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Opening Statement
Rep. Elijah E. Cummings

Democratic Steering and Policy Committee
Hearing on Women's Health

February 23, 2012

Thank you, Madame Leader, for hosting today's event. And thank you, Ms. Fluke, for coming here today to share the testimony you were banned from giving last week.

When Chairman Issa rejected your testimony before the Oversight Committee, he argued that his hearing was not about contraceptives and was not about women's reproductive rights. He said you are merely "a college student who appears to have become energized over this issue," that you are not "appropriate or qualified" to testify, and that you did not have "the appropriate credentials" to appear before the Committee. Obviously, everyone on this panel disagrees.

As I sat there and listened to the Chairman try to explain his position, I looked out on that panel of men, and I could not help but wonder: What credentials did they have to talk about the importance of the pill to the lives of women?

In my opinion, the Chairman committed a massive injustice by trying to pretend that the views of millions of women across this country are irrelevant to this debate. And that is what really offends people. Even if they did not agree with you, Ms. Fluke, that is no reason to silence you. That is no reason to deny you a voice in this debate or, literally, a seat at the table.

So I thank you for coming here today to finally give the other side, the side of millions of women across this country who want safe and affordable coverage for basic preventive health care, including contraceptives. I look forward to hearing from you today.

Let me add that I fully understand the religious component of this debate. My mother is a strong and independent woman who commands respect. She is also a woman of faith, and has been an independent pastor in a small church in Baltimore. I understand the importance of this issue to all women, including women of faith.

That is why I commend the Administration for the accommodation it made to allow women working at religiously affiliated organizations to obtain coverage for contraceptives directly through their health insurance companies.

Unfortunately, last week's completely one-sided hearing was not an isolated incident. Right now, a nationwide campaign is being conducted at both the state and federal levels to outlaw many forms of commonly used contraceptives.

These efforts include legislation and ballot initiatives in multiple states, as well as legislation proposed right here in the House of Representatives and the Senate intended to outlaw the pill, as well as other forms of contraceptives, such as IUDs.

This so-called "morality" legislation is intended to permit any employer, including for-profit private sector companies, to deny insurance coverage for contraceptives that are contrary to their religious beliefs, or even more broadly, to any of their "moral convictions."

Under this legislation, a CEO could decide to ban coverage of the pill for unmarried women employees, he could deny coverage for routine prenatal care and testing, he could deny coverage for medically prescribed IUDs—all in the name of undefined moral convictions.

Madame Leader, I am obviously not a woman, so I can never fully understand how central this issue is to the lives of millions of women across this country. But I am here today to support their right to exercise control over their lives and their bodies, and to make sure that they are never, ever denied a voice in this debate.

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