
A workshop on dis:connection in contraception in two parts

Part II: Responsibility, trust, contraception

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‘Contraception is about far more than just means and methods – it’s about decision-making, responsibility and justice,’ says Samara Relkovic.¹ Murmurs of agreement ripple through the rows. The participants, a diverse mix of experts, students and people from other fields, are busily taking notes, nodding in recognition or simply watching attentively as the two workshop leaders, Samara Relkovic and Ophelia Wach, deliver their opening speech for the workshop *Equal Contraception in Practice*.

The workshop, which took place at the Käte Hamburger Research Centre global dis:connect, focussed on a topic that is often swept under the rug, taboo or dismissed as a ‘women’s issue’: contraception. Over the course of eight hours, participants gained concrete knowledge from experts in various fields from sociology and gynaecology to activist organisations. With these diverse and interdisciplinary insights, participants engaged in discussion rounds on various aspects of contraception, developing both expertise and a better sense for the subject matter – a matter that most people will face sooner or later.

Fabian Hennig provided the first intervention, considering developments and research in contraception, such as hormonal and thermal methods, as part of his dissertation. The mood became more relaxed, and smiles spread across the participants’ faces as Hennig presented his first slide showing current common

¹ The text was originally published in German, and all quotations have been translated.



contraceptive methods for men, which turns out to be rather short: ‘Condom, vasectomy,’ it read. Fortunately, the list of contraceptive methods for men currently in testing is somewhat longer. Hennig explains various methods to the audience, from sperm flow blockage to vasectomy to hormonal and thermal approaches. A ‘pill for men,’ as Hennig put it (though without much enthusiasm for the term), seems to have stagnated in research. ‘Historically speaking, men weren’t really trusted to take the pill daily’ – followed by amused giggling that ran through the rows of participants. But then the atmosphere became more tense, with almost a hint of anger and frustration in the air, as Hennig explained that the side effects that might occur for men, which were identified while testing this pill, were considered ‘unreasonable’. The mood swings, depression and loss of libido were deemed too great a risk. ‘With male contraception, there are unrealistically high expectations – namely zero risk’, Hennig said. Further, the pressure in Germany to advance research in this direction is unfortunately not yet insistent enough. The almost palpable frustration of those present is interrupted – it’s time for the first breakout session.

In the first breakout session, participants with overlapping areas of interest came together. One or two experts also joined the discussion rounds to provide input, though even participants without particular expertise engaged enthusiastically in the exchange. Under the topic of *Where is the progress?*, one of the small groups exchanged opinions and thoughts relating to education: ‘What’s missing is the impetus to question the status quo and the entire system in such a way that you think: “What can we do differently?”’ said Louis Happel, a student and workshop participant. Gynaecologist Cornelia Höß also noted regarding education: ‘The topic of contraception should be part of young people’s upbringing and should be discussed equally’.

Fig. 01
(Photo: Samara Relkovic)

In schools and at home, contraception should not be taboo but actively addressed.

The goal of the group work – getting to know other workshop participants and consciously engaging with the topic of contraception while simultaneously gaining new knowledge – seemed to have been fully achieved in the first session.

The second presentation came from Louisa Lorenz, an education coordinator for sexuality and society. Her short presentation focussed on the topic of responsibility in contraception, which is famously one-sided: ‘Women are the main bearers of responsibility for pregnancy prevention’, Lorenz explained. The audience nodded in agreement. When Lorenz discussed one of her slides showing that men apparently massively overestimate their own engagement and responsibility regarding contraception, the listeners broke into brief, rather irritated laughter, as if the entire room were soberly shaking its head. The weight of responsibility for contraception that women usually shoulder became particularly clear when Lorenz listed the various steps necessary for the contraceptive method one by one or the preferred approach to be used. From going to the gynaecologist to constantly remembering to have the pill, condom or other means along when needed, the list is long. ‘Then you really notice why the burden is so high,’ said Lorenz, and the participants nodded in agreement.

The third breakout session also revolved around the theme of responsibility. In the context of gender-specific differences in contraception, a lively discussion took place in one of the groups, with the focus not only on responsibility, but also on trust: ‘Contraception is very much about trust. Regarding contraceptive methods for men, women are confronted with the question: “Can I trust my partner, even when the most serious consequences rest with me?”’ said Christoffer Voigt from the European Network for Shared Contraception. The group found that trust, along with a certain level of knowledge, education and, as banal as it may sound, money, are the most crucial prerequisites for contraception to proceed as fairly and equitably as possible between genders. But something else is needed too: communicating with each other, as the groups agreed. The negotiation of contraception is also based on compromises.

As diligently as the workshop participants discussed, took notes and thought, their concentration inevitably began to wane after eight hours. And yet everyone gathered for a final breakout session, this time on the topic of research and development. Even after almost eight hours of active participation, the energy was high, which is thanks to what Hennig reported in the ‘Research and Development’ group about ongoing research. Hennig talked about the barriers that are sometimes put in the way of developing male contraceptives. From lacking funds to lacking demand: research faces numerous restrictions. The conversation became



particularly charged when it returned to side effects. 'For other medical developments and research, the standard regarding side effects is not as high as for contraceptives for men', Hennig explained. A statement that revived everyone again.

After a day full of new knowledge, exchange, discussions and – as is to be expected with such a topic – anger and frustration, the workshop *Equal Contraception in Practice* came to an end.

Fig. 02
(Photo: Christoffer Voigt)

Despite visible exhaustion, it was obvious that all the education had stirred something in the participants' minds. And even though the issues surrounding contraception can certainly drive one to despair, there remains hope. As workshop leader Ophelia Wach put it, 'There is movement, even if there are always setbacks'.