

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH IN CRISIS: A SPECIAL SERIES

When Antiabortion Ideology Turns into Foreign Policy: How the Global Gag Rule Erodes Health, Ethics and Democracy

By Sneha Barot

On his first business day in office—and two days after unprecedented national and global protests by women’s rights supporters—President Trump signed an executive policy to expand antiabortion restrictions in U.S. foreign aid. The global gag rule, also known originally as the Mexico City policy, was first implemented in 1984 to halt U.S. assistance for family planning programs overseas to foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that used non-U.S. government funding to provide abortion services, information, counseling or referrals or to advocate for liberalizing or otherwise improving their country’s abortion laws (see “The Global Gag Rule and Fights Over Funding UNFPA: The Issues That Won’t Go Away,” Spring 2015). Proponents of the gag rule claimed that such a policy kept U.S. funding from supporting abortion, knowing full well that no U.S. foreign assistance funds have been spent on abortion since the Helms Amendment was enacted in 1973.

The Trump-Pence administration escalated the impact of the gag rule by expanding its application from international family planning funding to all “global health assistance furnished by all departments or agencies.”¹ After weeks of confusion and alarm, the administration released guidance in March to implement the policy, but only for recipients of international family planning assistance.² These guidelines essentially mirrored the 2001 provisions issued by the Bush administration. On May 15, the Trump administration finally announced the expanded guidance, which renamed the policy as Protecting Life in Global

HIGHLIGHTS

- *The Trump administration reimposed and expanded the global gag rule to block U.S. global health assistance to all foreign nongovernmental organizations that use their own funding to engage in abortion-related services or advocacy.*
- *This ideologically driven policy undermines the very goals of U.S. foreign aid programs by harming the health of people in poor countries, violating medical ethics and trampling on democratic values.*

Health Assistance and clarified that the policy now applies at the very least to global health assistance appropriated under the State Department, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Department of Defense.³

The global gag rule threatens the provision of health services in developing countries. Whether intended or not, the architects of the Trump global gag rule have created a policy that will disrupt and reverse the United States’ long-held development goal of improving health worldwide. The vast global health portfolio, supported by billions of dollars of U.S. funding, covers health-related activities in about 60 low- and middle-income countries, including programs on HIV/AIDS, Zika, maternal and child health, malaria, nutrition and others.⁴ International development and health experts have sounded the alarm that these programs will suffer in the future as have reproductive health programs in the past under these ideologically motivated prohibitions.