

# WITNESS *for* JUSTICE

A weekly commentary from  
the United Church of Christ

Issue #743 | June 29, 2015

## Women's Bodies Are Not Battlefields

by Kristen Walling  
Justice and Peace Fellow

The Helms Amendment, enacted in 1973, states that foreign assistance may not be used "to pay for the performance of abortion as a method of family planning or to motivate or coerce any person to practice abortions." Each administration since then, Democratic and Republican alike, has chosen to interpret the provision as an absolute ban on funding any abortions, with no exceptions for women and girls whose lives are in danger or who have been victims of sexual violence. Cases of rape, incest, or life endangerment, are not "family planning," yet the law has been misinterpreted for decades to restrict the care women can receive in hospitals and clinics. It is time for the U.S. government to change the way it responds to the needs of those recovering from sexual trauma.

We are seeing it all around the world: violence against women is being used intentionally and systematically as a tool of war. This is not a new practice, but events such as the Nigerian girls' kidnapping have brought gender-based violence into the spotlight. Militant groups in numerous countries raid villages and rape women to establish dominance and instill fear in the community. Survivors of rape in conflict face numerous physical, emotional, and cultural barriers. With no access to safe abortion care they are often forced to carry the children of those who have raped them and deal with the stigma or seek out illegal and medically unsafe abortions on their own. Women and girls all over the world die from unsafe abortions every year.

President Obama is well aware of these issues. He has spoken compassionately about women and girls raped in conflict on several occasions. He has spoken, but he has not yet chosen to act. Abortion rights are a touchy subject, and it is not surprising that he has not chosen to take a lead on this issue. Crafting and implementing policy is a delicate balance of capacity, competing priorities, and public opinion. There are moments to be cautious, as well as moments that require compromise. But let me be clear:

*God is still speaking,*  
**UNITED CHURCH  
OF CHRIST**



this is not one of those moments.

A few weeks ago, I was honored to be among a group of faith leaders from a broad spectrum of religious traditions that gathered at the White House to speak out against this violence and demand an immediate change in the administration's interpretation of the Helms Amendment. We lamented that political and cultural wars are being fought with women's bodies, and we stand firm in our moral conviction that as people of faith we must do all we can to stop the violence. Women's bodies are not battlefields.

Moreover, correcting the way the administration interprets and implements the Helms Amendment would also bring U.S. foreign policy in line with our domestic policies. If we are willing to make exceptions for American women who have been raped or whose lives are in danger, why do we not extend these same rights to women and girls around the world? It is time for our President to use his power to stand up for the rights of victims of sexual violence.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Kristen Walling is a Justice and Peace Fellow.*

**LEARN**

[ucc.org/justice](http://ucc.org/justice)

**DONATE**

[bit.ly/jwmnln](http://bit.ly/jwmnln)

**ARCHIVE**



[bit.ly/witness4justice](http://bit.ly/witness4justice)

*The United Church of Christ has more than 5,000 churches throughout the United States. Rooted in the Christian traditions of congregational governance and covenantal relationships, each UCC setting speaks only for itself and not on behalf of every UCC congregation. UCC members and churches are free to differ on important social issues, even as the UCC remains principally committed to unity in the midst of our diversity.*