



## THE ABORTION BAN AND U.S. FOREIGN ASSISTANCE

The **Helms Amendment** to the Foreign Assistance Act was passed in 1973, prohibiting the use of funds for the performance of abortion “as a method of family planning” or to “motivate or coerce any person to practice abortions.” The Helms Amendment has been over-interpreted by the U.S. government to ban a range of activities. Although abortion is not a “method of family planning” where the life or health of a woman is threatened or in cases of rape, U.S. aid does not support provision of safe services, even in these extreme cases.

The Helms Amendment is a restriction on what both private organizations and governments can do with U.S. aid funds. It was enacted by the U.S. Congress and can be repealed only by Congress.

The international community has recognized the need to address unsafe abortion and make abortion safe, where it is legal. The Helms Amendment thwarts these efforts. For example:

- A number of developing countries have laws that include broad indications for rape, incest, and women’s health, and a number have liberalized their laws during the past decade to address high rates of unsafe abortion and protect women’s human rights. The Helms Amendment impedes progress by poor countries in making abortion safe as mandated by their own laws.
- The Helms Amendment contributes to a shortage of equipment used to save the health and lives of women who suffer complications of unsafe abortion. Under the Helms Amendment, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) trains providers in the manual vacuum aspiration (MVA) procedure for treating abortion complications, but will not provide financial assistance to providers and health systems to acquire the needed equipment.
- The Helms Amendment can be used by the U.S. government to censor information on abortion for clients seeking reproductive health-care services and the public. Health-care providers working in USAID-funded programs are prohibited from providing information to patients on their full range of reproductive health options. Organizations cannot include information on safe abortion — even where a woman’s life is threatened — in USAID-funded publications and public information programs.



Millions of women have died of unsafe abortion in the 35 years since the Helms Amendment was enacted, and tens of millions more have suffered injuries and disabilities due to complications. As the global community recognizes the need to make abortion safe as a matter of public health and human rights, the United States now stands alone among major donor governments in maintaining a policy that violates these principles.