

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

October 22, 2015

President Barack Obama  
The White House  
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue  
Washington, D.C. 20500

Dear Mr. President:

We write to express our deep concern for the reproductive health of women and girls who are kidnapped, enslaved, tortured, raped, and impregnated in conflict-affected zones worldwide. Rape is increasingly used as a tool of warfare to destabilize communities, exert control over women and girls, and in some cases purposely impregnate them, as executed by Boko Haram in Nigeria and the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant in Syria and Iraq. Survivors are forced to carry pregnancies to full term because access to reproductive healthcare is not available following their assault. We cannot be bystanders to such gross violations of the human dignity of these women and girls. If the U.S. does not work to increase access to reproductive healthcare for vulnerable populations, particularly safe abortion services, there will be negative, long-term consequences. As such, we implore you to take the following actions to confront this crisis.

We request you take action to correct the overly constrained implementation of the Helms Amendment which serves as a critical barrier to safe abortion, particularly impacting women and girls fleeing conflict. Although the Helms Amendment prevents U.S. foreign aid from being used to perform abortions for family planning purposes, for over 40 years it has been incorrectly interpreted to prevent the use of foreign aid to fund safe abortions even in the cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment. These three cases clearly fall outside the restrictions enacted by the Helms Amendment. As such, we urge you to issue guidance to the relevant agencies, allowing them to support safe abortion services in at least the limited circumstances of rape, incest, or life endangerment, including for survivors of conflict-related sexual violence.

Subsequently, we urge you to exercise your existing authority to ensure U.S. foreign aid does not stand in the way of women and girls fleeing conflict who seek abortion services. The Helms Amendment restricts U.S. foreign aid from being used to pay for abortion even in countries where abortion is permissible by local law. For instance, although abortion remains illegal in Syria and Iraq, regional countries which receive U.S. foreign assistance—Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt—have welcomed millions of refugees and have varying legal exceptions or allowances for abortions related to rape, incest, or life endangerment, which are undermined by limitations imposed by this policy.

Finally, we applaud commitments made by this Administration to address these issues, including those made last year at the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict and those in the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security (NAP). We request that you further strengthen actions taken under the NAP implementation plan. A high-level objective of the NAP is ensuring women's access to relief and recovery in a manner that recognizes the

unique needs of women and girls in conflict-affected zones and the need to provide humanitarian services. As expressly noted in the NAP, women's access to relief and recovery can be addressed by "support[ing] access to reproductive health in emergencies and humanitarian settings." As such, we encourage increased attention to this matter and request a report of the Administration's comprehensive review and update to the NAP, scheduled to be released this year. We also ask that the Administration provide an assessment of how the relevant agencies are fulfilling their respective duties to provide access to the full range of reproductive healthcare.

We look forward to working with you to ensure these actions are implemented. As the world's largest aid donor, the U.S. can and should endeavor to provide the reproductive healthcare that is desperately needed by some of the world's most vulnerable populations.

Sincerely,



RICHARD BLUMENTHAL  
United States Senate



CLAIRE McCASKILL  
United States Senate



JEANNE SHAHEEN  
United States Senate



MAZIE K. HIRONO  
United States Senate



KIRSTEN GILLIBRAND  
United States Senate



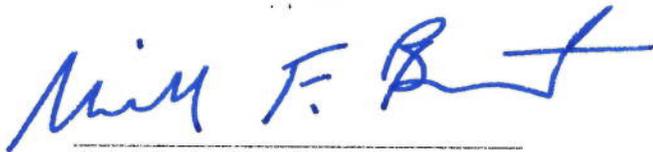
PATTY MURRAY  
United States Senate



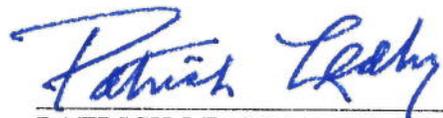
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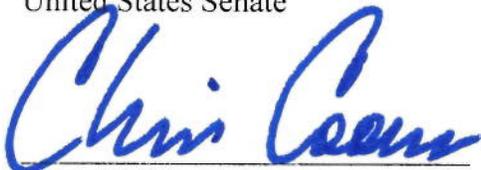
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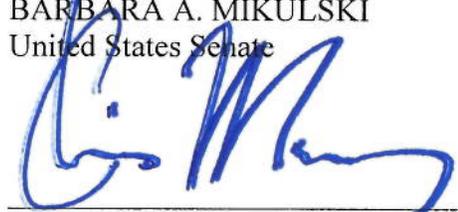
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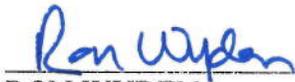
BRIAN SCHATZ  
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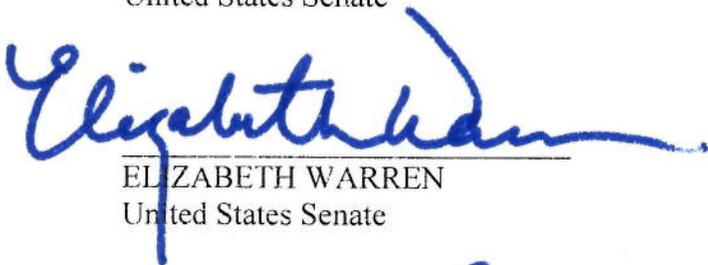
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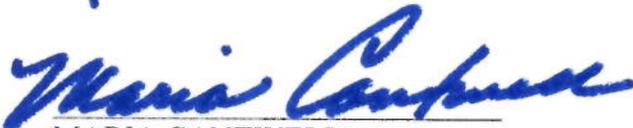
RON WYDEN  
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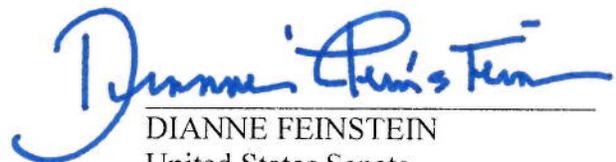
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