

October 29, 2003

SCHAKOWSKY ADDRESSES HUMAN RIGHTS CAUCUS HEARING ON GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE AND WOMEN'S HEALTH

I want to thank Congressional Human Rights Caucus Chairmen Lantos and Wolf for helping to highlight this important issue. I want to thank Reps. Barbara Lee, Slaughter, and Moore Capito of the Women's Caucus for co-chairing this briefing and for their leadership on this subject, and I want to thank everyone here for coming today to learn more about the intersection of violence against women and women's health. I especially want to thank our witnesses for coming to share their expertise, and I appreciate all the work done by the World Health Organization to put together such a valuable report on violence and health. Violence against women is not a private issue or just a "women's issue," it truly is a human rights issue, and I am pleased that the Human Rights Caucus, along with the Women's Caucus, decided to host this event.

Gender-based violence can have far greater consequences for victims, their families, their communities, and for our global society than most people realize. The harm done to women's health because of violence reaches deeper than a bruise or a broken arm, it can inflict permanent health damage, jeopardize a woman's ability to work and support her family, and affect the physical and economic health of her entire community.

For thousands of women in America, the consequences of domestic violence mean they have to deal with serious health problems while having to uproot their children and flee their homes to find safety. For thousands of women in Congo, the consequences of widespread and violent gang rape have left them suffering from vaginal fistula, leaving them unable to control their bodily functions, unable to care for their children, possibly unable ever to have children again, and all the while enduring ostracism and severe pain. For thousands of women in Southeast Asia, the consequences of sexual slavery have meant the proliferation sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV and AIDS, among entire populations.

Throughout the world, violence against women has been linked to the HIV pandemic in a number of ways. Violence can leave women unable to work or provide for their families, forcing them to exchange sex for food or money. Sexual abuse of girls often leads to later drug use and risky sexual behaviors, both of which are risk factors for HIV infection. Furthermore, domestic violence has prevented women from accessing critical information on the prevention and care of HIV/AIDS, from being tested for HIV infection, and from receiving HIV/AIDS treatment and counseling. In Sub-Saharan Africa, some older HIV-infected men coerce or force young women into sex in hopes of curing their own HIV. In Ethiopia, the practice of men inheriting their deceased relatives' wives has led to spread of HIV in both women and men.

But we are not helpless in this fight, and we must not be hopeless. We must fully fund

all Violence Against Women programs. In particular, I have been working hard since coming to Congress to secure funding for transitional housing for domestic violence victims. This year my legislation, H.R. 1704, authorizing a transitional housing grant program was included in the PROTECT Act and signed into law. I am working hard to see that we get this funding appropriated as its own line-item as part of the Department of Justice VAWA programs. In addition, we must restore funding for UNFPA and repeal the global gag rule so we can help prevent and treat many of the health problems which result from violence against women. And we must ensure full funding of the U.S. Leadership Against HIV/AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria Act which was signed into law to fight AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Finally, we must open our doors to women from across the globe who experience gender-based violence in countries that provide no relief. In one specific case, we are working to allow Ms. Rodi Alvarado Peña the opportunity to be granted asylum in the United States after she experienced ten years of violence at the hands of her husband in Guatemala. I urge all my colleagues to sign onto a letter to Attorney General Ashcroft asking him to grant her attorneys the opportunity to make her case heard.

Violence against women is an issue that we should all be aware of and working together to end. I am eager to learn more from each of our distinguished witnesses.