



The Pill Really Can Be Mightier Than the Sword: A Response to Recent Commentaries



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Abstract

We appreciate the four commentaries that add new material and fresh perspectives to our article “*The pill is mightier than the sword*.” In emphasizing the role of voluntary family planning and girls’ education as achievable strategies with a potential to make the world a more peaceable place, we did not mean to oversimplify or disregard the intrinsic complexity of human conflict. On the whole, the commentators support and add to our thesis, although we question Pillai and Ya-Chien Wang’s suggestion that we may have overstated the unique human predisposition to kill our own species. We present additional data on male team aggression.

Keywords: Family Planning, Girls’ Education, Terrorism, Population

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We value the four commentaries on our paper (*The pill is mightier than the sword*), and we appreciate the richness of the comments and depth of knowledge of the commentators. Ilsa Lottes¹ added data we had not seen ourselves about the correlation between high birth rates, a youth bulge and conflict and terrorism. At the same time, along with most of the other commentators, Lottes rejects “ideas that emphasize only one factor as a major cause of any social phenomenon.” We also accept that generalization, and apologize if we failed to give it sufficient prominence when telling our own particular story. Roger-Mark De Souza² adds two valuable perspectives to our basic argument. He documents how the defense community is beginning to recognize the role the autonomy of women can play in facilitating peace. Secondly, De Souza reminds us of the tribal congressional politics in Washington that continually undermine programs aimed at giving women the family planning choices they need and deserve. We see this political trend as growing out of the same patriarchal male drives that leads to team aggression, warfare and terrorism.³ Ultimately, patriarchy is an expression of the male reproductive agenda: a woman’s ability to control her own fertility is perceived as threatening to a man’s competitive drive. Perhaps the greatest patriarch of all time was the Mongol Emperor Genghis Khan (died 1227). He raped the women he captured and modern gene analysis suggests that most plausible explanation of the fact that 16 million men in the contemporary world have identical Y chromosomes is that they are linear descendants of Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan is an unfortunate role model for any contemporary politician, but his story underscores the need to reframe discussions of war, terrorism and the autonomy of women.

We are grateful to Raymond Gilpin⁴ for adding the perspective of a Defense University security expert to the debate. We certainly accept his insistence that, “Efforts to modify the population structure would only be effective if

they are conducted in concert with initiatives that improve governance, promote broad-based economic welfare, and guarantee basic human rights for all.” We also see how “Representative governance is a central element of this strategy.” The problem, however, is that Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Yemen and parts of the Sahel (which are the focus of our research) are many decades – perhaps even longer – from a fully functioning representative government. Meanwhile, making family planning available but can, and should, begin immediately.

We also appreciate Vijayan Pillai and Ya-Chien Wang’s support for way educating women contributes to peace.⁵ We accept the role of culture in modulating both male and female aggression, but we feel they overstate the case. We are a uniquely violent species. Only a handful of mammals systematically and deliberately kill other members of our own species. Fortunately, measured as a ratio of deaths from violence in the total population, the twentieth century was probably one of the least violent times on history.⁶ Among preliterate groups living a Stone Age way of life in New Guinea, 20% to 30% of men were killed by other men.^{7,8} Among the Yanamamo in South America, four out of 10 adults have participated in killing another human being and 60% of this 40% have been involved in more than one person. The 9/11 attacks killed one in 100 000 Americans.

Among hyenas, which also seem to engage in same species killing, it is the females who are the aggressors. Women will fight bravely to defend themselves or their children, but in the whole sweep of human history there is not one example of women banding together to spontaneously attack and kill other human beings – something that men have done countless times during the whole course of human history. We should be grateful that we live in a relatively peaceful world. The Islamic State and *Boko Haram* are the default position for human behavior. While such violence was once widespread it is now localized.

It is important to avoid the mistake made by UNESCO in the 1986 *Saville Statement*⁹ when many psychologists, anthropologists and sociologists bought into a statement that, “It is scientifically incorrect to say that war or any other violent behavior is genetically programmed into human nature.” Shortly after that statement Jane Goodall discovered that our closest relative – chimpanzees – also engage in same species killing, and up to one third of adult chimps are killed by other chimps.¹⁰ While emphasizing our brutal heritage, we also want to emphasize that we are not condemned to follow our violent predispositions. We are grateful to the commentators and hope that together we can contribute to an important debate on helping women to wage peace.

Ethical issues

Not applicable.

Competing interests

Authors declare that they have no competing interests.

Authors' contributions

MP and AG contributed equally to the writing of this article.

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