

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

USAID Senior LGBTQI+ Coordinator

Jay Gilliam¹  and Mona Lena Krook² 

¹Mayor's Office of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Affairs, USA and

²Department of Political Science, Rutgers University–New Brunswick, New Brunswick, NJ, USA

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

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The Senior LGBTQI+ Coordinator at the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) led the Agency's work on LGBTQI+ issues, integrating LGBTQI+ people across all inclusive development programs, policies, research, and training. The position was created in 2014 during the administration of Barack Obama to ensure that the promotion and protection of LGBTQI+ rights were fully incorporated into all aspects of USAID's work. Jay Gilliam (JG) was appointed during the Joe Biden administration as the second Senior LGBTQI+ Coordinator, as the position remained vacant during the first Donald Trump administration. In 2025, Trump dismantled the entire Agency, including the LGBTQI+ portfolio. This is a slightly edited version of an interview that took place with Mona Lena Krook (MLK) via Zoom on January 28, 2026.

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

JG: I was appointed by the Biden administration as the Senior LGBTQI+ Coordinator for the Agency. I served as Administrator Samantha Powers's senior most advisor on LGBTQI+ inclusion in our policies and programs at USAID. I had writ-large purview for LGBTQI+ inclusion, but the home office that I sat in was the Inclusive Development Hub. From the Inclusive Development Hub, I managed a team where we developed policy on LGBTQI+ inclusion in our programs. We managed a network of folks and colleagues from across the Agency as a community of practice on LGBTQI+ inclusion.

We managed Program and grants from that perspective. I managed a budget when I left of \$25 million just on LGBTQI+ inclusive programming that we [used for] programs from DC, as well as re-granted to mission country offices so that

they could supplement the programs that they were already doing, but with a focus on LGBTQI+ inclusion. On the policy front, we developed a policy, the LGBTQI+ Inclusive Development Policy, for the Agency. We also worked with other offices, like the [Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment's] office, like the Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance office, as they were working on their own policies to make sure they were also inclusive of LGBTQI+ issues.

[The position] did exist before Biden. During the Obama administration, there was a senior LGBTQI+ coordinator. There was [no one] appointed to the role during the first Trump administration, although the office that the first coordinator helped start did continue on. There was instead a Senior Advisor on LGBTQI+ issues who managed the portfolio during the first Trump administration. When the Biden administration came on, they appointed me to the role to help lead that work. [Under Trump 1] there wasn't a political will for that portfolio of work – therefore, they didn't appoint anyone at the agency to lead it.

MLK: What did you do before you came to USAID?

JG: In the international space, I started off in the development realm. I worked at an organization called Aga Khan Foundation USA. I did communications work there, and then I came over to USAID as an appointee. During the Obama administration, I started off in the legislative and public affairs office. I helped roll out the first LGBTQI+ public-private partnership that was started during that time, the Global Development Partnership, that we had with Sweden's SIDA [Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency], as well as the Australia Gay and Astraea Lesbian Foundation for Justice, the Victory Institute, and the Williams Institute. I helped roll that out, and then when the last coordinator got appointed, I helped support him getting acclimated to the Agency since he was new to the U.S. government, as well as to USAID and the development space. I helped him build out the office and the policy and programming work that really helped lay the foundation which I was able to build off of when I came back for the Biden administration. In between administrations, I was at Human Rights Campaign, where I led their global programming.

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

JG: For my time during the Biden administration, it would be the LGBTQ+ Inclusive Development Policy that we helped launch. We developed a policy that was the sole government agency policy on LGBTQI+ foreign issues in the development space. It was the sole LGBTQI+ policy published by the U.S. government agency, and so I'm really proud of the policy that we put out. We did it with lots of input from communities around the world. I was proud that it really reflected what we heard from them, focusing on not just human rights issues, but core development issues, like democratic participation, education, access to food, and humanitarian assistance programs.

With the policy, we worked well across the Agency, utilizing what we heard from communities. For example, going to our humanitarian assistance colleagues and saying: Hey, we're hearing from communities that they are feeling

left out. They are not getting the service provisions that we are providing to other community groups. Let's work together to figure out how to do that. Or looking at entrepreneurship and starting businesses and things like that. There's a lot of interest and we were able to start doing some economic empowerment-type programming before I left.

So that was, one, working on the policy. Two, being able to help people in other parts of USAID understand that they had a role to play in bringing about LGBTQI+ inclusion in their programs. It didn't mean doing something very different from what they were already doing. I think oftentimes, people only thought about the LGBTQI+ work at USAID as [being] part of human rights or PEPFAR [President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief] programming. We were able to open the apparatus for how people thought about LGBTQI+ inclusion in their programming.

Third, we were able to quickly ramp up resources for doing this type of work. When I came in November 2021, the office had a budget of \$6 million of appropriations for LGBTQI+ inclusion. That meant that we could support many different types of programs. [By the time] I left, we had supported 65 different country offices, supplementing or bringing on new LGBTQI+ programming in the work that they were doing. [With the policy behind us] we were able to engage with our colleagues in country offices a lot easier on how they could also be doing more engagement with LGBTQI+ inclusion, [in terms of] how they could be listening to communities, identifying communities and groups to be able to support, and leveraging the resources that we had in Washington, D.C., to do that type of work.

We had an internal process where we took applications from our country offices after they engaged with community groups, rated them, and chose which ones we were able to support. The last time we did that, we had over 40 country offices give us applications. We could only support around 15 of those. The demand for what we were doing was really there, and there were great applications. You could see that they were talking to community groups. They were trying to reflect how they could align the program that the office was already doing with better engagement with community groups, coming up with some really great ideas to build off of that programming to support LGBTQI+ communities.

I also really wanted to make sure that we were focusing on the most marginalized of the communities within our alphabet soup — transgender communities. One of the first events that I did when I came on board was for the Transgender Day of Visibility. I did an event in March 2022 with partner organizations. It was a great learning experience because we opened it up to all of our staff to hear from partners and advocates about their needs on transgender issues. People got a better understanding of that community and the challenges they faced and how they could better help and empower them with USAID resources.

Lastly, I would say that we tried to make sure that other organizations outside of our walls, outside of our agency, could understand what we were doing to help bring them along to do more. In the development global space, SIDA and the Norwegians are leaders in this space, but oftentimes they would focus just on the human rights or the health components. We tried to help them understand that

there is also a development angle. [In terms of] other government agencies, we worked very closely with our colleagues at the State Department as they were also ramping up resources — collaborating and coordinating to make sure that we weren't duplicating efforts and that we were spreading the resources as wide and as effectively as we could.

MLK: How did you manage to quadruple the money that you had to work on LGBTQI+ issues? Where did the money come from?

JG: [Along] with Jessica Stern's appointment [as Special Envoy to Advance the Human Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex Persons] and my appointment [at USAID], the White House had issued a Presidential Memorandum very early on stating that LGBTQI+ issues were a priority in our foreign policy. That support was helpful for being able to engage with community members around what their needs were — to build a policy that really reflected what we heard, but that also reflected how we could use that moment to work on LGBTQI+ issues in a strategic way.

It helped with advocacy on [Capitol] Hill, to say if we were able to get more resources, this is how we want to utilize them. We were able to talk about how there was demand across USAID as well as country offices, who were clamoring to be able to do more work. When I would go brief the Hill, I talked about how we had demand from 40 different missions who wanted resources to support this work but only had the resources to support around 15. This showed that if we got more resources, we would be able to utilize them and to do that work. In [the fall of 2024], we were rolling out new partnerships and bringing in some new, smaller LGBTQI+-led organizations to do that. It was a broader USAID priority from the Administrator, who wanted us to work with more local partners in the way that we deliver assistance.

MLK: Was there any work on LGBTQI+ issues during the first Trump administration?

JG: A little bit. I would categorize it as there wasn't this big motivation to do away with LGBTQI+ issues, particularly at USAID. The work was able to continue, flying under the radar. Also, Mark Green, the administrator during the Trump 1 administration, wasn't vehemently opposed to LGBTQI+ issues. He did attend Pride events that the team put on, more closed-door events. I think there wasn't tension surrounding LGBTQI+ issues like there is in the current administration. They avoided the spotlight, and so it didn't come under fire.

Gender and women's issues were a little bit different. They rewrote the gender policy during that time. They didn't quite get it out, but they were close, and we got the public version for comment that was not great for anyone. They were really focused on women's issues. We did have [an LGBTQI+] policy statement document from the Obama administration, but they didn't rescind it or take it offline. It was just a very different atmosphere during that first administration, I think. This is watching from the outside.

MLK: What happened to your position in January 2025?

JG: [As a political appointee], I left on January 20th at 11:59 PAM. But, obviously, I left a team behind. I wanted them to continue doing the work. I was in close

contact with them, as well as with a lot of past appointees. We're all very close. There were only about 100 or so of us at USAID, which is still a large group, but we were very protective of the work that we were doing and the legacy that we were leaving behind, watching very closely what was happening and wanting to protect it. During that time period, it was all very chaotic. Two days ago was the one-year mark of the stop-work order and things going down. I will say that they used LGBTQI+ issues as a scapegoat to try to say: This is why the agency has to go.

I saw lots of mis- and disinformation coming out, particularly from Elon Musk and the White House, around what types of programs USAID was supposedly supporting, mischaracterizing that type of work. I was doing a lot of fact-checking of those claims, getting this to allies and friends on the Hill so that they could utilize them and really try to correct the record. But the misinformation campaign worked, because a lot of people remember supporting an opera, or supporting a comic book around trans characters, which weren't actually USAID programs. But they were so cemented and shared so far and wide online that it didn't even matter what the truth was. People saw the support that we were giving to LGBTQI+ communities around the world.

I also think that, in broader terms, a lot of U.S. folks did not understand what USAID did exactly, which helped fuel the misinformation. To hear that we were giving \$50,000 or \$5 million to an LGBTQI+ group in a particular place hit some U.S. citizens in the wrong way, when they're struggling to make ends meet [and] when their community groups aren't getting funding from the government. This goes back to when I first started at USAID in 2012, working in the Legislative and Public Affairs Office. We were running a campaign to help people understand that the U.S. budget for foreign assistance was not half or one-third of the federal budget, but it was less than 1%. Even back then, we were having to help people understand what USAID was, correct the record on how many resources we were giving to countries and people in other places. We didn't do a great job, though. I think that also helped to fuel the misinformation without it being able to be corrected.

MLK: What have you been doing since you left USAID?

JG: I will say it was a pretty challenging year. I had expected to be competing for jobs with other political appointees who were coming out of USAID. I was not expecting to be competing with all of my colleagues, both in DC and abroad, as well as all of the implementing partners that USAID had been supporting. The last count I heard, there were like 150–160,000 jobs that people lost from USAID going under. I spent a lot of the year trying to bounce back. But I was fortunate at the end of the year to get a role with the DC Mayor's Office, doing LGBTQ affairs.

I also serve on the board of an international group called Global Black Gay Men Connect that focuses on rights and health equity for Black, gay, and queer men around the world. I serve as an advisory member of the F&M Global Barometers, based at Franklin & Marshall College, which is a past partner of USAID. They were helping us do research on LGBTQI+ issues – tracking the laws on the books, as well

as rating how these laws are fulfilled and the perceptions that LGBTQI+ people have regarding these protections. I'm still engaged on international issues, but for my 9-to-5, I'm focused hyperlocal now.

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

JG: I had a lot of time to think about this last year. One thing that both the global queer movement and the global feminist movement need to do is find a better way to tell the story of the world that we want to see. Oftentimes, we get down into tactics or policies — we want gender-affirming care, or we want people to be able to use the bathrooms that they want. The other side, they have a whole framework of how they want to see the world and any policy can fit under that. They have a story to tell, they have a framing of an issue, and people can grasp on to any part of that. It's hard to push back on a whole ideology that has a story to tell. For those of us in gender equality work, for the LGBTQI+ movement, we have to take a step back and talk about the world that we want to see and how everyone can be part of that.

I often go back to something from my time at the Human Rights Campaign [HRC]. We had a lot of global advocates who wanted to come through and hear about how HRC was building equality here in the U.S. My colleague and I always showed people a campaign called All God's Children that HRC did focused on faith and equality issues. One of the great things about that campaign was a video series of people sharing their stories of faith and equality. They were almost always allies. They were mothers, they were friends, they were siblings. They were talking about their story of being a person of faith, but also their trajectory of being able to accept a queer person in their life. That helped our allies see their role in supporting us.

The queer population is so small. With that small of a population, you're fighting to have a seat at the table — when what you really want is for people to be fighting for you, whether you're at that table or not. They understand your needs and respect them so much that they're willing to go to bat for you in different settings. Being able to say that no matter who you are, I want this person in my life because I love them. It doesn't matter who they are or who they love. That series, All God's Children, really helped build allyship, which helped build the movement.

Similarly, with our marriage equality campaign, it wasn't necessarily about fighting. It was about saying: We want the same things you want. Sometimes that less combative tone — saying that we are just like you — can work in some settings. It's about telling the story that we are part of whatever culture that we're in, and we just want to be included in that. I think that's maybe a little bit of a hint of where I could see some of the framing and messaging for our side to be working on. The broader work to do is to help tell the story of — not why we matter — but why people should be fighting for us and not us having to fight on our own.

Resources

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Jay Gilliam served as the Senior LGBTQI+ Coordinator at USAID, 2021–2025.

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

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