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New Campaign Calls on Obama Administration to Support Access to Safe, Voluntary Abortion Services for Women and Girls Raped in Crisis or Conflict

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) today launched the education and advocacy campaign “Break the Barriers: Stand with Women and Girls in Conflict and Crisis,” designed to raise awareness around the barriers to comprehensive health care for women and girls raped in crisis or conflict. The campaign, which kicked off at the National Press Club, also called on President Barack Obama to issue an executive order guaranteeing U.S. support for comprehensive post-rape care – including access to safe and voluntary abortion services – as part of the humanitarian response in conflict or crisis situations.

A September 2013 Oxfam/ABAAD report stated that the most extensive form of violence that women and girls face in Syria since the conflict began is sexual violence – including rape. A study published in the June 2011 issue of the *American Journal of Public Health* revealed that 48 women between the ages of 15 and 49 are raped every hour in the Democratic Republic of Congo. According to the international human rights organization MADRE, within the first two months of the earthquake in Haiti, rapes were reported in 15 internally displaced persons camps in Port-au-Prince. The United Nation’s Population Fund (UNFPA), recently reported that 65,000 women aged 15 to 49 are at risk of sexual violence following Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines.

“Where there is conflict or crisis, be it Syria, the Democratic Republic of Congo, or Haiti, women are being raped,” said CHANGE President Serra Sippel. “Now we are hearing reports out of the Philippines that rapes are happening in the wake of the typhoon. As nations coordinate humanitarian responses to conflict or crisis situations, access to comprehensive post-rape health care that includes safe abortion must be part of those responses.” said CHANGE President Serra Sippel.

As part of the launch, CHANGE brought together policy experts and women from the global south to discuss the rampant use of rape in conflict and crisis and the barriers to post-rape care. CHANGE also released a one-of-a kind legal analysis of abortion provision in U.S. foreign assistance. Currently, the U.S. policy does not facilitate access to abortion services for women and girls raped in crisis or conflict.

Participating in today’s discussion were Ruth Ojiambo Ochieng, Executive Director, Isis-Women’s International Cross Cultural Exchange (ISIS-WICCE) (Uganda) and Justine Masika Bihamba, Founder and Executive Director, Synergie des Femmes pour les Victimes de Violence Sexuelles (SFVS) (Democratic Republic of Congo).

“In Africa, the body of a woman is the battle ground,” said Ojiambo Ochieng. “Women are the center of African society. When you destroy her sexuality, her right to a safe abortion, you destroy the community.”

“Especially for a young girl who is just starting her life, faced with this unwanted pregnancy,” said Maskia Bihamba. “It destroys her whole life. We must support safe abortion for cases of rape in conflict situations.”

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“As we heard today, rape used as a weapon of war and torture is happening globally. The fact is that some of the women and girls will be impregnated by their rapists and will seek to terminate those pregnancies no matter the risk,” said Sippel. “It is not only inhumane to force a woman or girl to carry the product of a rape to term, it is potentially deadly.”

In November, Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues Catherine M. Russell stated that, “...addressing gender-based violence is a cornerstone of the Administration’s efforts to promote women’s empowerment and gender quality around the world.” In September, Secretary of State John Kerry announced “Safe from the Start,” a new \$10 million initiative designed to prevent and respond to gender-based violence in conflict or crisis.

“Safe from the Start” has been described by the State Department as building on the “U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security,” released by the Obama administration in 2011 and the “U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally” unveiled in 2012. None of the initiatives guarantee U.S. support of safe, voluntary abortion services as part of humanitarian responses abroad.

The Helms Amendment, a decades-old provision, forbids the U.S. to “pay for the performance of abortion as a method of family planning,” but does not prohibit U.S. foreign assistance in cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment. Despite the distinction, lack of clarity around the implementation of Helms has served as a barrier to post-rape care in conflict and crisis.

“We applaud the administration for important steps taken to address gender-based violence in conflict or crisis. They are to be commended for reaching further on this issue than any previous administration,” said Sippel. “However, those actions must include support for comprehensive post-rape health care, including access to safe and voluntary abortion services. U.S. foreign policy can serve as a hindrance to human rights or it can be a catalyst for change.”

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