

Testimony for Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission,
House of Representatives

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It is a complete life changing experience to hold a hand of a dying woman who has been burned alive by her own blood and kin. More than eighty percent of her body is burned, and the face that was once an epitome of beauty and youth is now skinless from burnt charcoal. Her voice that once had the zest for life is now deep and moaning, gradually fading but her eyes are wide, stark open and questioning the cruelty she suffered and as if demanding the reason for this cruelty. I hold her hand knowing that these are her final moments and she is drifting away... in pain, very intense pain.

Her last whispers come out "give me justice" and "will someone take care of my kids"...and I bend over her and whisper "live, live for the sake of your children" and she says "I don't want to live in this cruel world and not even for my children....I can't bear this pain anymore."

I remain haunted by these painful memories and I have seen countless such victims, some survived, some died...The words "GIVE ME JUSTICE", hardly ever escape the victim's lips, even if they do, they are smothered by patriarchal figure heads around them, who take these women as their property and commodities, having every right to control her life, her actions or even her thoughts. The demand for justice is never allowed to be loud enough to escape the four walls of their homes but if it does manage to reach the village councils it is hushed in the name of honor and securing the privacy of the domestic affairs. And if by any chance it escapes beyond the four walls and reaches the local police station, it is either abused with further intimidation and violence or is silenced by bribery from the rich, influential and the powerful. And if that voice survives the purgatory of the humiliating investigative police process and lands in a court room of justice...a House of Justice...it is no match against the inadequate legal procedures, the lack of relevant laws that cover the nature of atrocity committed to her, or applicability of the laws to her particular case, or getting strong evidence or witnesses for the abuse and violence she suffered ...this is the final destination beyond that the moaning voice of the victim cannot go.

It is very rare that such a voice reaches the parliament. I call myself that voice because my voice is concentrated with impression from all these victims, and carry the pain and sufferings of the atrocities they endured in the name of honor, tradition, norms, violation or sheer evil propensity. When I raised my voice in the parliament it created an alarm. Firstly, it was not traditionally welcomed at all and secondly the voice had a powerful audaciousness, which from the lips of the victims, four walls of its home, village councils, police stations and judicial courts, the voice had become strong enough to cross all these hurdles.

A lot of violence that today takes place in our lives because it's allowed to happen; because it is condoned and because it is permitted. Women today live in fear and their roles are structured around strict cultural norms, religious adherence and prescribed social roles that submit them to discrimination. Gender based violence is mostly a crime, not based in religion or culture but

these socio-cultural norms and customs are used for justification and evasion. We have not been able to provide that fundamental security and protection to women against these permissive ideologies. We have not been able to create new laws and enforce the existing laws that can protect women's lives and honors. When women are empowered and mobilized they play vital roles in averting violence, resolving conflict and helping rebuild societies. Evidence from around the world has proven that if women have the opportunity to become primary implementers they sustain governance, facilitate communications, create peace building bridges and transform security structures. And the best results come from empowering community level women organizations.

Empowering women by providing financial support systems, economic and financial opportunities, health programs and survivor services is the key strategy to combat gender based violence. Creating opportunities to improve health and education help them combat with social, political and religious hostility. In Pakistan and Afghanistan, civil society women working closely with women communities are successfully dissuading their children and husbands from joining extremist forces. Pakistan's Women Parliamentarians have made extraordinary progress and we have been able to repeal some extremely controversial laws like The Hadood Ordinance and replaced these legislations with Protection of Women, Act 2006 and made amendments in Pakistan's Penal code and the Code of Criminal Procedure to penalize sexual harassment and to facilitate prosecution.

In my own work, demanding justice for victims of violence depended on two things. First legal reforms a framework of law that abolishes violence against women in all forms: acid attacks, forced marriages, Vani, which is the bartering of women in lieu of punishment for crimes committed by their fathers and brothers, slaying them in the name of honor (honor killings), domestic abuse, setting them on fire for not bringing dowries (stove burn killings), and accusing women of adultery to usurp their inheritance and wealth.

I moved two resolutions in the parliament; one that demanded acid attacks to be recognized as murder attempt and the other against Vani, which is the bartering of women to evade punishment on crimes committed by the male family members. The resolutions were passed unanimously by the Punjab Parliament even though it encountered opposition from the conservative, literalists, patriarchal and feudal members. The recognition of these practices as heinous crimes and the suffering of victims were not dismissed by the majority of the House members. I was able to highlight, emphasize, assert and succeed in getting the majority votes even with all the opposition, resistance and intimidation I had to face. The resolution on Vani and its recommendations were included in the The Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, 2005 while the legislation proposed for acid attacks remains referred to federal law department and has been awaiting action for more than 5 years.

The most difficult legislation was the law to prohibit private usury. Private usury is controlled by criminal mafia who through money lending business control the lives of the impoverished people. When they were unable to pay back high interest rates of over than 140% on the debts, their daughters were forced into prostitution, sold into marriages, their pensions usurped and farmer's harvests went under debt. My own colleagues in the parliament were taking loans from agricultural banks on 2% and were giving them to farmers on 14% interest rate. Such a reform

was not welcomed but was strongly opposed by the political leaderships, cabinet members and administrative department.

Feudalism has been a parasitical tool to assert control and Violence. The landlord, by virtue of his ownership and control of such vast amounts of land and human resources, is powerful enough to influence the distribution of water, fertilizers, tractor permits and agricultural credit and, consequently exercises considerable influence over the revenue, police and judicial administration of the area. Having such a mentality, when members of feudal families obtain responsible positions in civil service, business, industry and politics, their influence is multiplied in all directions.

To mobilize such a parliament to vote on its conscience took four years of strenuous effort against severe resistance and intimidation. The bill survived 11 extensions and 24 committee meetings and was finally passed to create history as first piece of legislation by a private member in Punjab Parliament and within 15 days it was replicated and adopted by the NWFP Parliament.

My legislations clearly point out three main areas that affect the issues of violence on women. The law making (legislature), laws providing (Courts) and law enforcing agencies (police) are where the changes need to be vested. Proper legal framework with implementing mechanisms and the enforcement of laws through courts and police, all these areas need proper sensitization on gender based violence. The abused victims also require legal and judicial protection which also is the responsibility of legislature and judiciary.

Change of public attitudes and traditional mindsets is not something that will evolve on its own. This needs a comprising strategy that produces a comprehensive and holistic plan of action that engages media, public forums and local communities to create awareness and an open debate. Traditional practices most of the times are garb to dissemble crime and violence for sheer greed and control. Nevertheless, the fight against ignorance, bigotry and consciousness needs an effective strategy which can be followed in my successful personal experience in the Parliament, I was able to mobilize rigid, feudalistic and dogmatic mindsets and make the Punjab Parliament vote above party lines, for human issues and make them vote on the basis of conscience and today Punjab Parliament is proud of it.

There is a dire need to support and protect the survivors of violence against women. Reforms on Violence against women are about preventative measures. It's about giving them economic stability, so that they are empowered, and become effective decision makers in their families. It is allocating resources to those local level community organizations that are already supporting and protecting each other. There is a dire need for resources to support implementation of prevention or response programs. Women are key agents of change in shifting mindsets and equipping coming generations with different mindsets. Women are key agents of supporting and protecting each other. Examples of Liberia and Rwanda show us how women stood up to take charge of things in severe conflict torn areas, in midst of genocides and wars.

To eliminate violence is one of the crucial needs of today. Violence against women is not a phenomenon of any one particular region, any one particular society or any one mindset. It is prevalent in our social and religious ideologies and cultural traditions which tint our daily lives.

An attempt to redress it in a pragmatic way is an endeavor to reroute an external world towards stability and security.

The International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA) proposes a comprehensive policy to protect and empower women by prioritizing health, education and economic opportunities. It lays down preventative measures to respond to violence against women and creates pre-emptive mechanisms in conflict and post conflict regions. IVAWA allocates resources to local community organizations that play an essential role to increase societal well being in the long term and decrease the conditions that breed extremism and violence.

I would also like to take this opportunity to submit for the record a letter from a diverse group of 16 faith-based organizations in support of passage of IVAWA, including the National Council of Churches of Christ in the USA, Jewish Women International, Islamic Relief, and Disciples of Christ (Women's Ministries). I wish to also submit for the record additional written material from Women Thrive Worldwide on the link between violence against women and women's economic opportunity.

IVAWA has reached you, after fighting countless hurdles and barriers and rests today in your hands demanding protection and security for millions of women across the globe. It takes decades of effort to reach here, and has the sweat and blood of many, many women like me who are fighting this on an individual level. You have the power through IVAWA to transform our efforts into a consolidate policy and strategy to combat Violence against women worldwide. Thank you.