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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

USAID Bureau on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance

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The Bureau on Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance (DRG) at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) advanced democratic development around the globe, with a focus on building strong institutions and protecting citizens' rights. Julie Denham (JD) served as Senior Advisor on Elections and Political Transitions. The gender team at DRG included Caroline Hubbard (CH) as Senior Gender Advisor and Team Lead, Rebecca Gordon (RG) as Senior Gender Specialist, Alessia Stewart (AS) as Gender Advisor, and Meg McClure (MM) as Coordinator of the Network for Gender Inclusive Democracy. In early 2025, the Donald Trump administration officially shut down USAID, including the democracy, human rights, and governance portfolio. This is an edited and compiled version of five interviews that took place with Mona Lena Krook (MLK) via Zoom on December 16, 2025; January 9, 2026; January 15, 2026; January 27, 2026; and January 28, 2026.

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

JD: I served as a senior advisor for elections in USAID's Center for Democracy, Human Rights and Governance — the DRG Center, which eventually became the DRG Bureau — from 2012 to 2025. While I was not hired as a gender specialist per se, I did have considerable prior experience in women's political participation and leadership programming and led several related initiatives during my tenure at USAID.

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I joined USAID at a pivotal moment for both the DRG and gender sectors. The period from 2012 to 2014 saw the establishment of the DRG Center and the launch of both the Agency's first DRG strategy and its first gender policy. The DRG Center included a gender working group [GWG] from its inception, of which I was a member. In 2014, we hired our first full-time gender advisor. Together with the GWG, the gender advisor was charged with integrating gender considerations into all DRG work. This included providing technical support for gender analysis, training staff, and liaising with USAID's broader gender infrastructure on policy implementation.

We were fortunate to have had gender champions within the initial DRG Center leadership team. These senior officials approved resources enabling us to develop guidance for USAID staff on how to advance women's political leadership, and gender equality more broadly, through DRG programming. This included the Integrating Gender into DRG Programming Toolkit (2016), which provided guidance for conducting sector-specific gender analysis and illustrative programming options. It also included the Women in Power project (2014–2016), which I managed. The Women in Power project identified lessons learned and best practices from a decade of USAID-supported women's political leadership programming and piloted a tool for measuring women's political leadership in different country contexts.

Another opportunity presented itself with the Biden administration's Summit for Democracy initiative in 2021. Drawing on the work of partners in civil society and academia, as well as USAID's own programming experience, we highlighted the essential linkage between gender equality, women's political empowerment, and democracy. Alongside colleagues at the State Department and White House, we successfully advocated for the Advancing Women's and Girls' Civic and Political Leadership Initiative as part of the broader Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewal. I was pleased to co-lead this women's leadership initiative for USAID, through which we simultaneously strengthened relationships with a diverse group of partner organizations and governments and directed U.S. government funding to a select group of USAID Missions to expand country-level programming and advocacy to advance women's political leadership.

CH: I was brought in as the Senior Gender Advisor for the Center for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance. While I was there, the Center became the Bureau for Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance. Previously, democracy and governance programming at USAID was housed in a Center, which functioned more like a technical hub. When DRG was elevated to a Bureau in 2022 as part of a broader agency reorganization, it became a formal operational entity within USAID with clearer authorities, staffing, and budget lines. That shift was important for the democracy sector. Bureau status increased visibility, resources, and congressional oversight, and it positioned democracy and human rights work alongside other core development sectors. In many ways, we went from operating more like a technical think tank to being a fully institutionalized bureau within the Agency.

I became the Senior Gender Advisor for the Bureau. I built a gender team while I was there, which was not originally a part of my job scope, but was clearly a

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need based on demand versus existing human resources when I started. I became the gender team lead. When I started, they had not had a gender expert in this position for about four years, largely because under the Trump administration there had been a hiring freeze. There was a real vacuum in the center itself, in terms of organizational systemic processes around gender and their ability to even meet the existing Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy.

What I did over the three years I was there was build the infrastructure – the systems, processes, guidelines. etc. — which I was able to do better and more easily as we became a Bureau, because infrastructure building was what they had to do anyway. The other thing I was responsible for was increasing USAID's footprint as a leader in gender and DRG. Among the last major gender-related resources they had were the 2016 DRG Integration Toolkit, which Alyson Kozma developed as a consultant, and the Women in Power project that you worked on with Julie Denham and others. Both were valuable resources, but by that point it was clear the materials needed updating to reflect new evidence and programming approaches.

I also spent the years I was there finishing their [Women's Political Participation and Leadership (WPPL)] assessment framework. When I began working on it, the assessment had already been under development at USAID for several years, but it still required significant revisions before it could be implemented. We revised and completed the assessment, which we needed to use to implement in partnership with the elections and political processes office, which is where Julie Denham sat and we were co-leads on the Presidential Initiative for Democratic Renewals Gender Equality Initiative. So, as I began my work there was both an internal bureau mandate to build the DRG Bureau's gender infrastructure, expertise, and resources, while there was also a more public-facing Biden administrative mandate to deliver on key USG [U.S. government] gender, democracy, and human rights initiatives. For the latter, I was delivering mostly through Jamille [Bigio], and then directly with the White House Gender Policy Council.

More specifically, we were co-leading the Advancing Women's and Girls' Civic and Political Leadership Initiative with the elections and political processes office. This initiative required us to select a group of focus countries for the duration of the initiative. We ran WPPL Assessments in each of them and used that data to support the design and implementation of WPPL programs. The nine focus countries we selected in year 1 were Colombia, Ecuador, Honduras, Côte d'Ivoire, Kenya, Nigeria, Tanzania, the Kyrgyz Republic, and Yemen. In addition to funding and supporting the WPPL assessment in each country, they each received $1,090,000 in FY 2022. We eventually added Fiji as a tenth country as well. We were gearing up to give a second tranche of funding in year two of the program from the FY 23 allocations, but that never occurred. We were extremely effective in implementing the WPPL initiative. We got the funding to the missions in time and it was not easy to select, run assessments, and program the funding in that first year but we did it. We — Julie, Alessia, and eventually Meg — accomplished a lot with a small team.

I was also asked to help design their technology-facilitated gender-based violence [TFGBV] and democracy effort. Jamille had secured $6 million for us

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to do a TFGBV and democracy focused effort. She had gotten the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Hub to give us some of their WEE money, their Women's Economic Empowerment money. We don't normally get the WEE funding allocation in the DRG Bureau, but she and Julie had advocated for this funding to go towards TFGBV and had helped to secure it for this purpose. I worked with members of the GenDev GBV team and with support from Julie to develop Transform and to coordinate a process for identifying the implementing partner, which in the end was IREX [the International Research and Exchanges Board] and Pact. Transform Digital Spaces (Transform) was a three-year global pilot initiative, which supported practical approaches to preventing, mitigating, and responding to technology-facilitated gender-based violence, with a focus on addressing violence experienced by women in politics and public life. I worked with members of GenDev, the Africa Bureau, and Julie on the EPP (Elections and Political Parties) team to oversee implementation of Transform over the three years I was there.

Part of the goal for Transform was that it served as a programmatic output for the U.S.'s delivery to their commitments on the Global Partnership [for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse] to combat technology-facilitated gender-based violence. Each government in the Partnership was supposed to deliver on one or more of the goals, which included policy, research, and programming goals. Transform became USAID's deliverable for the U.S. on programming. That ended up meaning that Julie and I often were the working level and technical representatives to the Global Partnership for USAID, and to some extent USG, in the Global Partnership conversations — specifically, at that nexus between democracy and TFGBV.

In the final year of the Biden Administration, the work we were advancing through Transform, together with the development of the Network for Gender Inclusive Democracy, helped broaden the focus of both the administration and the Global Partnership to more explicitly address the impacts of technology-facilitated gender-based violence on women in politics and public life. One example of this shift was the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse hosting a conference on "Preventing and Disrupting the Spread of Gendered Disinformation by Anti-Rights Actors in the Context of Electoral Processes and Democratic Rollback." This was a really positive development and reflected the growing recognition of online violence as both a private and public sphere issue.

This growing attention to the democracy and technology-facilitated gender-based violence nexus, I think, also contributed to the White House Gender Policy Council's interest in launching the Women LEAD initiative. In my view, that interest was partly driven by the work we had been doing to elevate the visibility of the links between democracy, gendered disinformation, and TFGBV, as well as the importance of women's political participation through the WPPL initiative, an effort that Jamille very much supported us to advance. My team and I continued to support that work as it developed.

We coordinated closely with S/GWI [the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the State Department] on both Women LEAD and the Global Partnership. There was a designated point person at State — if I recall correctly, it was

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Kat Fotovat or Varina Winder, along with several others involved in the effort. My role was somewhat dual-hatted, both serving the DRG Bureau but also, because of the way gender initiatives were being implemented across the administration during the Biden years, helping to deliver administrative goals as well.

Most of the travel and representation I did was at the request of Jamille to represent USAID in more global conversations regarding gender, technology, and democracy, as opposed to my Bureau. We were gearing up to launch and publish the update to the 2016 integration toolkit, which had chapters for every sector of DRG on how to do gender integration. It had questions for all the assessments that you would do. After three years of creating resources, we were finally preparing, when everything fell apart, to focus on moving the new guidance and resources into the missions, moving away from global initiatives to country-level programmatic support. We were changing administrations, so we assumed that we weren't going to be delivering to the White House anymore but moving instead into helping the missions know how to do gender mainstreaming in their DRG work.

The [missions] didn't have nearly as much technical guidance before, because the Center/Bureau didn't have enough people with the technical expertise to support each Mission in a way that was needed, and GenDev didn't have gender and DRG expertise. GenDev served as the Agency's central hub for gender technical expertise across sectors and provided guidance on gender integration throughout much of USAID's development work. However, issues related to democracy, governance, and political participation were largely led through DRG, while elements of the Women, Peace, and Security agenda were coordinated with Tazreen Hussain and her team in the Bureau for Conflict Prevention and Stabilization.

We were working very closely and collaboratively with Diana [Prieto] and Kate Bollinger, who were part of a new team called the Integration Team at GenDev. They were looking at standardizing gender integration across all areas of USAID work. They had built a few Agency-wide mechanisms to better support gender integration, including some funding mechanisms for technical expertise/support, and they allowed me to integrate build democracy and governance into what they were building. There was an intentional effort to build DRG more across the gender architecture. But at the time I was in USAID, it still really needed to come from the DRG Bureau. Historically, we had not had the up-to-date tools, nor the human resources to provide adequate support to the Missions and HQ [headquarters] but we were finally getting there.

Within three years, we had built significant momentum and were well-positioned to shift toward more robust country-level support. We had developed the WPPL Assessment — a standardized tool to ground program design in data — and had already piloted it in eleven countries. We had developed and begun implementing a three-part gender integration training program for diplomats and assistance staff. At the same time, we were preparing to launch an updated Gender Integration Toolkit, with thirteen separate sections focused on integrating gender across specific DRG sectors, including media, political parties, and technology. Separately, we were poised to publish a comprehensive program

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design toolkit for social and behavioral change strategies to advance women's political participation. We had also built a four-person team and launched the Network for Gender Inclusive Democracy, which brought together key stakeholders and was designed to support more coordinated country programming. Together, these resources and partnerships positioned us to significantly expand support to missions and partners. However, before that work could fully take shape, USAID was eliminated.

AS: I was officially a contractor at USAID, so not actually directly employed by the government. I was there for three years, and I had three different roles. I started as a Program Associate, supporting three teams in the then-DRG Center before we became a Bureau. One of the teams was the Evidence and Learning team, which held the gender portfolio. I had an interest in gender equality and had studied it in university, so I raised my hand to be on those projects. Slowly it took up more and more of my time to [the point that] Caroline and the team created a Gender Program Associate position for me, so that then the gender portfolio could be my full-time work.

For about a year, it was just Caroline and me on our gender team. There hadn't been a gender advisor in the first Trump administration. We were really building that foundation and were responsible for everything. There was one program in particular that was really focused on gender equality and women's political participation, which we were running. We also reviewed the gender analyses for everyone else's projects within the DRG Bureau to make sure that gender was integrated in their work. We built the foundation internally for what our Gender Standard Operating Procedure should be. That was a mammoth task that we were taking on to create a change in the culture and norms within the Bureau. Towards the end, I switched into a Gender Advisor position, recognizing that I had been doing work much beyond the scope of a Program Associate up until that point.

MM: Working in DRG was my first time working for the U.S. government. Like Alessia, I was an institutional support contractor. I was brought on [in 2023] to be the coordinator for the Network for Gender Inclusive Democracy, to help get that initiative up and running. [The idea for the network] came out of the Summits for Democracy, as U.S. government initiative that USAID took the lead on organizing. The idea was to improve coordination, knowledge sharing, and advocacy among all these different partners working on women's political participation and leadership. It was initially conceptualized to encompass headquarters-level collaboration, in terms of the people who are in DC or the heads of these organizations, complemented by more on-the-ground coordination at the country level. I don't think that latter part ever manifested in the way that we had hoped it would.

USAID was the one coordinating it, but there was also involvement from people at State Department in DRL [the Department of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor] and some people in S/GWI. Other countries' governments — Sweden, Spain, Finland, Japan. Academics like yourself and Saskia [Brechenmacher] at Carnegie. A bunch of NGOs (non-government organizations) and CSOs (civil society

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organizations). The CEPPS (Consortium for Elections and Political Process Strengthening) partners — NDI (the National Democratic Institute), IRI (the International Republican Institute), and IFES (the International Foundation of Electoral Systems) were pretty heavily involved. Then also multinational or international institutions. We were working pretty closely on that with Jamille Bigio, who was USAID Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment. She was very involved in getting that operational.

My role was coordinating these ongoing meetings, and then simultaneously trying to build more concrete governance structures to make it something that could be potentially self-sustaining in the long term, where partners were wanting to be involved because we were doing things, rather than just meeting every few months. The only funding it had was basically my role. The USAID coordination role ended up being a problem later, when it became clear that USAID wouldn't be able to keep doing that role and tried to find someone to take it over.

In the summer of 2024, we were also [asked] to be part of this new initiative that the White House wanted to put out called Women LEAD. The idea was to collect together everything they'd been doing around women's leadership and participation under the Biden-Harris administration. [It was also about] bringing together partners working on those issues to make commitments on what they were planning to do in the next five years around this issue. It also brought the idea of working on technology-facilitated gender-based violence against women in politics, highlighting work that those partners were doing on that initiative. It was a lot of the same partners that were already involved in the network. Part of that new initiative was the idea that there would also be this community of practice for the Women LEAD partners.

What we ended up doing was revamping the Network, bringing in some of the new partners under Women LEAD into this new community of practice that was largely comprised of most of the existing partners, but then adding some new folks, maybe a few additional governments and some foundations who were part of this new initiative, as well as some folks who were focused a little bit more specifically on the issue of online violence and women in politics. It was bridging what we were doing with the network with some of the work that the Gender Policy Council and the White House had already been doing with the Global Partnership. We thought it would be great if we could bring more people into it and raise its profile and maybe use this as a way to advance some of the [things] we already wanted to be doing with it. But there are also drawbacks to being high profile. We knew when the administration changed that it was going to be a lot harder to keep that going under USAID.

RG: I was a senior gender specialist. I had not worked for the U.S. government before. I was hired to be the fourth member on the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance gender team. My role covered a few things, [like] general technical advising. I was the focal point for several of the sectoral units within the DRG Bureau. One of my main roles was to coordinate feedback and updates with the team get buy-in and roll out and implement standard operating procedures on gender for the DRG Bureau. That was a requirement of the gender policy at the time for the U.S. government and for USAID.

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I also coordinated and facilitated different functions, like having a consistent set of focal points across the different technical units, coordinating a working group for gender, supporting different technical deliverables and processes, and implementing some of the monitoring and liaising with different units. I conducted one gender analysis in East Timor while I was there and delivered the report. I did some additional technical advising and support. I also worked on the budget and did some admin coordination and reporting as well.

MLK: What were your backgrounds going into your roles at USAID?

CH: I came from the National Democratic Institute. I had been there for twelve years. I had grown with them from a team of about three or four to a team of probably eight or nine by the time I left. It was eleven by the time [the Gender, Women, and Democracy program] was dismantled at NDI. I had moved through building up the team's resources, best practices, and theory of change, with Susan [Markham's] and Sandra [Pepera's] leadership over the years. I had helped grow thought leadership and best practices around integrating gender into parties, civil society, parliaments, and elections.

[In contrast,] USAID gives money out. It's a funder. But then it [also] implements in the missions, and the subgrants in the missions. It was a very weird beast to me when I first started learning to look at it from the donor side. Julie and I worked very closely behind the scenes. We talked a lot about what was needed and where do we go [in the bureaucracy] for this. GenDev and people like Diana and Julie: they were bureaucratic ninjas. They understood how everything worked. It was about figuring out how to use that system and pull the levers and make the changes and so forth.

One thing we did at NDI was organizational change a lot from inside, because it was not a feminist organization. With Susan and then under Sandra, we tried to change the internal workings, because you have to have organizational processes as well as technical expertise to do gender mainstreaming. That's what it takes. It's funding and all of it. I did that through what they call standard operating procedures in the Bureau. I applied a lot of what I had done and learned from doing the work at NDI to create that also for the DRG Bureau, which I'm happy to share with you. It's a giant document.

The other thing I did while I was at USAID is I brought in the men and masculinity [work from NDI]. Over time, we created a three-day training that adapted *Men, Power, and Politics* and was used to train diplomats and U.S. government employees using that same methodology. We got to pilot it twice and implement it fully twice. It was really, really, really good. That was something we were also going to roll out.

The other thing they really wanted was somebody that did violence against women in politics. They did not have violence against women in politics integrated into the way they were working inside USAID. They had it in the CEPPS mechanisms and the funding outward towards the CEPPS partners, but the technical pieces of how to do it were being reflected back to them by the implementers. They needed somebody to be pushing out what USAID's stance

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was, to elevate USAID as a leader in this field by creating USAID documents that are giving this guidance. That's how you could tell the missions and leadership: This is what USAID says to do.

CEPPS funding has been around for almost forty years. What struck me when I came into USAID is that the majority of funding that went to U.S. government democracy assistance came from that one award. It funded NDI, IFAS, and IRI; Freedom House, Outright International. The entire ecosystem of democracy and governance work was funneled through that one channel in a lot of ways. There's also PAIRS (Political Accountability, Inclusivity, and Resiliency Support) in the Department of Human Rights and Labor at the State Department that got congressionally passed. That started funneling much more money from State into democracy, human tights, and governance work as well.

That actually funneled more money into gender, because they had — I don't know if it was an earmark exactly — but they had to basically give IRI and NDI a million dollars a year of PAIRS for gender. That is how Sandra's team [at NDI] grew to eleven people. It was a very big infusion. But really, the CEPPS mechanism is how they built the U.S. government democracy assistance sector — and, inside that, the gender and democracy sector.

One of the first contracts [the second Trump administration] eliminated was CEPPS, in the first couple of weeks, because they went after democracy and gender. With the elimination of that award, and then USAID, that is why you have this complete domino effect, where NDI, IRI, and IFES are laying off 75% of their staff. All their gender work was eliminated, basically. The elections team [at DRG] ran that award. There was a whole congressional approval process. We had to re-bid every five years. The money was there for 2025. It was already authorized. [The White House] cut it off. They just ended it. Whether or not that was legal remains to be determined.

AS: My degrees were international and global studies and anthropology, with a minor in Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies. Gender was not in the title of my degree, but it was woven in because that was what I gravitated towards and what I was interested in. I studied abroad in Jordan, and while I was there, I did an internship with the oldest and largest NGO in the country in their gender and women's empowerment office. It was really cool to help them with their grant writing and go to some of their community events and engage with the women. My career took a couple of different turns. I started in market research for tech companies. I got in the door at USAID in a Program Associate position, because I did not have enough gender experience for them to hire me off the street as a Gender Advisor. But I was able to grow and build my career in the direction I was always hoping it would go.

MM: I had been working for about a year and a half at the World Bank, updating their gender strategy. I had been part of the team developing that strategy update and coordinating a lot of the consultations around it. I had gone there right out of grad school. I'd been at Georgetown doing global human development and had focused there on gender equality and social inclusion and development. Prior to that, I had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine for three

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years. In Ukraine, I'd been working on side projects with HIV services organizations during my first two years and then transitioned to working full time with an HIV services organization for my third year. I had gone into grad school knowing I wanted to focus on the social inclusion and gender equality side of things. I was lucky that Georgetown has a really strong program through GIWPS (the Georgetown Institute for Women, Peace, and Security), the gender, peace, and security certificate. I got super interested in the gender work side of things through that. I was a Russian and political science major in college.

RG: I have an undergraduate degree in community health and a master's in public health. My background is in gender-based violence and around public health problems in general. Some child protection at the intersection of that and gender-based violence [GBV]. I've also been a more general gender equality advisor. I worked in humanitarian development settings. I worked abroad for several years. I worked with Together for Girls at the intersection of gender-based violence and violence against children creating national ownership of different research and processes. I was the gender advisor for the U.S. Refugee and Immigration Programs for IRC (the International Rescue Committee) for several years. I've kind of worked across the gamut of programming and research.

Other than some consulting that was gender equality focused, this was my second role where the written scope of the role was around gender equality. I started doing that work in college. As you probably know, if you go back more than ten years, there wasn't a lot of money in gender work. I did gender equality work in South Sudan as a gender-based violence person. But if you're the GBV person, you're also the gender and policy person, you're also the "why aren't women at the table" person, and you're also the person who is working with local women's groups around capacity building, coordination, and girls' education. I would say that at USAID there was more of a line between gender-based violence and gender equality. Until ten years ago, my experience was not that those were really separated out. You had to make those distinctions yourself and figure out what the entry points were.

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

JD: The achievements of which I am most proud during my tenure with USAID are in the women's political leadership area. The Women in Power study enabled us to look across programs in different regions and varied development contexts to identify best practices for each phase of the program cycle. It enhanced our ability to advocate for greater resources for women's political leadership work, not only in the immediate period around elections, but throughout the electoral cycle. And it pointed to the need for greater collaboration with like-minded partners — donors, civil society, academics — to advance women's political empowerment. This work, and relationships built through the project, was a key part of the foundation on which we were able to build the Summit for Democracy initiative in 2021.

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The Advancing Women's and Girls' Civic and Political Leadership Initiative was our attempt to more holistically address the persistent barriers to women's political leadership. It gave USAID and our partners a platform around which to rally our efforts and an unprecedented level of dedicated resources. USAID alone budgeted for $10 million a year over three years to pilot this approach in a select group of countries. And, along with related work being done to address technology-facilitated gender-based violence, this enhanced the U.S. Government's leadership and convening power on women's leadership and gender equality issues. While this work was abruptly canceled in 2025, it was beginning to bear fruit, both in terms of programming impact at the country level and in terms of the heightened collaboration among partners working in this space, including through the companion Network for Gender Inclusive Democracy effort.

CH: The GenDev 2023 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy was able to be passed and implemented while I was there. I think it's important to document the way that the gender integration architecture and mandates at USAID had been progressing over time in a good direction. They were put on hold during the [first] Trump administration. It kind of went a little bit backward, but [then] the WEE Act was the most money they'd ever received. They continued to receive that money under Biden, and it was a lot of money. I was able to use that policy to argue to my own bureau leadership, because, you know, really, like, the first six months, maybe three months I was there, I had to go to my leadership for money and staff to focus on gender and democracy. We need money for training. We need money to build resources, and we need staff to do that. And I succeeded. We secured those resources. It was not a given.

[Another] was creating the standard operating procedures. The 2023 policy mandated gender analysis. You start a program, you do a gender analysis, and — the assumption was — you'll have a gender-integrated program. But when I started, what was happening in the DRG Center was that they were doing a gender analysis that was like a paragraph. It was happening across the agency. I know it was. The new policy put in all these new rules and pieces to strengthen the mandate to move it from just gender analysis to gender integration. I was able to create these standard operating procedures by the end where we really moved the needle from gender analysis to gender integration. We hadn't quite gotten there yet, but getting the resources, getting the teams, building the training out — that positioned us to do the actual work better in-country, where the rubber hits the road. Holistically, that was a big accomplishment.

AS: The project I was involved in most closely that had the biggest impact was our Advancing Women and Girls' Civic and Political Leadership Initiative. That started in ten focus countries, and we expanded it to two more by the end. In each country, we conducted an assessment on what the barriers and opportunities were for women's political leadership with an assessment that Caroline and Julie created that looked at the individual institutional and sociocultural barriers. That survey was conducted hand-in-hand with the country offices and the local staff to get an understanding of the landscape, and then to build off those

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assessments into creating programs that had meaningful impacts on improving opportunities for women.

We were building a really exciting foundation. Those assessments were useful not just for the projects we were working on directly with the in-country offices, but also to inform all of their other work and have hopefully better outcomes down the road. Some of it was creating programs from scratch. In other cases, it was just informing the programs they already had going to maybe pivot direction slightly to have better outcomes for women.

The assessments were a collaborative experience. We knew it was going to be a big undertaking to do the assessments and work with us on these projects. We didn't want to force anyone to do it. Country offices did need to raise their hands and express interest. But there were a couple of countries that I know our team approached, like Fiji. It happened to work out well, especially with their election cycle, which was an important detail to consider. We wanted to make sure that we had an opportunity to see results within the next couple of years in some short-term capacity.

I also worked more internally on developing the Gender Standard Operating Procedure. We did some internal and external interviews to inform our thoughts. I was very proud of the document we ended up coming up with. It didn't go anywhere, but we worked hard on it. [The standard operating procedure we came up with was] specific to the DRG Bureau, recognizing that there was a gap in the gender infrastructure. There was a little bit of an energy, I felt, around people saying: We're good. We've thought about women. We're fine.

We tried to create something that dug a little deeper and recognized that, legally, with the requirement of the gender analysis, we were maybe not completing that to the fullest extent. It outlined how every office in the Bureau should be operating with regards to gender equality — both in terms of actually integrating the gender analysis, but also in terms of being engaged with the Gender Working Group, so we are able to support them, provide training, and know what the gender resource needs were. We also made strides on providing our leadership with gender integrated talking points. When we're talking about democracy and human rights, the gender equality piece is a huge part of all of those components. It shouldn't be just siloed to a gender analysis, but really woven through everything that the Bureau does, because women are impacted by everything the Bureau was doing but often not explicitly acknowledged.

I also worked on an update to the Gender Equality and DRG Programming Toolkit. There was an original version published in 2016 that walked through the different sectors, but obviously it was very out of date by the time we were getting around to updating it. We worked with one of our external partners to find subject matter experts in each of the different major sectors within DRG. They wrote chapters on gender equality in civil society, on democratic resilience, on information, on economic governance, and more. The idea was to have this toolkit that we could share with each of these teams that had provided input along the way, so that when we say gender should be mainstreamed and they come to us to figure it out — we could say, here's another resource to help you better understand what that looks like in your sector. January 2025 was the date

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we were aiming for, and then, obviously, nothing came out. We were so close to the finish line.

MM: Part of me wishes we had six more months [with the Network for Gender Inclusive Democracy] to bring in new partners and coordinate around things like: CSW's [the annual United Nations Commission on the Status of Women meetings] coming up, what are the kinds of messages as a network that we want to send? Or the more concrete advocacy stuff like: Do we want to start putting out briefs on various issues, given the collected expertise we have here? All of that was just beginning to percolate, unfortunately, when it ended. We finally got a steering committee who's starting to make some of these decisions. The goal for me from the beginning was how we can have USAID not be the sole organization driving this thing. For me, that was an accomplishment. In terms of the network itself doing things, it was just getting started, unfortunately.

RG: I was mainly doing operational work. I think only a couple of bureaus got standard operating procedures approved. I feel pretty good that we were able to get that in place and the infrastructure there and have a functional working group. I think, given time and bandwidth, we could have had a fair amount of success, seeing traction on use of gender analysis. I think that that was really great. I think there wasn't historically a lot of visibility on the gender work, and we were able to get some more visibility on it in and of itself.

MLK: What happened in January 2025?

CH: On January 20, [Trump] issued a lot of executive orders. The two that hit us the hardest were the DEIA (Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility) one and the one on gender equality and women's empowerment. The third one that also had an enormous impact was the funding freeze. There was an assumption by most people in USAID and our implementers that because there was going to be a freeze for 90 days, we're going to review everything and make sure it doesn't contradict our priorities, as outlined in the DEIA and other executive orders. Then we're going to start funding again. Inside, it became pretty evident very quickly that there was no actual review process taking place. Initially, people in the Bureau started listing their programs and preparing their defenses and trying to figure out how the review process was going to work. But there was never any real guidance. The funding just stopped flowing, from one day to the next.

OPM (the Office of Personnel Management) [did send] guidance on how to implement the DEIA executive order. I think it was on the 21st. That is when the different agencies started trying to figure out what they were going to do to look compliant. There were also threats. There were a lot of emails going around. They put AI on our computers. Everything was being recorded. Any meeting you were in, everybody was pretty much under the assumption that all our emails were being looked at, all our calendars, everything was being recorded, and there was just fear. There were emails that went out to us basically saying: If you know

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someone who used to have DEIA or gender in their title, and they're not telling us, you need to tell on them or you'll get fired. If you tell on them, you won't get fired. So there were all these threats going out. That was not the only one. Like, lots of threats.

We had been changing titles ahead of time, not in an effort to necessarily fool people, but the government people that have been there for a really long time know that you have to adapt. You're supposed to meet the policy priorities of the new administration. So, there is a certain amount of compliance that goes in place. If they don't like the word gender, we'll move back to [focus on] women's empowerment. Under the first Trump administration, they had the WEE Act, so focusing on women's empowerment seems [acceptable]. There was probably a combination of compliance and trying to protect yourself and hide. When I changed the title of my team from gender to women, it had to go through all layers of leadership. The top bureau leadership had to approve the name change. Everybody was in that position doing that, but after the 20th, after the executive orders, the administration was basically saying any of this is going to get you in trouble. You're all going to get fired. Everybody got paranoid about their jobs. Part of the self-compliance, or the over-compliance, was to protect our jobs and our work.

I remember being in meetings after the executive orders and the funding freeze came out. At the mission level, gender advisors were just sent home, on leave, with no information, because we didn't have a lot of information. We didn't really know what was going on. There were orders that were unclear. There were decisions being made about how to comply with them. There was not a lot of top-down communication with people like me. I wasn't getting a lot of information about how decisions are being made. At the headquarters level, they put a list together of all the DEIA programs, all the DEIA staff. This is where it's a little unclear, because they didn't communicate everything.

Through a process of deduction, we learned that anybody at USAID that had DEIA in their title or on their team was basically fired, if they could fire them. A lot of those people were human resources people. They were all gone within those first few days. Contractors were fired immediately. People with civil service status had to be put on annual leave and there was a little bit of a process. They were moved out. What we heard through that process is that people were getting to see some of these spreadsheets. I was having conversations with my own office of legal counsel and people in my bureau. I was getting the impression that they had started to conflate women and gender equality and youth with DEIA.

After that first swipe, there was continued aggregation of these [different identity-based] programs. Everything was getting listed. It was a lot of hearsay. Gender advisors from other bureaus that were in a close-knit collaborative group that I was in were saying: I just saw the spreadsheet from the Kenya mission, and all the programs on child marriage are on it. All the programs. It was a disorganized over-compliance that didn't really follow the executive order, because they didn't have any real guidance.

Then the gender equality and women's empowerment OPM guidance came which, again, wasn't very clear. Neither of these guidance notes was very specific.

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I think that might have been on purpose — the fear factor and kind of a general attitude like: We'll just see what we can capture. I think USAID didn't push back. The fact that they threw everything in so quickly in these buckets gave momentum to the administration. Doing it in a way that they didn't have to. [The Trump administration] may not have taken away what they did.

The OPM is the Office of Personnel Management. It is a separate agency. It's not USAID. They send [announcements] on hiring and firing. They're the interpreter of all the rules. They make decisions about all the processes of firing. Getting rid of any remaining USAID staff would go through OPM now. They are the rule givers. They're above USAID's interpretation. They're between Congress, the White House, and the agencies.

I went to my own DRG legal counsel and was on the phone with her the night that they were starting to put the list together for the gender equality executive order. I was telling her: Look, I have talking points. There is a difference between this and this. Please don't put women's empowerment programming on this list. That's not what this executive order is saying. Please interpret it. The legal counsel is supposed to interpret it. USAID legal counsel said at a certain point, like three days after the executive orders came out: We're just not going to interpret it. We're just not. That's totally unheard of. It's what they're supposed to do. They didn't want to get in trouble, basically. It's another form of self-compliance, or non-compliance. My legal counsel, eventually, maybe she told people what I said, maybe she didn't.

My direct leadership — I'm trying to remember her name. All the political appointees have to leave on the 20th, so we have a vacuum of political appointees leaving on the 20th. We don't have a way to make decisions outside of our structure. There was this point where there was a non-political career person put into the political position of leadership for the DRG Bureau. She increasingly became less accessible. At the time when I was trying to convince her to look at the talking points that GenDev was creating about how to interpret these executive orders and so forth, I couldn't get to her. I had to go through my own office director. I don't know what her conversations were.

Between January 20 and the end of January, anybody that was a contractor was fired, because they could fire them more easily. That was half my team. Alessia and Meg were both contractors. Along with all non-gender contracts. That was a way to eliminate a lot of the staff at USAID. After the executive orders came out, they started putting people on annual leave that they could not fire. That's the way they do it. That's when they started taking out the DEIA [people] they couldn't fire, and the gender architecture. We were fighting really hard to get our own leadership to push back on that. They didn't. It did not work. So we were all put on annual leave.

When the court came back the following week, or the week after, and said: You have to put everybody back. You have to end the funding freeze. They brought back a couple of people to actively review programs to approve them or disapprove them, but they didn't really approve any. None of the democracy, governance, and gender programs at USAID were ever coming back. They were never coming back. Formally, we received notice that our last day was the end of

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July. And the only reason we were in and out was because of the courts, not because of the administration doing anything nice.

The other thing that happened that's kind of interesting: when the USAID overall architecture was lost, the court case that went against that did not address the gender people, or the DEIA firings. It addressed the overall legality of ending USAID and those staff. One of the things that we discussed internally is: Do we want to also flag or legally push back on the fact that they've fired gender [specialists], which seems like it's illegal? We just kind of went back in with the flock. But we never worked. Nobody ever worked again. What was decided was it's not safe to elevate the visibility of the gender and DEIA people who remained.

The other lesson learned, I think, is that the other objective of those two executive orders, to a certain extent, was to pit different diverse groups against each other. You had to argue that you weren't doing transgender work, which probably created some schisms between different groups. People were not being mean to each other, but there wasn't as much cross-collaboration. Nobody trusted anybody. Everything was on Signal. It was a very dangerous time, people felt, and so that was maybe one reason they were more insulated. I'm not 100% sure what [the LGBTQI+ program people's] decision-making process was at that time.

AS: In November after the election, there were people who were there in the first Trump administration who said the work had continued then. So there was a feeling of, okay: Let's just stay calm. We'll get through it. Our core projects will most likely continue. Our leadership in the DRG Bureau was hesitant to put forward or publish anything that was related to gender equality or women's empowerment — I'm assuming, because no one said this explicitly — that we didn't want to rock the boat before the administration transitioned. One of the first things they would do would be to look back at what was forced through at the very end of the last administration. If we kept our heads down, and focused on women's empowerment, everything would be fine. In the end, it was like, okay, we don't know, so we're just going to keep going, business as usual.

On Wednesday night [after the inauguration], an email went out to everyone that all DEIA advisors had been put on administrative leave. And if anyone knew anything related to DEIA or related ideologies that was maybe being hidden, you should report it, otherwise you would get in trouble. It was spooky and raised the question: What is a DEIA-related ideology? What do you even mean by that?

Then that Friday, a memo had gone out that all contracts were going to be paused. Even though the contract I was hired under was funded through the next year and a half, we learned that all contractors were going to be getting a stop-work order. It was a very anxiety-inducing couple days waiting for an email telling you to stop work immediately. Sunday is when I heard the first one went out. Work on Monday was so stressful, and every other contractor I heard of got their stop-work order, but my contract continued until Tuesday.

I was in the office that Tuesday, and I felt anxious. Everyone around me seemed worried. No one wanted to do anything, because we were sure we were going to get the stop-work order at any moment. There was a meeting of senior leadership, and my office director came out and told me: Yeah, you should

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probably pack up your desk. It could happen at any moment. In the late afternoon, I finally got the stop-work order. Then that Friday is when all the gender advisors were put on administrative leave. If I hadn't been a contractor, it would have just been a couple days later that I was told to stop working.

There was a desire to hold on to some of the things that we accomplished. I had copies of papers all over my desk that we had been able to print out for some of our assessment reports. At that point, there was still a feeling that maybe we heard bad intel. A lot of people were saying: Well, the contracts are funded. It would be very strange, or unlikely for them to get rid of the contractors, because we've already put all this money into these contracts. Working under the assumption that maybe [they] didn't want to waste taxpayer money, but that was not the reality. My contract was officially terminated two weeks after that.

I only have a couple of physical records like employment documents that I saved, that I thought were going to be useful. I didn't imagine they were going to delete everything. I wish I had saved more things now, looking back. I was expecting there to still be an online database. I know some people have tried to piece that back together. A couple of weeks after everyone was starting to be put on admin leave, all the Signal chats were going crazy. I don't even know who the first person was who had their Paul Revere moment, letting everyone know that everything was being wiped. It just all happened so much faster than I think anyone was anticipating. It may be intentional that so many of those things were lost.

MM: After November and the election, we realized that it would be great if USAID were no longer responsible for coordinating the Network [on Gender Inclusive Democracy]. We spent those two or three months intensively reaching out to current partners to try to see who could take on that coordination role. It was challenging, because everyone who was involved in the network was basically there on a volunteer basis. Aside from USAID, no one allocated funding for it, so we were simultaneously trying to figure out how we could potentially fund another partner to do that coordinating or find someone who would be able to fund it themselves. Ultimately, we weren't able to find anyone in time who could take it on.

We were still trying to finalize that when we got the stop-work order and weren't allowed to communicate with external partners at all in that first week after the inauguration. So, unfortunately, that cut us off from making any progress on that, because everyone on the U.S. government side who had been involved, especially at USAID, was no longer able to work. Because I was a contractor, I think the 28th of January or something was the day I got a stop-work order, so I couldn't keep working on it at all.

A lot of our most involved partners from the civil society side were also very heavily USAID-funded. They were also really affected by the executive order stopping foreign aid and foreign assistance — NDI, IFES, IRI, all of them. Even if the organizations were still functioning to some extent, their gender folks were not in any position to take that on either. As far as I know, [the Network] does not exist anymore. From people I've spoken to and seen since this all happened, many of the people, at least on the US side, were just no longer in a position to

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even be working on their primary gender-related job things, let alone this additional thing. Unfortunately, we just weren't able to find other governments or multinational groups to take that on.

With the Global Partnership I mentioned before, they were able to transfer a lot of its functions over to the UK, which took on quite a bit of it. I think that was because the folks at the Gender Policy Council knew that, regardless of which way the election went, they were political appointees and were not guaranteed to be in there. [As a result] they'd been doing the groundwork to try to find a new home for that longer than we had been.

One thing that I keep taking away from those last few months between the election and the inauguration was being like: Hey, this is a playbook. We know it's coming. We've seen this happen in other places. We were shouting and ringing bells, and everyone else was like: We made it through the last administration. We'll be fine. It was a really frustrating time, as the work we were doing was a lot on the intersection of democratic backsliding and anti-gender movements. Then being like, oh, hey, we're living it, and no one else is appreciating it. Even within DRG, it felt like we were having a really hard time convincing people of the severity of what this meant. [Democratic backsliding] always starts with gender, but it doesn't stop with gender, and then seeing that play out. It was frustrating that so many of the people we worked with could be really eloquent when speaking about this happening in other places, but then were unable to see it when it was happening right here.

RG: I think there was a lot of fear about what was going to happen around gender. I was the person on the team who went and read the relevant sections of Project 2025 ahead of time, and so I think I felt pretty early on that we were going to get fired. I mean, they wrote in this book that they're going to fire us. As somebody who really cared about protection of queer and trans populations as part of gender work, there were some good faith and brave conversations. For some people, that line [between women and LGBTQI+ people] was clear. For some people, and to me, that line was blurry. It became clear that some people had never cared about transgender people or had never cared about anti-racism work or disability rights.

Maybe because I don't come from a long-term U.S. government perspective, and haven't had to surf those waves before, and wasn't particularly tied to that, the wave of harm that was coming felt very clear. I was definitely more pessimistic about what they were going to do than other people. I remember saying: What if they just want to fire us? But it never, never occurred to me they were going to get rid of USAID in general.

MLK: What have you been doing in the months since then?

CH: I started job hunting in January [2025]. The sector's so decimated. I've had two interviews in the last year. That's how bad it is. And it's not just me. It's a broader swath of people. I've done some consulting, but there's not a lot of consulting. The only consulting that I have been able to do has been

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international. There's no domestic money going for gender equality and women's empowerment work. I did [some work] in the Solomon Islands, testing the women's political empowerment tool. So that's a little bit of paid work, but not a lot.

I have not been able to pull away, though. I still keep getting sucked back. Some people are pivoting. I know people who are like: I'm just done. Those are the millennials. I did two things. The first was through Cailin Crockett and the Open Society Foundation. I convened a meeting in June, and one later in the summer, to map what had happened and what was lost. I have continued to try and coordinate and keep conversations going between former government agency people and implementers. I come from civil society, and so I'm interested in both. I think that's not necessarily the case for people that have been in government for a really long time.

We convened those because it was clear that people weren't talking to people. When you talk to people internationally, they don't have any clue of how decimated everything is. They don't even know that USAID is gone, or that gender work is done, and so forth. I wanted to do that mapping piece. Open Society Foundation (OSF) was really interested in reimagining the future. That was in March. I was like: Listen, people are in shambles. Their lives are in shambles. They've lost their homes. They've lost their jobs, their childcare, their medical coverage, and the work has just abruptly ended all over the world. Nobody here is going to come to a meeting and reimagine with you yet. That's just not going to happen.

They allowed me to shape it in a different way. Cailin Cockett and I co-facilitated it. We brought together in that first meeting any domestic implementers and former government people that worked on gender, peace, and democracy in some capacity. We just mapped and documented. That's the report I sent you. We had a very small virtual meeting where we tried to bring together more international viewpoints, like some of the government partners and so forth. There was very little interest. People are very afraid. A couple of people came, totally off the record.

Basically, what we learned in that meeting was that they were all still really scared. There's a tension between U.S. government-to-government relationships and diplomacy and funding, and what they do on gender and democracy, but also just on gender. That was right after the UK had shrunk their budget significantly, because [Prime Minister] Keir Starmer was going to put more money into Ukraine. That's what we heard in that meeting, that people were cutting budgets, or people were afraid to push back, because their own broader government wasn't going to fight for gender. A little bit of that self-compliance piece that we're still seeing, like: We're not going fight for gender because we want to save everything else.

I was working with implementers the whole time, even though I was doing it and was at the front of it. I went to NDI and IRI and IFES and their gender people, and I was like: Is this useful? Would this be useful? I'm not anybody anymore. How can this service you guys to keep doing the work? You still have money. They worked with me to plan that. Afterward, OSF was like: You know, we're not really in the gender space. We're going to step away from this. Maybe we'll come

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back to it. They didn't want to partner on a third event, so I went to NDI again. IRI basically has moved out of the [gender equality] space. They have one person there, so they're not really doing any of this right now. They won't join meetings or do this, but IFES and NDI have been wanting to continue to do something.

I've been volunteering with them, because they have no money. I helped them plan and pull together a third convening, which we were supposed to do in October. We decided we really needed an institutional partner that was international. We wanted to come out of the domestic space, because we've all been talking to each other for too long. That's what we've been trying to gauge and do through the meeting we had this past week. That was what that was, and it took us just a while to plan it, because they are one person running their entire team, and I'm working for free. I'll continue to support them. That's the organizing piece that we'll continue to do.

The other thing that we started is a mentorship effort, which was something that occurred to me over the summer as I was talking to the younger staff. A lot of what Sandra and I did at NDI, and what I was doing at USAID, was growing the field of democracy and gender practitioner experts. That was a junior-to-senior growth pipeline. The mentorship effort we started was to try and connect people that were largely unemployed, that were in very senior positions beforehand, with people that were starting out in their careers. That continued growth could potentially take place, so that the brain trust was saved somewhat as things come back online. Everybody got a mentor, and then we opened it up, and we added more people, and we've sort of broadened it to be a little bit more of a coordination effort among democracy and peace implementers and former government officials.

People are starting to get jobs, so it's morphing and we're now moving into doing our own reimagining. We had our first meeting yesterday, so we're going to start a process of reimagining international foreign assistance, specifically gender mainstreaming and gender integration in the peace and democracy sector. There are other efforts that are happening to reimagine foreign assistance, but they're not thinking about democracy. They're definitely not thinking about gender. We're thinking that we will hopefully be able to do something that we can have ready to tell people they should do. That is going to end up being a lot more work than we thought it was going to be. What we are working on is: What are we going to recommend they do on day one? What were the lessons learned?

The people that are still around are able to brainstorm and do evaluations of what worked and what didn't work. To rebuild the quickest but stronger. There's a whole shadow movement [of the different sectors] to be prepared and to push back. It's not going to be USAID. The consensus on the call yesterday was it's probably going to be the State Department. They've absorbed USAID, for better or worse. One of the problems with the State Department is that they don't do programming. How are you going to build the infrastructure and the technical staffing quickly enough on day one for them to be able to do the work? The new administration could pick up things like the Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy from 2023. But it may take them years to just implement that policy, following the rules and bureaucratic processes.

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AS: I had been joking a little bit that if I lost my job, I was going to go to Italy. Then I did lose my job, and so I did go to Italy for a month, which was lovely. I was working part-time at a Pilates studio, and then at the end of September, I started a new full-time job. I would have loved to continue in gender equality work or international development, and I applied to so many jobs that did not pan out in those spaces. I'm hopeful that maybe one day the sector will recover a little bit more, and there will be an opportunity to go back. But right now I'm working for the architecture association, roughly the architecture equivalent of the American Bar Association, doing research around the different rules and regulations affecting architecture licensure. It is not something I had been aware of before but, you know, I needed a job so I was happy to get that. It is interesting still to be tangentially involved in government, but at a slightly smaller level. [Gender jobs] are hard to find.

MM: Literally two days after we got the stop work order in January, I went on my honeymoon. That was good. Then I was on unemployment, applying for jobs — truly unsuccessfully. Everyone who I might have hit up for a lead or anything was also in the same situation. I had spent the better part of a year looking for a job with terrible, terrible success. Several months ago, I reached a point where I was like: I cannot keep doing this. I made the decision to pivot and have been applying to nursing programs and doing prerequisites for nursing school. Of course, right when I started doing that, I'm on the third round of interviews for an actual job. Thankfully, I'm in a position where my wife is not employed by the government in any capacity, so I have the space to explore other options.

I was talking with my therapist, because I was just really being ground down by the job search. She asked: What were the parts of past jobs that you'd really enjoyed, or that brought you a lot of meaning? I kept going back to my time in the Peace Corps and working with HIV services and thought: direct service work. There's definitely some appeal there in the stability of that, given everything that's gone on in the past year. Who on earth knows what will happen with development, and what will happen with all of that going forward.

In the blue sky scenario, where something like USAID does come back, or this kind of work is valued and funded again, I think that having skills and experience in healthcare, in that line of work, is not going to put me in any worse of a position to go back into development in the future. It could definitely be a benefit. One cool thing is that GW's (George Washington University's) nursing school offers a lot of the prerequisite courses online, and they have a scholarship for former federal employees or contractors. [It's a new thing.] I started those courses at the beginning of this year with an eye to start nursing school in the fall.

RG: I was supposed to start between six and eight months before I did. There was a set of issues getting my contract. One of the things I did in the interim was consult for somebody at the International Finance Corporation, which is the private arm of the World Bank. She reached out to me when USAID was falling apart and asked if I would consult again. So that's what I've been doing, consulting two-thirds of my time with them. I'm quite lucky because I

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transitioned to that once the firing went through. I am still working on gender-based violence, so I feel quite privileged to still be in my field. Right now, I am developing gender-based violence risk assessment and mitigation tools for financial institutions.

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

JD: It is critical that this work continue and very encouraging to see the efforts of former USAID colleagues and other partners to safeguard and take forward the work in the gender-inclusive democracy space after the gutting of USAID. We need to continue making the case, sharing resources, and finding safe and innovative ways to work together in this new reality. I salute the efforts of Caroline and other colleagues who are leading the charge.

Our experiences over the past 15 years have shown the benefits of a high level of political commitment to gender equality and women's political leadership but also the limits of government entities as policy leaders and funders in this space. Policy priorities shift from administration to administration, and not just in the U.S. I am grateful that civil society and academics are doubling down on this important work both domestically and internationally and am hopeful that these efforts will prove resilient.

CH: I think that there is a brain trust challenge. It has really been two decades, give or take, of building the field and building the body of people that know how to do the work. Reimagining is really important, but making sure that we are somehow salvaging what we've gained in the last twenty years in terms of expertise and people, if we can. Some of them are leaving and not doing this work anymore. There are not a lot of people that know how to do it. And there is a problem in terms of how we make sure that we maintain, if it's not the people, at least the value of the information and the approaches.

I think you do it already. A lot of academics. When you write something that gives the backbone of the practitioner guidance, or the expertise that we're applying in-country, it does crystallize it and standardize it and give it a certain amount of visibility and elevation. Catching up and building that bridge between where practitioners were and where academics are and making sure that you pick the stuff up. Maintaining the people, the brain trust, making sure that it doesn't get forgotten.

The other thing, going back to my point about USAID as a government entity, is operationalizing gender mainstreaming. From what I can gather from other governments, ours was pretty advanced in terms of where it was with its policy and its processes. It wasn't perfect, and it had a long way to go, but it was lessons learned being applied and being rewritten in better ways. It's the feminist foreign policy piece, I guess. There is reading and writing about feminist foreign policy, but is it documenting enough into the weeds of how good gender mainstreaming is done in an institution and in a government and so forth? That maybe could be something somebody would be interested in looking into more.

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I think people need to not be afraid and to push back. I think people are in different places. That's totally understandable, and I totally honor that. People are very afraid. If you're in a position with funding, and you have leadership trying to save funding, you are very curtailed in terms of what you're allowed to say and push back on. You're being told no, because it's going to get you in trouble. I don't think people are going to get in trouble in the way they think they are. I mean, maybe they will, but from what I saw in USAID, it was absolutely the fact that people were so afraid and didn't push back that we ended up where we are today. And I don't think continuing the way that we're continuing is going to get anybody where they want to go.

Part of the reason why it's happening is because people are all too ready to throw in the glove on gender. They weren't convinced. It's still very tough inside all these organizations, and inside the government. It was a really hard, uphill battle. My bureau was way behind. It's a combination of [1] we don't want to push back and we're afraid, and [2] we don't really care and don't think it's that important and we are not going to center it. That's why I think we do need to push back. Then it's figuring out: Who can push back? Can academics push back? Are they safe? Maybe not, maybe they are. Are people like me — who no longer have anything to lose — safe? We can push back, but will they listen to us? Can we get other people involved? That pushback, I think, if it doesn't start happening soon, could lead to catastrophe.

AS: The first thing that comes to mind is just to keep talking about the issues. When I mentioned how there was a feeling within the Bureau of: We've done enough. Pushing back on that by just keeping in front of your mind all the work there still is to be done. A lot of what that means to me is not just when people are talking about women, but bringing it up when we're talking about backlash against free speech or labor violations and things like that. In every conversation, there is that lens of how this is impacting not only women as a monolith, but also women of color, transgender women, and so many other marginalized groups.

I think too often, the conversation around gender equality is contained within boundaries around a gender conversation, instead of actually being a part of every conversation and every topic, like it should be. The more you talk about it, and the more that people hear about it, it opens up people's eyes in a way that then they can't ignore. I remember we did a training on gender equality and DRG that we were able to deliver a couple of different times. The big feedback we got from people as their takeaway was: I had never considered this before. Then, months later saying: I haven't been able to stop thinking about it and stop seeing that. Hopefully, people will carry that with them.

MM: I have really appreciated the chance to work with you and Caroline on getting the website [https://www.gwdresources.org/] operational, trying to preserve a lot of the stuff that was lost when USAID was taken apart. I really love to think that those will still be of use, of value, to people going forward. So much of that whole process of the stop-work order and USAID collapsing was just extremely isolating.

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I've really appreciated work that Caroline and other folks have been doing, just to keep people in contact with each other, bringing people together, having these dialogues. I think it's important, too, if we want to keep people's expertise, keeping people involved. But I also think, just psychologically, it's also important. [Feeling like you're still part of a community] and that this expertise you've developed, that you spent all this time building up, isn't wasted, or isn't just waiting to find the time and place where it can be applied again.

I think there are also a lot of people who were in positions like me or Alessia, who were just kind of getting started in this kind of work and are pivoting or doing other things now. This is something I've brought up in other conversations, but I think it's so important to find ways to keep people like me involved in these conversations, even if I am up to my neck in microbiology right now. I do want to keep up with this world. I think that finding ways to do that not in an official capacity is hard. Just more avenues for keeping engaged, even if it's not full-time. I think it's really important.

RG: Honestly, my opinion on this is that gender work was kind of the canary in the coal mine. I think it's a deeper story than that. I think there were people and organizations in the gender world that were a lot more willing to sacrifice particularly transgender people and separate them out from the gender work they did and said: This isn't what we do. I remember in the second week, when there was a scramble to save the gender work, and DEI was just the first on the cutting block. We cannot survive by buying into the splitting and endangerment that's happening. It was something that was very much on my mind.

I think we need to be proactive and brave and make sure that it is still an intersectional approach. There needs to be a real reckoning with [what has happened]. It will kill and harm so many people. I was reading this book the other day on art in the Act Out movement, and I just had a moment of grief about the number of people who will not have access to their HIV meds. So many people have been harmed and there's so much more that's going to happen. Gender work has to be in solidarity with other equity and anti-violence movements. Who can we protect and serve? Where can we channel money? How can we raise the voices of the people who still need protection who are still doing the work and are being cut out of conversation?

The movement has to be brave. If we don't talk about transgender people and don't stand against these anti-LGBQTI+ laws, we're not going to get traction. We need a new vision. There were feminists who did not have support in these countries before USAID came along, and they are still doing that work. How can we support them? What can we learn? If we're going to build something, it should be something new.

Resources

Gender, Women, and Democracy Resources, https://www.gwdresources.org/

Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse, https://www.gwdresources.org/_files/ugd/0b116e_99b30b074c8c4a6b86e51196ded669e1.pdf

National Democratic Institute. 2020. *Men, Power, and Politics: Online Program Guidance*. Washington, DC: NDI. https://www.gwdresources.org/_files/ugd/0b116e_64163085a4f1412b9b8b567e1f1e34dd.pdf

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Network for Gender Inclusive Democracy, https://www.gwdresources.org/_files/ugd/0b116e_67a14155b46f4cbe9e0734141e37c1d6.pdf

Transform Digital Resource Catalogue Fact Sheet, https://www.pactworld.org/sites/default/files/2024-03/TRANSFORM%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf.

Transform Digital Spaces to Reflect Feminist Democratic Principles Program, https://www.gwdresources.org/_files/ugd/0b116e_ed397e60540e42989aa4df30cb5be45a.pdf.

USAID. 2014. *Women's Leadership as a Route to Greater Empowerment: Desktop Study*. Washington, DC: USAID. https://www.gwdresources.org/_files/ugd/0b116e_ecf5b19ee6a240f986244d78011e3498.pdf

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