

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

August 26, 2020

Acting Administrator John Barsa
United States Agency for International Development
1300 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Dear Acting Administrator Barsa,

We write to express our concerns regarding the draft of the 2020 USAID Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment Policy. USAID has spent the last decade strengthening its ability to improve life for women and girls around the world. We do ourselves and those who benefit from U.S. programs abroad a disservice by ignoring the previous commitments we have made and needlessly starting from scratch.

A central governing document overseeing gender equality and women's empowerment should reflect evidence-based approaches and identify appropriate Agency roles and resources to effectively leverage U.S.-taxpayer supported foreign assistance. Such a policy should be written with a focus on technical expertise, with minimal political interference, reflecting the latest evidence and best practices to ensure that the United States lives up to its stated commitment to advance gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment. We are concerned that, breaking with precedent, this draft policy seems to have been developed as a political document and reflects priorities that may undermine gender equality.

As Members who have traditionally worked hand-in-hand with USAID with the goal of improving the lives of women and girls, we express the following concerns with this proposal:

1. This policy constitutes a full revision and reversal of existing policy that has been honed for over a decade. The new text narrowly recasts gender equality, reducing the focus on girls and minimizing the role of social norms, roles, structures, power imbalances, and institutions that perpetuate inequality.
2. Gender equality must be inclusive and intersectional, and USAID programs must recognize the existence and specific needs of LGBTI people.
3. The policy defines rights as basic, legal or "unalienable," rather than writing a policy that reflects and conforms with the existing globally recognized human rights approach or the treaties that define and strengthen human rights frameworks around the world.
4. The draft policy fails to recognize the critical role that comprehensive reproductive health plays in ensuring gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment. For example, access to modern, evidence-based contraceptives is critical for gender equality, but this new policy excludes any mention of contraceptives from the health section, and only


references “communication between spouses” as the recommended tool for family spacing.

5. There are numerous structural omissions that would undermine the effectiveness and consistency of USAID’s gender equality and women's empowerment efforts. The updated policy makes no reference to several relevant and exigent USG policies pre-dating this Administration including: U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally (2016 update); U.S. Global Strategy to Empower Adolescent Girls (2016); and USAID Youth in Development Policy (2012). It also fails to include key components from the USAID Congressional Notification on the DDI bureau like the Senior Coordinator for Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, and the Youth and Inclusive Development Hub. The policy also fails to ensure that a gender analysis shapes the strategies, projects, and activities of USAID as mandated by the WEEE Act.

These concerns represent just a few of the issues experts consider critical to advancing gender equality and women’s empowerment. This draft policy falls well short of these expected benchmarks. With these concerns in mind, we request that the external comment period be extended, that further Congressional consultations be held, and that the policy not be considered finalized until these limitations have been addressed.

We look forward to your prompt reply.

Sincerely,



Grace Meng
Member of Congress



Barbara Lee
Member of Congress

/s/ Norma J. Torres
Member of Congress

/s/ Jackie Speier
Member of Congress

/s/ Brenda L. Lawrence
Member of Congress

/s/ Adam Smith
Member of Congress

/s/ Andy Levin
Member of Congress

/s/ Deb Haaland
Member of Congress

/s/ Ted Deutch
Member of Congress

/s/ Veronica Escobar
Member of Congress

/s/ James P. McGovern
Member of Congress

/s/ Jim Cooper
Member of Congress

/s/ Darren Soto
Member of Congress

/s/ Chrissy Houlahan
Member of Congress

/s/ Ilhan Omar
Member of Congress

/s/ Jan Schakowsky
Member of Congress

/s/ Juan Vargas
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/s/ Anthony G. Brown
Member of Congress

/s/ Lois Frankel
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/s/ Gregory W. Meeks
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/s/ Dina Titus
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/s/ Susan Wild
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/s/ David Trone
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/s/ Lisa Blunt Rochester
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/s/ Stephen F. Lynch
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/s/ Lucille Roybal-Allard
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/s/ Nydia M. Velázquez
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/s/ Raúl M. Grijalva
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/s/ Jared Huffman
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/s/ Eliot L. Engel
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/s/ Marcia L. Fudge
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/s/ José E. Serrano
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/s/ Gwen S. Moore
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/s/ Jim Costa
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/s/ Joseph P. Kennedy, III
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/s/ Adam B. Schiff
Member of Congress

/s/ Ami Bera, M.D.
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/s/ Grace F. Napolitano
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/s/ Derek Kilmer
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/s/ Eddie Bernice Johnson
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/s/ Sylvia R. Garcia
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/s/ Michael F.Q. San Nicolas
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