

The Hill

We must confront violence against women

By Sens. Joseph Biden (D-Del.) and Richard Lugar (R-Ind.)

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One in three women worldwide will experience gender-based violence in her lifetime. In some countries, that's true for 70 percent of women. No country is immune. From the trafficking of women in Eastern Europe, to "honor" killings in the Middle East, to the use of rape as a weapon of war in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of the Congo, violence against women and girls crosses all borders and affects women in all social groups, religions and socio-economic classes.

Violence against women and girls violates their basic human rights. It prevents girls from going to school, stops women from holding jobs, and limits access to critical healthcare for women and their children.

Moreover, violence against women is a global health crisis, not just because so many women and girls are injured and die, but also because the violence interferes with efforts to save the lives of pregnant women and babies. Rape increases vulnerability to the transmission of HIV/AIDS, a disease that in many countries disproportionately afflicts women. In sub-Saharan Africa, for instance, women account for close to three-quarters of those living with HIV/AIDS between the ages 18 and 24.

For humanitarian reasons alone, the United States should do what it can to end this scourge. But equally important, it has a profound impact on the health and development of countries worldwide. Stopping gender-based violence isn't just the right thing to do; it's also smart diplomacy. Violence contributes to the poverty, inequality and instability that threaten our security and our broad national interests.

Specifically, because it impedes women's full and active participation in their communities and societies, it is one of the biggest obstacles that limit our effort to foster development around the world. Programs to address poverty and disease will be seriously encumbered as long as women face violence in their homes and communities.

At this year's World Economic Forum, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice stated that if she could focus on one thing in developing countries it would be the empowerment of women.

The good news is that local organizations are working in communities around the world with courage and sensitivity to help women overcome violence at home, in school and at work. Governments are bringing together all sectors of their countries to try to prevent and end abuse. But they need our help.

Significant progress has been made in reducing violence against women here in the United States since Congress passed the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) in 1994. It's time to throw our weight and leadership behind efforts to help women and their families worldwide lead safer, healthier lives.

Last fall, we introduced the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA). This bipartisan legislation would ensure that our foreign assistance programs include efforts to end gender-based violence. We would accomplish this goal in three ways:

First, we propose to reorganize and rejuvenate the gender-related efforts of the State Department by creating one central office, the “Office for Women’s Global Initiatives,” directed by a Senate- confirmed ambassador who reports directly to the secretary of state. The coordinator will monitor and oversee all U.S. resources, programs and aid abroad that deal with women’s issues, including gender-based violence. This centralization will help prioritize initiatives and ensure the efficient use of taxpayer funds.

Second, we mandate a five-year, comprehensive strategy to combat violence against women in 10 to 20 targeted countries. We would allocate \$175 million a year to support programs dealing with violence against women in five areas: the criminal and civil justice system, healthcare, access to education and school safety, women’s economic empowerment and public awareness campaigns that change social norms.

Third, in humanitarian crises and in conflict and post-conflict situations, women and girls are especially vulnerable to violence. Reports of refugee women being raped while collecting firewood, soldiers sexually abusing girls through bribery with token food items, or women subjected to torture as a tool of war are horrific and all too common. The Act requires training for workers and peacekeeping forces, and establishes reporting mechanisms and other emergency measures.

The legislation brings together, for the first time, coordinated American resources and leadership to this global issue. As the world continues this month to commemorate International Women’s Day, we believe this is the ideal time for the United States to get actively engaged in the fight for women’s lives and girls’ futures. We urge our colleagues to support this measure.

Biden is the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and Lugar is the committee’s ranking member.

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