

By BONNIE ERBE, Scripps Howard News Service

A funny thing happened on the way to, or actually at the Democratic Women's Working Group in the U.S. House, which invited journalists in for breakfast this week. The breakfast, which consisted largely of coffee, was held in the otherwise elegant Speaker's Dining Room in the U.S. Capitol.

The topic was passage of the International Violence Against Women Act, also the focus of a congressional hearing on Wednesday that included testimony from actress Nicole Kidman (a.k.a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations Development Fund for Women.)

I went to this event, as I have gone to so many others over the years, expecting to witness little by way of tangible progress for women. But while I was there I was reminded how much has changed and how women are starting to advance to positions of real power. They are using their newfound clout to make the world a better place for women not just here in the United States, but worldwide.

The act is a historic and unprecedented effort, as its sponsors say, to target and deter violence against women worldwide. It would spend \$1 billion over five years in the 10 to 20-most female violence-prone nations in the world. The support would go to programs that prevent and respond to violence against women in developing nations.

In Afghanistan, for example, where little girls risk death, beatings or mutilation by acid for the mere act of attending school, violence against girls and women is rampant. One of the most oppressive legacies of the Taliban regime was to force every grown woman to wear a burka or face execution for violating the severe dress code. Rep. Jan Schakowsky, D-Ill., who co-chairs the Working Group, brought a burka with her to the breakfast. She and other group members took a fact-finding tour of Afghanistan earlier this year.

It is one thing to see women shrouded in this huge, light blue amalgam of cloth on TV or online. It is quite another to see such a garment in person and imagine what life would be like if forced to wear one every minute outside one's home. The waves of blue fabric descend from a skullcap, that itself is covered. There is a small area of netted fabric from which women can peer out to a very limited view of the world. Afghani girls were and still are sold into marriage as early as 12 years of age. They must submit to statutory rape by their much older, often aged husbands.

Some of the money would go (if approved by Congress) to prevent the Taliban from forcing Afghani women back into the servitude they endured until the United States attacked that country post-911. It would also be used to prevent use of rape as a weapon of war as it has been used in the Congo, Darfur and Guinea.

Some taxpayers may believe their hard-earned dollars could be better used elsewhere. But consider this: if the United States had stopped the Taliban and its parent organization, Al Qaeda before 9/11, wouldn't we be in a much better position today?

The anti-violence act would never have become a viable bill if Nancy Pelosi were not House Speaker, or if Jan Schakowsky, Donna Edwards, D-Md., Nita Lowey, D-N.Y., and other women weren't supported by House leadership in their mission. They gain clout, too, from their association with a Secretary of State who's made quelling violence against women a core goal of U.S. policy.

Schakowsky told the story of how the Democratic House women marched over to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee to demand an international treaty that condemns violence against women. This was some 15 years ago when that committee was chaired by then-Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C. He had them escorted out by Capitol police and told them to sit down and, "act like ladies."

Are we where we need to be? No. Are we much closer than we were? My response is a resounding, "Yes."

(Bonnie Erbe is a TV host and writes this column for Scripps Howard News Service. E-mail

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## **Erbe: A bill that would help women worldwide**

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