

2025 Universal Periodic Review of the United States of America

Report from the United Church of Christ

This report is submitted by the United Church of Christ – Board for World Ministries, an ECOSOC organization accredited since 1998.

The report seeks to give an account of the continuing discrimination in the United States of America, as evidenced in the policies and practices of inequity throughout the country based on gender, orientation, and race as evidenced in health and reproductive injustices, the continuing violence against girls and women - disproportionately against those of African descent, and a lack of safeguards to protect against trafficking and exploitation.

During the 2020 Universal Periodic Review of the US, gender justice and racial discrimination - particularly against people of African descent – were addressed in the review, with many Member States recommending a series of measures to address policy and legislative gaps to promote and protect the right to freedom from discrimination based on gender and orientation.

While some progress was made in the period just after the 2020 review, significant changes occurred with Supreme Court decisions, most notably the Dobbs Decision in 2022ⁱ that reversed reproductive rights. Further restrictions occurred in January of this year, as the new administration stalled, and in some cases reversed legislation and implemented executive orders exacerbating discrimination based on gender, race, orientation, and identity.ⁱⁱ

1. The Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)

In the 2020 Universal Periodic Review of the United States, more than forty member states called for the US to ratify the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. Not only has there been no move toward ratification, in many aspects gender discrimination is expanding rather than being eliminated.

Adopted by the U.N.'s General Assembly in 1979, the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) is known as an international bill of rights for women. The treaty defines discrimination against women as “any distinction, exclusion or restriction made on the basis of sex which has the effect or purpose of impairing or nullifying the recognition, enjoyment or exercise by women, irrespective of their marital status, on a basis of equality of men and women, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field.” Currently, 187 U.N. member states have ratified CEDAW.

In reports from the Georgetown Institute on Women, Peace, and Security, ratifying CEDAW could significantly impact human rights and racial injustices in the United States including racially motivated violence against Black Americans and sexual harassment and abuse.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic exposed inequalities demonstrating that women – especially women of color – have suffered greater impacts. Studies reveal that women, disproportionately women of color, are more likely to have been laid off or furloughed during the COVID-19 pandemic.ⁱⁱⁱ

Although signed by President Carter in 1980, the United States is one of only 7 countries, including Sudan and Iran, who have not ratified the CEDAW Convention. It is the only industrialized nation that has not done so.

Recommendations:

- It is critical that the US Senate ratifies the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women as a matter of urgency.
- All recommendations made in 2020 remain relevant and should be implemented.
- The US government must recognize the particular vulnerability of women of African descent and take appropriate steps to protect them against violence and discrimination.

2. Trans, Non-Binary and Intersex People's Rights

Discrimination:

During the 2020 Review a representative from the US Department of Justice noted that the federal Government and most states in the United States had hate crime laws prohibiting violence motivated by race, color, religion and national origin and further stated that federal law and some states' laws also prohibited violence motivated by gender, disability, sexual orientation and gender identity.^{iv} However, the government of the US is now exhibiting discriminatory actions based on gender identity, opening the path to violence against individuals.

At least three executive actions taken by President Biden in 2021 concerning discrimination based on gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity were revoked by President Trump in January of 2025.^v President Trump has acted to remove protections from transgender and non-binary people with the reasoning of “defending women from gender ideology extremism” and “protecting children from mutilation and radical indoctrination.”

Trump's administration moves to limit official recognition of transgender identity nationally, taking the following actions: ending funding for hospitals that provide gender-transition treatments to minors, bar transgender women and girls from competing in women's sports, bar openly transgender people from serving in the military, house transgender women who are inmates in federal prisons with men, and to no longer reflect the gender identities of transgender people on passports.

These executive orders limit the definition of gender to focus on biology only, preventing people from living out the fullness of their identities as children of God, created in God's image.

In complying with executive orders, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has begun purging health data related to LGBTQ+ health, racial disparities, and reproductive health. A recent memo ordered the removal of content linked to so-called “gender ideology,” leading to the disappearance of key datasets like the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System and the Social Vulnerability Index. While webpages still offer background and information on the system, other featured links to substantive data have been gutted. Also removed from the CDC’s website were some pages referencing issues that include LGBTQ+ youth.^{vi}

The recent executive order denying the existence of trans and nonbinary Americans is not only a legal and political assault on this community. It is a moral and spiritual one, challenging the essence of what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves.

Equality Act

The Equality Act is proposed legislation in the United States that aims to prohibit discrimination based on "sex," which includes sexual orientation and gender identity, across various areas including employment, housing, public accommodations and facilities, education, credit, and jury selection, essentially protecting LGBTQ+ individuals from discrimination in these areas by expanding the definition of sex under existing civil rights laws. It passed the House of Representatives on February 25, 2021, but did not get a vote in the Senate, so it has not yet become law.

Recommendation:

- The US Government must re-introduce and pass the Equality Act
- Anti-discrimination policies and laws should be re-enacted so that people are not discriminated against based on gender, sexual orientation, and/or gender identity by the government or the private sector.
- The Government must ensure that critical data is not deleted from the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and other federal sites.

3. Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights

In 2020, when addressing comments made on sexual and reproductive health, the Assistant Secretary noted that abortion remained legal in the United States^{vii}, however that is no longer the case as detailed below. Additionally, recommendations 26.299 through 26.312 specifically call for comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services.

The Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization, US Supreme Court ruling on June 24, 2022, overturned the prior Roe v. Wade decision from 1974 and removed the constitutional right to privacy as regards medical decisions around abortion. The decision gives individual states the power to regulate abortion access, which has led to a variety of state policies, and limits access to abortion depending on geographic location. This decision has created a complex ethical and legal landscape for patients and providers.

The state of Texas sued a medical provider licensed by and living in the state of New York who prescribed abortion pills (approved by the Food and Drug Administration) to a woman living in Texas. The physician was fined over \$100,000 dollars and the judge issued an injunction prohibiting her from prescribing abortion medications to Texas residents^{viii}. This is a violation of the Shields Act causing more uncertainty for medical providers even in states where access to abortion is protected.

Currently, **abortion is illegal in 12 states, restricted in 14 U.S. states and territories, and not protected in four states and territories**. In six states there are severe restrictions on when a person can get an abortion legally, with many prohibiting the procedure after six weeks. It's not uncommon for people to not know that they are pregnant until after six weeks, making this limit both unrealistic and unjust.

18 states with abortion bans or early gestational limits have exceptions for when the pregnant person's life is in danger, but six states do not have exceptions for when the pregnant person's health is at risk. The determination of when a pregnant person's life vs. health is at risk is causing medical providers to withhold necessary medical care in fear of prosecution, leading to precarious outcomes for all involved.

For example, in Texas, where abortion is entirely banned and criminalized, rates of sepsis—a life-threatening condition—have risen by more than 50% for lost pregnancies that occurred in the second trimester. Historically economically marginalized populations including Black communities, people of color, and low-income communities have particularly diminished access to reproductive healthcare, placing them proportionately in greater harm.

Eight states have no exceptions for cases of rape/incest while 10 states have no exceptions when a fatal fetal anomaly is occurring. The lack of exceptions for rape, incest, or fatal fetal abnormalities leads pregnant people to experience ongoing effects on their mental, and even physical health.

The Hyde amendment, that blocks United States federal funding from being used for abortion procedures, except in the cases of rape, incest, or threat to a pregnant person's life, exacerbates abortion restrictions. Americans who have health insurance through the federal government do not have the benefit of abortion coverage. Affected programs include those that cover low-income people, disabled people, military personnel, veterans, Native Americans, federal employees, federal prisoners, detained immigrants, and Peace Corps volunteers.

The Hyde Amendment is a significant equity issue: People enrolled in Medicaid are, by definition, low-income; they are more likely to be people of color; and they are more likely to experience an unintended pregnancy.^{ix}

The Women's Health Protection Act (WHPA) is federal legislation that creates a new legal protection for the right to provide and access abortion care and the full range of reproductive healthcare. This includes protections from political or religious interference and protections from

state and federal legislation that impose medically unnecessary regulations on access to abortion services including medication, mandatory waiting periods, or full abortion bans. The need for federal abortion rights is more urgent than ever.

We know that when women and girls have full bodily autonomy and reproductive freedom their families and communities thrive. This is evident in the U.S. and around the world. For over 40 years, the United Church of Christ has affirmed and supported women's access to the full range of reproductive health care, including abortion. There is a need for faithful and strong response affirming an individual's self-determination for their own body.

Recommendations:

- The Government must re-introduce and pass the Women's Health Protection Act (WHPA) to safeguard access to abortion and the full range of reproductive healthcare.
- Nationwide legalization of abortion must resume, allowing pregnant people to access necessary medical care as determined by their doctors and medical care teams.
- The Hyde Amendment must be revoked, and federal funds allowed to go to health care providers who provide abortions both in the United States and around the world.

4. Human Trafficking

In the UPR of 2020 recommendations 26.257 and 26.279 – 26.282 refer specifically to trafficking and unfair labor practices. Although per the Attorney General for the State of Utah, Utah had prioritized combating trafficking in persons, initiatives are not established in all states.

Human trafficking—which includes forced labor, domestic servitude, child soldiers, sex trafficking, and forced marriage—is a human rights crisis in the United States. In 2024, approximately 24,000 people fell victim to human trafficking across the United States. It is the second most profitable illegal industry. Human trafficking is prevalent due to a variety of social issues, including racism, discrimination against LGBTQ+ people, unequal access to healthcare, worker protections, gender-based violence, housing inequality, and forced migration. These intersecting problems disproportionately impact vulnerable communities and must be addressed to combat trafficking.

In 2000, Congress passed the Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act, providing the legal definition and framework for prosecuting and addressing human trafficking in the United States. Since then, similar laws have been passed and re-authorized, including the Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPPRA). The TVPPRA ensures funding for prevention efforts and survivor support services.

Unfortunately, some funding provisions within the TVPPRA have already expired or will expire soon and require reauthorization. It is critical that this legislation is brought to a vote by Congress before survivors lose access to much-needed services.

The “TAKE IT DOWN Act” has been passed by the Senate but remains held in the house without vote. This bill would require platforms to take down non-consensual sexual images from their websites within 48 hours and would ultimately better protect children and adults from exploitation, trafficking, and extortion.

Trafficking human beings is a sin and a cruel violation of human rights with violence done to the physical, psychological, and spiritual wellbeing of those trafficked, many of whom are children. Survivors deserve to heal and thrive, which starts with having access to life-saving support.

Recommendations:

- The US government must do everything in its power to oppose human trafficking and empower survivors, which necessitates addressing the intersecting social issues.
- The Frederick Douglass Trafficking Victims Prevention and Protection Reauthorization Act (TVPPRA) must be immediately reauthorized.
- The Government must ensure laws, policies, and programs enacted by the original TVPPRA continue to be implemented and create new programs and regulations to prevent trafficking, protect and support survivors, and prosecute perpetrators.
- The Government must prevent and address online child sexual exploitation and trafficking by ensuring the adoption and enforcement of the “Take It Down Act” and enable greater accountability of online platforms.

United States Agency for International Development

The 2020 review contained at least six recommendations per lifting foreign assistance restrictions for women’s sexual and reproductive health services with a call to also uphold the commitments made at the Nairobi summit^x (26.149). Not only has this not been implemented, but federal assistance programs of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) are currently suspended.

One of the most widespread and detrimental acts of the US Government has been the freezing and elimination of USAID, and other foreign aid funding; resources that provide critical health services, HIV/AIDS prevention and treatment, and humanitarian assistance including natural disasters, in all parts of the world. The President’s Department of Government Efficiency (DOGE) has suspended USAID payments and programs, fired USAID staff, and ended most programs.

In February (of 2025), The Trump administration said it is eliminating more than 90% of the U.S. Agency for International Development’s foreign aid contracts and \$60 billion in overall U.S. assistance around the world, putting numbers on its plans to eliminate the majority of U.S. development and humanitarian help abroad.^{xi}

These actions literally endanger lives by eliminating critical services. This is not just an administrative change or budget cuts but is an act of violence against the most vulnerable.

Recommendations:

USAID programs and funding are vital to the well-being of the most vulnerable communities across the globe. The following are essential resources that must be immediately restored/re-instated:

- Restore funding for Presidential Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) programs at home and abroad. This global initiative to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic provides antiretroviral treatment, helps mothers living with HIV give birth to HIV-free babies, and supports orphans and other vulnerable children.
- Re-evaluate the extreme cuts at USAID and present a more moderate plan for continuance.
- Rejoin the World Health Organization and actively engage with efforts to promote world health.

ⁱ <https://constitutioncenter.org/the-constitution/supreme-court-case-library/dobbs-v-jackson-womens-health-organization>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/initial-rescissions-of-harmful-executive-orders-and-actions/>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://giwps.georgetown.edu/why-ratifying-the-convention-on-the-elimination-of-discrimination-against-women-cedaw-is-good-for-americas-domestic-policy/>

^{iv} <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/46/15>

^v <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/2025/01/initial-rescissions-of-harmful-executive-orders-and-actions/>

^{vi} <https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2025-02-03/q-amp-a-the-risks-of-trumps-purge-of-federal-health-care-websites>

^{vii} <https://docs.un.org/en/A/HRC/46/15>

^{viii} <https://www.npr.org/2025/02/14/g-s1-48889/texas-judge-fines-new-york-doctor-abortion-pills>

^{ix} <https://www.populationconnectionaction.org/policy-priorities/hyde-amendment/>

^x <https://www.icpd25commitments.org/>

^{xi} <https://apnews.com/article/trump-usaid-foreign-aid-cuts-6292f48f8d4025bed0bf5c3e9d623c16>