
End of Trump's rule will not end the assault on reproductive rights in Africa

Saoyo Tabitha Griffith*

As President Trump's term in office comes to an end, [analysis](#) has focused on what his leadership meant for climate change, the racial divide, the US Supreme Court, foreign relations and human rights. Largely overlooked is the impact that his policies and politics had in Sub-Saharan Africa in relation to the advancement of sexual and reproductive rights.

Since the international Population Conference in 1994, the struggle to safeguard sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR) has seen each side rely on political pressure, [organized protests](#) and legislative reform to push for or against its advancement. Trump's four year policies not only financed but also emboldened religious and fundamentalist groups in many African countries. In South Africa, Malawi, Zambia, Ghana, Kenya and Nigeria there were [continuous attacks](#) on policies, court rulings and proposed law reform to support access to safe abortion, comprehensive sexuality education and LGBT rights. His administration's intolerance to the advancement of bodily autonomy, reproductive freedom and sexuality education quickly found [local advocates](#). This led to increased disinformation, online cyber trolling, undermining of the United Nations and in some instances physical attacks against those supportive of reproductive rights.

The most important example is the impact of the Mexico City Policy (Global Gag Rule) reinstated by Trump's Administration in 2017. This expanded policy denied funding to foreign non-governmental organizations by demanding that they do not perform, counsel or refer women to abortion services. In return for compliance US global health assistance would be forthcoming. By forcing NGOs to drop any abortion related work, the policy systematically attacked women and girls from African states that have for years been heavily dependent on US aid to advance sexual and reproductive health. The [African Population Health and Research Centre](#) argues that the policy is associated with an overall decrease in contraceptive use and an increase in unsafe abortions. Across many African states, this led to the [closure of clinics](#) that were stripped of their funding and which suffered staff shortages, pay cuts and a shortage of family planning stock. This badly fragmented reproductive health services.

Alongside the gag rule came increased funding to religious groups. The US President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) [Operational Guidance 2019](#) favoured working with local faith based networks. This is despite church resistance to providing comprehensive sexuality education and addressing the rising issue of sexual violence in religious settings. The US government actively [aided](#) conservative Christian groups to scoop up more funding. During

* PhD student, School of Law and Politics, Cardiff University, UK. Email saoyogriffith@gmail.com

its [Ministerial to Advance Religious Freedom in 2019](#) the State Department offered faith-based organizations a tutorial in applying for government contracts to provide health services abroad. It was stated that conscientious objections to providing comprehensive sexual and reproductive health care was not a barrier to getting funded; indeed it explicitly stated that an applicant with this position was preferable.

Furthermore, Trump's administration gradually [decreased funding](#) to the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). This significantly threatened the ability to deliver reproductive services to millions of women and girls around the globe, particularly those in vulnerable humanitarian settings. By 2020, Trump's administration had deliberately [withheld funds](#) to support UNFPA for four consecutive years even during a pandemic that had disproportionate effects on women.

In October 2020 the US government, co-sponsored by Egypt and Uganda among others, launched the virtual [Geneva Consensus Declaration](#). This is a non-binding position paper that denies abortion as an international human right. It requires that the United Nations allow states the sovereignty to design their own laws regulating matters of abortion and the family, a dangerous concept and free hand particularly for states that have a poor human rights record. The Declaration has so far been co-signed by sixteen African states including Burkina Faso, Benin, Kenya, Zambia, Sudan, Congo, Cameroon, The Gambia and Niger. It is strong evidence of the retrogressive steps that the US takes to curtail women's rights. With increased funding, anti-gender groups have become bolder in undermining the United Nations and speaking out against embattled civil society organizations in Africa. These anti gender groups actively engage in parliamentary and court processes using religious, political and cultural language [to oppose SRHR rights](#).

The results have been devastating. In November 2018, Niger ordered [the closure](#) of two reproductive health centres run by Marie Stopes International on grounds that they were illegally performing abortions. This was replicated in both Kenya and Nigeria with police officers raiding a Marie Stopes clinic in Lagos on May 2019. A [similar ban](#) against Marie Stopes was witnessed in Kenya in November 2018 fronted by the Kenya Medical Practitioners Board. [In South Africa](#), efforts by the Department of Basic Education to expand the Comprehensive Sexuality Education curriculum were met with religious resistance, and deliberate peddling of misinformation. There was an attack on the curriculum in 2019 with the argument that teaching children about their bodies would lead to an early interest in sex. A similar narrative was displayed in Ghana on the proposed school sex education program. Many religious groups termed it a ["satanic"](#) attempt to promote LGBT values. The policy never saw the light of day.

The incoming US administration has a great deal of work to do to undo the damage of these policies. Beyond repealing the gag rule on paper, its long-lasting consequences in Sub-Saharan Africa must be addressed. Deliberate financial, policy and political commitments will be needed to redress the harm caused by these newly emboldened anti-gender groups.