



US WOMEN'S CAUCUS AT THE UN

August 27, 2020

Statement on Draft USAID 2020 *Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy*

The US Women's Caucus at the UN represents many national and international non-governmental organizations recognized by the UN Council of Economic and Social Affairs. Our member organizations work to secure the rights and improve the general welfare of women and girls in the United State and around the world.

In response to the release by United States Agency for International Development of its draft *2020 Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy* slated to replace the *2012 Gender Equality and Female Empowerment Policy*, the US Women's Caucus at the UN requests revisions as follows to address gaps and policy concerns with the proposed draft:

Executive Summary page 4 and Operational Principles page 11: The Executive Summary and Operational Principles refer to "Do no harm" as one of eight principals which "underpin our commitment to promoting and advancing equality between women and men and the empowerment, protection, and participation of all women, girls, men, and boys in their societies" (p. 11). Yet rather than advancing gender equality, this policy as drafted will do grave harm. Among other shortcomings, the policy provides a narrow and incomplete perspective on reproductive health. It diminishes reproductive health to a narrow focus on maternal health and family planning instead of a broad focus on comprehensive reproductive health access that is necessary to achieve equality and empowerment. It neglects the span of modern contraceptive methods and instead promotes fertility awareness only. It ignores the importance of education about and access to contraception in reducing unintended pregnancies.

Introduction page 7: The policy refers to the recognition by the Joint Strategic Plan of the U.S. Department of State and by the U.S. Agency for International Development for Fiscal Years 2018-2022 that "societies that empower women to participate fully in civic and economic life are more prosperous and peaceful." Yet women cannot participate fully and equally when their potential is limited by the inability to control their reproduction. The burden of abstinence-only sexual health education falls squarely on the shoulders of young women and girls. There is no equality possible in this position.

Vision, Objectives, and Definitions page 9: The third strategic objective is to "Increase the capability of women and girls to exercise their basic and legal rights fully, help determine their life outcomes, assume leadership roles, and influence decision-making in households,

communities, and societies.” We object to the restriction to legal rights only and not human rights. A focus on legal rights only leaves women and girls vulnerable to discriminatory laws. The policy should reference women's human rights, a broader protection for women and girls than legal rights.

Further, the restriction to legal rights coupled with the subsequent statement, “USAID deliberately sets these objectives at a general level to allow for adaptation in varying country contexts” (page 9), leaves women and girls in an extremely precarious position, particularly in countries where women and girls have little or no legal rights. This restriction opens the US up to inadvertently supporting harmful traditional practices like child marriage.

Vision, Objectives, and Definitions page 10: The policy defines gender equality as “the state in which women, girls, men, and boys have equal access to opportunities, resources, benefits, and legal protections and which recognizes their equal inherent human dignity, worth, and unalienable rights.” There is no definition of what constitutes an “unalienable” right in national or international law. The international human rights community rejects the State Department’s attempt to reframe rights with this language. Instead, the policy should affirm women’s human rights, agency, and gender equality as goals in and of themselves.

Vision, Objectives, and Definitions page 10: The policy defines women’s empowerment as “achieved when women have the ability to act freely in society, exercise their legal rights equally to that of men, and fulfill their potential as equal members of society, such as to help determine their life outcomes; assume leadership roles; and influence decision-making in households, communities, and societies.” Yet the policy neglects the importance of controlling one’s reproduction in fulfilling one's potential and determining one’s own life outcomes. Comprehensive reproductive health access is necessary to achieve gender equality and women's empowerment.

Operational Principles page 12: The policy notes that men and boys are “not taught the importance of shared responsibility in the home, or the productive value of domestic work.” The policy should add “nor are they taught the importance of equal responsibility in the context of human sexuality.” Comprehensive sexual health education and contraception are necessary to avoid unintended pregnancy and prevent the spread of sexually transmitted disease. Further, boys and men play a critical role in disassociating violence and healthy sexual expression. The policy should place more emphasis on the role of men and boys in changing unhealthy power dynamics and harmful gender norms, and ensuring they take a larger role in promoting gender equality, challenging the attitudes and beliefs that support violence, and dismantling structures that undermine efforts to promote gender justice.

Global Snapshots by Sector page 16: The policy notes that “Women may also be disproportionately expected to carry out often undervalued caretaking responsibilities, which may further limit their ability to thrive.” Women's disproportionate care burden is greatly exacerbated by restricted access to comprehensive sexual health education and safe contraception. The omission of this connection violates the “Do no harm” policy objective previously stated.

Global Snapshots by Sector page 16: Opportunities across all 13 sectors will increase for women who have access to comprehensive family planning and contraception.

Global Snapshots by Sector-Conflict and Insecurity pages 19-20: The policy notes that “Women’s lack of equitable representation in local and national politics constrains progress toward parity in other sectors - educational attainment, health, economic participation and opportunity - at great cost not only to individual women, but to the welfare of their societies.” The corollary is also true. Increased women’s participation in local and national politics accelerates the closing of the gender gap by influencing policies across all sectors.

Global Snapshots by Sector-Economic Growth page 21: “Even as women have entered the paid labor force, they remain largely responsible for care and housework — a pattern that is accentuated after marriage and childbearing. This can result in lower economic growth both at the national and business level.” The impact of childbearing on economic growth makes access to comprehensive family planning even more imperative.

Global Snapshots by Sector-Economic Growth page 23: “These barriers include women’s ability to access institutions, travel freely, own and manage property, build credit, and work in the same jobs and sectors as men.” The inability to control their own reproduction is an additional barrier for women and should be added.

Global Snapshots by Sector-Education page 24: “Negative gender norms and expectations around young women’s societal roles and inadequate or inaccessible infrastructure—including poor water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities—combined with social pressures to drop out of school, often prevent girls from continuing their education and limit their access to training and employment.” The policy should add that unplanned pregnancies often prevent girls from continuing their education and limit their access to training and employment.

Global Snapshots by Sector-Global Health page 29: The policy frames fertility and family planning discussions as occurring between spouses to the exclusion of people who want access to family planning and reproductive health care outside of marriage. Instead of this narrow view, the policy should focus on evidence-based content to advance sexual and reproductive health by addressing the global unmet need for contraception and access to the full range of modern contraceptive methods. In addition, the policy should emphasize the need for comprehensive sexual health education and reproductive health access to young people to help them determine their own health and life outcomes. Achieving the highest standard of sexual and reproductive health and rights is based on the fundamental human rights of all individuals to: have their bodily integrity, privacy and personal autonomy respected; freely define their own sexuality; decide whether and when to be sexually active; choose their sexual partners; have safe and pleasurable sexual experiences; decide whether, when and whom to marry; decide whether, when and by what means to have a child or children and how many children to have; and have access over their lifetimes to the information, resources, services and support necessary to achieve all the above, free from discrimination, coercion, exploitation and violence. The policy should include this broad view of sexual and reproductive health to give substance to its stated concern for gender equality and women's empowerment.

Global Snapshots by Sector-Global Health page 30: “Fertility awareness” is an insufficient recommendation. Instead, the policy should state that “Fertility awareness coupled with access to comprehensive sexual health education and contraception can help reduce adverse health outcomes, in part due to improving healthy timing and spacing of pregnancies so that women

and their babies have opportunities to thrive. Addressing the root causes for early marriage and early sexual debut should be considered to achieve equality and empowerment for women and girls, and to help promote safe, nurturing, and stable marriages, families, and communities.”

Missing from all sections of the draft policy: Finally, rather than a robust policy to advance gender equality and augment the 2012 USAID Gender Policy, this draft removes references to critical language affirming the inclusivity of people “regardless of age, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability status, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, geographic area, migratory status, forced displacement, or HIV/AIDS status.” It also removes several references to marginalization of people based on “ethnicity, gender identity, sexual orientation, lack of income, disability or other factors,” and the definition of “gender identity” resulting in a document that denies equality rather than advances it. The policy fails to acknowledge LGBTI individuals and is regressive in regard to inclusivity and intersectionality.

Of particular concern are repeated references to “citizens” instead of individuals, which would exclude large groups of people and particularly humanitarian/refugee/stateless populations who constitute a considerable focus of U.S. foreign assistance. The current wording limits USAID’s mandate to only benefit citizens rather than individuals more generally.