

Reversing Course: U.S. Feminist Foreign Policy and the Retreat from WPS Commitments

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Under President Donald Trump's second term, the trajectory of gender-focused initiatives established before and during the Biden-Harris administration has been sharply reversed. Several sectors that exemplified U.S. global leadership have shifted significantly, with many facing severe funding cuts. This update examines recent U.S. policy changes in the realm of feminist foreign policy, with particular attention on the closure of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and proposed funding cuts to Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiatives. A brief timeline of the WPS agenda—a foundational element of feminist foreign policy—at both the United Nations and within the U.S. precedes the review of these policy developments.

Timelines on UNSCR 1325 and U.S. Policies on Women, Peace, and Security

On Oct.31, 2000, the UN adopted UN Security Council Resolution 1325 (UNSCR 1325) on Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). Recognizing the devastating impact of conflict on women and girls, the resolution calls for women's active participation and representation to increase in decision-making processes across peace and security efforts, from conflict prevention to peacebuilding and post-conflict reconstruction. UNSCR 1325 stands as a vital global accountability mechanism designed to protect women and girls in conflict zones while promoting peace and security in inclusive and sustainable ways. The WPS framework is structured around four key pillars: prevention, participation, protection, relief & recovery. By the end of the year 2000, 12 member states, including the U.S., had adopted National Action Plans (NAPs) to implement the goals of UNSCR 1325.

In 2011, during the Obama-Biden Administration, President Obama launched the first National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security by Executive Order.¹ At the same time, the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security was also created. Georgetown University President John J. DeGioia and then-U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, who serves as the Institute's honorary founding chair, formally launched it. The institute began operations in February 2013. In 2016, Obama's executive order on WPS was updated.

In 2015, with the aim of urging youth participation, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 2250, and the Youth, Peace, and Security (YPS) agenda was formalized. It recognizes that "young people play an important and positive role in the maintenance and promotion of international peace and security."²

First Trump Administration - In October 2017, during Trump's first year in office, the U.S. passed the WPS Act 2017 to incorporate the objectives of UNSCR 1325 into its foreign policy "to affirm gender equity and equality, peacemaking, and peacekeeping, here in the United States and globally."³ Two years later, the Trump administration released the United States Strategy on WPS,⁴ defining women's political

¹ The White House. *FACT SHEET: The United States National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security*. Dec. 19, 2011.

² Agirre, Ane. "Thinking Intergenerationally: WPS and the Youth, Peace, and Security Agenda." *Global Observatory*, Oct. 19, 2020.

³ U.S. Congress. *Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017*, Public Law 115–68. Oct. 6, 2017.

⁴ The White House. *United States Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security*. June 2019.

empowerment and equality as integral to preventing, mediating, and resolving conflict. The updated U.S. strategy on WPS identified three main objectives: 1) increase women's active involvement in peacebuilding; 2) enhance protection and ensure equal access to assistance for women and girls, both domestically and internationally; and 3) strengthen institutional capacity in the U.S. and partner governments to sustain WPS efforts.⁵

The Biden Administration- In September 2021, through executive order, President Biden established the White House Gender Policy Council (GPC) to improve the lives of women and girls, addressing gender-based discrimination, violence, and health inequities, among other issues, in a step to advance gender equity and equality. It especially advanced reproductive freedom, made pay more equitable, and increased participation by women in the workforce. However, in June 2022, the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade*.⁶ Although the GPC faced challenges following the 2022 judicial decisions and subsequent state legislation, it remained a central figure in the administration's commitment to defending reproductive rights.

On Oct. 31, 2023, the U.S. released its Strategy and National Action Plan on WPS. The 2023 strategy is built on prior U.S. commitments to advance women's safety and meaningful participation in peace, political, and security decision-making processes. This strategy further supported the Biden Administration's advances in strengthening women's meaningful participation in national security, defense, and political leadership at home and abroad.⁷

New Trump Administration 2025 - However, countering decades of progress under the WPS agenda, the U.S. began rolling back key gender equality measures within the first weeks of Trump's second administration in 2025, undermining the principles of UNSCR 1325 and the 2017 U.S. WPS Act. In January 2025, through a new executive order, the Trump administration dismantled the White House GPC.⁸ Conservative efforts, such as Project 2025, argued that the GPC promoted abortion rights and "gender-affirming care" for minors,⁹ claims used to justify its elimination. That same month, Trump also reinstated anti-abortion policies abroad, including the Mexico City Policy (also known as the "global gag rule"), which prohibits U.S. funding for international organizations that provide or promote abortion services.¹⁰ In addition, the administration rejoined the Geneva Consensus Declaration, a multinational effort aimed at restricting global abortion access.

The proposed changes to the U.S. Institute for WPS are among the most devastating changes. In February, the U.S. closed USAID, and in April 2025, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth announced the termination of the Pentagon's WPS program, originally initiated by Trump during his first term. Hegseth characterized the initiative as a burdensome social justice measure, arguing it distracted from the military's core mission.¹¹

Closure of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID)

⁵ Rebecca Dennis, "Will Trump's Women, Peace and Security Strategy Actually Advance Women, Peace or Security?" *PAI*, June 21, 2019.

⁶ Mark Sherman, "Supreme Court Overturns *Roe v. Wade*; States Can Ban Abortion," *Associated Press*, June 24, 2022.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Women, Peace, and Security*, 2021–2025.

⁸ The White House, "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government," Jan. 20, 2025.

⁹ Colleen Long, "The Fate of the First-Ever White House Gender Policy Council Is Uncertain in Trump's Administration," *Associated Press*, Dec. 18, 2024.

¹⁰ Reuters, "Trump Uses Executive Power to Reinstate Anti-Abortion Pacts," Jan. 24, 2025.

¹¹ Axios, "Pentagon Ends Women, Peace, and Security Program Despite Its Origins Under Trump," April 29, 2025.

Although the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) accounted for just 1 percent of the U.S. federal budget, it was responsible for funding 40 percent of the world’s international aid, supporting critical areas such as vaccine distribution, lifesaving medicines, hunger and malnutrition relief, clean water access, peacebuilding efforts, and protections for women and girls. In times of disaster and conflict, since its establishment in 1961, USAID has long played a vital role in ensuring that women, children, and other vulnerable populations had access to safe spaces—places where they were protected from violence and harm. The agency provided essential support for survivors of sexual abuse and gave girls the opportunity to receive an education rather than be forced into early marriage. USAID also invested in the future of women by training them for employment and providing seed funding to support women entrepreneurs in starting their own businesses.

All of this came to a sudden halt in February 2025, during the first two weeks of the Trump Administration, when USAID was effectively shuttered, cutting 90 percent of USAID foreign aid contracts.¹² The consequences were immediate and far-reaching: 20,000 USAID staff across the globe lost their jobs, and millions of people across Africa, Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Latin America were left without critical aid. In Sudan, a country already devastated by civil war, 3 million children under the age of five now suffer from acute malnutrition following the closure of health centers. Lifesaving supplies—including antibiotics, anti-malarial drugs, and rape-treatment kits—remain stuck at ports, while vaccines have been discarded, unable to reach the people who need them most. In crisis zones like Afghanistan and Ukraine, these cuts led to reduced access to essential health care, legal aid, and trauma support for vulnerable women and girls.¹³

According to the *Generation Equality Accountability Report*, published annually by UN Women, progress on global gender equality commitments is being closely monitored through the Generation Equality Initiative. In 2023, approximately 612 million women and girls lived within 50 kilometers (about 31 miles) of at least one of the 170 ongoing armed conflicts, a staggering 41 percent increase since 2015. Meanwhile, conflict-related sexual violence surged by 50 percent since 2022, with women and girls comprising 95 percent of the victims.¹⁴ The 2023 Georgetown Women, Peace, and Security Index further underscores a direct correlation between women’s well-being and more peaceful, prosperous societies. Women often serve as both the first and last lines of defense against conflict, crisis, and terrorism.¹⁵ In this context, the dismantling of USAID would significantly hinder the global capacity to monitor, measure, and respond to the worsening conditions facing women and girls worldwide.

Proposed Cuts to the U.S. Institute for Women, Peace, and Security (WPS)

In April 2025, the Trump Administration, under Secretary Rubio’s reorganization plan, proposed significant cuts to efforts supporting the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) agenda.^{16 17} If adopted, the proposal would eliminate the State Department’s Office of Global Women’s Issues (GWI), the lead

¹² Ellen Knickmeyer, Matthew Lee, and Mark Sherman, “Trump Administration Says It’s Cutting 90% of USAID Foreign Aid Contracts,” *Associated Press*, Feb. 26, 2025.

¹³ Olivia Le Poidevin, “Funding Cuts Leave Women’s Aid Organisations ‘Stretched to Brink,’” *Reuters*, May 13, 2025.

¹⁴ UN Women. *Generation Equality Accountability Report 2024*. New York: UN Women, 2024.

¹⁵ GIWPS, *Women, Peace, and Security Index*, 2023.

¹⁶ GIWPS, “State Department Reorganization and WPS.”

¹⁷ Farnoush Amiri, Matthew Lee, and Ellen Knickmeyer, “Rubio Unveils a Massive Overhaul of the State Department That Would Cut Staff and Bureaus,” *Associated Press*, April 22, 2025.

agency responsible for advancing the rights of women and girls worldwide. This office has represented a decades-long, bipartisan commitment to gender equality across multiple administrations.

GWI plays a central role in implementing the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017, legislation sponsored by then-Senator Rubio and signed into law by President Trump in his first term. Eliminating the office would dismantle its role in championing women's rights and integrating gender perspectives into U.S. foreign policy. Under the proposed changes, WPS initiatives would no longer receive dedicated staff or funding. Instead, responsibilities would be dispersed across regional bureaus, without any guarantee of attention or resources. Experts warn that this could further marginalize gender-focused diplomacy and peacebuilding by weakening institutional accountability and leadership. The Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security, established in 2011 and operational since 2013, believes that dismantling GWI would deal a severe blow to America's leadership on gender equality and undermine its ability to uphold international commitments to peace, security, and human rights.¹⁸

Conclusion

The dismantling and defunding of initiatives that promote peace, security, and women's rights by the Trump-Vance Administration has severely impacted progress toward gender equality. These policy shifts threaten to curtail global healthcare access, undermine reproductive freedom and human rights, and weaken both domestic and international feminist foreign policy efforts. The dissolution of the White House Gender Policy Council, established in 2021, will directly affect women and girls in the U.S., while funding cuts to foreign aid organizations, including USAID, will have far-reaching consequences for women and girls around the world. These decisions are a sharp departure from the efforts of previous administrations, including Trump's first term, to integrate gender equality into U.S. foreign policy. Together, these actions not only cast doubt on the U.S.'s commitment to advancing gender equality but also risk inflicting long-term harm on the rights, safety, and well-being of women and girls worldwide.

Though the reasons given for these cuts were often based on "cost saving," Trump did not hesitate to spend an estimated \$40 million on a military parade held this year to mark both the Army's 250th anniversary and his 79th birthday.¹⁹ The cost of this single event is roughly equivalent to the annual budget of the Victims of Child Abuse Act/Children's Advocacy Centers program, a federal child welfare initiative funded at \$41 million in FY 2024, under the Department of Justice.²⁰

This stark contrast in spending priorities highlights an administration agenda that appears disconnected from investments in global peace, security, and the protection of women and children. Rather than upholding the U.S. history of leadership in these areas, recent decisions suggest a retreat from long-standing commitments to gender-focused diplomacy and humanitarian programs.

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¹⁹ Tom Vanden Brook, "Army, Trump Love a \$40 Million Parade. But Nothing Is Planned for Navy, Marines," *USA Today*, June 3, 2025.

²⁰ U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, "Victims of Child Abuse Act Regional Children's Advocacy Centers Grant Program," accessed July 17, 2024.

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