



EQUALITY NOW

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President Barack Obama
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500
By e-mail and fax: 1 202 456 2461; president@whitehouse.gov

31 August 2011

Dear President Obama:

I am writing on behalf of Equality Now, an international human rights organization, founded in 1992, working for the protection and promotion of the rights of women and girls worldwide. Equality Now's membership base, the Women's Action Network, is comprised of more than 35,000 individuals and organizations in over 160 countries. Issues of concern to Equality Now include discrimination in law, sexual violence, trafficking of women and girls, female genital mutilation, and all other forms of violence and discrimination against women and girls. I am writing now to urge you to issue an Executive Order rescinding the "no abortion" policy attached to US humanitarian aid, particularly in the case of victims of rape in armed conflict.

The World Health Organization (WHO) finds that, "An estimated 21.6 million unsafe abortions took place worldwide in 2008, almost all in developing countries."¹ Armed conflict mostly affects developing countries. UN Security Council Resolution 1820, which was proposed by the US, recognizes rape as a weapon in armed conflict: "rape and other forms of sexual violence can constitute war crimes, crimes against humanity or a constitutive act with respect to genocide." In addition to the clear physical and psychological health implications, rape destroys a woman's dignity through terror and humiliation, which in turn has severe negative repercussions on entire communities.

As our Nairobi Office Director noted on behalf of Solidarity for African Women's Rights (SOAWR) in her letter to you of August 10, 2011, the US "no abortion" policy is particularly devastating in its implications for women in Africa where the status of women's rights remains a matter of great concern and where in situations of armed conflict women often have fewer, if any, options. The Protocol on the Rights of Women in Africa to the African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights, a regional legal instrument, calls upon States parties to ensure the protection of women's reproductive rights by authorizing medical abortion, including in cases of sexual assault and rape. The U.S. can and should support these efforts to promote and protect women's rights in Africa by lifting the ban on provision of abortion information or services.

¹ http://www.who.int/reproductivehealth/publications/unsafe_abortion/9789241501118/en/index.html

August 12, 2011 marked the 62nd anniversary of the adoption of the Geneva Convention of 1949, which provides for civilians' right to comprehensive and non-discriminatory medical care during armed conflict, which should include abortion services. We thus urge you, Mr. President, to rescind the blanket restrictions on all US foreign assistance, and all foreign governments, NGOs and humanitarian aid providers that receive US funds, or whose donor funds are commingled with US funds, from offering abortion information or services with no exception made for rape or to save the life of a woman, especially during armed conflict. Lack of access to abortion because of US policy constitutes a gross violation of the rights of these women who find themselves in already dire situations.

We thank you for your attention to this urgent matter. Our Washington, D.C. liaison, Ms. Shelby Quast, looks forward to contacting your office to follow-up.

Respectfully yours,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Taina Bien-Aimé". The signature is written in a cursive style with a long horizontal stroke at the beginning.

Taina Bien-Aimé
Executive Director