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## **Against the Grain: U.S. Abortion Policy from a Global Perspective**

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In 1973, the United States was part of a global trend to reform restrictive abortion laws that resulted in the unnecessary deaths and injuries of millions of women. After the Supreme Court decision in *Roe v. Wade* secured the right to abortion, access to safe abortion care dramatically reduced maternal deaths and injuries. Despite this healthy trend, right-wing conservatives immediately began a crusade to undermine women's health and self-determination, promoting conservative ideology over public health interests and significantly limiting women's access to safe abortion services.

While things are bad in the United States, they are much worse globally. Nearly one-quarter of all adult women in developing countries suffer illness or injury related to pregnancy and childbirth. One hundred-twenty million couples want to delay childbearing but do not have access to modern contraceptive methods. Many more lack access to essential obstetric care, which leads to 515,000 maternal deaths each year. And not coincidentally, approximately 70,000 women die each year due to unsafe abortions and millions more are temporarily or permanently disabled.

So how has the Bush Administration shown compassion for these women? On his second day in office, President George W. Bush reinstated the global gag rule. It prohibits foreign nongovernmental organizations that receive U.S. funds for family planning from providing abortion services, including referrals, even when these activities are supported by their non-U.S. funds and are lawful under their own legal system. While freedom of expression remains a constitutional right in the United States, our foreign assistance is used as a vehicle to impose an ideological agenda that undermines that right around the world. Through the gag rule, the U.S. government is proclaiming that women outside the United States should not benefit from a right that American women, at least theoretically, enjoy.

While proponents of the gag rule maintain that its imposition is necessary to reduce the number of abortions, research shows that it accomplishes just the opposite. The restrictions cause more unplanned pregnancies, more unsafe abortions, and more deaths and injuries of vulnerable women and girls. In addition, it makes no distinction between the varied and sometimes tragic circumstances that lead women to seek an abortion. Whether women and girls are rape victims, HIV positive or simply too young to have a child, the policies of the United States give them only one choice: to continue an unwanted and potentially deadly pregnancy or risk their lives by self-induced or otherwise unsafe abortions. The underlying message of the gag rule is that women's lives simply do not matter.

While the United States exports this archaic, unscientific and undemocratic policy, the world is moving in a different direction. In 1994, 179 countries agreed to address the public health impact of unsafe abortion at a key United Nations event. In its 1996 post-apartheid constitution, South Africa guaranteed a woman's right to abortion. In the past five years, both Ethiopia and Nepal have greatly liberalized their abortion laws.

In the Muslim world where I am based, the parameters of the abortion debate, and the language and strategies used, differ substantially from the United States. The fervor, absolutism and sometimes violent tactics that characterize the U.S. anti-abortion movement are completely absent. Efforts are made to limit the number of abortions by understanding the circumstances that lead women to experience unplanned and unsafe pregnancies. While the sanctity of life is critical to all Muslims, debates do not focus on fetal rights or when pregnancy begins, but what is best for women, existing children and their families.



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In Egypt, Iran and Saudi Arabia, Muslim leaders have issued religious proclamations about the acceptability of abortion. Laws permitting abortion have been expanded in several countries including Bahrain, Turkey and Tunisia. These efforts are part of a global trend — ignored or opposed by the United States — of abortion law reform in more than 15 countries during the past decade.

In the time that it has taken to read this article, 88 women will have had an abortion, close to half of them under unsafe conditions. By contrast, thousands of lives have been saved in the U.S. since abortion was legalized 33 years ago. The struggle for reproductive justice continues, in Kansas as well as in Kenya. As we recognize the anniversary of *Roe v. Wade*, let us pause and scrutinize the real impact of our national and international policies. Unless we do, millions of women around the world will continue to suffer and die as a result of our misguided and morally bankrupt policies.

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