

**Testimony of Nicole Kidman
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**House Committee on Foreign Affairs,
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights and Oversight
“International Violence against Women: Stories and Solutions”**

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Thank you Chairman Delahunt, Congressman Rohrabacher, Chairman Berman and members of the Committee for granting me this opportunity to speak in my role as the Goodwill Ambassador of the United Nations Development Fund for Women, UNIFEM.

Violence against women and girls is perhaps the most systematic, widespread human rights violation in the world. It recognizes no borders, no race or class.

I became UNIFEM’s Goodwill Ambassador in 2006 to amplify the voices of women and shine a light on solutions that work and make a lasting difference. Until recently, violence against women and the instability it causes hid in the shadows. I think the attention today underscores a new recognition that the issue is urgent and belongs on center stage.

And while I’ve learned a lot working with UNIFEM, I am far from an expert. I rely on the people I’ve met to make the case.

A year ago I was honoured to talk with Marie Nyombo Zaina from the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Like your next speaker, Mallika Dutt, Maire’s work on the ground merited a grant from the UNIFEM-managed United Nations Trust Fund to End Violence against Women. Through contributions—including essential funding from the United States for which UNIFEM is very grateful—the Fund promotes the implementation of existing commitments. There are laws in many countries to end discrimination against women, to punish rape, outlaw spousal abuse, child marriage and more. But in the real world, the laws go unenforced and impunity is the norm.

I learned from Marie that she was a survivor of violence, forced by her father into an abusive marriage as a young adult. She fled after her first pregnancy, and found support to further her education through a religious organization. Confronted with the cruel impact on women and girls from the continuing conflict in the DRC—where rape is used systematically as a tactic of war—Marie took action. She started an organization to help victims of violence, mostly widows and orphans, many affected by HIV/AIDS. Over the years she’s built a national network of NGOs to care for survivors and empower women. With the Trust Fund grant, her group expanded services to include medical care, counseling, legal and economic support. Marie fully understands the need for a comprehensive approach.

Another time in Kosovo, I met and listened to women sharing experiences. One told me how she

had been repeatedly raped and abused by soldiers leaving her with lasting physical and psychological scars, and pregnant. In her community, this child brands her forever as an outcast.

Yet, she did not remain silent. Together with other women's rights advocates, she bravely took her testimony of how mass rapes shatter lives and communities to the International Tribunal for Yugoslavia, a legal landmark for prosecuting rape in wartime as a crime against humanity.

These champions need and deserve our support. Not with a box of band aids, but with a comprehensive well-funded approach that acknowledges that *women's rights are human rights*. It is time for policies that intentionally involve society's key communities—from health and education departments, to the police and judiciary—to deliver on that commitment. The plan must build strong alliances with men and collaborate with faith-based and traditional leaders. To succeed, it requires political will at the highest levels.

Violence against women deprives countries of a critical resource in the struggle to end poverty and attain stability. Economists confirm that women's empowerment is a central engine for development—if they cannot participate, the targets governments and the UN set will continue to be unmet.

So I commend the efforts that have gone into the drafting of the International Violence Against Women Act, and in particular appreciate the consultation with the real actors and the real beneficiaries to incorporate best practices and effective approaches.

My friends at UNIFEM and I believe that IVAWA, when passed, will be a beacon, lighting the way forward for other countries. My stories illustrate the impact of violence against women on individuals, families and communities. But IVAWA rightfully links the consequences of violence against women to global goals: economic development, stability and peace, improving health and reducing HIV/AIDs.

Were you shocked by the recent reports from Guinea and the searing images captured on cell phones showing gang rapes by Government forces in broad daylight? Do you wonder how those women can resume their lives when the perpetrators walk the streets fearing no punishment for their crimes?

Violence against women is not prosecuted because it is not a top government and urgent social priority. We can change this by exerting leadership, making wise investments and building local partnerships. Based on UNIFEM's and the Trust Fund's "lessons learned", IVAWA represents an effective cross-cutting approach that elevates the issue so it will count and be counted.

I want to thank the Members of Congress for listening and commend them for their efforts to make ending violence against women the top priority it must become. After all, a life free of violence is our *human* right.