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PEACE BEGINS AT HOME

Andrea Bottner

The "16 Days of Activism Against Gender Violence" campaign runs from November 25 to December 10, 2008. The dates are not accidental: November 25 is the International Day Against Violence Against Women, and December 10 is International Human Rights Day. These 16 days are a bridge between thinking of gender violence as a "women's issue" and understanding it as a human rights concern that touches us all.

Deadly discrimination cuts short women's lives in every country and stalks us at every point in our life-cycle: from before birth, in sex-selective abortion and infanticide; to childhood death from neglect in food and medicine; to genital mutilation; so-called "honor" killings; dowry deaths; sex trafficking; rape; systematic mass rape and torture in war zones; inadequate maternal health care; and socially-sanctioned impoverishment of widows. Taken together, around the globe, one in three women will experience gender-based violence in her lifetime. In some regions of the world, that figure rises to 70 percent.

Across diverse cultures and societies, one element unifies this savagery: the willingness to dehumanize women.

These sixteen days affirm women's rights in the world not in terms of what we do for our husbands or families, but simply in terms of who we are: human beings. Humans, who deserve dignity, and the ability to go about our lives free from violence and fear.

For too many women, the place where we ought to feel the most safe is in fact the most dangerous. Women are more at risk of experiencing violence in intimate relationships than in any other aspect of our lives.

Domestic violence happens behind closed doors, making it easy to dismiss as a private issue or a tragedy of interest only to the affected family. However, the consequences of violence in the home radiate outward and upward, affecting communities and entire nations. In the US alone, the economic cost of domestic violence exceeds USD 5.8 billion per year in health care services and lost productivity. A 2004 study in the UK that computed both direct and indirect costs of domestic violence arrived at a figure of GBP 23 billion per year, or GBP 440 per citizen. Regardless of the society in

which it takes place, domestic violence ruptures families. It breeds poverty, inequality, instability, and affects the standing of governments in the eyes of the world: the greatness of nations is always measured by how they treat their most at-risk citizens.

Most countries have laws that criminalize the assault component of domestic violence, but, according to a 2006 UN study, only 89 recognize the special combination of physical and emotional brutality – the particular circumstances brought about by the unique personal bonds between perpetrator and victim – that characterize domestic violence. Those laws are urgently needed.

We need partnerships between NGOs and legislative bodies, so their expertise and experience can inform the laws. And we need more thorough data collection, so that policies can be targeted and effective.

But laws and policies are empty gestures without stringent implementation and enforcement. Enforcement must recognize that domestic violence offenses have been separated from assault categories because their characteristics are different, and not because the crimes are any less serious.

We need consistent guidelines and training for police and social workers. We need courtroom procedures that allow privacy and confidentiality for victims – which can be as simple as allowing video testimony, or restricting courtroom access. We need expansion of the proven success of "one-stop centers" that offer interagency health and legal services for victims.

But most of all, we need political will from governments to adhere to international standards and norms. We need leaders who will insist -- loudly, frequently, and persistently – that women have equal worth, equal value, and deserve equal protection and respect.

A scant sixteen days will not accomplish these goals. But sixteen days are a start – a good start, if they can serve as the fuse that inspires us to examine our attitudes and take action all the other 349 days of the year.

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Andrea Bottner is the Director of the State Department's Office of International Women's Issues. For more information on International Women's Issues, visit <http://www.state.gov/g/wi/>.

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