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Rep. Jan Schakowsky, Abortion Rights Groups Announce First-Ever Bill to Repeal 47-Year-old Anti-Abortion Policy

Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act would repeal the Helms Amendment, which bars U.S. foreign assistance funding for abortion, expanding abortion access globally

WASHINGTON -- Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), a Senior Chief Deputy Whip and Chair of the Congressional Pro-Choice Caucus Providers and Clinics Task Force, today introduced the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act*. The *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* is the first-ever legislation to repeal the [Helms Amendment](#), a 47-year-old policy rooted in racism that bans the use of any U.S. foreign assistance funds for abortion, putting an arbitrary line between abortion and all other global health services. Reps. Nita Lowey (D-NY), Barbara Lee (D-CA), Jackie Speier (D-CA), Ayanna Pressley (D-MA), Diana DeGette (D-CO), and Norma Torres (D-CA) signed on as original co-sponsors.

Rep. Schakowsky [announced the new legislation](#) on a virtual press conference with reporters on Wednesday morning, discussing the Helms Amendment's harmful history, its burden on global reproductive and economic freedom, and the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on access to reproductive health care around the world. Joining her on the call were Dr. Ernest Nyamato, a Kenyan doctor and Quality of Care global team lead at Ipas, an international reproductive health and human rights organization, and former director of the Ipas Africa Alliance in Kenya; and Lienna Feleke-Eshete, public policy associate at CHANGE, a U.S. nongovernmental organization that advocates for sexual and reproductive health and rights for women and girls and others who face stigma and discrimination.

As the United States grapples with racism and barriers to racial justice, the Helms Amendment is yet another example of a systemic policy that has become commonplace in society.

"The Helms Amendment is a policy deeply rooted in racism. It imposes our arbitrary and medically unnecessary abortion restrictions on international communities, allowing the United States to control the health care and bodily autonomy of billions Black and brown people around the world. Just like the Hyde Amendment, the Helms Amendment puts reproductive and economic freedom out of reach for women of color. But enough is enough, and both amendments must fall if we want to realize true health equity and reproductive justice," **said Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky**. "I am proud that my sisters, Representatives Lowey, Lee, Speier, Pressley, DeGette, and Torres, are joining me to introduce the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act of 2020*, which will finally repeal the Helms Amendment. Comprehensive reproductive health care, including safe, legal, and accessible abortion, is a human right."

Dr. Nyamato explained how the Helms Amendment puts reproductive and economic freedom out of reach for millions around the world, including in Kenya and other African nations. He also discussed the impact of the restrictions on Kenyans who may already have limited access to critical health care services, noting the disconnect between the Helms Amendment and the needs of communities receiving U.S. foreign aid.

“While U.S. foreign aid has been critical for communities across Kenya, restricting funds for abortion has been harmful to the health and autonomy of people across the country. Because of these restrictions, too often, an unsafe abortion from someone without training becomes the only option,” **said Dr. Ernest Nyamato, a Kenyan doctor and Ipas quality of care lead.** “As someone who has worked in multiple roles in health and human rights, I see just how critical comprehensive health care, including abortion is, for people, their families, and their communities. Unfortunately, we are already seeing health inequities grow due to COVID-19 and people using the crisis to try to eliminate abortion access. Global support must help prioritize health care, not perpetuate barriers that make it harder for people to get the health care they need.”

Health systems worldwide are already overwhelmed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to a reduction in access to sexual and reproductive health care in many countries, despite the fact that abortion care is time sensitive. The Helms Amendment is poised to further exacerbate these disparities and put critical health care out of reach for millions across the globe.

“Having lived through other health crises, I know that women and girls often suffer disproportionately. COVID-19 has devastated many of the communities where I work, and now is not the time to further limit people’s options,” said **Monica Oguttu, an international women’s rights advocate, Kenyan midwife with decades of experience, founder of Kisumu Medical and Education Trust in Kenya, and an Ipas board member.** “My patients can’t afford more red tape right now, and I ask that the U.S. government help, not harm Kenyan people.”

Enacted in 1973, the Helms Amendment is housed in the Foreign Assistance Act and has been passed as part of Congressional appropriations bills every year for nearly five decades. The legislation was introduced by then Sen. Jesse Helms (R-NC), who was known for his anti-rights, racist efforts throughout his career. The amendment is related to, but distinct from, the global gag rule (also known as the ‘Mexico City policy’), an executive order that prohibits foreign organizations that receive U.S. global health assistance from using non-U.S. funding to provide abortion services, information, counseling or referrals and from engaging in advocacy to expand abortion access. Both policies are discriminatory and deeply unjust.

While this is the first introduction of a repeal bill, a broad coalition of global reproductive health and rights advocacy, research, and service delivery organizations has been working to mitigate and address the harms caused by Helms for years. Coalition members include Advocates for Youth, American Jewish World Service, Catholics for Choice, Center for Reproductive Rights, CHANGE (Center for Health and Gender Equity), Guttmacher, International Center for Research on Women, Ipas, International Women’s

Health Coalition, NARAL Pro-Choice America, Open Society Policy Center, PAI, Population Connection Action Fund, Population Institute, and Planned Parenthood Federation of America. Additionally, the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* is endorsed by more than 115 organizations and quotes from several groups can be found below for inclusion in media coverage. More information can be found at repealhelms.org.

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Quotes from Coalition Partners and Endorsing Organizations

Anu Kumar, president and CEO, Ipas

Abortion is essential health care—including during a pandemic. Abortion is a time-sensitive health-care service that cannot be deferred without profound consequences for pregnant people and their families. With worldwide lockdowns, and health systems focused on managing Covid-19, contraception and abortion are becoming harder to access, particularly for individuals who already face poor reproductive health outcomes. The pandemic has laid bare deep inequalities, including in access to safe abortion care, and we must address these inequalities now and in a post-pandemic future. The Helms amendment has politicized abortion services since it was enacted nearly 50 years ago—the policy strips abortion away from basic reproductive health care and it is Black and brown women who bear the burden of this discriminatory and deeply unjust, racist policy abroad. U.S. policies like this are harmful to people all over the world, particularly those living in low-to-middle income countries. The *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* is a tremendous step in moving us all to the day when everyone, no matter where they live or how much money they make, can get the health care they need, including an abortion if they need one with dignity. We are thrilled to join Rep. Jan Schakowsky and the original cosponsors, Reps. Nita Lowey, Barbara Lee, Jackie Speier, Ayanna Pressley, Diana DeGette and Norma Torres, in pushing to end a U.S. policy that is rooted in racism and colonialism—it's past time.

Serra Sippel, president, CHANGE (the Center for Health and Gender Equity)

It is unconscionable that the United States has accepted the Helms Amendment as status quo for more than 45 years. Today is a historic day because U.S. advocates and lawmakers for the first time are standing together to end this racist and neocolonial policy and ensure the U.S. government no longer turns its back on the health and human rights of people across the globe. As countries have lifted their own restrictions on abortion and prioritized the health and rights of women and girls, the Helms Amendment has dragged their progress backwards. The United States must stop dictating to other countries that they deny women, girls, families, and LGBTQIA+ communities access to life-saving health care. Congress must work to pass the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* and repeal the Helms amendment now.

Nicole Cheetham, international youth health and rights director, Advocates for Youth

Around the world, young people in need of abortion services face many challenges to accessing care, including legal barriers, lack of access to affordable services, long travel distances, and stigma. The Helms Amendment and its interpretation exacerbate these challenges by forbidding the use of foreign assistance funds for abortion, even in countries where legal. Such restrictions to services are harmful and put young people at risk because they may not be able to access the services that they need. The

Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act is a crucial step toward ensuring that young people have access to comprehensive reproductive health care services, including the provision of abortion services. Abortion access is fundamental to ensuring young people's autonomy, health, and ability to plan for their future. U.S. foreign assistance should contribute to improving the sexual and reproductive health of young people and reducing maternal mortality and morbidity, not create added barriers that harm their health and well-being.

Rori Kramer, director of U.S. advocacy, American Jewish World Service

The Helms Amendment has long prevented individuals from getting the health care that they want and need. This legislation makes it clear that abortion is not only health care, but a human right. We are proud to stand alongside Reps. Schakowsky, Lowey, Lee, Speier, Pressley, DeGette, and Torres in the fight to put abortion access within reach for everyone, including the most vulnerable around the world.

Sara Hutchinson Ratcliffe, acting president, Catholics for Choice

Catholics for Choice is proud to stand with moral leaders like Rep. Jan Schakowsky to right the wrong of the Helms Amendment, an affront to our values as Americans and as Catholics—freedom of speech, freedom of religion and the Catholic call to care the marginalized of society. For more than four decades, the Helms Amendment has endangered the lives of the most vulnerable people in the world—depriving them of both moral autonomy and basic reproductive health care. It is unconscionable for this dangerous and unjust policy to continue. Congress should pass the *Abortion is Healthcare Everywhere Act*, now!

Dr. Herminia Palacio, president and CEO, Guttmacher Institute

The U.S. government can and must show global leadership in safeguarding reproductive health and rights. This is true especially with the COVID-19 crisis threatening the health of women and families across the world—including potentially a significant increase in unintended pregnancies and unsafe abortion. U.S. leadership includes repealing the harmful Helms amendment through the *Abortion Is Health Care Everywhere Act*. The Helms amendment is a deeply unjust and discriminatory policy that in effect prohibits the use of U.S. global health assistance to support for safe abortion services abroad. Like other abortion restrictions, this funding ban most harshly impacts people with the fewest resources, including those who have low incomes, are young, or live in rural areas. The evidence is clear and irrefutable: Abortion is an experience shared by millions of people worldwide, both in countries where abortion is highly restricted and where it is broadly legal. Our urgent call to action for policymakers is that they must recognize the basic human right of all people to decide freely whether and when to be pregnant.

Dr. Chimaraoke Izugbara, director of global health, youth and development, International Center for Research on Women (ICRW)

International Center for Research on Women applauds the introduction of the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act*, which calls for the repeal of the Helms Amendment. For over four decades, the Helms Amendment has frustrated access to essential sexual and reproductive health services worldwide. Our research shows that people of all genders who have bodily autonomy are healthier, are more financially secure and are more empowered in their decision-making and participation in social and political life. Particularly for women and girls, these benefits extend to healthier and economically secure families, communities, and societies. Abortion is an essential health care service and should be upheld as such, regardless of political climate, local or global crises, or funding challenges. Access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health and wellness services is a human right.

Ilyse Hogue, president, NARAL Pro-Choice America

For over 45 years, the Helms Amendment has blocked access to care for millions of women around the world. Every body should have access to safe, comprehensive reproductive health care, including abortion care. Women and families everywhere deserve to make their own personal decisions about pregnancy without interference from politicians in Washington, DC. The Helms Amendment targets marginalized communities who already face too many obstacles to accessing care and remains a barrier to achieving economic and racial justice, which are inextricably linked to reproductive justice. Medical care should be determined by science—not an ideological agenda. For too long, the Helms Amendment has pushed time-sensitive, essential care out of reach for women across the globe. We must reverse this discriminatory policy and pass the *Abortion is Healthcare Everywhere Act* which will repeal the Helms Amendment and expand access to care.

Elisha Dunn-Georgiou, interim co-CEO, PAI

For more than four decades, the Helms Amendment has perpetuated and exacerbated health inequities around the world and compromised the effectiveness of the U.S.' global health investments. Along with the global gag rule, funding restrictions that impede access to essential health care—including abortion—and prevent individuals from exercising their rights have no place in U.S. foreign policy. The repeal of the Helms Amendment is long overdue and we thank our Congressional leaders for clearing a path toward safe, legal and accessible abortion everywhere.

Brian Dixon, senior vice president for media and government relations, Population Connection Action Fund

For nearly 50 years, the Helms Amendment has made life harder for hundreds of millions of people around the world. It's bad health policy. It's bad foreign policy. It's a disgraceful relic of a right-wing agenda that is utterly divorced from the reality of the lives of the people it hurts, and it is long past time for its repeal. We're proud to endorse this important bill and are excited to help it pass into law.

Alexis McGill Johnson, president and CEO, Planned Parenthood Federation of America

Abortion is essential health care—period. Politicians in the United States should not be able to deny anyone's access to health services, here in the United States, or abroad. The Helms Amendment has always been a coercive policy, pushing the extreme ideology of a vocal minority in the United States on people in many of the lowest income countries in the world—people in need of health care. The policy is a stark example of neocolonialism, taking advantage of the uneven relationship between the United States and the countries that receive aid. Planned Parenthood thanks Rep. Schakowsky and her original cosponsors for being champions for sexual and reproductive health care. And we're calling on others in Congress to support their efforts to repeal the Helms Amendment.

Shilpa Phadke, vice president of the Women's Initiative at the Center for American Progress

We applaud the introduction of the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* and its goal to ensure women around the world can better access safe abortion. This bill's historic introduction marks the beginning of a policy reversal that has been long overdue. For decades, women around the world, particularly in the Global South, have been denied access to the full range of reproductive health care as a result of the Helms Amendment, which has allowed politicians in the United States to place their ideologies about abortion ahead of women's autonomy. It is high time that we repeal and replace the Helms Amendment and protect women's ability to make decisions that are best for them and their families. If we want to forge the best solutions for promoting health and well-being and expanding peace and security throughout the world, women must help shape our collective future – and that is only possible if we safeguard women's autonomy and freedom.

Barbara Weinstein, director, Commission on Social Action of Reform Judaism

Jewish tradition emphasizes the importance of *kavod ha'briyot*, or respect for individual dignity. The Helms Amendment violates this core value by limiting abortion access for the most vulnerable and perpetuating inequality in global health care. We are proud to endorse the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act*, which would remove the Helms Amendment from statute and expand access to comprehensive reproductive health care worldwide.

Cristine Sardina, director, Desiree Alliance

As sex workers, accessing reproductive health without shame, stigma, or legal consequences, makes it harder to control and manage our health care choices. If we literally have to choose between our healthcare or losing our children because of economic and legal ramifications, we have to understand that the moral and carceral systems in which we are forced to abide by, is problematic at its very best.

Kenyora Parham, executive director, End Rape On Campus

End Rape On Campus is proud to endorse the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* because we believe that access to safe abortion is a fundamental human right for all individuals. Even more specifically, with respect to survivors of sexual violence, research shows that reproductive rights are intrinsically linked to intimate partner violence. We need to repeal this harmful policy that dismisses survivors' autonomy, high mortality rates, and instead uplift and empower survivors--regardless of how they identify across the gender spectrum and promote equality by also upholding their human right to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care access.

Grant Shubin, legal director, Global Justice Center:

While less known than the global gag rule, the Helms Amendment is the core of U.S. abortion restrictions abroad. It has been at the center of the United States' denial of essential medical care for over 40 years. Its repeal is long overdue. Thanks to Helms and other U.S. abortion restrictions, the United States is in constant violation of international human rights laws protecting non-discriminatory medical care and freedom of speech and association. Helms must be abolished before it is allowed to inflict any more harm around the world.

Beverly Winikoff, president, Gynuity Health Projects

Access to essential medical care also means access to safe abortion. Repeal of the oppressive Helms Amendment is long overdue.

Paul Golin, executive director, Jews for a Secular Democracy

Judaism has never considered human life to begin at conception, and neither does science; anti-abortion laws inherently privilege one interpretation of one religion over all other religions and none, and that is by definition a breach of the American values enshrined in the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

Tara Romano, executive director, NARAL Pro-Choice North Carolina

The Helms Amendment is nothing but an attempt by anti-abortion U.S politicians to cynically gain votes at the expense of the health and lives of women, especially women of color and Indigenous women, around the world. Organizations and advocates on the ground know what is needed for everyone in their communities to thrive, and receiving critical U.S aid should not be conditioned on accepting an anti-abortion ideology that is rooted in imperialist politics rather than medical science, health care, and gender equity. Sen. Jesse Helms' policies and positions often made it clear that he had no interest in supporting Black and Brown communities, women, and the LGBTQ community in North Carolina, and

this global amendment that bears his name is an extension of that disregard. It needs to be repealed now.

Jody Rabhan, chief policy officer, National Council of Jewish Women

At the National Council of Jewish Women (NCJW), we know that abortion is safe, essential, time-sensitive health care and that health care is a basic human right. Our Jewish values teach us that every single person's health is unassailable and that all deserve fair treatment and access to the resources necessary to make their own decisions about abortion without political interference or economic coercion. The Helms Amendment has long turned this principle on its head, denying care to millions of individuals around the world and hindering the exercise of their fundamental reproductive rights by blocking use of US foreign assistance funds for abortion services. NCJW is proud to endorse the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* to repeal this dangerous policy and to support access to high-quality, comprehensive reproductive health care services worldwide.

Toni Van Pelt, president, NOW

NOW is proud to support the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act*, which prioritizes the repeal of the Helms Amendment, an oppressive piece of legislation that denies women access to reproductive freedom. While it only bans the use of U.S. aid for abortion care as a method of family planning, every American president since its passing in 1973 has interpreted the ban to also prohibit aid for abortions in the case of rape, incest, and to save a woman's life. Abortion care is health care and reproductive freedom should be available to ALL women – the United States must play its part in increasing access for women around the world.

Ben Jealous, president, People For the American Way

The United States provides health care aid in parts of the world where international assistance is critically needed. It is essential that this aid go to supporting the full spectrum of safe reproductive health care, including abortion care. For too long, the Helms Amendment has not only hampered our ability to support safe care, it has done harm by allowing unsafe practices to flourish. We fully support the *Abortion Is Healthcare Everywhere Act* because it appropriately puts gender equity, medical science, and human rights at the forefront of our foreign assistance priorities.

Dr. Kristyn Brandi, board chair, Physicians for Reproductive Health

As an ob/gyn who provides abortion care, I see every day how critical it is that people have access to safe, accessible abortion care where they live. While we continue to fight for equitable access to abortion care in the United States, Congress must pass the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* to extend the reality of access to safe comprehensive maternal and reproductive health care, including abortion care, around the world.

Renee Bracey Sherman, executive director, We Testify, an organization dedicated to the leadership and representation of people who have abortions

The Helms Amendment is an outdated, xenophobic and racist policy that forces people of other nations to abide by horrific American anti-abortion beliefs. The Helms Amendment is unjust and colonialist at its core. The We Testify abortion storytellers will not stay silent as our loved ones in other countries are barred from the freedoms we're afforded in the constitution. We've had abortions and we know the powerful impact safe access has had on our lives. It's time for the United States to end its imperialist reign on the world and repeal the Helms Amendment to ensure everyone has access to abortion care, no matter where they live.

Elicia Gonzales, executive director, Women's Medical Fund

We at Women's Medical Fund believe abortion must be accessible for anyone, for any reason, by any method, at any stage of pregnancy. We support all efforts that expand abortion access.