

Support the Reproductive Rights are Human Rights Act

The U.S. State Department's annual Human Rights Reports, a vital resource for advocates around the globe, have a limited mandate on sexual and reproductive rights. Under current U.S. law, the reports are only required to include data on forced abortion and involuntary sterilization. The U.S. administration in power determines whether the reports will cover more comprehensive sexual and reproductive rights information — including contraceptives, safe abortion and quality maternal health care — which has politicized the scope of reporting.

It is time for Congress to update the law to require that broader sexual and reproductive rights considerations, including all forms of reproductive coercion, are included every year.

Reproductive rights are human rights

At the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development, 179 nations, including the United States, adopted the Programme of Action that defined reproductive rights as internationally recognized human rights. In 1995, this standard was reiterated in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action. Since then, international governing bodies, governments and civil society have looked to these standards in their efforts to advance reproductive rights for all.

The Human Rights Reports

Every year, the State Department releases the Country Reports on Human Rights Practices, often referred to as the Human Rights Reports. These reports, congressionally mandated under the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and the Trade Act of 1974, provide the status of human rights in U.N. member states and countries receiving U.S. foreign assistance. Governments and civil society use the reports as primary resources for tracking violations of human rights to drive evidence-based programming, hold rights violators accountable and assist in asylum cases. This critical documentation should include unbiased, objective findings and not be influenced by the political agenda of a particular U.S. administration.

Inconsistent inclusion of reproductive rights

Under current law, the Human Rights Reports only are required to cover “coercion in population control,” which has been narrowly defined as

forced abortion and involuntary sterilization. However, beginning in 2009, the Obama administration shifted toward a more holistic and comprehensive approach. The Human Rights Reports began recognizing a nation's lack of sexual and reproductive health access. That ended in the 2017 Human Rights Reports when the Trump administration, which vehemently opposed reproductive rights, reverted back to the limited focus on coercion in the annual reports. All other reproductive health data, including current rates of maternal mortality and other critical issues, were excluded — erasing the challenges that women and young people face from the reports and leaving advocates around the world without the information necessary for holding governments accountable to human rights and health commitments.

The Biden administration has announced its intentions to reinstitute broader and more holistic reproductive rights reporting, and plans to release an addendum with this data to the 2020 Human Rights Reports, which were largely written under the previous administration.

COSPONSOR THE REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

We encourage you to stand up for the health and rights of women, girls and their communities by passing the Reproductive Rights are Human Rights Act to obligate the State Department to conduct comprehensive annual reporting on sexual and reproductive rights.

This bill would amend the Foreign Assistance Act to:

1. Include specific reporting requirements on the status of reproductive rights; and
2. Require the State Department to fully consult with local and U.S. civil society organizations specializing in women's and girls' rights when preparing each report.

To be added as a cosponsor of the Reproductive Rights are Human Rights Act, please reach out to staff in the offices of Representative Katherine Clark and Senator Bob Menendez.