



Access to safe abortion and contraception:

Vital for young women globally, a priority for U.S. foreign assistance

THE UNITED STATES, as the world's foreign assistance leader, must play a key role in safeguarding a comprehensive and integrated approach to sexual and reproductive health and rights for young women. The U.S. government should expand family planning funding, repeal the damaging Helms Amendment, permanently repeal the Mexico City Policy (also called the Global Gag Rule), and continue to work toward a progressive sexual and reproductive health agenda in platforms like the International Conference on Population and Development and the United Nations. The United States must act now to ensure the rights of young women are respected and fulfilled to achieve broader diplomacy and development goals.

BACKGROUND

Young, unmarried women around the world who need reproductive health services face greater barriers than do older, married women.¹ More than half of young married and unmarried women ages 15–19 who are sexually active and want to avoid pregnancy have an unmet need for modern contraception, the highest level of unmet need among any age group.* Unintended pregnancy among adolescents (ages 10–19) and young women (20–24) is a global public health problem with dire consequences, especially in the global south.

Young women facing an unwanted pregnancy often must navigate considerable social, economic, logistic, policy and health-system barriers to access safe abortion services. These barriers lead many young women to resort to unsafe abortion, causing thousands of deaths and millions of injuries per year.^{1,2,3} Stigma surrounding abortion plays a critical role in the social, medical, and legal marginalization of abortion care around the world—silencing and punishing women who seek abortion and their medical providers.

“Unsafe abortion has eaten into our society, gradually destroying the lives of young women, as people have closed their eyes at the issue hoping it would disappear.”

—Young woman, Nigeria

HOW U.S. POLICY HARMS YOUTH

The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the State Department have prioritized and integrated adolescent and youth reproductive health with foreign assistance programming and policies, and progress continues with U.S. initiatives to mobilize funding, such as Family Planning 2020.

However, significant policy challenges remain that deny girls and young women around the world their sexual and reproductive rights and hinder their access to high-quality, woman-centered and youth-friendly reproductive health services:

- **Unmet need for modern contraception** persists, particularly among poorer, younger women. New estimates for 2014 show that sexual and reproductive health services fall well short of needs in developing regions.¹ Maintaining the status quo for family planning funding simply will not be enough to achieve access to modern contraception for every young woman with need.
- **The Helms Amendment**, appended to the U.S. Foreign Assistance Act in 1973, stipulates that “no foreign assistance funds may be used to pay for the performance of abortion as a method of family planning, or to motivate

or coerce any person to practice abortion.” The policy continues to be implemented as a total ban on abortion information and services—even in cases of rape, incest, and when a woman’s life is at risk.⁴ The policy endangers young women’s lives and exacerbates the stigma around abortion by causing fear amongst providers and health system managers who worry even associating with abortion services will jeopardize their U.S. funding. This, in turn, forces inefficiencies in resource-constrained settings, imposing an artificial separation of services where they should be available as a continuum of care. The United States continues to stand alone among major donor governments in maintaining a law that prohibits funding for safe abortion.

- **The Mexico City Policy,**** though currently not in effect, is a dangerous U.S. policy that has put U.S. politics and ideology above women’s health and lives. President Obama rescinded it in 2009, but without permanent repeal by Congress, any future administration could reinstate it. While in place, the law prevents foreign non-governmental organizations that receive U.S. funds for international family planning from using their own, private funds to provide legal abortion services, advocate for abortion law reform in their own countries, or even provide referrals for abortion care.

In 2002, Nepal made legislative changes to allow abortion up to 12 weeks’ gestation. USAID was the first external development partner to fund family planning and maternal and child health care in Nepal. However, due to the Helms Amendment, key U.S.-funded reproductive health stakeholders remain confused about how to implement U.S. policy, continue to censor information on abortion and fail to provide abortion counseling and referral, despite the liberalization of the country’s law. Young women, who face additional challenges and stigma in accessing safe abortion services, suffer disproportionately as a result of this harmful U.S. policy.⁴

“Separation of services due to U.S. policy makes things difficult for youth to access services—there are already enough obstacles in their way to get the care they need.”

—Ram Chandra, Ipas Nepal Youth Advisor

POLICY ACTIONS

A comprehensive approach to reproductive health care includes access to both contraception and safe abortion.

The U.S. government must take action to ensure the sexual and reproductive health and rights of girls and young women by doing the following:

- **U.S. Congress must permanently repeal the Helms Amendment and Mexico City Policy** to ensure young people’s lives abroad are not negatively impacted by political ideology surrounding sexual and reproductive health and rights. Fluctuations in U.S. policy, as seen through the repeated imposition of the Mexico City Policy, have led to confusion and incorrect implementation.
- **USAID should support safe abortion service integration and linkages**, including contraceptive access, and support health providers and facilities in coordinating care for safe abortion.
- **U.S. Congress must fully fund international family planning programs** to fulfill the unmet need among young women around the world.
- **U.S. stakeholders should promote a progressive sexual and reproductive health and rights development agenda** in international platforms, including the ICPD+20 process, Beijing+20 and the post-2015 development agenda discussions.
- **USAID and the State Department should implement foreign assistance programs to support other nations’ laws and policies promoting full access to contraception and abortion services.**

(1) Guttmacher Institute. (2014). Adding it up: The costs and benefits of investing in sexual and reproductive health 2014. New York, NY: Guttmacher Institute. * “Unmet need” signifies that women do not wish to be pregnant but are not currently using modern contraception, according to the Guttmacher Institute.

(2) United Nations. (2014). Framework of actions for the follow-up to the Programme of Action of the ICPD Beyond 2014: Report of the Secretary-General, February 2014. ** The Mexico City Policy/Global Gag Rule is a ban imposed by the U.S. government’s executive branch to prevent organizations that receive U.S. funding for family planning from providing abortion-related care, services and information. The ban also prohibits these groups from using their own private, non-U.S. funds for these activities.

(3) Plan International. (2007). Because I am a girl: The state of the world’s girls. London: Plan International.

(4) Ipas. (2010). U.S. foreign policy and abortion in Nepal: Barriers to saving women’s lives. Chapel Hill, NC: Ipas.

