



Women's  
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Initiative

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# DISRUPTING PROGRESS

The Devastating Impact of  
Trump's Executive Orders on  
Ugandan Women's Rights

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# Acronyms

<b>ADS:</b>	Alternative Distribution System
<b>AIDS:</b>	Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome
<b>ARVs:</b>	Antiretroviral Drugs
<b>CSO:</b>	Civil Society Organisation
<b>DEI:</b>	Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
<b>DFID:</b>	United Kingdom's Department for International Development
<b>GBV:</b>	Gender Based Violence
<b>GGR:</b>	Global Gag Rule
<b>EOs:</b>	Executive Orders
<b>HIV:</b>	Human Immunodeficiency Virus
<b>LGBTQI:</b>	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, and Intersex People
<b>MGLSD:</b>	Ministry of Gender Labour and Social Development
<b>MFPED:</b>	Ministry of Finance, Planning and Economic Development
<b>MoH:</b>	Ministry of Health
<b>NGOs:</b>	Non-Governmental Organizations
<b>PEP:</b>	Post-Exposure Prophylaxis
<b>PEPFAR:</b>	U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief
<b>PLW:</b>	People Living with HIV/AIDs
<b>PPP:</b>	Public-Private Partnership
<b>PREP:</b>	Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis
<b>PWDs:</b>	Persons with Disabilities
<b>UHMG:</b>	Uganda Health Marketing Group
<b>UK:</b>	United Kingdom
<b>UNFPA:</b>	United Nations Population Fund
<b>USA:</b>	United States of America
<b>USAID:</b>	United States Agency for International Development
<b>WHO:</b>	World Health Organisation
<b>WPI:</b>	Women's Probono Initiative
<b>WROs:</b>	Women Rights Organizations

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# Introduction

The United States of America (USA) has been a global reference point for the past few centuries. With various changes in the way democracy is presented, the USA is regarded as being the closest to the epitome of democracy. The world that firmly believes in this government model looks to America for hope, as one would look to the sun during the rainy season. For this very reason, the executive orders by President Donald Trump are causing tremors across the globe. A few hours after his inauguration, President Donald Trump issued several executive orders and memos across a wide range of areas from bureaucratic reorganization to trade, energy, gender, migration, and national security, among others, which aim at swiftly implementing his policy agenda and campaign promises.

One of the most prominent executive orders signed by President Trump calls for a ninety-day freeze and review of all U.S. foreign aid obligations and disbursements. Trump's deliberate destruction of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) marked a significant shift in the landscape of American foreign aid and global development. Established in 1961, USAID has long been a cornerstone of USA efforts to promote humanitarian assistance around the world. However, under President Donald Trump, the USAID faced unprecedented scrutiny and a re-evaluation of its role in development. The administration's "America First" policy emphasized national interests over global commitments, leading to a rethinking of how foreign aid is allocated and administered. Characterized by reducing expenditures and prioritizing bilateral agreements over multilateral partnerships, Trump's approach not only influences the strategic direction of USAID's programs, it also raises concerns about the potential long-term implications for global development efforts generally and financing women's rights in particular.

For this analysis, the 2025 USA presidential executive orders are categorised into four broad areas (see Table 1). One is the political angle, principally relating to the aspiration of making America great again. This extremist sentiment fell on fertile soil as white supremacy surged as a rising threat – globally and domestically. Second is economic nationalism, and this pillar aligns with the overall republican party ideology on tax cuts for big companies to promote economic growth and focuses on private healthcare to reduce the cost of government-provided healthcare. The third is national security. Having constructed immigrants as a domestic threat to security, racist attacks fall in neatly as the natural response by portraying non-whites as the drivers of high crime rates and job insecurity. The fourth and probably most important for this particular analysis is the pillar of meritocracy, anti-gender ideology, but harbouring extreme anti-equity and ultra-misogynistic sentiments.

**Table 1: Framing The 2025 USA Presidential Executive Orders**

<p><b>Political &amp; Economic Nationalism (America First)</b></p> <p>(23 Executive Orders)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14148 Initial rescissions of harmful executive orders and actions</li> <li>• 14149 Restoring freedom of speech and ending federal censorship</li> <li>• 14150 America first directive to the Secretary of State</li> <li>• 14153 Unleashing Alaska's extraordinary resource potential</li> <li>• 14155 Withdrawing the United States from the World Health Organization</li> <li>• 14158 Establishing and implementing the President's Department of Government Efficiency</li> <li>• 14160 Protecting the meaning and value of American citizenship</li> <li>• 14162 Putting America first in international environmental agreements</li> <li>• 14163 Realigning the United States Refugee Admissions Program</li> <li>• 14167 Clarifying the military's role in protecting the territorial integrity of the United States</li> <li>• 14169 Re-evaluating and realigning United States foreign aid</li> <li>• 14171 Restoring accountability to policy-influencing positions within the federal workforce</li> <li>• 14172 Restoring names that honour American greatness</li> <li>• 14174 Revocation of certain executive orders</li> <li>• 14176 Declassification of records concerning the assassinations of President John F, Kennedy, Senator Robert F. Kennedy and the Rev, Dr. Luther King Jr.</li> <li>• 14177 President's Council of advisors on science and technology</li> <li>• 14179 Removing barriers to American leadership in artificial intelligence</li> <li>• 14180 Council to assess the Federal Emergency Management Agency</li> <li>• 14181 Emergency measures to provide resources in California and improve disaster responses in certain areas</li> <li>• 14184 Reinstating service members discharged under the military's COVID-19 vaccination mandate</li> <li>• 14186 The iron dome for America</li> <li>• 14188 Additional measures to combat Anti-Semitism</li> <li>• 14189 Celebrating America's 250<sup>th</sup> Birthday</li> </ul>
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<b>Economy, capitalism and Neoliberal Orthodoxy</b> (4 Executive Orders)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14154 Unleashing American energy</li> <li>• 14156 Declaring a national energy emergency</li> <li>• 14178 Strengthening American leadership in digital financial technology</li> <li>• 14195 Expanding educational freedom and opportunity for families</li> </ul>
<b>National Security</b> (8 Executive Orders)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14152 Holding former Government's officials accountable for election interference and improper disclosure of sensitive Governmental information</li> <li>• 14157 Designating Cartels and other organizations as foreign terrorist organizations and specifically designated global terrorists</li> <li>• 14159 Protecting the American people against invasion</li> <li>• 14161 Protecting the United States from foreign terrorists and other national security and public safety threats</li> <li>• 14164 Restoring the death penalty and protecting public safety</li> <li>• 14165 Securing our borders</li> <li>• 14166 Application of protecting Americans from Foreign adversary-controlled Applications Act to TikTok</li> <li>• 14175 Designation of Ansar Allah as a foreign terrorist organization</li> </ul>
<b>Anti-equity &amp; ultra-misogyny</b> (9 Executive Orders)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• 14151 Ending radical and wasteful government DEI programs and referencing</li> <li>• 14168 Defending women from gender ideology extremism and restoring biological truth to the Federal Government</li> <li>• 14170 Reforming the Federal hiring and restoring merit to Government service</li> <li>• 14173 Ending illegal discrimination and restoring merit-based opportunity</li> <li>• 14182 Enforcing the Hyde Amendment</li> <li>• 14183 Prioritizing military excellence and readiness</li> <li>• 14185 Restoring America's force</li> <li>• 14187 Protecting children from chemical and surgical mutilation</li> <li>• 14190 Ending radical indoctrination in K-12 schooling</li> </ul>

**Source:** Federal Register 2025 (NB: This table represents the key highlights of Donald Trump's 2024 electoral promise to the American citizen).



# Methodology

This issue paper was derived through content and discourse analysis of the 2025 US presidential executive orders and a scoping review of literature, documents, and reports. In addition, selected voices were captured through online conversations. As part of the mapping exercise, the Women's Probono Initiative (WPI) convened a consultative meeting of key stakeholders to brainstorm and share their perspectives on how the US presidential executive orders have impacted (or will likely impact) women's rights in Uganda. The paper is organized as follows: The introduction provides the context and a brief understanding of the 2025 US presidential executive orders as part and parcel of the Republican ideology (only driven to the near extreme). This is followed by the location of the US and the global architecture. The next section is about foreign aid and women's rights in Uganda, specifically looking at the direct and indirect impact of the withdrawal of funding in the health sector. We then go into reading the implications of Trump's executive orders for women's rights in Uganda, pointing out the broad impact of a backlash based on the convoluted manner in which gender has been swept into the mix of many dissimilar contexts. In a sense, the executive orders have added more fuel to the backlash that already existed around gender equality and women's rights – re-arming conservative forces to enable them to re-tighten the grip on women's citizenship and dignity. The sections that follow look at pointers to lessons and the way forward.

# Trump, America, and the Global Architecture

The executive orders have attracted different sentiments. Some critical voices have argued that Trump's approach undermines decades of bilateral support for foreign aid as a tool for promoting stability, security, and prosperity around the world, and this could have lasting repercussions on future collaborations. Countries that had previously relied on U.S. support may seek alternative partnerships with other nations ready to render aid without political and economic strings. This shift could diminish U.S. influence in global development discussions and weaken America's standing as a leader in humanitarian efforts.

Another level of critique is that Trump's actions are a 'rollout of white supremacy,' sexism, and religious fundamentalism. Orders like Protecting the American people against invasion (14159), Protecting the United States from foreign terrorists and other national security and public safety threats (14161), Restoring the death penalty and protecting public safety (14164), Securing our borders (14165), and Designation of Ansar Allah as a foreign terrorist organization (14175) are some of the core executive orders targeting black and brown people.

Trump's comments on immigration policies, such as referring to some Mexican immigrants as "rapists" and "criminals," have been seen as racially charged. Trump's decision to label Mexican cartels as "foreign terrorist organizations" and deploy military forces to the U.S.-Mexico border perpetuates harmful racial narratives. The hurtful sentiment encompassed within these directives ignores the humanity and dignity of immigrants and inspires attacks on them and their human rights (Amnesty International 2025).

This rhetoric echoes historical policies like the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 - passed by

Congress and signed by President Chester A. Arthur, which instituted a 10-year ban on Chinese laborers migrating to the United States. Similarly, in 2017, President Trump signed an Executive Order that banned Muslim countries—Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen from traveling to the United States for 90 days and suspended the resettlement of all Syrian refugees. Some critics argue that this tactic of invoking fear of the "non-white" buttresses white supremacy's central narrative: that whiteness is synonymous with U.S. American identity, and everyone else is an outsider.

One of the most troubling executive orders eliminates Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) programs across federal agencies – which were established to address systemic inequities in hiring, retention, and advancement that have historically excluded marginalized communities. Arguably, the U.S. is one of the most highly unequal societies in terms of class, race, and gender, among others. Hence, the purpose of DEI was to correct long-standing imbalances caused by discriminatory practices (Amnesty International 2025). The nine or more Executive Orders are extremely loathsome, referring to DEI programs as demeaning and immoral race and sex-based preferences under the guise of DEI. For example, EO 14185 reads in part:

In recent years, civilian and uniformed leadership alike have implemented diversity, equity and inclusion programs and their attendant race and sex preferences within the armed forces. These actions undermine leadership, merit and unit cohesion. They also violate Americans' consciences by engaging in invidious race and sex discrimination...

On restoring merit to the federal hiring process EO 14170 reads in part:

...current federal hiring practices are broken, insular and outdated. They no longer focus on merit, practical skill and dedication to our Constitution. Federal hiring should not be based on impermissible factors such as one's commitment to illegal racial discrimination under the guise of equity or one's commitment to the invented concept of "gender identity" over sex. Inserting such factors into the hiring process subverts the will of the people, puts critical government functions at risk, and risks losing the best qualified candidates.

A rollback of this system and a return to "merit-based" systems suggests that Trump's administration ignores the structural barriers rooted in white supremacy that prevent equitable opportunities for all. It is a pushback to the efforts of feminists and the pursuit of equity globally. Black and brown communities will be most impacted - from dismantling federal equity programs to issuing controversial pardons for violent extremists - these decisions reinforce systems designed to maintain a racial and social hierarchy where whiteness holds on to its dominance.

On the topic of sexism, critics have attacked Trump's remarks about women, including derogatory comments about women and gender. Order 14168 (Defending women from gender ideology extremism and restoring biological truth to the Federal Government) has been regarded as part of the global backlash on gender and the feminist movement. The attacks on abortion and LGBTQ+ rights are often interlinked to pose a threat to the 'natural order' which has been undermined by feminism and human rights activists. The idea that there is a 'natural order' that needs to be re-established has its roots in fascist ideology, with a clear hidden intention of attacking gender equality and the women's rights agenda. According to feminists' critics, Trump's executive order that mandates the government to recognize only two sexes - male and female, based on reproductive anatomy dismisses the identities of transgender and non-binary individuals, denying their human

rights and recognition. In this, Trump's actions may sweep away the rights of diverse minorities and women's rights seem to be the obvious target, which aligns with white supremacist ideologies that glorify rigid gender norms as a means of reinforcing traditional power structures (Amnesty International 2025).

Executive Order 14182 (Enforcing the Hyde Amendment) prevents the use of federal funds to fund or promote elective abortion. According to Trump's administration, American taxpayers should not be forced to pay for elective abortion. The Republican administration seems to have a long history regarding the Hyde Amendment. In 2001, President George W. Bush restricted Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) abroad by reinstating a policy restricting family planning funding granted by USAID. The restriction has largely been referred to as the Global Gag Rule (GGR) (Skuster 2004), which took effect on March 28, 2001, when President Bush issued a memorandum to the administrator of USAID, reinstating a policy that required "foreign Non-Governmental Organizations to agree as a condition to receive federal funds for family planning activities that such organizations would neither perform nor actively promote abortion as a method of family planning in the recipient countries.

The aid restrictions and cuts attracted sharp criticism from women's rights advocates and health organizations. These policy changes not only affected reproductive health services but also complicated relationships with international partners who relied on the USA for funding.

The executive orders are not isolated acts, they represent a coordinated effort to reassert white supremacy through policy and power targeting marginalized groups, rolling back equity-focused initiatives, and protecting extremist actors which reinforces systemic racism. This calls for an attack on white supremacist policies that have waged war against human rights and women's rights in particular. It is clear that human rights are at stake, and Trump's administration will use the power of the office to attempt to roll back the hard-fought battles for equality (Amnesty International 2025).

# Foreign Aid and Women's Rights in Uganda

USAID (1994:20) has largely worked with civil society, promoting the neoliberal agenda of rolling back the role of the state. According to Carothers (1997), the single most favoured area of US civil society assistance is that of advocacy with NGOs such as human rights groups and election monitoring organizations. Specifically, Uganda is dependent on foreign aid for health care, with the United States as the country's largest provider of global health assistance. In fiscal year 2016, the United States released over USD 227 million to Uganda through USAID, majorly for HIV/AIDS, family planning, as well as maternal and child health (Hearn 2010). By September 2022, the U.S. President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) supported antiretroviral therapy (ART) for over 1.3 million Ugandans (Chimpreports 2025).

The U.S. government has partnered closely with the Ugandan Ministry of Health, other international bilateral and multilateral donors, and the private sector to help Ugandan families access a range of sexual and reproductive health care services, including family planning programming. The Ugandan Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Health has acknowledged that the US government had been contributing approximately \$300 million annually for antiretroviral (ARV) medicines, laboratory supplies, and human resources (Nafula 2025). Other donors include the United Kingdom's Department for International Development (DFID), the World Bank, and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) (Hearn 2010).

Debates surrounding foreign aid take two different facets. While one presents aid as a

lifesaving entity, critics believe that aid has created an unprecedented debt crisis in Africa compounded with acute dependency syndrome. Some scholars have argued that foreign aid brings about political manipulation and control of recipient countries (Murithi 2009). For some writers, donors are not funding the popular sectors of society, but are strengthening a new African elite committed to the promotion of a limited form of procedural democracy and structural-adjustment-type economic policies in partnership with the West (Hearn 2010).

Within the human rights and democratization rubric, Mark Robinson (1996b: 209) identifies the United States and Germany as having the largest and most prominent programmes of support to civil society organisations. Using DAC data for 1995, van Rooy and Robinson (1998: 19) calculate that the United States is responsible for 85 percent of total civil society assistance. These are followed by the like-minded group of donors (the Nordic countries, the Netherlands, and Canada), who state that the strengthening of civil society is a key objective of their aid programmes. Another important actor is the World Bank, a new but highly influential champion of civil society in Africa. Given that the USA is very influential in building civil society, which is the cornerstone of women's rights in Uganda, the USA's withdrawal from this commitment seems to be a blow to Uganda's women's rights movement, especially concerning the non-governmental organizations in the health sector and related spheres. This withdrawal could also have a contagion effect as other donor countries also attempt to realign their priorities.

# Implications of Trump's Executive Orders for Women's Rights in Uganda

There is a need to concretize what we mean by women's rights. We are talking about a highly heterogeneous social category. Women are differential by class, age, location, orientation, and belief, to mention but a few (see box 1). Women's rights are multi-layered, which has been captured by Kimberlé Crenshaw's notion of intersectionality. Crenshaw bases the notion of intersectionality on Black American women's experiences, articulating how black women are located in the intersection between racism and patriarchy. In Uganda's case, it is not one intersection but rather multiple. Women's Rights in Uganda, in this case, would encompass a diverse range of groups and identities, including rural and urban poor, ruling elites, ethnic and sexual minorities, as well as various sexual orientations such as heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, and asexual. Additionally, considerations extend to youth, persons with disabilities (PWDs), marital status (married,

single, childless, widow), socioeconomic classes (peasant, middle class), and gender identities, including transgender individuals.

Yet at the same time, there is something called women's rights as rightly articulated by Tamale (1999) in her seminal work of *When Hens begin to Crow: Gender and Parliamentary politics in Uganda*. Ugandan women are not a faceless monolith concerning class, religion, ethnicity, age, and so forth, but there are experiences of inequality that intersect with all these social categories, therefore generating the core interests of women as a group (Tamale 199:75). At the intersection of all these differences are the experiences of womanhood that then create a possibility to envision the whole notion of women's rights. This complexity of women's rights means that we have to be alert and inventive. There are never simple answers to complex questions.

## Box 1: Women's Rights as a differentiated social category



The social change experienced by people around the world due to accelerated economic globalization, neo-liberalism, and the attempt to fight against the homogenization of all women's experiences within white middle-class feminism has intensified the different debates, tensions between cultural rights and women's human rights (Aderinto, 2013, Mountis, 1996). Moreover, there has also been an assumption that different cultures have different definitions of what constitutes "human rights" (Mountis, 1996).

The aim here is not to delve into the debate between universalists and cultural relativists in understanding women's rights. Rather, the aim is to understand the context in which different people (countries) experience their reality. What is necessary, therefore, is to meet women's needs and interests in varied contexts and situations to promote change at the local level. Such a perspective opens up the possibility of forging more context-specific approaches but reflecting the actual diversity of women and the diversity of the transnational women's movement as a whole. Following Steans (2007), is it possible to hang on to and, indeed, reinvigorate the emancipatory aspirations of feminism by identifying some common experiences, interests, and/or goals shared by women in varied locales around the world?

The question that we need to critically engage with is; why do the Executive Orders by President Trump affect Uganda and its citizens? The answer seems to narrow down to two important issues. One is the aid cuts under USAID and PEPFAR. Two is the impact on the global (universal) feminist agenda. The suspension of aid raises questions about the sustainability of ongoing projects and the potential for increased suffering within the populations that relied on USA assistance. During the consultative meeting convened by WPI, a number of issues were raised, ranging from the very practical level of shortage of services, especially in the health sector, to the strategic level of the big dent in the women's rights agenda in Uganda (see Box 2 below).

**Table 2: Impact of US Presidential EOs on Women's Rights in Uganda: Voices from WPI Consultative meeting**

Direct impact on women's rights	Impact on service delivery/ Practical needs	Broader impact which includes women
Shrinking Civic Space is imminent. Increased stigma and backlash for women's rights defenders and activists as they are being accused of undermining national values, which will intensify their vulnerability and isolation.	<p>Disruption in service delivery especially for medical services to persons living with HIV/ AIDs. e.g. people have to buy HIV test kits &amp; ARVs which were previously free.</p> <p>The future is uncertain for over 1.2 million Ugandans reliant on life-saving HIV treatment, as numerous treatment centres are closing, leaving patients highly vulnerable. Critically, PEPFAR funding cuts have directly affected 400,000 people (40% of those receiving ARVs in the private sector), who previously received ARVs through PEPFAR (Nafula 2025).</p>	<p>Increased stigma and marginalisation of persons living with HIV/AIDs. This is because hospitals are developing policies to identify persons living with HIV/AIDs publicly.</p> <p>The already critical situation is further worsened by the problematic shift of HIV/AIDs care to public hospitals. These facilities, often overwhelmed, provide minimal to no privacy for individuals living with HIV. Compounding this, surveys reveal that 30% of healthcare workers harbour negative attitudes towards these patients. Consequently, there is a heightened risk of patients abandoning treatment, which will likely lead to increased drug resistance (Sky News 2025).</p>



<p>Voice and the right for women activists to speak will be curtailed. More women activists will fear to speak out. Critical aspects of women's bodily autonomy integrity and SRHRs, in general, are likely to be further silenced. Seeds for more fierce gender backlash have been sown at a stroke of a pen.</p>	<p>Increased HIV infections due to stress and abuse/misuse of ARVs in a bid to deal with uncertainty of access. This is explained by the closure of clinics that provide medicine to people with HIV/AIDS, as well as drugs that prevent transmission of the virus.</p>	<p>Decline in dissemination of sexuality education. Girls and boys may not access the much-needed awareness but girls may be the worst victims.</p>
<p>The Executive Orders and the overall global geopolitics have boosted anti-feminist imperatives and will likely result in the re-introduction of conservative legislation.</p>	<p>Women's organisations, activists and health workers dependent on US funding as all other similar CSOs have had to lay off workers. This is loss of employment.</p> <p>Dr. Diana Atwine, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health confirmed that at least 1000 people have lost their jobs following the recent executive orders by President Donald Trump (Nafula 2025).</p>	<p>Increased discrimination for minority communities such as the LGBTQ and sex workers. The Executive Orders justify the regressive laws and practice against sexual minorities not only in Uganda but all over the world.</p>
<p>Likelihood of increased Gender-Based Violence in the HIV Community as a result of anxiety. Women may suffer disproportionately.</p>	<p>There is a likelihood for increased mental health challenges. This is because counsellors in medical centres have lost their jobs creating uncertainty among PLHIV/AIDS</p>	
	<p>Victims of sexual violence will not easily access free PREP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) and PEP (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis).</p>	

**Source:** Selected views from the WPI consultative meeting held on 17/2/2025

# AID Cuts and Women's Rights in Uganda

The very obvious hit from the US is the suspension of USAID. USAID has largely been involved in Sexual and Reproductive Health (SRH) in Uganda. Indeed, in 2016, a report indicated that USD 91.74 million of U.S. global health funds went directly to 18 not-for-profit NGOs to implement a variety of programs throughout Uganda. The government of Uganda depends on USD 6.7 million annually in donor funding for reproductive health supplies, and the Ministry of Health has estimated a gap of USD 9 million in funding for family planning commodities. The USAID-supported UHMG has played a critical role in improved commodity quantification, supply and distribution especially with family planning though challenges remain. UHMG provides 80 percent of supplies in Uganda, and the National Medical Stores sometimes relies on the ADS (alternative distribution system) for stocking its own supplies.

To this end, the suspension of USAID and other U.S. funded initiatives such as PEPFAR signal disrupted long-standing relationships with local partners and communities that had benefited from U.S. support. For example, in Uganda, there has been disruption in service delivery especially for persons living with HIV/AIDS. The future is uncertain for over 1.2 million Ugandans reliant on life-saving HIV treatment, as numerous treatment centres are closing, leaving patients highly vulnerable. Critically, PEPFAR funding cuts have directly affected approximately 400,000 people (40% of those receiving ARVs in the private sector), who previously received ARVs through PEPFAR (Nafula 2025).

Furthermore, the LGBTIQ+ community, already facing systematic marginalisation, has been severely affected by the funding restrictions. As one of PEPFAR implementing partners, Tranz Network Uganda's community-led HIV prevention and treatment programs funded for essential interventions such as PrEP, ART initiation, HIV testing, health education, and the

distribution of condoms and lubricants in trans community hotspots were heavily disrupted. As a direct result, 52 trans persons on ART now face treatment interruptions, 200 will lose access to critical prevention kits and lubricants, and health talks planned for 100 community members are on hold. Beyond these immediate setbacks, the directive endangers broader HIV response gains and disproportionately impacts a population already at high risk and facing systematic marginalization. These disruptions not only jeopardise immediate health needs but also threaten broader HIV response efforts, disproportionately impacting a highly vulnerable population (Apako 2025).

The reduction in U.S. support is creating uncertainty among local governments and NGOs that have been depending on American assistance to implement their initiatives. In 2018, regions that were supported by USAID such as sub-Saharan Africa and parts of Latin America, the absence of U.S. support was felt intensely. The ripple effects of these changes extended beyond immediate project outcomes; they also threatened to undermine progress made over decades in building resilient communities capable of addressing their own development challenges. Currently in Uganda, many have lost their jobs due to these executive orders. Dr. Diana Atwine, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health confirmed that at least 1000 people from only the ministry of health have lost their jobs following the recent executive orders by President Donald Trump (Nafula 2025).

When the Global Gag Rule was previously in place, it resulted in the loss of USAID-donated contraceptives including condoms to NGOs in 29 countries including Uganda. Since that time, USAID has invested in the health supply chain to increase and improve access to reproductive, maternal, newborn, and child health commodities. Trump's expanded Global Gag Rule will impact commodity security in Uganda



by undermining two of the largest reproductive health providers who play a critical role in the distribution of contraceptive supplies.

Most Ugandans are perturbed by Trump's derogative executive orders. One feminist lawyer had this to say:

*Ahh what can I say? Trumpism is having a devastating backlash against marginalized groups including Ugandan Women. The injustices and structural violence brought forth by his anti-feminist, racist anti-immigration, Islamophobic, homo/transphobic will severely affect us. They have emboldened populist authoritarian leaders on the African continent to vigorously pursue regressive policies that worsen the conditions of women. The trump musk ultra – 'nationalistic' economic agenda has also pulled millions of funds from programmes which women were benefitting from (Feminist lawyer/scholar Uganda).*

According to some women's rights activists in Uganda that we interacted with, they were not only concerned about the loss of employment because of the sudden Executive Orders, but they also raised disastrous effects of President Trump's aid cuts on Ugandan women;

*Increased stigma, marginalisation and disruption in service delivery especially for medical services to persons living with HIV/AIDs. People may have to buy HIV test kits for themselves which were previously free. Furthermore, victims of sexual violence cannot access free PREP (Pre-Exposure Prophylaxis) and PEP (Post-Exposure Prophylaxis). There is likely to be an increase in suicidal attempts especially for persons living with HIV/AIDs who are uncertain of where they will get ARVs moving forward (WPI Consultative meeting 17/2/2025).*

*Access to safe abortion services has received further restrictions and this is a violation of the right to choose and bodily autonomy. Women currently turn to private*

*medical facilities for post-abortion care services. This may lead to an increase in maternal mortality in Uganda. The cutting of funds has affected research which ultimately affects data collection on SRHR issues, given that two hundred researchers from Makerere University were laid off after the freeze of US-based funds (WPI Consultative meeting 17/2/2025).*

*The already critical situation is further worsened by the problematic shift of HIV/AIDS care to public hospitals. These facilities, often overwhelmed, provide minimal to no privacy for individuals living with HIV. Compounding this, surveys reveal that 30% of healthcare workers harbor negative attitudes towards these patients. Consequently, there is a heightened risk of patients abandoning treatment, which will likely lead to increased drug resistance (Sky News 2025).*

Women activists also reported that President Trump's Executive Orders have bolstered some countries to reintroduce conservative laws that discriminate against women and girls. For example, Gambia is proposing the introduction of female genital mutilation. To women activists, Trump's orders are not only giving the conservative leaders (on the African continent) a leeway to stumble gender equality efforts, but the orders are also shrinking the civil society space.

*There is an increased stigma for women's rights defenders. As a result of the EOs there is likely to be increased backlash against activists because they are being accused of undermining national values, which intensifies their vulnerability and isolation.*

It seems, from the narratives above, that Trump has achieved his purpose of shrinking and waging a war against gender equality activism. Without losing hope, however, some scholars argue that a presidential term for America is only four years. While the four years may create

a dent, this situation is not permanent; another government may take over to reverse this rather ugly trend.

The role back of USAID is surely a big blow. There are organisations whose programming was over 80% USAID-funded. Even those with no direct funding have a connection. Europe is following suit in terms of either reducing or cutting foreign aid. The Netherlands has made significant cuts to development cooperation and eliminated support for women's rights

and gender equality where the Netherlands's Minister for Foreign Trade and Development, is quoted as saying "The Dutch interests will take precedence in our country's development policy. Those interests concern trade, security and migration". Most countries in Europe have announced reduced foreign aid and redirecting the money to national interests. This includes the United Kingdom announcing further cuts to the UK's overseas development aid budget, from 0.5 to 0.3 percent<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.womankind.org.uk/womankind-the-latest-uk-aid-cuts-threatens-advancement-of-gender-equality/>

# The Collapse of the Gender 'Industry'

Beyond funding, there is fear of a real pushback on the human rights agenda in general and women's rights in particular, if America becomes and assumes to be the standard as many players try to figure out how to comply with the Trump administration imperatives. Accordingly, within a space of one week, some organisations had pulled down information from their websites to be on the right side of 'things'. Gender is replaced by notions like women's protection programs, women and girls etc. For the first time, there is a global challenge and it is a big pushback. In the words of one gender development activist "We are rolling back to the 1970s, to the era of women in development to focus on service as opposed to rights" (interview 14/2/2025).

There was already stigma on the word gender and this is likely to intensify. There was already backlash as evidenced by research and commentaries by WROs leaders. Gender has been equated with sex and sexuality in an overly simplistic manner and at some point, the social construction aspect of gender was lost in the mix. The concept of gender had assumed a new meaning with convoluted status. Trump's statements are largely targeting transgender, but the aid cut is being deployed in a blanket manner. This calls for the non-convoluted conceptualisation of gender relations.

For Uganda, there is more to gender than transgender. To mention just a few, women and girls in Uganda have been subjected to immeasurable forms of abuse including alarming rates of rape, defilement, forced prostitution, early or forced motherhood, hunger, physical beatings, discrimination in property rights, unemployment forcing girls and young women (who desperately search for work abroad where they face a lot of dehumanization). The school dropout rate for girls is still high (meaning their right to education is not guaranteed) and most women do not enjoy the right to health care,

and access to justice within the Ugandan court system is very selective. Such are human rights violations Ugandan women activists cannot ignore. Yet, donor funding is being redirected without understanding these critical aspects.

The space and place of the USA as a global power is real. The direct and fierce onslaught by lumping all questions of diversity, equity, and inclusion and later tightly tying in gender, has drastically muddled the already turbulent waters. The legitimacy to claim women's rights is now dented, and the voice is severely fractured. Without a doubt, this situation requires critical reflection for women activists in Uganda on how to organize and work within the Ugandan context to achieve greater human rights for all and for women in particular.

Trump and his actions therefore seem to have planted more seeds to fuel gender backlash. Religious fundamentalists and ultra-conservatives, in their many guises, are demonstrating considerable political astuteness in a determined effort to roll back the women's human rights agenda, making the realisation of women's human rights in practice more difficult.

Researchers at the Institute of Development Studies had earlier noted as follows:

Whilst international policy between the mid-1990s and mid-2010s gave some hope for progress on gender equality, events since then- including conflicts and an increasingly insecure world have thrown these hopes into doubt... we now face backlash against gender justice and sexual rights (IDS Bulletin 55 (1) 2024).

It is also important to note that the visibility of 'women's rights' had already created a moral panic, demonstrated by worries about 'the family', the place of women vis-a-vis men in the domestic and public sphere, and especially worries about

whether women want to *rule* their husbands. There is already a clear shift in discourse – where the need to protect the family has regained traction, and gender equality is seen as a threat to the boy child and society at large (Mwiine & Ahikire 2024). **For instance, the debates on the Marriage Bill and Sexual Offences in 2024 revealed stiff** resistance and all forms of ridicule of the rights of women even within Parliament itself. This opposition to gender equality is clearly shaped by sexist norms and widespread acceptance of gender inequalities as biologically inevitable and justified. This backlash is likely to be further aggravated by the sweeping entanglements engendered by President Trump's EOs.

## Pointers to Lessons

### The need to Renew the gender and women's rights agenda

There are particular actors whose view is that the gender field has been infiltrated and overloaded. To this end, gender meant anything ranging from children, youth PWDs, minorities (including sexual minorities), and in some cases, women come in last or never. It is critical to note, that just like class, gender, and disability are categorizations, LGBTQI is another categorization. In other words, the LGBTQI category is also gendered, just like the disabled or black and white are gendered. Among the LGBTQI are women or the feminine category who need to enjoy rights just like other women. In this case, therefore, there is a need to separate women's rights from being synonymous with LGBTQI just like President Trump assumes. One informer had this to say;

*The gender field is overloaded. I get surprised when anything goes and is associated with gender. It has created ambiguity making it easy to squeeze and crush the whole arena of women's rights (Male, gender and development actor).*

Another important aspect to consider is that the gender industry has had many actors, in some cases, with those with little expertise

as the most outspoken, and it is now extreme positions against extreme positions. Also, most of the funding was in the name of gender, but as already noted, the women's rights agenda was funded by and from the margins, and most gender work had been only catalytic. Hence, according to this section of actors, it may turn out that gender and women's rights will now remain with the real people. In other words, ugly as it may look, the collapse of the gender industry could be the midwife of new social movements and new women's rights movement encounters. For example, some reflections are already coming out like;

*'There is need for solidarity. Women's rights organisations and activists need to speak with one voice in order to create impact.'*

The milestones the women's rights lobby has achieved at global and national levels cannot be erased. The milestone is partly what gave birth to the gender industry. Now, this milestone has been subjected to a big tremor, causing huge cracks but it is still part of our living history. What steps need to be taken in the immediate, and long term?

## Selected voices

We sent an online question to a few actors, on their thoughts on Trump's executive orders and the impact on women's rights agenda. Below are selected responses:

*I have avoided high blood pressure all these years, and I am not about to get it now (feminist scholar). There is no new analysis because Trump is simply repeating term one tactics but on steroids. We should have seen this coming... Trumps actions as they relate to foreign policy decisions that affect Africa from disbanding USAID which will affect SRHR funding, withdrawing from WHO..or his executive decisions on gender and DEI are not new. They come out of his term 1 playbook and are simply ratcheted up to foreground the ethno-nationalist character of his regime. The lessons here for women's rights actors globally is scenario building. In a global environment where far-right governments like Trump are an increasing phenomenon we need to be better at preparing for disasters (Feminist Scholar SOAS London).*

*The current wave of pushback is more brazen and perhaps brutal (though not unexpected). But Bangladesh is more hopeful. Even the darkest moment has resistance within (Feminist Scholar Bangladesh and IDS Sussex).*

*It is illusionary to assume that our salvation will be imported from overseas. We cannot import democracy or women's rights from America or elsewhere. It must be homegrown (Male academic).*

*Perhaps this is the time to decolonize, and build a truly African women's rights agenda not sure how (male academic on X).*

Furthermore, the WPI consultative meeting participants had the following pointers:

Selected Reflections from WPI consultative meeting

*There is a need to hold the government accountable as duty bearers for the rights of their citizens especially prioritising the provision of social services. Women's Rights Organisations and activists need to hold the Uganda Aids Commission accountable to push for the enactment of the National Health Insurance Bill which provides for the national health fund.*

*There is a need for scenario building and to strategize on the way forward when an emergency such as this happens. This can be used to build a resource of ideas on how to re-energise the pursuit of women's rights.*

*We need better public-private partnerships with ARV manufacturing companies such as CIPLA (a company producing ARVs in Uganda). One of the strategies should be to subsidize the taxes of these local companies so that drugs are bought in Uganda. The Government needs to invest in local research like we did during the COVID-19 pandemic when the Government supported the manufacture of Covidex.*

*There is a need to unlearn and re-learn how women's rights organisations can finance their work. It has also become clear to us that there is a need to fundraise outside the USA.*

*There is a need to prioritise community support groups to address the mental health of persons living with HIV.*

The above, are a clear indication that women activists are picking important lessons. The question that seemed to linger around them was

*'Why should a decision by the US cause commotion and hopelessness in our country?'*

With hope and resilience, they reminded themselves

*"As women's rights activists, we need to conduct self-care and wellness sessions to remedy the burnout caused by addressing the executive orders."*

In very specific ways there is a need for dialogue in order to do 'justice' to the plurality of positions

occupied by different women across the globe. Localising means recognising and integrating indigenous knowledge and ideas, emphasizing their essential role in the process. Indigenous ideas cannot exist without indigenous communities. Away from the funding issue, the discourse around women's rights is sailing in a campus-less boat and there is a need to re-engineer the voice.

## The path ahead is to be made by actual walking

There is a lot to learn and re-learn from Trump's Executive Orders for developing countries like Uganda. It is clear that women's organisations will be affected because of the dependence on America and Europe for funding feminist activities in Uganda. Breaking the dependence seems to be the best approach to sustainable feminist activities and programming. Awino Okech (2009) argues that it's only the emergence of autonomous African-led feminist funding bodies that can rectify aid imbalances, reshaping the thinking and accountability mechanisms concerning women's rights.

It is from such a background that we need to reflect on how much of the national budget the government of Uganda sets aside for gender-related activities and emphasis on women's rights and justice in Uganda. For Uganda, it is a call to action, and an opportunity to restructure and fortify its gender agenda framework to become more self-sufficient and resilient. Good governance and institution building requires establishing transparent, accountable, and

equitable governance structures that can attract investment, build trust, and create a stable environment for economic development, which can aid developing countries like Uganda to move towards greater self-reliance.

Self-reliance does not only give developing countries the liberty to finance their activities, it also empowers local communities to identify their challenges, focusing on issues that affect them. As Escobar (2011) notes, for development to be enduring and effective, it ought to be based on the assessment of local realities, which are the lived experiences and history of a people, as inherent in these are the proper conditions for change. Such local realities are lost when programmes of a country are dependent on others. At the core of all this is self-determination - people need the power and resources to build solutions that are relevant to them. Below is a matrix that makes a summation of the way forward for Uganda's women's rights agenda - indeed confronting the challenge with agency.



**Table 3: Way Forward**

Issue	Pathway	Key actors
There is a sense of helplessness especially among those most affected by HIV.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hold government accountable as duty bearers for the rights of the citizens especially prioritizing social services provision.</li> </ul>	CSOs
The health sector as the most hit requires swift state intervention. HIV and malaria will put a heavy burden on the households and women will suffer disproportionately in terms of the work/ care burden as well as attendant consequences like mental health and GBV.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Urgent need for pro-poor interventions.</li> <li>• Government should move swiftly into workable PPP with ARV manufacturing companies for possible subsidies and/or exemptions.</li> <li>• This intervention is about good economics to ensure productivity.</li> <li>• Invest in local research, learning from the COVID-19 era when government supported the manufacturing of Covidex.</li> </ul>	Ministry of Trade, Ministry of Health, MFPED, Parliament of Uganda CSOs (to craft advocacy messaging for the key actors)
Poor people especially women will face critical health challenges.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expedite the National Health Insurance Law.</li> </ul>	CSOs, Uganda Aids Commission
SRHRs care is a critical area that may be once again neglected, causing loss of vitality, especially amongst young people – loss of a generation.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage the existing infrastructure to ensure continuity of care.</li> </ul>	MoH, MGLSD, WROs
Risks to the women's rights agenda – demonization, backlash, rearming of conservative forces and further restricted funding.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dialogue on women's rights trajectory to strategize on voice and framing of women's rights.</li> <li>• Reaffirm the feminist stance in the country.</li> <li>• Relearn new modes of financing the women's rights agenda.</li> <li>• Forge new ways of organizing &amp; advocacy.</li> </ul>	WROs Academia MGLSD Donor community Women leaders
Uncertain present and future for the human rights agenda in general, women's rights in particular	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scenario building and creating a resource of ideas on how to reenergize the front of women's rights.</li> </ul>	WROs Academia MGLSD

# Conclusion

It should be clear that dependence on foreign aid will keep poor countries like Uganda caught up in the permanent tug of war between the vision of the donor (enforcing Western hegemony). An important issue to consider is the diversification of funding. Some of the funders do not have overt political ambitions, and they may give unrestricted funding. Such grants may give organisations space to use the grant the way they want. While the immediate implications of the freeze are indeed daunting, this crisis offers an opportunity for innovation, new partnerships, and the construction of sustainable funding mechanisms.

On the very practical side, the Uganda government has to be accountable to its citizens and do what it takes to protect them. The very immediate and direct action is related to the subsidization of ARVs to make them accessible, especially for the poor. Wimbi (2013) and many others have been sounding these same bells. If morbidity engulfs the population, there will be no productive citizens, and the women, once again, will be the victims of the disease, as well as the attendant increased work burden.

Last but not least, the clear understanding and deployment of gender as a concept and a collective voice of the women's movement – organizing – are some of the ideas on how Uganda's gender agenda may surmount the current setback and grow stronger.

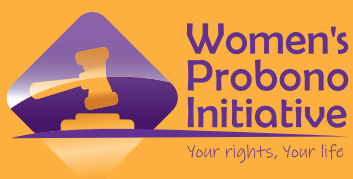


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