

Support the Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act

As the largest donor of global health assistance, the U.S. government should reduce — not compound — health inequities. Globally, more than 35 million women have abortions in unsafe conditions every year.¹ Unsafe abortion is a leading cause of maternal mortality and morbidity in low- and middle-income countries where there are significant barriers to accessing quality abortion care. Restrictive U.S. foreign policies like the Helms amendment create an added burden and undermine country-led efforts to reduce maternal mortality and bolster reproductive rights.

New research suggests that eliminating the Helms amendment would result in at least 19 million fewer unsafe abortions annually, leading to 17,000 fewer maternal deaths and 12 million fewer women needing medical treatment for complications from unsafe procedures.²

Congress must take action to repeal the Helms amendment and support safe abortion care by passing the Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act.

What is the Helms amendment?

In 1973, the anti-choice Senator Jesse Helms (R-NC) successfully lobbied to amend the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, prohibiting the use of U.S. foreign assistance funds to provide abortion “as a method of family planning.” Ever since, this amendment has been interpreted and implemented — by Republican and Democratic administrations alike — as a near-total ban on funding abortion, including in cases of rape, incest or life endangerment. The Helms provision was later reiterated in the annual State Department and foreign operations appropriations bill, where it has become just one of many boilerplate restrictions on abortion and reproductive health funding.

Helms Hurts: Nearly 50 years of undermining health and rights

For close to half a century, the Helms amendment has limited the ability of individuals to fulfill their reproductive rights — exacerbating the problem of unsafe abortion and worsening health inequities.

The Helms amendment’s prohibition on the use of U.S. foreign assistance for abortion means that safe abortion care may be out of reach or simply nonexistent for communities that heavily rely on funding from the U.S. government. Furthermore, despite legislative action through the Leahy amendment to clarify that this policy allows for the provision of information about abortion and referrals — confusion, conflation of the Helms amendment with other U.S. abortion restrictions and an overabundance

of caution have led to unnecessary censorship about all available pregnancy options. The consequences can be deadly: Complications from abortions provided in unsafe conditions lead to more than 23,000 deaths per year and countless injuries and infections.³

Although abortion is still restricted in many places around the world, over the past 50 years, advocates have campaigned to advance reproductive rights and reduce maternal mortality by liberalizing abortion laws in numerous countries where the United States delivers foreign assistance. However, the Helms amendment bans U.S. funds from being used for a medical procedure that is legal under some or all circumstances in over three-quarters of the countries where the U.S. Agency for International Development operates family planning and reproductive health programs.⁴

Eliminating the Helms amendment is necessary for the United States to take comprehensive action towards ending preventable maternal mortality and supporting human rights and gender equality.

COSPONSOR THE ABORTION IS HEALTH CARE EVERYWHERE ACT

We urge you to support the health and rights of people seeking safe abortion care by cosponsoring the Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act to permanently repeal the Helms amendment.

This bill would amend the Foreign Assistance Act, the permanent authorizing statute, to:

1. Remove the Helms provision, making it no longer illegal to use U.S. foreign assistance for abortion services.
2. Insert proactive language stating that U.S. funding “may be used to provide comprehensive reproductive health care services, including the provision of abortion services, training and equipment.”
3. Affirm that the United States should work to end unsafe abortion and promote safe abortion care by providing funding to and collaborating with affected governments and service providers.

To be added as a cosponsor of the Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act, please reach out to staff in the office of Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) or Senator Cory Booker (D-NJ).

Sources 1-4:

Guttmacher Institute. (2021, February 22). The Case for Ending the “Global Gag Rule” and the Helms Amendment. www.guttmacher.org/article/2021/02/case-ending-global-gag-rule-and-helms-amendment