

CENTER FOR HEALTH AND GENDER EQUITY
RELIGIOUS COALITION FOR REPRODUCTIVE CHOICE
Wednesday, May 14, 2014
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

FAITH-BASED LEADERS CALL ON OBAMA TO ENSURE ACCESS TO ABORTION AS PART OF U.S. FOREIGN POLICY

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Calling access to safe abortion in the cases of rape, incest, and life endangerment a “moral imperative,” more than 30 leaders of faith-based groups and organizations from across the United States today called on President Obama to ensure that U.S. foreign policy supports access to abortion services. In a letter coordinated by the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice (RCRC) and the Center for Health and Gender Equity (CHANGE), the faith-based leaders called on the president to clarify the Helms amendment, a decades-old provision that forbids the U.S. to fund abortion services as a method of family planning but does not prohibit U.S. foreign assistance of such services in the cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment. Lack of clarity around the Helms amendment has resulted in its misapplication as a complete ban.

“...[W]e urge you to use your executive authority to end the longstanding misinterpretation of the Helms amendment, which in current practice denies women and girls access to safe abortion services even in cases of rape, incest, and life endangerment,” stated the letter which was signed by faith-based leaders including Reverend Geoffrey A. Black, General Minister and President of the United Church of Christ; Reverend Dr. C. Welton Gaddy, President of the Interfaith Alliance; Reverend Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe, General Secretary, General Board of Church and Society, the United Methodist Church; the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, Presiding Bishop and Primate, the Episcopal Church; and Lori Weinstein, CEO and Executive Director, Jewish Women International.

“For many women in dire situations abroad, US-funded programs are the best—and in many situations the only—option they have for receiving safe reproductive healthcare,” said Rev. Harry Knox, President/CEO of the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice. “In our view, turning away these women in need when we could so easily help them violates one of our most basic religious values: compassion. At the very least, the administration should follow the existing the law and abandon the current practice of denying women access to abortion even in cases of rape, incest, or when the life of the mother is at stake.”

The letter is part of an international push for executive action to correct the misapplication of the Helms amendment. The Break Barriers campaign, launched in December 2013, calls on President Obama to issue an executive order ensuring access to comprehensive health care – including safe, voluntary abortion services – for women and girls raped in crisis or conflict.

“While ultimately we want to see Helms repealed, the fact is that the misapplication of Helms is serving as a barrier to care for millions of women and girls globally. With one swipe of his pen, the president could eliminate those barriers,” said CHANGE President Serra Sippel. “This letter sends a message to the White House that a wide swath of the faith-based community stands ready to support him on this.”

Reports show that 48 women and girls between the ages of 15 and 49 are raped every hour in eastern Congo, that the most extensive form of violence women and girls face since the conflict in Syria began is sexual violence, and that in some cases, more than 80 percent of war rape victims are children under 18.

“Although we come from different religious traditions,” the group wrote, “we are united in our belief that women and girls who face sexual violence and rape deserve meaningful access to the full range of reproductive healthcare including safe abortion.”

***Attention Editors/Reporters: The full list of signatories is below. For a copy of the letter [click here](#).

Rev. Harry Knox
President and CEO
Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

Dr. Michael J. Adee
Director
Global Faith and Justice Project

Rabbi Jon Adland
Chair, Clergy Advocacy Board
Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Rev. Geoffrey A. Black
General Minister and President
United Church of Christ

Rev. Pat Bumgardner
Executive Director
Global Justice Institute

Rabbi Marla J. Feldman
Executive Director
Women of Reform Judaism

The Reverend Canon Carol Cole Flanagan
St. John's Episcopal Church & School, African
Palms, USA

Rev. Dr. C. Welton Gaddy
President
Interfaith Alliance

Sister Jeannine Gramick
National Coordinator
National Coalition of American Nuns

Rev. Dr. Larry Greenfield
Chair
Religious Institute

Rev. Debra W. Haffner
President and CEO
Religious Institute

The Rev. Dr. Timothy Hart-Andersen
Westminster Presbyterian Church, Minneapolis,
MN

Rev. Dr. Susan Henry-Crowe
General Secretary, General Board of Church and
Society
The United Methodist Church

Mary E. Hunt, Ph.D.
Women's Alliance for Theology, Ethics
and Ritual (WATER)

Nancy K. Kaufman
CEO
National Council of Jewish Women

Rev. Marti Keller
Minister
Unitarian Universalist Women's Federation

Frances Kissling
Former President, Catholics for Choice
Current President
Center for Health, Ethics and Social Policy

Rabbi Debra Kolodny
Executive Director
Nehirim

Rachel Laser
Deputy Director
Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism

Rev. Barry W. Lynn
Executive Director
Americans United for Separation of Church and
State

Rev. Peter Morales
President
Unitarian Universalist Association

Chett Pritchett
Executive Director
Methodist Federation for Social Action

Elizabeth Raider
National President
NA'AMAT USA

The Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori
Presiding Bishop and Primate
The Episcopal Church

The Rev. William F. Schulz
President
Unitarian Universalist Service Committee

Reverend Martha Shiverick
Immediate Past President
The Clergy Advisory Board
Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Reverend Jan Taddeo
Unitarian Universalist Minister

Rev. Dr. Jon M. Walton
Pastor
The First Presbyterian Church in the City of
New York

Rabbi Arthur Waskow
Director
The Shalom Center

Lori Weinstein
CEO and Executive Director
Jewish Women International

Marcia J. Weiss
Vice President and National Advocacy Chair
NA'AMAT USA

Rev. Dr. Nancy L. Wilson
Moderator and Global Leader
Metropolitan Community Churches

Ani Zonneveld
Founder and President
Muslims for Progressive Values

###