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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, 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.

Compared with their male counterparts in the global workforce, women hold fewer paid positions and earn less for similar work. 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 Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has further exacerbated these issues; some experts suggest that any 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, is the only treaty specifically addressing the rights of women. The United States has signed but not ratified the convention 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 that "women's rights are human rights."
- U.N. Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace, and Security (2000), which was strongly supported by the United States, urged governments to ensure the increased representation of women at all

decisionmaking levels for conflict prevention, management, and resolution. (The council has since adopted nine 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.
- A provision included in annual State-Foreign Operations (SFOPS) Appropriations Acts since FY2014 requires that funds from such acts promote gender equality in diplomatic and development efforts. (For FY2021, see Section 7059 of P.L. 116-260.)

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, President Biden issued an executive order creating the White House Gender Policy Council, which seeks to address gender issues in domestic and foreign policy.

Legislation on 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 Ambassador 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 time, some policymakers have proposed codifying the offices and leadership positions.

Key Policy Issues

Women, Peace, and Security (WPS). Research has found that when women participate in peace processes they are more likely to build coalitions, support marginalized groups, and promote national reconciliation. In 2017, Congress enacted the Women, Peace, and Security Act (P.L. 115-68), which 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. The FY2021 SFOPS Appropriations Act provides \$130 million for WPS and \$50 million for women's leadership, including political participation.

Women's Economic Empowerment. Evidence suggests that gender inequality is a barrier to economic growth and that economic contributions from women are not fully realized in many parts of the world. The United States has long supported programs to increase economic opportunities for women, most recently through the Trump Administration's W-GDP Initiative (Congress has appropriated up to \$300 million to W-GDP since FY2020). In 2018, Congress enacted the Women's Entrepreneurship and Economic Empowerment Act (P.L. 115-428), which aims to reduce gender disparity in economic opportunity and codify gender analysis in USAID programs.

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. global education activities support safe and quality education for both girls and boys, while recognizing the importance of gender parity in education for girls and their communities. In 2017, Congress passed the Reinforcing Education Accountability in Development Act (P.L. 115-56), which promotes activities that strengthen educational systems, including removing education barriers for girls. The FY2021 SFOPS Appropriations Act provides \$150 million for the education of girls in conflict areas.

Women's Health. Inadequate access to basic health care is a key cause of more than 800 daily deaths from pregnancy-related causes worldwide, with 94% of these deaths in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Many girls and women in LMICs suffer from malnourishment, which can raise the risk of disease, stunting, eclampsia, and obstetric fistula. They are also more susceptible to HIV, and women represent the majority of new HIV infections in many

LMICs. Appropriations for USAID maternal and child health programs rose from \$295 million in FY2001 to \$855 million in FY2021. The State Department reports that the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief invested over \$800 million from FY2015 to FY2019 on HIV prevention programs for girls and young women.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV). GBV, which includes random acts of violence as well as sustained abuse over time, can be physical or psychological. Often underreported, it occurs in all regions and economic classes, with higher rates in some developing countries. The United States supports a range of anti-GBV activities in more than 40 countries. In 2016, the Obama Administration issued a U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-based Violence Globally. For over a decade, Members have considered versions of the International Violence Against Women Act, as well as bills addressing specific types of GBV. The FY2021 SFOPS Appropriations Act provides \$165 million for the multiyear strategy to address GBV.

Women in Humanitarian and Conflict Settings.

Humanitarian crises and conflict situations often disproportionately affect women and girls, who may be displaced and require life-saving assistance and protection. In these contexts, women are particularly vulnerable to exploitation, including GBV, which may be used as a strategy of conflict or to induce displacement. Congress has long supported humanitarian assistance for vulnerable populations, including women. It recently enacted bills to prevent child marriage in displaced populations (P.L. 116-94) and to support women and girls at risk from violent extremism and conflict (P.L. 115-31).

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 government and agency-wide policies addressing women's issues, including how, if at all, they are adjusting to recent global events such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

Funding and Program Coordination. The State Department and USAID track some gender programming broadly; however, the U.S. government does not comprehensively track or coordinate funding for specific types of women's issues. Some policymakers contend that current efforts are adequate, while others argue that such challenges may hinder U.S. efforts to assess programs at both the policy level and in the field.

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