

# Human Life International: The Quiet Giant Underwriting Abortion Politics Abroad

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## Summary

Human Life International (HLI), a U.S. nonprofit based in Front Royal, Virginia, has spent decades quietly funding anti-abortion campaigns in foreign countries. HLI funds affiliated groups in nations where abortion is totally illegal or only legal in rare cases to preserve the life and health of the woman. In many of these areas, women are being jailed with decades-long sentences and are suffering enormous consequences under these laws.

While HLI's front-facing media doesn't talk about criminalizing women, the organization is spending millions of dollars and holding up its campaigns as examples for success when criminalization efforts succeed abroad.

In addition to advocating for harmful and punitive abortion bans, HLI has participated in foreign election-related activity that calls into question its 501(c)(3) tax status in the United States.

HLI's influence both at home and abroad is complex and far reaching, the extent of which is not fully known. What is clear, however, is HLI's ongoing commitment to making abortion a criminal offense without exception and under any circumstance. HLI's activities abroad are notable and concerning due to the extreme laws it supports, the conflicts between its documented positions and endorsed policies and its involvement in local political contests. This merits a close look by the IRS, as it appears that endorsing and promoting specific candidates, as HLI affiliates have done in the Philippines, violates the "Restriction of Political Campaign Intervention."

HLI is also closely related to C-FAM, a designated [hate group](#), and represents an anti-abortion mission at the United Nations. Moreover, C-Fam has close ties to the Trump administration; Trump judicial advisor Leonard Leo was on C-FAM's [Board of Patrons](#) recently as July 2017, and former U.N. Secretary Nikki Haley [asked](#) C-FAM to represent the United States at an international event.

EQUITY

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# Who is Human Life International?

Founded in 1981, Human Life International is a Virginia-based organization that claims to be "the world's largest pro-life and pro-family educational apostolate,"<sup>1</sup> with affiliates and associates in more than 100 countries.<sup>2</sup> Its Front Royal, Virginia headquarters is home to a complex web of anti-abortion causes, organizations, businesses and even a private school.

The organization funds education for local religious and civic leaders around the globe, providing training and materials to affiliates that in turn promote anti-abortion messages in their communities. HLI affiliates have become influential voices in their respective nations. These affiliates regularly work to galvanize support for anti-abortion policies and to gin up opposition to policies that expand access to reproductive health care.

HLI's affiliates have been directly involved in promoting harsh policies, endorsing anti-reproductive health candidates and resisting any rollback of limitations to abortion and birth control.

The extreme laws promoted via HLI's investments abroad are highly problematic. Women are criminalized for undergoing abortions for any reason and have even been jailed for experiencing common obstetric complications that local prosecutors spun into serious charges. El Salvador provides one example: [The Guardian](#) reported in 2017 that the Central American country's hardline abortion ban has "led directly to the prosecution, imprisonment, and even deaths of scores of women."<sup>3</sup>

However, HLI's history of funding foreign campaigns in support of harsh and punitive abortion bans appears to directly contradict the positions held by the organization's leadership. HLI's director of education and research Brian Clowes wrote in 2014 that "Pro-abortion leaders should be imprisoned, not the desperate women being pushed into abortion."<sup>4</sup> And in 2007, the director of education programs for the Hispanic division of Human Life International, Adolfo J. Castañeda, wrote an opinion piece titled "Women Who Have Abortions Should Get Help, Compassion Not Prison."<sup>5</sup>

## Abroad, HLI has spent millions advocating for hardline anti-abortion policies and even endorsing and promoting anti-abortion candidates for public office.

- HLI was founded in 1981<sup>6</sup> and began establishing affiliates in Latin America and elsewhere shortly thereafter. These affiliates were founded to educate local religious and civic leaders on so-called "pro-life" issues, providing training and materials in a number of countries around the world.<sup>7</sup> The affiliated leaders and/or organizations quickly became active promoters of anti-reproductive health policies in their respective nations.
- HLI spent nearly \$8 million since 2000 to fund affiliates from Rwanda to Mexico, Malta to El Salvador and beyond.<sup>8</sup>
- In the Philippines, HLI affiliates have fought the expansion of birth control access and the roll back of the nation's complete abortion ban. Additionally, HLI affiliates have publicly endorsed and promoted anti-abortion candidates for political office in the Philippines,<sup>9</sup> calling into question its IRS tax status, which does not allow for such endorsements.

- In El Salvador, HLI affiliate Sí a la Vida was the driving force behind legislative measures to tighten abortion laws and codify the rights of an “unborn child” into the Salvadoran constitution and penal code. **Human Life International has taken credit for<sup>10</sup> and been credited with<sup>11</sup> leading Sí a la Vida's successful campaigns to criminalize abortion in El Salvador.**
- Since then, the HLI affiliate has fought every attempt to roll back the country's total ban on abortion, in spite of cases where women have been **jailed for miscarrying or have died due to lack of abortion access.**

HLI's transfer of millions to affiliates abroad, some of which openly endorse and/or promote political candidates, merits a close look by the Internal Revenue Service. Furthermore, HLI's promotion of hardline abortion bans deserves scrutiny given the harsh consequences women face in the countries wherein HLI affiliates actively operate.

## HLI's Foreign Spending

Between 2000 and 2015, Human Life International spent a total of \$8,657,999 abroad in places with some of the strictest abortion laws in the world, including Sub Saharan Africa, the Philippines, El Salvador and Malta. These are places where abortion is banned even when the woman's life is in danger or the pregnancy is not viable. Women are being imprisoned,<sup>12</sup> are suffering from health complications<sup>13</sup> and are dying<sup>14</sup> because they don't have access to reproductive health care.

HLI maintains strict oversight over its affiliates, staying closely tied to grantees' activities and, according to its own IRS form 990, occasionally going so far as to send U.S. representatives to work "side by side with them."<sup>15</sup>

### 2000-2007 Contributions [Human Life

**International IRS Form 990s] Note:** *The year 2000 is the earliest year for which 990s are available from the IRS. From 2000-2007, the IRS required organizations to list the countries where money was sent.*

<b>Philippines</b>	\$1,034,110
<b>Brazil</b>	\$140,348
<b>Mexico</b>	\$136,602
<b>El Salvador</b>	\$47,360
<b>Bolivia</b>	\$40,472
<b>Malta</b>	\$24,911
<b>Nicaragua</b>	\$22,500
<b>Ecuador</b>	\$15,740
<b>Chile</b>	\$11,570
<b>Dominican Republic</b>	\$7,250

### 2008-2014 Contributions [Human Life

**International IRS Form 990s] Note:** *After 2007, the IRS changed the reporting requirements such that organizations only had to specify by region.*

<b>Sub Saharan Africa</b>	\$2,948,147
<b>East Asia and the Pacific</b>	\$1,398,006
<b>South America</b>	\$1,384,383
<b>Central America/Caribbean</b>	\$617,188
<b>Middle East and North Africa</b>	\$171,337
<b>North America</b>	\$65,623

### 2015 Contributions [Human Life International

**IRS Form 990s] Note:** *For 2015, HLI outlined contributions both by regions and by countries, though the regions don't appear to match up with previous reporting or with IRS guidelines. For example, IRS specifies South America and Central America/Caribbean as regions, but here HLI uses "Latin America."*

<b>Europe</b>	\$161,464 (with \$5,562 earmarked for Malta)
<b>Asia</b>	\$124,916 (with \$116,498 earmarked for the Philippines)
<b>Latin America</b>	\$89,715 (with \$77,715 earmarked for Bolivia)
<b>Africa</b>	\$216,357

## The Philippines

Abortion has been criminalized for more than a century in the Philippines and constant assaults on women's reproductive health and rights continue to this day. In 1987 the anti-abortion movement succeeded in changing the constitution to adopt the position that "the life of the unborn [is] from conception."<sup>16</sup> More recently there have been attempts to roll back these draconian measures,<sup>17</sup> but such efforts have been crushed under the weight of opposition from groups like Human Life International.

The Philippines was one of HLI's largest recipients of funds from 2000 to 2007, receiving more than \$1 Million in total from HLI. This money was doled out to five groups scattered across the country. These groups are described as "regional office[s]" and "affiliate[s]" of HLI and at least one is headed by an HLI country director.

### HLI has spent more than \$1.1 million in the Philippines since 2000.

In 2008, IRS reporting requirements for Form 990 reports changed and organizations had to specify regions instead of foreign countries where money was spent. The Form 990s demonstrate that HLI provided at least \$1.3 million to all of East Asia (including the Philippines) from 2008 to 2014.

Considering that the contribution levels remained consistent from 2000-2007 and 2015, it is reasonable to assume that between 2008-2014 most or all of the \$1.3 Million (\$185k per year, roughly consistent with other years) went to the Philippines.<sup>18</sup>

### HLI Involvement in Philippine Elections

HLI "led the charge" in organizing and maintaining opposition to the country's 2012 Reproductive Health Bill (RH Bill).<sup>19</sup> In 2013, ahead of national elections, HLI formed an alliance with the Catholic Church to endorse anti-abortion legislative candidates committed to keeping abortion illegal and denounced the RH Bill — electioneering that could violate the terms of HLI's 501c3 status.<sup>20</sup>

**"In 2008 alone, the Philippines' criminal abortion ban was estimated to result in the deaths of at least 1,000 women and complications for 90,000 more."**

*Center for Reproductive Rights, [Facts on Abortion in the Philippines](#)*

HLI's efforts in the Philippines received a blow when the RH Bill to provide expanded access to birth control passed the Philippine Congress<sup>21</sup> in December of 2012, but HLI and its allies were determined to continue fighting back.<sup>22 23</sup>

In early 2013, HLI teamed up with the Catholic Diocese to form a "movement" called the Lay Initiatives For Election (L.I.F.E.) 2013 to endorse anti-abortion candidates for legislative elections. **HLI Philippines country director Dr. Rene Bullecce said in May 2013, "The main objective of L.I.F.E. 2013 is to screen pro-life candidates running for national congressional offices, then endorse them and campaign for their victory in the coming May 13, 2013 mid-term national elections. We are endorsing candidates of all political parties who pledge to vote pro-life. The May 13 election is crucial for our pro-life crusade."**<sup>24</sup>

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*Human Life International [Press Release, May 2013](#)*

The L.I.F.E. coalition endorsed twelve candidates for the Senate and eight candidates for the House. They organized a large political rally that attracted a reported 500,000 participants and suggested it was "the first of



its kind in Philippines” since candidates for Senate and House do not typically appear alongside one another during campaigns.

HLI promoted its endorsements widely on its website despite its 501(c)3 status in the U.S. Endorsing candidates and organizing political rallies constitute a definition of electioneering that could violate the terms of HLI’s 501(c)3 status.

## **IRS: The Restriction of Political Campaign Intervention by Section 501(c)3 Tax-Exempt Organizations**

**“Under the Internal Revenue Code, all section 501(c)3 organizations are absolutely prohibited from directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office. Contributions to political campaign funds or public statements of position (verbal or written) made on behalf of the organization in favor of or in opposition to any candidate for public office clearly violate the prohibition against political campaign activity. Violating this prohibition may result in denial or revocation of tax-exempt status and the imposition of certain excise taxes.”<sup>25</sup>**

To this day, HLI has remained heavily involved with its Philippine affiliates. Momentum has begun to grow in the region to loosen existing abortion restrictions, but reproductive rights advocates face heavy headwinds thanks to the long-established anti-abortion lobby in the Philippines — including Human Life International.

## El Salvador & Sí a la Vida

El Salvador's abortion law is "by most accounts, the world's strictest abortion ban,"<sup>26</sup> outlawing all legal grounds for abortion even in cases of rape and those in which the woman's life is at risk.

The "most public face" of the well-funded anti-abortion lobby in El Salvador is an HLI affiliate called Sí a la Vida ("Yes to Life") and its leader Julia Regina de Cardenal, according to a report<sup>27</sup> from the [North American Congress on Latin America](#).

According to The New York Times, Regina de Cardenal was a "key advocate" for El Salvador's most restrictive abortion laws.<sup>28</sup>

Sí a la Vida was an integral force in further restricting women's access to abortion in El Salvador; the country now even allows for women to be charged with homicide for "abortion related crimes."<sup>29</sup> In practice, this means women have been prosecuted for abortion and jailed after suffering obstetric complications, including miscarriages.

**"The laws have also led directly to the prosecution, imprisonment, and even deaths of scores of women. Under the law, a woman who obtains an abortion or a doctor who performs one — whatever the reason — can be sentenced to several years in prison."**

[The Guardian](#)<sup>30</sup>

Dennis Muñoz, a Salvadoran lawyer who represents women jailed for reproductive crimes, told Marie Claire, "the options for El Salvadoran women who need abortions: suicide, death, or jail."<sup>31</sup>

Opposition to the ban has become louder over the years and recently momentum has been growing to roll

back some restrictions on abortion, principally in cases of rape, death of the fetus and risks to the life and health of the woman.

In April 2017, "the committee on legislation and constitutional points...convened the first public hearing on abortion."<sup>32</sup> In November 2017, the United Nations took a stand against El Salvador's draconian ban. The UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, Zeid Ra'ad Al Hussein, called on authorities to review all cases where women were jailed under the ban, saying, "I am appalled that as a result of El Salvador's absolute prohibition on abortion, women are being punished for apparent miscarriages and other obstetric emergencies, accused and convicted of having induced termination of pregnancy."<sup>33</sup>

However, as reported by The Guardian, "support for keeping the ban is formidable – and may have an outside source of help: a US-based anti-abortion group that has quietly funneled funds to El Salvador's main advocates for the ban." That main advocacy group is Sí a la Vida, led by Julia Regina de Cardenal.<sup>34</sup>

### *Further History of Sí a la Vida*

Sí a la Vida was founded around the time the Salvadoran civil war ended in 1992 to provide anti-abortion counseling and support to pregnant women, but in addition to providing these services it quickly became a political heavyweight. In the early 1990's following the end of the war, "religious right-wing groups like Sí a la Vida ("Yes to Life") began to advocate for the protection of unborn babies."<sup>35</sup>

Regina de Cardenal began working for Human Life International in 1993 and took the helm at Sí a la Vida in 1995,<sup>36</sup> which HLI has repeatedly referred to as the "El Salvador affiliate of Human Life International" in communications issued from Front Royal, Virginia.<sup>37</sup>

In 1997, as the effort to tighten abortion laws picked up steam in Salvadoran politics, Harper's Magazine credits Regina de Cardenal as "a singular driving force" behind the passage of a law banning "abortion under all circumstances."<sup>38</sup>

After the law's passage, Regina de Cardenal's Sí a la Vida foundation proposed the Constitution be "amended to establish the protection of life from the moment of conception," which "passed by a landslide." [Lifesite News](#)



— co-located at HLI's headquarters at 4 Family Life Lane in Front Royal, Virginia — wrote that in 1999, "Cardenal and her group began a national campaign for a constitutional amendment that would 'defend the right to life from conception.'"<sup>39</sup>

**"In El Salvador, the law is clear: the woman is a felon and must be prosecuted."**

*New York Times, 04/09/2006*

Subsequently, Regina de Cardenal made sure criminalization of abortion was added to the Salvadoran penal code. Sí a la Vida also manipulated public opinion surrounding the penal code reform through the Salvadoran media. A study by the Center for Reproductive Rights outlined how Sí a la Vida "published a series of sensationalist newspaper advertisements about an abortion procedure" and paid for additional ads "in support of the total criminalization of abortion."<sup>40</sup>

A 2000 press release<sup>41</sup> noted that Regina de Cardenal, as head of Sí a la Vida, led the campaign to remove all exceptions from the already-restrictive abortion law, as well as the 1999 campaign for the constitutional amendment allowing women to be charged with homicide for having an abortion.

### *HLI in El Salvador*

Beginning in the 1980's, HLI was active in Latin America, establishing anti-abortion counseling centers and setting up affiliate organizations. It is not known how much money HLI spent in the region prior to 2000, but what is known is that HLI claimed Sí a la Vida as its El Salvador affiliate as early as 1993.

HLI's IRS Form 990s show that from 2000-2007, the U.S. organization transferred \$47,360 to efforts in El Salvador. From 2008 to 2014, HLI spent an additional \$617,188 in Central America.

## **“HLI brought the crisis pregnancy centre model to Latin America in the 1980s and is one of the most active supporters of the anti-abortion movement in the region.”**

*The Guardian, 10/26/2017*

Sí a la Vida is intricately tied to HLI as a formal affiliate with "a unique and special relationship" that serves as an agreement between the organizations "to coordinate their efforts to better promote the sanctity of life and family values, and to fight the opposition to both," according to its Latin America website.<sup>42</sup> The relationship appears to be so close that Human Life International has taken credit for and been credited with leading Sí a la Vida's successful campaigns to criminalize abortion in El Salvador, according to a 2000 press release<sup>43</sup> and a CatholicCulture.org<sup>44</sup> article.

## **“In 1997 the pro-life movement in El Salvador began its counterattack, and won a first victory when the legislature eliminated those “special cases” that allowed legal abortion. But with HLI at the helm, the movement sought more permanent protection for the right to life, in the form of a constitutional amendment recognizing the legal status of the unborn child.”**

*Catholic World News, 11/26/2001*

### ***HLI Involvement in Salvadoran Elections***

Julia Regina de Cardenal's husband, Luis Gonzaga Cardenal Debayle, is among the most influential conservative politicians in El Salvador. He is the former president of the conservative think tank Center for Democratic Studies (Centros de Estudios

Democraticos), former president and CEO of Unibanco de El Salvador, former Minister of Tourism and twice former president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry. He is currently president of the National Association of Private Enterprise (ANEP).<sup>45</sup>

In 2000, Cardenal ran for mayor of San Salvador — the capital and largest city in the nation — as a member of the National Alliance Republican Party (ARENA) and lost. ARENA's platform consistently supported the anti-abortion proposals of Sí a la Vida and the Catholic Church.<sup>46</sup>

When Cardenal did not win, Human Life International issued a press release from Virginia where it conveyed its dismay at his loss and called its supporters to action, saying, **“The elections in El Salvador must serve as a lesson for Catholics in every part of the world. We must bring our faith into the public square and participate in the political arena.”**

HLI's overt support for Cardenal once again brings up a question of whether Human Life International and HLI-affiliate Sí a la Vida are **“directly or indirectly participating in, or intervening in, any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for elective public office,”** which would violate the terms of HLI's 501c3 status in the U.S.

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## **Conclusion**

The full extent of Human Life International's support for affiliates that are engaging in local and national elections is not known. This merits a close look by the IRS as it appears that endorsing and promoting specific candidates, as HLI affiliates have done in the Philippines and El Salvador, violates the “Restriction of Political Campaign Intervention.”

What is clear, however, is HLI's commitment to making abortion a criminal offense without exception and under any circumstance. While in the U.S. HLI may not use words like “criminalize,” it is spending millions of dollars and holding up its campaigns as examples of success when a criminalization policy measure succeeds abroad.

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