

Dear Prime Minister Erna Solberg
Minister for Foreign Affairs Børge Brende

Extended Mexico City Policy will have devastating effect on the world's poorest women

On 23 January 2017, President Trump signed an executive order reinstating the Mexico City Policy, or the 'Global Gag Rule'. This order from the new US administration denies U.S. funding to global health and family planning organizations if they use money from other donors to provide abortion services, counselling or referrals—even if abortion is legal in a country. It blocks critical funding for life-saving health services like contraception, maternal health, Zika and HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment for any organization that refuses to sign it.

The restoration of the Global Gag Rule will have a devastating impact in many countries around the world. Programs will lose significant funding to ensure that women have access to safe services, and critical aid will be blocked to international organizations that use their own non-U.S. funds to provide information, referrals, or comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services. Maternal and child health programs will suffer, including voluntary HIV testing and referral services and gender-based violence programs will be limited as well.

With access to contraception severely compromised under the Global Gag Rule, the incidence of unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and ultimately maternal deaths will rise. By reinstating the Mexico City Policy, the only thing that we know for sure is that millions of women could die because they would be deprived of their access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care services. As a consequence, families could be destroyed, as communities and countries will plunge further into poverty and will be stripped of their basic right—to lead a life of dignity,

It will have a devastating effect. The Policy will hit hardest women living at the margins of society – the poorest, disabled, the most remote and those under 25. The World Health Organization estimates that every day, approximately 830 women die from preventable causes related to pregnancy and childbirth and 99% of all maternal deaths occur in developing countries. Zika and HIV are more likely to spread putting people across the globe at risk.

The Global Gag Rule will bring about cutting staff, scaling back services, and shutting down clinics that had provided some of the only access to modern contraception in remote corners of the world, resulting in more unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and maternal deaths.

This means that the Norwegian Government's investments in women and girls' health and opportunities, will be jeopardized.

Economic growth and women's workforce participation in priority countries for Norway will be reduced by lack of access to vital health services. Furthermore, due to the close inter-linkages between women's health and poverty, environmental degradation, forced migration and conflict, the Global Gag Rule will impact negatively on the Norwegian Governments priority concerns.

In the spirit of the Women's Marches in January 2017, we call on the Norwegian government, as a pioneer of international development, to join other governments in championing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and rights politically and financially.

During the Presidency of George W. Bush, who signed a similar Executive Order in 2001, Norway stepped up and significantly increased its funding to organizations working on sexual and reproductive health and rights, including the important work done by civil society.

Since taking up office, you have spoken about the importance of growth, peace and security and have advocated for women. The government's Action Plan for Women's Rights and Gender Equality in Foreign and Development Policy 2016-2020 – Freedom, Empowerment and Opportunities, has SRHR as one of its 5 priorities. It states that "access to health services that ensure safe conditions for pregnancy and childbirth, and to family planning services and modern forms of contraception is crucial for realising these rights for all women."

To safeguard Norway's leading role and progress made in these areas we call on you to take action now. Increase funding significantly with additional money to ensure that it is not taken from other areas where funding is needed for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Join forces with other donors to encourage that others also increase their funding, joining initiatives from countries like Netherland, Sweden and Canada.

Yours sincerely,

FOKUS – Forum for Women and Development - Norway