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Office of Inspector General  
United States Department of State

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ESP-20-04

Office of Evaluations and Special Projects

September 2020

# **Review of the Selection Process for the International Women of Courage Award**

INFORMATION REPORT

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## Summary of Review

At the request of eight Senators, the Office of the Inspector General (OIG) examined the reason for the Department of State's (Department) decision not to award an International Women of Courage (IWOC) award to Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro.<sup>1</sup> These Senators also questioned the accuracy of statements the Department made about this decision to the public and to Congress. Specifically, various media articles had reported that Ms. Aro's award had been withdrawn due to her past social media posts critical of the President, but the Department denied that it had withdrawn Ms. Aro's award, instead asserting that Ms. Aro had never been selected to receive the award in the first place and that her non-selection was for other reasons.

There is no statutory or regulatory guidance regarding this award, and the only criteria governing the processes surrounding the award are set forth in a nominating cable issued by the Department office responsible for overseeing the award process. Based on OIG's analysis of that cable and other information, OIG found that Ms. Aro had been selected for the award and notified of this selection. However, after notification but prior to the award ceremony, Department officials discovered "disconcerting" social media postings by Ms. Aro, some of which were critical of the current President, and, because of these, decided to rescind the award.

OIG found that decisions as to award recipients are governed solely by the guidance in the nominating cable and are wholly within the Department's discretion and that the Department's decision to rescind the award appeared to be an authorized exercise of its discretion. However, the Department initially stated to the public and to Congressional staff that Ms. Aro was incorrectly notified of the selection and, when asked direct questions, refused to acknowledge that her social media posts factored into the decision. The Department subsequently provided more information in response to a congressional question for the record in which it acknowledged that, in general, a nominee's social media posts is one factor reviewed when determining eligibility for an IWOC award.

## OBJECTIVES AND SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

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On March 7, 2019, Secretary of State Michael Pompeo presented the Department's annual IWOC Award to 10 women who "demonstrated exceptional courage and leadership in advocating for peace, justice, human rights, gender equality, and women's empowerment." One of the individuals who had been notified by Department officials that she was to receive the award was Finnish journalist Jessikka Aro. However, prior to the ceremony, Ms. Aro was notified that she would not receive the award.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The signatories of this letter are Senators Robert Menendez, Patrick Leahy, Richard Durbin, Benjamin Cardin, Jeanne Shaheen, Christopher Coons, Edward Markey, and Cory Booker.

<sup>2</sup> Ms. Aro was ultimately replaced by another candidate who received the award.

On the day of the ceremony, *Foreign Policy* magazine reported that Ms. Aro's award was rescinded because Ms. Aro had posted various items on social media that were critical of President Donald Trump.<sup>3</sup> In response to questions concerning the article, the Department characterized the reported reasons for the rescission as "speculation" and instead stated that Ms. Aro was "incorrectly notified" before a final decision on the award recipients had actually been made.

On March 28, 2019, eight members of the Senate requested, via letter, that OIG review why the Department had apparently rescinded the 2019 IWOC Award for Ms. Aro. The letter noted that Department personnel asserted that Ms. Aro had not actually been "selected as a finalist" and that any notification she received to the contrary was the result of a "lack of coordination" among Department officials. However, evidence suggested that the Department rescinded the award because of Ms. Aro's social media posts. The Senators requested OIG to review the decision-making process behind Ms. Aro's nomination and the accuracy of statements made by Department officials to Congress and the public.

In order to undertake this review, OIG requested and reviewed documents and emails surrounding the award process, relevant Department criteria and guidance, the Department's public statements regarding Ms. Aro's nomination, and notes taken by Congressional staff members during a Department briefing on the topic. OIG also interviewed relevant witnesses.

## **BACKGROUND**

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The IWOC Awards were established in 2007 by Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. The Department issues the awards annually in conjunction with International Women's Day, which is celebrated on March 8. Recipients attend an official awards ceremony in Washington, hosted by the Secretary and attended by the First Lady of the United States. Following the ceremony, recipients participate in meetings and interviews with government officials, nongovernmental organizations, and other stakeholders in Washington. They then participate in the International Visitor Leadership Program, traveling to various U.S. cities. Finally, each recipient is given a grant by American Women for International Understanding (AWIU) to help them continue their work. The Department uses discretionary funds to cover costs associated with the award.

No criteria regarding selection of recipients exists in statute, regulation, or the Foreign Affairs Manual. Instead, as set forth below, nomination guidance for posts and the overall guidance for determining award recipients is provided in a cable sent by the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues (S/GWI).

The selection process begins every year with a cable that S/GWI sends to all posts soliciting nominations. This cable, which has remained substantively similar since the award's inception, states that each mission may nominate one woman who has "taken unusual risks, surmounted obstacles, or challenged harmful cultural practices or discrimination in [her] efforts to defend

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<sup>3</sup> Robbie Gramer and Reid Standish, *U.S. Cancels Journalist's Award Over Her Criticism of Trump*, *Foreign Policy* (March 7, 2019).

and promote progress” in her country. The cable also states that the nomination should be approved by the Chief of Mission or the highest-ranking diplomat at the mission. The cable instructs posts to “rigorously vet” all nominees for potentially derogatory information, although it does not provide specific guidance regarding what constitutes “derogatory information” or how such information, if discovered, could affect a nomination. According to the cable, this vetting process may include:

- 1) interviewing the potential nominee
- 2) completing an exhaustive internet search on the prospective nominee’s associations and affiliations, current and past social media postings and public speaking engagements, with a continued monitoring of all social media accounts until the IWOC Awards Ceremony; reviewing other publicly available information by or about the nominee, such as that on social media blogs, media/news reports, and other online platforms
- 3) obtaining country team approval and reviewing information provided in visa namecheck systems
- 4) searching Post files
- 5) corroborating a potential nominee’s story of courage, especially if the nomination hinges on a particular story, with at least two independent sources, and
- 6) reviewing information voluntarily provided by the nominee.

Once missions have submitted nominations, S/GWI reviews them and rates them using the following criteria:

- Longevity in Cause
- Personal Risk/Endangerment
- Challenges Faced
- Measurable Progress
- Enduring Success
- Inspirational Qualities
- Leadership
- Taking it to the Next Level
- Innovation
- Institutional and Legal Reinforcement
- Assistance to Oppressed and Endangered
- Lack of Exposure to U.S.
- Lack of Prior Recognition
- Unique Area of Courage
- Whether the Mission has had an awardee in the past three years

S/GWI notes that even with these criteria, the selection process is subjective, and selections are based on discussions between S/GWI, the relevant bureaus, and the nominating posts.

Once S/GWI narrows the list of nominees to a smaller set of semi-finalists, it solicits the input of regional bureaus concerning nominees from their regions and contacts the nominating mission for any additional information needed. Finally, S/GWI selects the finalists for the award and submits the list to the Secretary as an action memo for his or her approval. Once the Secretary approves the list, S/GWI contacts the relevant missions and instructs them to contact the nominees and ask them if they accept the award and if they can travel to the U.S. for a ceremony. If a nominee accepts, the mission is instructed to begin planning for each recipient's travel.

Although S/GWI is usually led by a presidentially appointed Ambassador at Large, in 2019, it was led by a career official serving as Acting Director. This was the Acting Director's first year in this role; she had no previous involvement with the IWOC Awards.

## THE SELECTION OF JESSIKKA ARO TO RECEIVE AN IWOC AWARD

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On October 11, 2018, S/GWI disseminated a cable soliciting nominations for the 2019 IWOC Awards. On November 27, 2018, U.S. Embassy Helsinki transmitted a cable nominating Ms. Aro for an IWOC Award. This nominating cable highlighted Ms. Aro's work as a journalist exposing "disinformation campaigns perpetuated by Russia's social media propaganda machine," for which she had faced death threats that forced her to leave Finland. The idea to nominate her appears to have originated from one or more individuals within the public affairs office at Embassy Helsinki and was ultimately approved by the Deputy Chief of Mission (DCM). At the time of the approval, the U.S. Ambassador to Finland, Robert Pence, was at Post intermittently. In his absence, the DCM was acting as Chargé d'Affaires at Embassy Helsinki. The Ambassador told OIG that he was unaware of the nomination at the time it was submitted, and the DCM confirmed that she had not advised him of the decision.<sup>4</sup> The DCM explained that since Embassy Helsinki is a small post, section heads take charge of their work.

As noted above, the cable soliciting nominations stated that the social media accounts of potential nominees should be "vetted." In keeping with this guidance, the November nominating cable included the representation that "U.S. Embassy Helsinki has vetted this nomination." Individuals at Embassy Helsinki involved in vetting Ms. Aro's nomination confirmed that they had followed Ms. Aro's various social media accounts but were not concerned about any of the posts they reviewed, some of which are described later in this report.

S/GWI ultimately received 55 nominations from various posts throughout the world and began its own internal deliberative process to generate a list of 18 semi-finalists. The Acting Director stated, and contemporaneous emails reviewed by OIG confirmed, that S/GWI did not include Ms. Aro on the short list of semi-finalists from the areas covered by the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs (EUR). Although the S/GWI ratings of nominees noted that the nature of

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<sup>4</sup> Ambassador Pence provided this information to OIG as part of a separate project, namely, an inspection of Embassy Helsinki by OIG's Office of Inspections. *Inspection of Embassy Helsinki, Finland* (ISP-I-20-08, December 2019). Ambassador Pence was on leave and unavailable to be interviewed during the course of this review.

Ms. Aro's work "may prove controversial," OIG found no evidence to suggest that this initial decision not to include Ms. Aro was related to her apparent views on the current administration or the content of her social media accounts. Instead, the Acting Director stated that she and others within S/GWI were reluctant to select Ms. Aro as a semi-finalist because of the relatively short amount of time she had been engaged in the relevant work, because there were already several strong candidates from the EUR region, and because they believed she had not demonstrated the same level of heroism as some of the other nominees.

Nevertheless, Ms. Aro was ultimately included among the 10 finalists in the final action memo that was sent to the Secretary. The Acting Director stated, and the email evidence reviewed by OIG confirmed, that senior officials within EUR advocated for Ms. Aro's inclusion, particularly after S/GWI declined to include one of EUR's other nominees for wholly separate reasons. The Secretary approved this action memo, thus including Ms. Aro in the 10 finalists selected to receive the award.

On January 24, 2019, S/GWI staff sent an email with the subject "Selection: 2019 IWOC Finalist (Finland)" to Embassy Helsinki stating:

We are happy to inform you that Secretary Pompeo has selected Jessikka Aro [to] be one of this year's International Women of Courage (IWOC) awardees! He is looking forward to presenting the award to Jessikka and her fellow 2019 IWOC winners at the State Department in Washington, DC.

The email thanked Embassy Helsinki for its previous vetting of Ms. Aro and requested that Embassy Helsinki continue to monitor her social media postings. The email also stated, "let us know . . . whether your winner accepts the award." Although the Acting Director told OIG that a finalist did not become an awardee until she actually received the award at the ceremony, all of the individuals interviewed by OIG who received this email stated that they understood that Ms. Aro had, in fact, been selected to receive the award and was an "awardee."

Shortly after this email was sent, Embassy Helsinki notified Ms. Aro that she had been selected as an IWOC Awardee and began making travel and visa arrangements for Ms. Aro. The arrangements included providing her with flight options, scheduling her interview in connection with her visa, and directing her to complete a form to receive the AWIU grant. Embassy Helsinki also provided a biographical summary of Ms. Aro, intended to be used in the 2019 IWOC Awards materials and press releases.

## **RESCISSION OF THE AWARD**

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On February 8, 2019, S/GWI requested the social media handles of all the selected awardees. After receiving them, S/GWI assigned interns to review the various social media accounts. During this process, S/GWI discovered dozens of Twitter and Facebook posts by Ms. Aro that it considered controversial, some of which were critical of the current President. For example, one of the tweets that S/GWI flagged was a September 1, 2018, retweet of an NBC news report describing threats against the *Boston Globe*. Ms. Aro added the comment, "Trump constantly

labels journalists as 'enemy' and 'fake news.' One Trump supporter made threatening calls to Boston Globe reporters and said he was shooting them in the head because they are 'enemies of the people' and 'fake news.' A search of the house found weapons and ammunition." S/GWI also flagged a tweet dated June 28, 2018, in which Ms. Aro wrote, "Russian troll factory organized pro-Trump protests in US soil. In July Trump and Putin will meet in Helsinki, Finland, and Finnish people can protest them both. Sweet."

On February 14, 2019, an S/GWI staff member emailed an EUR official and stated that it was "urgent that we find time today" to discuss the "2019 IWOC Awardee from Finland." The staff member also forwarded this email to a Senior Advisor in the Office of the Under Secretary for Civilian Security, Democracy, and Human Rights (J), noting that they had "something to address regarding the 2019 IWOC Awardee from Finland." The Acting Director, who was copied on this email, then replied and attached the package of materials containing Ms. Aro's posts. The Acting Director wrote, "I am very concerned over her retweets that may cause blowback. She is not suitable." The Senior Advisor responded, "Yikes. These are out of place."

On February 15, 2019, S/GWI staff held a call with both EUR and Embassy Helsinki officials. Ambassador Pence also joined the call from Washington, although it was unclear how he learned of the call or the underlying issue. The DCM did not participate in the call. According to meeting notes provided by Embassy Helsinki, the Acting Director argued that Embassy Helsinki should not move forward with presenting an IWOC Award to Ms. Aro, citing concerns that Ms. Aro could potentially use the ceremony's platform to make "a political statement." These notes also reflect the Acting Director's concerns that "the media could highlight the tweets and Facebook posts during the ceremony," causing potential embarrassment to the Department, particularly given the involvement of the Secretary and the First Lady. The Acting Director told OIG that her primary worry was that Ms. Aro would be on the stage with the First Lady, the wife of the person about whom Ms. Aro had made negative comments. The Acting Director also said that other senior Department officials shared this concern, although she did not specifically identify any individuals other than the J Senior Advisor and Ambassador Pence. In contrast, officials at Embassy Helsinki who were involved in this process told OIG that they did not consider the posts to be problematic. Instead, they noted that some of the social media posts at issue appeared to be the result of poor internet translations or were "reposts" of content generated by internet "trolls" in an effort to smear Ms. Aro. To the extent the posts were correctly attributable to her, some viewed them as "legitimate political speech."

According to the notes, officials from Embassy Helsinki and EUR argued on the call that not proceeding with the presentation of an IWOC Award to Ms. Aro "could be worse, publicity-wise," given that Ms. Aro was "a high-profile journalist and active social media presence who has been the subject of international press attention by NYT, BBC, CNN, and others." They also noted that Ms. Aro was a close Embassy Helsinki contact who had never used her position to embarrass the Embassy or U.S. government at previous engagements, including public events and meetings with high-level Department officials. The notes reflect that the Acting Director replied to these arguments by saying she "did not see any option" other than to "revoke the award." She noted that the award was not final until the ceremony and cited previous instances in which awards had been revoked, such as the case of a prior nominee who allegedly made

anti-Semitic comments on social media. However, other participants on the call told OIG they disagreed with the comparison of “legitimate political speech” to anti-Semitic remarks.

According to those present during the call and meeting notes reviewed by OIG, Ambassador Pence stated that, although he appreciated Ms. Aro’s work, the risk of embarrassment to the First Lady and the Department was too great to have her appear on stage at the awards ceremony. The Ambassador described a previous incident in which Spike Lee made negative comments about the Trump Administration during an event in Helsinki and he was worried that a similar situation might occur.

In an email following the call, the Acting Director wrote to the J Senior Advisor and stated that, with respect to Ms. Aro, the “ongoing vetting process identified disconcerting social media content which could have led to potentially embarrassing media coverage.”

On February 16, 2019, the DCM at Embassy Helsinki emailed several Embassy, EUR, and S/GWI officials to offer her point of view. As noted, the DCM had not participated in the earlier call. The DCM stated:

Jessikka has criticized the current U.S. administration openly on Twitter and I understand that yesterday’s discussion focused on whether this was an indicator that she would somehow discredit the award or the White House, or, that it would bring negative reporting to the event. Jessikka accepted the nomination in the spirit in which it was made and its affirmation of the continuing commitment the United States and its leadership has to securing the universal rights of all people. I do not in any way think that she would use this occasion as a platform to slam the President as an individual or to launch a campaign to belittle the United States. She is not that kind of an individual and also has the fullest backing of our counterparts who chair the Finnish President’s whole of government approach to strategic communications and countering malign influence.

The Acting Director responded:

The concern with the nominee is not her political points of view (that was evident from her nomination cable), and we are not concerned about what she may say in DC. The issue is her past tweets and retweets that could potentially be highlighted and flashing across tv screens. It may negatively impact the awards, take away the attention from the other 9 courageous women, and cause embarrassment[.] This will be a huge risk for the DOS to take and put her on the same stage as the Secretary and the FLOTUS.

Following this exchange, S/GWI drafted an action memo that was sent to and cleared by Secretary Pompeo. The memo stated that S/GWI was unable to move forward with presenting an IWOC Award to Ms. Aro because she had not been “fully vetted” and had a “history of inflammatory tweets, targeting US leadership and the Administration in a specific way.” It further noted that the “identified disconcerting social media content could lead to potentially



embarrassing media coverage for the Department and the First Lady along with the other awardees.”

Neither this memo nor any of the contemporaneous documents reviewed by OIG set forth any other reasons for the decision not to proceed with presenting the IWOC Award to Ms. Aro. Indeed, every person OIG interviewed in connection with this matter acknowledged that had S/GWI not highlighted her social media posts as problematic, Ms. Aro would have received the IWOC Award.

The Department’s decision to rescind Ms. Aro’s award appears to have been an authorized exercise of its discretion. Because there are no criteria for the award in statute, regulation, or Department policy, decisions regarding the selection of awardees are completely within the Department’s discretion. Moreover, the only guidance on the exercise of that discretion—namely, the nominating cable—specifically instructs posts to conduct “continued monitoring of all social media accounts until the IWOC Awards Ceremony.”

## EXPLANATION OF THE RESCISSION TO THE PUBLIC AND CONGRESS

Initially, when addressing the public and Congress concerning the reasons for the decision not to present Ms. Aro with an IWOC Award, individuals within S/GWI generally cited factors unrelated to Ms. Aro’s social media posts as the basis for the decision. It was not until a response to a Congressional question for the record (QFR) following the Secretary’s budget testimony in March and April 2019 that the Department acknowledged that a nominee’s social media posts factored into its decisions concerning IWOC Awards.

For example, on February 15, 2019, two S/GWI staff members finalized a set of talking points labeled “S/GWI/Press Guidance” that stated:

A nominee made it to semi-finalist consideration by the Department of State for this competitive, high-profile award. While the nominee’s credentials are impressive, the nominee was not selected to receive an award due to the extremely high caliber of this year’s nominations.

Likewise, on February 21, 2019, S/GWI circulated for clearance additional press guidance in a question-and-answer format to internal stakeholders in EUR, J, the Offices of the Deputy Secretary and Policy Planning, and the Bureaus of Public Affairs and Democracy, Human Rights and Labor. The first question was:

Q: Our understanding is that the Finnish nominee put forth by Embassy Helsinki was informed by the Embassy that the Secretary selected her as a finalist. She may have made travel plans for herself and her family to go Washington, DC, for the awards ceremony. Was Embassy Helsinki’s information incorrect?

A: Earlier in the final IWOC selection process, Embassy Helsinki's [sic] was notified the Finnish nominee was a finalist for the award. Subsequently to that stage in the process, she ultimately was not selected to receive the award, due to the highly competitive selection of candidates. We cannot comment on the optional travel plans made on behalf of family members interested in attending the IWOC Awards ceremony.

A subsequent question addressed the social media issue:

Q: Is the Department's decision to withdraw her award linked to her publicly stated opinions about the current U.S. administration?

A: No. The award recipients are nominated and selected based upon a variety factors, not political opinions. The 2019 cycle was highly competitive and we had a pool of 55 extremely high-caliber nominations.

On March 7, 2019, the day of the Department's 2019 IWOC Award ceremony, *Foreign Policy* magazine published a story stating that the Department revoked Ms. Aro's IWOC Award after Department officials discovered social media posts in which she criticized the President. The article included an official statement provided by a Department spokesperson, which stated that Ms. Aro had been "incorrectly notified" that she had been chosen for an IWOC Award. According to the statement, this mistake was the result of a "lack of coordination in communications with candidates and our embassies." Similarly, during the Department's Daily Press Briefing held the same day, the Department's Deputy Spokesperson responded to a question about the decision not to give Ms. Aro an IWOC Award by characterizing the situation as the result of a "mistake" and a "regrettable error." When asked additional questions, the Deputy Spokesperson said that Ms. Aro had been "incorrectly notified" that she had been selected as a finalist. He characterized assertions that the decision was based on social media statements that were critical of the President as "speculation" and said he was not "able to go further into weighing the merits of who was selected."

EUR officials told OIG that they disagreed with the language in the talking points and press statements suggesting that Ms. Aro was incorrectly notified and was not an awardee. This was corroborated in contemporaneous emails. For example, the emails of two Embassy Helsinki officials expressed concerns that the Department would not be able to justify the position that she was not selected to receive the award, and that this version of events was "easily disproven by the correspondence [that the Embassy had sent Ms. Aro.]"

Following the *Foreign Policy* article and the statements made in the Daily Press Briefing, minority staff from the Senate Foreign Relations Committee (SFRC) requested a Department briefing to address the matter. On March 21, 2019, representatives from S/GWI, EUR and Ambassador Pence participated in a briefing with the SFRC staff by telephone.

The Department talking points prepared for the briefing by S/GWI were more detailed than the press guidance and contained a section that specifically addressed Ms. Aro. The document,

which was circulated to EUR, J, the Offices of the Deputy Secretary and the Legal Adviser, and the Bureau of Legislative Affairs and Public Affairs, stated that “due to the furlough and partial shutdown which led to some confusion, the wrong candidate received notification” that she was to receive the award. It made no mention of Ms. Aro’s social media posts, instead attributing the decision not to give the award to Ms. Aro to the fact that she “was not sufficiently aligned with the broader goals of the award.”

OIG reviewed SFRC staff notes from the briefing, which are consistent with the Department’s prepared talking points. When committee staff asked how the purported error had occurred, the notes memorialize that the Acting Director replied:

As the process moved forward to official announcement of awardees, upon more careful review and consideration and in concurrence with Embassy Helsinki, the Department made the calculation that in order to achieve the broader goals of the award and achieve better geographic and thematic balance, the awardee from Finland was not sufficiently aligned with the broader goals of the award. While we celebrate Ms. Aro’s work, she has just been working as a blogger for a couple of years. We’re hoping she can be selected again in the future but compared to the scope and length of work of other awardees, Ms. Aro did not rise to their level.

According to the notes and statements from others who attended the briefing, when the SFRC staff asked if Ms. Aro’s social media posts played any role in the decision not to give her the award, the Acting Director stated “not really” and that Ms. Aro “did not come to that level that she could share the stage with [other finalists].” According to the notes, the Ambassador then stated that he was not “worried” about Ms. Aro’s social media posts, but that when he “finally got involved and found out what was happening, it was [his] vote that there were other people more deserving of the award than she was.” The Ambassador also expressed that the proper procedure was not followed because he was not involved in the selection process.

As described above, the Department’s statements during this briefing do not align with the internal discussions that occurred at the time the decision was made to rescind Ms. Aro’s selection. OIG found no documentary evidence to corroborate the Department’s claims during the briefing with congressional staff. Also, Department officials from S/GWI, EUR, and Embassy Helsinki all told OIG that, had Ms. Aro’s social media content not come to light, she would have received the award.

When OIG asked the Acting Director about the inconsistency between the internal discussions of Ms. Aro and the Acting Director’s statements to the congressional staff, she responded that she believed that Embassy Helsinki failed to properly vet Ms. Aro prior to her inclusion as a finalist and that if she had known the information about Ms. Aro’s social media activity at the time, Ms. Aro would not have “risen to the level” of the other nominees and been selected as a finalist.

Subsequently, the Department addressed this matter in its responses to QFRs from members of Congress following the Secretary's budget testimony in March and April 2019.

One QFR asked:

Were social media postings that Ms. Aro made which were critical of President Trump's statements a reason for the Department rescinding her status as a finalist for the award? If not, for what reason(s) did the Department rescind Ms. Aro's status as a finalist for the award?

The Department responded:

A number of errors were made in the nomination and approval process of Ms. Jessikka Aro. Ms. Aro should not have been notified that she was an awardee in the absence of a comprehensive review, which is a prerequisite for the nomination process.

A second QFR asked:

Can you confirm that Ms. Aro's social media postings, some of which were critical of President Trump's statements, had nothing to do with the Department not giving her the award?

The Department's response to this question was:

A number of errors were made in the nomination and approval process of Ms. Jessikka Aro. Ms. Aro should not have been considered for approval before the Department completed the research needed to vet candidates. The Department's research showed she was not a suitable candidate, and she should not have been notified that she was an awardee in the absence of a comprehensive review, which is a prerequisite for the nomination process. We commit to improving the process moving forward. I regret that a number of errors were made in the nomination and approval process of Ms. Jessika Aro of Finland. In accordance with policy dating back to the previous administration, the Department and nominating posts review many factors including social media postings to determine a candidate's eligibility to receive an award. Upon careful review of information gathered during this process, we decided to rescind the award offer to Ms. Aro.

This is the Department's first suggestion that Ms. Aro's social media may have played a role in its decision-making process, despite earlier statements to the public and to congressional staff implying that Ms. Aro's social media postings did not affect its decision regarding her selection.

## CONCLUSION

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After she was nominated by Embassy Helsinki, Department officials agreed to award the IWOC Award to journalist Jessikka Aro. Her name was included as an awardee in a memo that was prepared by S/GWI and approved by Secretary Pompeo. S/GWI then instructed Embassy Helsinki to notify Ms. Aro of her selection and prepare for her travel to attend the award ceremony. After this notification, but prior to the award ceremony, S/GWI discovered social media posts by Ms. Aro that were critical of the President. At that point, S/GWI, in concurrence with Ambassador Pence, decided to rescind the award to Ms. Aro. Because decisions as to IWOC awardees are solely within the Department's discretion, the decision to rescind Ms. Aro's award appears to have been an authorized exercise of the Department's broad discretion to select awardees.

OIG found, however, that Department officials made subsequent statements to the public and to congressional staff that inaccurately asserted that Ms. Aro was erroneously notified that she had been selected for the award and that factors other than Ms. Aro's social media posts formed the basis of the decision not to give her the IWOC Award.

## APPENDIX: DEPARTMENT'S RESPONSE

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OIG received comments on a draft of this report from the Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues (S/GWI), which are published below. In addition to sharing OIG's concerns regarding the processes and procedures of the 2019 International Women of Courage Award (IWOC) selection process, S/GWI told OIG that, following the 2019 awards, it conducted an analysis of the process to address process deficits and identify remediating actions. For example, one recommendation resulting from the analysis was to integrate consistent language for how the Department refers to IWOC nominees, finalists, and awardees, which was reflected in the Department's call for nominations for the 2020 awards.



**United States Department of State**


*Washington, D.C. 20520*

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September 10, 2020

### **MEMORANDUM**

**TO:** OIG – Jeff McDermott, Assistant Inspector General, Evaluations & Special Projects

**FROM:** S/GWI – Ambassador-at-Large Kelley E. Currie 

**SUBJECT:** S/GWI Response to OIG Report on the Review of the Selection Process for the International Women of Courage Award

The Secretary's Office of Global Women's Issues (S/GWI) appreciates the opportunity to respond to the Draft OIG Report on the Review of the Selection Process for the International Women of Courage Award and shares the OIG's concerns regarding the processes and procedures of the 2019 International Women of Courage Award (IWOC) selection process.

During the time period examined by the OIG, the S/GWI office was without a Senate Confirmed, Presidentially Appointed Ambassador-at-Large. Since joining the office in December 2019, as the Ambassador-at-Large, I have implemented a robust examination of office policies and procedures to ensure consistency, transparency, and accountability

While there are no formal recommendations from the OIG, I have reinforced the Department of State Ethos in all aspects of S/GWI work to uphold not only the tradition and integrity of the IWOC Award but also the Department's commitment to the sacred trust placed in the institution by the American people.

## ESP TEAM MEMBERS

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Alison Roach  
Julie Silvers

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