hospitals, social service agencies and schools to comply with this new rule, it was a great victory for women and for women's health. But Catholic universities are still fighting it, arguing that the decision violates their religious values.

Really? The Jesuit values that Fordham University claims to be guided by were one of the reasons I chose it as my college. It proffers itself as a university that is about nurturing the individual, and as the current President of Fordham says, about challenging students "to be bothered by the realization that [we] don't know everything and bothered by injustice." How can you teach me to honor those values and fight social injustice when you deny women the reproductive freedom to realize their full potential? When you establish policies that impose reproductive oppression? Fordham students still experience the same struggles for contraception that I faced over a decade ago, and recently created a contraception fund for students. Restricting women's access to contraception does not honor the Jesuit values and traditions that I still deeply respect.

Catholic universities claim that requiring them to provide students with access to contraception violates their religious conscience, but as my colleague wrote in the Raising Women's Voices for the Health Care We Need newsletter last month, [whose conscience matters anyway in birth control decisions?](#) The majority of my friends from Fordham were, and still are, practicing Catholics and I know we all agree that a woman's own conscience matters the most in matters relating to her health and life. Fordham may not value our opinions enough to change its policy, but our enthusiastic support -- and the support of millions of women like us -- for the HHS contraceptive coverage decision will help shore up this policy. Women speaking out about their support can make sure that right-wing politicians and Catholic bishops aren't able to take away the historic gains in health care access that we're making because of the new health reform law. [Please thank HHS for making the right call for women!](#)

Raising Women's Voices for the Health Care We Need is a national initiative founded by the Avery Institute for Change, MergerWatch Project of Community Catalyst and the National Women's Health Network.