



Celebrating *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965)

Landmark Supreme Court Decision Secured the Right to Use Birth Control

June 7, 2005 marks the 40th anniversary of the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965) which invalidated Connecticut laws prohibiting counseling and use of contraception. In recognizing a constitutional right to privacy, this landmark decision secured the right of married women to use contraception and laid the groundwork for widespread access to birth control for all American women.

***Griswold* Decision Recognizes Constitutional Right to Privacy**

An 1879 Connecticut law forbade any use of contraception or the assisting of anyone seeking contraception. Under this statute, Estelle Griswold, the executive director of the Planned Parenthood League of Connecticut, and the League's medical director, Dr. C. Lee Buxton, were arrested and convicted of providing contraceptive information to married couples. In *Griswold v. Connecticut* (1965), the Supreme Court found the Connecticut law unconstitutional and overturned the convictions. Importantly, the *Griswold* case recognized a constitutional right to privacy that served as the foundation for future decisions expanding reproductive rights. In 1972 in *Eisenstadt v. Baird* the Supreme Court invalidated a Massachusetts statute and thereby secured the right of unmarried women to access contraception services.

Landmark Case Revolutionizes American Life

In recognizing an individual right to privacy in family planning matters, the *Griswold* case revolutionized American life. Widespread use of birth control continues to be a critical component of basic preventive health care for women and has been the driving force in reducing national rates of unintended pregnancies, STDs and abortion. Virtually all women (98%) who have ever had intercourse have used at least one contraceptive method. Importantly, contraceptive use has led to dramatic declines in maternal and infant mortality rates and has vastly improved maternal and infant health. In addition, the ability of women to control fertility has afforded women the ability to achieve educational and professional goals making women a critical component of the nation's economic success. The numbers speak for themselves:

Since 1965 maternal and infant mortality rates have declined by more than two-thirds and women have gone from comprising one-third to nearly one half of the total U.S. labor force. In addition, being able to plan if and when to have children has allowed women to take advantage of education and career advancement opportunities. Since 1975 the percentage of women physicians has nearly tripled, from nine percent to 25 percent and women are expected to account for more than one-third of the medical workforce by 2010.

In 1999, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recognized the significant impact of birth control on American society by including family planning in their list of the “Ten Great Public Health Achievements in the 20th Century.” Despite this, access to contraceptive services, especially for young women and low-income women, is far from secure. Not only does the United States have one of the highest rates of unintended pregnancies and STDs among industrialized nations but too many women in this country do not have access to basic preventive health care. Today, almost 17 million women need publicly supported contraceptive care—a number which grew by 400,000 alone between 2000 and 2002 due to a rising uninsured population. Between 2001 and 2003, there was a 10% increase in the number of uninsured women age 15-44.

Celebrating the *Griswold* decision provides a perfect opportunity to reflect upon the importance of the *Griswold* decision, acknowledge the threats to contraceptive access still faced by many American women, and recognize the importance of expanding access to basic preventive care.