

The Global Gag Rule: Finally a Thing of the Past



A 14-year-old Afghan mother receives contraceptive pills during a visit to her midwife. She believes her husband will be supportive of their use once she has explained to him the benefits of family planning. Photo: Emily J. Phillips/MSH, Courtesy of Photoshare

Since 1965, the United States has been the leader in international family planning assistance. For over four decades, American funding and technical expertise have prevented millions of maternal deaths and unwanted pregnancies around the world. But the religious right's objection to abortion has prompted two presidential administrations to curb their funding for international family planning programs, with devastating consequences.

Unsafe Abortion

More than 19 million unsafe abortions occur each year in countries where abortion is illegal or difficult to obtain. About 70,000 of them result in the death of the woman, usually through hemorrhage. Education and modern contraceptive services can help women in developing countries to make responsible decisions about their sexual and reproductive

health—decisions that could help them avoid an unwanted pregnancy in the first place.

A Dangerous Policy

However, women often have nowhere to turn when they need answers to their family planning questions because so many health clinics have closed in recent years. Beginning in 2001 (and ending in January 2009 with the inauguration of President Obama), funding from the United States was provided to foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on a conditional basis. No funding was given to organizations that perform, discuss, or refer a client to another abortion provider. Organizations were also prohibited from lobbying for increased abortion rights in their respective countries. If they refused to comply with these stipulations, their funds were revoked, often resulting in the closure of clinics. This policy would

be illegal if it were applied to NGOs in the United States because it limits free speech.

Known amongst opponents as the Global Gag Rule (although formally named the Mexico City Policy), this conditional funding was a central tenet of the United States international family planning approach for the past eight years. It first took effect under President Reagan. U.S. health officials wrote the repugnant policy after participating in the United Nations International Conference on Population in Mexico City in 1984. President Clinton reversed the policy on his first day in office in 1993. On *his* first day in office in 2001, President Bush reinstated the policy. This year, President Obama reversed the Gag Rule as one of his first presidential actions.

Conflict of Interests

In many cases, the Gag Rule created a dilemma for organizations in developing countries whose mission is to empower women by providing comprehensive sexual health education and services. By taking abortion off the list of services offered, NGOs were pigeon-holed into accepting much-needed funds at the expense of censoring the core of their programs, or refusing to comply and going bankrupt.

In Zambia, refusing to adhere to the Gag Rule caused one organization to cut back on \$100,000 worth of condoms, the only contraceptive method that prevents the spread of HIV/AIDS. In Kenya, where more than half of all pregnancies are unwanted or mistimed, one organization was forced to close several of its clinics, effectively withdrawing from communities that had come to depend on their services. Even organizations most recognized for the comprehensive nature of their programs, like the International Planned Parenthood Federation, had to choose between receiving the funds necessary to sustain their services, and upholding the fundamental identity of

their organization. Ultimately, they refused to submit to the Gag Rule and as a result, lost more than \$100 million over the course of Bush's eight years in office.

NGOs that acquiesced to the Global Gag Rule in order to continue receiving U.S. assistance, were prohibited even from discussing the negative consequences of unsafe abortion with women. Unable to counsel women who were contemplating an unsafe abortion, the professionals at these organizations were forced to withhold guidance that could have meant the difference between life and death.

Life-Threatening Effects

The effects of the Global Gag Rule may not be obvious to the average American, but they are plain to see throughout the developing countries that depend on U.S.

foreign assistance. The United States is the primary source of funding for international family planning assistance. Offering aid on conditions that hinder the quality of these programs limits their ability to improve the health of the communities they serve.

Several countries whose family planning assistance was severely cut have revise their population projections upward. Kenya is perhaps the most jarring example: before the Gag Rule, Kenya's population in 2050 was projected to be 44 million. In the latest revision, however, that figure rose to 85 million. This example illustrates the time sensitive nature of compounding population growth. Each generation creates a larger base upon which the next generation grows. Just eight years has completely altered the trajectory of Kenya's population.

Safe...for Now

The reversal of the Gag Rule does not mean that it is necessarily gone forever. In fact, just one week after President Obama signed it away, Senator Mel Martinez (R-FL) offered an ammendment to the State Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) which would have restored the Gag Rule. Luckily, the Senate defeated the measure 60-37.

To keep up to date on this odious policy, join our Email Action Network at www.populationconnection.org.

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Population Connection is America's largest grassroots group advocating for progressive action to stabilize world population at a level that can be sustained by the Earth's resources.



A community-based health distribution program in Lusaka, Zambia reaches women and adolescents with information and services related to family planning and reproductive health. The referral center serves an average of 100 women per month. Photo: Yesaya Banda, Courtesy of Photoshare