August 3, 2015

Barack Obama
President
The United States of America
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Dear Mr. President:

Your administration has demonstrated a laudable commitment to the health and wellbeing of women and girls, both in the United States and abroad. In light of your recent trip to Ethiopia and Kenya, we ask that you take swift action to end the unduly strict interpretation of the Helms Amendment and continue your legacy of action to better the lives of women worldwide. Specifically, we urge you to issue guidance to the State Department, USAID and other relevant agencies to clarify that the Helms Amendment permits exceptions in the events of rape, incest or danger to a woman’s life.

For more than four decades, the Helms Amendment has prevented the world’s most vulnerable women from accessing critically needed health services. This amendment prohibits the use of U.S. foreign assistance for “the performance of abortion as a method of family planning.” Since its initial passage in 1973, that language has been incorrectly construed as an outright ban on the use of U.S. aid for abortion services.

That interpretation is both overly restrictive and inconsistent with established legal precedent. The Hyde Amendment, which bars Medicaid, Medicare and Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP) coverage of abortion care, permits exceptions in the events of rape, incest or life endangerment. In Fiscal Year (FY) 2013, the same exceptions were extended to federally-funded health insurance coverage for women in the armed forces. Last year, the House and Senate’s FY 2015 State and Foreign Operations appropriations bills allowed for the same exceptions for volunteers in the Peace Corps. Failing to extend those exceptions to women outside of the United States does not align with precedent or Congressional intent.

Kenya and Ethiopia are among the 24 USAID priority countries in which 70% of worldwide maternal deaths occur. They also both have very high rates of sexual violence; Ethiopia, in particular, has one of the world’s highest rates of violence against women. In these two countries, U.S. policy continues to be a barrier between women and the care that they need.
Around the world, about 289,000 deaths occur each year due to complications related to pregnancy and childbirth, 13% of which result from unsafe abortion. By making it harder for women to access safe abortion care, the Helms Amendment – and particularly the overly restrictive interpretation of this policy currently in place -- puts the lives of women at risk.

We encourage you to take this opportunity to ensure that the U.S. is correctly implementing the Helms Amendment. The clarification we seek would require only the use of existing authority, and would not interfere with sovereign local laws. It would merely allow the U.S., in limited cases, to provide the world’s most vulnerable women with the care they need and are legally entitled to in their countries. Such a change would bring foreign policy into line with domestic policy and help ensure that women around the world have access to a minimum level of care.

President Obama, you have been a tireless leader and champion for the rights of women and girls, both here in the United States and around the world. We urge you to act immediately to end the overly restrictive and extremely harmful implementation of the Helms amendment, and in doing so, to help save the lives of women and girls around the world.

Sincerely,

Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

Eliot L. Engel
Member of Congress

Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

Eleanor Holmes Norton
Member of Congress

Gwen Moore
Member of Congress

Doris Matsui
Member of Congress

Michelle Lujan Grisham
Member of Congress

Lois Capps
Member of Congress
James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

Elizabeth Esty
Member of Congress

Raul Grijalva
Member of Congress

Sam Farr
Member of Congress

Yvette D. Clarke
Member of Congress

Louise M. Slaughter
Member of Congress

Diana DeGette
Member of Congress

Jerrold Nadler
Member of Congress

Grace F. Napolitano
Member of Congress

Adam Smith
Member of Congress

Mark Takai
Member of Congress

Jackie Speier
Member of Congress

Alan Grayson
Member of Congress

Mark Pocan
Member of Congress

Betty McCollum
Member of Congress

John Conyers, Jr.
Member of Congress
Carolyn B. Maloney  
Member of Congress

Judy Chu  
Member of Congress

Ted Deutch  
Member of Congress

Mark Takano  
Member of Congress

David N. Cicilline  
Member of Congress

Rosa L. DeLauro  
Member of Congress

Sheila Jackson Lee  
Member of Congress

Suzanne Bonamici  
Member of Congress

Mark DeSaulnier  
Member of Congress

Lois Frankel  
Member of Congress

Cedric Richmond  
Member of Congress

Julia Brownley  
Member of Congress

Scott Peters  
Member of Congress

Dina Titus  
Member of Congress

Kathy Castor  
Member of Congress

Brad Sherman  
Member of Congress
Rick Larsen  
Member of Congress

Mike Quigley  
Member of Congress

Joseph P. Kennedy  
Member of Congress

Donald S. Beyer Jr.  
Member of Congress

Frederica S. Wilson  
Member of Congress

Katherine Clark  
Member of Congress

Chellie Pingree  
Member of Congress

William R. Keating  
Member of Congress

Albio Sires  
Member of Congress

Zoe Lofgren  
Member of Congress

Joseph Crowley  
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Debbie Wasserman Schultz  
Member of Congress

Peter DeFazio  
Member of Congress

Sean Patrick Maloney  
Member of Congress

Tim Ryan  
Member of Congress

Eddie Bernice Johnson  
Member of Congress
Paul Tonko  
Member of Congress

Ed Perlmutter  
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Peter Welch  
Member of Congress

Karen Bass  
Member of Congress

Gerald E. Connolly  
Member of Congress

Dave Loebsack  
Member of Congress

Bobby Scott  
Member of Congress

Ami Bera, M.D.  
Member of Congress

Michael M. Honda  
Member of Congress