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## Fixing, preventing obstetric fistula

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THE politics of abortion adversely affect areas of women's health that should be kept separate. The conservative position is that if women are offered any reproductive control at all, then little or no funding is available for other health concerns, including obstetric fistula.

Women who suffer from obstetric fistula might be likened to modern victims of leprosy. They are scorned, mocked, and sent to the edges of society where they barely make a living because nobody can stand to be around them.

It's a preventable condition that women - many are young girls and child brides - in developing countries have after long and difficult child labor. About 95 percent of the time they deliver stillborn children. Where American women have access to good health care in the event of a difficult labor, women in developing nations don't have that benefit or the option of giving birth by Caesarean section. And that's setting aside cultural standards in developing societies where pregnant women who do go to hospitals are labeled "weak."

Obstetric fistula describes a hole that develops inside a mother's body after the baby's head presses on her soft internal tissues for hours. If not surgically corrected, the rest of their lives the women leak urine and feces, causing others to shun them. Trying to keep clean is hopeless, and the body fluids leave painful sores on the women's legs.

That's terrible, but it's only part of the story. The women become social outcasts, too, unable to participate in religious events or travel in public circles. They cannot put on enough clothes to try to hide. The stench identifies them as victims of a condition that is not their fault.

Awful? Yes. Very much so. Only it's worse for the 2 million women throughout Africa, South Asia, and Arab states. This is incredible partly because the cost of surgery to correct obstetric fistula is only about \$300 each. Ninety percent of the women only need simple surgery, and the success rate is about 90 percent. After surgery, many can later have children.

This has not been a problem in America since the improvement of Caesarean surgery. In fact, where the Waldorf Astoria now is in New York City once stood the world's first fistula hospital, the 19th century Woman's Hospital of New York.

The Bush Administration has withheld releasing up to \$34 million per year since 2002 that Congress allotted for the United Nations Population Fund. The administration believed the agency supported coercive abortions and sterilization in China. However, Heidi Breeze-Harris,

cofounder of One by One, a campaign to raise donations for the Global Campaign to End Fistula for the prevention and treatment of women with fistula, said that has been proven untrue. A team sent to China by the administration found no proof to support the suspicion, and also learned that UNFPA opposed the practices.

Still, the administration has not released the funding. Not doing so forces women who could be helped to endure continued immense suffering. Even when House Democrats tried last year to earmark \$25 million only for fistula surgeries for UNFPA, the Chicago Tribune said that was defeated through procedural maneuvering.

If UNFPA had the additional funding, more Third World women's lives could be improved with access to the medical help that would be provided. Family planning does not just mean abortion, and it's too bad the two have become synonymous.

It's widely recognized that the lives of women in any society improve when they have access to good health care and education. In turn, whole societies improve.

But apparently, key members of this administration, like the Reagan and former Bush administrations, were absent from class on the days those lessons were discussed.

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