

August 12, 2014

President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President,

We, representatives of 80 undersigned organizations, write to urge you to take immediate action to correct the unduly restrictive implementation of the Helms Amendment by issuing guidance to USAID and the State Department to allow abortion services in the cases of rape, incest, and life endangerment. Such action is necessary to safeguard the lives and health of women in developing countries served by U.S. foreign assistance. We applaud the unprecedented steps taken by your administration to establish a U.S. foreign policy that puts women and girls at its center. We ask that you continue to build on this momentum.

The Helms Amendment prohibits the use of U.S. foreign assistance funds for “the performance of abortions as a method of family planning.” However, your Administration continues to implement this law as a complete ban on all abortion-related services, including support for abortion in cases of rape, incest, and life endangerment. In countries where abortion is legal in such cases, this misapplication of U.S. law has created barriers to women seeking the care they need. By limiting access to safe and legal abortion, the Administration’s interpretation of the Helms Amendment leads to preventable deaths and injuries among the world’s most vulnerable women and violates their fundamental human rights. This implementation is out of line with other U.S. policies regarding coverage for abortion in these cases and goes far beyond what is required by this law: abortions in the cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment are not abortions “as a method of family planning.”

Women around the world face high rates of gender-based violence, limited access to trained health-care providers, and financial and geographic barriers to access comprehensive reproductive health care, including safe and legal abortion. Every year, an estimated 287,000 women die from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth – 13% of those deaths are the result of unsafe abortion. Close to half of those who die from unsafe abortion are younger than the age of 25. While no single policy can address the broad challenges that affect women in developing countries each day, the Administration can take an important step by correcting its implementation of the Helms Amendment. Removing this improper barrier to health care will help to ensure that women and girls who experience a life-endangering pregnancy, or a pregnancy resulting from sexual violence, are offered the full range of safe and legal options through U.S. health and humanitarian aid programs.

We ask you to act immediately to end the harmful and excessively restrictive implementation of the Helms Amendment by issuing guidance to instruct USAID and the State Department to allow abortion services in the cases of rape, incest, and life endangerment. Our organizations and a myriad of supporters stand ready to support you. President Obama, you are a champion for women’s health and human rights and we are counting on you to take action now on this important issue.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Youth
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
American Civil Liberties Union
American Humanist Association
Amnesty International USA
Anti-Defamation League
Association of Reproductive Health Professionals
Black Women's Health Imperative

Breakthrough
Catholics for Choice
Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE)
Center for Reproductive Rights
Center for Reproductive Rights and Justice at UC Berkeley School of Law
Center for Women Policy Studies
Disciples for Choice (a caucus of the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) USA and Canada)
Disciple Justice Action Network
DKT International
EngenderHealth
Family Care International
Feminist Majority Foundation
General Board of Church and Society, The United Methodist Church
Global Fund for Women
Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS
Gutmacher Institute
Gynuity Health Projects
Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America
Healthy Teen Network
Human Rights Watch
Ibis Reproductive Health
Institute for Science and Human Values, Inc.
International Center for Research on Women
International Gay and Lesbian Human Rights Commission
International Planned Parenthood Federation-Western Hemisphere Region
International Women's Health Coalition
IntraHealth
Ipas
Jewish Women International
John Snow, Inc. (JSI)
Law Students for Reproductive Justice (LSRJ)
Management Sciences for Health
Marie Stopes International
Medical Students for Choice
Methodist Federation for Social Action
NARAL Pro-Choice America
National Abortion Federation
National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum
National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women's Health (NPWH)
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Center for Transgender Equality
National Coalition of American Nuns
National Council of Jewish Women
National Family Planning and Reproductive Health Association
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health
National Network of Abortion Funds
National Organization for Women
National Partnership for Women & Families
National Women's Health Network
National Women's Law Center
Pathfinder International
Physicians for Reproductive Health
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Population Action International
Population Connection Action Fund
Population Council

Population Institute
Population Services International
Public Health Institute
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
Religious Institute
Reproductive Health Technologies Project
Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS)
Sierra Club
Union for Reform Judaism
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
Unitarian Universalist Association
Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation (UUWF)
URGE: Unite for Reproductive & Gender Equity
Venture Strategies Innovations (VSI)
Women's Information Network
Women's Refugee Commission