

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

U.S. State Department Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues

Kat Fotovat¹, Rachel Wein², Varina Winder³ and Mona Lena Krook⁴ 

¹Peace Pays, Washington, DC, USA; ²WPS Collective, Washington, DC, USA; ³Arch Collaborative, Washington, DC, USA and ⁴Department of Political Science, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

Corresponding author: Mona Lena Krook; Email: m.l.krook@rutgers.edu

(Received 18 April 2026; revised 18 April 2026; accepted 20 April 2026)

The Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues (S/GWI or GWI) at the United States Department of State was established in 2009 when Hillary Clinton served as U.S. Secretary of State during the administration of Barack Obama. S/GWI's mandate was to promote the rights and empowerment of women and girls through U.S. foreign policy. During the administration of Joe Biden, Kat Fotovat (KF) served as Senior Bureau Official and, for two years, as Acting Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues. Rachel Wein (RW) was the Women, Peace, and Security Advisor, and Varina Winder (VW) served as Senior Advisor and Chief of Staff. In 2025, the Donald Trump administration eliminated S/GWI as well as the Ambassadorship. This is an edited and compiled version of three interviews that took place with Mona Lena Krook (MLK) via Zoom on January 7, 2026; January 14, 2026; and January 30, 2026.

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

KF: I started my career at the State Department. I was in the office to monitor and combat trafficking in persons. I had finished law school, and I had my own trafficking in persons organization in the Republic of Moldova. They recruited me when John Ashcroft did a conference around trafficking in persons and national security and had asked my organization to come in. Randomly, somebody said: Does anybody speak Romanian? Can you translate between the Moldovans and Israelis? And I was like: I can. We had a whole conversation about trafficking in bodily organs. It wasn't trafficking of persons. I was introduced to the [Trafficking

in Persons] Office through that, and they were like: You're really useful. And I'm like: I am really useful.

I got brought into the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Office, where I was their Global Grants Officer. There weren't many people working on trafficking in persons, with a specific focus on gender issues. I was there for about eight years. Beyond being their grants officer, I was covering several programming portfolios. I was really focused on small grants to localized organizations. I had been a Peace Corps volunteer in Moldova, where I started training these local organizations on capacity building and things of that nature. I was working with one organization, partnering with UNICEF (the United Nations Children's Fund), teaching democracy programming inside schools in Moldova.

Enough of the girls that I had been working with went missing, so this is how I got involved in trafficking in person. I was like: Where would they go? This is back in 2000. They kept telling me in Romanian: *Avendut*. I was like: What? They were sold? What's happening here? Trafficking in persons wasn't really something that was talked about. I mean, obviously, slavery and forced labor and things like that have been happening for centuries. But it wasn't something that we focused on, so I went up to the U.S. Embassy and I asked them what is happening.

They put me in touch with the ABA (American Bar Association) Central Eastern European Law Initiative and this organization called La Strata. They were like: This is what's happening. They're trafficking these girls. I ended up starting this organization that worked with orphanages and schools in Moldova to teach them. IREX (the International Research and Exchanges Board) funded our organization. We were doing training in schools — teaching [students] how to use computers and putting in information on if they had ever been approached by a trafficker. That's how I got involved in trafficking issues. It obviously predominantly focused on girls. A lot of the girls coming out of the orphanages were specifically being targeted for sex trafficking purposes.

In the Trafficking in Persons Office, my organizational development skills really focused on local organizations. I had led a local organization, so I knew the unbelievably horrific regulations that the U.S. government had and how difficult that was, especially if English wasn't your first language. [I helped] translate that into organizational information that small organizations could actually understand. USAID (the United States Agency for International Development) then recruited me to come in and start the first iteration of how to get things to local organizations through small community development grants.

I was at USAID for about a year, at which point the [State Department] Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor (DRL) was also trying to figure out how do they also do more localized programming, so I went back to the State Department as the deputy director for global programming. We launched a very large initiative around emergency funding. One of the issues that had come up from the embassies was [a need for] flexible funding available for emergency purposes. Something horrific would happen in a particular country, and the embassies would say: We need funding right now to help this. India is a good example. There was this acid attack, and nobody's able to help this woman who just was attacked.

Based on what I had done at the TIP office, we started a very large emergency fund program. I think we ended up with ten different emergency funds specifically at DRL to be able to provide funding within 48 hours for anything from legal support to medical support to relocation and security. Some of it was for organizations and some of it was for specific people. The emergency funds I worked on for two decades saved thousands of people. There are several Nobel Prize winners that have publicly said: I am here because of this emergency fund. Nadia Murad got up on stage at the Kennedy Center and said: This emergency fund saved my life. To me, that was one of our biggest accomplishments. We were able to save these changemakers who were able to continue their work on gender and human rights, because we were able to give them even small amounts of funding to save their lives.

Believe it or not, the Trump administration, in the first round, had given our office more money than it had ever gotten. Going into the Biden administration, we said: We got a lot done here on this particular issue. What I want from you now is to double the amount of foreign assistance focused on gender. Having someone like Jen Klein and Rachel Vogelstein, who both had worked in my office before they went into the White House, helped. The amount of funding that was specific to gender in the overall foreign assistance budget was about 4%. It was nothing. So we were like: Hey, why don't you do something crazy and make it 8%?

Coming from the democracy world, I was like: How are we having democracy funding and it's not being equally distributed amongst men and women? How is this not even already a requirement? Because that's not democracy. We had those discussions, and basically the agreement was we would double the amount of foreign assistance going towards gender. It's still nothing, but at the same time, how do we make sure to leverage that? The funding was previously \$1.2 billion, which sounds like a lot of money, but it's not in the broader scope. We said \$1.2 billion, let's double that, and it became \$2.4 billion.

VW: I was the former Chief of Staff for the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues. It was an office at the U.S. Department of State, which has since been abolished and decimated with all staff members fired. I came to that role in early 2021 as a Schedule C, or as a political appointee, but I also served in that office as a civil servant from September of 2011 until May 2017, when I resigned. I have occupied a number of roles in the U.S. State Department, all as a staff member of S/GWI, as we call it, or GWI. I was hired to be their media person right out of graduate school. I then became their Latin America hand, then their UN (United Nations) hand, and then by the time I left in 2017, I was our UN/multilateral person, our gender-based violence person, and our health person.

Between 2013 and 2015, the thing that I was proud of was leading the U.S. government process, not the UN process, that eventually led to SDG 5 (Sustainable Development Goal 5), the goal on global gender equality. One of the things that I did — and I can't believe I had the chutzpah to do this as a 30-something-year-old — was figure out who the fifteen or so people were across the U.S. government who might care about this and get them to a common position on: This is what the U.S. government is going to advocate for. We were the first country to step out and say: Yes, we need to have a dedicated goal on

gender equality, and this is what the framework should look like. We were able to set the stage for what the negotiations ended up shaping. And so, if I do nothing else in my life, I know that I did that.

For a while, it seemed like that would hold. All through the 2017 to 2021 period, where we had these absolute attacks on everything, we always had the SDGs to come back and say: No, these are universal. These are not development goals. These are universal goals. And the U.S. signed up for those. I was a civil servant, and I had been planning on staying when the [2016] election happened. I was devastated, and I wanted to immediately resign. Then I thought about it. If people like me resign — I'd been there six years at that point — I know enough to hopefully explain to people that are coming in why we do the things that we do. Maybe even slow roll the bad things. I'm going to stay, and at the very least, if I do nothing else, I'll occupy a seat that would otherwise be occupied by somebody with more nefarious goals. I said [to myself] the only exceptions are these, and I quite literally wrote down three red lines in January 2017, right before the new administration took hold. I said, if [Trump] crosses any of these three red lines, I'll leave. One of them was: I will not work with an SPLC-designated (Southern Poverty Law Center-designated) hate group. That happened in March, so I was out. I made the decision to leave in March [2017].

GWII is funded, or was funded, I should say, along two lines. We traditionally have had \$10 million in what's called ESF (Economic Support Fund) funding. This is funding for grants and programs that we oversee. \$10 million — I looked this up — the Pentagon spends \$10 million in about four minutes. This is what we had to support all women's rights organizations globally for the year. \$10 million sounds like a lot of money, but it is not even a speck of dust when you think about full government spending. The second pot of money that we have is our operations money. This is the money that goes to pay for our travel, our staff salaries, etc.

Trump 1 threatened to defund the ESF funding, the grants, and the programs. There was enough of a scuffle about it and Congressional Republicans, at the time, had enough buy-in and said: We still think it's important to work on women. Eventually, the line was written in that we would maintain this funding. Congress often works by basically just passing whatever they passed before. In order to have taken out our funding, they would have had to basically make changes that would have then prevented them from passing [the budget]. They were like: We're not going to slow this whole process down just to defund the Women's Issues Office. This was back when Congress was really exercising its Article 1 authority, which is that they are the holders of the purse strings, not the executive.

There was a moment when we got more operational funding, and that was huge. When I started in 2011, which was two or even three years into the Office being a real thing, we were a staff of maybe eleven or twelve people trying to cover half the global population. By the time that everybody on my team was fired, we were 67. [Senator] Jeanne Shaheen's staff helped to steadily increase our operations spending. There was a real risk at this time last year that we were going to lose our operations budget line, which was going to be devastating. We were operating at about \$15 million.

RW: I was a Women, Peace, and Security Advisor in the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the State Department. I was on the policy team and worked very closely with our program side. While I was there, we had a lot of policy-intensive documents that we were coordinating with the White House and the interagency on. The 2023 Women, Peace, and Security Strategy and National Action Plan were drafted. I think that was a big accomplishment from the time I was there. Two years later, we released the implementation plan for the State Department that I led and that was released on like January 3, 2025. It was a real punch in the gut seeing that come out and not being implemented or read extensively.

In my role, I also worked very closely with our regional advisor for the Near East Affairs Bureau. I had the opportunity to coordinate with posts in the Middle East. I went to Jordan for a couple of meetings and a longer symposium. I also went to Saudi Arabia to connect with our post in Riyadh and Jeddah on a program we were coordinating with the Saudi government related to women's empowerment. It was an interesting portfolio to have at this time in history.

MLK: What was your background going into the role at S/GWI?

KF: I was born in Iran. I came to the United States when I was about four, right before the revolution started. I was always very conscientious of the fact that I would probably be one of those people who would have been killed or locked up at this point. I'm very much a feminist. Back in 2000, before I joined Peace Corps, I was in Iran working with UNHCR [the UN Refugee Agency] and doing all these community development programs. My aunt worked for UNITAR (the UN Institute for Training and Research) in Iran. She was like: Why don't you come with me and volunteer? I worked with UNHCR for about six months. I was meeting with a lot of Afghan refugees, and I was like: Who the hell would want to come to Iran? This is awful for women. Why would any woman come here?

This was before 9-11. It sounds crazy that people wouldn't know what was going on in Afghanistan, especially someone like me, but I didn't know. I was like: I'm going to go back and tell my government about what's happening here, because they're going to be really upset when they know about [the treatment of women by] the Taliban. I ended up doing income-generating programs for Afghan refugees. My heart became very much invested in Afghan women and the horrible plight that they were facing. I didn't think anything could be worse than Iran. I was hearing about these awful stories. I was like: Oh, it is better here. That's what got me involved.

I had started [my undergraduate degree] as a cellular molecular biologist. It was horrible. There were no women in any of my classes. I had done AmeriCorps and everybody kept saying: You should probably go into law. I was very much about let me tell you my rights, and let's fight for communities to be able to advocate for themselves. All that is to say that I ended up going into sociology. My minor was women's studies. From there, I went into the Peace Corps.

VW: Not in gender studies. I went to Georgetown University. I studied English, and I studied Spanish. I had no idea what I wanted to do with my life. I've always cared about gender equality. I grew up in France, which is now a much more

progressive country than we are. We came to the U.S. when I was in fourth grade. I remember so clearly walking out on my very first day of fourth grade recess. Obviously, I had no friends. I knew nobody. Nobody thought that I spoke English. They thought I spoke French, because my mom has an accent, and I was too shy to correct anybody.

We walk out to recess, and I'm looking around for the girls' corner, because that's what we had in France. We had a playground, and there was a girls' corner, and that was where the girls were allowed to play. There were just jump ropes there, and so I was a very good jump roper. I walked out onto the new, American playground, and I was looking for the jump rope. There was nothing. I looked around this vast, expansive playground. The girls were playing soccer, and they were doing the monkey bars, and I just had this — I will never forget it — this moment of like: What else have I not asked for in my life that I didn't even know I could ask for?

That really animated me my entire middle school, high school, college, grad school. Everywhere I've gone, I've always been like: Okay, what else can I ask for on behalf of women and girls? In college, I ran our pro-choice groups, and when I graduated from college, I really thought that I wanted to work for Planned Parenthood or NARAL (the National Association for the Repeal of Abortion Laws) or NOW (the National Organization for Women). I tried really hard to break into those spaces. The one time I got an interview, I believe it was with NARAL, they were going to pay me something like \$18,000 or \$19,000, and no benefits. I was like: I'm a really lucky college student. I don't have student loans at this point, but I can't live on this.

I worked for a law firm. That was awful. I worked on [Capitol] Hill for my member of Congress. That was slightly better, but he retired four months in, and he left, and I was like: Now I'm out of a job again. Then I spent two years lobbying for a child welfare nonprofit, basically lobbying on behalf of foster care kids. My through line, looking back, was always about advocating or working on policies that impact women the most — even if I don't think that I was able to articulate it in that way then.

Then when I went to grad school, it was very focused on — I'm going to take out all this money, I'm going to make this big bet — so when I come out, I'm going to swing hard. I want to work on gender and this is what I'm going to do. I went to the [Harvard] Kennedy School in Boston. They have a Women and Public Policy Program, which changed the trajectory of my career just by showing me and telling me that they believed in me. They funded my summers. One summer, I worked at Planned Parenthood. Another summer, I worked at Catalyst, the organization in New York that does corporate board placement.

My final year at Kennedy, I applied for and got the PMF, the Presidential Management Fellow Program, which is the federal government's way of the putting a gold star on your resume and helping you get around the USAJOBS portal, which is terrible. With that, I basically took a big, long scan at the U.S. government and tried to identify those offices that were working on women's rights or women's issues or anything. I looked at [the Department of] Labor, with the Women's Bureau, but I'm not a statistician. I looked at HHS (Health and Human Services). I looked at DOJ (Department of Justice). I looked at

[the] State Department. When I looked at State, this was in 2011, S/GWI was two years old. It was dynamic. It was interesting. It covered all these issues that I wanted to work on, all of them. I literally knocked on the doors until I figured out who could let me in. That's how I got there.

RW: I did political science and history in college. I played field hockey, so I feel like I was vitalized by women's sports. Then working in DC, I worked at some non-profits and think tanks in the national security and foreign policy space. One of the think tanks I worked at, we hosted a big international conference. I worked very closely with the president of the organization to put together these panels for these conferences. I wasn't fully aware, and I didn't have the language or technical understanding yet, but I just remember being so pissed off chronically in that job about all the manels I was helping put together. White manels.

In every meeting, I listened to Ambassador Jacqui O'Neill [who was on the advisory board] advocate [for women]. One of these panels I remember vividly was called *Winning with Women*, and it was a side panel off on the margins, off the record. I just remember being like: I don't know what the right way to integrate women's voices is, but this isn't it. Just being, I think, in this space, and a critical thinker, I was like: Okay, I care a lot about this and it matters.

I started reading more feminist literature and policy pieces. In grad school, I got my MPP (Master of Public Policy) at GW (George Washington University). My feminist "a-ha" moment happened when I took a global gender policy class with Shirley Graham at the Elliott School. She brought in some amazing guest speakers who spoke about their work implementing WPS and other gender-related policies, and I was sold. I knew I wanted to work on WPS at the State Department.

I worked in many different offices at State. The State Department is pale, male, Yale — old bureaucracy in the way that it's organized. The mentality of performance evaluations and foreign service officers. It's just so patriarchal. It hurts. I set my sights on GWI, and after lots of shameless cold calls and coffee chats, a position opened up on the WPS (Women, Peace, and Security) policy team, and I found myself in my dream job. Having the opportunity to be in a very feminist space — not just feminist, but a majority of women, doing foreign policy inside this institution felt good. Like we were making progress. And then to see it so quickly dismantled and marginalized feels equally disempowering. Devastating.

MLK: In your view, what were the main accomplishments while you were at S/GWI?

KF: Melanne [Verveer] and Cathy Russell [previous Ambassadors-at-Large for Global Women's Issues] had tried multiple time to bring me into the Office of Global Women's Issues. I was like: Don't you think I'm better placed in DRL because I'm your advocate here? I finally accepted a week before the 2016 election. They were like: We'd love it if you came and led our programs. Please come be the director of programming for GWI. I was like: Well, who wouldn't want to lead Office of Global Women's Issues programming under the Hillary Clinton administration? Think of all the great things I can do now.

I started the week after the 2016 election. I remember Tom Malinowski, Assistant Secretary at the time in DRL, grabbed me in the hallway and was like:

Don't go! They're going to end the office. They're going to do all these horrible things. I was like: Tom, I'm a bureaucrat's bureaucrat. I wrote many of the regulations that the State Department operated under. I knew this stuff inside out. Nobody knew this better than me, so they might need me now more than ever.

I go into the Office of Global Women's Issues. I ended up having to be Acting [Ambassador-at-Large] multiple times, because I was the highest-ranking civil servant. I was acting ambassador under the first Trump administration. Under the Biden administration, I was acting ambassador for three years, because it took so long to get Geeta [Rao Gupta] confirmed. I was holding the role until she finally got in, but it was also a good opportunity. I knew budgets like the back of my hand. I knew regulations. I knew processes. I knew where all the dead bodies were. I knew all the admin people, because I helped write all the budgets and helped do all the things. I knew everybody that you needed to know to get things done.

When the Biden administration walked in, they knew who they were dealing with, so I could get the gender budget doubled. We got quite a bit done in terms of being able to bring the interagency together to work on different aspects of the gender strategy. We had quite a few initiatives under there. It was really helpful to have champions in the White House that would push those things forward. We pushed women, peace, and security quite a bit. We partnered a lot with our WPS caucus, the Women, Peace and Security Caucus, so Representative [Lois] Frankel, Representative [Jen] Kiggans.

To be completely honest with you, I asked the Biden administration to — and this is actually still true to this day — please do not revoke the executive orders on gender that the Trump administration put in on women's economic empowerment and on WPS. If they come back, I want to be able to say: This is still in effect. They were like: Kat, are you crazy? And I was like: [These executive orders are] not coming back. I survived the last administration, and I do not have as much faith that this could happen again.

I was very paranoid. I was like: I'm a civil servant. I serve the American people, regardless of the political party, regardless of what's happening. We've built up a lot, actually. What happened in the Obama administration set the stage for what happened under the first Trump administration and then what happened in the Biden administration. All of these things should build upon each other. Please don't revoke it. Please let it stand. And they did. Both the executive orders signed under Trump 1 are still active.

We had a lot of hope that things wouldn't go badly under the new Trump administration. He signed the Women, Peace, and Security Act. We had the Women's Economic Empowerment Act. We had all these executive orders that still stood. The Biden administration also continued to fund the We-Fi (Women Entrepreneurs Finance Initiative). That was the big project that we had under Ivanka Trump. It existed into the new Trump administration. I think it still is alive. It focused on women's entrepreneurship.

One of the things that we did not address under Trump 1 on women's economic empowerment was gender-based violence. They didn't say don't do it — just let's not talk about it. They didn't prohibit us from working on it, but

they definitely didn't focus on it. That was something we did pull back in when the Biden administration came in. So, again, lots of hope going into this one. We had set it up so that if this happened, we were in a really good position. Alas, that did not happen!

VW: It depends on when you're asking. Under [Hillary] Clinton, it was getting the office established. It was elevating for the first time into the consciousness the idea that women were important foreign policy thought leaders and implementers. Getting the small grants program started under Clinton was really unique. It was Melanne's [Verveer] doing, or Anita Botti, who was Melanne's Chief of Staff. She's probably the one who saw that we couldn't just be a policy office. We needed to have some money to bring to the fight if we wanted embassies to pay attention to us – and more broadly, women's rights. Embassies could apply for money from us to do these projects, and that's how we could think about influencing larger policies.

Not all the embassies liked it. Nobody likes to manage a \$25,000 grant. Except for those young, hungry program officers. The program evolved over time. In one of its early iterations, it was mostly community-led grant-making with the embassy imprimatur. The embassies were saying things to us like: We're hearing from this community of activists that the domestic violence shelter is so well known that nobody feels like they can go there because they know that their husband or partner will just show up and drag them home. We need to build a new infrastructure. We need also money for a small campaign so that we can tell people: Don't go here. Go here.

Under [John] Kerry, I would argue that the SDGs and Global Goal 5 were a huge win. Looking back, a lot of that time feels now tainted by the level of destruction that happened after that under Trump 1. I think just surviving was probably a goal. The big program to come out of [the Trump years] was WGDP, the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative. That was essentially a fund that Ivanka Trump started. She wanted to be able to take money in from people like the Saudis and then invest that into women entrepreneurs.

The irony in all of this, of course, is that we came back in 2020 and we looked at this and were like: Oh my god, this is so poorly designed. People don't fall out of Trump Tower and land multi-million-dollar handbag deals. What a lot of these women need is just money to ensure consistent supply of flour so they can make arepas, right? We're not building Louboutin. We're building sustainability for women. We took that fund, which had \$50 million at the time — you should ask Kat [Fotovat] how she did this — and Kat was able to make that into \$100 million. We then turned this into this larger initiative. Of course, now I would give anything for Ivanka Trump to care about women, because, of course, that \$100 million is now gone.

Under Biden, we executed three major global strategies: one on gender-based violence, one on economic security, and one on women, peace, and security. We elevated for the very first time the idea that online violence was a real form of violence. At the time that we were forced out of government, we were testing what I thought was a really innovative rapid response fund for people who are suffering from [online violence]. People who could just use \$5,000 to move into a

hotel, get their data off the dark web, and keep their kids safe for a period while this danger spiked. I was really proud of that.

For the first time ever, we secured \$500,000 to give to UNICEF/UNFPA (the UN Population Fund) child marriage program. That was the first time that the U.S. had ever explicitly invested and put money where our mouth is on child marriage. As I'm sure you know, the U.S. doesn't have any federal law on child marriage. It's always been really tricky for us to publicly talk about child marriage, but that was money that our gender-based violence team oversaw. We had champions in the White House who could help us get things done. We were a big team. We were finally, I think, the right size. We had a budget that allowed us to accomplish the things that we wanted to do.

We were making real progress on the WPS side in terms of not just getting the strategy done, or getting the grants out, but — for example — in bringing Sudanese women to the peace negotiation table. It was changing the discourse. The Gambia was set to overturn their ban on FGM (female genital mutilation), which had been passed in 2015. We got word of this, and we led this whole group of like-minded organizations and other countries to quietly support the women activists who were getting drowned out online and stopped the ban from being overturned. Then it all came to a screeching, devastating halt and reversal.

The State Department operates entirely around something called the Foreign Affairs Manual. This is sort of like how you do your job for anybody who works at the State Department, but especially how you do your job as a Foreign Service Officer (FSO). We had a whole chapter on gender as part of your job. It was also a monumental [achievement]. [My colleague Amanda Van Dort] worked for basically three years to get that section added. The last time we checked, it's still there. So, hopefully, if we ever come back, we're not going to have to go through that whole rigmarole again.

RW: The 2017 [WPS] Act was the first comprehensive piece of legislation on WPS in the world. That was a big deal. It was signed by Trump. I think that he didn't know what he was signing, but whatever, he signed it. Before that, President Obama signed an executive order requiring national action plans. Before the Act, there were two national action plans in 2011 and 2016. The law mandated a whole-of-government approach, and named [the] State [Department], USAID, DHS (the Department of Homeland Security), and DOD (the Department of Defense) to be the four implementing departments and agencies. The strategy outlines broad policy efforts. The 2019 strategy included four lines of effort: participation, protection, integration, and institutionalization and partnerships. The 2023 strategy added relief, response, and recovery to mirror the global agenda and UN Security Council Resolution 1325.

The State Department played the role of liaison, or coordinator, with the National Security Council. At that time, the Gender Policy Council would set up weekly calls with the interagency to talk through different priorities, work through issues we were having with the draft, and then filter some of those thoughts and ideas or concerns or roadblocks up to the Gender Policy Council. Lots of back and forth and editing. Lots of debates on language, like whether we say women in all their diversity, or just women and girls, or use of the term gender, even in the Biden administration.

There were a lot of language debates — I'm going to be frank, I have nothing to lose — that involved too much self-censoring, in a way that just slowed things down to a crawl. In my time in GWI, we spent way more time litigating language in these policy documents than we really should have. We should have been able to devote way more time to implementing this important policy and thinking through a more resilient structure or a way to better embed some of these functions outside of government or in a less centralized fashion.

Rollback on gender and human rights is not new. We've been watching this trend for several years now. From my perspective, and in hindsight, I wish we could have spent more time grappling with that and thinking through ways to Trump-proof or anti-rights-proof this agenda. Ultimately, I don't think much would have been different, given how they slashed so much, but I think building the resilience of some civil society groups, or some training or more knowledge sharing, so that it just wasn't completely decimated, would have been a better use of time.

Coordinating within the State Department was the hardest part of my job, especially on these giant policy documents with hundreds and hundreds of different people who want and need to weigh in. GWI had an incredibly broad mandate. When you say women and girls in all their diversity, I think there were differing opinions on what that meant and included. For instance, my colleagues in DRL, Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, who I agreed with, personally, would push for much more inclusive language. And then when it would get up to the higher levels of the building, and a lot of it would be stricken for fear of ruffling feathers outside of the building.

I do think there's a bit of a divide in our community, especially on the government side, on LGBTQI+ and inclusivity, which I think is just a real shame. I think there was a tension at the working level of people pushing for language that ultimately reflects where we should be and where we should be going, that ultimately got taken out of these policy documents because of some hesitation, just being really risk-averse.

We now know it probably didn't matter anyway, but I think it would have meant a lot to the movement at large to see certain language in U.S. government documents. Talking to other offices and bureaus made me see how marginalized [gender equality] is. To remind people that [the WPS Act] is a requirement from Congress and it still wasn't prioritized or integrated into bureaus' and offices' annual planning. It was very much an afterthought.

My team also coordinated on the Women, Peace, and Security centers of excellence, which was a new initiative in 2023 or 2024. We started with the Philippines, Colombia, and Kosovo. There was funding involved. We helped establish the framework, but the intention was that these were all host government run and owned. They were also meant to be regional hubs of knowledge, information, and expertise. These were all partners that expressed an interest in participating, like leaders within [the] WPS [field] and influential bilateral partners.

When I joined, the U.S. was the UN Focal Points Network for WPS co-chair with Romania, so that was an enormous lift. We hosted a week-long summit in June of 2023, where all of the global, WPS focal points came to Washington for meetings

and trainings and conversations around WPS and implementation. That was a huge accomplishment. UN Women is the secretariat, so it's all international partners. Lots of civil society are also involved where there aren't government focal points. Most of them are ambassadors. Kat Fotovat was ours. It's that level of WPS champion.

MLK: What happened in January 2025?

KF: I used to work with Pete Morocco, who was the person that literally destroyed USAID, at CSO (the Conflict Stabilization Operations Bureau). When they were taking apart USAID, I was like: I'm walking in there. I went to his office and plopped right in his chair, and I was like: Nobody wants to reform USAID more than me. I was there. I understand. But people will die. You have to do this logically. You have to do this in a structured way that makes sense and is efficient and effective. Otherwise, you might cost the U.S. taxpayers money, as opposed to helping them. I laid it all out for him. We had a rapport at one point, especially around women, peace, and security. He was a huge women, peace, and security champion when I was in CSO, believe it or not. There was a lot of back and forth around that.

I also went into the West Wing. They invited me into the West Wing to talk about women's economic empowerment and gender issues. I had written May Mailman, who was the person in the West Wing that worked directly for Stephen Miller. They asked me to come in and talk to her to see what we were going to be able to work on. It was all very domestic-focused, but it was very informational for me to [grasp] this is where things are going. It ultimately didn't help the office, or help gender issues, or any of those things. I requested to meet with her after they had put out that executive order, the anti-trans executive order. They called it the Protecting Women Executive Order.

The problem around it was everybody in the State Department was reading that as you couldn't even say the word — literally, I'm not kidding you — you couldn't even say the word "women." We are actual people, right? What are you talking about? This is the dumbest thing I've ever heard. So I went there and said: You wrote this executive order. Is this what your intention was? Because this is what is happening. That gave me the ability to go back and say: I've met with the White House. They did not mean, by any stretch of the imagination, to say we're not allowed to talk about women. The whole point of throwing transgender people under the bus was to protect women. That was the crux of that executive order. At least I could go in with some authority and say: I've had this meeting with Stephen Miller's team. They said: No, they're not saying that we're not allowed to talk about women. We should be protecting them.

What's interesting is how everybody was petrified. Everything was super confusing. Nothing was clear. They were supposed to put out guidance based upon executive orders. They didn't do that for the gender one. That was one of the reasons I was pushing to have these meetings with the White House. During Trump 1, I had a connection to Ivanka. Having her champion all this was very, very helpful. When I went in and was like: I still have her program going. I still have these executive orders. I haven't ended any of it. I was told: She's out of this. Nothing that Trump 1 did is a part of this anymore. It doesn't matter. That was

the messaging I got at that point. I was like: Oh, great, I killed myself to keep all these things moving, and it doesn't matter.

We really pushed for the International Women of Courage Awards to continue, and I was getting block, block, block, block, block, block, block, block. I also got mansplained as to what International Women's Day was. To say it was insanity is the undershoot of the century. I did have communications, I won't say how, with Melania [Trump's] team. She had written in her book that the International Women of Courage Awards was one of the best things that she had done during her time as First Lady. I was happy to continue that effort.

Every entity within the State Department didn't seem to think that this was something we wanted to do, but I got an email from Melania's team saying: She can't wait to do this. When is it? Now I have a Trump. I was like: The First Lady is waiting to find out when you're going to approve this. So we ended up having the ceremony. My main goal in that was to reiterate to everyone that you're not only allowed to say "women." You're also allowed to celebrate women and support them. Then have the Secretary of State [Marco Rubio] talk about the Women, Peace, and Security Act that he helped sponsor.

We were really, really pushing that. Everybody kept telling me: Keep your head down and shut up. At highest levels, the lowest levels, everybody wanted me to shut up. I was like: That's not in my DNA. Just not how I operate. I had conversations with people on the outside. One person in particular who's quite prominent, and kind of a hero of mine was like: Keep doing as much good as you can for as long as you can. I was like: They're going to figure me out in a minute. I am at a lot of risk, and everybody keeps telling me to shut up, and I just honestly cannot. I think in these situations, people were unbelievably scared.

I had gone to the Commission on the Status of Women [meetings in New York in March 2025]. At one point, I was told by someone from another country — one that is not known for supporting women's issues — that the United States government was very bad on women's issues. I was delivering talking points and they were looking at me — as they worked with me for two decades — and were literally like: What are you saying? I was delivering the points that I was told to deliver. Everybody has their line and that week at the Commission on the Status of Women [CSW], I [realized]: I can't do this. I can't. I'm no longer doing good for women at this point. I didn't feel like I was being helpful. I was always willing to participate and stay wherever I thought I could be useful and keep things moving in a positive direction and be helpful to the American people and to our national security. I didn't feel like I was doing that anymore for various reasons.

The Saudis were the chairs of CSW. For five years, people were dreading the Saudi Arabian government being the chairs. But they were amazing. They were basically using my talking points — my normal talking points, very inclusive, very supportive. They had changed a lot of their laws and regulations to be much more supportive of women entrepreneurs, and they used the word "gender-inclusive." It was insane. We had flipped. And I was like: I'm not doing this. I'm good now. I had very frank conversations with a lot of people and was very clear about how things had absolutely changed. You need to be aware of this. I was delivering talking points that I was supposed to deliver, whether or not I agree

with them — I was a bureaucrat and that's what I did. But I was also quite frank with people about what's coming and what they needed to know.

For me, that CSW week was very determinative. I took early retirement after I got back from that. Interestingly, at that point there were all these rumors around [the Trump administration] cutting the human rights apparatuses. I didn't know for sure that they were going to cut our office, because I had had discussions with Stephen Miller's team. Everything was very anti-DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion), but I didn't know what that meant. DRL has legislation, the TIP office had legislation, but they still annihilated huge portions of both DRL and the TIP office. They got rid of anything that seemed superfluous to them that didn't need to happen, trying to get the regional bureaus to take over.

It was interesting, because what they were doing was going back to the way the State Department operated thirty years ago, which is dumb. Part of the reason a lot of these entities got built up was because it wasn't working the other way. There was fraud. They were working in countries that they didn't have expertise to work with. [The Trump administration] got rid of all [those changes] in order to create this slimmed-down version of the State Department.

I have so many heads of state that I still am in touch with. I went to the [United Nations] General Assembly this year, just as my own organization. People kept referring to me as if I was the U.S. representative, because there was literally nobody from the U.S. representing us at, for example, the Women, Peace and Security Focal Points Network. I was like: I'm not the U.S. It was fascinating to have that kind of vacuum there. The Canadians were saying things like: We all need to acknowledge that things have absolutely changed. The global order is different now. It was interesting seeing how people were reacting to things and what was happening as a result.

The national security aspect of what's been lost is huge. I don't know if the average American understands. I have twenty years of experience. I've built trusted relationships with people all over the world. I've helped them. I've represented the U.S. government in a way that people trusted and would help us. They would tell us when things would go wrong. We got information from a national security perspective that was fundamentally important. All of that's gone. You've lost that credibility. I don't know if the average American realizes how abolishing these human rights entities hurts our credibility. The number of women who oppose violent extremist organizations, whether it be the Taliban or ISIS or Hamas, it's in their best interest to partner with entities like the United States government.

The one thing that AI (artificial intelligence) can't take over is trust. They cannot build trusted relationships. It will never be able to replace people like me. My entire office has built relationships all over the world, and it's horrific to see just how much of our credibility and trust is gone now. Why would any of these women put themselves on the line anymore to give us information or to protect our interests? They don't necessarily think that our interests and their interests align anymore. My heart breaks for this country, to be honest with you.

VW: The Day 1 executive orders on gender ideology were really a shock, because it was like: What even is this? The term gender ideology was never defined. We're

like: Okay, well, we don't do gender ideology. Nothing that we've ever done in our entire universe of anything is about trying to convince people to be trans or not trans. We were not naive to the fact that that's obviously not what they're aiming for, right? For them, gender ideology is anything that disagrees with the concept that women are to be quiet and subservient, in the home and not at work, versus what we were doing in a long-time bipartisan way.

Then the DEI executive order came out. I think that was even the same day. That one was the one that made clear that promoting women's rights is what they were coming for. And that's what our office is about. Kat [Fotovat] was very smart in terms of saying: Okay, who are the politicals I need to convince here that this office is worth saving, and if you destroy the office, it will be bad for Trump's legacy and all of that. She really killed herself for a couple of months. She got [Secretary of State Marco] Rubio to host the International Women of Courage Awards, where he talked all about how important women's rights were to the State Department. Obviously, we wrote that, he didn't write that, but getting your principal on the record saying something is one of the most powerful ways you can get the rest of the building to do something. That felt like such a win. That was April.

Then the rumblings started about this red sheet with the offices that were redlined and going to be eliminated — whether they were women's rights, or human rights, or criminal justice, whatever it might be. They got the notice that they were going to get RIF'd [reduction in force] and then had like a month or two to basically close up shop. By July 1, they were all out. I was a political appointee, so I was fired as of 6 pm on January 17. I knew in November that my job was done. What I tried to do in those last remaining months that I had was lock down my staff as best as I could, get the money out the door, and put our nose to the grindstone in those last remaining months was that [Foreign Affairs Manual] chapter published.

RW: I wrote a *More to Her Story* piece on this. It was a traumatizing year. In November [2024], right after the election, my team was moved down to a first-floor office that was separate from everyone. But it was new and nice. We had our own space. In that time, we were expecting transition team representatives to come and request meetings with offices and bureaus, as had happened before, but no one ever did. That created a lot of angst and anxiety, not knowing. Our office leadership tried to anticipate [based on] what we had done before.

Each team updated our talking points based on what Trump and Rubio had said publicly about foreign policy to show how our work supported those priorities, which frankly, was the worst thing ever. The whole point of America First is so counter to the development of smart foreign policy — the point of the State Department to begin with and to women, peace, and security. It was a real mind scramble. I felt like my colleagues and I who were working on it were just making jokes about feeling like propagandists. In hindsight, I'm just like: Why did we do that? What could we have done differently? But we were just so eager to justify our existence and protect our life's work. We did what we thought was right.

I think a lot of veterans in my office probably have admitted to you that they thought GWI would be fine, given Trump signing the WPS Act, Ivanka's support of

the office and women's economic empowerment in the first administration, and Rubio being a co-sponsor of the WPS Act in 2017. I think a lot of people maybe had some false confidence that things were going to be okay. In February, I hosted the WPS Steering Committee, which consisted of WPS points of contact from around the Department. People were thirsty for information and guidance that we could not provide. Shortly thereafter, I was told to stop hosting those meetings.

I feel like we really didn't do a lot for a couple of months. It was so bad. We tried to find creative ways to keep up morale in our hidden basement office, because it was so demoralizing to have to come in every single day and not have any work to do. We found ways to keep each other's spirits high, finding work where we could. We spent a ton of time putting together handover notes that we then disseminated to our regional bureau contacts, kind of quietly. Knowing that this work would be decentralized, [it was about] just making sure that our colleagues would at least know where everything was and the status of things.

The International Women of Courage Awards happened on April 1. I think for our office, we were putting a lot of stock in that being what would save us. We got Secretary Rubio to speak, and then Melania [Trump] spoke. That's a whole different story. But I think a lot of people were like: This doesn't matter. We should be focused on policy.

Later in April, when the new org [organization] chart was released, our box was not on the org chart anymore. But there was no other information, we were literally in the dark from April until July, pretty much. We also found out that our acting SBO (Senior Bureau Official), Kat [Fotovat], was being replaced by a 26-year-old political [appointee] via department notice. [An SBO serves] in the absence of an ambassador or a political appointee being confirmed. She was a 26-year-old beauty queen. No gender experience, obviously.

There was a period of intense uncertainty. Starting in May, every Friday, we thought that that was going to be the day we would get the RIF notification. It didn't happen until July. It was super unceremonious. We got an email in the morning asking us to be out of the building by 5pm. It feels like a long time ago, my god. Any time that Rubio or others were on the Hill, the Women, Peace, and Security Caucus co-chairs, Lois Frankel and Jen Kiggans, asked about GWI and the reorganization and the implications for implementation. Rubio consistently said that this expertise would be reabsorbed by regional bureaus. People didn't know if we were going to get reassigned or what. Regional bureaus are very busy already, and they just don't have the expertise or the time to work on these issues effectively.

MLK: What have you been doing since then?

KF: I started my own NGO [non-governmental organization] with three other women, one of who. used to work with me in the Office of Global Women's Issues, focused on women and AI. I came at it as a problem that's an opportunity. There are a lot of inefficiencies in the foreign assistance world. I was interested in how to get back to being able to give funding to the people on the ground. Asking how to do this without the other entities around, the answer to me was very clearly AI. One of the things that has really popped out of the world I've been working in now is that AI really lacks empathy. Tech bros that have given it bad behavior, being fed hate and porn and all these other things.

The voices that are not being fed into AI are women's voices. That empathetic piece is missing. How do I make sure that women peace builders, especially, are able to get their voices heard? Some of them maybe use ChatGPT for little things, but they don't see how this thing is being utilized against them. We had a UN meeting with many of the women peacebuilders that I've been working with for years from Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, Kosovo, and the Gambia. We had all these women come together, and I had them talk to AI engineers. We had this group meeting, an initial thing to see: Am I crazy?

Fascinatingly enough, one of the AI engineer guys started crying. The Syrians were like: This technology is absolutely being utilized against us. We want to learn how to use it to protect ourselves. One of the AI engineers was like: We could create avatars of you, so it's not even your face speaking on behalf of these things. The woman from the Gambia who is fighting FGM, she was like: I am the only voice that's public, because people are so scared to be public about these things. It was about how we can make [AI] a tool for humanity.

One of the reasons I think the AI engineers were so open to hearing what I was saying was because one of the things that they've been grappling with is AI becoming so smart so fast. They're really worried about it turning against people. Seeing us as the problem. We've had a lot of high-level discussions with a lot of the LLMs (large language models) recently, and they're very open. They don't necessarily want to invest money or time, but they're like: If you have it, we'll take it. We'll feed it into the system.

We are training all these women practitioners and peace builders all over the world, and I've gotten some in-kind contributions from some companies to teach them how to utilize AI. We're doing assessments, giving them certifications. The other piece of this is to create a sustainability model for them in their country. One of the ways I've sold it to the AI guys has been: Don't you need more clients in different countries? You aren't including women. That's 50% of the population you're not even thinking about in terms of clientele. Making that business case has been really helpful.

VW: I think about my time in four buckets. They don't all get equal time. The primary bucket and where I spend most of my time is on building what is now called the Arch Collaborative. Our founding date was March of 2025. This is about how we ensure that the future doesn't negotiate away gender equality. What do we need to do to resist? What do we need to do to rebuild? We've gotten a small amount of funding to do that work. We're in talks with lots of other folks. People are hungry for new ideas, and they want people to stay in the sector, but they're not necessarily putting their money where their mouth is quite yet. Lots of iterations of a concept note, lots of different events.

With the Arch Collaborative, we spend a lot of time on the resist side. We're really focused on what we've called wedge issues that the anti-rights actors are using to divide us and to promote their agenda. We've identified pronatalism, online violence, and family values and how that translates to adolescent lives, as three places where really want to lean in. A lot of what we're doing, it's not measurable, which is really hard for raising money.

As diplomats, our superpower often is to serve as connective tissue between other actors. We did a briefing, a very quiet briefing, for all of the folks at UNICEF

who work on gender on what to expect, what this language means when the U.S. comes in with it. We know how to run this process, and we know what they're going to do. The resist bucket is about what are the opportunities where we can see where our previous experience can help you be much more effective in your job. Let's also talk about all the ways that they're breaking us into segments.

The second bucket is the independent consulting work that I've been able to pick up. I've had a couple of clients. The third bucket, which I was much better about in the early days with USAID's destruction and the destruction of my office, was personal organizing. I'm still talking to [people on Capitol] Hill quite a bit. I'm talking to reporters quite a bit. I would put this in this category of trying to ensure that all the work that we did didn't go to waste. I published a piece in *The Meteor* last summer, right after the destruction of my office.

The last piece was the piece that I thought I was going to spend most of my time on, the personal piece. I was going to go to the gym more. I was going to be a room parent. I was going to adopt a dog. I was going to learn how to arrange flowers. I was going to do five or six things that I never had had any time for that I really wanted to do. I've done some of it, but there is way too much other stuff to do much of it.

RW: I am working with Tazreen [Hussain], Hannah Proctor, and Kayla McGill and have founded the WPS Collective. We are essentially taking our network, experience, and understanding of women, peace, and security globally, helping to bridge the divide with domestic activists. In the U.S., the community is very robust, but it's also very siloed. We're trying to help apply some of the lessons learned, especially in authoritarian contexts, to what's happening now in the U.S., especially the U.S. government. [The idea is] to connect and bridge gaps, like talking to an activist in Portland, Maine, about what they're seeing, and the challenges they're facing, and then reaching out to Syrian activists – obviously, very different contexts but a lot of similar authoritarian tactics. How they can learn from each other and find solidarity with one another in this moment.

I also started a part-time job at Orange Theory Fitness, which has been great – helping to restore some [of my] faith in humanity. People are so nice after they work out. In November, I started a full-time job for Eagle Hill Consulting, where I am a Manager supporting a VA [Department of Veterans Affairs] project. I'll be working at a VA medical center in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, helping them with transitioning to a new electronic health record system.

I used to have so much trust — and I don't want to say reverence — but respect for the U.S. government and bureaucracy. I think that has eroded so much. Real change and real power can't be eliminated with changes in administration. Building grassroots movements and coalitions is so much more powerful, and where my passion is. Not a silver lining, because everything sucks, but I feel very — not good — but comfortable with the way that I'm contributing in this moment, as I can. I think Varina said this, that with the dissolution of GWI, the way that people are running in different directions and trying to find how they can help — it's like planting thousands of little seeds. Hopefully, something positive will bloom from this eventually.

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

KF: I have been asked to be a guest lecturer at a couple of college courses recently. A lot of them are foreign policy focused, and they're always like: How do we get to be like you? I'm like: Don't be like me. Learn AI. I fundamentally believe that AI is the next frontier. It's going to take over so much. It's going to push a lot of people both out of work. The problem is that nobody understands how to use it. You just have to know more than the next person. This is a moment when women can step into and be those bridges for how AI is utilized by companies and broader community-based efforts. Women really are well-positioned for this moment. I would advocate that everybody understand AI well enough to understand how it can be utilized for good. It's already here. You're not going to put this genie back in the bottle, for sure.

The organization that we started is called Peace Pays. The premise around it is to look from a financial perspective. Peace is profitable itself. It's got three components. One is an effort around early warning systems for when violence might be coming up. Gender-based violence is one of the first issues that comes up. Utilizing AI is a game changer in that field. Before, Google and others would tell us [at CSO] that [a surge of] bad language is promoting violence and getting people riled up. When I was doing the Internet Freedom portfolio [at CSO], we would say: Can you not monitor for this? Can you not tell us quicker? They would say: We can't. The translations are too difficult. Or we don't have the infrastructure to be able to do it. Now they do. AI is able to gather that information in an unbelievably fast way.

The second piece is training, capacity building — that preventative piece of training women on how to access [AI] and do that work. We're trying to do a lot of work with academic institutions. I'm calling it AI Core — the academic institutions and the AI engineers and bringing in women to have these conversations. Some corporations have given us quite a few in-kind people to be able to do the training. [With more in-kind support], I could have an AI Core that I can deploy to help women all over the world. That's my hope.

The third piece is the storytelling effort, the documentary piece. Training people how to tell their own stories. Before, working for the U.S. government, I didn't have to ask anybody for money. I would just be like: We have this much money. Do you want to partner with us? Now I'm out there saying: Can you fund this? It's a very interesting world of dealing with tech bros and all their money.

VW: I'm grappling with the answer to this, too. I don't think anybody has an answer, or we would be doing it. I've had two other conversations today with people who basically were like: I give up. I'm so tired. I don't think I can consume the news in the same way. I don't think I can show up in the same way. I have to protect my peace. On the one hand, yes. Rest is important, and essential if you're going to stay in the fight. But rest for rest's sake is not laudable, I think, in this moment. Rest so that somebody else can come in off the sidelines, great. But there's still a game to play. When good people give up, or assume that somehow the future is already written, that is when it's written. Us walking off the field is when it's written.

In terms of the broader strokes of my diagnosis, what the anti-rights community has done is conveniently marry opportunists, for lack of a better word. You've got your anti-women, your anti-LGBTQ, your anti-pluralists, your Islamophobes, you name it. Your anti-migrants and your anti-immigrants, your fundamentalist religious groups. They have married up with the people who are power hungry. In here, I would put your political authoritarians, your fossil fuel [lobby], and your tech bros. These disparate sets of actors that actually don't have that much in common have found the sort of 10% that they agree on, and that 10% happens to be to take away rights from women, who are the most democratically leaning and most democracy-protecting group that you can have. They all get what they want ideologically. They get more power to stay in office forever, like in Turkey and Hungary.

The way that they've been able to come together is they have out-networked us. They have a drumbeat of international and also national conferences and convenings that are fun, that are engaging, that happen every six months. They're constantly picking up new people, and they're solidifying and cementing the friendships and relationships between the people who, over the year, have ascended to power. There's this sort of built-in trust that they have. They've also out-organized us. The proliferation of anti-rights groups — how they've been set up and how they all feed into each other — is just incredible. I mean, there are over 1,200 anti-rights groups in the United States alone. That has exploded since 1994. You can see this in data from the SPLC.

They've out-funded us. The money is really hard to track. The best estimates that we have from Neil Datta at EPF (European Parliamentary Forum on Sexual and Reproductive Rights) and Matthew Hart at GPP (Global Philanthropy Project) are that it's at least six to one. It's probably, I would guess, more like a hundred to one. The money's so hard to track because a lot of it comes from church groups, and none of that has to be reported. Church groups don't fund progressive causes in the same way. On the LGBTQ front, you have a six-to-one mismatch on anti-LGBTQ versus pro-LGBTQ, and that was data from 2007 to 2018.

If you think about the explosion of wealth of these autocratic tech bros since then, it's hard to even imagine. It's not just the amount of money that they have. The way in which they fund is different, too. They fund individuals' ideas and institutions, and they give them money for the long haul. Whereas we fund projects and products and ask: What are you going to do with our money in 18 months? We want to know. Whereas the Koch brothers are cutting checks for multi-millions of dollars and being like: Talk to us in 30 years. In their wildest dreams, would they have destroyed USAID when they started this project in the 90s? I don't think so, but they got it!

Lastly, they've out-messed us. I'm sure you've seen the Media Matters thing, that's specific to the United States. But RT, Russia Today, is moving it all across Africa right now. This is true all over the world, that sort of red bubble that Media Matters put out is true all over the world, and so they've done all that.

We need to do all of those things, too. We need to get in gear in terms of the funding. The funders need to fund and think differently. Bigger. Countries and governments need to create an appetite for these kinds of networking convenings and conferences. That can be the UN, but it needs to be broader than that. We

have Women Deliver. That takes place every three years, and it is a bonanza of events. There's no networking.

The Reykjavik Global Forum is the best conference I've ever been to in my entire life. I've been twice, and in my dream world, we create a hundred Reykjavik global forums, tailored to different regions. [The Reykjavik Global Forum] is two and a half days of highly curated events and speakers. But mostly it is a highly curated audience of people who all have pretty close common cause. There are these beautiful benches where people can talk outside. At the very end, there's a social event, and because it's Iceland, you go to the spa. You're seeing people literally stripped down to their skivvies, and you have these really engaging conversations in the middle of this lagoon. The number of friends I've made in that lagoon that help me just stay in this work mentally is unspeakable. And that's what the right has done that we haven't done.

We need to fund differently and fund better. We need to network better. We need a real reckoning that needs to take place in nonprofit spaces, with the destruction of USAID and 90% of women's organizations potentially collapsing this year. We're going to need to figure out who the value-adds are and who aren't. Then we're going to need to figure out the gaps that haven't been filled and fund those. That's what the anti-rights folks did. And they did it without a gun to their head. Maybe that's a moment for hope that we have a gun to our head.

RW: So many ideas, so many thoughts. A lot of women in this space, people in this space, talk about their a-ha moment, the moment they looked through their gender glasses and never took them off. To the extent that gender people can help others find their gender glasses, I think that's so powerful. Just having people open their eyes to the oppressive systems that exist all around us. It is so important and mobilizing and inspiring. The more people are seeing these things, the more different ideas will come to the surface.

Seeing what some of these women leaders are doing in Minneapolis — and have been doing for years and decades — is really, really impressive. I think that's one thing: education and spreading the word, urging people to give a damn. At Orange Theory, some of my coworkers are in their early 20s, so I call them my new intergenerational friends. Finding ways to talk about this stuff in a way that resonates for them has been therapeutic and rewarding. These are usually people who [don't care] about current events, politics, news, but finding entry points and meeting people where they are is an important strategy.

I don't think anything is too small. We all have something to do and give. I've been complaining all week about my neighbors who aren't shoveling their sidewalk. This is such a public policy issue. People don't care about their neighbors enough to make sure they don't slip on ice when they're walking in front of their house. Those little things matter and symbolize so much about the way we are viewing this moment and viewing small acts of resistance. Nothing is too small. We've got to keep doing the work, even when it's hard and uncomfortable.

Resources

- Arch Collaborative, <https://www.linkedin.com/company/the-arch-collaborative/>
- Gupta, Geeta Rao, and Mona Lena Krook. 2026. "United States Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues." *Politics & Gender*: 1–6. doi: 10.1017/S1743923X26100634.
- Peace Pays, <https://www.peacepays.ai/>
- The White House. 2023. *U.S. Strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace, and Security*, <https://reliefweb.int/report/world/2023-women-peace-and-security-strategy-wps-and-national-action-plan>
- U.S. Congress. 2017. *Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017*, <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/senate-bill/1141/text>
- U.S. Department of State. 2025. *Implementation Plan for the U.S. Strategy and National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security*, <https://www.state.gov/reports/department-of-state-implementation-plan-for-the-u-s-strategy-and-national-action-plan-on-women-peace-and-security>
- U.S. Department of State Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues, <https://2021-2025.state.gov/bureaus-offices/secretary-of-state/office-of-global-womens-issues/>
- Wein, Rachel. 2025. "The Office of Global Women's Issues is Gone. America is Less Safe Because of It. More To Her Story, October 31." <https://www.moretoherstory.com/stories/the-office-of-global-womens-issues-is-gone-america-is-less-safe-because-of-it>
- Winder, Varina. 2025. "The U.S. is Abandoning Women's Rights. The Women It "Honored" Are Paying the Price." *Meteor*, July 1. <https://wearethemeteor.com/an-attack-on-diplomacy-itself-and-the-women-left-behind/>
- WPS Collective, <https://www.wpscollective.org/>

Kat Fotovat served as Director of Global Programs, 2016–2020, and Senior Bureau Official, 2021–2025, in the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the U.S. State Department. She also served as Acting Global Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues, 2021–2023.

Rachel Wein served as Women, Peace, and Security Advisor in the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the U.S. State Department, 2023–2025.

Varina Winder served as Senior Policy Advisor, 2011–2017, and Senior Advisor and Chief of Staff, 2021–2025, in the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues at the U.S. State Department.

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

Cite this article: Fotovat, Kat, Rachel Wein, Varina Winder, and Mona Lena Krook. 2026. "U.S. State Department Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues." *Politics & Gender* 22, 263–284. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X26100683>