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Household Bargaining and Excess Fertility: An Experimental Study in Zambia

By NAVA ASHRAF, ERICA FIELD, AND JEAN LEE

We posit that household decision-making over fertility is characterized by moral hazard since most contraception can only be perfectly observed by the woman. Using an experiment in Zambia that varied whether women were given access to contraceptives alone or with their husbands, we find that women given access with their husbands were 19 percent less likely to seek family planning services, 25 percent less likely to use concealable contraception, and 27 percent more likely to give birth. However, women given access to contraception alone report a lower subjective well-being, suggesting a psychosocial cost of making contraceptives more concealable. (JEL C78, D12, D82, I31, J13, J16, O15)

The ability to control fertility through modern contraception is one of the most important technological developments of the twentieth century, with potentially broad social and economic consequences for women and society. Yet despite the fact that modern methods of birth control have been around for almost half a century, many countries still report substantial unmet need for contraceptives and high rates of unwanted births.¹ For instance, the overall rate of unmet need in sub-Saharan Africa was estimated to be 27 percent in 2006 (Westoff 2006). Although unwanted births are often treated as evidence of a supply constraint, the fact that high rates of unwanted births occur in settings in which birth control is readily and cheaply

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¹Unmet need is defined as the difference between the share of women at risk of pregnancy who report wanting to space or discontinue childbearing and the share of women who report currently using a contraceptive method. Unwanted births are defined either, using panel data, as births to women who reported within the past two years that they did not wish to become pregnant within the next two years, or, using cross-sectional data, as births to women who report as past that the birth was unwanted.

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