Recent political events reviving battle of sexes

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It was a heck of a way to celebrate International Women's Day.

On Thursday, both sides of the contraceptive debate were still getting over their hangover from the Rush Limbaugh "slut" and "prostitute" remarks, directed at a female law student who advocated for her right to contraception.

The week before that, it was the all-male panel testifying in front of Congress about contraception, while the same law student, Sandra Fluke, was not allowed to speak.

Before that, the Blunt-Rubio amendment was introduced that would have allowed employers to deny coverage for contraception as a matter of conscience.

And before that it was the Susan G. Komen for the Cure Foundation's decision to deny funding to Planned Parenthood, quickly reversed after an uproar by Planned Parenthood supporters.

Does all that activity add up to a war on women?

The head of a Florida anti-abortion group says no.

"The use of the phrase 'war on women' is utter nonsense. It's partisan rhetoric," said John Stemberger, president and chief counsel of the Florida Family Policy Council.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops also says no.

In recent statements regarding the Obama administration's mandate that all employers including church-affiliated institutions provide birth control through medical insurance, the bishops said it is not a question of women's rights, but a matter of the church's moral conscience, to deny certain types of health insurance coverage to women employees, whether Catholic or not.

But Evern Williams says yes.

"I am fired up and ready to go," the 61-year-old West Palm Beach resident said. "We've got to take a stand. There are more of us than there are of them. Let's get busy, ladies."

Health overhaul at core of fight

Like other women of her generation, Williams was chagrined to find that a battle she thought was fought and won 40 years ago was being waged again.
At the heart of this controversy is the Affordable Care Act of 2010.

"We should take every chance to remind people the government is going after the Catholic Church," Sen. Jim DeMint R-S.C., a member of the Senate tea party caucus, said last year.

DeMint, who favors repeal of the Affordable Care Act, said Republicans must "connect the dots" between health care reform and new regulations such as the recent one mandating coverage of contraception.

"Unless we repeal the whole thing, we're going to keep getting this dribble of things, one after another," DeMint said.

Attempts to repeal the Affordable Care Act, or to hobble it by adding conscience clauses for employers and insurers, are squarely aimed at limiting women's rights, said Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz of Weston, who heads the Democratic National Committee.

The Affordable Care Act forbids insurance companies from charging women higher premiums "just because we have the tendency to get pregnant," said Wasserman Schultz, who also pointed to attempts in Congress to pull funding for Planned Parenthood and other family planning services.

"Contraception is a debate that was settled before I was born," said Wasserman Schultz, who was born in 1966, a year after the landmark Supreme Court case of Griswold v. Connecticut, which ruled it was illegal for Connecticut to prohibit married couples from obtaining birth control. Griswold is considered a foundation case leading to the 1973 Roe v. Wade case, which established a woman's right to privacy regarding abortion.

Stemberger, a lawyer and strategist, is part of a nationwide movement to weaken the effects of Roe v. Wade through measures in state legislatures, including personhood amendments, pre-abortion ultrasounds, parental consent forms, waiting periods and other restrictions, a number of which have been proposed in the Florida Legislature in this and past legislative sessions.

"The real war from our perspective is against religious liberty and the rights of conscience," said Stemberger, adding that the term "mother's health" is vague enough to cover everything from a transient mood swing to deep depression.

"It's a case where the exception swallows the rule," Stemberger said. "The ultimate pro-choice argument is 'It's my body, I'll do what I want with it,' but there is another human being involved. The unborn child is that human being."

Limbaugh was 'tipping point'

A recent attempt to introduce a fetal personhood amendment in the Florida Legislature failed in part because those who seek to overturn Roe through a stronger case are in a legal standoff with their ideological opposites in the pro-abortion-rights movement, who are looking for a case that will be constitutionally more stable than Roe.

"If it doesn't work to say that men's domination of women is normal, natural and God wants it that way, then it must be done by force," said Jane Caputi, professor of women's studies, communications and multimedia at Florida Atlantic University.

Caputi equates the Limbaugh slurs of "slut" and "prostitute" as "the verbal equivalent of stoning."
She added that a proposed Virginia bill to use an intra-vaginal ultrasound probe before an abortion was "a sort of medical rape meant to shame and harass. And yet if someone mandated a vaccine, the same people would scream holy murder." Virginia's governor did not sign the intra-vaginal ultrasound requirement and instead returned the bill to the state assembly to rewrite it as an abdominal ultrasound requirement similar to a law Florida passed last year.

Debbie Martinelli, 64, of West Palm Beach, founded on Facebook a group called Unite Against the War on Women and plans to join a nationwide protest April 28.

"Rush Limbaugh was the major tipping point," Martinelli said. "If he had not done that, I'm not sure enough people would have gotten angry and active. Enough is enough."

Describing herself as a Christian and an independent voter, she sees a no-win-for-women underside to the discussion of women's reproductive rights, exemplified by a Wisconsin state senator's recent introduction of a bill that would characterize "non-marital parenthood" as contributing to child abuse and neglect.

"They don't want you to get birth control, they don't want you to get an abortion, and now they're going to label it child abuse if you're a single mother," Martinelli said. "What am I missing here?"