

Remarks by Ambassador Susan E. Rice, U.S. Permanent Representative to the United Nations, At the Commission on the Status of Women, March 6, 2013

Thank you, Madame Chair. On behalf of the United States, let me thank you for this opportunity to stand firmly in support of the safety and dignity of women and girls and to insist upon the elimination of all forms of violence against women everywhere.

I come here to reaffirm a simple, bedrock principle: that the rights of my daughter are just as real, just as sacred, just as self-evident as the rights of my son. We cannot live in truly free societies, if women and girls are not free to reach their full potential. We cannot live in truly open societies, if the doors of opportunity are not open equally to all women and all girls.

I am glad that this year's Commission on the Status of Women is giving particular focus to preventing and eliminating rape, abuse and all forms of gender-based violence. All women and girls have a fundamental right to live free from violence and fear. Whenever one woman suffers physical or sexual abuse, our common humanity is assaulted along with her. Violence against women takes many forms, whether inflicted by a family member or a stranger, by a state-backed militia or by an abusive partner. When women are attacked, so is their full and equal participation in society and that of all of us. Violence against women weakens our communities, stunts our economies, and erodes our common values.

Twenty years ago, the UN General Assembly adopted a landmark declaration on eliminating violence against women. Since then, we have taken major strides to prevent, reduce and condemn the abuse of women and girls worldwide—and to do more to help those victims that we were not able to save from assault. In a single generation, the ground has shifted. We have debunked the vicious myth that women who have been sexually assaulted were “asking for it”. Domestic violence is now outlawed in 125 countries. The use of rape as a weapon of war is widely condemned as a most despicable crime.

But we still have far more work to do together. One in three women worldwide—one in three—will still be beaten, coerced into sex, or otherwise abused in their lifetimes, most of them by an intimate partner. More than 600 million women and girls still live in countries that have not yet declared domestic violence a crime. Women with disabilities are two to three times more likely to be physically or sexually abused. Lesbian, bisexual, and transgender women still face higher risks of violence and abuse. Thousands of women and girls caught in conflict zones and post-conflict zones are subjected to rape and horrific abuse daily. And some 60 million girls are assaulted each year while simply trying to get to school.

Ending this global scourge will require comprehensive support services for survivors, justice for perpetrators, redoubled efforts to prevent assault, and the common recognition that women and girls have fundamental and inalienable rights, including making their own reproductive health

choices. Community members—from police officers to religious leaders to health officials—must also fulfill their respective responsibilities to defend women’s rights.

My own country has also made important progress. In the United States, the rate of intimate partner violence has declined by two-thirds over the past two decades. All 50 states in our union now have laws that treat date rape or spousal rape as just as much of a crime as rape by a stranger.

We are training law enforcement officers and judges to care better for victims. We are helping educators reduce gender violence and improving access to quality women’s health care. And we are enlisting men and boys in this critical work—because halting violence against women is everyone’s responsibility.

But we have much more to do. That’s why tomorrow President Obama will sign the Violence Against Women Act, renewed by the U.S. Congress last week. This historic law transforms the way the United States approaches both survivors and perpetrators of abuse. It strengthens tools to hold offenders accountable, launches new programs to help rape and assault victims, and will now finally offer increased protections for Native American women and the LGBT community.

At the same time, the United States is taking action internationally. Last year, President Obama launched the first-ever U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally. The United States is leading the UN system in helping end violence against women and girls—from creating a UN Special Representative to combat sexual and gender-based violence in conflict, to demanding justice when UN personnel inflict sexual exploitation and abuse, to empowering women as equal partners in conflict prevention and peacebuilding.

But, we don’t just need plans and laws. We need implementation, accountability and enforcement. We need to recognize that reproductive rights and access to reproductive health services are essential to empowering women and girls. We need action not just by government officials but by all parts of society, which is why we are so glad there are so many representatives from civil society groups here today.

We all know that the epidemic of violence against women and girls has touched many of us personally. Let us never forget that the victims whom we seek to protect are our own mothers and daughters, our sisters and friends, and maybe even ourselves.

Madame Chair, the United States looks forward to forging a robust set of Agreed Conclusions that enshrine our common commitment to protecting women and girls from violence and discrimination in all forms. Billions are depending on us. We must not fail.

Thank you.