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The Collapse of Democratic Guardrails: Strategic Targeting of Gender Equality in the U.S.

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Remnants of signage for the U.S. Agency for International Development are seen on the facade of the Ronald Reagan Building in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 29, 2025. (Brendan Smialowski / AFP via Getty Images)

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Across the globe, deliberate illiberal strategies that exploit entrenched gender inequality are increasingly being used to weaken democratic institutions from within. The dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) was not simply a byproduct of chaos at the beginning of U.S. President Donald Trump's second term. Rather, it followed a well-documented authoritarian strategy in which attacks on gender equality are used to consolidate power, narrow civic space, and make democratic governance harder to defend. While the process of dismantling the agency that administered U.S. government foreign assistance has been well documented, significant gaps remain between what insiders witnessed and what the broader public understands. This gap in understanding is not benign. When the public perceives these events as isolated policy shifts rather than coordinated institutional erosion, it diffuses accountability, obscures the impact, reduces resistance, and allows similar tactics to be redeployed without scrutiny.

The administration's early actions targeting gender equality, women's empowerment, LGBTQI+ initiatives, and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility functions operated not as peripheral policy disputes but as frontline tactics that weakened foreign assistance infrastructure, government institutions, and democratic norms. Trump has used this approach since at least 2016. It was mapped out in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025. Drawing on firsthand experience and technical analysis, this report situates these actions within an effective authoritarian pattern of leveraging patriarchal norms and cross-ideological gender bias to justify institutional retrenchment, create administrative compliance, and accelerate structural dismantling. Ultimately, the strategic sidelining of gender equality functions increased institutional vulnerability. Although the Trump administration's targeting of those functions did not create the vulnerability, it recognized, exposed, and exploited it as part of a wider effort to erode democratic norms.

Rebuilding democratic systems and foreign assistance architecture, therefore, will require treating gender equality as a core resilience safeguard rather than a peripheral policy concern. Its strategic targeting is central to the broader authoritarian assault on democracy. Democracy stakeholders must name that pattern, examine the decisions that enabled it, and learn from what unfolded.

Policy Recommendations

1 U.S. DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS ADVOCATES CANNOT IGNORE GENDER EQUALITY

U.S. efforts to resist democratic backsliding should treat gender equality and women's empowerment both as nonnegotiable democratic principles and as a structural requirement for democratic resilience.

2 BILATERAL DONORS MUST EXPAND, NOT DECREASE, INVESTMENTS IN GENDER EQUALITY

Donor governments must reinforce international commitments and increase political and financial support for gender equality.

3 INSTITUTIONS MUST REBUILD AND PROTECT GENDER EXPERTISE

Eliminating gender advisers and dismantling gender teams weakens organizational resilience and strips away one of the most reliable early warning systems against democratic erosion.

4 TREAT WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS AS FRONTLINE DEMOCRATIC DEFENDERS AND INVEST IN THEM

Broad-based women's movements are proven counterweights to authoritarian consolidation and must be supported as strategic partners in protecting democratic systems.

5 RECOGNIZE THE AUTHORITARIAN CONTEXT AND RECALIBRATE ADVOCACY STRATEGIES

U.S. women's rights organizations must adapt their approaches by learning from global counterparts who have resisted authoritarian backsliding through mass mobilization and sustained civil society pressure.

6 CHOOSE COURAGE OVER COMPLIANCE

Democratic resilience depends on governments, institutions, and civil society defending gender equality publicly and consistently as a foundational democratic principle.

EDITOR'S NOTE

This analysis by Caroline Hubbard, former senior gender advisor and gender team lead in the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance at the U.S. Agency for International Development, and Tazreen Hussain, USAID's former Women, Peace and Security policy adviser, includes an account of the events at the agency after the November re-election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency through its virtual dissolution in February 2025. Those accounts are based on the authors' own observations, conversations with stakeholders, and consultations with former colleagues. Much of what transpired during that period has not been previously documented.

Introduction

In their initial stages, authoritarian regimes often target women's rights and gender equality as they are often treated as politically expendable priorities. In the first two weeks of U.S. President Donald Trump's second term, a series of administrative decisions rapidly altered the structure and mandate of U.S. foreign assistance efforts, culminating in the effective dismantling of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). Although these developments generally have been reported as discrete and routine policy shifts, less attention has been paid to the internal dynamics that shaped how and why certain functions were targeted first. Inside the agency, the sidelining of gender equality, women's empowerment, LGBTQI+ initiatives, and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) functions occurred almost immediately and were completed with unusual speed, signaling deeper institutional vulnerabilities.

The closure of USAID and the effective elimination of U.S.-led democracy and peace programming, alongside deep cuts to international development, have forced civil society and implementing organizations to adapt under extraordinary pressure. In response, the affected people and organizations have demonstrated resilience, forming new coalitions and striving to survive while reimagining a future sector that addresses longstanding structural challenges. What has been largely missing from this reflection, however, is a delineation of how gendered attacks by the Trump administration, coupled with the willingness of the agency's existing leadership to treat gender equality as expendable, shaped these outcomes. An examination of accounts from former officials responsible for advancing democracy, peace, and gender equality within the U.S. foreign assistance sphere and a technical examination of those early events illustrate how those decisions reverberated across the agency and the broader development ecosystem.

An understanding of what happened in those crucial weeks illuminates the Trump administration's strategic targeting of gender equality as a key aspect of its authoritarian assault on U.S. and global democracy. Defenders of democracy must be able to identify patterns of authoritarian creep, examine the decisions that enabled them, and learn from what unfolded in order to push back against ongoing democratic erosion and respond to the rise of democratic backsliding both domestically and globally.

The Link Between Democratic Backsliding and Gender Equality

Authoritarian regimes consistently weaponize gender inequality and rely on gendered stereotypes to erode democratic norms and gain power. As Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks note, modern authoritarian leaders often present themselves as "strongmen" and frequently begin consolidating power by rolling back women's rights.¹ They understand that democracies with higher degrees of gender equality and women's political empowerment are more resilient, prosperous, and secure.² Illiberal political leaders stoke fear of "gender ideology," conflating women's rights and LGBTQI+ rights with moral decay and weakness, to manufacture a shared "enemy."

By mobilizing fears of social change and promising a return to "traditional values," authoritarians attempt to galvanize support for illiberal policies; justify expanded executive power; and weaken courts, civil society, and the news media. Established authoritarian regimes such as those in Russia and China

1 Chenoweth, Erica. and Zoe Marks, "Revenge of the Patriarchs: Why Autocrats Fear Women," *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-02-08/women-rights-revenge-patriarchs>

2 Hubbard, Caroline "Venezuela's Democratic Transition Needs Women, Including Machado," *Council on Foreign Relations*, February 11, 2026, <https://www.cfr.org/articles/venezuelas-democratic-transition-needs-women-including-machado>; International Peace Institute, *Reimagining Peacemaking: Women's Roles in Peace Processes*, IPI E-book (New York: International Peace Institute, June 2015), <https://www.ipinst.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/IPI-E-pub-Reimagining-Peacemaking.pdf>

established the pattern that demonstrates how restrictions on gender equality have reliably preceded broader assaults on democratic institutions.³ The regression of women's rights functions as both an early warning sign and a core instrument of authoritarian consolidation, revealing that these actions are never isolated social issues but instead are foundational moves in dismantling democratic governance. Yet time and again, liberal pro-democracy actors overlook rhetoric and actions targeting women's rights as indicators that signal broader democratic erosion.

As the world has seen a rise in authoritarian leaders, documentation of the linkages between anti-gender equality platforms, closing civic space, and democratic backsliding has increased – visible in countries such as Brazil, Hungary, and Türkiye.⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated 15 years of global democratic erosion and gave authoritarian-leaning regimes an opportunity to visibly leverage the pandemic to roll back gains in gender equality and women's empowerment to increase their political power.^{5,6} Technology strengthened both these endeavors.⁷ The U.S. recognized the urgency of the situation, identifying the need to strengthen democratic governance at home and abroad and, as a part of President Joe Biden's Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal in 2021, dedicated more than \$9 billion to counter rising authoritarianism, much of which was implemented through USAID.⁸ The initiative included specific efforts to document, prevent and respond to authoritarian attacks on gender equality and women's empowerment.⁹

Although USAID made meaningful progress in recognizing the connections among gender equality, women's empowerment, democratic resilience, and national security, this understanding did not consistently translate into systematic action within the agency's own operations. When direct attacks on USAID's gender equality and inclusive development programs and staff emerged, many across the agency did not respond in a way that reflected this reality. In fact, early warnings from technical experts that these actions signaled a broader institutional threat did not fully register. Having long recognized these actions as core tactics commonly used to undermine democratic norms, peace, and security, several gender experts understood that canceling programs and removing gender equality expertise would severely weaken USAID's ability to fulfill its development, democracy, and national security mandates; contribute to the politicization of U.S. development assistance; and create a false sense of compliance and protection that distracted from the need to prepare for and resist unlawful actions.

What Global Gender Equality Experts Saw Coming

Global gender equality experts were aware that Trump and his allies had used gendered attacks as a prelude to weakening democratic norms and had been watching this approach unfold and intensify since his first administration.

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- 3 Erica Chenoweth and Zoe Marks, "Revenge of the Patriarchs: Why Autocrats Fear Women," *Foreign Affairs*, February 8, 2022, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/china/2022-02-08/women-rights-revenge-patriarchs>
 - 4 #ShePersisted, *Big Tech and the Weaponization of Misogyny in the Brazil Online Ecosystem (ShePersisted.org)*, April 2024, <https://she-persisted.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/ShePersisted-Brazil-Report-ENG.pdf>; Péter Krekó and Zsolt Enyedi, "Explaining Eastern Europe: Orbán's Laboratory of Illiberalism," *Journal of Democracy* 29, no. 3 (July 2018): 39–51, <https://www.journalofdemocracy.org/articles/explaining-eastern-europe-orbans-laboratory-of-illiberalism/>; Yesim Arat, "Democratic Backsliding and the Instrumentalization of Women's Rights in Turkey," *Politics & Gender* 18, no. 4 (2022): 911–41, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X21000192>
 - 5 Freedom House, "NEW REPORT: *Democracy under Lockdown – The Impact of COVID-19 on Global Freedom," *Freedom House*, October 2, 2020, <https://freedomhouse.org/article/new-report-democracy-under-lockdown-impact-covid-19-global-freedom>
 - 6 Saskia Brechenmacher and Caroline Hubbard, "How the Coronavirus Risks Exacerbating Women's Political Exclusion," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, November 17, 2020, <https://carnegieendowment.org/russia-eurasia/research/2020/11/how-the-coronavirus-risks-exacerbating-womens-political-exclusion>
 - 7 DRG Learning Digest Combatting Technology-Facilitated Gender-Based Violence in Politics Gender, Women, and Democracy Resources (GWD Resources), https://www.gwdresources.org/files/ugd/0b116e_ed397e60540e42989aa4df30cb5be45a.pdf
 - 8 The White House, "Fact Sheet: Announcing the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal," December 9, 2021, Biden White House Archives, <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/12/09/fact-sheet-announcing-the-presidential-initiative-for-democratic-renewal/>
 - 9 The Status of Women is the Status of Democracy: Advancing Women's Political and Civic Participation and Leadership at the Second Summit for Democracy, Gender, Women, and Democracy Resources (GWD Resources), https://www.gwdresources.org/files/ugd/0b116e_46031da4e0d94b4a95bae65966a54bec.pdf?index=true



The entrance to the USAID building in Washington, D.C., is barricaded on Feb. 27, 2025, the day terminated employees were told to collect their personal belongings. Thousands of USAID workers were given 15 minutes to clear out. (Chip Somodevilla / Getty Images)

The collaboration with Cambridge Analytica during the 2016 U.S. presidential election campaign offered an early indication of this strategy.¹⁰ The firm employed voter-targeting strategies that incorporated gendered attacks aimed at discrediting the Democratic Party's nominee, Hillary Clinton, and capitalizing on sexist attitudes to shape electoral behavior.¹¹ This demonstrated the Trump campaign's early understanding of how effectively gender could be deployed as a strategic tool and provided early examples of what would become a core authoritarian tactic: gendered disinformation campaigns.¹² Equally visible was the unwillingness of more liberal democratic actors since then to acknowledge the influence of sexism on political judgment and broader democratic outcomes.¹³ This lack of recognition continues to affect pro-democracy stakeholders and shaped how risks to USAID were understood and addressed.

In subsequent years, high-profile attacks on women in public life, normalization of sexual assault and harassment, and support for legislation and messaging that restricted the rights of women and members of the LGBTQI+ community signaled both a willingness to use inequitable gender norms as a political instrument and an understanding of their effectiveness to mobilize supporters and shape political dynamics. The New York Times reported that conservatives, having lost same-sex marriage as a rallying issue, then pivoted to a focus on transgender rights, leveraging cultural anxiety around gender identity to build political power and donor support, particularly by framing debates around children, sports, and schools as threats to traditional values.¹⁴ This strategy coincided with an unprecedented surge in anti-LGBTQI+ and anti-trans legislation. In 2023 alone, legislators in statehouses nationwide filed

10 Campaign Legal Center, "Newly Published Cambridge Analytica Documents Show Unlawful Support for Trump in 2016," *Campaign Legal Center*, October 16, 2020, <https://campaignlegal.org/update/newly-published-cambridge-analytica-documents-show-unlawful-support-trump-2016>

11 Kaitlan Collins, "Opinion: Trump, Cambridge Analytica, and the Clinton Slogan," *CNN*, March 21, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/03/21/opinions/trump-cambridge-analytica-clinton-slogan-opinion-psaki/index.html>

12 Georgetown University School of Continuing Studies, *The Forum*, "Not a 'Women-Only' Issue: Gendered Disinformation Poses a Threat to Election Integrity," <https://gssr.georgetown.edu/the-forum/topics/identity/not-a-women-only-issue-gendered-disinformation-poses-a-threat-to-election-integrity/>. (gssr.georgetown.edu)

13 Diane D. Blair Center of Southern Politics & Society, *The Impact of "Modern Sexism" on the 2016 Presidential Election* (University of Arkansas, 2016), <https://blaircenter.uark.edu/the-impact-of-modern-sexism/>

14 A. Nagourney and J.W. Peters, "How a Campaign Against Transgender Rights Mobilized Conservatives," *The New York Times*, April 16, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/16/us/politics/transgender-conservative-campaign.html>

hundreds of bills regarding transgender youth and LGBTQI+ rights.¹⁵ The 2022 U.S. Supreme Court reversal of the *Roe v. Wade* precedent, paving the way for states to institute more stringent restrictions on abortion, underscored how far Trump-aligned political actors were willing to go to roll back established human rights.¹⁶ Rather than viewing these actions as early warnings of an explicitly illiberal political project, many voters and pro-democracy leaders treated them as routine policy disputes or “women’s” issues, allowing attacks on gender equality to proceed largely unchecked.¹⁷

Taken together, these developments should have been understood as early indicators of an illiberal project likely to extend beyond policy change to challenge legal and institutional constraints, warranting heightened legal preparedness well before February 2025, when USAID was effectively shut down. Early attacks on the agency’s gender equality and women’s empowerment work were not isolated incidents but part of a longer pattern visible for nearly a decade and articulated in the Heritage Foundation’s Project 2025, including proposals to eliminate USAID gender advisor roles and to restructure USAID’s Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment Hub.¹⁸

The Transition That Never Came

In the weeks between Election Day and Inauguration Day, USAID’s gender architecture shifted into a transition planning mode, routine for all federal agencies during administration changes. Briefs were prepared for the incoming administration to discuss gender equality and women’s empowerment programs. Many within the gender architecture were skilled career public servants who, as was also routine, remained in their roles, upholding existing laws and ensuring continuity while adapting to each administration’s priorities and agenda as required. This continuity was further anchored in bipartisan laws governing the work, including the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 (WPS) and the Women’s Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act (WEEE Act).^{19,20} In fact, Trump signed both of these laws during his first term. But this 2024-25 transitional period was far from routine. Scrutiny of language had been a constant across administrations, requiring technical experts to respond to shifting political contexts. However, Project 2025 and the leaked training videos highlighted by ProPublica signaled a significant shift in Trump’s approach to gender, moving beyond routine political debate toward a more coordinated effort to dismantle gender equality efforts.²¹ Technical terms such as gender equality, gender-based violence, and women’s empowerment that had long been considered accurate and noncontroversial but were now being politicized by the incoming administration.

Compounding these concerns was the atypical absence of a transition team at USAID. Usually between presidential administrations, transition officials visit agencies to meet career staff, share priorities, and understand ongoing work. The absence of a Trump transition team raised alarm across the agency. Attempts by former colleagues to reach the former leadership of the gender program appointed during the first Trump administration were unsuccessful,

15 Trans Legislation Tracker, *TransLegislation.com*, <https://translegislation.com/>, an independent database tracking state and federal anti-transgender legislation in the United States.

16 N. Delaney, “*Roe v. Wade Has Been Overturned. What Does That Mean for America?*” Harvard Kennedy School, June 28, 2022, <https://www.hks.harvard.edu/faculty-research/policy-topics/fairness-justice/roe-v-wade-has-been-overturned-what-does-mean>

17 E. Prey and K. Spears, “*The Global Consequences of America’s Anti-Abortion Agenda*,” *New Lines Institute*, August 9, 2022, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/gender-peace-security/the-global-consequences-of-americas-anti-abortion-agenda/>

18 The Heritage Foundation, *Mandate for Leadership: The Conservative Promise* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2023), https://static.heritage.org/project2025/2025_MandateForLeadership_FULL.pdf

19 S.1141, *Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017*, 115th Cong. (2017), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1141?q=%7B%22search%22%3A%22women+peace+and+security+act+2017%22%7D&s=1&r=2>

20 S. 3247, *Women’s Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act of 2018*, 115th Cong. (2018), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/3247/text>

21 A. Kroll and N. Surgey, “*Inside Project 2025’s Secret Training Videos*,” *ProPublica*, August 10, 2024, <https://www.propublica.org/article/inside-project-2025-secret-training-videos-trump-election>



A woman waits in a government-run regional hospital on Aug. 23, 2025, in Ghazni, Afghanistan. According to World Health Organization data, more than 400 health facilities closed in Afghanistan since President Donald Trump issued an executive order to terminate USAID funding in February 2025. (Elise Blanchard/Getty Images)

and no information was provided about potential nominees to fill critical roles such as the agency's senior gender coordinator or the State Department's ambassador-at-large for global women's issues.

These gaps were additional portents of later developments. Some technical experts began to recognize signs of a shift that went beyond changes in policy priorities and pointed instead to more fundamental departures from established norms and laws. In a preemptive effort to satisfy what they assumed would be the next administration's priorities, USAID decisionmakers decided to change language; however, some offices went further and began to pause the rollout of gender-specific, evidence-based research, tools, training, and programs. This response reflected a limited recognition of how early accommodations to roll back gender equality efforts could contribute to a widening pattern of overcompliance rather than a means to stabilize the agency. It also signaled how unprepared parts of the institution were for the challenges ahead.

Teams working directly on implementation of the Women, Peace and Security Act understood that this priority would likely remain protected based both on their treatment during the first Trump administration and because it was legally mandated. What was not fully acknowledged or understood, however, was how significantly views on women and gender equality had shifted between the first and second Trump administrations, reflecting a calculated adjustment that centered attacks on gender equality, rather than support for it, as the most effective way to consolidate power in the U.S. and globally.²²

Before Trump's Jan. 20 inauguration, technical experts from different offices had been prepared to release several rigorously developed and legally compliant gender-related resources using funds already approved by Congress. These documents were not considered controversial in substance and did not conflict with any stated priorities or legal requirements; their only distinguishing feature was a focus on gender equality and women's empowerment. Despite this, some technical experts were instructed by internal agency leadership to halt their publication while other materials outside those topics continued forward. Even though no policy changes had yet been issued, this pause was largely interpreted within the agency as compliance with expected policy shifts, despite running counter to preexisting legal requirements. Long-standing institutional risk aversion contributed to a sense that scaling back gender equality work might help protect the broader assistance portfolio. This interpretation, however, obscured the reality that these early actions were the clearest warning that the agency's wider development and democracy agenda was the actual target and that gender was simply the first point of entry.

What unfolded next demonstrates how this misreading contributed to the agency's demise. From Inauguration Day onward, gender and DEIA became the first visible points of pressure, but inside USAID that focus continued to be interpreted as routine compliance rather than the opening move in a broader effort, even as the administration's moves became increasingly bold and perceived to be illegal by scholars and lawyers alike during that time.²³ Most of USAID was unprepared for the speed and severity of what followed, helping explain why the agency was caught off guard when the shutdown accelerated over the weekend of Feb. 1. What many experienced as sudden or shocking developments were, for some USAID gender experts, understood as the culmination of several weeks in which early warning signs were repeatedly misread and initial accommodation gradually widened into a pattern of escalating institutional vulnerability.

22 Bjarnegård, Elin, and Pär Zetterberg. "How Authoritarians Exploit Gender." *Journal of Democracy* 37, no. 1 (2026): 160-171. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/jod.2026.a977952>

23 Andy Kroll and Michael Grabell, "USAID's Destruction Under Trump and Musk May Have Broken the Law," *ProPublica*, May 8, 2025, <https://www.propublica.org/article/usa-id-trump-musk-destruction-may-have-broken-law>

The First Two Weeks: How Gender Became the Wedge

Operational Incapacitation and Confusion

The text of Trump's inaugural address signaled the new administration's intention to target gender equality and social inclusion, including the assertion that the only two sexes are male and female. Within hours, the White House issued a series of executive orders that collectively set the stage for dismantling U.S. foreign assistance: Ending Radical and Wasteful DEI Programs and Preferences; Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government; and Reevaluating And Realigning United States Foreign Aid.^{24,25,26} By the end of January, these orders had triggered a cascade of changes inside USAID.

Instead of a transition team or the dozens of political appointees a new administration customarily places in leadership positions to interpret incoming directives, only two political appointees arrived at USAID, both placed in operational bureaus rather than in policy or management roles. The agency entered the new administration with a significant leadership gap. The acting USAID administrator issued directives requiring immediate alignment with the president's executive orders, accompanied by Office of Personnel Management (OPM) guidance on DEIA-related reforms.²⁷ The ambiguous nature of the orders and the lack of guidance for implementation,²⁸ coupled with the threat of disciplinary action against anyone who did not report on related staff and activities, unleashed confusion, fear, and escalating overcompliance.²⁹ For example, a gender policy lead sought guidance from agency lawyers on how to proceed with both implementing the WPS Act and the gender ideology EO since they contradicted one another. Their response, that they could not and would not answer such a question, further demonstrates the confusion across the agency. Many career staff viewed these moves as administrative policy shifts and believed they could navigate the new requirements without breaking laws or causing harm. Career staff and leaders worked in good faith to determine compliance despite the absence of political leadership and without legal clarity. The result was an agency primed for overcompliance and paralysis.

While modern authoritarian rollbacks on democracy often advance unnoticed through the slow erosion of democratic norms via administrative maneuvering such as this, the targeting of gender equality should have served as a red flag. As with other authoritarian regimes, the Trump administration's early and clear attack on gender was an indicator of an overt attack on the U.S.'s constitutional democracy. However, instead of responding to this threat, offices scrambled to decipher the administration's directives, hoping to protect jobs, funding, and longstanding programs. What made this possible was not simply the orders themselves but how they were interpreted.

USAID gender policy experts began coordinated efforts to interpret the executive orders as well, drawing on decades of combined experience. The language was clear to them; the requirements were actually quite limited and explicit for each of the orders. As part of the routine work that gender experts perform,

“Instead of a transition team or the dozens of political appointees a new administration customarily places in leadership positions to interpret incoming directives, only two political appointees arrived at USAID, both placed in operational bureaus rather than in policy or management roles.”

24 The White House, “Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferences,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>

25 The White House, “Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/defending-women-from-gender-ideology-extremism-and-restoring-biological-truth-to-the-federal-government/>

26 The White House, “Reevaluating and Realigning United States Foreign Aid,” January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/reevaluating-and-realigning-united-states-foreign-aid/>

27 U.S. Office of Personnel Management, Initial Guidance Regarding DEIA Executive Orders (January 21, 2025), <https://www.opm.gov/media/e1zj1p0m/opm-memo-re-initial-guidance-regarding-deia-executive-orders-1-21-2025-final.pdf>

28 Although the executive order requires implementation “consistent with applicable law,” it offers no guidance on how agencies should reconcile that clause with existing sex-equality requirements, leaving interpretation to OMB, OPM, DOJ, and agency leadership. The White House, Ending Radical and Wasteful Government DEI Programs and Preferences, January 20, 2025, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/ending-radical-and-wasteful-government-dei-programs-and-preferencing/>

29 Michael Igoe, “USAID Threatens ‘Disciplinary Action’ in DEIA Crackdown,” Devex, January 23, 2025, <https://www.devex.com/news/usaids-threatens-disciplinary-action-in-deia-crackdown-109136>

they developed guidance to support accurate and lawful implementation of the orders. However, this guidance was taken up unevenly across the agency. In the absence of clear, authoritative direction, the agency increasingly defaulted to expansive interpretations of the new directives in an effort to demonstrate alignment with the Trump administration. This pattern reflected a combination of uncertainty, fear, and an assumption that visible compliance would help protect staff, teams, and programs operating globally.

Gender Perspective: The First Two Weeks when USAID was Dismantled in 2025

Jan. 20	Executive Orders 14151 (“Ending DEI Programs”), 14168 (“Gender Ideology”), 14169 (“Foreign Aid Review”) issued; gender advisers warn of statutory conflict and overcompliance risk
Jan. 21	Immediate alignment ordered alongside OPM DEIA guidance; handful of political appointments rather than the usual dozens arrive at USAID
Jan. 22	DEIA staff removed; gender experts’ narrow statutory interpretation & guidance unevenly adopted
Jan. 23	“DEIA Tasker” conflates statutory gender equality programs with DEIA despite objections
Jan. 24	Stop work orders prepared for about 3,000 contractors, including most gender advisers; gender equality categorized as DEIA
Jan. 27	Stop work orders take effect; contractors terminated; lawyers and senior officials placed on leave, weakening compliance capacity
Jan. 28	White House rhetoric brands gender programs “fraudulent and wasteful,” reinforcing political reframing
Jan. 29	OPM memo implementing EO 14168 expands identification of “gender ideology” staff beyond narrow EO text
Jan. 30	Agencywide review to identify any position descriptions mentioning “gender,” regardless of statutory mandate
Jan. 31	Unauthorized AI tool, Gemini, activated agencywide; majority of Washington-based gender advisers placed on leave; formal gender architecture dismantled
Feb. 1-2	Staff locked out of offices and USAID headquarters closed; USAID website offline; core agency functions halted — de facto institutional shutdown

Source: Caroline Hubbard, former senior gender adviser and gender team lead in USAID’s Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance; and Tazreen Hussain, former USAID Women, Peace and Security policy adviser

Instrumentalizing Ambiguity and Gender Bias to Eliminate Programs

Taking it a step further, the agency leaders issued instructions requiring offices to report DEIA-focused activities at headquarters and mission levels. This is significant because this period was further complicated by a challenge that predates the new administration, which is the persistent conflation within the agency between the terms “DEIA” and “inclusive development.” Inclusive development is an industry term that has historically referred to programmatic approaches designed to ensure development assistance reaches marginalized populations, which is not limited to any identity trait but includes every characteristic from age to rural and urban proximity. DEIA has been used to describe internal human resources policies and workforce practices. The longstanding blurring of these distinct concepts within USAID contributed to confusion and shaped how early directives were interpreted and applied. Although gender equality work is governed by separate statutory mandates, including the WPS Act and the WEEE Act, the lack of clarity meant women’s empowerment, DEIA, and other inclusive development programs became increasingly conflated. Efforts to end child marriage; advance girls’ education and women’s economic empowerment; ensure justice for survivors of gender-based violence; as well as maternal nutrition programs, in addition to legally required gender analysis and training, were increasingly labeled as DEIA programs.

In response, technical experts issued guidance detailing the difference between gender equality and women's empowerment programming and DEIA frameworks, emphasizing that women's empowerment work should not be automatically swept up under DEIA or treated interchangeably with staffing or personnel actions, and to explain statutory requirements and prevent further misinterpretation. These actions reflected concerted attempts to help the agency comply with the executive order in a lawful and technically sound manner and to avoid rushed, fragmented, or chaotic responses that could undermine the agency's mandate and misinterpret the scope of the directive. They also made clear how rapidly the early directives were being interpreted in ways that were far broader, and far less accurate, than the orders themselves required.

The response to technical input from gender experts and advisers over the following days was uneven and fragmented. Some, including those in the central gender hub and a few other offices, were able to brief career leadership; engage with policy, legal, and operations staff; and coordinate with colleagues. Others within the gender architecture, however, were distanced from decision-making and denied opportunities to brief or coordinate, based on the assumption that overcompliance or a vague, precautionary approach to compliance would be safer in the long run. At the same time, mission-level Foreign Service National gender advisers who had DEIA in their position description were placed on leave without clear explanation, formal notification that such action was required, or guidance on the conditions or timeline for returning to work. Most were never brought back. By Jan. 24, the administrator's office issued additional guidance for implementation of executive order on DEIA that explicitly, and inaccurately, listed gender equality and LGBTQI+ strategies as DEIA, reinforcing internal confusion and accelerating the collapse of gender equality and women's empowerment-related functions.

Accelerated Breakdown Through Bias and Overcompliance

A recognizable authoritarian tactic is to target vulnerable and divisive policies, people, and programs, often those that both liberal and illiberal stakeholders may view as expendable or politically costly to defend. By focusing on groups made vulnerable because of their identities, including race, gender, and migrant status, these tactics gradually chip away at institutional safeguards in areas where resistance is fragmented and protections are perceived as negotiable, often without fully recognizing the broader risks. In this instance, rather than relying on technically sound guidance from gender experts who identified the EOs' targeted attacks as an early warning sign of authoritarian overreach, the response tilted toward overcompliance, leading to the early termination of technical experts who were urging a pause to ensure accurate interpretation and statutory alignment.

Further compounding the disruption, on Jan. 29, OPM published a memo on the gender ideology executive order directing that all staff that "inculcate or promote gender ideology" be put on administrative leave and that all related activities be stopped.³⁰ Although the OPM guidance appeared to be in direct contradiction with the agency's statutory mandate under the WEEE Act, the memo triggered a formal agencywide directive the next day directing all offices to review position descriptions for the inclusion of the word "gender" and place those staff members on administrative leave. Technical experts repeatedly sought to clarify that this approach directly contradicted the text of the executive order and lacked any legal or policy basis. After all, many job descriptions that referenced gender, including gender equality and gender policy positions, were not just grounded in legal requirements but also could not reasonably be

30 Charles Ezell (Acting Director), *Memorandum to Heads and Acting Heads of Departments and Agencies: Initial Guidance Regarding President Trump's Executive Order Defending Women*, U.S. Office of Personnel Management, January 29, 2025, <https://www.opm.gov/media/yvlh1r3i/opm-memo-initial-guidance-regarding-trump-executive-order-defending-women-1-29-2025-final.pdf>

“Authoritarian leaders know to leverage the divisive nature of gender equality, as well as the subconscious or conscious sexism of more liberal democratic stakeholders, to erode democratic norms and institutions.”

construed as advancing “gender ideology.”

Those working on conflict prevention initiatives received isolated clarification on Jan. 30 from political leadership about WPS programming that they did not see it as a part of the gender rubric the team was looking at or that was of concern to the administration. They agreed not to include WPS in any requests focused on gender. This was due to the broader efforts of technical experts in the agency to clarify the executive orders. After all, Trump signed the WPS Act into law, so presumably current administration officials deemed it to be of importance. By this time, however, contractors supporting WPS implementation had been terminated. The agency’s WPS adviser was placed on administrative leave the next day. The administration’s focus on gender and DEIA at USAID exhibited how even those who support democratic norms can be successfully instrumentalized. In this environment of ambiguity, fear, and the desire to preempt further harm at USAID, more than three decades of gender equality work were rapidly undone without the deliberation such changes should require. Authoritarian leaders know to leverage the divisive nature of gender equality, as well as the subconscious or conscious sexism of more liberal democratic stakeholders, to erode democratic norms and institutions.

The Final Stages of Institutional Decay

The day after most Washington-based gender advisers were placed on administrative leave, many inside USAID believed the agency had taken the necessary steps to demonstrate alignment with the new administration and willingness to abide by Trump’s executive orders. In the preceding weeks, teams eliminated gender programs, disbanded working groups, and removed staff at headquarters and missions to comply with executive orders that lacked clarity and at times contradicted existing law. The events that unfolded in the weeks following the inauguration made it clear that agency staff’s overcompliance to the new administration’s orders provided it no protection. Between Feb. 1 and 2, remaining Washington-based staff were locked out of systems, placed on leave, and denied access to agency facilities. USAID’s public website went offline, and its headquarters was closed, signaling a rapid institutional shutdown. While many were surprised at the speed of these events, gender advisers were not. The pattern reflected how sustained overcompliance, in the absence of accurate and legal guidance, increased the agency’s vulnerability to precisely this outcome. While earlier action would not necessarily have prevented an eventual shutdown of core functions, the lack of early legal and institutional preparedness limited the agency’s ability to slow, shape, or contest the process once it began. Formal legal pushback did not emerge until after the shutdown was already underway, largely through external actions initiated in the days that followed. By the time the full scope of the threat that the new administration posed was recognized, the agency was reacting to a shutdown rather than better positioned to manage its trajectory.

Gendered Disinformation as Justification

On Jan. 28, White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt publicly labeled US-AID programs as “a preposterous waste of taxpayer money.”³¹ Her misleading and factually inaccurate claims about the list of programs notably highlighted gender and inclusive development work, most of which was actually funded by the State Department.³² This selection mirrored global anti-rights narratives and contributed to a perception that gender programs were politically suspect, further chilling internal decision-making. By the beginning of February 2025, Elon Musk, then head of the Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE),

31 Associated Press, “Fact Focus: No Evidence That \$50 Million Was Designated by the U.S. to Buy Condoms for Hamas in Gaza,” *AP News*, January 29, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/gaza-condoms-fact-check-trump-50-million-26884cac6c7097d7316ca50ca4145a82>

32 Saranac Hale Spencer, “Sorting Out the Facts on ‘Waste and Abuse’ at USAID,” *FactCheck.org*, February 8, 2025, <https://www.factcheck.org/2025/02/sorting-out-the-facts-on-waste-and-abuse-at-usaid/>

was sharing inaccurate information about the agency on X, highlighting conspiracy theories and declaring that he put USAID through the “woodchipper.”³³

On Feb. 3, the administration deployed its final justification for its actions against USAID, engaging in a campaign of gendered disinformation. White House Press Secretary Karoline Leavitt held up this same list of programs from the week prior and specifically highlighted programs about family planning, reproductive health, transgender communities, and DEIA as wasteful and fraudulent. Since USAID.gov had been removed without archiving, these allegations could not be verified. An analysis found those programs had been mischaracterized and, furthermore, some were not USAID programs.³⁴ The Trump administration had used disinformation to influence public opinion, justify dismantling an entire agency, and further expand executive power. This is known more recently as “gendered disinformation” wherein false or misleading narratives are spread and intentionally target women or gender-diverse people because of their gender. These campaigns often rely on gender stereotypes, sexualized or demeaning tropes, and attacks on credibility or morality, and are used to undermine women’s participation in public life and influence political and policy outcomes. The use of such information has become a tactic autocrats have deployed with increasing frequency over the last decade.

What This Pattern Reveals

In the two weeks after inauguration, a consistent dynamic emerged. Technical experts, drawing on decades of experience implementing gender equality laws, conducted analyses of the executive orders, identified the obligations and constraints outlined in them, and provided guidance to support lawful implementation. This was routine work and a core component of their roles. While some leaders recognized the importance of working alongside the gender architecture and supported efforts to not overinterpret the directives, this understanding was not universal, and many offices did not fully take up or act on the guidance provided. In parallel, several internal gender experts pointed out that the initial orders regarding gender and DEIA mirrored early warning signs of an autocratic-leaning administration, signaling broader antidemocratic moves and the rollback of established legal norms and precedents.

Requests to brief bureau leadership were increasingly declined, and coordination with the agency’s legal counsel often stalled. The assumption driving these decisions was that removing anything related to gender equality, women’s empowerment, and marginalized populations would offer protection for programs and people in their offices. While this approach was intended to reduce risk, it ultimately increased it. The pattern of overcompliance, rooted in fear and misinterpretation, created a false sense of security and weakened institutional readiness. Although many continued to emphasize the need to adhere to statutory requirements, agency practice more often reflected maximal compliance with vague executive orders, conflation of distinct legal mandates, and the sidelining of technical guidance that could have provided clarity.

The rapid removal of gender programs and staff in January did not occur in isolation. In the days that followed, it became increasingly clear that these actions were not only part of a broader effort to weaken USAID’s capacity to support democratic governance worldwide but also part of a wider assault on federal support or funding for all human rights and justice issues. During the same week gender advisers were placed on leave, USAID terminated its first batch of programs: hundreds of democracy and governance programs, including longstanding ones supporting human rights, women’s political participation, independent media, civil society organizations, and election processes.

33 Elon Musk (@elonmusk), “Could [have] gone to some great parties. Did that instead,” X (formerly Twitter), February 3, 2025.

34 Linda Qiu, “Fact-Checking Claims About USAID Funding,” The New York Times, February 8, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/02/08/us/politics/usaaid-funding-trump-fact-check.html>.

“While gender equality may have been the opening target, it was not the end goal.”

More than 600 employees were placed on leave and hundreds of personal service contracts were terminated.³⁵

Among the most consequential losses was the effective elimination of the Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening (CEPPS), the primary mechanism through which the United States has supported democratic integrity and good governance globally for more than three decades. It was also the central mechanism through which the U.S. supported women’s political leadership. USAID and the State Department together accounted for roughly 90% of U.S. global democracy assistance funding, including most funding for gender-inclusive democracy efforts.³⁶ The dismantling of CEPPS removed a significant institutional tool for countering global democratic backsliding and simultaneously eliminated the largest and most longstanding source of U.S. support for women’s political leadership. Because gender-inclusive leadership and democratic resilience are mutually reinforcing, this action was another key indicator of the intention to weaken the foundations of a rules-based global order and create space for illiberal leaders to consolidate power and align with one another with fewer constraints.³⁷ Through these actions, this administration has made clear that its aim is to replace a human rights-based foreign policy approach with a transactional authoritarian process. This shift will ultimately weaken U.S. standing on the global stage and jeopardize longstanding relationships with allies who have historically fought to preserve democracy in both their domestic and international relations.

What happened during the first two weeks of the new administration therefore cannot be understood as a series of disconnected policy changes. It was an intentional first move that softened the institutional terrain, creating confusion, fear, and a pattern of overcompliance that set the stage for a broader dismantling of gender equality, human rights, media freedom, access to justice, and much more. While gender equality may have been the opening target, it was not the end goal.

What Must Be Done Now

As the dismantling of USAID illustrates, ignoring gendered early warning signs could have severe consequences. Recognizing these patterns, and refusing to repeat the same misreadings, is essential for the defense of democratic institutions in the current moment both in the U.S. and globally. The tactics used to eliminate USAID served as a test run for the administration to see if other federal offices, personnel, departments, and agencies could be shuttered in the same way. With the shutdown, the administration normalized executive overreach and moved on to other parts of the federal government, including, for example, the impending shutdowns of the Department of Education, the closure of the State Department’s Office of Global Women’s Issues, gutting the Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, hollowing out the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), removing offices of the Inspector General across federal agencies, wiping out civil rights offices and key personnel, and increasing resources to Immigration and Customs Enforcement within the Department of Homeland Security who are now ignoring citizens’ rights to due process and

35 Simon Lewis, Daphne Psaledakis, and Humeyra Pamuk, “Hundreds of USAID Internal Contractors Put on Leave, Terminated Amid US Freeze on Global Aid,” *Reuters*, January 30, 2025, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/hundreds-usaid-contractors-put-leave-terminated-amid-us-freeze-global-aid-2025-01-29/>

36 Thomas Carothers, “Does U.S. Democracy Aid Have a Future?,” *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 3, 2025, <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2025/03/does-us-democracy-aid-have-a-future>

37 Elena Ortiz, Joshua Allen, Robert U. Nagel, and Jessica M. Smith, “Exploring the Links between Women’s Status and Democracy,” *Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace and Security*, March 21, 2023, <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/resource/exploring-the-links-between-womens-status-and-democracy/>

therefore normalizing such action for everyday citizens.^{38,39,40,41,42,43,44,45}

While democratic backsliding is happening at speed in the U.S., it reflects a broader global trend. According to the 2025 V-DEM Democracy Report, there are now 88 democracies and 91 autocracies in the world.⁴⁶ The world is also experiencing the most conflicts globally since World War II, and in parallel a targeted backlash against gender equality and women's leadership. Each of these issues compound and reinforce others.⁴⁷

Broad lessons can be drawn from the dismantling of USAID and the broader erosion of democratic safeguards. They reveal a systemic failure across the democracy and development ecosystem in which gender equality and women's empowerment are treated as politically expendable rather than as core democratic infrastructure. The early and excessive compliance to the White House's demands reflected this deeper failure, namely the inability to confront how gender inequality is routinely exploited as a tool of power. Whether driven by cognitive dissonance or calculated strategy, the outcome was the same. Gender equality was treated as expendable, and democratic norms and rules were weakened.

That choice mirrors authoritarian tactics in which gender equality and women's rights are targeted because they are viewed as negotiable.⁴⁸ Unlike pro-democracy stakeholders who treat gender equality as peripheral, autocrats are acutely aware that it is foundational to democratic stability. They attack gender early and effectively to consolidate power. In Hungary, Viktor Orbán's government banned gender studies programs at universities as part of a broader effort to centralize authority.⁴⁹ In Brazil, former President Jair Bolsonaro publicly attacked "gender ideology" and rolled back gender equality policies to mobilize political support and weaken liberal democracy. Present-day Afghanistan offers one of the starkest contemporary examples. The Taliban has used severe restrictions on women's education, employment, and public life to ensure political dominance, while much of the international community has treated what amounts to gender apartheid as a political reality rather than a crisis demanding sustained resistance.⁵⁰

Attacks on gender equality cannot be treated as routine policy disputes. They violate fundamental human rights and directly weaken democratic resilience, since societies with higher levels of gender equality are more resistant to

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- 38 Associated Press, "Education Department Offloads Programs to Other Agencies as Trump Accelerates Plan for Its Closure," *PBS NewsHour*, November 18, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/education-department-offloads-programs-to-other-agencies-as-trump-accelerates-plan-for-its-closure>
- 39 Kayla McGill and Rachel Wein, "The Elimination of the Women, Peace, and Security Implementation Capacity at the Department of State," *New Lines Institute*, January 12, 2026, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/gender-peace-security/the-elimination-of-the-women-peace-and-security-implementation-capacity-at-the-department-of-state/>
- 40 Scott Busby and Charles O. Blaha, "How the Proposed State Department Reorganization Guts U.S. Human Rights Diplomacy," *Just Security*, June 2025, <https://www.justsecurity.org/114200/state-department-reorganization-human-rights/>
- 41 Sarah Boim, "Months of Tumult and Waves of Staff Cuts Take a Toll on the CDC," *NPR*, December 1, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/12/01/nx-s1-5619764/months-of-tumult-and-waves-of-staff-cuts-take-a-toll-on-the-cdc>
- 42 Zeke Miller, Mary Clare Jalonick, and Stephen Groves, "Trump Fires More Than a Dozen Independent Inspectors General at Government Agencies," *PBS NewsHour*, January 25, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/politics/trump-fires-more-than-a-dozen-independent-inspectors-general-at-government-agencies>
- 43 Bloomberg Law, "Gutting Civil-Rights Offices Leaves Federal Workers Few Options," *Bloomberg Law Daily Labor Report*, January 2026, <https://news.bloomberglaw.com/daily-labor-report/gutting-civil-rights-offices-leaves-federal-workers-few-options>
- 44 Bill Chappell, "How ICE Grew to Be the Highest-Funded U.S. Law Enforcement Agency," *NPR*, January 21, 2026, <https://www.npr.org/2026/01/21/nx-s1-5674887/ice-budget-funding-congress-trump>
- 45 Ximena Bustillo, "Trump Wants to Bypass Immigration Courts. Experts Warn It's a 'Slippery Slope,'" *NPR*, April 29, 2025, <https://www.npr.org/2025/04/29/g-s1-63187/trump-courts-immigration-judges-due-process>
- 46 Marina Nord, David Altman, Fabio Angiolillo, Tiago Fernandes, Ana Good God, and Staffan I. Lindberg, *Democracy Report 2025: 25 Years of Autocratization – Democracy Trumped?* (Gothenburg, Sweden: Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) Institute, March 2025), https://www.v-dem.net/documents/60/V-dem-dr_2025_lowres.pdf
- 47 Annika Silva-Leander, "Defending Democracy, Advancing Gender Equality," *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance*, March 8, 2026, <https://www.idea.int/news/defending-democracy-advancing-gender-equality>
- 48 Laurel Weldon, *Protest, Policy, and the Problem of Violence against Women: A Cross-National Comparison*, updated ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 124–45 (Poland chapter on gender as democratic stabilizer).
- 49 CNN, "Hungary's Viktor Orbán Bans Gender Study at Colleges," October 19, 2018, <https://www.cnn.com/2018/10/19/europe/hungary-bans-gender-study-at-colleges-trnd>
- 50 Elena Becatoros, "UN envoy defends failure to include Afghan women in rights talks as Taliban bars girls from education," *Associated Press*, June 21, 2024, <https://apnews.com/article/un-afghanistan-taliban-women-girls-education-rights-88e7f5aadb25439b328c90283ae6ab5a>

backsliding.⁵¹ Stakeholders in the United States and globally must center gender equality in every programmatic, financial, and advocacy strategy aimed at countering democratic erosion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1 U.S.-BASED DEMOCRACY ORGANIZATIONS MUST FUNDAMENTALLY RECALIBRATE THEIR STRATEGIES TO CONFRONT DEMOCRATIC BACKSLIDING

Efforts to defend democratic norms in the U.S. have too often siloed gender equality, women's rights, and women's political participation as discrete issue areas rather than integrating them into strategies to advance and ensure democratic rule and for countering authoritarian threats. However, the evidence is unequivocal: Democracies are more peaceful and durable where women participate fully in political life and where gender equality is protected by law and practice.^{52,53} Attacks on sexual and reproductive health and rights are therefore not peripheral social policy disputes but deliberate entry points used to weaken democratic institutions and normalize broader authoritarian control. Democracy organizations must respond accordingly. They should listen to gender experts, center women's leadership, confront gendered disinformation as a strategic threat, and defend women's rights issues under attack not only as nonnegotiable democratic principles but as structural requirements for our country's democratic resilience.

2 BILATERAL GOVERNMENTS MUST RESIST ACCOMMODATION AND REAFFIRM THEIR DEMOCRATIC COMMITMENTS

Removing gender expertise, and deprioritizing women's rights in international engagements is short-sighted and will cause harm.⁵⁴ This accommodation echoes early compliance by USAID and is short-sighted and dangerous. History shows that appeasing authoritarian pressure does not preserve influence – it accelerates democratic erosion.⁵⁵

At the same time, as the U.S. retreats globally under the current administration, it is ceding the normative world order to other authoritarian actors who are actively reshaping international standards in their own image. Russia has moved aggressively in the opposite direction, increasing funding for so-called "traditional values" initiatives that explicitly reject gender equality frameworks and systematically undermine the very human rights that the United States once championed. Russia has also worked to roll back these commitments in international fora, reframing women's rights as ideological threats rather than universal human rights.⁵⁶ Russia understands what many pro-democracy leaders in the U.S. continue to ignore: Women's rights, gender equality, and healthy, democratic societies are intrinsically linked and indivisible.

Rather than following the U.S. trajectory, bilateral donors should intensify their international legal commitments under the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Women, Peace and Security agenda, and the broader set of international frameworks dedicated to democracy, human rights, and gender equality.⁵⁷ These are among the most

51 Westminster Foundation for Democracy, *Women Political Leaders: The Impact of Gender on Democracy*, accessed March 15, 2026, <https://www.wfd.org/what-we-do/resources/women-political-leaders-impact-gender-democracy>

52 See Barnhart, Karlsson, and Lindberg, *Democratic Countries with Women's Suffrage Initiation of Disputes Comparison*, in *V-Dem Policy Brief*,

53 United Nations Women, "Participation of Women in Peace Processes and Agreement Durability,"

54 Women's Refugee Commission, *A Year of Harms: The Impact of US Foreign Aid Cuts on Women and Girls in Humanitarian Crises* (New York: Women's Refugee Commission, 2026).

55 Erica Chenoweth and Maria J. Stephan, *Why Civil Resistance Works: The Strategic Logic of Nonviolent Conflict* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 1–44.

56 Security Council Report, "Annual Open Debate on Women, Peace and Security," *What's in Blue*, October 2025, https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/whatsinblue/2025/10/annual-open-debate-on-women-peace-and-security-2.php?utm_source=substack&utm_medium=email

57 United Nations, *Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW)*, accessed, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/cedaw/cedaw.htm>



Supporters hold signs as terminated USAID employees collect their personal belongings at the USAID headquarters on Feb. 27, 2025, in Washington, D.C. (Chip Somodevilla/Getty Images)

3 IMPLEMENTERS AND AID ORGANIZATIONS MUST RESTORE GENDER EXPERTISE AS A CORE COMPONENT OF DEMOCRACY AND PEACEBUILDING WORK

4 DEMOCRATIC STAKEHOLDERS MUST STRENGTHEN AND PROTECT CIVIL SOCIETY, PARTICULARLY BROAD-BASED AND WELL-COORDINATED WOMEN'S MOVEMENTS

effective tools available for strengthening democratic governance, preventing conflict, and sustaining global peace. Meeting these commitments requires sustained political will; gender expertise and leadership in diplomatic and assistance bodies; and robust, predictable funding for women's rights organizations, women-led movements, and initiatives that dismantle structural barriers to women's political and economic leadership. It also requires responding to attacks on women's sexual and reproductive health and rights as a central indicator of democratic backsliding and a direct threat to institutional resilience.

In addition to country donors, aid organizations, including those still able to implement democracy, peace, and conflict programs must also confront the consequences of recent retrenchment. Budget cuts and political pressure have led many institutions to eliminate gender adviser roles and disband gender teams, treating this expertise as optional rather than essential. Innovation and adaptation are necessary, but they cannot succeed if women's leadership is sidelined and more than three decades of gains in gender equality are rolled back. Peace and democracy without half the population is not peaceful nor democratic; it is a system structurally vulnerable to capture.

Such movements remain one of the most powerful counterweights to democratic backsliding. Research and history have demonstrated that women's movements play a disproportionate role in sustaining nonviolent authoritarian resistance, broadening participation, and restoring democratic principles. Women's movements are often the first to push back when democracy and human rights come under attack, because women's personal status and bodily autonomy are targeted early and intentionally, as reflected in the timeline of USAID's demise.⁵⁸ Women's movements are often targeted early precisely because they challenge hierarchical and exclusionary power structures. Supporting them is therefore not symbolic. It is strategic.⁵⁹

58 Saskia Brechenmacher and Caroline Hubbard, "Breaking the Cycle of Gender Exclusion in Political Party Development," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, March 24, 2020, https://carnegieendowment.org/files/202003-BrechenmacherHubbard_final.pdf Weldon, S. Laurel. 2022. *When Protest Makes Policy: How Social Movements Represent Disadvantaged Groups*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

59 Laurel Weldon, *Protest, Policy, and the Problem of Violence against Women: A Cross-National Comparison*, updated ed. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), [relevant pages on Polish case studies]; "2020–2021 Women's Strike Protests in Poland," Wikipedia, last modified [current date], https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2020%E2%80%932021_women's_strike_protests_in_Poland; Monica Gray, "Poland's Abortion Ban Spurs Largest Protests in Decades," *New York Times*, October 30, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/30/world/europe/poland-abortion-women-protests.html>.

5 U.S. WOMEN'S RIGHTS ADVOCACY ORGANIZATIONS MUST UNDERSTAND THE CONTEXT WITHIN WHICH THEY ARE NOW OPERATING AND EXPAND THEIR STRATEGIES BEYOND LEGISLATIVE ENGAGEMENT

6 ALL STAKEHOLDERS MUST RECOGNIZE THAT DEMOCRATIC DEFENSE REQUIRES ACTIVE RESISTANCE, NOT CAUTIOUS ACCOMMODATION

The experience of USAID shows that attacks on gender equality are not isolated policy disputes but tactics embedded within an authoritarian playbook. Look to countries where there has been successful pushback against autocratic efforts. Congressional advocacy alone has rarely been effective in these contexts, especially when gender is tied to authoritarian power consolidation. Examples from Brazil, Hungary, and Iran show that meaningful resistance has required mass mobilization and sustained civil society pressure, not only legislative remedies. Advocacy and women's rights stakeholders are not confined to formal organizations; they include women activists, women leading community networks, informal groups, and social movements who may not operate in formal channels but are key stakeholders.

Authoritarian consolidation thrives when institutions self-censor, when governments soften commitments to avoid conflict, and when individuals remain silent out of fear or fatigue. Upholding democratic norms and institutions depends on people inside governments, multilateral bodies, civil society, and the private sector being willing to speak up and speak out – clearly, publicly, and consistently. Democracies do not erode only because of those who seek power for their own sake but because too many others choose accommodation over accountability. Reimagining the future of democracy and development must therefore begin with a simple but difficult truth: Gender equality is not a liability to manage. It is a democratic imperative to defend.

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