

# The International Consequences of the United States' Domestic Restrictions on Abortion Rights

## A Centre for Feminist Foreign Policy Briefing

### *The Issue*

From Alabama to Missouri to Ohio: Over the past few months, an increasing number of US states have passed bills which restrict and/or remove the right to legal and safe abortions.<sup>1</sup> This seriously endangers not just those with uteruses who reside in the US, but puts the life of people across the globe at risk.

Over the last few decades, Republican administrations have widely refused to provide funding for international and national non-governmental organisations (NGOs) which provide reproductive health services or education. However, the Trump administration has taken this to a new level. Since President Trump's inauguration in 2017, his administration has continuously worked to limit reproductive rights everywhere, to challenge international progressive norms, and to promote conservative and patriarchal agendas – in particular, those related to sexual and reproductive autonomy.<sup>2</sup>

When looking at the global impact of the US domestic policies, it is important to acknowledge that the approach of the Trump administration is part of growing trend seen around the world. The restriction of reproductive rights as an international policy is a creeping phenomenon attached to the rise and power of right-wing populist and conservative governments. From Poland to Hungary, Brazil and Italy, we see heads of states embodying a 'strongman' mentality, promoting 'traditional' gender roles, and openly rejecting feminism by means of reversing policies which support gender equality.

### *Background*

US President Ronald Reagan introduced the Mexico City Policy ('Global Gag Rule') in 1984.<sup>3</sup> The policy blocks US funding for NGOs which "provide abortion counselling or referrals, advocate to decriminalise abortion, or expand abortion services", even if the NGO does not use government funding for such services. Should an NGO seek US funding, they must abide by the Global Gag Rule, and thus must choose between providing life-saving services or being eligible for funding from a country with one of the largest aid budgets.

## *Global Impact*

In late April 2019, and in an attempt to better support survivors of sexualised violence in conflict and to hold perpetrators of these crimes accountable, the German government (as of July 2019, a non-permanent member of the UN Security Council (UNSC)) introduced resolution 2467 into the UN Security. The resolution, which became the 9th resolution of the Women, Peace and Security Agenda, was adopted by the UNSC on 23 April 2019 with two abstentions by China and Russia. Its final form differed strongly from the initial draft as the US insisted on removing any reference to "the need for U.N. bodies and donors to give timely sexual and reproductive health assistance to survivors of sexual violence in conflict." Ultimately, and much to the disappointment of feminist and women's rights organisations, the UNSC and Germany caved to the US's demands.<sup>4,5</sup>

This was not the first time the Trump administration has undermined an international women's and reproductive rights agenda, nor are these efforts limited to the UN. Since his inauguration, President Trump has refused to agree to any UN documents related to sexual and reproductive health on the grounds that such language implies support for abortion. In May 2019, the US pressured other G7 countries to remove any reference of a woman's right 'to control and decide freely and responsibly on all matters related to their sexuality, including sexual and reproductive health' from the G7's Declaration on Gender Equality. In November 2017, during meetings at the UN General Assembly's Third Committee, the Trump administration sought to replace the condemnation of 'all forms of violence' against women and children with the phrase 'unlawful violence', thereby inferring there are situations in which violence might be legally deemed appropriate.<sup>6,7</sup>

Limited reproductive health services have always taken a heavy toll on all who have uteruses. Each day, over 800 people who identify as women die because of preventable and/or treatable causes related to pregnancy or birth. Much of the debates about reproductive rights centre on cis women, actively excluding transgender people, who across the globe face tremendous obstacles to reproductive healthcare, including difficulty in finding a knowledgeable doctor and harassment by medical staff. Ultimately, limited access to reproductive health often acts as a catalyst to further fortify life-threatening physical and mental health issues, as well as the vulnerability and economic instability of women, girls, gender nonconforming people, and LGBTQ people.

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*This CFFP Briefing is a summary of the June edition of CFFP's 'Feminist Lens on Current Affairs' column, accessible through our Members Corner as one of our Membership Benefits. Itching to read our full analysis on this issue? Click here to become a member and get access today!*

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