



Australian Federation of University Women Inc.

PO Box 224, Enmore NSW 2042

<http://www.afuw.org.au>

14 July 2008

The Hon. Stephen Smith MP
Minister for Foreign Affairs
Parliament House
Canberra ACT 2600

Dear Mr Smith,

Re Guidelines preventing use of AusAid money for family planning organizations that include abortion as one of the options available for birth control.

The Australian Federation of University Women wrote to you in January 2008 urging the lifting of the ban for allocating Australian foreign overseas aid money for family planning agencies that included abortion as an option in their advice to women in developing countries.

You advised us in your reply that an advisory group had been convened on this issue and that a decision was awaiting their report. We have noted a recent news item in the *Age* to the effect that the report is about to be sent to you and that this would be followed by a meeting when Parliament resumes in August so that you could discuss the recommendations with those responsible for the report. The *Age* paragraph also stated: 'sources say that a majority [of the group] wants the restriction lifted.'

We very much hope that this is so and that you will act on such advice. No one welcomes the idea of abortion, even if they do not subscribe to specific religious prohibitions against it. Nonetheless we believe that the current policy contributes not only to a great deal of personal suffering, even death, for individual women but also to continuing levels of poor health and poverty in the relevant countries.

Fertility rates in countries with which AusAid has connections, such as PNG, the Solomons, Cambodia and Laos, are somewhat more than double the Australian rate of 1.75 per women – in East Timor it is 7.39, higher than most African countries – but the maternal and infant mortality rates are very much higher than in Australia. In Australia 5 babies die for every 1,000 births; in the countries cited, the infant mortality rate ranges from 32 to 88. In Australia, 8 women die for every 100,000 births; in the countries cited the maternal mortality ranges from 130 to an appalling 660.

Many of these maternal and infant deaths must be attributable to women being obliged to conceive and bear children in excess of the number that they feel they can provide for and in circumstances that seriously endanger their health and/or that of their baby. Maternal death can also have serious implications for the health and economic and social welfare of the surviving children in the family. Australia should not be contributing to the creation of the misery reflected in these statistics.

Contraception is clearly preferable to abortion, but may be beyond the reach of many of these

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women for reasons of expense or simple unavailability, quite apart from cultural and religious objections to its use, even though it is known that it will be resorted to by women desperate not to bear an unwanted baby. Contraceptive prevalence in Australia is 76%; in the countries cited it ranges from an extreme low of 9% in East Timor to 29% in Laos.

At the Triennial Conference of AFUW in 2003, the following policy resolution was passed:

The 32nd Conference of AFUW urges the Australian government to give the fullest possible political and financial support to the work of the International Family Planning Association, including

- (a) support for birth control programs that include all methods that are legally available in the host country, and
- (b) for the distribution of condoms as a measure to counteract HIV/AIDS.

We believe that it is high time that the first part of this policy was adopted by Australia and we urge you to include it among other welcome changes being made by the ALP Government,

Yours Sincerely

(Dr) Jennifer Strauss AM
President, Australian Federation of University Women