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Women Of Colour in International Development: Navigating Identity Assault in Trump's America

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Abstract

This paper critically examines the dismantling of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) under the second Trump administration and its implications for women of colour (WOC) in the US international development sector. Positioned within a broader ideological backlash against gender and equity, the study interprets the agency's dissolution as both a material and epistemic disjuncture that exposes the racialised and gendered hierarchies underpinning global development. Drawing on critical race theory (CRT) and intersectionality, it interrogates how White epistemic dominance and colonial legacies continue to shape structures of knowledge, labour, and legitimacy within the industry. Empirically, the paper draws on a 2025 series of focus group discussions with four WOC practitioners from a larger narrative inquiry involving twenty-four participants. Their narratives reveal that the termination of more than 90 per cent of USAID contracts and mass layoffs had disproportionate economic, psychosocial, and identity-related effects on WOC, many of whom experienced acute precarity and erasure within a hostile political climate. Yet the participants also articulated resilience and resistance through what this paper theorises as the "Five A's": assimilation, amelioration, agency, affinity, and alliances - strategies that collectively constitute intersectional survival and transformative praxis. The paper argues that the crisis of US development assistance represents both a breakdown and an opening: a moment to advance localisation, plural epistemologies, and decolonial development paradigms. Centring the counter-narratives of WOC, it contributes to critical debates on race, feminism, and power, urging a reimagining of aid architectures grounded in justice and epistemic plurality.

Keywords: Critical race theory; Decolonisation; Global aid; Intersectionality; Women of colour, USAID