



Updated May 5, 2022

## 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 Coronavirus Disease 2019 (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 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. 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 FY2022 SFOPS Appropriations Act (Division K of P.L. 117-103).)

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 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 these 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. 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 FY2022, Congress appropriated \$135 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 FY2022, Congress appropriated \$50 million for activities to promote 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 worldwide. The United States has long supported programs to increase such opportunities for women. Most recently, 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 2019, President Trump created the Women's Global Development and Prosperity Initiative, which President Biden expanded and renamed the Gender Equity and Equality Action Fund. Congress appropriated up to \$200 million to the fund in FY2022.

**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 FY2022, Congress appropriated \$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 \$890 million in FY2022. The State Department reports that by the end of 2021, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) had reached more than 2.9 million girls and young women with HIV prevention programs.

**Gender-Based Violence (GBV).** GBV includes random acts of violence as well as sustained abuse over time. 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. GBV strategy, which the Biden Administration states it plans to update. For FY2022, Congress appropriated \$175 million to implement the multiyear GBV strategy.

**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. Congress has long supported vulnerable populations, including women, through global humanitarian appropriations. In recent years, Members sought to prevent child marriage in displaced populations (P.L. 116-94) and considered legislation addressing GBV in humanitarian situations (S. 765, 117<sup>th</sup> Congress).

## 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 recent global events 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.

---

**Luisa Blanchfield, Coordinator**, Specialist in International Relations

---

**Rhoda Margesson**, Specialist in International  
Humanitarian Policy

**Tiaji Salaam-Blyther**, Acting Section Research Manager

**IF11804**

---

## Disclaimer

This document was prepared by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). CRS serves as nonpartisan shared staff to congressional committees and Members of Congress. It operates solely at the behest of and under the direction of Congress. Information in a CRS Report should not be relied upon for purposes other than public understanding of information that has been provided by CRS to Members of Congress in connection with CRS's institutional role. CRS Reports, as a work of the United States Government, are not subject to copyright protection in the United States. Any CRS Report may be reproduced and distributed in its entirety without permission from CRS. However, as a CRS Report may include copyrighted images or material from a third party, you may need to obtain the permission of the copyright holder if you wish to copy or otherwise use copyrighted material.