

CENTER FOR HEALTH AND GENDER EQUITY

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Response to Rape in Conflict Must Include Abortion Access, Say Advocates and Providers

NEW YORK, NY – At an NGO/Commission on the Status of Women panel held in New York today, human rights, women’s rights, and service provider organizations highlighted the importance of access to abortion services as part of government responses to gender-based violence in conflict.

The event, which was organized by the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE) brought together representatives from Human Rights Watch, Médecins Sans Frontières, GRACE-AGENDA of Kenya, Dandelion Kenya, and the Netherlands government to discuss the role of donor nations in providing access to comprehensive post-rape care for women and girls in conflict. The discussion centered on the importance of abortion services as part of post-rape care.

“We know that rape is used as a weapon of war and torture, globally,” said CHANGE President Serra Sippel. “You need only to turn on the nightly news to hear about the abductions and rapes of women and girls by Boko Haram in Nigeria and by ISIS across Iraq and Syria. As donor nations work to address gender-based violence in conflict, it is paramount that they include in their response access to comprehensive post-rape care, including safe abortion services.”

“We know that women and girls who are raped and become pregnant are more likely to want to terminate that pregnancy, and in places where safe abortion services are not accessible they will seek unsafe abortions and put their health and lives into danger,” says Catrin Schulte-Hillen, MSF’s reproductive and sexual violence health care working group leader. “Adequate medical care for victims of rape can prevent unwanted pregnancy, as well as HIV infection and other sexually transmitted diseases, if women come for treatment within the first days after the assault. But she must be made aware that these services exist and that she needs to come right away, and her confidentiality must be ensured.”

“It is sad that we speak of emancipating women and girls, but still fail to make our interventions to facilitate this emancipation comprehensive,” said Catherine Nyambura, deputy director, Dandelion Kenya. “This is especially when our failure to support certain aspects of women and girls rights is due to the politicization of women’s rights. It is crucial that we include access to post rape care that supports women’s rights to choose and this choice should not at any time be subject to politics if we are to fully support women’s autonomy! We cannot sit and continue to assume that it is OKAY for women’s bodies to be part of guns and machetes used during war. Women’s rights are human rights.”

Government representatives and advocates from around the world are in New York for the 59th Commission on the Status of Women, marking the 20th anniversary of the Fourth World Conference on the Status of Women, held in Beijing China. It was during that conference that then-First Lady Hilary Clinton declared that, “Women’s rights are human rights.”

“Twenty years ago, donor nations, including the United States, committed to advancing access to safe abortion services where it is legal,” said Sippel. “While the U.S. has done a great deal to advance gender equality globally, it has failed to live up to its commitment around abortion access.”

In addition to organizing today's panel, CHANGE is working with U.S. and international NGOs calling on President Obama to remove current political barriers to post-rape care, including abortion, for women and girls globally by clarifying the Helms Amendment a decades-old restriction on U.S. foreign assistance. While Helms prohibits U.S. funding for abortions as a "method of family planning" it does not prohibit U.S. support in the cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment. Despite this distinction, no U.S. administration has ever implemented the law correctly.

Last year, more than 20 organizations from around the world co-hosted a rally at the White House calling on Obama to take action on Helms, more than 80 CEOs from U.S. and international NGOs wrote to the president urging action, and more than 30 U.S. faith leaders wrote to the president, urging an executive order on Helms, calling access to abortion a "moral imperative."