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“Violence against Women: Global Costs and Consequences”
CARE Submission to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee
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We thank Chairman John Kerry and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for the opportunity to provide this statement and for holding a hearing on the critically important topic of the global costs and consequences of gender-based violence (GBV).

As an international development agency that works in over 70 countries around the world, CARE has become acutely aware of the costs and consequences of gender inequality and the unique vulnerabilities women and girls face. As a result, our organization has increasingly placed special emphasis on working with poor women and girls because we believe that such investments are the key to pulling them, their families and entire communities out of poverty.

CARE also believes that violence against women and girls, in addition to being a severe and widespread violation of human rights, is at the heart of women’s disempowerment and marginalization around the world. As such, CARE works to prevent and respond to violence against women in many countries around the world, including in emergency, post-crisis and stable settings. This includes programs in countries such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Uganda, Burundi, the Balkans, India, Bangladesh, Egypt and Benin.

CARE has also increasingly engaged in international policy discussions on GBV in the hopes of marshalling an adequate international response as we firmly believe GBV undermines many of our organization’s and international community’s health, development and humanitarian assistance priorities.

Key Issues

It is estimated that one in three women around the world has been beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in her lifetime. Gender-based violence (GBV) takes many forms, ranging from abuse in the home, in schools and other spaces, to culturally sanctioned practices that are harmful to women, to widespread rape and sexual violence by armed actors in times of conflict. Such violations have grave impacts on survivors’ physical and psychological health, and in the case of sexual violence, may lead to exposure to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS and the loss of vital support due to the social stigma associated with sexual violence.

However, even in countries where violence against women is prohibited under law, such acts are rarely reported or addressed through legal processes. This is due to the existence of social attitudes that condone GBV and stigmatize and blame the survivor, as well as the absence of safe and supportive health, psycho-social and other assistance for them. Ultimately, such violence, and the costs associated with it, hinder women’s and girls’ full participation in social, economic and educational activities, handicapping their contributions to the development of their communities and contributing to a cycle of gender inequality and poverty.

While violence against women is a widespread and severe problem, it is not an insurmountable one. CARE's experience working in communities around the world has shown us that addressing violence against women is possible through long-term and well-coordinated engagement and action by actors across a range of key sectors including health, social, security and legal services. In this regard, CARE carries out a number of multi-sectoral programs and initiatives to prevent and respond to GBV. These programs include initiatives aimed at supporting and building the capacity of local organizations and community structures to strengthen access to medical services, psychosocial support and livelihood assistance for survivors.

Recognizing that violence against women and girls is rooted in gender inequality and discrimination, CARE also works within communities to increase awareness, education and dialogue around issues of gender, violence and related themes, in order to influence norms and attitudes that condone violence and undermine women's human rights. This includes activities focused on engaging men and boys in preventing violence against women. CARE also supports the empowerment of women and girls throughout its programming, through activities aimed at strengthening women's access to economic livelihoods, initiatives to strengthen education and health care for women and girls and advocacy for national and international policies that promote their rights.

The global policy framework to protect the rights of women and girls has seen some improvement in recent years, but the persistence of widespread GBV in many countries indicates a failure at various levels to address the problem and its causes in a serious manner. Key areas of weakness in the response to GBV include:

- inadequate resources to provide survivors with accessible and comprehensive assistance
- inadequate support for long-term initiatives aimed at addressing the root causes of violence, including the cultural norms that encourage violence and impunity
- weak and uncoordinated action from governments, multi-lateral agencies and other stakeholders involved in the multi-sectoral response to GBV

Outlined below are key recommendations for improving the US response to violence against women and girls globally.

Recommendations

1. Increase assistance to survivors

Access to health, psychosocial, livelihood and legal assistance for survivors is the cornerstone of efforts to address violence, including efforts to tackle impunity and gather reliable information on the situation. Without access to such basic assistance, survivors have no entry-point for support and are unlikely to report their experiences and sustain any participation in judicial or police processes. Unfortunately, many countries lack appropriate, adequate and accessible health, psychosocial and other services for women and girls affected by violence, thereby ensuring that the problem is under-reported, perpetrators go unpunished and survivors do not receive appropriate assistance.

The US can play an important role in addressing this problem by increasing its support for initiatives aimed at strengthening basic health, psycho-social and livelihoods support for women and girls and by encouraging other governments, as well as multi-lateral actors such as the UN, to step up their response in these areas.

2. Address the underlying causes of violence

Prevention is a huge challenge, but CARE's experience suggests that addressing the underlying social, cultural and political drivers of GBV, including the unequal status of women, is the most effective way to stop violence from happening. CARE's experience also indicates the importance of increasing the involvement of men and boys in preventing violence against women. For example, in the Balkans, CARE works with local advocacy and youth service agencies to reach thousands of young men to instill more equitable gender norms, attitudes and behavior. In Burundi, Uganda and other countries, CARE supports community dialogue aimed at encouraging men and women to reflect on and change attitudes and behaviors that condone violence against women and girls.

The US should increase and sustain its support for such long term approaches which seeks to address the structural causes of violence. Only by addressing the root cause of GBV can we hope to stem the incidence of this scourge.

3. Ensure effective coordination

Because of its complex and multi-dimensional nature, an effective response to GBV demands effective coordination among actors from diverse sectors involved in efforts to prevent and respond to it. Too often, however the response to GBV is plagued by coordination and capacity challenges, including duplication of efforts between different agencies and underfunding of certain sectors or areas, leaving survivors' needs unmet.

The US government can begin to address this challenge by developing a comprehensive strategy on GBV. Such a strategy will help ensure that key US government agencies are working together in a coordinated way towards the goal of addressing GBV by integrating efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls into all foreign assistance programs, including health, governance, education, economic growth, humanitarian assistance and security programming. The US should also support multi-lateral efforts at the UN and elsewhere to better coordinate the global response to sexual and gender based violence, particularly in humanitarian contexts when a wide range of actors are engaged in response efforts.

4. Continue and increase US global leadership

CARE commends the US government for the increased leadership and commitment it has shown in recent UN Security Council discussions addressing the issue of sexual violence in conflict. We urge the US government to maintain its global leadership on the issue and ensure that all governments, multi-lateral agencies and other actors live up to their commitments to protect and promote the rights of women and girls around the world.

In addition to demonstrating leadership through multilateral mechanisms, the US should make a bilateral commitment to stopping GBV by reintroducing and passing the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA). CARE supported this bipartisan legislation during the 110th Congress because it provided the framework and resources for the US to address GBV in the comprehensive manner we have found to be most effective in addressing the root causes of violence and responding to survivors' needs.

We encourage the current Congress to reintroduce legislation that would take a similarly robust and transformative approach to ending and responding to violence during the 111th Congress.