

July 22, 2015

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

Dear Mr. President,

On behalf of 71 undersigned organizations, we have repeatedly called on you to correct a longstanding misinterpretation of the Helms Amendment to allow access to abortions in U.S. foreign assistance programs for women who become pregnant as a result of rape or incest, or face a life-threatening pregnancy. U.S. policy should promote women's health and lives, not turn them away from care when they need it the most. During your upcoming travel to Kenya and Ethiopia, we request that you meet with the U.S. government's partners who are implementing health and gender-based violence programs on the ground, their in-country civil society counterparts, and the women they serve. These conversations would afford you an opportunity to see and understand why this correction is urgently needed firsthand, and how this fix can be implemented. The failure to end the overly restrictive implementation of the Helms Amendment leads to preventable deaths and injuries among the world's most vulnerable women and violates their fundamental human rights. This matter deserves your serious attention.

The Helms Amendment permits the use of U.S. foreign assistance funds for abortions that are not undertaken "as a method of family planning." However, your Administration continues to implement this law as a complete ban on all abortion-related services—even in the cases of rape, incest, or when a pregnancy threatens the life of the woman. In countries like Kenya and Ethiopia, where abortion is legal in some or all of these cases, this misapplication of U.S. law is a primary barrier to women seeking the care they need. This practice is also 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 should not be considered abortions "as a method of family planning" under any reasonable definition.

This issue is urgent because women are dying. Unsafe abortion is a key driver of maternal mortality, and Kenya and Ethiopia are among the 24 USAID priority countries where 70 percent of maternal deaths worldwide occur. While we have nearly halved maternal mortality over the past two and a half decades, 289,000 women worldwide still die each year as a result of pregnancy and childbirth—13 percent of which result from unsafe abortion. As maternal mortality has declined, disparities have become more apparent. The risk of death is disproportionately highest among the most vulnerable women in the poorest of nations. Similarly, rates of gender-based violence are unacceptably high in these two countries—one in three women—and shockingly, 1 in 3 girls under the age of 18—experience sexual violence. Studies have shown that Ethiopia has one of the highest rates of violence against women in the world. It would be a missed opportunity not to visit a U.S.-supported integrated service delivery facility where women's lives could be saved from a change in this harmful policy.

President Obama, your leadership has led to many important gains for women's health and human rights in the U.S. and around the world. We ask you once again to lead by acting immediately to end the incorrect—and harmful—implementation of the Helms Amendment.

Sincerely,

Advocates for Youth
American Association of University Women (AAUW)
American Civil Liberties Union
American Humanist Association
American Jewish World Service
Amnesty International USA
Anti-Defamation League
Association of Reproductive Health Professionals
Black Women's Health Imperative
Catholics for Choice
Center for Health and Gender Equity
Center for Inquiry
Center for Reproductive Rights
Center for Women Policy Studies
Colorado Organization for Latina Opportunity and Reproductive Rights (COLOR)
Disciples for Choice
Disciples Justice Action Network
EngenderHealth
Family Care International
Feminist Majority
Girls Health Ed
Global Fund for Women
Global Health Council
Global Youth Coalition on HIV/AIDS (GYCA)
Hadassah, The Women's Zionist Organization of America, Inc.
Ibis Reproductive Health
In Our Own Voice: National Black Women's Reproductive Justice Agenda
Institute for Science and Human Values, Inc
International Center for Research on Women
International Planned Parenthood Federation
International Women's Health Coalition
IntraHealth International
Ipas
John Snow, Inc. (JSI)
JWI
Management Sciences for Health
Marie Stopes International-US
Medical Students for Choice
Methodist Federation for Social Action
NARAL Pro-Choice America
National Abortion Federation
National Asian Pacific American Women's Forum (NAPAWF)
National Center for Lesbian Rights
National Council of Jewish Women
National Family Planning & Reproductive Health Association
National Latina Institute for Reproductive Health

National LGBTQ Task Force
National Network of Abortion Funds
National Organization for Women
National Partnership for Women & Families
National Women's Health Network
PAI
Pathfinder International
Physicians for Reproductive Health
Planned Parenthood Federation of America
Population Connection Action Fund
Population Council
Population Institute
Populations Services International
Positive Women's Network - USA
Public Health Students for Choice
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice
Religious Institute
Reproductive Health Technologies Project
SisterLove
Unitarian Universalist Association
United Church of Christ, Justice and Witness Ministries
United Methodist General Board of Church & Society
WIN (Women's Information Network)
Women Thrive Worldwide
Women's Refugee Commission