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Global Women's Issues: Background and Selected U.S. Efforts

For several decades, Congress has considered or enacted legislation aimed at improving the rights and status of women and girls worldwide. These efforts, which may address a range of issues globally, including women's health, education, and security, are often grouped under the broad policy umbrella of "global women's issues."

Background

Many U.S. and international policymakers have increasingly recognized gender inequality as a human rights and development issue caused by long-standing unequal power relationships between men and women. This imbalance is reflected in pervasive stereotypes, attitudes, and behaviors that perpetuate a cycle of discrimination in many societies, with significant consequences for women's socio-economic status and security. Often women do not have equal decisionmaking power with men and cannot independently make choices that affect their overall well-being, including household decisions, marital status, health, education, livelihood, and civic participation.

These inequalities often negatively affect the rights and status of women in many parts of the world. In the global workforce, women hold fewer paid positions and earn less for similar work than men. Many women also lack basic legal protections. For example, in over 70 countries women hold no property or inheritance rights, and in more than 40 countries women have no legal protection against domestic violence. Globally, 60% of food insecure populations are women and girls. The emergence of COVID-19 further exacerbated these issues; some experts suggest that recent gains in gender equality may be lost due to the secondary impacts of the pandemic.

Selected International Efforts

Governments, including the United States, have sought to address gender equality in international fora. For example, the *United Nations (U.N.) Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women* (1979), ratified by 189 countries, specifically addresses the rights of women. (The United States has not ratified the treaty due to sovereignty concerns.) At the *Fourth U.N. World Conference on Women* (1995), governments, including the United States, committed to eliminating discrimination against women and affirmed "women's rights are human rights." In addition, *U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security* (2000) urged governments to ensure the increased representation of women in conflict prevention, management, and resolution. (The Council has since adopted several follow-up resolutions.)

U.S. Policy

U.S. efforts to address global women's issues have shifted over time, often reflecting world events, domestic political

conditions, and the priorities of individual policymakers. During the past two decades, many Members of Congress and the executive branch have increasingly recognized a growing body of research linking gender equality to the overall stability, prosperity, and security of societies.

Selected Legislation and Trends. U.S. policymakers have considered women's issues from global, regional, and country-specific perspectives, ranging from issuing high-level policy statements to providing assistance to other governments, civil society, and international organizations. Some have also sought to incorporate women's issues into foreign policy on a broad level. In Congress, for example, the "Percy Amendment," enacted as part of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1973 (P.L. 93-189), requires that foreign assistance funds work to integrate women into the national economies of developing countries. Since FY2014, State-Foreign Operations (SFOPS) Appropriations Acts have required that funds from such acts promote gender equality in diplomatic and development efforts. (Most recently, see Section 7059 of the FY2023 SFOPS Appropriations Act (Division K of P.L. 117-328).)

In the executive branch, successive Presidents have supported different aspects of global women's issues; in some cases issuing executive orders or memoranda. Most recently, in March 2021 the Biden Administration issued an executive order creating the White House Gender Policy Council to address gender issues in domestic and foreign policy. In October 2021, the Administration published a *National Strategy on Gender Equity and Equality*, which aims to elevate and promote gender issues in strategic planning, budgeting, and policy development at both domestic and global levels.

Legislation on global women's issues has at times reached an impasse due to long-standing abortion and family planning-related debates. Some policymakers contend that previously enacted abortion and family planning restrictions should be included in certain gender-related legislation to ensure the restrictions apply to those bills. Others argue that the restrictions do not need to be included because they are already law or because the bills are unrelated to abortion or family planning.

Agency Roles. The Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) play key roles in coordinating U.S. efforts to address women's issues, with the names and priorities of relevant offices often changing between Administrations. The State Department's Office of Global Women's Issues is led by an Ambassador-at-Large who reports to the Secretary of State and is tasked with coordinating and raising awareness of women's issues. (President Obama created the position in 2009.) The origin

of the office dates back to 1994, when Congress declared that the department should designate a senior advisor to promote international women's human rights (P.L. 103-236). The USAID Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Hub was established in 1974 as the Office of Women in Development. Led by a senior coordinator, it provides gender expertise, training, and technical assistance. Over the years, some policymakers have proposed codifying these offices and leadership positions.

Key Policy Issues

Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). Research has found that when women participate in peace processes women are more likely to build coalitions, support marginalized groups, and promote national reconciliation. The Women, Peace, and Security Act of 2017 (P.L. 115-68) promotes women's participation in conflict prevention, management, and resolution; calls for a U.S. WPS strategy; and requires gender training. Presidents Obama and Trump issued WPS strategies in 2016 and 2019, respectively. For FY2023, Congress appropriated \$150 million for WPS programs.

Women's Leadership. Women remain underrepresented at all levels of decisionmaking, despite representing more than half the global population. Causes include discriminatory laws and practices, gender stereotypes, low education levels, lack of health care access, and the disproportionate effects of poverty. The United States supports programs to improve women's leadership through training, advocacy, and capacity building. For FY2023, Congress appropriated not less than \$50 million for programs to promote women's leadership, including political participation.

Women's Economic Empowerment. Evidence suggests that gender inequality is a barrier to economic growth and opportunities for women. The United States has long supported programs to increase such opportunities for women. The Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act of 2018 (P.L. 115-428) aims to reduce gender disparity in economic opportunity and codify gender analysis in USAID programs. In January 2023, President Biden published the first-ever U.S. Strategy on Global Women's Economic Security. Previously, President Trump created the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative in 2019, which President Biden restructured as the Gender Equity and Equality Action Fund. Congress appropriated up to \$200 million to the fund in FY2023.

Girls' Education. Over 132 million girls are out of school worldwide, while those who attend school often have lower completion rates and learning levels than boys. Barriers to education include poverty, child marriage, conflict, and violence. U.S. activities support safe and quality education for both girls and boys, while recognizing the importance of gender parity in education for girls. In 2017, Congress passed the Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development Act (P.L. 115-56), which aims to strengthen educational systems, including by removing education barriers for girls. For FY2023, Congress appropriated \$150 million for the education of girls in conflict areas.

Health. Inadequate access to quality health care contributes to more than 800 pregnancy-related deaths that occur daily

worldwide, with 94% of these deaths in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Malnutrition—which can raise the risk of stunting, eclampsia, and obstetric fistula—is another driver of these deaths. Funding for USAID maternal and child health programs that address these issues rose from \$295 million in FY2001 to \$910 million in FY2023. Social inequities also leave this population more susceptible to HIV infection. For example, adolescent girls and young women in sub-Saharan Africa comprised 25% of new HIV infections in 2020 but were 10% of the population. By the end of 2022, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) HIV prevention programs reached more than 2.9 million girls and young women.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV). GBV generally refers to any harmful threat or act directed at an individual or group based on their gender. Women are particularly susceptible, which affects their ability to contribute to their communities. Often underreported, GBV occurs in all regions and economic classes. In 2016, the Obama Administration issued a U.S. GBV strategy, which the Biden Administration updated in 2022. In FY2023, Congress appropriated \$250 million for GBV activities.

Women in Humanitarian and Conflict Settings.

Humanitarian and displacement crises, particularly in conflict, often disproportionately affect women, who may lack access to food, health care, education, and economic opportunities and are vulnerable to exploitation that may exacerbate other challenges. Congress has supported vulnerable populations through humanitarian assistance and legislation targeting specific concerns, such as preventing child marriage in displaced populations (P.L. 116-94).

Congressional Considerations

Integration into U.S. Foreign Assistance and Policy.

Some Members may consider whether women's issues can be more effectively addressed as discrete subjects, or as considerations within broader development assistance and strategies. In the policy context, there is some debate as to whether specific types of women's issues can be isolated from each other or whether they are inextricably linked.

Ongoing Oversight of Existing Legislation and Policies.

Congress may continue to monitor executive branch implementation of gender-related legislation, as well as the status of multiple government-wide policies and strategies addressing women's issues, including how, if at all, they are adjusting to global challenges such as COVID-19.

Funding and Program Coordination. The State Department and USAID track some gender programming broadly; however, the U.S. government does not comprehensively monitor funding for specific types of women's issues. Some policymakers contend that current efforts are adequate, while others argue that they may hinder U.S. efforts to assess its global gender programs.

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