

Statement of Congresswoman Jan Schakowsky
Subcommittee on International Organizations, Human Rights, and Oversight
Hearing on “International Violence Against Women: Stories and Solutions”
October 21, 2009

Mr. Chairman, thank you for calling this hearing today, and for your long-standing commitment to this issue. I appreciate the opportunity to testify.

Today’s hearing is critical because it is too easy to dismiss violence against women as a product of cultural differences. Or as a byproduct of war. Or as a “women’s issue.”

The reality is that violence against women is a humanitarian tragedy, a vicious crime, a global health catastrophe, a social and economic impediment, and a threat to national security. Violence against women knows no borders, nor class, race, ethnicity, or religion. It is a truly global plague, affecting women and girls at all stages of life. The numbers speak for themselves: one in three women worldwide is beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused over the course of her lifetime. But the stories of individuals are even more powerful.

We could talk about Bárbara, from Mexico, who was a volunteer working with street children when she was detained without charge and reportedly physically and sexually abused by Mexican police. Or Claudina, from Guatemala, a 19-year old student studying to become a lawyer, who’s murder, despite evidence of rape, was not investigated. Or Shadi, from Iran, a women’s rights activist who was beaten and abducted on her way to prayers.

You don’t have to look far to find cases violence against women. FBI statistics show that there were 89,000 cases of reported rape here in the United States last year. While there is some evidence to suggest that women in developing countries face higher rates of abuse than those in developed nations, domestic violence is a leading cause of injury among women of reproductive age here in the United States as well as abroad.

However, women in conflict zones face a particularly desperate situation. According to Amnesty International, over 142,000 women have fled Darfur for neighboring Chad over the past six years. And while they ran from violence and rape in their homeland, thousands continue to face sexual violence as refugees. Not only do women risk rape and abuse every time they travel outside the camp to gather food, water, and firewood, but sexual violence also routinely occurs within the camps, despite the presence of UN security and humanitarian workers.

Take Aisha, a married, 26-year-old mother, who was raped and beaten while returning to her refugee camp. When asked about the attack nearly a year later, Aisha found it difficult to speak of her abuse and said she still faces vivid flashbacks. Or Fatima, a 20-year old mother, who was attacked while gathering wood. Fatima says she was not raped, but she did not want to talk about the attack in front of any member of her family, presumably because of the shame faced by survivors of sexual violence.

Aisha and Fatima are just two of the thousands of women who fled violence and abuse in Darfur only to face further attacks in Chad.

The situation is perhaps even more dire in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where the systematic use of rape as a low-tech, low-cost weapon of warfare has become a defining characteristic of the long-standing conflict in the east. Rape is used to destroy communities and to instill a sense of despair and hopelessness within a population. Hundreds of thousands of women have been raped; in some villages, as many as 90% of the women have been raped. Patrick Cammaert, who served as UN force commander in the DRC, has said that it is “more dangerous to be a woman than to be a soldier.”

Since the most recent offensive began in January 2009, the situation has reportedly become even worse. This year alone, Oxfam has received 4,500 reported rape cases in the eastern DRC provinces of North and South Kivu, and this figure only represents those women who come forward. It is likely that thousands more are too afraid, or too ashamed, to tell their stories.

Last year, a number of survivors of rape in DRC broke through the silence and came forward, through UNICEF, to talk about what they have faced. One woman, Lumo Furaha, told about being gang raped by over 50 armed men. After nine surgeries, she has still not physically recovered, but she says she is hoping that telling her story will help her find what she calls “a brighter future.”

Another woman, 50-year-old Zamuda, spoke out of hope that telling her story could prevent what happened to her from happening to others. She said, “I don’t understand, the men did it with objects, it wasn’t from any physical desire. The only answer I have is that they wanted to destroy me; to destroy my body and kill my spirit.”

These are not just stories of individual women; they are stories of families, of communities, even entire countries facing endemic violence against women. My good friend, Jane Saks, co-directed a powerful photo exhibit called Congo/Women. One of the women featured in the exhibit, named Sarah, stated “The man had a gun and he had the power. I just wanted to survive.” Sarah’s world is one where violence is power. This is the reality for too many women throughout the world.

It is very hard to talk about these stories. But I think it is necessary. And it’s not just DRC, Sudan, and Chad. A reported 500,000 women were raped in 1994 in Rwanda, and tens of thousands of rapes occurred during the warfare in Bosnia and Croatia. And the problem extends far beyond conflict zones: to Eastern Europe, where trafficking of women and girls remains prevalent; to regions in Africa, where an estimated 3 million girls are at risk of female genital mutilation every year, and to homes throughout the world, where women are beaten by members of their own families.

Many women throughout the world face sexual harassment and violence in their workplaces. The International Labor Rights Forum, which has surveyed women in Kenya, the Dominican Republic, Thailand, Ecuador, and Mexico, found that between 50 and 90% of women in these

countries reported some form of sexual harassment in the workplace, even rape on the job. Women reported being threatened by supervisors to keep quiet if they want to keep their jobs.

Even after the horror of the initial attack, many women who survive sexual violence face further abuse from their own families and communities. Too often, the victim herself is blamed for the violent crime perpetrated against her. Even when not explicitly blamed, many women who survive rape and other sexual crimes are shunned by their families and cast out of their villages. Other women are too afraid to tell their stories, hiding the truth about their attack for fear of being stigmatized. Fear and cultural taboos against speaking about sexual violence often prevent women from seeking desperately needed medical treatment in the aftermath of an attack.

Beyond the immediate effects on the survivors, sexual violence affects entire communities. Studies show that sexual violence and the attached social stigma hinder the ability of women to fully participate in and contribute to their societies. Survivors of violence are less likely to hold jobs and are more likely to live in poverty than other women. One study, conducted in Nicaragua and cited by the World Health Organization, found that women who had been abused earned an average of 46% less than those who had not, even when controlling for other wage-affecting factors. Many survivors seek to avoid public places, including school and the workplace. There is evidence linking sexual harassment and violence to low female enrollment and high dropout rates from secondary schools.

Women, together with their families and communities, often must overcome devastating health consequences as a result of sexual violence. Women and girls who survive sexual violence face an increased risk of poor reproductive health and they are at risk of contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDs.

In addition, women who have been sexually abused, particularly young girls who have been forced into early sexual activity, are more likely to develop complications during pregnancy, as well as serious health problems like obstetric fistula. The latter, a childbearing injury that may occur when emergency obstetric care is not available during childbirth, generally causes incontinence. Left unable to control her urine or feces, the woman is often abandoned by her family and community. Though obstetric fistula is both preventable and treatable, an estimated two million women remain untreated in the developing world and between 50,000 and 100,000 new cases occur every year.

Studies have linked abuse and rape to higher rates of serious psychological problems, including drug and alcohol abuse, nervous system disorders, and post-traumatic stress syndrome. UN statistics indicate that rape survivors are nine times more likely to attempt suicide than individuals who have not experienced sexual violence.

Mr. Chairman, U.S. leadership on this issue is critical. Two recent United Nations resolutions have made major strides toward a real recognition of this issue and linking sexual violence against women to international peace and security. Both Security Council Resolutions 1820 and 1888 were sponsored by the United States. These two resolutions represent a major step forward toward an international consensus that women's rights are human rights, and that the entire international community has a responsibility to address violations, wherever they occur.

There is also a growing international legal consensus surrounding the seriousness of using systematic sexual violence against women as a weapon of war. The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR) and the International Criminal Tribunal for the Former Yugoslavia (ICTY) issued a series of landmark decisions, finding rape to be a crime against humanity and a tool of both genocide and torture. Further, the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court codifies rape as both a crime against humanity and a war crime.

I commend the Obama Administration, and the leadership of Secretary Clinton and Ambassador Verveer, for clearly stating that fighting international violence against women will be a priority. The Secretary's recent trip to Goma, in the DRC, where she announced \$17 million to assist survivors of sexual violence in the region, is an important statement of the Administration's commitment to addressing this issue.

Still, we need to do much more. I am proud to work with you, Mr. Chairman, on the International Violence Against Women Act, or IVAWA, which will soon be reintroduced. This unprecedented legislation firmly establishes the prevention of violence against women as a foreign policy priority, and requires the coordination, across our government, on integrating this goal into every aspect of our diplomatic and development policy.

IVAWA's approach is particularly groundbreaking because it takes a comprehensive, holistic approach toward the problem of violence against women. While there are already many programs that address specific facets of this international problem, IVAWA is crucial because it creates a central coordinating mechanism, linking all American efforts to combat international violence against women.

To be specific, IVAWA authorizes a multi-year, comprehensive strategy to prevent and respond to violence against women in a select number of targeted countries. The funding will cover a full spectrum of programs, including judicial reforms, health care, education, economic empowerment, and changing social norms. To ensure accountability, the legislation designates funding for research and evaluation of supported programs to determine the effectiveness of U.S. efforts.

In addition, IVAWA recognizes the particular dangers faced by women in conflict and post-conflict situations, and authorizes training for military and police forces operating in these dangerous zones to effectively address violence against women and girls.

Mr. Chairman, violence against women affects us all. As co-chair of the Women's Caucus I strongly feel that we must do more to help the women, throughout the world, whose lives have been forever altered by violence, and the families, communities, countries, even entire regions of the world that will never be stable, open, and prosperous so long as violence against women is perpetuated.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman.