

RELIGIOUS AMERICANS SPEAK OUT

Pro-Choice

Global Gag Rule Puts Women's Lives at Risk Religion's Support Aid for Family Planning

More than 500,000 women worldwide die every year from pregnancy-related causes, including clandestine abortions. Family planning can help healthy families. Yet some governments and far-right groups in the United States and other countries are blocking reproductive health care and undermining women's ability to make reproductive decisions. People of faith demand an end to this deadly injustice.

"Gag Rule" Harms Women

The United States and other industrialized countries provide family planning assistance to the world's poorest countries, where high birth rates contribute to poverty and the death of women and children. Countless women and teenagers have avoided unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortions because of this assistance. As Senator Barbara Boxer (CA) has said, "By providing family planning counseling and care, by working to increase child survival rates, by improving maternal health and preventing the spread of HIV/AIDS and other infectious diseases, we help save lives." The reinstatement of the "Global Gag Rule" is having a chilling effect on these services.

The draconian gag rule, also known as the Mexico City Policy, restricts foreign non-governmental organizations that receive U.S. family planning funds in three ways. First, they may not use their own money to provide legal abortion services. Second, they may not use their own money to advocate for changes in the abortion laws of their own country. Third, they may not use their own money to provide full and accurate medical information about legal

abortion services to their patients, in clear violation of medical ethics.

Since 1973, U.S. law has barred any U.S. funding for abortion services. Yet with the reinstatement of the gag rule, clinics that so much as mention abortion risk losing their U.S. aid for family planning. The real losers are the women who rely on the clinics for family planning services. Many clinics are being forced to limit their services or simply close their doors. Without their services, there are more unintended pregnancies and more abortions, often illegal and dangerous.

What Religions Say

The United Methodist Church:

"Far from being pro-life, restricting international family planning funds...only ensures that more poor women and their children will perish." *James Winkler, Executive, General Board of Church and Society, February 2002*

Presbyterian Church (USA):

"We affirm our current Presbyterian Church (USA) policy stating that the church opposes legislative efforts that reduce foreign aid for comprehensive family planning programs." *214th General Assembly Committee on Peacemaking and Global Issues, 2002*

Reform Judaism:

"As advocates of family planning and defenders of a woman's right to choose, we must make our voices heard on this crucial issue and urge the President to fully fund UNFPA." *Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, May 24, 2002*

United Church of Christ:

"The United Church of Christ General Synod has spoken for more than 30 years in support of women's reproductive choices and urged UCC members to resist attempts to erode or negate such choices. The global situation is dire and will become far worse if UNFPA funding is eliminated." *The United Church of Christ, January 16, 2002*

“Chilling Effect” on Post-Abortion Care

A little-known provision in the gag rule allows post-abortion care. But the confusion and misinformation about this policy has stymied health care providers. Family planning clinic directors in Egypt, as just one example, say they are afraid to offer care to women who have had unsafe abortions because they fear losing their U.S. funding. Some clinics have even refused to have certain equipment for post-abortion examinations on hand because they might be accused of performing abortions. Ironically, post-abortion care and counseling could help reduce abortion.

Every year, 78,000 women die as a result of unsafe abortions. One fourth are teenagers ages 15-19. Women often refuse to go to government clinics for complications from illegal abortions because they fear arrest. Their only option may be private clinics that receive U.S. funds. Women’s lives depend on clear policies allowing post-abortion care.

Anti-Family Planning

While the gag rule is being promoted as anti-abortion, it is really anti-family planning. The most effective and acceptable way to reduce abortion is to increase access to high-quality contraceptive services. The gag rule does the opposite—by prohibiting U.S. family planning assistance from going to hospitals and clinics that also provide abortions or even abortion-related information, it misses those most in need.

Abortion Laws Liberalized

Governments around the world are liberalizing abortion laws. More than half of all women in the developing world live in countries where abortion is broadly legal; U.S. family planning support now goes to 35 countries in which abortion is legal under circumstances broader than allowed under the gag rule. The gag rule, in effect, ignores local law and imposes a “U.S.” position on abortion—one that does not, however, reflect either U.S. law or U.S. public opinion.

“Golden Rule”

The Global Democracy Promotion Act, introduced by a large, bipartisan coalition in the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, aims to overturn the gag rule. It would allow foreign family planning groups to continue to provide legal family planning services without needlessly restricting use of their own funds. It also protects them from being forced to give up their right to free speech in order to receive U.S. funding.

Representative Nita Lowey (NY), in introducing the legislation with Senator Boxer, called this the “Golden Rule” bill. She referred to the fact that both free speech and access to abortion are constitutionally protected rights in the U.S. and yet we are exporting the opposite message overseas.

What You Can Do

Contact your representative and senators. Tell them you support full funding for international family planning and oppose the global gag rule.

Source: Alan Guttmacher Report on Public Policy, June 2001, “Global Gag Rule: Exporting Antiabortion Ideology at the Expense of American Values,” by Susan A. Cohen.

The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice, founded in 1973, is the national organization of pro-choice people of faith. The Religious Coalition—comprising Protestant, Jewish, and other denominations and faith groups, the Clergy for Choice Network, and state affiliates throughout the country—works to ensure reproductive choice through the moral power of religious communities. All programs seek to give clear voice to the reproductive health issues of people of color, those living in poverty, and other underserved populations.

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