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Global Impacts of Shifting US Gender Policies

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Policy Brief

Executive Summary

President Trump administration's rollback of gender-focused policies and foreign aid cuts—totaling over \$8 billion—poses significant challenges for civil society organizations advancing gender equality, reproductive rights, and Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiatives. The defunding of these programs deprioritizes gender-inclusive security policies and weakens peacebuilding networks, disproportionately impacting grassroots movements in the Global South. As U.S. foreign policy shifts toward militarization and conservative gender frameworks, civil society must take a proactive stance, moving beyond reliance on Western aid structures. Strengthening South-South cooperation—through regional partnerships, alternative funding models, and cross-border feminist alliances—will be critical in sustaining gender justice efforts. Advocacy groups must mobilize to counter restrictive policies and assert localized development priorities. The international community, particularly multilateral institutions like the EU and the U.N., must step in to bridge funding gaps and reinforce gender-focused programs. **This moment demands a fundamental reimagining of civil society's role—not as passive recipients of aid, but as active agents reclaiming autonomy, shaping policy, and driving sustainable, community-led solutions for gender justice.**

Gender-related Policies under the Spotlight

With President Donald Trump's return to the White House, gender-related policies are once again under the spotlight. In his first days back in office, he swiftly signed a series of executive orders rolling back progress made in gender equality and reproductive rights. These directives shift federal priorities in funding gender-related initiatives and cut funding for diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility (DEIA) programs ([White House](#)). However, the impact of these policies is not just a domestic issue and extends far beyond U.S. borders, particularly in the Arab Region, where U.S. funding has long supported gender equality initiatives. The executive orders temporarily suspend all U.S. foreign assistance programs for 90 days pending reviews to evaluate if they are aligned with the new administration agenda. The order further mandates that federal agencies cease funding for programs that promote what the administration refers to as "gender ideology extremism" ([White House](#)). However, this reallocation does not only affect gender-related social programs but also threatens Women, Peace, and Security (WPS) initiatives, which have played a crucial role in supporting women's leadership in conflict prevention, mediation, and peacebuilding efforts worldwide. Deprioritizing gender-inclusive security policies and weakening local peacebuilding networks put at risk long-term stability and conflict prevention efforts—an outcome that directly contradicts broader U.S. national security objectives.

Impact on Gender-Focused Foreign Aid

With over \$8 billion in cuts targeting gender-focused programs and reproductive health initiatives, organizations are bracing for significant changes ([AP News](#)). Secretary of State Marco Rubio emphasized a new approach, stating that all aid expenditures must align with national interests. The shift coincides with a broader realignment of U.S. foreign policy priorities, emphasizing economic and security interests over social development programs. As a result, the rollback of gender-related aid is not merely a fiscal decision but a **redefinition of America's role in global gender advocacy**. Although aid spending accounts for just 1% of the federal budget, President Trump has consistently criticized it, arguing that funds should prioritize domestic interests. Under President Biden's administration, \$68 billion was allocated to foreign aid in 2023, supporting initiatives in 204 countries. Comparatively, the European Union has allocated €79.5 billion through the 2021-2027 Neighborhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI), underscoring its sustained commitment to global development ([European Commission](#)). However, long-standing aid commitments to allies like Israel (\$3.3 billion), Egypt (\$1.5 billion), and Jordan (\$1.7 billion) are expected to remain intact under treaty obligations.

The Militarization of U.S. Foreign Policy and Its Impact on Women, Peace and Security Agenda

At the same time, the administration is reinforcing a shift toward a security-first foreign policy, significantly increasing military spending. The strategy pressures NATO allies to raise their defense budgets to at least 5% of GDP, signaling a clear prioritization of military strength over diplomatic and peacebuilding efforts ([El Pais](#)). This militarized approach has direct implications for the WPS agenda, as it could relegate gender-responsive security policies to a secondary concern. If WPS initiatives are absorbed into broader defense strategies without dedicated funding and safeguards, their effectiveness in fostering inclusive, sustainable peace may be severely compromised.

A New Landscape

As these funding shifts take effect, civil society organizations working on gender policy initiatives must navigate an increasingly restrictive environment. The reallocation of U.S. aid will likely require advocacy groups and international institutions to seek alternative funding sources and adjust strategies to sustain ongoing gender equality efforts in affected regions. However, it is important to acknowledge that not all gender-related initiatives conflict with the administration's policy priorities. Some programs that align with broader security and economic objectives may continue to receive support, though the scope of such funding remains uncertain.

Broader Global Implications

U.N. agencies focused on peacekeeping, human rights, and refugees have frequently been targets of Republican-led budget cuts. During President Trump's first term, the U.S. withdrew from the U.N. Human Rights Council and suspended funding for the U.N. Population Fund and

the Palestinian Authority ([Politico](#)). President Biden reinstated some of these contributions, but President Trump's return signals renewed efforts to cut support for organizations such as the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), which had already been excluded from U.S. funding under legislation signed by President Biden in March 2023. President Trump's recent executive order mandates the reallocation of funds toward initiatives that promote "family values," reinforcing traditional roles and focusing on strengthening socio-economic programs that align with this approach.

Jordan, a key U.S. ally in the region, has relied on American aid to support various social and economic development programs. U.S. funding has supported Jordanian civil society organizations, provided grants for women's economic empowerment, and facilitated gender-equality initiatives in education. However, with the redirection of funds, these efforts are at risk, compelling local organizations to seek alternative funding sources and re-evaluate their strategies. As Jordan and other Arab countries brace for these changes, stakeholders must prepare for a period of financial restructuring and strategic adaptation. Civil society organizations must diversify funding avenues, engage with new partners, and double down on grassroots efforts to ensure gender equality momentum is maintained. The international community, including the European Union and U.N. agencies, may need to step in to fill the gaps left by U.S. policy shifts.

Gender Policy Priorities Shifts Across Administrations

Understanding the current policy trajectory requires looking back at recent administrations and their differing approaches to gender-related issues.

1. During his first term, President Trump pushed a conservative gender policy, cutting funding and emphasizing a biologically-defined approach. Key actions included:

President Trump Second term (2017-2021)

- **Repealed Obama-era Title IX protections**
- **Reinstated Global Gag Rule on abortion services**
- **Banned transgender military service**
- **Cut gender-focused foreign aid**

2. President Biden Administration (2021-2025)

President Biden took a starkly different approach, expanding protections and funding:

President Biden (2021-2025)

- **Restored transgender military service & Title IX protections**
- **Expanded DEI policies across agencies**
- **Increased reproductive health & gender funding**
- **Reaffirmed global gender equality commitments**

3. President Trump 2nd Administration (2025-Present)

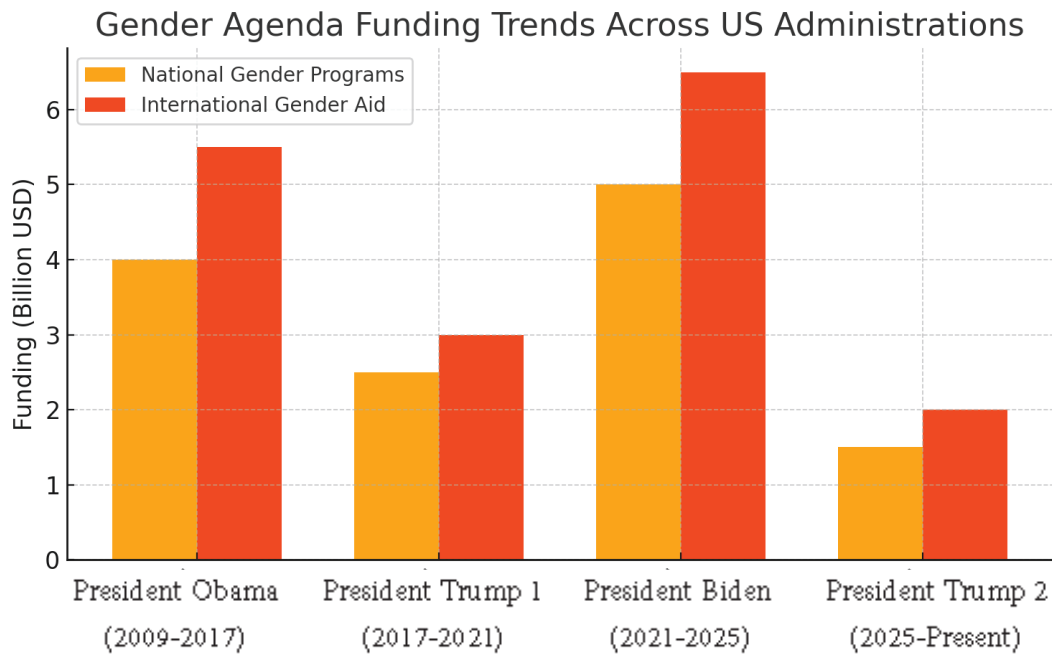
The second term of President Trump marks a return to conservative gender policies, with significant rollbacks on gender agenda ([Brookings](#)). Notable actions include:

President Trump Second term (2025-Present)

- **Defined gender strictly by biological sex**
- **Cut federal & international gender funding**
- **Reinstated reproductive rights restrictions**
- **Rolled back DEIA efforts in institutions**

Gender Agenda Funding Trends Across US Administrations

The diagram below illustrates the trends in gender agenda funding across the last three U.S. administrations, focusing on both national gender programs and international aid funding.



Key Observations:

1. President Trump's 1st Administration (2017-2021):

- National gender program funding was relatively low, around \$2.5 billion, reflecting policy shifts that deprioritized gender equality initiatives domestically.
- International aid funding was slightly higher at \$3.0 billion, though funding cuts were observed in areas like reproductive health and LGBTQ+ rights globally.

2. President Biden's Administration (2021-2025):

- A substantial increase in both national (\$5.0 billion) and international (\$6.5 billion) funding, with a focus on gender equality, reproductive health, and inclusive policies under the broader DEI (Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) framework.
- Efforts were made to restore funding to organizations affected by previous cuts, particularly in global reproductive health and gender-based violence prevention.

3. President Trump's 2nd Administration (2025-Present):

- Funding for national gender-related initiatives has sharply declined to \$1.8 billion, reflecting a shift toward more conservative policies with a focus on traditional gender roles.
- International funding has also seen reductions, down to \$2.0 billion, with restrictions reinstated on programs related to reproductive health and gender inclusion, including the reinstatement of the Global Gag Rule.

These trends indicate a recurring pattern of fluctuating support for gender programs, with significant increases under Democratic leadership and reductions under Republican administrations.

What Lies Ahead: Projections and Challenges

Given past trends, the following can be anticipated in the coming years:

- **Reduced Funding:** Organizations supporting reproductive health, women's rights, and gender-based violence prevention will face financial shortfalls. The Global Gag Rule¹ may be expanded, further limiting international health initiatives.
- **Policy Reversals:** DEI-related policies will likely face continued rollback, shrinking institutional support for gender inclusion. Protections under Title IX may see further erosion.
- **Strained International Relations:** The U.S.'s hardline stance could create friction with allies committed to progressive gender policies and could impact UN-led gender programs.
- **Civil Society Response:** Advocacy groups will likely mobilize to counteract funding cuts through legal challenges and grassroots campaigns.

Conclusion

The shifting geopolitical landscape surrounding U.S. policies is not just a moment of crisis—it is also an opportunity for civil society, particularly in the Arab region, to rethink strategies and reclaim agency in shaping development priorities. The continued emphasis on restrictive funding policies highlights the persistent inequalities embedded in global aid structures, reinforcing the need for decolonial approaches that center regional actors in decision-making processes. While the rollback of women's rights initiatives poses challenges, it also compels civil society to reimagine its role beyond dependency on U.S. aid. The U.N. Commission on the Status of Women (CSW69) remains a critical space for amplifying local voices, advocating for policy alternatives, and building cross-regional coalitions. Women's organizations must utilize this platform not only to counter restrictive narratives but also to drive a global dialogue that prioritizes locally defined development goals over externally imposed frameworks.

Drawing from decolonial feminist thought, particularly the work of scholars like Chandra Mohanty and María Lugones, it is imperative that advocacy efforts resist the imposition of Western-centric gender paradigms and instead foreground grassroots knowledge and experiences. **This means shifting from a reactive stance—merely responding to policy rollbacks—to a proactive approach that asserts alternative funding models, strengthens South-South cooperation, and builds sustainable partnerships beyond traditional donor dependencies.**

¹ The global gag rule prohibits foreign nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who receive U.S. global health assistance from providing legal abortion services or referrals, while also barring advocacy for abortion law reform—even if it's done with the NGO's own, non-U.S. funds.

Recommendations

To move forward, the following strategies must be prioritized:

- Engaging regional and multilateral mechanisms to reduce reliance on U.S. aid and build self-sustaining networks of funding and policy advocacy.
- Strengthening local coalitions to ensure that civil society actors in the Arab region lead the discourse on development priorities rather than reacting to external policy changes.
- Advocating for policy commitments at CSW and beyond by centering regional knowledge and challenging top-down approaches to gender and development.
- Deepening strategic alliances with non-Western partners, including African, Latin American, and Asian feminist networks, to create new funding and advocacy pathways that break away from colonial-era dependencies.

The shifting tides of U.S. foreign policy should serve as a wake-up call for civil society to assert its autonomy and resist frameworks that do not reflect local realities. **Localization must be central to this shift, ensuring that development agendas are shaped by those who are directly impacted rather than dictated by external forces.** Women's organizations can reclaim decision-making power and redefine global conversations on development. Gender justice should be built on localized knowledge, contextual needs, and regional priorities, not imposed frameworks. The road ahead is complex, but it also presents a pivotal moment for reclaiming agency, fostering resilience, and shaping a future where feminist movements define their own paths to justice and equality through community-driven solutions.

