

Testimony by Catherine M. Russell
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Introduction

Good morning, and thank you, Chairman Boxer, Ranking Member Paul, and distinguished members of the Committee for inviting me to testify today. I am happy to be here to discuss the importance of preventing and responding to gender-based violence and to highlight U.S. and international tools and strategies to combat violence and discrimination against women and girls globally. Before I begin, I'd like to thank this subcommittee, under Chairman Boxer's leadership, for the tremendous work you have done to raise the profile of these issues and to ensure they receive the attention they deserve. I'd also like to recognize my counterpart, Susan Markham, at USAID, as well as the NGOs in the room today who are instrumental partners in this work.

Gender-based violence, which we have seen splashed across the front pages of newspapers most recently in India, Nigeria, Pakistan—as well as here in the United States—is a global epidemic. It crosses every social and economic class, ethnicity, race, religion, and education level, and transcends international borders. It takes the form of intimate partner violence, early and forced marriages, sexual violence, acid attacks, and traditional harmful practices such as female genital mutilation/cutting. And it is widespread. Worldwide, an estimated one in three women will be physically or sexually abused in her lifetime, and one in five will experience rape or attempted rape. In some places, especially in conflict zones, these statistics are even higher. This violence doesn't only affect women and girls, but it threatens entire communities, precludes economic growth, and fuels cycles of violence and conflict.

My job as Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's issues is to ensure that the rights and empowerment of women and girls are integrated into all aspects of U.S. foreign policy, to reiterate that peace, security, prosperity, and economic growth cannot be achieved without the full participation of women, and to ensure that men and boys are engaged as important partners in this effort. I believe firmly that gender-based violence is inextricably related to women's status and that we must address the issue in a comprehensive manner, including through women's

economic empowerment and girls' education. I want to speak today to some of the tools we have at our disposal to address and respond to gender-based violence, and to the reasons why this topic is so critically important to the work of this Administration.

Tools

A. Diplomacy

One of my highest priorities as Ambassador is to ensure that efforts to end gender-based violence are a key aspect of U.S. diplomatic engagement. That is why I make sure that gender-based violence is on the agenda of every trip I take and nearly every meeting I hold. These efforts range from encouraging the Afghan government to fully implement the Elimination of Violence Against Women (EVAW) law to meeting with survivors of acid attacks in Pakistan. Like you, I am motivated by the deeply personal stories I have heard during my travel—from the young Nepalese girl whose family did not value her enough to send her to school, the Sri Lankan young woman who told me of a brutal gang rape during a police interrogation, and the Afghan schoolgirl whose father wanted to sell her rather than send her to school. We cannot rest until the violence stops.

I know that this is a priority for Secretary Kerry as well. Two weeks ago, he traveled to the United Kingdom to attend the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, where he powerfully stated that “Gender-based violence, anywhere, is a threat to peace, security, and dignity everywhere.” He also recently visited an obstetric fistula clinic at St. Joseph’s hospital in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, where some of the world’s worst atrocities against women and girls are committed. Just as this is a personal priority for me, it is a priority for him. Our voices, joined with yours and with those of the survivors of gender-based violence, must ring loud and clear: it is unacceptable.

B. Policy

The second powerful tool we employ in this fight is through our policy efforts. While serving as Chief of Staff to Dr. Jill Biden, I spearheaded an interagency effort to develop the *U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally*, which the Administration released in August 2012. This past December, the Department launched three interagency committees to implement

the strategy and the accompanying Executive Order from President Obama. The committees are currently working to identify focus countries, ensure that U.S. programming to prevent and respond to gender-based violence is based on best practices, and implement intensive monitoring and evaluation programs for our initiatives. This work also complements and builds upon the December 2012 *U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security*, which aims to protect women and advance their participation in conflict, post-conflict, and relief and recovery settings. The National Action Plan also focuses specifically on addressing gender-based violence in countries characterized by war, violence, and insecurity.

To help address impunity, Secretary Kerry recently issued a “challenge” to other governments to restrict travel by those responsible for crimes against humanity, war crimes, and other serious violations of human rights, including those involving sexual violence. The United States has suspended entry into the United States of perpetrators—including government officials, at any level—of war crimes, crimes against humanity, or other serious violations of human rights, including those involving rape, sexual assault and sexual slavery. We are hoping that other governments around the world take similar action, and we encourage you to raise this issue with them in your bilateral discussions.

All of these efforts are a direct extension of the broad gender policy initiatives undertaken by the Obama Administration, which has brought an unprecedented focus to bear on promoting gender equality in service of our national security and foreign policy objectives. Advancing the status of women and girls is woven into our National Security Strategy, the QDDR, our Department of State Foreign Affairs Manual, and in policy guidance recently released by Secretary Kerry directing all bureaus and embassies to continue to further integrate gender equality in all aspects of our diplomacy, including preventing and responding to sexual violence in peacetime and conflict.

C. Programming

This brings to me to my third and final tool: programming to match our policy priorities and our diplomatic engagement. We recognize that prevention and response to gender-based violence is a critical part of our work, and I’d like to take a moment to highlight a number of recent efforts announced by Secretary Kerry.

These efforts build upon long-standing work being done by the Department and USAID on this issue.

First, we will soon release a new funding opportunity to build on our \$10 million *Safe from the Start* Initiative. *Safe from the Start* is a joint State-USAID effort that focuses on getting the right systems in place at the very onset of a conflict or crisis. The United States has already provided support to the Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) to help hire specialized staff and to develop innovative methods to protect women and girls at the onset of emergencies worldwide. We know that women and girls are most at risk in these settings, and we must make every effort to ensure their safety.

Second, we recently announced a doubling of the original commitment to the *Gender-Based Violence Emergency Response and Protection Initiative* to \$1 million. This initiative addresses the immediate security needs of survivors of severe gender-based violence, as well as individuals under credible threat of imminent attack due to their gender. Individuals can quickly receive U.S. assistance for up to six months, reaching a total of \$5,000. These flexible funds can be used to address short-term emergency needs such as payment of legal and medical bills, relocation, security, and dependent support. This fund provides a mechanism to respond immediately to the horrible stories of violence we read about so often in the news. In addition, it also provides targeted training to implement gender-based violence laws and support activism to address cultural attitudes and norms around gender-based violence.

Third, the United States just committed an additional \$2.5 million to expand our partnerships with countries undertaking Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) National Violence Against Children Surveys along with the global public-private partnership *Together for Girls*. *Together for Girls*, which the United States government helped to launch, helps countries undertake comprehensive surveys to document the magnitude, nature, and impact of physical, emotional and sexual violence against children with a specific focus on girls. Based on this data, *Together for Girls* helps implement evidence-based coordinated policy and program actions to address issues identified through the surveys, including legal and policy reforms, improved services for children who have experienced violence, and prevention programs.

And finally, as announced at the Global Summit in London, the United States is launching a new *Accountability Initiative* to help survivors of gender-based violence access the justice they deserve. This effort will help us build the capacity of partner governments to prosecute sexual violence crimes and bring perpetrators to justice through specialized judicial mechanisms in countries ravaged by war, violence, and insecurity. As you know, many countries facing serious sexual violence crimes often lack functioning judicial systems. This initiative is designed to send a strong message to would-be perpetrators that they will be held accountable for their crimes.

In addition to these recent announcements, the Department of State runs a variety of programs focused on preventing and responding to gender-based violence. For example, through our Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, we are currently funding women's protective shelters in Afghanistan. One of our largest programs, the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR) specifically addresses the link between gender-based violence and HIV/AIDS. My own office has administered a series of small grants over the past few years to support civil society organizations working in their communities to address gender-based violence. I would be happy to share more information about these efforts.

Yet we know that a tremendous amount of work remains to be done. We need additional research and data on best practices to end this global scourge, and we need to know more about how best to engage men and boys, who often serve as leaders in the community. Finally, we need to change mindsets so that it is clear to everyone that violence against women and girls can never be dismissed as cultural or inevitable – it is criminal.

Gender-based violence is a collective problem that demands a collective solution – it requires not only the expertise of private, public and nonprofit sectors, but the commitment of the global community. The United States will continue to be a vocal advocate on this issue in the multilateral space, including at the Commission on the Status of Women and the U.N. General Assembly.

The statistics regarding gender-based violence are sobering, and the challenge and needs are great. And yet, somehow when I meet with women and girls who have faced this kind of violence, I walk away feeling reenergized. The young Afghan

girl I mentioned earlier in my testimony—whose father wanted to sell her—was part of a larger group of girls I spoke with. When I asked them what they wanted to be when they grew up, their answers were no different than the ones my own daughter might give: lawyer, doctor, teacher. One girl said she wanted to be president.

These girls embody promise and possibility. We know that empowering women and girls and protecting them from violence will lead to stronger families, communities, and countries. I look forward to working with you to make this a reality.

Thank you.