

Testimony of Esta Soler
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Senate Foreign Relations Committee Hearing on Ending Violence Against Women
and Girls
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Thank you, Chairman Kerry, Ranking Member Lugar, and Members of this Committee. It is my great honor to join you today to discuss one of the most compelling causes of our time: ending violence against women and girls.

This hearing could not come at a more opportune moment. As you know, Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton chaired yesterday's United Nations Security Council Meeting, introducing a resolution to provide greater protections to women during times of conflict. This resolution responds directly to the horrific sexual and physical violence being committed against women, often as a tool of war and conflict, around the world today.

Senator Kerry, you are no stranger to the cruelties of armed conflict. I hope you agree that it's time to acknowledge that these horrendous crimes are nothing less than a war on the next generation, and a tool for the permanent destruction of communities and ultimately nations. The devastation they cause will be felt long after the fighting has ended.

This is also a critical moment because we have an unprecedented worldwide call to end this violence. The world does not expect the United States to solve this problem alone, but it does see our leadership as essential to changing course. Who are the people demanding change? They are the Secretary General of the United Nations, top military leaders and diplomats. They are the World Health Organization and UNAIDS. They are leaders of nations large and small, and nongovernmental organizations, all of whom recognize that gender inequality, and violence against women and girls, are among the greatest barriers to global health and security. They recognize that investing in programs that improve the safety of women and girls, and their ability to participate in civic life, offers the greatest hope for peace and prosperity in our time.

This movement is also driven by the voices of those who risk their safety every day to demand basic human rights. I am talking about the girl, age 10, who refuses to be married to a man 40 years her senior, to settle a family debt. The teen who musters the courage to say, 'I was raped' -- even when family and community stand against her. The father who goes without food so his daughter can attend school, driven by hope that education and economic opportunity will protect her from a violent husband, a rampaging soldier, and the sex traffickers who prey on those without prospects for a better life.

I share these examples because we must remember that courageous women, girls and men, and remarkable nongovernmental organizations, are doing heroic work to stop this

violence – and that real change will only come when we stand together – governments and individuals, women and men – to say ‘no more.’

Often when I talk about the debilitating epidemic of global violence against women and girls, someone will say that it’s a particular culture, or region, or religion. They are saying that it’s about ‘them,’ not us. That attitude leads to resignation, hopelessness... and inaction. We have to remind people that, all over the world, mothers and fathers love their daughters *and* their sons, and want for them what we want for our children: A life during which they can learn and grow, thrive and prosper, without fear, degradation, and the trauma associated with violence.

I also want to talk specifically about the role men can play in ending violence against women. At the Family Violence Prevention Fund, we began intentionally focusing on the role men can play in this work more than a decade ago. We asked men about their stake in the issue, and what they were willing to do to end the violence. We explored who helped them develop their attitudes and beliefs. Then we built on that research to create our Founding Fathers campaign through which, each Father’s Day, men across the nation re-dedicate themselves to teaching the next generation that violence against women and girls is wrong. Founding Fathers include people like M.L. Carr, former all-star with your Boston Celtics; Ted Waitt, founder of Gateway Computer; Terry Lundgren, Chairman, President and CEO of Macy’s; and hundreds of others.

Those lessons also led us to create *Coaching Boys Into Men* in 2002. It invites fathers, uncles, teachers, coaches and other men to teach the next generation that violence is always wrong. It has changed men’s behavior in the United States, significantly increasing the number of fathers, and men, who talk to boys about violence. Now we are adapting those strategies overseas. We are proud that, with support from the Nike and NoVo Foundations and in partnership with the International Center on Research on Women, we are introducing *Coaching Boys Into Men* in India, where cricket coaches and players are helping educate boys about the need to treat girls with respect. When messages come from popular, respected coaches and players, boys listen. We also are working with UNICEF to adapt *Coaching Boys Into Men* for South Africa and link with the upcoming World Cup.

These are the kind of proven programs Americans support. Recently we have been working with Lake Research, along with Women Thrive Worldwide, to explore voters’ attitudes about violence against women and girls globally. Americans care deeply about this issue. Three in five voters say addressing global violence should be one of the top priorities for the U.S. government. One in four says it should be the top priority. Reducing this violence matters to voters, even when compared to other priorities like promoting democracy and trade, fighting corruption abroad, and reconstructing Iraq and Afghanistan.

Voters also told us they strongly support the *International Violence Against Women Act* – known as *I-VAWA*. This legislation would make stopping violence against women and girls a priority in American diplomacy and foreign aid. Seventy-two percent of voters

say they support *I-VAWA*, even after being told it might cost as much as \$200 million per year.

Senators Lugar and Kerry, we are so grateful that you are about to re-introduce this bill. Senator Lugar, you were there from the beginning, introducing it last year in partnership with now-Vice President Biden. Chairman Kerry, we thank you for making it a priority. I know you both agree that its passage should be among the high priorities for this Congress.

The *International Violence Against Women Act* is groundbreaking legislation that would have an immediate and direct impact in saving the lives of women and girls around the world. As you make final revisions to the language, I ask you to consider these suggestions:

- To be successful we need an office within the State Department that is responsible for developing a comprehensive strategy and coordinating implementation, and is accountable to you.
- Stopping violence against women and girls must be a diplomatic priority and a foreign assistance priority. The State Department needs the authority and support to coordinate our work and USAID needs funding to implement programs.
- Our approach must be holistic. We recommend beginning with comprehensive programs in 10-20 countries that address violence in a coordinated way, through legal and health sector reform, by changing social norms and attitudes that condone rape and abuse, and improving education and economic opportunities for women and girls.
- A portion of the funding must go to support overseas women's organizations to develop their own capacity, and we must provide targeted support for protection of women and girls in humanitarian crises.
- This will require resources. We are asking for a substantial investment because this is a worldwide problem in need of a global solution. Stopping violence against women and girls and promoting their full participation in society is not just an end in itself. It is critical to achieving our development goals, from fighting HIV/AIDS to reducing poverty, and it is the essential missing element in our efforts to promote civil society and guarantee our own security.

Much of the support here in Congress to address violence against women emanates from high-profile emergencies like the crises in Darfur and the Democratic Republic of Congo. It's a commendable impulse to respond to emergencies, but violence against women and girls is an emergency every day. We need a response that is sustained and durable enough to address not just today's emergencies, but those that lie ahead. The days of piecemeal solutions must end. It is time for a bold and transformative piece of legislation. We need this Congress to pass – and fund – the *International Violence Against Women Act*. Thank you.