Politics & Gender (2026), **22**: 1, 362–371
doi:10.1017/S1743923X2610066X

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

USAID Women, Peace, and Security Policy Advisor

Tazreen Hussain[1] and Mona Lena Krook[2]

[1]WPS Collective, Washington, DC, USA and [2]Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
Corresponding author: Mona Lena Krook; Email: m.l.krook@rutgers.edu

(Received 25 March 2026; revised 25 March 2026; accepted 30 March 2026)

The Women, Peace, and Security Policy Advisor at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) served as the agency's lead responsible for implementing the Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) Act of 2017 and the 2023 U.S. Strategy on Women, Peace, and Security. Tazreen Hussain (TH) served as the USAID Women, Peace, and Security Policy Advisor from 2024 to 2025. In early 2025, the Donald Trump administration officially shut down USAID, including the women, peace, and security portfolio. This is a slightly edited version of an interview that took place with Mona Lena Krook (MLK) via Zoom on December 12, 2025.

MLK: What role did you play in promoting gender equality in the U.S. government?

TH: I joined USAID in 2023, so I was only there for two years before it all went kaput. I was hired to be the gender advisor for the CPS Bureau, the Conflict Prevention and Stabilization Bureau. That Bureau itself was fairly new. It was about five years old by the time I had joined, and I was going to be their first gender advisor. In that same bureau there was also a WPS policy advisor. The person that held that role transitioned out as I was joining, so I ended up taking on the acting WPS policy lead, and come 2024, I [took that on] full-time. In two years, I had two different titles, but I was doing a lot of similar work.

Initially, [my focus] was on trying to get the CPS Bureau to begin to integrate and mainstream gender equality and women's empowerment [in a strategic way], incorporating best practices in all our programs, funding, research, and policies. I was trying to help the Bureau think about how to build that infrastructure, because we had five very different offices doing very different work. As I took on the WPS policy lead position, that involved leading WPS implementation

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https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X2610066X Published online by Cambridge University Press

for the entire agency. It was much more about working with other bureaus and other gender leads across the different bureaus to advance the work and make sure we're implementing the requirements of the WPS Law [of 2017].

MLK: What was your background going into those roles at USAID?
TH: Before that, I was working in international development. I started my career at IFES, the International Foundation for Electoral Systems. I was there right as they had just started to incorporate gender into their work. There were some programs before that had dedicated activities [on gender], but I joined right as they were trying to figure out how to make this a priority for the organization and develop the infrastructure and the leadership to make that happen. I was at IFES for eight years. During that time, I helped develop the whole portfolio with a senior gender advisor. We built technical resources to understand election management and administration, but with a gender lens, focusing on political participation. Also bringing in agendas into our work that hadn't traditionally been linked, like the WPS portfolio, because so many of the countries that we worked in at IFES were conflict-affected countries. That's really what got my WPS buzz started.

I was also there for the beginnings of a lot of new things that we had identified, like gender-based violence in elections and politics, and then online VAWIE (violence against women in elections) work, which I had just started as I was transitioning out. Now all that work is called TFGBV (technology-facilitated gender-based violence). We had started working with the tech companies to identify how to find out that this is an issue and do the analysis and write the reports and all those fun, fun things. Those were a lot of cool things that we did. I worked on men's engagement and women, peace, and security, developing training and curricula and surveys and analysis to inform the development of those tools.

After that, I went to the Center for Civilians and Conflict, which looked specifically at civilian protection. I was their first official gender advisor — again, looking at things from the baseline and integrating and mainstreaming gender where I could, building up the team's capacities to do that, developing trainings, and really kind of bringing that stuff out to the forefront. Then after that, I went to Vital Voices Global Partnership. I wanted to be at an organization where I didn't have to convince people to think about women. I kind of needed that break. I wanted to be in an environment where I could do the work without having the barrier of having to convince people it was a good idea to begin with.

While I was there, I did a lot more work on women's leadership more broadly. I got a lot of experience developing training curriculum and designing programs that really focused on supporting women in the world that actually did this work. Finding ways to advance them, get their information and their ideas out. Doing it in a creative way, working with corporations, working on storytelling, and providing support to women on their specific needs, whatever it may be, personal or professional.

It was really cool, but then I was like, you know what, I want to go back and focus on these issues, and I also want to be a part of the system and see how I can

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shift it. So many of the issues that we know women leaders face in the world are so similar. There's a lot of influence to be had with U.S. funding and U.S. foreign policy, so how can I really get into that? And that's what took me to USAID.

MLK: In your view, what were the main accomplishments while you were at USAID?

TH: While I was there, we were working on a brand new government strategy for WPS, one that was required by the law every four years. When I came on board, that process had just begun, so I was involved in the development of that. I was also working with my interagency leads — the lead person at the State Department, the lead person at Defense, and Homeland Security. The four of us worked together to develop that and we each had to bring in our agencies in that process. We did consultations with civil society and others to make sure it was an informed process.

Once we had that strategy in place, each agency and department had to develop its own implementation plan for the next four years. So that was another big accomplishment, because I had to get every single bureau in the agency to make some type of commitment to do this work, whether it be through their existing programs, future programs — getting dedicated people, getting dedicated metrics that they would be reporting towards, things like that. Making sure that our implementation plan reflected what we could actually achieve in the coming years. Also aspirational [as to] where we wanted to see some changes happen. That was a very participatory process that took about a year to actually complete and finalize. It was actually released on January 17, 2025, the Friday before the inauguration [of Donald Trump].

Two other things. One is, within the CPS Bureau, there was this notion that people didn't understand what the difference was between having a gender advisor and then having a WPS policy advisor. I had gotten to a point where people understood what the difference was, and they also understood why they needed these positions. Before, there was that lack of understanding, so there was a lot of resistance to actually bringing me in or someone in a similar role to help do what needed to get done and build out the capacity for the Bureau to do this work. It was important because that's how you get influence over where funding goes. It was also a way to ensure that all the training and analyses we were producing incorporated that lens, which benefitted the entire Agency.

We had a whole new conflict assessment methodology that was released. It took many years to complete, but the gender aspect of it was very minimal. I had gotten agreement to create an addendum to do a proper gender and conflict analysis and make it a standard part of the services that the Bureau provided to the rest of the agency. That was a big deal. It was getting that buy-in and the commitment to integrate gender equality and women's empowerment into that work. The CPS Bureau also was like a service provider to the rest of the agency, because we were working on technical information. We weren't a regional bureau that implemented a lot of critical work in the different missions. We were subject matter experts, and we were offering services to the rest of the agency.

The second thing [involved] identifying new issues and trends in this space and bringing people together to figure out how to address that. One of the things

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that we did in 2024 was hold a symposium on TFGBV and WPS. It was one of those things where USAID had done a lot of work on this issue, and TFGBV was a priority that we wrote into the WPS strategy and implementation plans. But as an interagency we hadn't talked about who's looking at this issue when it comes to conflict-affected contexts.

One of the things that we did was partner with the U.S. Institute of Peace. We had a two-day symposium where we brought in representatives from all four agencies, people who were not traditionally in the gender space – the intelligence people, the technology people, the conflict people. We brought them all into the room and used expertise from academia and civil society to do both learning and also tabletop exercises, or what we call the peace game. We did that using Ukraine as an example of information warfare and what that looked like from the gender lens.

We were able to do this learning piece for everyone in the room because everyone was at a different level of understanding. We also got them talking to one another and identifying, like: Oh, you're doing this? Well, we're doing this. There's a lot of overlap here. How can we make sure we're not doing that? And I didn't know you were doing XYZ thing. Is there a way we can get that information from you? Or it's finding areas of collaboration. We even had, at that time, the head of the AI unit at Homeland Security say, wow, we didn't even think about these issues with the gender lens. Now, not only do we have to, but we will, and we need to strategically think about it from the top down. We got really good commitments. I would say it was a different way of addressing this issue that I hadn't seen in government, and I think many people in government hadn't seen, because you usually go to conferences, and you listen to the people, and then you go about your day, right? But this was kind of like you've got to listen to these people, and now you have to apply it.

People were excited to meet people that they probably should have met before and started partnering with one another. The peace game was developed by women who were in the military before. The head game writer was a junior in college. She was excellent. It was fascinating. It garnered a lot of momentum on the issue, and a lot of excitement, and it was also a new way of coordinating and collaborating with the interagency on issues where we, as USAID, had been trying to address and understand the implication of from the communities where we worked. Other departments and agencies were just starting to understand what we were seeing. It was a labor of love, and I say it because it was just so different in the way that we approach that work.

MLK: What was your perspective on what happened in January 2025?

TH: It was interesting because — as a citizen, not as a government employee — I was seeing all the alarm bells and the early warning signs that we know and see in the democracy and governance space and in the peace and conflict space. Levels of gender equality and how you treat women, and what it means for democracy. Since 2016, the way that women have been targeted, gender biases, just building up and up and up in the U.S. Being in foreign policy, I couldn't really talk about that. There were legally required firewalls.

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Election Day was funny, because it's such a tense day, given where we are politically in this country. That day, we actually had a meeting, the WPS Interagency, at the White House to talk about our implementation plans and the rollout of that. It was just a weird, weird meeting to be in, because we're not allowed to talk about politics. Hatch Act rules, right, while working in government buildings. Which was fair, but the rollout of our implementation plans was going to look very different depending on what the results of the elections were — and nobody could talk about it or even acknowledge it.

We wanted to make sure that we're able to continue this work between administrations, which is the actual goal of what we're doing, right? For us, it didn't matter which administration came into power, because we knew these were commitments that were bipartisan. The WPS Act was signed by the first Trump administration. It was more about how we make sure that we're able to continue to do this work. But we couldn't talk about any of that, so we just kind of kept on moving forward the way that we were supposed to.

After that, once we saw the results of the elections — because I was newish in government, and I hadn't gone through a change in administration — I was trying to understand, what does this transition time look like? How can we make sure that WPS and gender equality are a part of that, so they understand our approach and how we've been working on this? How can we work together to make sure that the incoming administration's priorities feel aligned and we can move this work forward?

Personally, for me, I knew we would be attacked. It was going to be an uphill battle, just because of what I'd seen in the last couple of years in U.S. discourse. But I was told that it's going to be fine because, one, the first Trump administration signed the [WPS] law, so we would probably get a lot more spotlight, and probably more prioritization and funding, because it's something that they clearly care about. I was kind of dismissed when I was talking about a lot of my concerns. Those concerns were shared by others within USAID who also saw similar things and have similar backgrounds. We were like, how do we make sure we're saving the work, the people, the policies, whatever we can, and that it doesn't get targeted or diminished, or changed in a way that would do more harm. It just felt like I was alone on an island doing that, because everyone else was like, you're going to be fine. Don't worry about it.

Then the executive orders came out on January 20, both the foreign assistance one as well as the gender ideology one. Even then, when I was talking about a lot of concerns with that executive order, people were interpreting it in different ways. There was no clarity on how to interpret it within our building. Usually what happens is that an executive order is signed, and then there's guidance that's shared with specific tasks for each department and agency to report and say you're going to be doing XYZ thing. None of that happened. It was chaos. And because there was chaos, people were interpreting things differently. There was no clear determination.

But as the WPS advisor and the expert, I was also not being heard. It was interesting because I was finally able to get my leadership and my bureau to agree that the WPS work does not fall in line with what is requested of the gender ideology executive order. I got written guidance from the head of my bureau

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saying exactly that. Because WPS doesn't fall in line with what's in the gender ideology executive order, we're not going to respond to any requests. That was good. That was a big win for me. I think we were the only ones that were able to get that.

Ultimately, it didn't matter, because of the lack of clarity and the lack of guidance. People were already listing anything gender-related, putting it on a list that would be determined as not being in line with the priorities of the incoming administration or the requirements of the executive order. At this point, everyone is trying to save their programs, their funding, and their work. It was chaos. It was confusion. There was no real leadership across the agency to make determinations and to set an agenda to help enable us to understand how to move forward.

All of that didn't matter, because on January 31, all gender advisors, or anyone with gender in their titles or job descriptions, were all put on leave. All of us. That weekend was when the rest of the agency was put on leave and the doors were shut. Earlier in the week, on Monday, they got rid of all the contractors. Tuesday, they got rid of all the senior leaders. That made the news, the senior leaders, the 200-plus senior leaders. Wednesday, we got a vague memo from OPM [Office of Personnel Management] on how to implement the gender ideology executive order. Even then, there was still chaos inside, because some people got guidance, some people didn't, some people were reporting up, some were not. We didn't know what was going to come of that.

Thursday, I got my bureau to send out that written guidance. And then Friday, we were all put on leave. I think it was also that same Tuesday or Wednesday that the inclusive development and the DEIA (diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility) advisors across the agency were all put on leave, too. Inclusive development, DEIA, gender, all happened first, and then the rest of the agency. As gender and democracy people, we knew this was strategic. We knew that the targeting of gender at the very beginning is the wedge in to enable the destruction moving forward. And these were the red flags we'd been raising. But it was falling on deaf ears.

MLK: Just as an aside, how do you think the WPS Act managed to be passed under the first Trump administration?

TH: There was a lot of political momentum built. The messaging with that was done in a very bipartisan way, because it was grounded in research and reality, and people just understood it. The co-sponsors of the bill, the people that supported it, the people that were leading the [WPS] caucus in Congress. The question is, how does this about-turn happen? How do you abandon everything that you've stood for, including your own laws?

I wasn't at USAID for this, but what I heard was Ivanka Trump actually championed WPS a lot. I think it was her influence that got her dad to sign it as president. It was that and the [Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment (WEEE)] Act. Those were the big pieces of legislation for gender equality in our foreign policy. It came with requirements for training for people for expertise, for resources, funding, all those things. Those were the two things that we, as a community, were using as a part of this whole transition, and trying

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to showcase that these are things that you prioritized and signed. Here's what we've been able to accomplish. Here's what we hope to do with you in partnership in the future.

But it didn't matter. No one was there to hear or listen to any of that. I will say, in those couple of weeks, we were trying to get signals from any transition team or incoming administration official [as to] who would be filling the seats for the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues and the Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality within USAID. Who could it potentially be? Are their names floating around? There was nothing. It was silence. No one [among the previous Trump appointees to those positions] could be reached. That was also a big signal that this is not good, because there's zero information coming from anyone about any of this.

MLK: What have you been doing since then?

TH: I was put on leave. I was [in the] civil service, so my last day at USAID was July 1. I went six months getting paid without doing any work — great for me, but terrible for the taxpayer. That makes no sense. In that time, there was a lot of discussion with other WPS counterpoints in civil society, and in the field more broadly, about what the future looks like. How do we hold on to this? How do we keep this? What's strategic? And how can we make sure we actually are not doing harm by pushing for and advocating for this work? There's been a lot of that.

Civil society has been pretty active. Once I was no longer in government, I could be myself. I no longer had to worry about what it means to be a federal employee. To be afraid to speak out because of DOGE (Department of Government Efficiency). To be afraid of being targeted. A part of that time period was also this realization of being targeted the way that a lot of the women that we supported across the world were. We had government-furnished technologies — phone, laptop. DOGE was in all of them. We had to be careful what we said and how we said it, and it didn't matter if I was talking to a family member about something on a personal level. The way that the political targeting was happening, we saw the writing on the wall. We needed to make sure and be very careful of what we said, who we talked to, how we communicated on issues that we have worked on our entire careers that were okay before January 20. Even words like gender, gender equality, gender-based violence could be triggers. It was very much just being careful and afraid. That fear really did take a big toll.

I will say that when July 1 came, I felt a sense of relief. I mean, I was mad and angry and sad. But it was also like, alright, I'm no longer the government, the "lunatic bureaucrat," as I've been deemed in the media. I can actually speak out. Who's going to stop me? I started doing some writing. I put out a piece with Georgetown on what the WPS Act is, here's what we've been able to accomplish, and why are we giving up on this now? In memoriam, to show what USAID did. I was trying to find ways to save a lot of the work and the research and tools and everything that we developed that was public, because all of that was gone.

Seeing so many of the parallels between what we've seen across the world with what's happening in our own backyard, I also started talking to some old colleagues from the State Department. We came together and formed our own

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entity, which we're in the process of developing now. It's called the WPS Collective. It's our effort to apply a domestic lens to WPS in the United States. We also want to build a bridge between U.S. actors, activists, and leaders, and the broader global movement, because this rise in authoritarianism is not unique to the U.S.

If anything, we need to be a part of a broader global movement, because what we're seeing now in the U.S. is — at least with many of the actors I've talked to — there's a sense of hopelessness. These activists have been doing this work for years. They know what it feels like to be targeted. Women on the other side have strategies and lessons to share. That gave me hope, and I was like, I need to give this hope to people I'm talking to. How can we build those bridges? That's what we're working on at the moment. Trying to keep the hope alive, if you will.

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

TH: It's something I think about a lot. I don't know if I have the answer, but what I can say that has been helping me is, one, finding your community. I used to say that a lot, because I work with women leaders, and I knew that that was something that they've always shared as being an important aspect. Now that I've lived it, I can say that you really need to find your community who understands what you're going through, what's at stake. To share in your frustration, but also help you strategize or find glimmers of hope to build on what you know and take action.

Two, is speaking up and being loud. People are afraid to speak up. People are scared to say specific words. I lived that myself. But us as gender practitioners, as those in the democracy and peace space, we know all these things that are happening are the early warning signs. We know this field. We know what's at stake. We know what's happening is a strategy and a tactic. I think we need to be bolder and louder about it, because I think we're talking amongst ourselves a lot. But no one else is understanding what we're trying to say. We need to be louder and bolder and more courageous by speaking out and connecting the dots for people to understand and see what's going on, so that when we're talking about solutions, it's not gender blind. I say that also because so much of what I've seen with some of the organizations that I've worked for — the broader democracy assistance sector, the foreign policy work, the international development — there are a lot of conversations happening about how we save democracy, what are the lessons learned, and they're all gender blind. No one's actually talking about this stuff.

I will say separately, that's something that I have been working on with a former USAID gender and democracy expert. We have this informal network of 30-plus people, both from the government and from implementing organizations that have been doing this work. We are the ones that built the infrastructure, or developed the frameworks, or saw what the needs were [in the democracy and peace sectors]. We identified those lessons learned and best practices. We all want to save our work. We're working informally together to do that, but we're also seeing more and more that there's an urgency for that, because the sector's

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moving on without us right now. It's crazy, because these were organizations and entities that talked a lot about the importance of gender equality and democracy and prioritized it. Now they have just completely erased it from their vocabulary and aren't doing anything about it. It's almost like, for them, it's one less thing that they have to do, even though we know that's going to be a problem if we're talking about democracy moving forward.

I think that third thing is, at least in our sector, when it comes to the foreign policy work, there's a lot of conversations happening now on reimagination. What would the field look like? What should our foreign assistance look like? It's completely gone now. If we were to rebuild it, there's a lot of opportunity there to rebuild a system that's better, that's more effective, and that speaks to what we know are some of the long-standing barriers and issues that women leaders and women's organizations have faced when it came to U.S. foreign assistance. There's really an opportunity to redefine that with gender equality at the center, particularly on democracy, peace, and conflict.

But what I've been seeing is that our counterparts who don't think about gender are still not thinking about gender, so there are conversations happening on this whole reimagining that are gender blind. Then there are the gender people that are kind of working on their own, like us in our informal little group. We're planning our own little session to kind of figure out what it is that we want to see and what we want to advocate for, so that we can then be a part of those broader conversations and make sure [gender is] squarely at the center of how we're thinking about broader reimagination. Any work on reimagining, rebuilding, redefining what the future looks like, we need to be centering gender equality. Right now, it's not looking very good, so we're trying to address it before it becomes a long-term problem in the next few years.

I will say the other piece of this is trying to use my voice where I can as a former government official. One of the things that I did with my former colleagues was write a WPS shadow report for Congress. We did that because we knew the report was due this year. If we were still employed, we would have been the people having to write it. We figured that this administration was not going to provide one, so we took the opportunity to draft a shadow report from former government officials to Congress. Outlining what's at stake, what's been lost, and [providing] recommendations of what they can do as Congress to continue to implement the law and provide the congressional oversight needed to do this work.

It seems like a dumpster fire, but there have been members of Congress who have asked questions in different briefings, drafting letters, doing all these things. We're having a briefing next week, talking to staff on what they can do and how they can think about it. That was an interesting thing to do because, again, we're employing a tactic that we've seen used globally as a way to demand transparency and accountability of our own government. Just finding creative ways to put it out there, because we know what's at stake. We don't want Congress to give up its powers and its authority when there is a law on the books.

What a lot of people have been doing since the dismantling of USAID is not just save their work, but also do the work in ways that we used to do at USAID. I'm just afraid that in the effort to do that, folks are also continuing bad practices. They're

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not really addressing the long-standing problems and issues in our space. I feel like that's a big mistake. In our effort to continue this powerful work that we've all done, there's still an opportunity to shift it and change it. We're no longer the government, you know? We have authority and autonomy over ourselves.

That was a big difference for us in my group, the WPS Collective. We went to UNGA [the UN General Assembly] this year, and we were like, oh wow, we're writing our own talking points. This is different. It's exciting to be able to do that now in this space. We can change the way that we do things, even though we're all unhappy with how things were destroyed and how things came falling apart. We're trying to save what we can. There's still opportunity to make it better, which is what I've been pushing as much as I can.

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Tazreen Hussain served as the Women, Peace, and Security Policy Advisor at the United States Agency for International Development, 2024-2025.

Mona Lena Krook is Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Rutgers University: m.l.krook@rutgers.edu

Cite this article: Hussain, Tazreen, and Mona Lena Krook. 2026. "USAID Women, Peace, and Security Policy Advisor." *Politics & Gender* **22**, 362–371. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X2610066X

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