

**Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission**  
**Briefing: Ending Violence Against Women in Politics**

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Good afternoon, Representatives Jan Schakowsky, Ann Wagner, Suzanne Bonamici, Salud Carbajal and other Members of Congress and the public. I want to thank the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for the opportunity to speak on **ending violence against women in politics in commemoration of National Women's History Month**. It is a pleasure to be here before you today as a human rights defender, as a former Attorney General and now as an OAS Official. The participation of women in politics is an issue at the core of democracy as well as the need to develop strategies to prevent the hardships and violence that women suffer while participating in the public space or as public officials.

The importance of women holding positions of power is directly linked to the meaning of democracy: If barriers caused by discrimination didn't exist, we would occupy half of the seats in parliaments and half of the ministers of government, municipalities, judges and prosecutors because we represent half of the population. Therefore in order to strengthen democracy and eradicate discrimination, it is necessary to remove all obstacles that prevent our full access to our political rights, to elect and be elected or to hold public positions.

But along with this very evident reasoning, I am also convinced that women, due to how some of us have been educated, the roles that we've had to assume and the paths that we have had to walk in life, we share different perspectives from a series of experiences that have allowed us to understand and face many of the problems that afflict our society. But perhaps because we have suffered, it has become easier for us to feel empathy and put ourselves in the shoes of those whose lives have been affected by discrimination or violence. When we are aware of this, we have a greater capacity to listen, to work as a team and to commit ourselves to confront situations of injustice and exclusion.

For these two particular reasons, our participation is important, however it doesn't come easy or automatic because the majority of times, women must break personal, family, community and social barriers to access a public position. And mostly, because we are not thought to excel in this area, at least in my generation and in my country. We are expected to be good mothers, good daughters and good wives. It didn't even cross our minds to be good congresswomen,

mayors, presidents or general prosecutors. Personally that was the first barrier I had to break, I had to visualize myself in this role.

But then, there are a thousand other signs that tell you that public office is not a place for a women, they tell you that you are going to neglect your family, that you are being overly ambitious, that you will be corrupted by politics. And then you begin to believe that if you do assume public office, you will fail.

But I as other women, did assume the position, and have to prove in every step that I was capable. I found other men and women equally as committed to succeed in making justice happen, in helping victims and survivors, in investigating and punishing those responsible for serious crimes such as homicides, drug trafficking, violence against women, human rights violations, and people who enjoyed the privilege of impunity.

It is precisely those who enjoyed the privilege of impunity that reacted with defamation and smear, with negative campaigns against me that in no way questioned or contradicted my arguments, they only took actions against me and my family. There were threats and attacks against judges, prosecutors and police officers that were just trying to do their job. They filed false accusations against me and shortened the period I had been appointed. Finally after leaving office I had to leave my country, to which I have not been able to return to.

What I went through, was experienced by other justice officials, such as the current attorney general, who in the fight against corruption has faced serious death threats. The reason why I mention this is because it highlights the importance of the theme that brings us here today, what should we be doing to prevent, and punish violence against women in politics.

To start, I believe that there are series of protective actions that must be taken. Networks among women must be utilized to allow us to identify those of us that are at risk in order to implement strategies needed to mitigate the barriers and violence. However, if we think about it at a short and long term basis there are two indispensable strategies: One that ensures equal access for women to positions of power in order to combat discrimination and at the same time ensure that our presence responds to the rules of democracy. For girls and young women to grow up observing other women having held public office, dignifying and serving those who need them the most so that these girls are able to picture this career path as a mental horizon where they can live in full equality.

The other strategy, although it is incredible that we are still dealing with this in the 21st century, is to make visible and to recognize the legitimacy of our work as women in politics.

That we are not usurping a chair that is not ours, that as citizens we have the right to opt for public positions and as employees we exercise them with responsibility, commitment and dedication. That a nomination or an election is not a concession that we can and must contribute to, just like our fellow men. Initiatives such as the Declaration on Political Harassment and Violence against Women from the follow up mechanism of the Convention of Belem do Para, are necessary in order to promote the measures needed to prevent; punish and eradicate political harassment of women in public and private spheres.

I would like to end, by sharing a personal strategy during one of the most difficult moments in my life, just before I departed from Guatemala. Of course in order to face this situation, I sought the affection and support of my sisters and friends, but I also gave myself the task of reviewing the life of other women that I admired, my mother, my grandmothers and great grandmothers. To think about what they did when they faced difficult situations and what they would have done if they were in my shoes. I think about the paths that have already been transited by other women, and I went on to find my own, not only to overcome the risks I faced, but also to ensure that these paths towards equality remained open for other women.