

Testimony Of Mallika Dutt
Executive Director and Founder, Breakthrough: building human rights culture
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
SUBCOMMITTEE ON
INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONS, HUMAN RIGHTS AND OVERSIGHT
International Violence Against Women: Stories and Solutions
October 21, 2009

Text Begins

Thank you Chairman Delahunt, Congressman Rohrabacher, Chairman Berman and members of the Committee for allowing me to speak to you today about how we might all collectively work to end the global pandemic of violence against women, and create opportunities for half the world's inhabitants to claim their rightful place as full and active members of society.

For the past twenty-five years, I have dedicated much of my life to challenging the violence faced by women and girls around the world - who because of their gender, face myriad forms of violence through their life cycle whether it take the form of female infanticide, sexual and emotional abuse, dowry related murder, honor killings, domestic violence, or rape during times of war and conflict.

For the past decade, I have focused my efforts on challenging violence against women in India through the work of Breakthrough, an international human rights organization that uses multi-media tools and community mobilization efforts to change cultural norms and social practices that violate human dignity. I would like to share with you our most recent campaign, Bell Bajao (Ring the Bell) to demonstrate how a bottom-up approach that partners with local initiatives can be creative and effective in challenging gender-based violence.

Bell Bajao is a multi-media campaign that calls on men and boys to take a stand against domestic violence. Launched last year with support from the UNIFEM managed - UN Trust Fund to End Violence Against Women, Breakthrough created Bell Bajao in a pro bono partnership with the advertising agency, Ogilvy & Mather. The Indian Ministry of Women and Child Development joined Breakthrough as a dissemination partner, and since September 2008, the campaign, which includes TV, radio and print advertisements, has reached approximately 120 million people.

Thousands of young men and women along with members of community-based organizations, who have been trained by Breakthrough to become catalysts for change in their own communities have taken Bell Bajao into homes, schools, work places, community centers, health centers and government offices. They conduct performances, puppet shows, and workshops on street corners, buses, train stations and shopping malls and have one simple message – that ending domestic violence is everyone's responsibility.

And the message seems to be getting through! Breakthrough has been flooded with calls, blog posts and emails from individuals around the country who have been moved to act by Bell Bajao. Let me share three of these stories with you. In a small town called Mandya, a group of teenagers who noticed that their neighbor beat his wife on a regular basis after he returned from

work, decided to watch television in the neighbor's home every evening. The teenagers report that they don't hear the beatings any longer.

In the city of Kanpur, a Protection Officer, responsible for registering complaints under the India Protection of Women from Domestic Violence Act 2005, signed a pledge to promote its active implementation and now regularly raises awareness about the Act. In preliminary research, Breakthrough is finding a 15% to 20% increase in complaints filed under the Act in a number of precincts.

Christina Lobo from Mumbai wrote this on the blog, "There is a woman in my building who goes to hell and back once a week while all the neighbors sit quietly in their flats, pretending to have heard nothing. Last week, the screaming and crying started at 8 am. It stopped when her husband left for work. Come 8 pm, the husband was home again and it started again. By 1 am, the screams were louder than ever. I couldn't take it anymore and marched upstairs with my dog, Kelly, and I rang the bell! Her husband shooed my dog out and told me not to interfere, but I haven't heard any more screams since then. I hope it stays that way. I won't hesitate to ring the bell again ... and call the cops, too."

Bell Bajao is but one example of the kinds of initiatives that women are spearheading globally to fight for their very lives. In villages and towns in every corner of the world, women are challenging social and cultural norms and laws that make them second-class citizens. They are engaging in courageous acts to stop the pandemic of violence that permeates the lives of women and denies us all the talents and strengths of half the world's population.

I ask you to imagine how the voices of these hundreds of thousands of women could be strengthened if the International Violence Against Women Act - known as I-VAWA – became a reality, and American foreign policy made the ending of violence against women a priority in our diplomacy and foreign aid.

As you consider the provisions of I-VAWA, I urge you to keep in mind the following recommendations:

- Invest in partnerships with local organizations and encourage bottom-up initiatives that can work effectively in their own contexts and create long-term sustainable change.
- Maintain a focus on women's empowerment while partnering with multiple stakeholders including men and boys, community leaders, religious institutions, and business heads.
- Make youth outreach and participation a key priority in order to transform cultural norms that permit violence against women and build the next generation of human rights leaders.

Through strong leadership and local partnerships across a range of actors, the International Violence Against Women Act could have a direct and immediate impact on saving the lives of millions of women and girls. For a small investment, the United States could see an enormous return— that of ensuring that women and girls can realize their potential and contribute more fully to society.

Thank you, Members of Congress for taking this important step towards ensuring that the fundamental right to live a life free from violence can become a reality for the world's women.