

***NEWS FLASH* – FAMILY VIOLENCE PREVENTION FUND**

November 1, 2007

International Violence Against Women Act Introduced

Groundbreaking legislation to combat the global crisis of violence against women and girls was introduced in the United States Senate on October 31st by Senators Joseph Biden (D-DE) and Richard Lugar (R-IN). The *International Violence Against Women Act (I-VAWA)* would, for the first time, integrate efforts to end gender-based violence into foreign assistance programs, applying the force of U.S. diplomacy and foreign aid totaling \$1 billion over five years to prevent the abuse and exploitation that affects up to one in three women worldwide.

“The *International Violence Against Women Act* marshals together, for the first time, coordinated American resources and leadership to address this global issue. I believe the time is now for the United States to get actively engaged in the fight for women’s lives and girls’ futures, and we must begin by preventing and responding to the violence they face,” Senator Biden said.

“It is essential for the United States to work with non-governmental organizations and like-minded countries to end domestic violence,” Senator Lugar added. “No woman, regardless of her income or education level, should live in fear or be made to believe that physical or emotional abuse is acceptable. We cannot expect to reduce poverty and decrease the spread of diseases such as HIV/AIDS until we have more equitable treatment of women in developing countries. Empowered and educated women are the key to breaking these cycles.”

In 2005, the Family Violence Prevention Fund (FVPF), Women’s Edge Coalition and Amnesty International USA convened meetings to develop the legislation, recognizing the need for a comprehensive worldwide approach, rather than a country-by-country approach or one that looks at separate challenges depending on the form the violence takes. More than 150 U.S.-based experts and 40 women’s groups overseas gave advice on the bill.

Major Components of *I-VAWA*

The new legislation would authorize more than \$200 million annually in foreign assistance for international programs that prevent violence, support health programs and survivor services, encourage legal accountability, change public attitudes, promote access to economic opportunity projects and education, and address violence against women in humanitarian situations. It aims to prevent domestic and sexual violence, including “honor” killings, bride burnings, genital mutilation, mass rapes in war, and more.

To deal with situations like the Darfur and the Congo, it would require the Secretary of State to identify critical outbreaks of violence against women and girls in armed conflict and develop emergency measures to respond to these outbreaks. These measures would include efforts by the United States government to protect women and girls, to urge all parties in the conflict to protect women and girls, and to facilitate prosecution of perpetrators.

In addition, *I-VAWA* has three main components. It:

1. **Creates one central Office for Women’s Global Initiatives** to coordinate the United States’ policies, programs and resources that deal with women’s issues. Never before has there been one person who reports directly to the Secretary of State on issues related to gender-based violence.
2. **Mandates a five-year comprehensive strategy to fight violence against women in 10 to 20 selected countries and provides a new, dedicated funding stream of \$175 million a year to support programs dealing with violence against women in five areas:** the criminal and civil justice system, healthcare, girls’ access to education and school safety, women’s economic empowerment, and public awareness campaigns.
3. **Requires training, reporting mechanisms and a system for dealing with women and girls afflicted by violence during humanitarian, conflict and post-conflict operations.** As the recent reports from the Congo make tragically clear, in situations of humanitarian crises, conflict and post-conflict operations, women and girls are particularly vulnerable to violence. Reports of refugee women being raped while collecting firewood, soldiers sexually abusing girls in exchange for token food items, or women subjected to unimaginable brutality and torture as a tactic of war are shocking in number and inhumanity. There is a dire need for increased training and reporting requirements for refugee workers to help crack down on these brutal acts of violence. In addition, the bill crafts a new designation of “critical outbreaks” and requires emergency measures when rape is used as a weapon of war or in conflicts where violence against women is sharply escalating with impunity.

I-VAWA would integrate training to change attitudes that condone violence against women and girls into humanitarian assistance programs, and train lawyers and police to deal with domestic violence cases. It also bolsters women’s organizations overseas that are already working to end violence against women in their countries.

The legislation would decrease potential sexual exploitation and abuse by U.S. humanitarian workers, military personnel, military contractors and police involved in peacekeeping operations by creating training programs to prevent such abuse and a complaints mechanism for reporting problems.

Reaction

“Every day around the world, women and girls suffer brutal domestic violence, rape, honor killings, bride burnings, violence as a weapon of war, and other atrocities,” said FVPF President Esta Soler. “Violence against women is a devastating problem, from Africa and the Middle East, to South and Central America, to right here in the United States. *I-VAWA* is critically important legislation that can help stop the violence women and girls experience each day. We are enormously grateful to Senators Biden and Lugar for introducing it. We intend to put the same energy and resources into enacting *I-VAWA* that we put into the *Violence Against Women Act*. It’s time to do much more to protect women and children worldwide.”

“Violence is one of the biggest barriers to women’s economic participation. It’s hard to work if you fear for your life,” said Women’s Edge Coalition co-founder and president Ritu Sharma Fox. “This legislation will ensure that hard-earned tax dollars support efforts to end this scourge, and that violence does not prevent women from going to work, getting an education and supporting their families.”

“Violence devastates the lives of millions of women and girls and their families worldwide,” said AIUSA Executive Director Larry Cox. “We have seen the terrible consequences of mass rapes in Bosnia, the Congo and elsewhere. We grieve with the mothers in Juárez whose daughters are victims of an ongoing femicide. Violence against women, whether in the home or in armed conflict, destabilizes communities, undermines economic development and breeds poverty and despair.”