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NOTES FROM THE FIELD

Gender at the National Security Council

Cailin Crockett[1], Andrea K. Freeman[2] and Mona Lena Krook[3]

[1]Department of Foreign Policy and Global Security, American University School of International Service, Washington, DC, USA; [2]Consultant, Washington, DC, USA and [3]Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA
Corresponding author: Mona Lena Krook; Email: m.l.krook@rutgers.edu

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The National Security Council (NSC), established in 1947, advises and assists the President of the United States on matters of national and international security. Members of the NSC include staff seconded from government agencies, like Andrea Freeman (AF) from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Cailin Crockett (CC) from the Department of Defense. During the Joe Biden administration, CC also held a unique position dual-hatted as a Director on the NSC and as a Senior Advisor on the White House Gender Policy Council. This is a slightly edited version of interviews that took place with Mona Lena Krook (MLK) via Zoom on January 5, 2026, and February 2, 2026.

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

AF: I was a long-time USAID civil servant, and as you may or may not know, much of the NSC at the working level is staffed by personnel recruited from departments and agencies. At the outset of the Biden Administration in 2021, I was recruited from USAID to stand up part of a new directorate that was being re-established — it had been reorganized in the prior administration — called Development, Global Health, and Humanitarian Response. I was sitting with a group of people, other directors, who looked at long-term development issues, but also emergency response around humanitarian disasters — whether it was the earthquake that happened yesterday or long-term complex or chronic crises.

There was one person who had to be alert to anything that was happening in the world that potentially could be classified as a humanitarian crisis. Someone else was focused on global health-related work and global health policy. One was on longer-term international development issues, such as poverty reduction, income equality, and the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals). My job on the

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team was working on conflict prevention issues, recognizing that a majority of the world's poor live in conflict-affected or fragile states. Together, we formed a complementary and holistic team with a goal of ensuring the application of this development lens to country-specific policy discussions, while also driving policy-making processes around specific development, global health, and humanitarian issues needing a whole-of-government consensus and approach.

When I started, my boss said, you will be responsible for reviving the implementation of the Global Fragility Act, the GFA, if you've heard of it, and the Elie Wiesel Genocide and Atrocities Prevention Act. Most people serve one year. I ended up serving two years. About a year into it, when a colleague left, I was also handed the WPS (Women, Peace, and Security) portfolio. Like the Elie Wiesel Act, which was the first legislation of its kind globally to address atrocity prevention, the U.S. was the first country to legislate women's participation in conflict prevention and peacebuilding. To some degree, that made quite a bit of sense, because then I had the whole package of the prevention agenda that had been passed through Congress.

All three pieces of legislation had been passed and signed into law with bipartisan support during the first [Donald] Trump administration. Each law includes specific actions to be taken by the executive branch — development of a strategy or requiring funding to be used in a certain way, as well as regular reporting to Congress. But implementation was uneven, and in the case of the GFA, key deliverables had stalled and were overdue to Congress. The task for me was to recharge GFA, get it going again. And then on Elie Wiesel, further consolidating and strengthening the institutionalization of atrocity prevention that had been developed, even predating the law, over the course of a decade-plus through predecessor NSC directors. For the WPS piece, there were congressionally mandated updates to the U.S. strategy that were required. I left before this part was all done, but I started that process with Cailin.

Together, these three laws are mutually reinforcing. They shifted U.S. foreign policy towards addressing root causes of instability and conflict, which are often inextricably linked to gender inequality, and elevated gender equality from being considered as a tangential issue to a core national security priority. My role, like other directors across the NSC, was to convene interagency meetings on these three topics to work through issues and bring to agreement — not always consensus, depending on the topic — and ensure departments and agencies are working together with a common goal. In essence, it is a coordinating job. In the case of WPS, this meant convening the WPS Departments and agencies in collaboration with Cailin, who was dual-hatted between the NSC and the White House Gender Policy Council (GPC).

CC: I was seconded from the Department of Defense to be the Director for Military Personnel and Readiness at the NSC in September 2021. Concurrently, I was in a novel position as a senior advisor at the Gender Policy Council from the start of my tenure at the NSC in September 2021 through October 2024. I was there for almost the entirety of the GPC's existence, which was a new policy council established via executive order by President Biden. It was disbanded via executive order in the first days of the second Trump Administration.

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My portfolio was dual-hatted with the National Security Council. My role was to apply a gender lens to our foreign policy and national security, as well as activities happening across the NSC through the lens of women, peace, and security and technology. In partnership with Andrea, I was charged with coordinating the interagency policy committee to develop and monitor and implement the National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security and the Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017.

The other big part of my role — and why I was placed in the Defense Directorate of the NSC and dual-hatted with the Gender Policy Council — was to carry out the president's plans for the bipartisan military justice reform that changed how the military prosecuted sexual assault.

A big part of that — and really my entrée into women, peace, and security — has been from the perspective of modeling a diverse, equitable, inclusive, and safe armed forces. My gender lens in national security comes from my gender-based violence background. My NSC and GPC portfolios were very much women, peace, and security, both our internal force development and externally [in terms of] military-civil relations. Through our foreign policy and development, how are we supporting women peace builders, commanders, and decision-makers in the domains of defense and national security?

The third prong of my work at the Gender Policy Council, which straddled domestic and foreign policy, was building and then executing how the U.S. government was thinking of technology-facilitated harms, primarily against women but also children and LGBTQ+ individuals. I helped develop our foreign policy approach to online harassment and abuse, including new and emerging technologies and the weaponization of AI (artificial intelligence), which entailed launching and coordinating the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse.

I was also involved with the White House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse, which included twelve federal departments and agencies and required deliverables to build the capacity of how their agencies were responding to the weaponization of technology against women and girls and kids. Some of that overlaps with the work that Rosie [Hidalgo] and I did together on the National Plan to End Gender-Based Violence, which Rosie oversaw as the Senior Advisor for Gender-Based Violence on the GPC. One of the pillars of that plan is online safety, which pulled from the work that I was leading.

Initially these dots [WPS, technology-facilitated gender-based violence, sexual violence in conflict and the military] were not very implicitly connected. My role was to make the case to federal agencies why they had the tools or could refine and further develop the tools to respond to these threats and their intersections. When we first started, it required a lot of case-making because these more emerging policy issues weren't fully understood or integrated. But I think we were ultimately quite effective, in large part because one of the things I think the Gender Policy Council really took to heart and did well was that we listened.

We brought in expert stakeholders — frontline women leaders, NGOs (non-governmental organizations), civil society, academics, and survivors — who were very much the cornerstone of the work that Rosie and I did with the White

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House Task Force to Address Online Harassment and Abuse. I think that helped us to get a lot right. Of course, we didn't have as much time as we would have hoped to fully implement the work we started. We would have needed a dedicated budget and larger staff at the GPC, considering the substantial policy, programmatic, and public-private partnerships we led. One clear marker of this lack of manpower is my role: I had at least two full-time jobs, effectively — a broad portfolio, but we got a lot done.

MLK: What was your background going into the role at the National Security Council?

AF: I did not come from USAID being "a gender person." I was a regional person. I worked on Africa, with years and years on Sudan and South Sudan and supporting USAID's engagement in the policy-making process for these countries. In other words, my exposure to WPS was through the lens of working on these countries, where the role of women is important and multilayered and should not be ignored if the goal is a lasting and just peace. I carried an understanding of the evidence that peace agreements don't last if you don't include certain people, particularly in the context where we have seen failure after failure of peace agreements in Sudan, in both Sudans, because of the lack of inclusion of any kind of alternative voices.

Those who are impacted most by all these conflicts tend to be women and children. These voices have been perennially shut out of these major processes in this part of the world. No surprise — the violence and conflict may be paused with an agreement, but they don't go away, because the underlying issues of exclusion and marginalization are merely swept under the proverbial rug. They come back. That's the orientation that I was coming in with when I was asked to pick up WPS as part of my portfolio.

In that role, I had the benefit of a cadre of amazing WPS experts I could call or consult with from [the key WPS agencies] — [the] State Department, DOD [Department of Defense], USAID, and DHS [the Department of Homeland Security] — plus Cailin and the GPC team, on the technical aspects. I approached my role differently: I'm a bureaucrat. I'm going to build on my experience working in a bureaucracy to try and get this on track in terms of the implementation of this legislation. For me, it was important to look at how to institutionalize it across government to ensure lasting, systemic change beyond the small group of committed experts and practitioners working on the issue day-to-day.

You have three different laws, and we tend to silo things. Here are the WPS people over here. And there are the atrocity prevention people. And then there are the conflict people over there. But the world doesn't work that way. The world isn't siloed like that, right? The challenge is the bureaucratic structures and the institutions — ultimately the people in them — and how those things interact with the policy-making process. For me, WPS was a key part in terms of changing that siloed mentality — having instead a more strategic, integrated look across all of these things. They're all related and connected to each other, and they are all needed to have a chance at averting conflict.

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CC: Prior to last February, I had been a career civil servant in the federal government for thirteen years, serving through the Obama-Biden administration, the Trump-Pence administration, and the Biden-Harris administration. My background has been working on gender-based violence policy, initially through a public health and social protection lens. I came into federal government as a Presidential Management Fellow in the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Family Violence Prevention. Through that role, I had the opportunity to work for then-Vice President Biden as a detailee under his first White House Advisor on Violence Against Women, where I was initially exposed to the President's long-standing commitment to addressing sexual violence in the military. Through my exposure to a whole-of-government approach to addressing sexual and domestic violence, I developed an extensive network and community of gender-based violence experts and advocates working within the federal agencies, domestically and globally.

Later on in the Obama administration, I spent about a year on another detail in the Vice President's office working for his second White House Advisor on Violence Against Women, focusing on violence against older women and women with disabilities and violence against indigenous women and girls. I spent the first year of the Trump administration in the Office on Violence Against Women at the Justice Department, managing grant programs domestically under the Violence Against Women Act to tribes and rural and local domestic violence, sexual assault, and trafficking programs. I then had the opportunity to move to the Department of Defense in 2019, the last year or so of the Trump-Pence administration. I moved to the office that manages domestic violence and child abuse and neglect for active-duty military and their families. I did a lot of work with the Sexual Assault Prevention Office because of the nature of gender-based violence, although at the time those offices were very much separate.

When the transition for the Biden-Harris administration came, having been at the Department of Defense, and having a knowledge of that system and some of the changes that the incoming President wanted to make, I was assigned to the 90-day Independent Review Commission [IRC] on sexual assault in the military. That ultimately provided the recommendations and the base text for the bipartisan legislation that was passed to change the way that military sexual assault was prosecuted. Namely, it removed the role of commander in prosecutorial decisions for sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and other felony-level offenses.

After serving as the Chief of Staff on the Independent Review Commission, I went to the White House as the Director for Military Personnel Policy to oversee the implementation of the Independent Review Commission's Recommendations to get the military justice reform across the finish line and support the President and First Lady's priorities for military personnel and their families. I also began developing my portfolio at the Gender Policy Council. Initially, it was to provide continuity with the gender-based violence priorities that the president had that were very much housed within the Gender Policy Council. The NSC played a key role as the direct liaison with the Pentagon on the sexual assault reforms.

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

AF: I think the most consequential gender-specific work for me would be the work that we did to release the Presidential Memorandum on Promoting Accountability in Conflict-Related Sexual Violence [CRSV] in November 2022. A small team of us — lawyers, Cailin, and I — developed and drafted it. Basically, that was a response to understanding that there were multiple frameworks out there around gender-based violence in conflict contexts specifically, but there was a gap in implementation. You have all these tools out there, like sanctions, but they weren't necessarily being applied consistently — or frequently enough, given the prevalence of CRSV in conflict — to address the problem of CRSV as an "inevitable" cost of war. It wasn't getting the policy-making attention, particularly from an accountability perspective. This means justice for survivors of crimes that are so depraved and devastating, but are surrounded by silence, so there is a culture of impunity. As a result, the violence just continues.

We had a lot of conversations with the lawyers about what gap exactly we were trying to fill. While the U.S. has a number of country-specific sanctions regimes that could be used against perpetrators of sexual violence, and also regimes focused on human rights violations, none focused on CRSV specifically. So, without creating another sanctions instrument which could be seen as duplicative, the presidential memorandum is essentially a memo to all the agencies that we're going to start paying attention to this more and strengthen the USG's [U.S. government's] ability to combat CRSV by treating it as a core national security priority and the serious human rights abuse that it is.

Getting it through the [Biden] White House was relatively straightforward, because there was already commitment at the level of the President to addressing violence against women. Following the release of the memo, a number of sanctions specifically for CRSV were issued in mid-2023, after I left, against individuals in a number of countries including South Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo [DRC], and Syria. We also saw some funding dedicated to CRSV investigations and increased reporting on CRSV to support accountability efforts.

There is great symbolic and soft power in public messaging that adopts a survivor-centered approach that validates survivors' experience and prioritizes their dignity. The bureaucratic and implementation challenge with measures like these is that any agency will say: Okay, now you're giving me something else to do. Before I had 100 priorities, now I have 101. That's why it's still hard to make progress quickly on cross-cutting efforts like this that are important but not necessarily seen as urgent.

CC: There are three achievements under the Biden-Harris Administration I am particularly proud to have played a role in that I think were historic and impactful. The first, the signature [achievement], is the military justice reforms. The work began under the Independent Review Commission and contributed to the most significant changes to the military justice system since it was first established in 1950. It changed the role of commanders in the prosecution of sexual assault, but also in domestic violence, sexual harassment, and child abuse and neglect cases and other felony-level offenses.

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These are often crimes of polyvictimization, with similar dynamics in terms of power and control, and are complex to effectively investigate and prosecute, so removing the role of the commander in key decisions — decisions that ultimately should be made by a lawyer — was a landmark change. We also effectively leveraged the bipartisan interest of Congress to look at sexual violence in the military and put it into the president's budget. Under the Biden administration, we moved from an annual budget of $500 million at the Pentagon for sexual violence prevention and response to just over $1 billion per year. Two years later, we saw a reduction by 10% in rates of sexual assault and sexual harassment among active-duty military.

I know it's hard to pinpoint [these effects], but never before had we seen the level of resources applied to evidence-based, public health-informed interventions for sexual violence prevention and response. The resourcing combined with the messaging coming from the top, from the Commander-in-Chief and the Defense Secretary, Lloyd Austin, on how important this issue is to our force lethality really made a difference. Thinking about the risk and protective factors for sexual violence where unit formations have much higher concentrations of men versus women, and what that means for whether or not women should be in the military, or women should serve in combat roles — the answer is not removing women from these contexts, but rather insisting on environments of safety, dignity, and respect for all who wear the uniform. That message has to come from the top. This all relates to women, peace, and security as well.

Progress is fragile, but these bipartisan reforms were realized in statute. The Office of Special Trial Council, which is the independent prosecutorial arm of each military branch and service, [therefore] continues to carry on their mission, prosecuting and taking the hard cases. They have had a string of successes. Even in this very different cultural environment that the military is faced with right now, there is a very strong message that's coming out of the military justice system that these cases will be prosecuted to the fullest extent.

That's just not something that the military had before. I'm really proud that the IRC fought hard to ensure domestic violence was one of the offenses that, along with sexual assault, were removed from the prosecutorial discretion of commanders. Domestic violence is now the most cited crime in the caseload for all the new military prosecutors. Before it was severely under-prosecuted, for many of the dynamics you would imagine related to family and privacy, normalizing family violence especially — an issue not unique to the military but one we see in civilian contexts as well.

The second item I'm proud of having led with Andrea is transforming how the U.S. designated sanctions targets with a gender lens in mind, specifically looking at conflict-related sexual violence. Previously, there was no policy-directed focus on gender. There was a broad category for human rights, but there wasn't anything honing in on sexual violence in conflict. We really focused on building the capacity of the intelligence community and the sanctions-designating offices at Treasury and the State Department, on what was happening on the ground in places like Ukraine, Haiti, Sudan, or the DRC, to help make a robust package for designating sanctions against perpetrators of sexual violence in conflict.

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As Andrea described, a vehicle we used quite effectively in the [Biden] administration was presidential memorandums to create a cohesive set of priorities as well as action items for agencies to operationalize those priorities, which we did for CRSV. Admittedly, sanctions are just one tool, but our perspective was that we needed to use all the tools that we had in our diplomatic and economic arsenals to make very clear that this is as egregious a crime as any. It deserves recognition on the international stage, because it's one that is so gendered and happens with such silence and impunity. For us, and importantly for the President, it was so important to make that effort.

The third area that has had sustained impact, as part of my role on the Gender Policy Council, is launching the Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse. That was originally an outgrowth, or a deliverable, of the first Summit for Democracy that the administration held in December of 2021. It started as an effort that was co-led with Denmark and the UK and Australia. There are now at least sixteen countries who are a part of it. The UK and Chile are the co-chairs of that coalition for this year and have valiantly stepped up to lead where the U.S. has retreated. We haven't formally disengaged from the Global Partnership, but we're not playing an active role, given the shift in priorities and the fact that our participation in the Global Partnership was staffed initially by the Gender Policy Council and then GWI [Secretary of State's Office of Global Women's Issues] — teams that no longer exist under the current Administration.

That effort really led to a number of important changes in global norms setting through multilateral instruments on articulating tech-facilitated gender-based violence (TFGBV) as a threat to national and global security; as a women, peace, and security issue; as a human rights and freedom of expression issue; and as an issue related to women's economic security. The Global Partnership was able to secure normative language in different G7 and G20 documents and ensure the issue was squarely addressed in different UN (United Nations) Human Rights Council resolutions and Commission on the Status of Women resolutions and texts.

One of the areas I'm most proud of is the role that the Global Partnership countries played together to negotiate language in the revised NATO (North-Atlantic Treaty Organization) WPS policy. It was issued during the 75th anniversary Summit of NATO, which the Biden-Harris administration hosted. We negotiated the text to ensure that TFGBV and gendered disinformation were included as part of NATO's reconceptualization of WPS and different security threats that require a WPS lens.

The Global Partnership continues today, with great credit to the UK, Australia, Chile, Canada, and Spain. France also really embraced TFGBV as part of their feminist foreign policy efforts. It continues to be a laboratory of shared learning across the countries that are participating in it. It is also coordinating across the UN funds and programs that have become more engaged on TFGBV. UN Women, UNFPA (the UN Population Fund), and UNICEF (the UN Children's Fund) are all key advisors to this effort and have helped play a role in coordinating with civil society and member states. Through our role in the Global Partnership during the Biden-Harris administration, we invested a record — it sounds paltry, but for

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gender issues and for a gender issue that has no legislative basis in our foreign policy appropriations — we invested $36 million in dedicated funding across government for TFGBV, both internationally and domestically.

[That included] grant funds going to community-based organizations to provide assistance to survivors. We hadn't made those investments before. Some of that was domestic, including launching the first federally funded 24-7 hotline for non-consensual intimate images. That continues to be funded. Thankfully, [the Trump] administration did not pull back their funding, although continuation of the three-year grant, which will end during this administration, is yet to be determined.

We had had some hope at the beginning of this administration, in the spring, with the President and the First Lady really getting behind the Take It Down Act, which makes illegal, for the first time, non-consensual intimate images (NCII). We thought that maybe that could be an opening for some diplomacy on these issues and continued engagement, including through the UN Cybercrime Treaty that designated NCII as an international recognized cybercrime. The US supported passing it at the end of the Biden Administration, but it has not yet been ratified under the second Trump Administration. Unfortunately, we have not seen a consistent position from the current administration in support of these issues as a foreign policy priority.

MLK: What happened in January 2025?

AF: At the institutional level, the incoming Trump administration eliminated the positions that were working on this family of prevention issues in the first few months of 2025. I was on a temporary assignment working with the Senate staff on Capitol Hill at the time USAID was targeted for dismantling. I had to leave the Senate offices one day in February and never had the opportunity to come back. I was supposed to be there through the end of my one-year detail at the end of March, and then return to USAID.

With the dissolution of USAID and the targeted termination of staff focused on gender issues, you immediately lost one of the four pillar agencies as designated by law to implement WPS: the State Department, DOD, USAID, and DHS. Then, DHS eliminated the office that implemented WPS. The Department of Defense publicly announced that WPS would be implemented at the bare minimum in the Department. The State Department reorganized and eliminated the Office of Global Women's Issues, the locus of WPS efforts for the State Department and laid off their staff. Not reassigned — laid off.

Each of these agencies and their lead offices had budgets, staff, policies, procedures, activities, trainings, and programs. It was only after DOD's announcement that we saw any public statements from the Hill objecting to the demolition of WPS — after more than half the capacity and expertise were expelled. So, in a matter of months, by summer 2025, the WPS agenda, as enshrined in law, was dismantled and gone. Only a fraction of these expert staff remains, and those who do remain are reassigned to other tasks.

In early 2025, there were waves of USAID personnel being terminated, starting at headquarters. Very early on, any staff associated with diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility [DEIA] were targeted for termination. If you were

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employed through a certain hiring mechanism, you were fired right away. I'm a civil servant, which in theory means you have more protections, so it took a bit longer to understand more clearly how the removal of scores of us was going to go down. A large number of us were put on administrative leave in late February. Along with many others, I received my letter notifying me that I was being "reduced in force," or RIF'ed, which essentially meant we were formally being laid off from federal service, at the end of March, with an end date of July 1. Between the end of March and July 1, we were not allowed to report to work or do our jobs, but we were getting paid.

While this is not specific to your gender focus, I will share that this was hard for the entire community — the gender experts at USAID, seen as part of DEIA, were at the tip of the spear and felt the pain instantly. The programs they crafted and managed — focused on elevating women's voices and empowering them as political and civic leaders and as champions of peace — were all suspended as part of a rapid review process that did not draw on technical expertise in international development, or a deliberate and systematic assessment of program effectiveness.

Our last day as an agency was July 1, 2025. Since then, a handful of people have stayed on or have been re-hired to help close out thousands of programs — this is a tedious and lengthy process if it is done properly. The programs were closed so abruptly, without warning, that many internal policies and procedures regarding the management of grants and contracts were not followed. This includes things like who to turn over office assets or vehicles to in any of our seventy countries of operation, how to manage compliance with local labor laws in seventy countries to deal with severance and other obligations when you fire local staff, and how to terminate leases. The list goes on and on. The closeout of these programs continues to this day.

CC: For most of the Biden Administration, I was a career civil servant on detail from the Pentagon to the National Security Council. When I was coming up on three years at the NSC and GPC, I wanted to return to the Department of Defense to support the implementation of bipartisan military justice reforms and the recommendations adopted from the Independent Review Commission. I applied and competed for the Senior Executive Service (SES), a merit-based, competitive category of career civil servants that are situated in upper management above the GS (General Service), to be the Deputy Director of a new division in the Army called Prevention, Resilience, and Readiness.

Its mandate was to implement the sexual assault reforms that I had advised on at the beginning of the Biden administration. That was a career position, importantly, not a politically appointed position, intended to provide continuity for this very bipartisan agenda. I was there from October [2024] to February 20, [2025] — for the end of the Biden administration, and the first month of the Trump-Vance administration — before my role was effectively eliminated. Under the current administration, a number of executive orders have been issued to diminish and constrain the career SES — so my departure coincided with the overarching efforts by DOGE (the Department of Government Efficiency) to reduce the career federal workforce.

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

AF: Since July 2025, I've been consulting for a small think tank that focuses on the prevention of genocide and atrocity crimes. It monitors and analyzes risks for mass atrocities with an eye towards raising the alarm toward preventative action, so risks don't escalate into atrocity crimes. Sudan and South Sudan, for example, have historically been high-risk countries, so external actors like ourselves, our governments, need to understand this context in order to help tamp down tensions and avert preventable tragedies like the genocide in Darfur.

I'm helping them on a couple of projects. It's a temporary position, but I am fortunate to be working with experts on these important issues that are neglected or deprioritized. Atrocity prevention is important, and the countries that I worked on still need that lens. That lens has largely dropped out of the policy-making process today. I worry about what this means for the future stability and prosperity of many places in the world — and what that, in turn, means for our own national security. I feel fortunate to be able to continue to focus on these issues. For so many of my colleagues, this is not the case, although there is still a need for this kind of analysis and approach to difficult crises.

CC: One of the things that is keeping me hopeful is that the rest of the world is deeply invested in seeing this work continue — including pockets of the private sector, civil society, and governments at the state and global level. I'm currently consulting for a UK NGO implementing a grant from the UK FCDO (Foreign, Commonwealth, and Development Office) to work with multilateral, civil society, government, and industry partners to set global standards and norms for preventing and addressing non-consensual intimate images and develop model policies. So that's wonderful, and I was even able to brief the current government members of the Global Partnership at the end of last year on this effort, as that body is very invested in this work and actively shaping it.

Similarly, domestically, I have been involved in different efforts to promote online safety for women and girls and kids. We're seeing a lot of momentum among state legislatures where federal action has stalled regarding protecting children online and setting guardrails for AI (artificial intelligence). I'm working with the California Governor and First Partner on a new Technology Innovation Council focused on addressing image-based sexual abuse and protecting kids online statewide. So I've been doing what I can to build on the knowledge and experience of what worked (or didn't work) in the last administration on these issues — to share that with other countries, other governments in the U.S. and globally, and the private sector. That's been really rewarding. But, of course, so much was lost.

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

AF: However frustrated we may be with the pace or nature or substance of Congressional action right now, I think there still needs to be an effort to continue the education. Part of the challenge with a lot of these issues is that they don't necessarily get institutionalized because they don't have a champion or the resources or because of the transitory nature of people in government.

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People come and go. They get new jobs — they move to other positions in government or leave altogether. You may train a bunch of foreign service officers, and then they move on to their next assignment. There are all these structural things — but that doesn't mean they can't be improved or fixed. And we need to remind Congress: Pass these laws. You're supposed to be watching what's happening. [If something] has been legislated, it should be implemented. You need to provide meaningful oversight.

One thing is on the advocacy front. Not everyone on the Hill is a WPS expert — or they may think that [the WPS Act of 2017] was a yesteryear piece of legislation. Those of us who have been around, we at least know the basic tenets. But for new people entering the space, we need to ensure they become familiar with these issues and keep demanding the rigor in implementation. You saw the shadow report to Congress for WPS — this was an independent assessment prepared by former government officials when the government failed to submit its own required report. A group of former federal workers produced a similar report for the Elie Wiesel Act earlier in the year. The State Department had not been submitting these congressionally mandated reports. And we did not necessarily see Congress asking for them or for updates on these topics. Why weren't they calling people up to the Hill to ask: Where's our report? How have you implemented the law this past year?

In past years, this would have been very likely. Maybe they seemed marginal rather than core priorities at the time — which again points to a gap between what was articulated as national security interest and its formal absorption into all aspects of our government. Reminding key stakeholders and cultivating the next generation of lawmakers and staff who can be advocates, in order to build a constituency again around these issues. I think people care. I think a lot of people care, even amid competing priorities. But it's hard with so many pressing issues to address and limited staff time and the leadership necessary to see things through.

The other piece is protecting the space that we did have. The reality is that the conditions for advancing this agenda within the executive branch — or enforced by Congress vigorously — are extremely challenging right now. Meaningful progress within the executive branch is going to be very difficult in the near term. But if you can at least shore up, or hold off, the space that has been created for it — I think that's really important. That means it might not be within the U.S. government executive branch where that space can be protected as much. We need to look at what other avenues we have.

To give you an example on atrocity prevention, we recently had a conversation around the role of the private sector as a pillar of accountability when there are gaps in governing. If governments are not doing their jobs on certain things, then can businesses help fill that gap? But I don't know what the degree of uptake is on these kinds of issues, and that also places many costs — or perceived costs — on business. There are human rights and due diligence frameworks for businesses. There's a cadre of people who advise on compliance and respect for human rights in business. But I don't know if there is a more focused look at the role of women in that existing guidance. It's a space to watch.

Despite everything, I remain hopeful. These conflict prevention laws were passed with bipartisan support because the underlying issues — preventing

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conflict, protecting the most vulnerable, and ensuring women have a seat at the table — resonate across political lines. The expertise hasn't disappeared; it's dispersed now. It's in civil society, in academia, in state and local governments, and the international community will also continue to do the work. The foundation is there. The conditions will shift. It may take time, but when they do, the community will be ready to rebuild.

CC: I do think we need to be a lot more strategic as a movement overall. For me, this comes down to understanding the vital need to leverage where there is common ground and where you can build bridges, bringing others along and focusing on the breadth of the work that you want to do and play the long game. For me, that was definitely the story for working on tech-facilitated gender-based violence. Something that everyone agrees on, at least in principle, was on kids' safety online. In large part this is because harms to children online and offline are less caught up in debates on freedom of expression and the First Amendment, whereas online abuse against women is at greater risk of being mired in these debates and there are more legal complexities and nuances.

The question now is to learn from this and build back better when we can. My anecdote about the $500 million to $1 billion investment in sexual violence prevention and response at the Pentagon — and the results that we saw — illustrates this, which is that this work needs serious resources to be fully effective. Even something as basic as human capital to do this work. Because of the rollback of the federal workforce and expertise, I think an active consideration now and in the future is who does this work behind the scenes? It's just not sustainable. If a future administration is serious about wanting to do right by these issues, you have to have a fully staffed and resourced workforce to do it. Thinking through what it's going to take to rebuild and really understanding that that will require an investment in personnel.

I was listening to NPR (National Public Radio) the other day, and they had a review of the first year of the Trump administration. They were talking about the dissolution of the federal workforce. They had Max Stier, the president of the Partnership for Public Service, talk about the dismantling and how quickly that happened. The buildup of the knowledge and capacity and technical skills of this apolitical federal workforce — it's something we took for granted. And it didn't happen overnight. It was something built up over a hundred years, across Republican and Democratic administrations. That's why I love public service and have dedicated my career to being a civil servant across administrations. I love that common purpose, that higher calling. The things that I've been able to do on behalf of the U.S. government are incredible. It really was a privilege. Amazing things that people said never could be done — for women and girls, and the most marginalized communities and invisible issues — can be done. And we did them.

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Cailin Crockett served as Director of Military Personnel and Readiness on the National Security Council and Senior Advisor for the White House Gender Policy Council, 2021–2024.

Andrea K. Freeman served as Director of Fragility and Atrocity Response on the National Security Council, 2021–2023.

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

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