



**Hearing: The Global Gender-Based Violence Threat
Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission
U.S. House of Representatives
November 20, 2013**

**Statement of Esta Soler
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On behalf of Futures Without Violence, I would like to thank the members of the Tom Lantos Human Rights Commission for holding this congressional hearing on one of the most compelling causes of our time: ending violence against women and girls globally.

For more than 30 years, Futures Without Violence has led the way and set the pace for groundbreaking education programs, national and international policy development, professional training programs, and communication campaigns designed to end violence against women, children and families around the world. In 1994, FUTURES (then the Family Violence Prevention Fund) was instrumental in developing the landmark Violence Against Women Act passed by the U.S. Congress. Ten years later, FUTURES built a major coalition with experts from across the United States and around the world and played a critical role in the development and introduction of the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA), which is poised for reintroduction with bipartisan support in the House and Senate in the days ahead.

This hearing could not come at a more opportune moment. In the last several years, advocates across the United States and local leaders around the world have celebrated new U.S. government initiatives that provide a diplomatic, programmatic, and policy framework for the prevention and reduction of gender-based violence internationally. Most notably, we applaud the U.S. government for presenting the first ever U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally (U.S. Strategy) and U.S. National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security (NAP) -- two historic policy frames that align closely with provisions in the IVAWA. These initiatives aim to institutionalize efforts to achieve gender equality, promote women's empowerment, and end gender-based violence, and to weave this priority into the permanent fabric of U.S. foreign policy. In addition to the important work undertaken by the U.S. government to implement the U.S. Strategy and the National Action Plan, FUTURES celebrated early this year when the U.S. Congress reauthorized the Violence Against Women Act, which included important provisions to end child marriage internationally and also reauthorized the Trafficking Victims Protection Act.

This is a critical moment because there is an unprecedented worldwide call to end this violence. Who are the people that are demanding change? This growing global movement is made up of leaders of nations large and small, international agencies and financial

institutions, nongovernmental organizations both global and local, and of women and men collaborating with local leaders of diverse communities, ethnicities, faiths and political affiliations, all of whom recognize that gender inequality and violence against women and girls are among the greatest barriers to global development, security, and prosperity.

Most importantly, this global movement is 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 with little prospects for a better life. The young girl who says no to breast ironing, rejecting the notion that only by delaying puberty can she deter possible rape. Violence against women and girls is an emergency *every day* and affects women and girls in *every* country.

All too often, the world's leaders are moved to act in the face of critically urgent and high profile emergencies, like the earthquake in Haiti and now the tragic aftermath of the typhoon in the Philippines. These crises demand urgent action – and it is imperative that such action takes into account the heightened vulnerability of women and girls to become targets of violence, sexual assault, and trafficking.

In regions of armed conflicts like the Democratic Republic of Congo, horrific sexual and physical violence are being committed against women and girls, often as a tool of war. These horrendous crimes are nothing less than a war on the next generation, and a tool for the destruction of communities and ultimately nations. The devastation they cause will be felt long after the fighting has ended. We need a response that is sustained and durable enough to address not just today's emergencies, but also those that lie ahead.

Often when the focus is on the debilitating epidemic of global violence against women and girls, someone will say that it's a part of 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.

In fact, all over the world mothers and fathers love their daughters and their sons, and want for them what we want for our children: The chance for them to learn and grow, thrive and prosper, without fear, degradation, and the trauma associated with violence.

With each passing day, there is a growing understanding of the correlation between improving the status of women and girls and achieving peace and prosperity. Nations that promote gender equality and empower women and girls, and that remove the often formidable barriers for women and girls to access education, secure safe employment, participate in civic life, and live free from violence, also experience reductions in the rates of HIV and AIDS, declines in incidents of child and maternal mortality, improvements in economic productivity, and the enrichment of participatory and democratic government.

When we eliminate violence against women and girls and empower women and girls, everyone benefits.

The reality is that real change will only come when we stand together to stop this violence. There is a role for each of us.

The International Violence Against Women Act codifies many of the groundbreaking initiatives undertaken by the U.S. government that are having an immediate and direct impact in saving the lives of women and girls around the world. Most notably, the IVAWA:

- Establishes the Office of Global Women's Issues at the Department of State that is responsible for developing and coordinating government-wide implementation of the U.S. Strategy and the National Action Plan, and reporting back to the U.S. Congress on progress;
- Underscores that stopping violence against women and girls must be a critical diplomatic, programmatic, and funding priority for the U.S. government;
- Recognizes the need for an intentional and comprehensive approach for ending gender-based violence that focuses initially on a few select countries with strong local partners and clear data collection to measure outcomes and inform best practices.

We need the U.S. Congress to stand together and affirm with unquestioned conviction that gender-based violence is not only deplorable, but is an issue that requires U.S. leadership. We need the U.S. Congress to move beyond the rhetoric and to pass – and fund – the International Violence Against Women Act.

Stopping violence against women and girls is a moral imperative, but it is also an essential feature for building stable democracies, enabling economic development, and improving global security. This is an issue that rises above partisan politics. It is about the promotion of universal human rights and about creating a better world for everyone. Thank you.