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| Title: | **Written Evidence submitted by Professor Navtej K Purewal**  **to the All-Party Parliamentary Group on**  **Population, Development and Reproductive Health**  **(APPG on PDRH)** |
| Date: | **17-1-2021** |
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| Reason for submitting evidence: | To highlight the detrimental impacts of the Mexico City Policy, or ‘the global gag rule,’ on SRHR in developing countries and to signal the timely importance of the UK government to act on the review of the gag rule in light of the incoming US administration |
| Body (less than 3,000 words): | 818 words. See below |

The Mexico City Policy, commonly known as the ‘Global Gag Rule’ first introduced in 1984 by US President Ronald Reagan, is a highly contentious and politically manoeuvred attack on sexual and reproductive health rights globally. Over different periods of time since 1984 it has resulted in the banning of US funding of international NGOs providing abortion services in developing countries. Without exception, each incoming Republican administration has reintroduced it and each Democrat administration has rescinded it. The Trump administration’s reintroduction of the Mexico City Policy happened at the start of its term in January 2017 and tightening restrictions were further extended in March 2019 when more severe cuts to frontline and often essential reproductive health services across developing countries occurred. The extent of the impacts can be seen through the experience of international organisations working most directly in the area of SRHR, such as IPPF whose projects across member countries in South Asia, Latin America, the Caribbean and sub-Saharan Africa saw services being curtailed by over 40% within the first year of the gag rule coming into effect. These restrictions have even been felt in countries where abortion is illegal. Marginalised and vulnerable communities will, as always, be the most gravely affected.

Other countries following the lead of the US in denouncing sexual and reproductive rights, including Brazil, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt, have similarly placed pressure on the World Health Organisation, International Planned Parenthood, Marie Stopes International and other NGOs/INGOs in curbing the very definition of sexual and reproductive health by removing the dimension of rights and access which are so integral to the principles of the ICPD. This has presented a fundamental threat to the ICPD principles and requires immediate attention, coordination and action.

The inauguration of Biden in January 2021 should predictably see the Mexico City Policy revoked with the anticipated messaging about the new government’s new domestic and foreign policy agenda and its already stated desire to renew its commitment to global partnerships and sexual and reproductive health and rights, as outlined by the ICPD 1994 and upheld by the global community.

The APPG on Population, Development and Reproductive Health (PDRH) can and must play a crucial role in highlighting the importance of the UK government on the global stage in leading on both population and development and SRHR agendas as a long-standing defender of the principles of ICPD in ensuring accessible sexual and reproductive health services. The shocks that have been felt over the past few years under the gag rule have seen the collapse of some NGOs and the halting of frontline essential healthcare services due to the interpretive conflation of the anti-sexual and reproductive rights approach of the Trump administration and its allies. Given the volatility of the US’s own domestic SRHR debates which continually politicise and forefront abortion as a means to deny, cut or ban funding for SRHR programmes, it seems an important step for the APPG on PDRH to promote a position within the UK government which firmly stands by the principles of the ICPD which, particularly at this juncture in US-global politics, could be an important voice on the global stage in reinstating the principles of the ICPD in the support for SRHR services.

In March 2019, the Trump administration extended the ‘gag’ even further by adding a diktat stating that any organisation providing counselling regarding abortion and receiving funds from elsewhere, even from another donor or its own health ministry, would have its US funding cut. This not only applied to reproductive health clinics, but also organisations working with HIV and children/young people. The gag rule has severely jeopardised frontline, essential health services in many developing countries reliant on donor aid by threatening the sustainability of SRHR. There has also been a detrimental effect on relationship and sex education (RSE) through the creation of barriers for teachers, NGOs, and health workers who fear being seen to be transgressing the diktats of the gag rule in their essential community-based work. Thus, the ‘gag rule’ has not only affected access to essential health services but has most worryingly threatened the availability of basic information and advice impacting girls’ and womens’ health in the long term, including the risks that unsafe reproductive services present.

The start of the Biden administration is an opportunity for the UK government to reaffirm its commitment to the principles of the ICPD, given the devastating cuts to SRHR funding over the past few years. As the [Center for Reproductive Rights](https://reproductiverights.org/press-room/center-reproductive-rights-statement-election-joseph-r-biden-jr-46th-president-united) stated on 11.1.2021, there is an urgency to rescind Trump-era legislation not only in the US as it has had global impacts.

The APPG on PDRH could play a critical role by initiating an informed parliamentary discussion on the importance of upholding the ICPD principles with the aim of standing firmly against the Mexico City Rule and working towards the agenda of ensuring sustainable SRHR service provision to the most vulnerable communities in developing countries.