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Our Opinion: Renew, Expand Domestic Violence Bill

Tucked within the federal law against violent crime is the Violence Against Women Act, now 14 years old and up for renewal.

The bipartisan bill to renew the act makes several progressive changes.

The act would become gender neutral and encourage arrest and enforcement not only for domestic violence, but also for dating violence, sexual assault, stalking and cyberstalking. Of special interest here in the Southwest, the new act also would protect illegal immigrant victims by waiving deportation for victims while their cases are adjudicated.

Also pertinent to Arizonans are special provisions for Indian women.

Although contrary to Native American culture, violence against tribal women is far higher than that of other U.S. women.

One in 3 Indian women will be raped in her lifetime, and 6 in 10 will be physically assaulted, the National Congress of American Indians reports.

“If these statistics were true for any other population of women in the United States, it would be considered a national crisis requiring immediate attention,” the NCIA Web site says.

So, in the Violence Against Women Act, tribes are seeking criminal jurisdiction over non-Indians who commit domestic violence within tribal boundaries. They also want sentencing

limits lifted in tribal courts in these cases and a tribal division created within the Violence Against Women Office.

As sovereign nations, tribes have a complex maze of court systems. A woman in one tribe may be unable to pursue a case against a man in another tribe.

While that situation may be impossible to unravel, Congress should approve a national study on violence against Native American women to determine its magnitude, causes and possible solutions.

Separate bills to renew and enhance the Violence Against Women Act already have been passed by the judiciary committees in the House and Senate, so the bill soon will be brought to the floor. We urge Congress and President Bush to ensure the protection of all vulnerable women, whatever their status, by enacting a renewed and strengthened version of this landmark legislation.

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