

Canada's Stance on Abortion Funding Ignores Reality

By JANET BAGNALL, *The Gazette*
January 27, 2012

There was an element missing when Prime Minister Stephen Harper made an otherwise masterful effort, during the 2010 G8 summit in Muskoka, to paint his government as the West's leading benefactor to, and champion of, women and children in the developing world.

Harper insisted, presumably for ideological consistency and out of concern to keep his core constituency happy, that none of the inter-national maternal and child health projects he was urging the G8 to support would provide abortion services.

It was a question, he said, of obeying other countries' laws.

But here, as a new study this week points out, is the part Harper left out: the absence of reproductive health services, including abortion, leads to death, serious medical problems and a frightening number of orphaned children condemned to poverty, with all that that implies for their future well-being.

In the absence of accessible contraception and safe abortions, tens of thousands of women in the developing world die every year trying to terminate unwanted pregnancies.

In Africa and Latin America, 95 to 97 per cent of abortions are unsafe. The new study, by the New York-based Guttmacher Institute and published in the British medical journal *The Lancet*, found that globally, 47,000 women died in 2008 as a result of

an unsafe abortion, and another 8.5 million women had serious medical complications. (An unsafe abortion is defined as "done either by people lacking the necessary skills or in an environment that does not conform to minimum medical standards, or both.")

The Harper government chose to ignore that reality.

Instead, it presented its contribution to maternal and child health in less contentious terms, as a response to a lack of clean water, trained medical staff and inoculations against common child-hood diseases.

As necessary as those measures are, any serious effort to help women and children in the developing world can-not ignore the impact of un-planned and unwanted pregnancies and childbirth. In the developing world, pregnancy and childbirth are the biggest causes of death among teen-age girls, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development. Among children in the developing world under age 5, as many as nine per cent of deaths could be avoided by in-creasing the spacing between births, again according to the OECD.

Instead of refusing to fund projects that would allow abortion, Canada should refuse to fund projects that don't allow it. Going along with other governments' refusal to provide adequate medical care to their citizens condones that lack of care, including the deaths that result from it. It is not too late for Canada to change its mind. It could cite the best of reasons: that lives are at stake.

The proportion of un-safe abortions globally has climbed in recent years, going from 44 per cent in 1995 to 49 per cent in 2008, the latest year for which worldwide statistics are available. Abortion rates were lowest in jurisdictions where abortion laws are liberal and birth control accessible, such as North

America and Western Europe, and highest in regions like Africa and Latin America, where abortion laws are restrictive and birth control difficult to obtain. Western Europe's abortion rates are lowest, at 12 per 1,000 women aged 15 to 44; in North America, the average rate is 19; and in east Africa, the estimated rate is 38. These are facts that should give anti-abortionists pause.

According to the study published in The Lancet, the demand for contraception in jurisdictions that do not make it accessible or that turn family planning into a shameful thing is outstrip-ping the supply of family-planning services, with the result that abortion rates are climbing.

The demand for contraception is driven mainly by a growing desire for small families and for better control over the timing of births. If the unmet need for contraceptive

services in developing countries was satisfied, there would be 52 million fewer un-intended pregnancies a year, the OECD says.

While Canada's government tries to cling to a 1950s North American vision of family life, the reality in the developing world is quite different: girls married as children, bearing children of their own at age 15 and 16, with little or no access to contraception and even less to a safe abortion.

Outlawing abortion doesn't stop the practice; it just makes it more dangerous.

By insisting that abortion not be funded, Canada joined the ranks of policy-makers who refuse to address the needs of women who lack the political power and money to change the way they're treated - which is shameful.