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2008 Legislative Trend: Abortion Harms Women

Women who choose to end their pregnancies do so because they take parenthood, family obligations, and their health seriously. But anti-choice lawmakers paint them as victims who are unable to make critical decisions about their reproductive health. During the 2008 legislative session, three states—[Oklahoma](#), [Missouri](#), and [Kansas](#)—considered anti-abortion bills that claim to protect women from being coerced into having abortions. To that end, these omnibus bills imposed burdensome consent requirements, compelled women to view ultrasounds before getting abortions, and penalized doctors. (This month’s Glossary term: Omnibus Bill). Oklahoma’s bill became law, while Missouri’s only passed the House, and Kansas’ was vetoed by the governor.

All three bills reflect a significant shift in anti-choice strategy, from a focus on protecting the “unborn” to the unsupported claim that [abortion harms women](#) emotionally and physically. According to this logic, women can never truly choose to end a pregnancy because abortion violates their inherent maternal instincts. If a woman seeks an abortion, she is either deceived or coerced.

This new tactic was used in 2006 in South Dakota when the legislature passed a ban on almost all abortions. (Voters subsequently rejected the law in a referendum.) Of the [17 abortion bans](#) introduced by states in 2007, six argued that abortion should be outlawed to protect women. Even the United State Supreme Court adopted the language when it upheld a [federal abortion ban](#) in April 2007: “It seems unexceptional to conclude some women come to regret their choice to abort the infant life they once created and sustained,” the Court wrote in its majority opinion.

Women make important decisions for themselves and their families, at work and at home, every day. What hurts their well-being is not access to abortion, but being prevented from making their own—sometimes difficult—decisions about what happens to their bodies and their lives. The Center continues to work with allies to develop effective litigation and advocacy strategies that assert a woman’s basic right to decide for herself whether or not she should have a child.



“...we expect the Council to address the full expression of women’s rights, including reproductive rights, in its next sessions. The integrity of this process is at stake.”

– Ximena Andión Ibañez
International Advocacy Director

Short Shrift to Reproductive Rights

In the Philippines, millions of women are denied access to modern contraception. Up to 200,000 illegal abortions take place in Poland every year. In India, some 117,000 women die annually from pregnancy-related complications—more than anywhere else in the world. And Brazil accounts for nearly a quarter of the maternal deaths in Latin America. These are clear human rights violations, but the United Nations Human Rights Council ignored them when it reviewed India, Poland, Brazil and the Philippines during the first-ever Universal Periodic Review in April.

The new review process has the potential to be an effective tool for monitoring human rights around the world. By 2011, it is supposed to review all 192 UN member states, regardless of what human rights treaties they have ratified. But the Council is a political body in which, rather than being evaluated by human rights experts, states’ governments review each others’ policies, thus increasing the risk that they will selectively criticize or ignore human rights violations on the basis of purely political agendas.

The April session of the Universal Periodic Review set a disappointing precedent. Reproductive rights and health issues were mostly absent from discussions, as were other key women’s rights issues. Non-governmental organizations were sidelined, with few opportunities to engage governments. Yet the Holy See was able to make an official recommendation to the Philippines that it should protect life from the moment of conception.

“States, even progressive ones, were not willing to talk about, or didn’t prioritize, reproductive rights, and I think this is partly due to political pressure from conservative governments and the Holy See,” said **Ximena Andión Ibañez**, the Center’s International Advocacy Director. “We know that this is a process under construction, and we expect the Council to address the full expression of women’s rights, including reproductive rights, in its next sessions. The integrity of this process is at stake.”



Glossary: Omnibus Bills

An omnibus bill packages together several measures or laws into one bill. All the measures are then passed or rejected by a legislature in a single vote. Anti-choice lawmakers often use omnibus bills to push for a number of restrictions that, on their own, would have limited impact, but together create a significant barrier for women seeking abortions. For example, a recent anti-abortion bill in Kansas included provisions that would have required women to provide a written reason for seeking an abortion, would have required minors to show identification and proof of state residency before getting an abortion, and would have allowed siblings, parents, and grandparents to go to court to stop a woman from having an abortion if she is more than 21 weeks pregnant. The bill was passed by the legislature but vetoed by Governor Kathleen Sebelius on April 21.



Khiara Bridges

“As the Center moves forward with an ambitious strategic plan, we have created four new positions to help implement the plan’s vision.”

Joining the Center

As the Center moves forward with an ambitious strategic plan, we have created four new positions to help implement the plan’s vision. A Chief Operating Officer will join the [Center’s management team](#) to supervise internal operations and facilitate cross departmental work. **Laura McQuade**, a seasoned executive with extensive financial, operations, and planning, experience will join the Center as its first COO on June 2nd.

Cassandra Ryan starts work as the Center’s new Director of Major Gifts on June 16th. With an impressive background in fundraising and donor relations, Ryan will be an excellent addition to the Center’s strong Development team. She will work to expand the fundraising capacity of the Center by helping secure major individual donors.

Khiara M. Bridges has been selected as the first [Center for Reproductive Rights-Columbia Law School Fellow](#). This program is the first in the Center’s initiative to promote legal scholarship and teaching on reproductive rights as human rights. Already valedictorian at Spelman College and a graduate of [Columbia Law School](#), Bridges recently defended her doctoral dissertation in anthropology. She has focused her academic work on how reproductive rights law and biomedical ethics intersect to reinforce racial inequalities in the U.S.

The Center is also recruiting a [Human Rights Researcher](#) for the Domestic Legal Program. This person will develop, design, and implement fact-finding reports on reproductive rights and health issues in the United States.

NEWS YOU MAY HAVE MISSED

[Center Declares Victory Against Virginia Abortion Ban](#)
[Kansas Supreme Court Affirms Patients’ Privacy Rights](#)
[Council of Europe Takes Groundbreaking Step](#)

SPEAKING ENGAGEMENTS

June 12 -14: Cynthia Soohoo, “The U.S. and Human Rights at Home,” American Constitution Society for Law and Policy National Convention, Washington, D.C.

June 13: Janet Crepps, “Legislative and Litigation Update,” National Network of Abortion Funds’ Annual Organizing Summit, Bryn Mawr, PA

June 16-17: [Christina Zampas](#), “Russia’s International Human Rights Obligations in the Area of Sexual and Reproductive Health,” Russian Family Planning Association and the [Swedish Association for Sexuality Education](#) Conference, Moscow, Russia