Dear Senators McConnell, Schumer, Cornyn and Durbin:

As members of the Coalition for Women’s Health Equity, and organizations working toward equitable healthcare access, women’s empowerment, and civil rights, we are writing to express our deep concerns about the Better Care Reconciliation Act of 2017 (BCRA).

The Coalition for Women's Health Equity represents a wide variety of the nation’s most prominent organizations advocating for gender equity in medical prevention, research, funding, and quality of care; and raising awareness about how health inequities adversely affect women and families throughout the United States. The Coalition was convened in response to pervasive gender disparities throughout our healthcare system, with the mission to create a well-coordinated and unified force to advocate for women’s health equity—from prevention and diagnosis, to treatment and cure. Coalition members represent a wide variety of the nation's most prominent organizations.

The Senate bill falls short on ensuring quality, affordable women’s health coverage and would exacerbate women’s health inequities. Women must be able to have coverage of all the services they need to take care of their health and wellbeing—including essential health benefits, preventive care, and comprehensive family planning services—and be able to access care from trusted, qualified providers. We cannot allow millions of Americans covered through private insurance or Medicaid, including many members and patients of our organizations and associations, to lose health care access, experience interruptions in care, and have their health and financial stability threatened. As the bill stands, several aspects would have a devastating effect on women—particularly low-income women, young women, women with disabilities, and women of color—and their families.

First, the bill allows states to waive the requirement that health insurers cover essential health benefits (EHBs), including maternity care, pediatric care, prescription drug coverage, and mental
and substance abuse services. If and when insurers exclude these benefits from their coverage and begin providing less comprehensive plans, women would be forced to pay thousands of dollars in out-of-pocket costs for these services. Simultaneously, the costs of coverage are expected to increase—imposing additional costs on women for less coverage.

Second, the bill would also result in reduced access to preventive services by “defunding” Planned Parenthood -- the only health care provider that meets the bill’s specific description of “prohibited entities.” Thus, millions of women who rely on Medicaid and go to Planned Parenthood health centers for care would no longer be able to access preventive, life-saving health services that promote early detection and save lives, including well-women visits, pap smears, breast exams, contraception, and STI testing and treatment.

Third, the bill’s proposed freeze of Medicaid expansion would especially harm low-income women, the majority of Medicaid recipients. Rather than being able to count on the federal government to pay at least 90 percent of their costs, states that have not already expanded their Medicaid programs would be left without any additional financial resources to cover more people. In addition, states that have expanded their Medicaid programs would see significant cuts to their federal matches starting in 2021 and by 2024 would receive no enhanced federal match. This would ultimately result in millions losing coverage as current expansion states would opt to drop their expanded coverage.

Furthermore, some Medicaid recipients would risk losing their coverage completely, as the measure would require states to elect between receiving a capped lump sum of money for each enrollee or a block grant regardless of the number of people requiring coverage. And, states that elect to block grant their Medicaid program would no longer have to comply with the freedom of choice of provider provision, further limiting access to care.

Fourth, redefining qualified health plans to exclude abortion services will force insurance plans to drop coverage of abortion. Currently, 85 percent of people on the Marketplace use financial assistance to purchase a plan, and the Senate bill would prohibit this financial assistance from being used to purchase a plan that includes abortion coverage. This provision unfairly increases the financial burden for women seeking comprehensive reproductive health coverage through the health insurance marketplace or their small business employer.

Finally, and importantly, we are deeply concerned about the lack of women’s representation in the Senate Healthcare Working Group and the lack of transparency throughout the bill’s creation. Women have many unique health needs and perspectives, necessitating that we play a critical role in all healthcare policymaking. Decisions about maternity coverage, family planning, pre-existing conditions, and access to comprehensive care should never take place without women at
the table. Women disproportionately have the responsibility to care for children and aging parents, making our input even more indispensable in this process.

We welcome the opportunity to work with you should the Senate move forward on creating a more equitable, affordable, and higher quality health care system. Unfortunately, the current legislation is a major step backwards. We urge you to oppose the BCRA and to reject any proposals to allow states to waive essential health benefit requirements, permit insurers to charge higher premiums based on gender or pre-existing conditions, “defund” Planned Parenthood, cut the Medicaid program, or eliminate Medicaid expansion.

Sincerely,

American Association of University Women
American Medical Women’s Association
Black Women’s Health Imperative
Breast Cancer Prevention Partners
Hadassah, The Women’s Zionist Organization of America, Inc.
Jewish Women International
National Association of Nurse Practitioners in Women’s Health
National Council for Jewish Women
National Partnership for Women and Families
National Women’s Law Center
National Women’s Political Caucus
Planned Parenthood Federation of America