



Diplomatic Doublespeak: U.S. Representatives Seek to Undermine U.N. Sex and Gender Terminology Ahead of Commemorative Day to End Gender-Based Violence

As United Nations leaders gathered last Monday to commemorate the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women (officially recognized on Nov. 25th), the United States attempted to weaken a number of [U.N. Third Committee](#) resolutions related to gender-based violence (GBV). The Third Committee, one of the six main committees of the U.N. General Assembly, handles matters related to social, cultural and humanitarian affairs, as well as human rights—including the advancement of women.

The U.S.' latest antics at the U.N. began making headlines last month when it was reported that the [U.S. was seeking to strip the word "gender,"](#) including the phrase "gender-based violence," out of U.N. resolutions. The reports coincided with news that the Trump-Pence administration was also considering proposals to [narrowly redefine the legal definition of gender](#). Both efforts were viewed as a means of limiting the rights and protections of transgender individuals. However, when questioned about its positioning at the U.N., [a State Department spokesperson](#) denied that was the intent, claiming instead that the motivation for proposing the use of "women" or "women and girls" in place of "gender" (e.g. violence against women vs. GBV) would make the resolutions not only "clearer" and "more accurate," but also "stronger in the administration's efforts to empower women and girls." It's an interesting explanation coming from an administration whose rhetoric and actions at the U.N. and elsewhere have consistently undermined the empowerment of women and girls.

One need only look at the U.S.' official positions and amendments on the Third Committee resolutions on [violence against women](#), [female genital mutilation](#) and efforts to [end obstetric fistula](#) to see how easily the U.S. can disregard the health and rights of women and girls. For years, the U.S. negotiating position at the U.N. was in support of "sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights," a long-held, well-understood international consensus position. For a brief period near the end of the Obama administration, the U.S.—after years of internal discussions and pressure from advocacy groups—was willing to accept the more progressive framing "sexual and reproductive health and rights." The U.S. has now appeared to abandon that language altogether.

On all three resolutions, the U.S. issued positions disassociating themselves with any operative paragraphs containing the terms “sexual and reproductive health” or “sexual and reproductive health-care services,” alleging that the terms [“have accumulated connotations that suggest the promotion of abortion or a right to abortion that are unacceptable to our administration.”](#) This behavior isn’t surprising, or out of the ordinary for the Trump administration. In fact, rumors that the administration is seeking to eliminate any use of the phrase “sexual and reproductive health” in the U.S. State Department’s work and diplomacy prompted several members of Congress to send a [letter](#) to Secretary of State Pompeo urging him to reconsider.

The U.S.’ interference and [position on the resolution on violence against women](#), which focused on sexual harassment, was even more distressing. The U.S. [offered an amendment](#) to strike the entire operative paragraph on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, arguing that the language is “inconsistent with the theme” of sexual harassment. Claiming that access to sexual and reproductive health care, information and education are irrelevant to sexual harassment reflects either a poor understanding of the issue or a blatant effort to put a political agenda ahead of the well-being of women, girls and all survivors of harassment. Sexuality education and information can play an important role in helping individuals to understand their right to live free from GBV—including sexual harassment—and what they should do if they find themselves in uncomfortable or dangerous situations. The U.S. also sought, unsuccessfully, to amend the paragraph on comprehensive education to explicitly state that individual member states have the right to control what is addressed in their curricula. Although definitions vary, sexual harassment covers a wide continuum of behaviors, some of which may involve physical conduct, including sexual demands or requests for sexual favors that individuals may feel obligated or coerced to carry out. It’s reasonable to assume in these scenarios that some of those subjected to harassment may need to seek out health services, just as those who’ve experienced other forms of GBV would. The amendment failed after being widely opposed, including by U.S. allies.

The U.S. also made clear that it took issue with what it sees as the resolution’s conflation of sexual harassment with physical violence against women. It argued that not all sexual harassment would classify as violence under U.S. law and that sexual harassment is generally considered a violation of the Civil Rights Act, not the U.S. criminal code, which deals with violent crimes. Although sexual harassment is largely handled as a civil issue, this U.S. position runs counter to widely accepted international definitions and the U.S. State Department’s description of GBV, which has long included [sexual harassment](#).

Also flagged by the U.S. was a section in the resolution on [school-related violence](#), which the U.S. noted needs to be “... consistent with domestic law, including applicable due process protections.” The note is likely a reference to the [newly proposed Title IX rules](#) regarding the handling of sexual assault and harassment in U.S. schools and universities, released by Betsy DeVos’ Department of Education just days before the U.S. provided its position and explanation on the U.N. resolution. The proposed rules backtrack efforts made during the Obama and prior administrations to tackle the issue of sexual assault and harassment on college campuses. The proposed rules narrow the definition of sexual misconduct while enabling schools to require higher burdens of proof, permit colleges and universities to choose not to investigate cases that occur off-campus, and allow those accused of sexual assault to cross-examine survivors (through a third party) in disciplinary hearings, among other changes. These changes have been criticized by many as putting the rights of schools and those accused of assault above the rights of survivors.

By all indications, this administration isn't concerned with empowering women and girls, and is instead determined to push an extreme ideological agenda with little regard for the impact that it has on women and girls.

The recent rhetoric and actions at the U.N. are just the latest examples in a series of continued attacks on women and girls' autonomy, launched in the first days of the Trump-Pence administration. Over the past two years, in the U.S. and around the world, the administration has sought to cut funding for programs that work to prevent and respond to GBV; instituted policies and rules that restrict the health services available to women and girls; and [denied asylum to those fleeing domestic violence and gang violence](#), while also stoking fears through oft-repeated, yet unfounded claims that tighter [immigration](#) and [refugee policies](#) and border security are needed to protect our country from rapists and others seeking to hurt women. The list could go on, but these are some of the most egregious of the administration's actions.

As the world kicks off the [16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence](#), the Trump administration has made clear where it stands—and it isn't with the 1 in 3 women worldwide that experience GBV or those that need access to sexual or reproductive health care.

The 16 Days of Activism Against Gender-Based Violence run from International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women on Nov. 25th through Human Rights Day on Dec. 10th. Throughout this time, PAI will be sharing analysis of U.S. policies and the work of our partner organizations around the world, as we strive together to end GBV and ensure that all survivors have access to the critical care they need.