

Aid that fosters poverty and death

FOR more than a decade Labor and Coalition governments have presided over a foreign aid policy that has condemned millions of families to poverty and contributed to the deaths of 68,000 women a year.

To court the vote of a conservative Christian senator, both sides jettisoned aid programs that tackled poverty by helping the poor control the number of children they had to feed.

In 1993 the Keating government froze the \$130 million we formerly spent on family planning programs.

In 1996 the Howard Government banned aid workers from providing many contraceptives or from giving women advice on unsafe abortions.

It introduced such strict reporting requirements on family planning aid most agencies gave up providing it.

The deals were done to get the vote of anti-abortion, anti-contraceptive independent Tasmanian Senator Brian Harradine. On many occasions Labor and Liberal governments needed his support to get legislation through the Senate.

Harradine left parliament in 2004 and the Howard Government now controls the Senate in its own right, but Harradine's legacy lives on. A pity that can't be said for scores of women worldwide, some 186 of whom die every day — according to one estimate — from unsafe abortions.

Typing up the family history written by my mother over summer, I was aghast to learn one of my great great aunts had given birth to 14 children!

She wasn't alone. Some of my other great aunts and great grandmothers had nine, 10 and seven children.

In an age when women could not control their fertility all



Sue Dunlevy

these hungry mouths condemned them to poverty.

Now, 130 years on, women can choose how many children they want and how to space them. Thanks to the pill and other forms of contraception, they can put off child-rearing until after they have finished their education and built a career.

Because they can now choose the size of their family, they can afford to offer the children they choose to bring into this world a better life.

Being able to control our fertility is what has made the feminist revolution possible.

But in hundreds of countries around the world today, still millions of women are enslaved, like my great aunts, by their fertility.

They don't have access to the contraception which would stop them getting pregnant in the first place.

And when their abject poverty leads them to abort the unwanted babies they can't support, 13 per cent of them will end up dead.

Aid agencies from the World Health Organisation to the UN now recognise that birth control is one of the primary solutions to world poverty.

"While food and water remain priorities, reproductive care is among the crucial elements that give refugees basic welfare and dignity that is their right," says the UN High Commission for Refugees.

But our governments have been running an aid policy that discourages giving advice that could help them out of poverty.



We're saying that it's okay for Australian women to have safe contraception and abortions, but poor people don't deserve the same rights.

There are 2.6 million people in the Asia Pacific who live off less than \$2 a day.

Marie Stopes International, a group that does provide family planning aid, told a parliamentary committee there were 76 million unintended pregnancies a year in the developing world. Each year 19 million abortions are carried out under unsanitary conditions resulting in 68,000 deaths.

Last week a group of 50 MPs from almost every party in parliament demanded the Harradine legacy end.

Describing Australia's foreign aid guidelines as "cruel and illogical" they said they "increased the likelihood that more women will die".

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer is now considering whether to act on the report.

These guidelines were backward looking when they were introduced. Today there is no longer even a political excuse for them.

It's time they were ended.