

NOTES FROM THE FIELD

The White House Gender Policy Council

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The White House Gender Policy Council (GPC) was established by President Joe Biden in 2021. It built on earlier offices like the White House Council on Women and Girls, which was created during the Barack Obama administration but was dissolved under the first Donald Trump administration, and the White House Office for Women's Initiatives and Outreach, which existed during the Bill Clinton administration but was eliminated by the George W. Bush administration. The GPC was responsible for the advancement of gender equity and equality in both domestic and foreign policy. Jennifer Klein (JK) and Rachel Vogelstein (RV) served, respectively, as Director and Deputy Director until the GPC was dismantled by the second Trump administration in 2025. This is a slightly edited version of an interview that took place with Mona Lena Krook (MLK) via Zoom on February 16, 2026.

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

JK: I led the Gender Policy Council as an Assistant to the President and Director of the Gender Policy Council.

RV: I served as a Special Assistant to the President and Deputy Director of the Gender Policy Council.

JK: The GPC covered both foreign policy and domestic policy, focused on four sets of issues: health; economic security; preventing and addressing gender-based violence; and democracy and human rights.

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RV: I was also dual-hatted as a Special Advisor on Gender at the National Security Council. I led our global gender equality portfolio. For the first two years, I also helped lead domestic efforts on reproductive rights in the wake of the reversal of *Roe v. Wade*.

JK: Just taking a step back to how this Policy Council got started, first and foremost, it's important to note that, previously, there had been a National Security Council, Domestic Policy Council, and, as of the Clinton administration, a National Economic Council. The Gender Policy Council became the fourth policy council in the Biden administration, sitting alongside the other three. There was also a Climate Policy Office that was set up in the Biden White House.

Rachel and I actually started thinking about this way back in 2015, when Secretary [Hillary] Clinton was running for president. For all obvious reasons, we were thinking about what might happen, first of all, when and if we had the first woman president, but second of all, somebody who had long been focused on women's rights as human rights, long been focused on full and fair opportunities for women. We thought about what this could look like in a potential Hillary Clinton administration. We put our thoughts on paper by writing a memo during the transition period. Obviously, that didn't come to pass because we know how that election ended.

We put it in our file cabinet, and then fast forward to the summer of 2020, I got a phone call from a colleague who was working on the Biden campaign, who said, remember when you wrote that memo about what it could look like to have a real policy council working on gender equity and gender equality? Could you pull that memo out and imagine what that might look like? And that was really the genesis of the Policy Council. Then when President Biden got elected, I worked really closely with the Biden transition team who were thinking about the first executive orders, because they wanted this to be one of the first. So I worked late nights, early mornings, all day, with an incoming staff member of the Office of Management and the Budget to draft the executive order that brought into fruition the Gender Policy Council.

RV: I'll jump in to put the Gender Policy Council in historical context. We had seen early foundations of a commitment to women's rights and gender equality, particularly on the foreign policy side, in the 1980s with the establishment of the Women in Development Office at USAID. Initially, women's issues resided in the Bureau of Human Rights at the State Department. But these issues were largely treated in a programmatic fashion. Then, in the aftermath of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in the mid-1990s — where, of course, famously, then-First Lady Hillary Clinton declared women's rights are human rights — we saw the elevation of these issues.

Under Secretary of State Madeleine Albright, the State Department created an Office of International Women's Issues and reported on women's rights in the Human Rights Reports for the first time. There was a coordinator on women's issues in the White House, focused on domestic consultation. Under these new roles, women's issues began to be elevated on the U.S. agenda. The expansion

continued under the George W. Bush administration on particular issues — for example, the work on Afghan women through the U.S.-Afghan Women's Council and the establishment of the International Women of Courage Awards under Secretary [Condoleezza] Rice. You saw this drumbeat of expansion.

Then, under President Obama, two important changes took place. First, we saw the establishment of a White House Council on Women and Girls, which was largely focused on coordinating with external groups on domestic and global women's issues. On the global side, we saw the establishment of the Office of Global Women's Issues, which reported directly to the Secretary of State and had, as its leader, the first-ever U.S. Ambassador for Global Women's Issues [Melanne Verveer]. That elevation and infrastructure became a prototype for how we could elevate and integrate these issues across the entirety of the federal government through the White House Gender Policy Council.

Under President Biden's establishment of the Gender Policy Council, he issued an Executive Order that created senior designees from every government agency who were part of the Council, with whom we worked across both domestic and foreign policymaking. We also had an opportunity to set a national agenda by issuing the first-ever National Strategy on gender equity and equality to advance these issues across both our domestic and foreign policy. Combined with the change in the White House, where this new council sat alongside all of the other policy councils — the Domestic Policy Council, the National Security Council, the National Economic Council — this shifted created something we hadn't had before, which is a seat at those policy-making tables, with a focus on women's rights and gender equality issues. The combination of the coordination across agencies, as well as the seat at policy decision-making tables at the White House, created a new architecture that built on the steps that have been taken previously but was more comprehensive and more policy-focused than in years past.

JK: I would just add two things. One is, going back to the Clinton administration for a minute, there were two things that were happening during the Clinton administration. During that time, as Rachel mentioned, there was a women's office within the Clinton administration within the White House. That was similar to what existed in the Obama administration, a very outreach-focused office. The second thing that was happening in the Clinton administration was that the First Lady's office, really for the first time, and maybe the only time, became a real policy office very focused on this set of issues.

At that time, I was Special Assistant to the President for Domestic Policy, and I was working dual-hatted with both the Domestic Policy Council and the First Lady's Office. That turned out to be a very convenient accident. It happened because this was the first First Lady's office to ever be integrated in the White House on policy issues. For example, we worked on healthcare, health reform, [and] reproductive health. We worked on childcare and early childhood development, economic issues, a range of issues. But there was no spot, no slot, FTE [full-time employee], to be doing that, so the First Lady's office was essentially lent a slot from the Domestic Policy Council. I was fortunate enough to hold that position for almost seven years. That's where, really, in my mind, the idea of a policy-making office focused on women's issues and gender equality really had its genesis.

That was sort of another important thread to getting to the Gender Policy Council. I would agree with everything Rachel said about the Gender Policy Council. I would just emphasize two things. One was actually a piece of advice from Tina Tchen, who had led the White House Council on Women and Girls in the Obama administration. At the time that we were reviving this memo that we had written, she counseled that the person who would lead the policy council should be an assistant to the president, which is the designation for the most senior White House staff. That sounds like a silly Washington thing, but it actually wasn't, for the reason that Rachel emphasized. We had somebody at the highest level going to all the senior meetings, seen at the same level as the heads of the other policy councils.

The second thing was what Rachel said, I just want to emphasize, was the creation of, first, the structure. In that executive order that I referenced earlier, every single cabinet secretary and agency head had a home on the Gender Policy Council. We effectuated that by having, probably every month to six weeks, meetings of people they had designated as senior designees to be part of the council. Formally, every cabinet secretary and agency head, really sending the signal that this was a priority for everyone. Whether you're the Treasury Secretary or the Transportation Secretary, or the Secretary of Labor, or Health and Human Services, the Secretary of Defense, everybody had a seat at that table, and everybody sent a senior person to represent them, every six weeks or so, at these meetings.

And then the last thing, just to emphasize what Rachel said, is that we created this National Gender Strategy, which really became a roadmap for the work across the entire administration. In creating the National Gender Strategy, we reached out to probably 1,000 or more people in civil society to inform that strategy. [Outreach] was very much part of our work, but it was part of our work in service of policymaking.

MLK: What were your backgrounds going into your roles in the U.S. government?

RV: I'm happy to start. I've focused my whole career on women's rights and gender equality issues. I started working on these issues domestically in the area of reproductive rights, working for the ACLU Reproductive Freedom Project; with the National Women's Law Center, where I was a senior counsel; and also working to promote women in public life. I had the good fortune of working on Secretary Clinton's very first campaign for Senate, back when she was First Lady, in 1999 and 2000, and went on to work for her campaigns for the presidency, both in 2008 and 2016. Though I had started working on these issues domestically, I then shifted to take what I had learned on the domestic side and apply that on the global stage.

I joined Secretary Clinton during her tenure at the State Department to help create the Office of Global Women's Issues and to elevate these issues in our foreign policy. After that, I went with her to the Clinton Foundation to establish her office on women and girls there and create an initiative called No Ceilings. It was focused on analyzing where we've seen progress for women and girls since

the transformative 1995 UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, and also where we haven't — and identified a policy agenda to address the unfinished business that remains. I also worked on global women's issues at the Council on Foreign Relations, where I led the Women in Foreign Policy Program, and wrote a book about the global MeToo movement, which has spread to over 100 countries around the world. And then I had the good fortune of joining the Biden Administration to realize the vision of the White House Gender Policy Council that we had envisioned back on the 2016 campaign, and to elevate gender equality issues across the entirety of our federal government.

JK: I started my career as a lawyer and moved to Washington, D.C., in 1993, when President Clinton was elected and announced that there would be an effort on national health care reform. Though I was always interested in women's issues and women's equality, I didn't think that this is what I was going to end up doing. I thought that I was going to have a career in health policy. I moved to DC to work on national healthcare reform, but had the great fortune, when healthcare reform failed in 1994, of moving into the First Lady's office, where I worked for Secretary Clinton in her role as First Lady. You know, Rachel and I talked about care as an economic issue that we worked on through the Gender Policy Council in the Biden-Harris administration, but the germ of that, for me, was working for the First Lady at that point on childcare and family and medical leave and thinking about these issues as economic issues way back when in the early 1990s.

Fast forward a bit, Rachel and I worked together in the Office of Global Women's Issues. My role there was [as] a deputy in that office. We worked on many of the same issues, including President Obama's global health initiative. We also had a focus at the time on girls' education and women and girls in Afghanistan. A big focus of our work in the second two years was to fully integrate a focus on gender equality throughout the State Department as a foreign policy priority. As Secretary Clinton has said, "it's not only the right thing to do, but also the smart thing to do." Fast forward a little bit more, after the 2016 [presidential] campaign, I went to Time's Up, where I was the chief strategy and policy officer working on combatting sexual harassment until I was tapped by the Biden campaign and transition to come work with them, and then, as I said earlier, helped to conceive of the White House Gender Policy Council.

MLK: How was the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues different from the predecessors you mentioned under Secretary Albright and Secretary Rice?

RV: The Office of Global Women's Issues was different in two key ways. The first was the elevation of the office. There was an office that existed before, but under Secretary Clinton, the office was elevated to be within the office of the Secretary of State and reported directly to the Secretary. That elevation really changed the authority with which the office was able to work, both across the bureaus at the department and with missions and embassies around the world. The second difference was the articulation of a policy strategy. There were policy guidance

documents [and] secretarial policy guidelines that Secretary Clinton issued that elevated gender equality and improved the status of women and girls as a pillar of foreign policy that advances prosperity, stability, and security around the world. This policy guidance document marshaled the evidence and explained why elevating the status of women and girls advances our interests in prosperity and security globally. It provided concrete examples of how to advance women's rights and gender equality through our diplomacy, foreign assistance, and development, and it was circulated to every bureau in the State Department and every mission around the world.

Secretary Clinton routinely elevated this policy in the daily work that she did. Just to give you an example: she convened ambassadors from around the world annually to talk about priorities for the State Department, and when she did, she elevated this issue as one of those priorities. We had an opportunity to brief ambassadors as to why and how advancing gender equality furthers U.S. interests; we also briefed bureaus, both regional and functional, on this policy guidance, and worked with them to advance concrete policies. What was different with the Office of Global Women's Issues was both the elevation of this topic and the articulation of policy establishing gender equality as a pillar of U.S. foreign policy. That then became the prototype we used to advance women's rights and gender equality across the entirety of the federal government under the auspices of the White House Gender Policy Council.

JK: The other thing, just to note, is the policy guidance that Rachel referred to specifically also required that every bureau and embassy think about integrating gender in their discussions of budgeting. Also, there were requirements for management and training. We actually worked with the Foreign Service Institute to create a course on what it means to integrate gender throughout your work. Finally, there was a part on evaluation, monitoring, and evaluation. The focus on policy was reinforced by those three other things. You've articulated your policy goals and then, one, what was the budget that you were going to use to get there? Two, whether the personnel that you were deploying were prepared and trained to actually implement these goals. And three, making sure there was accountability to ensure that what you said you were going to do in terms of policies and programs was effective.

MLK: In your view, what were the main accomplishments of the Gender Policy Council? Maybe the National Gender Strategy was one of the biggest achievements?

JK: It'd be interesting to see if we have the same answer to that question, because I don't know if I would call the National Gender Strategy an achievement, but rather a means of achieving our goals. As Rachel said earlier, there had never been a National Strategy. I guess I always thought of it as the roadmap, and the achievements were what we actually accomplished across the administration. We can talk about the importance of the creation of the strategy itself, and it was important, but we should also talk about what we did under that strategy. When we left the White House, we drafted an extensive fact sheet outlining the administration's accomplishments to advance gender equality.

To start with the creation of the strategy, it was built into the executive order that created the council that there would be senior designees. We reached out to over a thousand external stakeholders to get their input on what a strategy should be. We worked with colleagues across the government. The criticism we received of the strategy, which I really am proud of, and it says it all, was that it was very ambitious and comprehensive. To which we responded, yes, guilty as charged.

We had several underlying principles. One was that [the strategy] needed to deal with issues comprehensively. There were ten issue areas, everything from health to education to economic security to climate to human rights and democracy. We were [also] very focused on how those issues integrated, so you couldn't deal with issues in a silo. You had to deal with issues in, you know, from the perspective of an individual experiencing a range of different issues that needed to be addressed. And then it was very intersectional, so it was, you know, obviously focused on gender and gender equity and gender equality, but we also felt strongly that it reflected the full experiences of people, whether that was race or gender identity or where you're from or your socioeconomic background. We ensured that all of the issues we touched on were seen through those three lenses.

RV: I'll add that the strategy itself was meant to articulate a vision to strengthen prosperity, stability, and security by advancing gender equality, both domestically and globally. So, as Jen said, you first have the articulation of these guiding principles, that we need a whole-of-government approach to implement a strategy like this. That is an insight from the work we did at the State Department and USAID; so this was an attempt to conceive of a whole-of-government effort to advance gender equality. [Along with] the other guiding principles that Jen mentioned, taking an intersectional approach and recognizing the interconnection between these issues, I think the articulation of ten strategic priorities was meant to outline a concrete vision for the future — not necessarily one that could be fully achieved in any one administration, but that offered a roadmap for how to advance gender equality through domestic and global policy, and why doing so makes a difference.

The ten issue areas were: improving economic security and accelerating economic growth; eliminating gender-based violence; protecting, improving, and expanding access to healthcare, including sexual and reproductive healthcare; ensuring equal opportunity and equity in education; promoting gender equity and fairness and justice in immigration systems; advancing human rights and gender equality under the law; elevating gender equality and security and humanitarian relief; promoting gender equity and mitigating and responding to climate change; closing gender gaps in STEM [science, technology, engineering, and mathematics] fields; and advancing full participation in democracy, representation, and leadership. That was the meat of the strategy — these ten strategic priorities. Those remain strategic priorities for those who are working to advance gender equality, either in the U.S. or globally. Then the third section

of the strategy, similar to the secretarial policy guidance that Jen referenced before, articulated modes of implementation, outlining how a whole-of-government approach should proceed — with a focus on accountability and budgeting, as well as consultation and engagement with outside groups and with other countries in implementation.

MLK: What were some of the things that you were able to do at the GPC?

JK: I think, really, in each of the areas, we did have some major accomplishments, so I will just point to a few. The first is that after the *Dobbs* decision came down from the Supreme Court in 2022, President Biden asked GPC to lead the administration's efforts in responding to that decision that overturned *Roe v Wade* and with it a fundamental constitutional right to reproductive rights. Defending reproductive freedom, I'd say, was one of the most important areas that we worked on. President Biden issued three executive orders and a presidential memorandum, all designed to protect and expand access to abortion, including medication, abortion, and contraception, and other reproductive health services. To defend access to emergency abortion care, which became and has remained a big issue after abortion bans have passed or come into effect in many states. To help defend the constitutional right to travel across state borders to access legal healthcare. To safeguard the privacy of patients and healthcare providers. To protect access to reproductive healthcare for veterans and for service members. And, finally, to support sexual and reproductive health globally.

We also worked on a number of other health issues. One that I would point to which we led from the Gender Policy Council, working for the First Lady, Dr. Jill Biden, who made closing gaps in women's health research a signature issue. Recognizing that women's health remains underfunded and understudied, President Biden launched this first-ever White House initiative on women's health research, which was led by the First Lady. We were the office that staffed her for that effort to really unleash huge funding, but also policy changes to ensure that women's health was given the attention that it deserves throughout the research process.

Another area of particular interest was women's economic security. Part of that was achieving the lowest women's unemployment rate in 70 years, ensuring that women had access to good-paying, high-quality jobs through some of the major pieces of legislation that were passed, like the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, the American Rescue Plan, and the Inflation Reduction Act. We worked hard on passing the Pregnant Workers Fairness Act, instituting regulations under that, and the PUMP Act so that pregnant women and new mothers would be able to work without discrimination on the basis of pregnancy or childbirth. We were really integral to the work on protecting access to care — child care, home and community-based care — and fighting for, which we did not achieve, national paid family and medical leave, which was a focus of the administration.

On gender-based violence, probably the most important accomplishment was the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act [VAWA], which President Biden, in particular, but also the Vice President, felt incredibly strongly about. President Biden actually wrote the Violence Against Women Act back

in 1994, when he was a U.S. Senator. It had been reauthorized four times. This was the fifth since then, in 2022. We achieved historic funding levels for VAWA and made some really important changes to the law to strengthen and expand it.

In addition, we were able to write the first-ever U.S. national plan to end gender-based violence [GBV], which guided the range of the work on GBV. We instituted historic reforms to the military justice system to protect survivors of sexual assault and harassment in the military. This was one of the first things the President did. He called together an independent review commission on sexual assault in the military to strengthen accountability for sexual assault and to institute reforms, bipartisan reforms, to strengthen prevention, as well as accountability.

The only other thing I would add [on the domestic side] is promoting women's representation, leadership, and political participation. First, of course, Vice President Kamala Harris was the first woman to serve as Vice President. And a number of other personnel choices demonstrated the commitment of the administration. For example, the existence of the Gender Policy Council was a statement about this president's focus on the status of women. The President also appointed the first-ever gender-equal cabinet in our nation's history. The president appointed a really diverse slate of judges, including more than 65%, I believe, who were women and people of color. We fought for the Equal Rights Amendment. We strengthened the federal government's recognition of women's history by, for example, signing an executive order specifically on women's history, which led to the creation of a monument in honor of Francis Perkins [the first woman cabinet minister in the U.S.]. Rachel can fill in on the foreign policy side.

RV: On the foreign policy side, we saw accomplishments in every one of the issue areas that Jen just mentioned. I will highlight a few. On women's economic security, the administration, importantly, was focused on matching its commitment to gender equality and policy with resources. On International Women's Day, President Biden made a commitment to increase resources to advance gender equality around the world. He ultimately mobilized over \$3 billion in both public and private resources to advance women's economic security, in particular.

The administration created a Gender Equity and Equality Action Fund that was focused on advancing economic security and invested \$500 million in resources and service of this goal globally. [It] also committed to three flagship public-private partnerships that were focused on tackling persistent barriers to women's economic participation. Those initiatives include the Women in the Sustainable Economy Initiative, which was a public-private partnership between governments, the private sector, philanthropy, multilateral organizations, and civil society, to promote women's access to jobs, training, leadership roles, and also, importantly, financial resources in the industries that are critical to the fight against climate change — the industries of the future in so many parts of the world. Ultimately, 33 governments and other partners mobilized over \$2 billion in commitments to the women in the Sustainable Economy Initiative.

Second, to address the gender-digital divide, which inhibits women's economic participation in a 21st century economy, the U.S. did two things. First, the U.S. secured a historic commitment in the G20 Leader's Declaration, under U.S. leadership and with the partnership of the Indian government when the G20 met in New Delhi, to cut the digital gender gap in half by 2030. To help reach that goal, the administration launched the Women in the Digital Economy Initiative, which was a public-private partnership with more than a billion [dollars] in commitments from 49 government, private sector, and civil society partners to accelerate progress to close the gender digital divide and to fully enfranchise women in our globalized economy.

Third, to address one of the key barriers to women's participation in the workforce, which is the lack of investment in childcare, we partnered with the World Bank, other governments, and philanthropy to create the Invest in Child Care Initiative, which catalyzed and supported investment in childcare infrastructure in low- and middle-income countries around the world. So the administration did a lot of work to address the barriers to women's full economic participation in the 21st century.

We also made strides in addressing gender-based violence globally. In addition to the domestic accomplishments that Jen mentioned, we worked on the issue of online harassment and abuse. There was a national task force, which promulgated a series of policy recommendations domestically. Globally, we created a Global Partnership for Action on Gender-Based Online Harassment and Abuse, the first coalition of government and multilateral partners coming together to push for policy, for resources, and for data collection on this growing scourge that limits women's participation in public life.

We also improved the U.S. response to conflict-related sexual violence. President Biden issued a presidential memorandum that was focused on increasing accountability for conflict-related sexual violence by ensuring that we close loopholes that previously meant that sanctions could be imposed only if conflict-related sexual violence was one of several crimes. We changed the policy so that sanctions could be imposed based on the commission of conflict-related sexual violence alone. We worked to improve and coordinate sanctions, and then collaborated with partners — including the UK and other government partners at the UN — to impose a series of sanctions in countries around the world where conflict-related sexual violence is being used as a tool of war.

With respect to women's human rights and women's leadership, we created an initiative called Women Lead and mobilized almost a billion [dollars] in resources from government partners and philanthropy to help close gender gaps in women's leadership and political power around the world. That work continues. While there are obviously limitations in terms of what the U.S. government is doing now, many of the coalitions that have been formed under the various initiatives that I mentioned continue to fulfill their commitments in each of these areas.

MLK: What happened to the Gender Policy Council in January 2025?

JK: As I said, President Biden asked Vice President Harris to join him, so she was the first woman vice president. We had much excitement about the work that

could continue if Vice President Harris had won [in 2024]. At the same time, I think we were very mindful of the fact that, you know, a lot of this work could be undermined if President Trump had won again.

The last year, or six months, of the Biden-Harris administration were spent, one, envisioning the work that we would want to continue and how we would grow and expand our work. But also thinking about how we could protect what was already in place. Given the experience of the first Trump administration, I don't know if I would use the word optimistic, but I would use the word that we were sort of cautiously optimistic that some things would either continue or not be devastated in the way that, quite frankly, they were. For example, when he came into office the first time, the Office of Global Women's Issues at the State Department remained.

It was a harsh awakening when, on the second day of his administration, he issued the executive order aimed at combating what they termed "gender ideology extremism," which formally dissolved the White House Gender Policy Council. That was more than a signal that not only was this work going to be challenged. [They also] literally repudiated much of what we had done over the previous four years. That is the reality we are living with. The Trump administration has done away with anything labeled "DEI." Programs to support diversity, equity, and inclusion are important, but that's not what the GPC was or did. We worked on policies that help all people have an opportunity to have full and equal participation in their societies.

The tarring of these things, which is quite deliberate, is a huge problem. But there are people who remain in government who believe that the issues that we worked on were core to prosperity, to stability, to security. That work, I believe — if I am, you know, a little optimistic — has continued in some very different forms under new leadership. I think that this infrastructure has been really tested. Taking away the Gender Policy Council and the Office of Global Women's Issues at the State Department are just two examples of a much broader attack on the federal government itself. The hardest thing to do will be to really rebuild that infrastructure when this administration is over.

RV: I will add that I think it would be a mistake to look at what's happened since the inauguration of the second Trump administration as something that took away the progress over the last four years. When we see what has transpired since the beginning of the second Trump administration, we see that we're going much farther backward in time — back before that history that we started our conversation with, right? Principles, offices, policies, programs that existed for decades and previously were upheld during the first Trump administration have been eviscerated this time around. The Office of Global Women's Issues had an ambassador and did important work during the first Trump administration. Certainly, there were areas where we did not expect to see progress, such as, for example, women's reproductive rights. But there were many other areas, including women's economic participation as just one example, where work not only continued, but took a step forward.

We see that in the second Trump administration, however, not only did this work stop, but the office itself has been dismantled. So the effort that was started

in the Trump administration on women's economic participation called WGDP has ended, and now we see the complete deconstruction of the office. The same thing is true for Women, Peace, and Security. President Trump signed the Women, Peace, and Security Act into law during his first term, and we saw the promulgation of policy of a national action plan on women, peace, and security under that law. In contrast, during his second administration, the Secretary of Defense has explicitly repudiated women, peace, and security — which has demonstrable effects in terms of promoting global stability — as so-called wokeism.

Another example of regression: the issue of family planning. During the first Trump administration, the U.S. continued to serve as the leading donor to family planning services worldwide. This time around, the second Trump Administration has decimated the infrastructure and commodity supply for family planning globally. After decades of bipartisan support — not just Democratic administrations, [but] also in Republican administrations, going back to George H.W. Bush, when he served as Vice President in the [Ronald] Reagan administration — we established a tradition of U.S. leadership in support of family planning services globally to advance maternal health. That infrastructure, which goes back to the 1980s, has been eviscerated.

Or consider an issue like conflict-related sexual violence. Not only are we concerned about whether the accountability principles in the Presidential Memorandum that were articulated during the Biden Administration are being upheld; we are also struck by the recent issuance of an executive order by the second Trump administration withdrawing the U.S. from a number of UN agencies and entities—including the Office of the Special Representative to the Secretary General on Sexual Violence and Conflict — which was deemed “inefficient and inconsistent with U.S. values.” This is after, under George W. Bush's administration, Secretary Condoleezza Rice led the U.S. at the Security Council in getting support for UN Security Council Resolution 1820 on countering rape in wartime, which has been a bipartisan issue up until this moment.

So what we're seeing under this Administration is not just the evisceration of what we had the privilege of working on over the last four years. This is the evisceration of infrastructure, policies, programs, and commitments — both global and domestic — that is taking us back in time, to before the second wave of the women's movement.

MLK: What have you been doing since you left the White House?

JK: We were very lucky to be able to move together to continue this partnership at Columbia [University], at the School of International and Public Affairs, where we are professors of professional practice and [are] also leading together the Women's Initiative within the Institute of Global Politics. [We are] working on so many of the same issues that we talked about, from health to economic security to safety and security to political participation, leadership, women's human rights. So we are sort of taking much of the work that we continue to think about and doing it from the perspective of an academic institution.

RV: One of the innovations of the Gender Policy Council — one of the many — was uniting work on gender equality and women's rights issues from both a

global and a domestic perspective under one umbrella. There's so much that we have to share with the world in terms of the work that's happened in the United States on gender equality and the advancements that have happened here. And there's so much that we have to learn from models elsewhere, from shared challenges. With that same spirit in mind — but from the perspective of an academic institution where we're doing research, producing scholarship, [and] convening thought leaders — we are looking at challenges and barriers to gender equality and women's rights from both a domestic and a global lens. At the Women's Initiative at Columbia's Institute of Global Politics, we are producing innovative policy solutions that are drawn from the experiences we have here in the U.S. and the experiences of our colleagues and friends around the world.

One of the recent reports that we issued on the 30th anniversary of the Beijing Women's Conference is a strategy on how to make progress on gender equality and women's rights over the next 30 years. To inform this report, we held a convening with thought leaders from around the world — former women heads of state, civil society leaders, [and] multilateral leaders who came together in dialogue with us. [That] then produced a series of policy recommendations to accelerate the pace of change, particularly mindful of this moment of regression that we're seeing in gender equality.

We've also recently released a new report on how to accelerate progress in the fight to end child marriage. Again, recognizing some of the backtracking we've seen in terms of foreign assistance and aid and support of this issue around the world, how is it that we can move forward? After a period where we've actually seen rates of child marriage prevalence going down, how can we ensure that we continue to make progress? This report finds that the cost of inaction is staggering — imposing an estimated \$175 billion in losses annually — and outlines a strategy to reduce prevalence even at a challenging fiscal time.

JK: Just to give you one more example, another thing we're working on is a large project on care infrastructure, both global and domestic. What we are building is a set of resources, including a website, which will include model care policies in childcare, in long-term care, and in paid family and medical leave. That hopefully will be a resource for academics, for practitioners, for policy makers, and for advocates looking for model policies, whether that's what some great state in the United States has done, or what they've done in Mexico on care blocks. [We can] name so many other countries where they have better paid leave policies than we do. And private sector policies as well.

Last semester, I [also] taught a class called Reproductive Health and Rights Post-Dobbs: Policy and Politics. This semester, I'm teaching a class on Women's Economic Security: Power, Participation, and Policy. I will be teaching an intensive short course in the late spring on women, peace, and security.

RV: I taught a survey course for our human rights students on Global Gender Equality Law and Policy. This semester, I'm teaching a course on gender-based violence, and also leading a simulation on human rights that will include a focus on women's rights issues, because as we know, women's rights are human rights.

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

RV: I think it's really important, when we think about rebuilding from here, that we recognize the degree to which we have gone backward. It seems to me there's three elements that we ought to be focused on for the future. The first is our messaging. I gave a talk not so long ago, making the evidence-based case for gender equality, explaining why promoting gender equality advances prosperity and stability. And one of the members of the audience raised his hand and asked, isn't this obvious? Doesn't everyone know this? And what we are seeing, not just in the U.S, but with the regression of gender equality in countries around the world, is that it is not obvious. We still need to make the case, and part of that is about how we are framing these topics as issues that advance our shared goals and our shared values. And I think that we need to be doing more work on how to articulate this agenda effectively. Norms and messaging are a really important piece of the work ahead.

JK: Just to interrupt there, I think that that is absolutely true. I think that we have to acknowledge that it's even more complicated and bigger than that, because it is an issue of messaging. It's also an issue of this geopolitical moment that we are in, where the rise of authoritarianism and the rise of misogyny and gender discrimination around the world are happening together. That is not an accident.

RV: I agree completely. Really understanding how we are talking about these issues, and how our opponents are talking about these issues, including through this rise of authoritarianism around the world. So that's point one. I think the second point is institutionalization. We walked you through the history of the different offices and programs that catalyzed incremental steps forward in institutionalizing a focus on gender equality and women's rights through our government infrastructure. But for the most part, these innovations, these steps forward, were because of individual leaders who championed a particular office or a particular program — not through long-lasting reform. If we want to be in a position where the entirety of the infrastructure we've developed is not wiped away at the stroke of a pen of whoever happens to serve in the White House, we need to institutionalize the infrastructure to support these issues.

Within agencies, within the White House, I would analogize what we need to the progress we saw in combating violence against women in the 1990s. There was a movement, as you well know, to advocate on behalf of survivors of gender-based violence that long predated the Violence Against Women Act. But the passage of that law made it so that it will require another act of Congress to go backward. We need that type of longevity in the infrastructure to promote women's rights. It needs the stability of legislation to formalize commitments and withstand the political vagaries or winds of the day.

The third area that Jen often highlights, and we were talking about earlier, is resources. For so many of the issues on which we've worked, making progress [involved] public-private partnerships — whether that was in service of women's health research in the U.S., or women's economic security around the world. Part of the gap that we've seen, even during the decades in which

progress was made, is that we are still investing far too little in these issues, both at home and abroad. So in addition to shifting our messaging and shifting norms on these issues, and in addition to building long-lasting infrastructure and institutionalizing these issues within our government, we need to dedicate sufficient resources to treat gender equality as the priority that it is.

I would add that I think it's critical that we be working cross-sectorally, and that we work in partnership with folks who are, for example, focused on economic growth and prosperity, or are focused on advancing our stability and security, or are focused on global health, or global education. I think [that] to the extent these issues continue to be the province of women's rights advocates, and not seen as part and parcel of the broader priorities that we have, they will continue to be marginalized. It's critical that we're not only talking amongst ourselves as advocates, but that we are doing the hard work of joining in coalition with folks from other sectors.

JK: That is exactly what I was going to say. I gave a speech back in January of 2025 immediately following Trump's inauguration. It was a very fired-up, very angry audience of women's advocates, and I was asked exactly that question. My answer was we should stop talking to each other in rooms like this. We need to really integrate a focus on these issues in across every issue — which was hopefully the lesson of the Gender Policy Council and of the strategy that we wrote.

In thinking about it across those ten issues that Rachel talked about earlier, it's also much broader than the inner workings of the White House or the U.S. government. That's sort of a lesson for all of us, I think, as we look to the future. The other thing I would say is, in addition to agreeing with all of the points Rachel made, is that we have to continue to make that same case internally as well as externally. I would like to say that everybody in the Biden White House or the Obama administration, or the Clinton administration — I've worked in all three — agreed with the first premise that gender equality and women's human rights are essential to prosperity, stability, and security. But they don't. As we think about rebuilding for the future, we should be mindful that both internally and externally, we need to continue to make that case.

Resources

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