Parliamentary Assembly
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COUNCIL OF EUROPE
CONSEIL DE L'EUROPE

Resolution 1347 (2003)[1]

Impact of the "Mexico City Policy" on the free choice of contraception in Europe

Parliamentary Assembly

1. The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates that, every year, over half a million women die worldwide as a result of pregnancy-related causes; in addition 7 million become ill or disabled. Some 40 million abortions occur each year, often under unsafe conditions – claiming some 70 000 extra female lives. In the developing world, pregnancy and childbirth remain the greatest single threat to a woman's health in her reproductive years.

2. Contrary to popular belief, Europe is also concerned by this blight. The Regional Office for Europe of the WHO has set the target of less than fifteen maternal deaths per 100 000 live births. Several Council of Europe member states still experience difficulties in reaching this target.

3. In 1994, 172 countries agreed on a twenty-year programme of action at the Cairo United Nations International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD). This programme of action recognised the right of women and men to "be informed and to have access to safe, effective, affordable and acceptable methods of family planning of their choice". The Cairo Programme of Action was confirmed and strengthened in 1999. In November 2002, parliamentarians from all over the world, including members of the Parliamentary Assembly, met at Ottawa to consider and promote the implementation of the Cairo Programme of Action, adopting the Ottawa Statement of Commitment.

4. Several international governmental and non-governmental organisations are working hard to realise the Cairo Programme of Action and the Ottawa Statement of Commitment. The United States is the largest individual donor to what the United Nations calls "international population assistance", contributing 43% of all funds for family planning, maternal and child health care and for sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/ Aids. However, one of the first actions taken by George W. Bush on becoming President of the United States was to restore the Mexico City Policy.

5. The Mexico City Policy lays down that United States federal foreign assistance funds cannot be granted to foreign NGOs performing abortion or lobbying to make abortion legal, even if foreign NGOs use their own non-US funds to perform legal abortions, or to provide counselling and referral for abortion, or engage in the abortion policy debate. This policy was first announced at the 1984 UN International Conference on Population in Mexico City during Ronald Reagan's presidency, rescinded by President Bill Clinton in 1993, and is once again in force. Its restrictive interpretation means that all foreign NGOs have to ensure that abortion and family planning remain completely separate and independent of one another to avoid losing United States federal funds.

6. In no case should abortion be promoted as a method of family planning. But in circumstances where abortion is not against the law, such abortion should be safe and accessible. This both avoids the health complications (and deaths) arising from unsafe abortions and allows family planning counsellors direct access

1. Assembly debate on 30 September 2003 (28th Sitting) (see Doc.9901, report of the Committee on Equal Opportunities for Women and Men, rapporteur: Mrs Zwerver). Text adopted by the Assembly on 30 September 2003 (28th Sitting).

to women who have recently undergone an abortion in order to help them avoid another unwanted pregnancy. The goal of a successful family planning policy must be to reduce the number both of unwanted pregnancies and abortions.

7. The impact of the Mexico City Policy has translated into loss of considerable funding for international NGOs unable or unwilling to submit to its restrictive interpretation. The International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF) reports losses of millions of dollars for its member associations, especially in the developing world – but also, for example, in Albania, Serbia and Montenegro (especially in Kosovo), Moldova and the Russian Federation. Even international organisations, such as the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and the WHO have been hit. While some European governments have stepped up their donor aid, in response to the reinstatement of the Mexico City Policy, they have however not been able to bridge the gap completely.

8. Ironically, the impact of the Mexico City Policy is therefore the opposite of its intention: as clinics close and access to reproductive health services becomes more difficult for lack of funding, less poor women in Europe and worldwide can afford contraception, leading to an increase in unwanted pregnancies – and consequently abortions, many of them unsafe. This, again, drives up the maternal mortality rate.

9. The Parliamentary Assembly thus calls on the parliaments and governments of its member states:

9.1. to ensure that, in their own countries, sex education, reproductive health and family planning services are guided by the Cairo Programme of Action and the Ottawa Statement of Commitment;

9.2. not to promote abortion as a method of family planning, but to ensure that it remains safe and accessible where it is not against the law;

9.3. to encourage and stimulate discussion and an exchange of experience between member states on dealing with safe abortion as a public health and reproductive rights issue;

9.4. to consolidate and increase their donor support for reproductive and sexual health programmes in countries which have not reached WHO maternal health targets, by reviewing and, if necessary, increasing their commitment within their aid budgets (bearing in mind the international consensus that developed countries should give at least 0.7% of GDP to development aid);

9.5. to prioritise, in their international development policies, the allocation of funds to those organisations which have lost funding as a result of the Mexico City Policy;

9.6. to affirm their support for the Cairo Programme of Action and the Ottawa Statement of Commitment and to engage the United States in an informed debate about the harmful impact of the reinstatement of the Mexico City Policy worldwide, but especially in Council of Europe member states, encouraging President George W. Bush to rescind it.