

Rep. Henry C. “Hank” Johnson, Jr.
Statement for the Record
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission Briefing on
“Ending Violence Against Women in Politics”
March 21, 2017

I want to first thank Representatives Schakowsky, Bonamici, and Carbajal for hosting this very timely panel. I want to thank our four panelists, all of whom are incredible women who have served at the highest political levels and have done much to advocate for the rights of women across the globe.

Although we’ve made some progress in ensuring more equitable and fairer representation of women in political positions around the globe, enormous challenges remain. The Inter-Parliamentary Union’s (IPU) recently surveyed 55 female parliamentarians from 35 countries who shared their varied experiences in government. The majority of them stated they were subject to some form of violence – ranging from intimidation to harassment to sexist remarks – which was connected to their role as a public official. As the IPU’s report noted, the practice of violence against women in politics (VAWP) is “unacceptable” and has “no place in political culture.”¹

VAWP can take many forms and happen at different times. It can occur during electoral campaigns, but also beyond that point. Once women assume office they may be pressured to resign because of their gender. They may be subject to coercion because they are a minority among their peers. For the most part, women who enter politics always have to swim upstream – against the current of sexist stereotypes, traditional social roles, and body-focused images which pervade the media.² During the 2016 Presidential Primaries candidate Hillary Clinton was subject to twice as many insulting tweets as Bernie Sanders,³ and during the general elections was subject to such levels of abuse that Republicans themselves admitted that “Trump’s own words have fostered sexism.”⁴ During Australia’s 2014 elections, former Australian Prime Minister Julia Gillard received roughly twice as much abuse online as Kevin Rudd, her male political opponent who she replaced before his return and replaced her.⁵ More recently, sexism

¹ “Sexism, harassment and violence against women parliamentarians,” *Inter-Parliamentary Union* (October 2016) <<http://www.ipu.org/pdf/publications/issuesbrief-e.pdf>.>

² “Consolidated Reply of the e-Discussion on: Violence Against Women in Politics,” International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (December 2016) <http://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/vawip_cr_0.pdf.>

³ See Elle Hunt, Nick Evershed and Ri Liu, “From Julia Gillard to Hillary Clinton: online abuse of politicians around the world,” *The Guardian* (June 26, 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/technology/datablog/ng-interactive/2016/jun/27/from-julia-gillard-to-hillary-clinton-online-abuse-of-politicians-around-the-world>.>

⁴ Tamara Keith, “Sexism Is Out In The Open In The 2016 Campaign. That May Have Been Inevitable,” *NPR* (October 23, 2016) <www.npr.org/2016/10/23/498878356/sexism-is-out-in-the-open-in-the-2016-campaign-that-may-have-been-inevitable.>

⁵ Hunt et al., “From Julia Gillard to Hillary Clinton,” *The Guardian* (June 26, 2016).

was on display when President Trump refused to shake hands with a visiting head of state, German President Angela Merkel.⁶

Over the long-term VAWP breeds a culture of fear and mistrust in society. Dr. Madeline Albright, the former American Secretary of State, recently argued that most VAWP takes place in private and protected spaces, and that as a result, “many [women] have learned not to complain about it.”⁷ If women do talk about their experiences, they are viewed as a liability rather than an asset to party leaders. This may lead to a vicious cycle, where women end up subjecting themselves to further harassment, which ultimately dampens “the political aspirations of other women and girls.”⁸

VAWP harms talented candidates from running in the future. It discourages voters from going out on Election Day and civil society organizations from carrying out their work. It impacts journalists and poll workers. Countries that deprive half of their citizens a political voice will themselves end up not having a voice on the international stage.

Despite these challenges I am encouraged by the courageous efforts of activists and officials in the private and public sectors to end VAWP. Almost a year ago to this day the National Democratic Institute (NDI) launched the #NotTheCost campaign. NDI’s campaign works to “ensure that women can be politically active without experiencing any form of discrimination, harassment or assault”⁹ and calls for examining “indicators on prevalence of threats and abuse, and support for those affected” by VAWP.¹⁰ Meanwhile, the United Nations – through UN Women and the UN Development Programme – are jointly developing a guidebook on violence against women in elections.¹¹ The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) works to tackle VAWP by sponsoring programs that focus on strengthening political parties and ensuring that this subject is addressed in regional and global interventions.¹²

Programs led by civil society organizations are essential, but our government – and governments abroad – must also play their role. In Congress, I am proud to have sponsored a wide variety of resolutions the aim of which was to raise aware about violence against women and aim to end it, including H.Res.519 – “Supporting the ideals and goals of the ‘International Day for the

⁶ WITW Staff, “Implicit sexism Trump displayed with Merkel is all too familiar to women,” *New York Times* (March 21, 2017) <[nytlive.nytimes.com/womenintheworld/2017/03/21/implicit-sexism-trump-displayed-with-merkel-is-all-too-familiar-to-women](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/21/implicit-sexism-trump-displayed-with-merkel-is-all-too-familiar-to-women)>.

⁷ Madeline Albright, “A hidden reality: Violence against women in politics,” *CNN* (March 8, 2016) <<http://www.cnn.com/2016/03/07/opinions/madelaine-albright-protect-women-in-politics/>>.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ “#NotTheCost: Stopping Violence Against Women in Politics,” *National Democratic Institute* <<https://www.ndi.org/not-the-cost>>.

¹⁰ Liz Ford, “From Peru to Kosovo, female MPs aim to end abuse of women in politics,” *The Guardian* (March 24, 2016) <<https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2016/mar/24/violence-against-women-in-politics-not-the-cost-campaign-national-democratic-institute>>.

¹¹ “Consolidated Reply of the e-Discussion on: Violence Against Women in Politics,” International Knowledge Network of Women in Politics (December 2016) <http://iknowpolitics.org/sites/default/files/vawip_cr_0.pdf>.

¹² “About Us,” *International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance* <www.idea.int/about-us>.

Elimination of Violence against Women”¹³ and H.R.11 – “Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013.”¹⁴ I am also honored to have hosted a town hall in my district promoting the empowerment of women in the workforce¹⁵ in support of Nancy Pelosi’s campaign, “When Women Succeed, America Succeeds: An Economic Agenda for Women and Families.”¹⁶ Violence against women in politics affects individuals, communities, societies, countries, and ultimately our world. Our government must do more to tackle this challenge, to empower women in politics, and I look forward to continuing the dialogue on this subject today and finding solutions to this very challenging issue.

¹³ “H.Res.519 - Supporting the ideals and goals of the ‘International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women,’” *Congress* (introduced November 5, 2015) <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/house-resolution/519>>.

¹⁴ “H.R.11 - Violence Against Women Reauthorization Act of 2013,” *Congress* (introduced January 22, 2013) <<https://www.congress.gov/bill/113th-congress/house-bill/11/>>.

¹⁵ Henry Johnson Jr., “Rep. Johnson hosting ‘When Women Succeed, America Succeeds’ town hall,” *Press Release* (October 3, 2014) <<https://hankjohnson.house.gov/media-center/press-releases/rep-johnson-hosting-when-women-succeed-america-succeeds-town-hall>>.

¹⁶ Nancy Pelosi, “Women’s Economic Agenda,” *Office of Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi* <www.democraticleader.gov/issue/women-succeed-america-succeeds/>.