



September 2007

Dear Volunteer Leaders and Group Coordinators,

Amnesty International's International Executive Committee (IEC) adopted a position on Sexual and Reproductive Rights that includes support for abortion in very particular circumstances, in the context of our work to stop grave human rights abuses against women and girls. This new policy, which grew out of our campaigning to stop violence against women and the tragic circumstances in which women all too often find themselves, will enable the organization to:

- Support women who seek a safe, early medical termination of pregnancy in cases of rape, incest, sexual assault, or when a woman's life or health is at grave risk;
- Urge governments to make medical care available to women who suffer complications from unsafe abortions;
- Oppose imprisonment and other criminal penalties for abortion against women and their providers.

In order to help our activist members respond to inquiries and potential criticism in your communities, the SRR Working Group has compiled materials and guidance for your use in decision-making and in communications. The documents are located in the Women's Rights section of the Amnesty International USA website and include the following:

- Letter from the Executive Director: This document outlines the policy decision and the international context and can be sent to those who have questions about the policy.
- Two-page background document: This document gives more details on the context of this decision and the consultation process. Located on members' section of aiusa.org.
- Letter to the Editor: This document should be used to respond to critical editorials or letters to the editor in local newspapers. See below concerning general media inquiries.
- FAQ: This document covers questions concerning the policy, specific ways for dealing with criticism from those who disagree, and how to minimize any negative impact on your group.
- Letter by Larry Cox in response to the July 2, 2007 statement issued by the US Catholic Conference of Bishops.
- Letter from Larry Cox to members of Catholics Against Capital Punishment and their response.
- International Cases: This document describes real-life cases related to the three SRR policy areas in countries outside the US.
- SRR Handout for 2006 Regional Conferences: Although the document was written before the decision was finalized, it remains a good source of information regarding the policies, what the terms mean, and why AI is pursuing these issues.
- Information on AI's current work in the area of Sexual and Reproductive Rights: <http://www.amnestyusa.org/women/reproductiverights.html>

General guidance:

What to do if contacted by the media:

Any press inquiries should be sent to Gwen Fitzgerald (fitzgerald@aiusa.org) or Suzanne Trimel (strimel@aiusa.org) in the Communications Department's media office.

What to do if you are uncomfortable or uncertain on how to respond to inquiries from members and the public:

Contact your field organizer in the regional office, email the SRR Working Group at srinfo@aiusa.org or contact Suzanne Trimel (strimel@aiusa.org) directly.

What to do if a school's administration is unwilling to or uncomfortable with maintaining an Amnesty International group on campus:

There is no "one size fits all" response to such situations. Group coordinators, student area coordinators, and field organizers can work together to address the concerns of a particular school and to achieve a successful outcome. Success in these situations is not necessarily that all groups remain involved with Amnesty International; success here is that groups engage in a thoughtful reflection on the issues and the actual policy, not make decisions based upon what they think or have heard the policy is. Also, some schools may be able to find ways to remain engaged on the many human rights issues Amnesty International seeks to address. Student leaders have identified a number of different strategies which may or may not be effective in any given situation.

-When speaking to school administrators, explain that the group does not have to work on any particular issue (and in fact cannot possibly work on every campaign of the organization), emphasize that there are many issues and campaigns that have benefited from strong partnership between Amnesty International and religious institutions, and suggest that

-Offer to do a presentation to the school/administration. Bring real life stories or speaker if possible; provide stats and factsheets on the policy. Re-explain the stance, emphasizing the health angle. Illustrate why the policy is critically needed in other countries and not related to efforts to expand or restrict abortion in the US. Explain that it is for the protection of women's lives in very particular circumstances. Talk about Catholic organizations that are remaining engaged with Amnesty International to further joint human rights goals, such as death penalty abolition and religious freedom.

-Given the power dynamics of students engaging with administrators, engage faculty and parent support, particularly that of the faculty advisor. There may also be clergy willing to remain in coalition with Amnesty International despite disagreement with the policy. Amnesty International staff can also be helpful in such situations, as more of a "peer" with administrators or community members.

-If the administrators decide that the group cannot remain at the school, there are a couple of options. The group could be "re-purposed" as a general human rights advocacy group, not officially affiliated with Amnesty International. Also, students could affiliate with the local community group rather than be a school group. Finally, students could register as a school group affiliated with a different community institution, such as a community center.

What to do if a local group is uncomfortable with the policy (either in whole or in part) or if communities challenge Amnesty International's work in other areas due to the policy:

Similar to the challenges faced by some school groups, there is no easy solution. Group coordinators and volunteer leaders have taken a variety of approaches, depending upon the context and their pre-existing relationships.

-First, find out what the group or community members think the policy is. Asking questions about their understanding of the policy will help you know what their concerns or objections are based upon.

-Second, for many people, general descriptions of the three parts of the policy, along with answers to a few questions, are sufficient. Not everyone wants or needs detailed policy information. The background document and FAQs are good to familiarize yourself with. It is perfectly okay to pass any questions you cannot answer "up the ladder" to those who have more information. No one is an expert on every AI policy or human rights issue. Such resource people include your state's stop violence against women coordinator, your field organizer, or the SRR working group.

-Emphasizing the global nature of the policy and giving examples outside the US helps to move the discussion beyond the “pro-life”/“pro-choice” paradigm commonly found in the US.

-Finally, recognizing that abortion is a contentious issue in the US, do not expect to change people’s mind on it. It is more fruitful a) to ensure they understand the context of the decision and the international situations that led Amnesty International to explore this issue and b) to encourage them to remain connected with the broader human rights priorities of Amnesty International. As one leader put it: don’t condemn our work over one issue.

What to do if a “pro-choice” organization wants to engage with activists on abortion-related issue, such as block or promote a particular piece of state-level legislation:

As with requests to join any coalition, there are multiple facets to consider. It is generally a good idea to discuss coalition opportunities with your field organizer in the regional office; in this particular case, your state stop violence against women coordinator is another good resource. The Stop Violence Against Women Coordinators are also encouraged to consult with one another via their listserv.

-Depending upon the particulars of the above the scenarios, there are a couple of ways Amnesty International could and could not engage with that particular coalition. One, it may be okay to speak at a public event on the human rights angle of a particular situation, even if we do not support the outcome the coalition seeks to promote. For example, although Amnesty International does not work extensively on police brutality in the US, we can speak at events on the international guidelines and standards for police conduct and accountability. However, in some circumstances Amnesty International could then become affiliated with the outcome of the coalition even if it is not our human rights goal.

-Second, as with discussions about joining any coalition, it is important to clarify the role of each person/organization within the coalition. What specifically does the coalition seek from Amnesty International?

-When speaking with the members of the coalition and others engaged on the particular issue, begin with clarifying what the policy is/is not, with emphasizing that Amnesty International is not “pro-choice,” and with giving the human rights framework to the policy. In some circumstances, it may be appropriate to share your personal views on the policy. However, always be aware of your role as representing Amnesty International in the particular setting.

What to do if members of a death penalty coalition no longer want to partner with Amnesty International:

If Amnesty International has been actively engaged with the coalition, hopefully there are good relationships between the coalition members and the Amnesty International representatives. In that case, many of the strategies outline previously are valid here: provide accurate information, focus on mutual goals regarding abolition, and enlist other coalition members as allies. The numerous documents available, such as the Letter from the Executive Director and the Background Document, will be helpful, as will the correspondence between AIUSA’s Program to Abolish the Death Penalty and the Catholics Against the Death Penalty. That relationship is an example of a partner organization disagreeing with one of our policies but remaining engaged on another policy.