



Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State

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Dear Chris,

Thank you for your letter of 10 October expressing your concern about the issue of poverty and human rights abuses around the world. I share your concern about these issues.

The elimination of poverty is at the core of all of DFID's work. To this end we are very aware that poverty is not only about a lack of money and opportunity but about the failure to protect people's human rights. We are also aware that such failure disproportionately affects women and children. Respect for and commitment to the human rights and fundamental freedoms of poor people, and particularly children, as set out in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is central to our work.

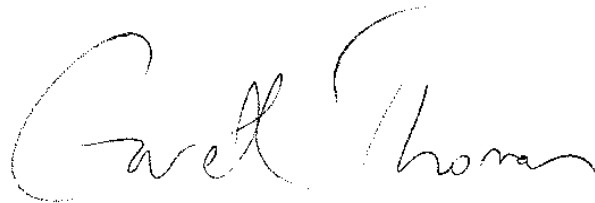
The shocking fact is that a woman in Malawi, Ethiopia or Nepal is over 200 times more likely to die as a result of pregnancy and childbirth than a woman in the UK. There are over 4 million preventable under 5 child deaths in sub-Saharan Africa every year. This is unacceptable. I agree with you that silence is not an option and would assure you that DFID is a vocal actor on these issues – International advocacy and raising the profile of the need to reduce maternal and newborn deaths is a key strand of our development strategy.

The UK government's policy on population and sexual and reproductive health in the developing world is also about providing choice. We believe that women should be able to decide freely and responsibly the number and spacing of their children. Unfortunately, all too often sexual intercourse takes place in circumstances not freely chosen or consenting. Sometimes contraception fails. Women, and very often young adolescent girls, may not be able to avoid unwanted pregnancy. Many women and girls, often desperate, seek abortions. The legal status of abortion has relatively little impact on the extent to which it is used to stop pregnancy. For example, in some countries where abortion is not permitted, abortion rates are up to twice as high as in many of the countries where abortion is allowed. Many of these unsafe abortions will be sought by vulnerable young girls.

Globally some 120 million women and men say they would like to use family planning but do not have adequate access to modern contraception. We are working to ensure that these people have access to the services they desire so that they can avoid unintended pregnancy and the all too often tragic consequence of seeking an unsafe abortion. Equally we work to ensure that young men and women have the information that they need to make safe and responsible decisions as they enter their reproductive lives.

We recognise the importance of human rights as a means of empowering all people, including adolescent girls, to make effective and informed decisions about their own lives.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Gareth Thomas". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping initial "G".

GARETH THOMAS