

Gagged and Bound

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, November 18, 2003

“We talk in hiding, whispering to each other.”

“When I am interviewed by the press, I must choose the words I say very carefully and must limit what I can speak about.”

Confessions of political activists in a totalitarian regime? No, these are words of overseas workers in reproductive health services that receive U.S. dollars for family planning assistance. These proponents of education for women on contraception, sexually transmitted diseases, and prenatal care are not allowed to even mention abortion, much less offer it. They can't talk about it with patients, and they can't talk about it with policymakers. No counseling. No lobbying. Nothing. Clinicians fear that if they even utter the word, their funding will be cut.

This climate of fear is revealed in a recent report, “Breaking the Silence,” distributed by the Center for Reproductive Rights, a nonprofit legal advocacy group. The authors studied the impact of President Bush's Global Gag Rule, and the results show a frightening pattern: closed clinics, botched abortions, medical disabilities, and death.

The gag rule applies even if health clinics use non-U.S. funds and even if abortion is legal in that country. Since the U.S. is the largest donor of family-planning funds to developing countries, the financial effects have been devastating for groups that refuse to comply. In Nepal, several clinics have closed, and family planning groups have laid off a substantial number of staff members. In Zambia, Ethiopia, Uganda, community outreach programs have been canceled, health workers dismissed.

Five clinics have closed in Kenya, where unsafe abortions are now “prevalent,” according to a member of a nongovernmental group opposed to the gag rule. As with most of those interviewed for the Center's report, she would only speak anonymously: “Conservatives have made it impossible to let information flow freely. Consequently, young women don't know about their bodies, about their sexuality and its consequences. The result is misery and death from unsafe abortion.”

It was in the dark days of the sixties, when abortions in the U.S. were still illegal, that reports surfaced of dangerous back-alley procedures. The clandestine operations were hard to track, but studies show that women may have obtained up to 1.2 million illegal abortions in one year alone. In 1973, the Supreme Court paved the way for safe abortions with *Roe v. Wade*, which granted women the right to choose—in private. But that was too late for the estimated 5,000 to 10,000 American women who had been dying each year from illicit abortions.

For the poorest women around the world, those dark times are back. Sticks, catheters, powdered glass, herbs, lemon juice, detergent, and cow dung are the coat hangers of the world's women. Each year, complications from these 20 million homegrown procedures kill some 70,000 women; millions more suffer permanent injuries.

Ethiopian Doctor Eunice Brookman-Amisshah, one of few willing to speak out publicly, describes the impact: "Contrary to its stated intentions, the global gag rule results in more unwanted pregnancies, more unsafe abortions, and more deaths of women and girls. We who have seen those effects first-hand can no longer tolerate silence about the gag rule's tragic effects."

Instead of heeding this cry, the current U.S. administration, in a nod to its right-wing supporters, is proposing to extend the gag rule to overseas clinics that offer HIV/AIDS counseling. Once again, women will be deeply affected: 50 percent of all persons living with the lethal disease are female. The problem is most acute in sub-Saharan Africa, where women account for 58 percent of all HIV-positive adults.

Why should we care about our foreign policies restricting women's rights? Because those policies are becoming a hallmark of the president's domestic agenda, as well. Mr. Bush just signed the first ban on a late-term abortion procedure—even though it's used rarely, and then in extremely complicated cases or when a woman's life is at stake. The ban is "inappropriate, ill-advised, and dangerous," according to the American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists. But the proponents ignored medical evidence for the sake of political ideology—just as the gag rule ignores international standards of care for women's reproductive health.

Catering to the religious right, Bush is also winning kudos from Catholic bishops, who have just renewed their hard-line stance against contraception as part of their anti-abortion campaign. These men are out

of step with the public: 96% of Catholics ignore Church teaching on contraception, and a majority of Americans support a woman's right to choose.

President Bush calls his actions compassionate conservatism. I call it coercive conservatism.