

Address for reply:
Humanists UK
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London EC1V 8BB

The Rt Hon Liz Truss MP
Secretary of State for Foreign,
Commonwealth, and Development Affairs
Foreign, Commonwealth,
and Development Office
King Charles Street
London SW1A 2AH

22 July 2022

Dear Ms Truss,

We are writing to you with serious concern about the deletion¹ of references to ‘sexual and reproductive health and rights’ and ‘bodily autonomy’ from the UK-organised ‘Statement on freedom of religion or belief and gender equality’.² We urge you to reverse this move, and hope you could explain why the change happened in the first place.

As Professor Ahmed Shaheed, the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, has said in response to the changes: ‘Claims that freedom of religion or belief can be invoked to deny women and girls the exercise and enjoyment of their sexual and reproductive health rights have no foundation in human rights. Rather, such claims must be rejected as representing intolerant and patriarchal attitudes that deny the equal rights of men and women to freedom of religion or belief. Such claims especially ignore that freedom of religion or belief also guarantees to women the right to bodily autonomy and conscientious choice.’

At a time when abortion provision around the world is under serious threat, due to the reversal of *Roe v Wade*, it has never been more important for the UK Government to stand up for sexual and reproductive health and rights and bodily autonomy. We note that the latest British Social Attitudes Survey to ask indicates that less than 5% of the UK population oppose access to abortion in all circumstances.³ In addition, 22 countries had signed up to the statement before revision – a similar number to those signing the other Ministerial statements – which is further indication that there is no sound reason for these amendments. We urge that they be reversed immediately.

We would like to ask to meet with you so we can discuss further the UK’s commitment to gender and freedom of religion or belief.

¹ ‘Abortion deleted from UK Government-organised international human rights statement’, Humanists UK, 19 July 2022: <https://humanists.uk/2022/07/19/abortion-deleted-from-uk-government-organised-international-human-rights-statement/>

² ‘Policy paper: Statement on freedom of religion or belief and gender equality’, purportedly updated 2 July 2022 but in fact last revised 18 July, Foreign, Commonwealth & Development Office: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality-statement-at-the-international-ministerial-conference-2022/statement-on-freedom-of-religion-or-belief-and-gender-equality>

³ British Social Attitudes Information System: <http://www.britsocat.com/>

Yours sincerely,

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Chief Executive, British Pregnancy Advisory Service (BPAS)

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Yasmine Ahmed
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Jemima Olchawski
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Helen Marshall
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Andrea Simon
Director, End Violence Against Women Coalition

Quinn McKew
Executive Director, Article 19

Ros Bragg
Director, Maternity Action

Mara Clarke
Founder, Abortion Support Network

Emma Campbell
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Jane Fisher
Director, Antenatal Results and Choices (ARC)

Dr Hayley Webb
Co-Chair, Doctors for Choice UK

Lesley Hoggart and Jayne Kavanagh
Co-Directors, Abortion Talk

Marge Berer
Retiring Coordinator, International Campaign for Women's Right to Safe Abortion

Tanya Taylor
Communications Manager, Sister Supporter

Rachel Adamson and Laura Tomson
Co-Directors, Zero Tolerance

Jackie Longworth
Chair, Fair Play South West, the women's equality network

Professor Claire de Than
Chair, Sexual Health and Disability Alliance

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CC
Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon, Human Rights Minister
Fiona Bruce MP, Prime Minister's Special Envoy on Freedom of Religion or Belief