

Enactment of Policies in the United States of America that Support Women's Health Worldwide

Every four years, the USA has a democratic transition of leadership determined by its people. As the transition occurs, so potentially does the government's position on a host of scientific, cultural, social and health decisions that impact not only the USA, but the world. As President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris take their oaths of office on 20 January 2021, they will determine a new course of leadership, embracing what President Biden has termed "the soul of America." As part of this transition, President Biden has promised to roll back many of the actions put in place by former President Trump, including those related to women's health and rights.

FIGO position

The International Federation of Gynecology and Obstetrics (FIGO) calls on the new administration in the USA to immediately revoke three recently enacted policies that negatively impact the health and wellbeing of women around the world.

FIGO asks the USA to:

- revoke the Global Gag Rule
- rejoin the World Health Organization (WHO)
- reinstate funding for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Investing in the health and wellbeing of women is an investment in their future, and the future of our communities and societies. Nowhere is the need more apparent than in the support for reproductive health and rights. It is through the empowerment of women that we make the greatest gains.

Revoke the Global Gag Rule

This rule has prohibited US foreign aid from being provided to non-governmental organisations that fund, provide or advocate for abortion services and information. Its implementation was expanded under former President Trump to include all forms of global health assistance. In 2020, the Guttmacher Institute summarised the serious global impact this policy has had on women's health.¹ Access to safe abortion saves lives² and is a fundamental aspect of women's healthcare and reproductive health. The Global Gag Rule has served to destroy access to much-needed healthcare and health workers.³ The ripple effect on public health facilities and care is felt deeply and broadly and must come to an end. FIGO calls on the USA to adopt permanent legislation to protect women and girls and avoid the significant impact on global health that is felt with each change in federal administration. Such legislative proposals have come before the United States Congress, and FIGO supports efforts such as the Global Health, Empowerment and Rights Act (HERS Act, HR 1055 of the 116th Congress), which permanently repeals the Global Gag Rule and enables organisations to use their funds to provide safe abortion care, in line with local laws, while receiving US foreign aid.

Rejoin the WHO

FIGO requests that the USA's withdrawal from the WHO is halted and that the country commits to maintaining its relationship with the WHO in the interests of scientific knowledge and leadership. President Biden and Vice President Harris have committed to a strong sense of scientific governance by leading with science and truth. The withdrawal from the WHO has been likened by USA scientists to shutting down the forest service in the midst of our greatest forest fires.⁴ The USA is not just a contributor of funds, but also acts as a leader, sharing knowledge and contributing to the success of WHO and the improvement of global health.

Reinstate funding for UNFPA

FIGO calls on the USA to reinstate its funding of UNFPA to at least the level it contributed before it withdrew in 2017. The USA played a pivotal role in the launch of UNFPA more than 50 years ago and has supported efforts to reduce poverty, address gender-based violence, and support childbirth and emergency care and prenatal services. In fact, in 2016 the USA was the largest contributor to address gender-based violence in crisis-affected communities. UNFPA serves to empower women and girls to determine their life course and it is vital the organisation is supported.

FIGO commits to taking the following actions

- FIGO will support our member societies in advocating on behalf women's health and rights.
- FIGO will advocate for women's health and reproductive rights and the freedom of healthcare providers to advise patients based on their needs.
- FIGO will maintain and build partnerships with WHO, UNFPA and other kindred organisations to propel women's health and rights to the top of the global health agenda.

References

- ¹ Ahmed Z. The unprecedented expansion of the Global Gag Rule: trampling fights, health and free speech. *Guttmacher Policy Review*. 2020;23:13–18. www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2020/04/unprecedented-expansion-global-gag-rule-trampling-rights-health-and-free-speech#
- ² Singh S, et al. *Abortion Worldwide 2017: Uneven Progress and Unequal Access*. Guttmacher Institute. 2018. www.guttmacher.org/report/abortion-worldwide-2017
- ³ Barot S. When antiabortion ideology turns into foreign policy: How the global gag rule erodes health, ethics and democracy. *Guttmacher Policy Review*. 2017;20:73–77, www.guttmacher.org/gpr/2017/06/when-antiabortion-ideology-turns-foreign-policy-how-global-gag-rule-erodes-health-ethics
- ⁴ Bloom B, et al. WHO's Next – The United States and the World Health Organization. *NEJM*. 2020 383:676–677. www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJMe2024894

About FIGO

FIGO is a professional organisation that brings together obstetrical and gynaecological associations from all over the world.

FIGO's vision is that women of the world achieve the highest possible standards of physical, mental, reproductive and sexual health and wellbeing throughout their lives. We lead on global programme activities, with a particular focus on sub-Saharan Africa and South East Asia.

FIGO advocates on a global stage, especially in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) pertaining to reproductive, maternal, newborn, child and adolescent health and non-communicable diseases (SDG3). We also work to raise the status of women and enable their active participation to achieve their reproductive and sexual rights, including addressing female-genital mutilation (FGM) and gender-based violence (SDG5).

We also provide education and training for our Member Societies and build capacities of those from low-resource countries through strengthening leadership, good practice and promotion of policy dialogues.

FIGO is in official relations with the World Health Organization (WHO) and a consultative status with the United Nations (UN).

For enquiries

Rob Hucker, Head of Communications and Engagement
rob@figo.org +44 (0) 7383 025 731