



US WOMEN'S CAUCUS AT THE UN

October 22, 2019

The Honorable Michael Pompeo
Secretary of State
US Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Secretary Pompeo:

The US Women's Caucus at the UN represents many national and international non-governmental organizations recognized by the UN Council of Economic and Social Affairs (ECOSOC). Our member organizations work to secure the rights and improve the general welfare of women and girls in the United State and around the world.

We write to express our deep concern and condemnation of the US State Department's policies challenging the use of the phrase "sexual and reproductive health and rights" in UN related documents.

A recent letter from the US State Department urged members of the General Assembly to actively oppose such language in regard to universal health care. Such actions constitute a major attack on women's most basic of human rights, their health and reproductive rights.

The use of the phrase "sexual and reproductive health and rights" is not unusual. Nor is it ambiguous, as some supporters of the proposed action would suggest. These are broadly accepted ideas that previous US administrations and human rights organizations have fought long and hard to include in all major international human rights documents, treaties and protocols. The US Women's Caucus stands behind the UN policy statements on reproductive rights embedded in the Beijing Platform for Action, the Sustainable Development Goals and the recent Agreed Conclusions.

By challenging such language, the US appears to believe that women's reproductive needs and rights can be easily erased or ignored. Women's reproductive health is not something that can be erased. It is the very essence of what differentiates a male from a female.

This attack on the importance of reproductive rights is a recurring theme in the current administration. In 2018, the US State Department published its congressionally mandated Country Reports on Human Rights Practices without any reproductive rights section, after political appointees removed it. Accordingly, there now is no regular public accountability on this issue in the United States.

Neglect and underfunding of reproductive health in the US has consequences. New studies have found that more women in the United States are dying of pregnancy-related complications than in

any other developed country. Only in the US has the rate of women who die from reproductive causes been increasing.

In addition, the US has drastically cut the amount of funding for family planning and women's health service abroad, while re-instigating the infamous "gag rule" requiring foreign nongovernmental organizations to certify that they will not perform or promote abortion if they receive any US global health assistance. In practice, this rule alone adversely affects millions of women and their families around the world that would have received vital, life saving medical services.

Such policies do not preserve and protect families, but rather sacrifice the health of millions of women and girls and weaken families. Family planning is the essential element that enables economic empowerment, benefitting families, communities and economies both locally and globally.

The United States used to be the champion of human rights and a leader in promoting the rights of women. Sadly, this is no longer the case, and these new policies have only diminished the reputation of the United States on the world's stage at the UN. More importantly, these policies do not represent the voice of the majority of Americans, which by a large majority favor a woman's right to choose and control her own body.

We urge the State Department to reconsider these shortsighted, narrow, regressive and blatantly sexist policies. Women in the US, as well as women abroad, will not tolerate the rollback of their reproductive rights. The US must once again stand on the right side of history by promoting women's rights, not ignoring and subverting them.

Yours sincerely,

The Rev. Susan H. Lee, Ph.D.
Convener, US Women's Caucus at the UN

UN ECOSOC Delegate, Sociologists for Women in Society
uswomenscaucus@gmail.com