

### **Gag Trumps Women's Rights**

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of January 2017, Donald Trump signed an order affecting millions of women globally, eagerly shadowed by a party of men. The Mexico City policy, also referred to as the global gag rule, has been a Republican favourite since Reagan's introduction of it in 1984. Whilst every democratic president has revoked the policy upon taking office, the ascension of a Republican candidate has promptly brought it back into practice. In 2003, the rule stated that U.S.A.I.D and the U.S. State Department would not provide financial aid to non-governmental organisations that perform abortion, or even promote it as a family planning option. Donald Trump's induction into presidency has inevitably re-established the Mexico City policy, albeit with a twist. Trump has amplified the rule to include funding cuts to organisations from *all* U.S. governmental departments and agencies. To put this in numbers, a rule that previously cut back family planning by a seemingly enormous five hundred and seventy-five million dollars will now restrict this foreign aid by nine and a half *billion* dollars. To the new president, the policy provides a simple technique to support pro-life sentiments nationally, however international consequences are nothing short of catastrophic.

Before even delving into the complexities of the policy and discussing the quantitative statistics, a glaring error can be seen. Thrice over, wealthy Caucasian men have enforced a rule that primarily concerns women in disadvantaged regions. There is absolutely no reasoning that can support this as the correct way to go about creating rules regarding abortion, or any issue to do with women and their bodies. The Mexico City policy is a violation of the basic right of women and girls, one that is protected under international law, to be able to choose whether, when and how many children they have.

The United States is the single largest donor to women's health programs internationally. However, even with the looming threat of such significant budget cuts, the majority of non-governmental family planning organisations are resistant to the United States' strong recommendation to withhold any mention of abortion in their programs. These NGOs are more than aware of the dangers of removing the procedure as an option. Without the availability of safe opportunities, women are much more likely to resort to potentially very harmful ways of terminating birth, including hitting their stomachs, consuming toxic liquids like Tansy oil or probing. Marie Stopes International is an Australian organisation that refused to adopt the rulings of the Mexico City policy upon Trump's signing, even if the financial effects were bound to be felt fully, and heavily. Six and a half million unintentional pregnancies, two hundred million one hundred thousand unsafe abortions and twenty-one thousand seven hundred maternal deaths are expected to occur in Trump's first term,

only considering the effects on this single organisation. Vice-president of the NGO, Marjorie Newman-Williams, stated that the policy “only (exacerbates) the already significant challenge of ensuring that people in the developing world...can obtain the contraception they need”. The common belief between the groups is that restrictive laws such as the Mexico City policy will never have any of their desired effects as denying women the ability to abort does not reduce their need to do so. When NGOs do not receive the funding required to provide sufficient contraception to women in disadvantaged areas, or even just to keep these women informed about their options when put in a situation such as unexpected or unwanted pregnancy, the very opposite to the intention of the rule occurs. When George Bush put the policy into effect in 2001, the abortion rate in sub-Saharan Africa *increased*. Even before reimplementation of the global gag rule, almost seven million women in the developing world were treated for complications involving unsafe abortion every year and sixty-eight thousand died in the process. This can be credited to the fact that in countries where this occurrence was most common, like India and Cambodia, it is difficult to get access to birth control or a safe procedure may be too expensive. Under the Mexico City policy, these statistics will be amplified to an unfathomable extent.

The highest proportion of these mothers that are children exists in the African region. In the continent, about a quarter of unsafe abortions occurring are for mothers within the fifteen to nineteen-year-old age bracket. For these girls, the need to abort is often strongest and their still developing reproductive organs mean that unsafe abortion is riskiest at this age. The likelihood of their deaths without a safe procedure should be a horrifying idea, no matter anyone’s political opinion.

In 2014, two hundred and seventy-six schoolgirls were kidnapped by Islamist militant group Boko Haram. Girls as young as nine years of age were raped. Those who survived were likely carrying the offspring of sexually abusive extremists. Though the Helms amendment, which concerns the prevention of the physical process of abortion, was still being acted upon, the Mexico City policy was not, under Barack Obama’s presidency. The Helms amendment is not as easily lifted and re-enacted by President of the United States, though it could have been adjusted, and the effects of it on the pregnant girls were harrowing. Some attempted to end their pregnancy themselves, while others were segregated from their community due to the fact that they were bearing the child of an extremist. However, with the Mexico City policy in place, it is beyond imagination how blatantly devastating the consequences would have been. At the time, the United Nations Populations Fund and other organisations were able to hand out “dignity kits” and reproductive health supplies to

assist in the prevention of sexually-transmitted infections. Under the gag rule, the children would not have access to even this.

The Mexico City policy is detrimental far beyond just a single facet of women's health. The rule is predicted to stifle more than a few initiatives from family planning organisations which could potentially have revolutionary impacts on developing nations. Trump's policy will take one-hundred million dollars away from the International Planned Parenthood Federation. The consequences include the loss of the ability to try Sayana Press, a new contraceptive, in Uganda. Uganda has one of the highest fertility rates globally and without Sayana Press, thousands of women will not be able to access contraception. The global gag rule slows progress on HIV prevention as NGOs have reduced services that they can contribute to the cause. In 2001, upon the policy taking effect, the Lesotho Planned Parenthood Association was forced to stop condom shipments to Lesotho and the HIV rate in women rose to one in four. Any health services that have been created in relation to contraception, STI prevention and family planning are inevitably going to be cut off by the Mexico City policy, almost reversing eight years' worth of effort by global programs.

The Mexico City policy is not a small part of Trump's praxis, or a hiccup in the works of non-governmental family planning organisations. It is a matter of women's rights and the outright disregard of them in the recurrent signing of such an executive order. The Dutch government initiative "She Decides" is a funding program aimed to help organisations affected by the rule and received one hundred and ninety million dollars in pledges at its summit in March. A draft legislation called the HER Act has also been gaining support in the United States which will permanently repeal the Mexico City policy. Though highly unlikely that Trump's administration will take this into consideration, there is hope for future leaders to adopt it and disrupt the vicious cycling of the gag rule.

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