

INTERNATIONAL VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN ACT (“I-VAWA”/ H.R. 5905) SUMMARY

Sponsored by: Representatives Jan Schakowsky (D-IL), Nita Lowey (D-NY), and Howard Berman (D-CA) and 37 additional original sponsors.

Background:

One out of every three women worldwide will be physically, sexually or otherwise abused during her lifetime—with rates reaching 70 percent in some countries. This type of violence ranges from rape to domestic violence and acid burnings to dowry deaths and so-called “honor killings.” Violence against women and girls is a human rights violation, a public health epidemic and a barrier to solving global challenges such as extreme poverty, HIV/AIDS and conflict. It devastates the lives of millions of women and girls—in peacetime and in conflict—and knows no national or cultural barriers. Most importantly, it must end.

The International Violence Against Women Act (I-VAWA) is a historic and unprecedented effort by the United States to address violence against women and girls globally. It directs the U.S. government to create a comprehensive, 5-year strategy to reduce violence against women and girls in at least 5 countries where it is severe. Enhanced data collection and transparency of results is a core component of the bill that ensures accountability and continued use of best practices. The Act recognizes that violence intersects with nearly every facet of women’s lives and therefore supports health programs and survivor services, encourages legal accountability and a change of public attitudes, promotes access to economic opportunity projects and education, and addresses violence against women in humanitarian situations. The I-VAWA also calls for U.S. training of foreign security forces on violence against women and girls and emphasizes support and capacity-building for local women’s organizations already working to stop violence against women and girls.

The I-VAWA makes ending violence against women and girls a top diplomatic priority. It permanently authorizes the Office of Global Women’s Issues in the State Department as well as the position of the Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women’s Issues, who is responsible for coordinating activities, policies, programs, and funding relating to gender integration and women’s empowerment internationally, including those intended to prevent and respond to violence against women.

More specifically, the I-VAWA would do the following:

Increase Legal and Judicial Protection to Address Violence Against Women and Girls.

The I-VAWA focuses on establishing and supporting laws and legal structures that help prevent and appropriately respond to all forms of violence against women and girls, including rape, physical abuse, ‘honor killings,’ and child or forced marriage. Emphasis is placed on promoting political, legal, and institutional reforms that recognize violence against women and girls as a crime and train police and the judiciary to hold violators accountable and to respond to the needs of victims. This includes helping women and girls access the justice sector and ensuring that they are safe and supported throughout the legal process.

Increase Health Sector Capacity to Address Violence Against Women and Girls.

The I-VAWA will integrate programs to address violence against women and girls into already existing health programs focused on child survival, women’s health, and HIV/AIDS prevention,

care, and treatment. It takes a holistic “systems” approach and emphasizes enhancing the capacity of the health sector to assess the impact of violence on a woman’s health and help her protect herself from violence.

Change Social Norms to End Violence Against Women and Girls.

The I-VAWA focuses on preventing violence by changing community norms and attitudes about the acceptability of violence against women and girls. It will support public awareness programs to change attitudes that condone and at times encourage violence against women and girls, and will emphasize community-based solutions. For instance, activities supported by the I-VAWA could include programs that organize women who are survivors of violence to speak out publicly or work with male leaders to help other men and boys become more supportive of respectful and non-violent relationships.

Increase Women’s Economic Opportunity and Education.

The I-VAWA focuses on reducing women’s vulnerability to violence by improving their economic status and educational opportunities. Emphasis is placed on ensuring women’s access to job training and employment opportunities and increasing their right to own land and property. This would allow them to potentially support themselves and their children. The legislation also addresses the rights of women and girls to work and go to school free of sexual coercion and assault.

Address Violence Against Women and Girls in Natural Disaster and Conflict-Related Humanitarian Situations.

The I-VAWA focuses on expanding and coordinating overseas disaster assistance and funding for humanitarian programs to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. For instance, private military contracting firms must demonstrate a commitment to recruiting female candidates for security force training and humanitarian relief roles. Disarmament, Demobilization, and Reintegration (DDR) must identify and provide services for women and girls associated with the fighting forces. The Act also decreases potential sexual exploitation and abuse by humanitarian workers, U.S. military, military contractors and police by creating more accountability through reporting mechanisms and training.

In addition, the I-VAWA requires the Secretary of State to develop emergency measures to respond to critical outbreaks of violence against women and girls in armed conflict such as mass rape. These measures include efforts by the United States to protect women and girls from sexual and physical violence and facilitate prosecution of perpetrators of such violence.

Increase U.S. Training of Overseas Foreign Security Forces on Violence Against Women and Girls.

The I-VAWA requires that U.S. training programs for foreign militaries and police address how to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. Training on these issues will be incorporated into already existing training programs addressing human rights and humanitarian issues.

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