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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

# United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues

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The United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues led the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the U.S. Department of State. The position was created in 2009 when Hillary Clinton served as U.S. Secretary of State during the administration of Barack Obama. Ambassador Geeta Rao Gupta (GRG) was the fourth Ambassador-at-Large and the first woman of color to hold the position. In 2025, the Ambassadorship and Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues were eliminated by the Donald Trump administration. This is a slightly edited version of an interview that took place with Mona Lena Krook (MLK) via Zoom on February 4, 2026.

**MLK: What role did you play in promoting gender equality in the U.S. government?**
GRG: I was Ambassador-at-Large for Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues in the U.S. Department of State. I was nominated by President Biden and it's a Senate-confirmed position, so I had to wait for Senate confirmation. That took 18 months in my case. It was one of the longest that any nominee has waited. [The delay] was for various reasons, mostly because of politics around the fact that I had worked in my career on reproductive rights, reproductive health, and maternal health. Some of the Republicans on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee had decided that was the reason to not vote for me. I also think that the information that they had received about me from a right-wing NGOs influenced their vote — even though that information was false. I was finally confirmed by the Senate in May 2023 by a narrow margin.

The role of the Ambassador is to integrate women's concerns and priorities into U.S. foreign policy and to advance three strategic priorities: women's economic empowerment, the prevention and response to gender-based violence,

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and implementing the women, peace, and security agenda. During the 20 months that I was in office, I represented the State Department at bilateral, regional, and multilateral fora on those issues and worked with colleagues across the Department and interagency to make sure that women's contributions, opportunities, and leadership, as well as the barriers they faced and the indignities they suffered, were taken into consideration in policies and programs that the Department promoted.

**MLK: What was your background going into the role as Ambassador-at-Large?**

GRG: I have spent more than four decades working on advancing gender equality and women's rights. I completed my education in India and over my career have had the opportunity to work in academia, the non-profit sector, a multilateral organization, and briefly in philanthropy. All of that led to getting this incredible opportunity to serve my country in government.

I was educated in India and my PhD dissertation focused on the role conflict that women in Bangalore city experience and the coping strategies that they deploy to address that conflict. Immediately after that, I had the unique opportunity — just by being in the right place at the right time — to be on a team that developed and taught the first women's studies course in a graduate school in India. It was a pilot program funded by the Ford Foundation that is now a part of the graduate curriculum at that school, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. It was an incredible experience because there is no better way to learn than to teach! The curriculum that my colleagues and I developed covered courses on women in the law, women's employment, women's health, and women's status in India. The focus of those courses was on women's role and contributions to economic development.

And then, my husband was transferred to the U.S. to represent the Export-Import Bank of India. That's what brought us to the U.S. We were told it was a two-year assignment, so I took a sabbatical from my job as a lecturer at the university, thinking that I would be back in that job soon! As it happened, my husband's term kept getting extended. By the third year, I was going crazy staying at home and went out exploring job opportunities in the field of women in development. I found the only organization that existed at that time in Washington, D.C. that worked on women and international development, the International Center for Research on Women (ICRW). I started out there as a research assistant and rose up the ranks to ultimately become ICRW's president. I loved that job. It gave me the ability to focus on, learn about, and advocate for investments in women. I worked on a range of issues at ICRW, from women in poverty to maternal and child health to women's vulnerability to HIV.

After 20 years of being at ICRW, I was invited by the Gates Foundation to serve as a senior fellow on their Global Development team. That was a great opportunity to get a view into one of the largest philanthropies in the world. From there I went on to become Deputy Executive Director of UNICEF in New York. I did that for five years. It gave me a deep appreciation of the value of multilateralism and the value of global governance. From there I joined the UN Foundation as a senior fellow and while I was there I started a program called the 3D

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Program for Girls and Women, which stood for Document, Drive, and Deliver for Girls and Women. Based in Pune District in Pune City in India, it tried to see how local government could collaborate with the private sector and civil society to bring about changes in women's status.

Then, out of the blue, I get this call out of the blue asking if I would consider being nominated to lead the Office of Global Women's Issues in the State Department. I accepted right away because I was so honored to have an opportunity to serve the country that I had adopted as my own. I knew the office. I knew the position. I had worked closely with Melanne Verveer [the first Global Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues] through ICRW. That was a long, meandering way to answer your question — but I love telling the story of my journey because I can't believe how fortunate I have been to have had these experiences and such a rich career.

**MLK: What were the day-to-day priorities of the Secretary's Office for Global Women's Issues?**

GRG: The office had three strategic priorities: women, peace, and security (WPS); women's economic opportunity; and gender-based violence. We also worked on cross-cutting issues, like climate change and adolescent well-being. [The day-to-day work] was about developing and implementing strategies on each of those priorities and representing and promoting the U.S. position on those issues at bilateral and multilateral levels through diplomacy, policies, and programs.

The work on WPS was mandated by the WPS Act of 2017. Our office was the lead in implementing that strategy interagency. And because it was mandated by Congress, we, together with the Department of Defense, USAID, and the Department of Homeland Security, had to report to the WPS Caucus on [Capitol] Hill on the progress we made in implementing the strategy. The Office also worked across the State Department to integrate attention to women's issues into all of U.S. foreign policy. So we served as internal advocates, too, because there is evidence to show that when women's participation — civic, political, and social — is undermined, democracy is undermined. Ensuring women's economic and political participation contributes to peace, stability, and prosperity.

**MLK: In your view, what were the main accomplishments while you were there?**

GRG: I didn't have a lot of time, which was really sad. It was my first time in government and there was a lot I needed to learn initially on how government works. But the office over those 20 months was able to advance each of the strategic priorities.

On gender-based violence, the focus was on technology-facilitated gender-based violence [TFGBV] — the way in which technology like digital platforms and the internet are weaponized to undermine women's leadership and participation in public life. I heard from women political leaders, parliamentarians, and those in the media that they wouldn't recommend anybody else younger than them taking on these roles, because it was so threatening to their security, as well as their family's safety. I vividly remember women leaders in Kenya telling me stories of how they had to move house several times because their information

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had been shared on the internet. Threats online often translate into real-life incidents of violence and women are aware of that — so they did not want younger women to take on public-facing roles.

That really upset me, because for the past couple of decades the one indicator I had watched rise systematically was women's representation in public roles, especially in politics. Never actually getting to 50% in any country, but at least it was headed in the right direction. The trend line was good. And so, to hear that we might actually see a plateauing of that trend line and maybe even a reversal is deeply disappointing. And, sure enough, the Inter-Parliamentary Union, which tracks the statistics on women's representation in political office globally, reported that the rate of increase in that trend line had decreased over the past year.

One of the ways in which we tried to address the needs of women who face these threats was to put out a call that women who were survivors of TFGBV could apply for the money they might need to get legal advice, support with security or technology expertise, or even to help them move house at short notice if they needed to — small grants to meet the immediate needs of survivors. I pushed hard to use some of the foreign assistance we had. But as you know all that is gone now — the entire office was eliminated and many of the grants we made were discontinued.

On WPS, while I struggled to leverage my role to meaningfully incorporate women's voices or protect women from harm in the resolution of several ongoing conflicts, I am proud of my office's efforts to lift up the voices of Sudanese women leaders in negotiations on the conflict in Sudan. We worked closely with the U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan to convene 14 women civil society leaders who presented detailed priorities and recommendations to the U.S. mediation and technical teams and international stakeholders. Their determination and perspectives breathed energy into the talks and introduced new approaches to advance peace.

The contributions that they made were really significant. They could tell the group which particular humanitarian corridor would be feasible and provided specific geographical details. They were able to share information on the reality of the situation on the ground and demanded that the requirements to the warring parties should include allowing farmers to grow food and holding them accountable for using rape as a weapon of war. There was so much more texture, so much more detail and nuance that they introduced into the talks through their interventions.

**MLK: What happened to your position in January 2025?**

GRG: The way it is [with political appointees] is that you submit your resignation at the end of the term of the administration. I did that and stepped down on January 17, 2025. When I left, the Office was still there. My colleague, Kat Fotovat, continued as senior official in charge of the office, which is what she'd done for the 20 months that I was waiting for confirmation. I was truly grateful that she offered that continuity at both ends of my term. For our 60 staff members, their future was very unclear for a while, because some of them were told you're on

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furlough, and some were told that you'll be absorbed by other departments, and then in March the entire office was eliminated from the new organizational chart. They were all left without a job. In anticipation, a couple of them had already applied for positions in other parts of the State Department and did get employed, but most of them were out.

**MLK: What have you been doing since then?**

GRG: I've co-founded two different initiatives. One is called the Alliance for Diplomacy and Justice, which I co-founded with seven of my colleagues from the State Department. We each held a human rights portfolio and we all happened to be women. We had lunch after inauguration day, and the plan was to have one last time together before going off into the sunset! But by then, [Trump] had already issued all these executive orders that were devastating to us because they undermined human rights. So we decided, no, we have to do something. Over lunch, we decided that we would advocate for the value of diplomacy and human rights in U.S. foreign policy, serving as both a rapid response and monitoring mechanism to track and expose the real-time fallout of the U.S. government's abandonment of its core values, while offering alternative approaches that center on human rights. That's the mission and it's now well on its way. We are working with Congress, across both parties, to stop further erosion and to protect what remains. Through op-eds, scholarly publications, podcasts, and radio and TV interviews, we are also engaging the public and making the case on why diplomacy, development, and human rights matter globally, but also domestically for their daily lives and economic security. In doing our work we are cultivating close partnerships with international organizations, global leaders, and civil society in the U.S. who are similarly committed to the pursuit of justice, equality, and democracy.

And then separately, with another colleague from my office, Varina Winder, who was my Chief of Staff and a Senior Policy Adviser in the office, and another colleague from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Jessica Marcella, we established a five-year strategic initiative called the Arch Collaborative. It is designed to build bridges between key stakeholders — governments, civil society, and donors, in particular — to resist and address the anti-rights, anti-gender equality, global movement that is so well organized, so well-funded, and so well networked and so well coordinated. Simultaneously, we are trying to generate and curate new ideas to build back a better global architecture to advance gender equality and protect women's rights — an architecture that includes a strong multilateral platform given the weakened state of the UN; adequate funding from national budgets, in overseas development assistance as well as through private sources; data platforms for gender data that are transparent and sustainable; narratives and communications strategies to better make the case for investments in gender equality; and technology to get the narrative to wider audiences.

So, yes, there is a lot to do and I am happy to be busy promoting the values that I believe in!

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**MLK: What advice would you give to those of us who want to advance gender equality in the current context?**

GRG: I just think that everybody should do what is possible to do within their own context. There is so much to do to advance gender equality and protect human rights. So much is being dismantled and destroyed. My advice would be to stay politically engaged. Don't look the other way or say it's all too overwhelming. Pick up the phone and call your representative or Senator, vote in every election, write and publish an article on what you feel passionate about, volunteer to help those who are particularly vulnerable in this moment, and donate money to causes and organizations you believe — every little amount counts.

## Resources

U.S. Department of State. 2022. *Roadmap for the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse*, https://2021-2025.state.gov/2022-roadmap-for-the-global-partnership-for-action-on-gender-based-online-harassment-and-abuse/

Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues, https://2021-2025.state.gov/bureaus-offices/secretary-of-state/office-of-global-womens-issues/

The Alliance for Diplomacy and Justice, https://www.thealliancefordiplomacyandjustice.org/

The Arch Collaborative, https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-arch-collaborative/

**Geeta Rao Gupta** served as Global Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues in the U.S. State Department, 2023–2025.

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