Statement regarding Protecting Reproductive Freedom

by The Safe Abortion Advocacy Initiative Global South Engagement (SAIGE)

We welcome Dr. Fauci's statement[1] suggesting that the US administration intends to repeal its anti-abortion policy on aid and major turnaround on the global health policy by the Biden administration. The Mexico City Policy is harmful and further restricts access to reproductive health services including funding for foreign organizations that provide any services, referrals, or even information for safe abortions, or that advocate for changes to abortion laws in their country. We join the US-based NGOs in celebrating this move and urge the US administration to uphold the reproductive rights and human rights of women, girls, marginalised communities and LBTI across the world.

The current US administration should recognise that access to safe and legal abortion is an essential component of comprehensive healthcare. Safe abortion should be made accessible, available, and affordable for all persons who can be pregnant, regardless of race, economic status, gender or other identities. In the midst of the still raring COVID-19 pandemic, it is more important than ever to restore access to sexual and reproductive health care. The pandemic has made social, economic, health and gender inequities more prominent and women and girls have been disproportionately affected, especially in low- and middle-income countries. The potential impact of closed clinics and abortion being considered as a non-essential service is likely to cause the shift in 10% of abortion from safe to unsafe, which is equivalent to over 3 million additional unsafe abortions and 1,000 additional maternal deaths. The decline in use may be even more than 10% reduction in available services.[2]

Funding for organisations that offer abortion information and services are crucial. Without access to accurate information and services, pregnant persons are compelled to seek unsafe abortions. This calls for restoration of federal funding of safe abortion services through the repeal of not just the Mexico City Policy but also the Hyde Amendment, which bans the use of federal funds to pay for abortion except for a set of conditions, and the Helms Amendment, which restricts the use of US foreign assistance in abortion-related services. Although President Joe Biden vowed to repeal the Mexico City Policy, this would not be enough on its own. They must build on this momentum to advance gender equality and sexual and reproductive health and rights. This must pave the way towards a world where abortion is recognised as essential healthcare and enable people to exercise their right to make free and informed decisions about their own body and their own life.

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/jan/21/fauci-us-repeal-anti-abortion-rule-aid-join-covax-vaccine-scheme
[2] https://www.guttmacher.org/journals/ipsrh/2020/04/estimates-potential-impact-covid-19-pandemic-sexual-and-reproductive-health

The Safe Abortion Advocacy Initiative Global South Engagement (SAIGE) is a network of abortion rights advocates based in the Global South. We join the international advocates in calling that the mere repeal of this draconian law will not be enough. We demand for larger actions to improve access to safe abortion care in the US and abroad.[3] We urge the Biden administration to champion the Global Health, Empowerment and Rights (HER) Act, which would permanently repeal the Mexico City policy and to significantly increase the US contribution to international family planning programs, from the $575 million currently set aside for 2021 to $1.66 billion. According to Guttmacher, this increased funding will ensure that more than 46 million women and girls can have access to reproductive health services. This dramatically scaled-up effort would avert roughly 21 million unintended pregnancies, 7 million unsafe abortions and 33,000 maternal deaths. For families, communities and countries around the world, this level of investment could transform not only their health, but also their economies, development and progress toward gender equity.[4]

The Biden administration should acknowledge the adverse impact caused by the Global Gag Rule on not impeding the progress of countries towards public health goals and gender equality and the set back it caused to the organisations particularly in the Global South. Policies such as Global Gag Rule and Helms are neocolonialist in approach. These policies aim to override existing policies in place on ground, reverse gains hard-won by the women's movements on the ground, and ultimately to control the bodies of the women from the Global South where reproductive poverty is a huge barrier in accessing care. By limiting aid, these policies further push women and girls into poverty, put their lives at risk and jeopardise their bodily autonomy. It is important to ensure that such attacks on gender equality are not possible in the future. The US administration should endeavour to put in place an ironclad feminist foreign policy that is embedded in priniciples of gender equality and human rights and puts at its centre the interests of marginalised communities, women and girls and LBTI.

[3] https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/01/04/global-gag-rule-trump-biden-reproductive-womens-rights/?fbclid=IwAR3d55Bbmq4pddWrPRGQonpmaPkCpvDK4Pw2hxru7hT78MEXel3uMZvBKf8

[4] https://www.guttmacher.org/article/2020/07/more-not-enough-its-time-radically-scale-funding-global-family-planning#