

Effects of the Global Gag Rule: Examples from Around the World

On January 23, 2009, during his first week in office, President Barack Obama repealed the global gag rule, a policy that prohibited the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) from granting family-planning funds to any overseas health center unless it agreed not to use its own, private, non-U.S. funds for: (1) abortion services, (2) abortion-related advocacy, or (3) abortion counseling or referrals. The policy has been in place during all anti-choice presidencies since it was first imposed in 1984.

During the years that the global gag rule was in effect, it resulted in dramatic drops in funding to organizations worldwide that provide necessary family-planning services and other health-care services and an increase in abortion. Indeed, a 2011 Stanford University study found that abortion rates more than doubled in African countries that were most reliant on U.S. family-planning aid during the years that policy was in place.

Following are just some examples of the devastating effects of the global gag rule:

- The Family Life Movement of Zambia (FLMZ), a faith-based, anti-abortion organization, was stymied in efforts to expand programs because the global gag rule disqualified Planned Parenthood Association of Zambia (PPAZ), a partner organization. FLMZ promotes abstinence among young Zambians, and does not provide contraceptives of any kind. For those young people who were sexually active, FLMZ would refer them to PPAZ, where they could receive information about condoms and other contraceptives. But the global gag rule forced PPAZ to close three of its nine rural outreach programs and cost them more than \$100,000 worth of condoms and other contraceptives.
- The Family Planning Association of Kenya (FPAK), which does not provide abortion, had to cut its outreach staff in half, close three clinics that served 56,000 clients in traditionally underserved communities, and raise fees at the remaining clinics. One of the clinics that closed housed a unique well-baby center that provided comprehensive infant and post-partum care. That well-baby center is now lost to the community. In Nairobi, four additional clinics supporting safe abortion services and offering post-abortion care closed due to the loss of U.S. funds. Three of those clinics alone served an estimated 1,560 women, men and children who are now without health care. Recently, the health minister suggested that abortion be made legal as a way to confront the devastation that unsafe abortion has on the lives of Kenyan women. But organizations that accepted funds under the gag rule were barred from agreeing that legalizing abortion might help reduce maternal mortality and morbidity, so their right to participate in the democratic process of public debate was forfeited.

- The Family Guidance Association of Ethiopia (FGAE), the largest reproductive-health provider in the country, operates 18 clinics, 24 youth service centers, 671 community-based reproductive-health-care sites and hundreds of other sites for health-care services. Still, fewer than 20 percent of Ethiopians live within a two-hour walk of any health provider. The global gag rule cost the FGAE more than half a million dollars – and cut off the supply of condoms and other contraceptives – even though abortion was illegal in Ethiopia and FGAE did not provide abortion services. Because the organization does, however, educate policymakers in the country about the role that unsafe abortion plays in Ethiopia’s staggering maternal mortality rate, it was unfundable, due to the gag rule. The result was a loss of services to 229,947 men and 301,054 women in urban areas.
- In Peru, the Movimenta Manuela Ramos agreed to the global gag rule policy in order to receive U.S. funds for a program it runs called ReproSalud (Reproductive Health). The program is designed to engage local women from poor communities across the country in identifying the most pressing reproductive-health needs. Manuela Ramos convenes the discussions and then works with the Ministry of Health to develop solutions. In many communities, women identify unsafe abortion as their most pressing problem. The gag rule, however, prohibited Manuela Ramos from engaging in discussions about ways to reduce illegal, unsafe abortion.
- In Nepal, the maternal-mortality rate is the highest in the world and the abortion law was, until very recently, the most restrictive in the world. Women who had abortions – and survived – were routinely sentenced to long prison terms. In one infamous case, a 13-year-old girl was raped and impregnated by a relative. Another relative took her for an illegal abortion. Yet another relative reported her to the authorities and she was sentenced to 20 years in prison. The Family Planning Association of Nepal advocated releasing her and other women imprisoned under the abortion law and worked with the Nepalese government, at the government’s request, to legalize abortion in Nepal. These actions disqualified the agency from receiving U.S. family planning aid.

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