

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

March 5, 2018

The Honorable Rex Tillerson
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street, NW
Washington, D.C. 20520

Dear Secretary Tillerson,

We are deeply disturbed by a recent report detailing deliberate censorship of critical information on women's reproductive rights and discrimination in the State Department's annual Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2017 (Human Rights Reports, or Reports).¹ According to press reporting, a State Department "directive," allegedly from a senior State Department official, would remove sections from the Reports that "describe societal views on family planning, including how much access women have to contraceptives and abortion." The Department is also reportedly seeking to censor sections that detail key information on "discrimination, societal abuses, and trafficking in persons."² This prescription fails to account for the reproductive health needs and deadly discrimination that millions of people around the globe face each and every day. It undermines the credibility of the Human Rights Reports as a whole and suggests to the rest of the world that the United States does not value, or even permit, a fact-based approach to women's health issues and anti-discrimination efforts. We ask that these Reports include all relevant information and updates on human rights issues, and that they are published without these harmful and inexplicable restrictions that serve only to hurt millions of women around the world.

The Human Rights Reports are released annually and serve as a non-biased and fact-based accounting of conditions in dozens of countries around the world. Legislators, agencies, international organizations, and activists use the Reports as a basis for analysis, advocacy, and most importantly, action. Excluding information from the Reports, whether it be regarding women's rights or discrimination, undoubtedly slows or reverses progress on addressing these important issues and undermines the credibility of the reports. Further, claims from a State Department spokeswoman that exclusion of important information on reproductive rights or discrimination stems from an effort to avoid "duplicating statistics that are readily available from international organizations" is shamefully disingenuous. Indeed, past senior State Department officials understood the purpose and importance of information included in the Human Rights Reports, regardless of that information's existence elsewhere. Perhaps most alarming, however,

¹ Nahal Toosi, "State Department report will trim language on women's rights, discrimination," Politico, last modified February 21, 2018, accessed February 23, 2018, <https://www.politico.com/story/2018/02/21/department-women-rights-abortion-420361>.

² *Id.*

is the notion that the historically fact-based Human Rights Reports now suffer from politically motivated omissions, raising serious concerns that the Reports' "impact and integrity" will be threatened.³

The president, setting the tone for the rest of his administration, has consistently and contemptibly shown a flagrant disregard for human rights. This administration has implemented historic expansion of the Global Gag Rule despite the dangerous and well-documented threat this policy poses to women around the world. It ended funding for the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), which focuses on global maternal and reproductive health.⁴ Likewise, the president's most recent budget proposal would cut funding for international family planning in half.⁵ Contrary to American values, this administration is deliberately walking back America's longstanding tradition of leading the international community in ending anti-LGBTI persecution by failing to appoint a Special Envoy for the Human Rights of LGBTI Persons, by proposing to cut over \$1 billion from our efforts to combat HIV and AIDS around the globe, and by the failure of the administration's top leaders to condemn the state-sponsored violence targeting LGBTI people in places like Chechnya and Egypt. The State Department's failure to take proactive action to protect the rights of women and LGBTI folks around the world is simply reprehensible and runs contrary to American values.

It is clear that the political purge of information on women's reproductive rights and discrimination from the Human Rights Reports would be yet another instance of America abdicating its position of leadership on critical international issues as a result of this administration's insistence on prioritizing ideology over facts. Therefore, in an effort to prevent this dereliction of duty on global women's health and anti-discrimination issues, we respectfully demand that these issues be included fully, without censor or undue political influence, when the Human Rights Reports are released. To help us better understand any efforts by State Department officials to suppress information on these issues, please provide the following information and documents by no later than March 15th:

1. Who gave the directive to censor or remove sections in the Human Rights Reports related to reproductive rights and "discrimination, societal abuses, and trafficking in persons"?
2. When and how were State Department officials directed to censor or remove sections in the Human Rights Reports related to reproductive rights and "discrimination, societal abuses, and trafficking in persons"?
3. What purpose does censoring or removing sections in the Human Rights Reports related to reproductive rights and "discrimination, societal abuses, and trafficking in persons" serve?
4. Please provide any communications distributed to or shared with State Department officials that conveyed orders or directions to censor or remove sections in the Human Rights Reports related to reproductive rights and "discrimination, societal abuses, and

³ *Id.*

⁴ Michelle Nichols, "U.S. withdraws funding for U.N. Population Fund," edited by Bill Rigby, Reuters, last modified April 3, 2017, accessed February 23, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-un-populationfund/u-s-withdraws-funding-for-u-n-population-fund-idUSKBN17600T>.

⁵ United States Department of State, *Congressional Justification: Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs, Fiscal Year 2019*, Washington, DC; Government Printing Office, last modified February 12, 2018, accessed February 23, 2018, https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/1868/FY_2019_CBJ.pdf.

trafficking in persons.” Such communications should include, but not be limited to, emails, letters, faxes, or any other written materials, as well as a list of any meetings, calls, or other oral communications in which such directives were discussed.

5. The Human Rights Reports were to be released on February 25, 2018, according to the statutory deadlines. What is the Department’s updated timeline to release the Reports?

Thank you in advance for your attention to this critical matter.

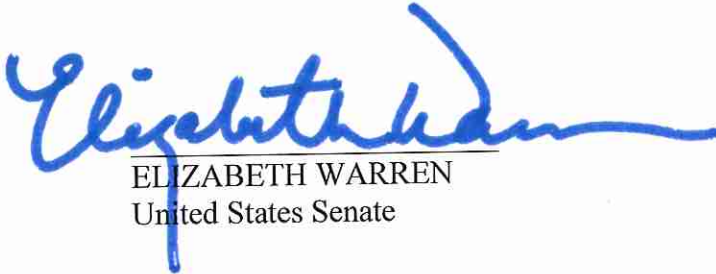
Sincerely,




RICHARD BLUMENTHAL
United States Senate



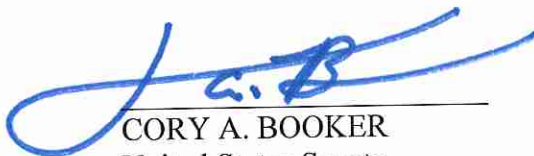
PATTY MURRAY
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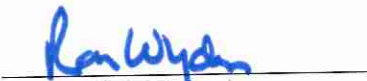
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