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# Cruelty to Women Overseas

By THE EDITORIAL BOARD

Each year some 47,000 women around the world die as a result of unsafe abortions. Efforts to reduce that toll are severely hampered by the Helms amendment, which was originally enacted in 1973 and restricts the use of United States foreign aid money to finance abortions overseas, even in places where abortion is legal.

President Obama can significantly reduce the harm by directing the State Department and the United States Agency for International Development to reject a longstanding misinterpretation of the amendment under which aid cannot be used to help women whose lives are endangered or in cases of rape or incest. According to the amendment, foreign assistance money may not be used to “pay for the performance of abortion as a method of family planning or to motivate or coerce any person to practice abortions.” That wording plainly excludes cases of life endangerment, incest and rape.

Providing abortions to women and girls subjected to rape as a weapon of armed conflict obviously has nothing to do with planning family. Yet this has not stopped successive Republican and Democratic administrations from treating the amendment as an absolute abortion ban. The misinterpretation has also prevented foreign aid recipients from offering abortion information even though a separate 1994 amendment makes clear that providing information does not amount to improper coercion. There is a strong case to be made that the current reading of the amendment violates Article 3 of the Geneva Conventions, which entitles all victims of armed conflict, including rape victims, to complete and nondiscriminatory medical treatment, like access to abortions.

Anti-abortion zealots in Congress may oppose a change in the implementation of the Helms amendment, but virtually every federal abortion policy includes exceptions for life endangerment, incest and rape. Mr. Obama has room under the law to abide by the amendment in a way that is true to its wording, more humane and consistent with his own ideals. He should use it.



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