



Abortion Rights
Coalition of Canada

Coalition pour le droit à
l'avortement au Canada

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Conservative Government Contradicts Itself

Long-time funding for safe abortion and family planning in jeopardy

NATIONAL – Despite the Conservative government’s promise on Wednesday that “Canada is not currently going to be changing its approach to improving maternal and infant health,” that appears to be exactly what it’s doing. According to Conservative MPs and spokespersons, the new maternal health initiative will have “absolutely nothing to do with abortion,” (Shelly Glover); family planning measures were never part of Harper’s focus for funding; and “there’s no intention on regenerating any debate on abortion.” (Bev Oda)

“This represents a major and troubling shift in policy, because Canada has funded family planning and safe abortion care in developing countries since the mid-1980’s,” said Joyce Arthur, Coordinator of the Abortion Rights Coalition of Canada. Through CIDA (the Canadian International Development Agency), Canada has been funding the International Planned Parenthood Federation (IPPF), which provides a wide range of reproductive healthcare, including family planning and abortion. However, International Co-operation Minister Bev Oda has failed to renew IPPF’s \$18 million in funding over the next three years, which expired in December.

“We suspect that not renewing this funding could be related to Conservative MP Brad Trost’s petition last fall to stop government funding to IPPF, because a small part of its work is providing safe abortion services,” said Carolyn Egan, a spokesperson for ARCC. “The government’s anti-abortion ideology is well-known – most Conservative MPs are anti-choice. So we fear that the government might be planning to adopt a disastrous Bush policy from the U.S. which cut funding to aid organizations providing contraceptives and abortion care,” said Egan, concerns also voiced by Liberal Leader Michael Ignatieff, Liberal MP Keith Martin, and others. “Those cuts closed many health clinics in developing countries, leading to significant increases in unintended pregnancies, unsafe abortions, and maternal and infant death,” said Egan.

“It’s just not possible to protect maternal or child health by denying help to the 20 million women every year – mostly mothers – who risk their lives by resorting to illegal,

unsafe abortion," said Arthur. She explained that 13% of maternal mortality is due to unsafe abortion – that's 68,000 women a year – and when a woman dies from unsafe abortion, her existing children are 10 times more likely to die within the next 2 years.* Further, family planning is strongly linked to maternal and infant health in the developing world, because delaying and spacing pregnancies saves the lives of mothers and their babies and improves outcomes.

"By turning their backs on women who lack family planning services or resort to unsafe abortions, the Conservatives have decided that their lives are not worth saving," said Egan. "In effect, Canada now has an official anti-choice foreign policy that endangers the lives and health of women and children in other countries, while cynically pretending to save them."

Arthur and Egan urged the government to immediately renew funding for IPPF, and to explicitly include family planning and safe abortion in its maternal health initiative. "It's an essential part of saving the lives of countless women and children around the world," said Arthur.

* See attached "*Key facts about maternal and infant health in developing countries*". Also available on our website: <http://www.arcc-cdac.ca/action/key-facts-maternal-health.html>

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Key facts about maternal and infant health in developing countries:

- 19-20 million women in developing countries resort to unsafe (usually illegal) abortions every year. 98% of unsafe abortions occur in countries with restrictive abortion laws (generally archaic laws passed by former colonial powers). There are 42 million abortions a year in total.
- 68,000 women die every year from unsafe abortion. 8 million women experience complications serious enough to require treatment. Of those, 3 million never receive medical treatment.
- Thirteen percent of all pregnancy-related deaths are due to unsafe abortion.
- Unsafe abortion is the only cause of maternal mortality that is entirely preventable.
- The highest abortion rates in the world are generally in developing countries with strict criminal laws against abortion. Laws don't stop abortion; they only drive it underground and make it dangerous. (Abortion rates are lower and have been declining in countries where it is legal and widely available.)
- 220,000 children worldwide lose their mothers every year from abortion-related deaths. (Most women in the developing world who have abortions are married with children.)
- When a pregnant woman dies from unsafe abortion, her existing children are 10 times more likely to die within the next two years.
- 215 million women in the developing world have an unmet need for modern contraceptives (meaning they want to avoid a pregnancy but are using an ineffective family planning method or no method).
- If all women who wanted contraception received it, more than 53 million unintended pregnancies would be averted, preventing 25 million abortions, 150,000 maternal deaths, and 640,000 newborn deaths. (Childbirth is dangerous in many developing countries – for example, the lifetime risk of maternal death is 1 in 17 in West and Central Africa, and 1 in 8000 in industrialized countries.)
- Additional consequences of unsafe abortion include loss of productivity, economic burden on public health systems, stigma, and long-term health problems like infertility.
- The costs of treating the 5 million women who are hospitalized every year after unsafe abortion is at least \$460 million. In Africa, complications of abortion account for 30 to 50 percent of maternal deaths, and hospitals' maternity wards and budgets are often largely diverted to treating these complications.
- Safe legal abortion saves women's lives. Without exception, every country that has legalized abortion has seen dramatic decreases in deaths and serious complications due to unsafe abortion. In western industrialized countries, death from unsafe abortion has been virtually eliminated.

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