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TechWomen & the Power of STEM Diplomacy ^[1]

On March 14, 2025, the Executive Director of TechWomen, a global citizen diplomacy program that has received applications from tens of thousands of women around the world in the past 15 years, sent out a devastating email: All of her staff had been furloughed, and she didn't know when their funding would resume and allow them to continue the public-private partnership. On March 27, she wrote again, but this time announced that TechWomen was back online. The WhatsApp group for the Committee to Restore TechWomen's Funding lit up with emojis and GIFs from program fellows across Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and the United States.

But what happened in those 13 days? These women leaders in STEM rallied together and wrote and published opinion articles, worked to schedule more than a dozen meetings with Congressional offices, secured bipartisan commitments of support, all volunteering their time in between work, graduate school, and family duties. While we may never know exactly why funding was restored, women in this program rallied together to fight for public diplomacy — and won.

What is so special about TechWomen, to motivate engineers, computer scientists, physicists, professors, and scholars to work tirelessly to save it? TechWomen is a U.S. State Department initiative that brings leading women in STEM from 23 countries to Silicon Valley and Chicago for month-long fellowships at top tech companies. Fellows then return home with enriched careers and their sights set on leading roles in their home societies. This includes tech giants such as Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, Google, and Microsoft, as well as start-ups of all sizes and industries, all contributing mentors.

TechWomen leans on volunteer citizen diplomats such as hard science researchers, start-up investors, and tech entrepreneurs to build friendships with future leaders in places the United States is not always welcome. Think Benghazi, Islamabad, and Gaza. TechWomen is where hard science meets soft power, and it's a key component of U.S. diplomacy's work to support American strength, prosperity, and safety.

Members of Congress know the value of soft power and have supported it vocally and budgetarily for decades. Their jobs and careers depend on their soft power skills: communication, discipline, organization, shared values, and hard-working outreach. Every member of Congress knows the value of a well-timed ad or a carefully maintained relationship. They understand that the most powerful relationships take decades to fully develop, particularly relationships with future national leaders.

However, this is not the only U.S. exchange program under threat. Fulbright Scholars in and out of the United States have been stranded. Benjamin A. Gilman Scholars haven't received the awards they won through a long and highly competitive process. As of writing, it is unclear if these invaluable programs have had their funding restored. Highly trained and dedicated employees of the 100-year-old Institute of International Education (IIE) — the group administering these programs — aren't sure when they will get their next paycheck or when they will be able to return to the citizen diplomacy-enabling work they love.

Our elected leaders also know their constituents value these opportunities: Fulbrighters come from every state in the Union, with thousands applying to these coveted, competitive, life-changing slots. For smaller, younger programs like TechWomen, dozens of companies, from Chicago to Silicon Valley, engage in public-private partnerships every year to keep them going.

Host companies hand-pick brilliant computer scientists, start-up founders, cancer researchers, climate scientists, and even the Chief Scientific Officer Nigerian Space Agency to work with them during the fellowship.

Many of these women come from countries whose top leaders often come from technical fields: the President of Kenya has a PhD in Plant Ecology; the Chief Minister of Sierra Leone has a PhD from MIT for work in its Biomechanics Group, focused on the design of comfortable prosthetic sockets and wearable interfaces; and the President of Uzbekistan has a PhD in Technical Sciences and held a professorship at the Tashkent Institute of Engineers of Irrigation and Mechanization of Agriculture.

The next generation of national leaders in the Middle East, Africa, and Central and South Asia may very well come from STEM fields. By focusing on these industries and supporting leaders within them, the United States is making a generational bet. We are betting that if we bring brilliant women in STEM to the United States early in their careers, they will forge positive first-hand experiences, learn who we are and how to work with us, and when they reach the highest points of their careers, they will know who to call if they need us.

International exchange programs have enjoyed wide, bipartisan support for decades exactly because their value to American democracy is clear. They are the engine that drives future diplomatic success, connecting people around the world as citizen diplomats. TechWomen has thrived under every Secretary of State since 2011, each of whom expanded the industries, regions, and issues it touched, incubating companies, informing policy, and improving technology.

Therefore, it is all the more shocking that these programs were under threat in the first place, even if they seem safe at this moment. The March 14 email announcing the furloughing of TechWomen staff shared it was because of “[n]umerous factors, including Executive Orders, program suspensions, and changes in the payments and processes of the U.S. Department of State have impacted our operations.”

This was heartbreaking and wrong. Thousands of women had already applied for the Fall 2025 class, and dozens of U.S. volunteer mentors were reviewing more than 50 applications each when the March 14th furlough email arrived. They were preparing to welcome an entirely new country to the fold, and the first European country to join the program: Albania. Halting this life-changing program would have done irreparable harm not only to these women, but

the reputation of the United States in countries throughout Africa, Central and South Asia, the Middle East and Europe among the very future national leaders we need relationships with to ensure American strength in the 21st century.

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Don't take my word for it.

Ejiroghene John of Nigeria (TechWomen 2023) is the Founder of the small-but-mighty Teach Girls Tech Foundation and a production engineer by training. She wrote to me: "After TechWomen mentorship I came to realize that Americans are committed to really [...] reaching real people in Nigeria. In fact I saw excitement and passion in the IIE team and the mentors and how they were eager to support our tech journeys [...] It's like a little village, a home and family."

Dr. Zebo Isakova of Uzbekistan (TechWomen 2019) is a professor and currently National Evaluator and Green Economy expert for Linpico SARL in Paris. She shared with me: "TechWomen isn't just a mentorship program — it's a global sisterhood, a STEM powerhouse."

Sylvia Mukasa of Kenya (TechWomen 2014) wrote: "As a 2014 TechWomen Fellow, seeing the program's funding restored is a deeply emotional moment for me — a testament to the power of global mentorship, resilience, and the unwavering belief that investing in women in STEM transforms lives, industries, and nations."

American mentors too were overjoyed to see their program saved.

Maryann Hrichak of San Francisco, California, wrote to me: "Smart women, smart tech and smart power: The restoration of the U.S. Dept of State's TechWomen program ensures that the U.S. will remain competitive in the global economy. My many years of involvement as an impact coach and cultural mentor have already proven the significant contributions in STEM this program has brought and will continue to bring to the table."

Amy Graff of Chicago, IL shared with me: "In an endless stream of troubling news, TechWomen being restored is a bright and hopeful reprieve. Not only do the world's most promising leaders get an opportunity to experience the warmth, generosity, and opportunity of the United States, but we mentors benefit too. I've learned more about the world, built unbreakable bonds, and been inspired in my own line of work. Above all, I now imagine possibilities for my life that would not have been conceivable without witnessing the accomplishments and drive of these amazing women."

Ella Morgulis of San Francisco, CA wrote me: "The TechWomen program is about uniting and empowering women around the world, in the U.S. and abroad. When we stood collectively and fought for it, we got the results and demonstrated that we live our values. Strong as ever."

Katy Dickinson of San José, CA told me: "I am so very glad and relieved that the funding for

TechWomen has been restored so that even more inspiring STEM leaders can join us and we can have the honor of mentoring them. Together, TechWomen work together to make the world a better place.”

People often say there is no domestic constituency for foreign aid. But there is a strong domestic constituency for international education. There are 54 Fulbright Association chapters in 38 states in the United States, who have helped to coordinate calls and meetings with Congress since the funding freeze. And even for small programs like TechWomen, there are people across the United States and around the world willing to fight for them as the 13-day fight to save TechWomen has shown.

As volunteers, we fight for these public diplomacy programs not just because they align with our personal values or because participating in them is joyful; for many of us, volunteering for these programs is one way we do our part to protect and defend our country in a complex, frightening world. We know America needs friends to be secure, needs allies to be safe, and needs co-founders, funders, employees, and customers all around the world to be prosperous.

TechWomen, Fulbright, and Gilman all benefit the United States and Americans. Members of Congress have the tools they need to protect them.

It is my sincere hope they continue to use them.

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