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On International Safe Abortion Day: Why we must dismantle laws and policies that deny people access to essential abortion services

The Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act, cosponsored by more than 100 members of Congress, would expand abortion access globally by repealing the harmful Helms Amendment, which bars U.S. foreign assistance funding for abortion

WASHINGTON – Today is International Safe Abortion Day, a day that unites people around the world to call for access to safe abortion everywhere. This year focuses on dismantling archaic laws and policies that deny people access to abortion.

In July, Rep. Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), a Senior Chief Deputy Whip and Chair of the Congressional Pro-Choice Caucus Providers and Clinics Task Force, introduced the [Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act](#), the first-ever legislation to repeal the Helms Amendment, a 47-year-old racist policy that bans the use of any U.S. foreign assistance funds for abortion, putting an arbitrary divide between abortion and all other global health services. This bill is currently cosponsored by more than 100 representatives in the 116th Congress.

“Now, more than ever, in memory of our champion Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, we must stand up for reproductive health care as a human right in the United States and around the world. On this International Safe Abortion Day, I’m proud to announce that over 100 of my colleagues have cosponsored H.R. 7816, my Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act, the first-ever bill to repeal the racist Helms Amendment and replace it with policy expanding access to abortion care worldwide,” **said Congresswoman Schakowsky**. “I’m hopeful that over the next year, this bill will garner even more support and that we will sign it into law alongside other critical legislation to ensure coverage of abortion for every woman in the United States and to prevent states from enacting medically-unnecessary restrictions on access to abortion.”

In a letter urging members of the United States Congress to support the legislation, a group of more than 90 reproductive health, rights and justice organizations state:

“Historically, Black and brown communities around the globe have been denied both {racial justice and reproductive justice} due to colonialism, white supremacy and ideological policies imposed through foreign aid like the Helms Amendment. This harmful policy forces our punitive and medically unnecessary abortion restrictions on international communities, allowing the

United States to control the health care and bodily autonomy of millions of Black and brown people around the world.”

Restricting U.S. foreign aid for abortion is harmful to the health and bodily autonomy of people around the world. Barriers to accessing abortion care too often mean that people’s only option is to seek an abortion in conditions that are considered unsafe —globally, more than [35 million](#) people have abortions in unsafe conditions each year. As a result, an estimated 23,000 people die and millions more face dangerous injuries and complications.

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, even though abortion care is time sensitive. The neocolonialist Helms Amendment further exacerbates these disparities and puts critical health care out of reach for millions across the globe. It must be repealed.

Although the [Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act](#)—introduced by Rep. Jan Schakowsky with original co-sponsors 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) —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 and currently the bill is endorsed by more than 117 organizations.

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.

The international day for safe abortion is a time when the world must unite and demand the repeal of U.S. policies that deny people the right to access essential reproductive health care services, including abortion.

Quotes from several of the groups that endorse the Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act can be found below for inclusion in media coverage.

More information can be found at repealhelms.org and congress.gov.

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Quotes from Endorsing Organizations

Anu Kumar, president and CEO, Ipas

At Ipas, our vision is of a world where everyone can determine their own future. Like Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, we know that reproductive rights, including abortion rights, are human rights.

Today is the International Safe Abortion Day and it is past time that we acknowledge that U.S. policies like the Helms Amendment, which is rooted in racism and colonialism, are harmful to people all over the world, particularly those living in low-to-middle income countries.

The Helms amendment has politicized abortion services since it was enacted. 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 policy abroad.

Everyone, no matter where they live or how much money they make, should be able to get the health care they need, including an abortion, with dignity. *The Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* is a tremendous step in realizing this aim.

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

On International Safe Abortion Day, we recommit ourselves to ensuring that all individuals are able to access the health care that they want and need. For too long, the Helms Amendment has restricted the autonomy and dignity of women, girls, gender non-conforming and trans individuals, unjustly putting abortion care out of reach, endangering countless lives across the globe, and undermining U.S. foreign assistance programs.

The Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act – led by Representatives Schakowsky, Lowey, Lee, Speier, Pressley, DeGette, and Torres – ends this decades-long racist policy and would reaffirm human rights for the most vulnerable. We are grateful to stand alongside 107 Members of the House of Representatives in calling for an end to this dangerous restriction and promoting human rights across the globe.

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.

Dr. Ali Bokhari, President, American Medical Student Association

The American Medical Student Association believes that all women, regardless of age, social status or marital status have the right to obtain a legal, safe, voluntary abortion. That is why we support efforts to repeal the Helms Amendment and to support the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act*.

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!

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.

Salih Booker, President and CEO, Center for International Policy

The Helms amendment combines the racism and sex-based discrimination that is inherent in United States policy and inflicts the combined harm of both on women of color around the world that are reliant on health services funded by the US through limiting women's access to full reproductive healthcare. The goal of the Helms amendment, much like that of the Hyde amendment, is to advance an agenda that limits personal freedom and control of one's health — especially the freedom and health of women of color. Every woman, regardless of color and country, has the right to freedom of choice and to safe healthcare. Any attempt to undermine that freedom is nothing other than a cruel, racist, and sexist act seeking to continue global domination by a white, Western patriarchy.

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

It is unconscionable that the United States has accepted the Helms Amendment, a racist and neocolonial policy, as status quo for more than 45 years. We must remove the abysmal legacy of Jesse Helms and ensure that 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.

Karla Gonzales Garcia, policy director, COLOR

We know that the policies that take away the ability to obtain abortion care when you need it fall hardest on people who are already struggling to make ends meet, care for themselves or their families and to obtain the health services they need. Simply put, they are political attacks on the backs of marginalized people. We will never remain silent when the state decides to try to control our reproduction, how we build our families or the decisions we make about our bodies and our lives. We are honored to speak out with partners from around the world to advance the *Abortion Is Healthcare Everywhere Act*.

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.

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.

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.

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

On this International Safe Abortion Day, we are reminded that reproductive freedom cannot be achieved until everybody is free to make their own decisions about their bodies, their lives, and their futures.

We must pass the *Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* to repeal the discriminatory Helms Amendment, which has blocked access to care for millions of people around the world for decades. The Helms Amendment targets marginalized communities who already face multiple obstacles to accessing care.

This harmful policy remains a barrier to achieving economic and racial justice, which are inextricably linked to reproductive freedom and justice. Today and every day we must remain focused on ensuring that everybody has access to safe, comprehensive reproductive healthcare, including abortion care, no matter where they live.

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.

Dr. Geri Hewitt, president, North American Society of Pediatric and Adolescent Gynecology (NASPAG)

The mission of NASPAG is to advocate for the reproductive well-being of children and adolescents and the provision of unrestricted, unbiased and evidence based practice of pediatric and adolescent gynecology. Reproductive health care, including access to abortion, empowers young women by permitting the opportunity to delay pregnancy and complete their physical and mental growth and development. Having choice about planning a family can also be particularly important for those girls who may be at increased risk of health problems and death from early childbearing. Access to abortion care also gives girls and women the opportunity to complete their education and to pursue and fulfill their career goals. *The Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act* is a global opportunity to promote the autonomy, success and

optimize health for all patients and their families. We endorse and support the *Abortion is Healthcare Everywhere Act*.

Christian Nunes, 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.

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.

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.

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, domestically 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. We're calling on Congress to support Rep. Schakowsky's efforts to repeal the Helms Amendment.

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.

Fatimah Gifford, Executive Director, Provide.

At Provide, we envision health care systems that care for all people with dignity and respect. We support policies that expand abortion access, and are proud to support the Abortion is Health Care Everywhere Act, which prioritizes the repeal of the Helms Amendment, a harmful and oppressive piece of legislation that hinders access to all folks moving closer to obtaining full reproductive justice.

Rev. Katey Zeh, CEO, Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice

The decisions we make about our bodies are profound and the decisions we make about abortion and pregnancy are sacred. As leaders of faith we denounce the endless attacks on abortion access. People across traditions seek abortion care. We must ensure that care is provided without judgment. We are proud to work with our partners to advance the *Abortion Is Healthcare Everywhere Act*.

Dazon Dixon Diallo, Founder and Executive Director, SisterLove

Anti-abortion beliefs and anti-abortion laws are two different things. Believe and practice what you will in your own life. But any law that restricts, limits or prohibits women and people assigned female at birth from exercising their rights to bodily autonomy, integrity and the dignity to decide for themselves is a sexist, racist and imperialist violation of their human rights. The time for allowing politicians and corporations to decide the reproductive fate of women and their communities has come to an end. Helms and Hyde Amendments must die eternal deaths, and with this bill, it is my hope they will.

Cherisse A. Scott, CEO & Founder, SisterReach

Women, girls and people who give birth in Tennessee have been abandoned around their reproductive and sexual health services, education and resources. Access to safe, legal and affordable reproductive health care, including abortion services, is imperative for people who may not have the privilege to carry a pregnancy to term, for those who need to terminate due to sexual violence and for those who face dire economic circumstances if they expand their families. SisterReach stands in solidarity with women and birth-able people across the globe on International Safe Abortion Day. May our choices always be ours to make.

Monica Simpson, Executive Director, SisterSong

No one should have to live in a world where their bodies and reproductive decision making is controlled by politicians. We trust women of color to manage our health and plan our families. We have seen the harm and indignity caused by policies to limit or interfere with our ability to control our own bodies and futures. We will never stop fighting for the rights and liberation of women and girls. Our commitment is not limited by borders of state or country. We are in this for the liberation of our people. That is why we are proud to support the *Abortion Is Healthcare Everywhere Act*.

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.

Jocelyn Foye, The Womxn Project

Whether it is abortion bans or the laws that put up extra barriers – there is a dangerous and calculated agenda to take away all access to abortion. These policies deny us the agency and autonomy in our own reproductive lives. And like other political games, these policies fall hardest on marginalized communities who already struggle to get healthcare. We are proud to work with our partners to advance the *Abortion Is Healthcare Everywhere Act* and take on any law or policy that tries to take away our most personal decisions.

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. Any effort that restricts access to abortion are inherently racist by design. State sanctioned violence forcing hysterectomies on people with uteruses in ICE detention centers is equally racist. We at Women's Medical Fund stand against any coercive practice that prevents our communities from having control over their own bodies and making decisions that are best for themselves and their families.
