

“Violence Against Women in the Americas”
Remarks by Under Secretary Sewall on International Women’s Day

Organization of American States
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Good morning everyone! Thank you to all of our partners from the Organization of American States (OAS), the Canadian Mission to the OAS, and the United States Mission, for organizing this event.

Today is about recognizing the contributions of more than three-and-a-half billion women around the world – including nearly a billion women in the Americas.

In our hemisphere, women serve as heads of state, command space shuttles, and head top global companies like General Motors and Yahoo. Renowned female authors like Isabel Allende push the boundaries of literary convention, while artists like Shakira record the best-selling tracks of the century. Strong women leaders – like Chilean President Michelle Bachelet – win reelection in a landslide while championing gender equality. Countries like Bolivia, Cuba, Mexico, Ecuador, and Nicaragua lead the world with their number of women in elected office. Our collective progress as a region is undeniable.

But so too are the many obstacles that remain to full equality – and today we recognize those as well. Of these, perhaps most appalling is the widespread violence against women in the Americas.

In the United States, one in five women is sexually assaulted during her college years, though just one in ten incidents are ever reported. In 2014, there were over 19,000 sexual assaults in the U.S. military, 86 percent of which went unreported. A staggering *53 percent* of all women in Latin America have suffered some form of domestic violence. In Guatemala, thousands of girls have been raped by fathers and family members, many becoming mothers before they turn 15. Many Latin American countries rank among the worst *in the world* for the number of women killed each year – like Colombia – where ten women are murdered each and every day.

These numbers are sickening. They are unacceptable. And we must call this violence what it is: a pervasive human rights abuse in our own countries and communities, against our own daughters, sisters, and mothers. President Obama has said that, “one of the best indicators of whether a country will succeed is how it treats its women.” By that measure, we all have much work to do.

That work starts with *preventing* violence against women in the first place. That means everyone, private citizens and public leaders – and especially men – speaking out against violence and *for* equality. President Obama has said that, “it is on all of us to reject the quiet tolerance of sexual assault and to refuse to accept what’s unacceptable.”

Preventing violence against women also means addressing the deeper imbalances – in education, employment, and politics – that reinforce a culture where women are valued less than men, where they are somehow seen as less worthy of equal respect, opportunity, and protection.

Many countries in the region have made great strides in addressing those imbalances. Some have all but closed the gender gap in education and health; yet significant disparities remain. On average, women in the region are still paid less than men for the same work. And women remain dramatically underrepresented at the highest levels of business and government. Of the top 500 companies in the United States, women lead just *twenty-four*. They hold a mere 20 percent of all seats in our Congress.

We have to close these gaps between men and women in all manner of public life. And we have to hold up the principles of equality and inclusion to build an environment where it's never okay to look away, or to stay silent, when women are attacked.

But when women are subjected to violence, they must have a clear path to justice. Thanks to the Inter-American Human Rights System, the region has set high standards for countries to protect women's rights. Yet clearly, in the pervasive violence against women we see year after year, the region is falling far short. To meet them, countries have to consistently *enforce* the law and ensure a fair and responsive judicial process.

They must also address the reality that, for women, the path to justice is often obstructed by the broader barriers they face in society. Barriers like unequal access to quality education and stable employment, gender stereotypes and outright discrimination, and a system of laws and statutes written mostly by men and for men.

Those barriers and biases take many forms. For example, when women in Mexico and Chile bring allegations of violence to court, the system allows judges to suspend legal action and require an alternative resolution process that often has no penalties. That is a double standard; and it feeds a culture of impunity that enables violence against women. And in all our countries, when women do face perpetrators in court, they often face a judge and jury laden with biases that discount their testimony or allow gender norms to impact their application of the law.

All of these barriers combine to impede justice for women in the region. And of course, those barriers are even higher for women who face other forms of discrimination because of their class, ability, sexual orientation, gender identity, or ethnicity. These women face a form of double and even triple discrimination that puts justice far out of reach – undermining the notion that all our people enjoy equal rights and protections under the law.

The poorest in our societies are often more vulnerable to violence. Unequal access to education, healthcare, and stable employment make them easier to exploit. That is especially true for poorer women, who also face greater rates of domestic violence and sexual assault. Some of the poorest are trapped in a web of forced labor and prostitution. Women from poor communities more often bear the sole burden of raising children and earning an income. So *even if* they know how to seek justice, they have precious little time and even fewer resources to pay for effective legal support.

Adding to the burden – they must often contend with corrupt police, lawyers, and judges who exploit their lack of education and resources.

Exploitation is also widespread for women with disabilities, who are two to three times more likely to suffer physical violence and sexual abuse. Similarly, women of different sexual orientations and gender identities in the region face higher rates of violence and a harder path to justice. South of here in Fredericksburg, Virginia, a lesbian student was strangled to death just one day after she took part in a vigil to oppose bullying and harassment against the LGBTI community. In Brazil, more transgendered people are murdered than anywhere else in the world. No one should fear for their life because of who they love – or how they identify.

I recently learned the story of a trans woman from Honduras. After a long struggle to find work, she landed a job at a local restaurant. Then the death threats started coming in. *We'll find you, and we'll kill you* – the notes read. The restaurant owner decided to fire her because it was “too dangerous” to keep her around. Stories like this are all too common in the region.

Across the Americas, women from racial and ethnic minorities are also more vulnerable to violence – which is made worse by the legacy of repression and racism pervading our societies. A legacy that, in a cruel twist, often makes minority women less likely to seek justice from authorities they do not trust.

This issue has taken center stage here in the United States after a series of incidents where police seemed to use violence – including rape – against black women. Even though incidents of domestic violence against black women are 35 percent higher than for white women, many do not report these cases to the police because they fear their partners will be mistreated and abused. We have documented similar trends for minority groups across the Americas – highlighting the twisted ways that gender, racism, and violence intersect to put minority women in harm's way and justice out of reach.

The same is true for indigenous women across the Americas, who also face greater violence and a long road to justice. Here in the US, women from native communities are two-and-a-half times more likely to experience sexual violence than other women. In remote areas across the region, militias, criminal networks, and private contractors have subjected indigenous women to all manner of sexual violence to terrorize, traffic, and displace them. Governments across the region have also been complicit, and there have been many reports by independent human rights groups of members of the military perpetrating violence and rape against indigenous communities.

Justice for all of these crimes remains elusive. Many incidents go unreported because indigenous women fear backlash and condemnation for taking the issue outside the community. Others stay silent because they fear retribution by the perpetrators, whether they are in or out of government. More don't seek justice because they were never taught how.

Violence against women of all backgrounds remains one of the most pervasive but underreported human rights in the region – one that demands not only our attention, but our urgent action.

And fortunately, there are signs of progress as countries across the Americas begin to act. Colombia recently joined 15 other countries in Latin America to classify the murder of women as a separate crime with a stiff prison sentence. El Salvador established special courts to make it easier for women to seek justice when they are subjected to violence.

And in a historic decision last month, a Guatemalan court convicted two former military officials of crimes against humanity, including sexual violence against indigenous women – the first time the crime of sexual slavery has been heard in a domestic court in relation to the armed conflict.

Here in the United States, the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act in 2013 strengthened the ability of native tribes to prosecute those who commit sexual violence, regardless of whether they are a tribal member. It also expanded resources to law enforcement to investigate rape, provided incentives for colleges to educate students about sexual assault, and increased assistance to vulnerable immigrant and LGBTI victims of domestic violence.

At the Department of State, we've expanded efforts to combat sexual violence against women around the world. In 2012, the Department developed a global strategy to tackle all forms of violence against women through a holistic, government-wide approach to protect and assist survivors, broaden access to justice, and help women across the globe understand and exercise their rights under the law.

Since the strategy was announced, funding to tackle gender-based violence around the world has grown to more \$150 million – an increase of 60 percent. Many U.S. embassies are developing plans to prevent violence against women and girls. The Department is also strengthening how we use data to ensure that new programs to prevent and respond to gender-based violence are more targeted and impactful.

These efforts go hand-in-hand with the State Department's broader efforts to empower women in all manner of public life and integrate gender perspective in our work. Along with partners like the Inter-American Foundation and the OAS, the Department is helping women across the Americas to lift their voices and build their talents to move entire region closer to parity. In Colombia and Guatemala, the United States assists indigenous and African descendant women to participate in local government and advocate against violence and discrimination. Throughout the region, we train female entrepreneurs to reach new markets; we support women in politics to rise to positions of leadership; and we partner with local law enforcement to train more female police officers, prosecutors, and judges.

We do this not only because gender equality is inherently worthwhile; the experience of many nations, including ours, shows that when you broaden participation and emphasize inclusion – in business, in arts and culture, in politics – it enriches us all.

I mean this quite literally. When ten percent more girls enroll in secondary education, the economy increases by three percent. A recent study by McKinsey Global Institute found that advancing women's equality could add up to *\$12 trillion dollars* to global GDP by 2025. So this is not only about parity for its own sake, but also building strong economies for the 21st century.

It's also about building stable and robust democracies. When women, or any group for that matter, fail to see themselves in the halls of power year after year – that can lead many to conclude that government does not care about their interests or futures, producing alienation and detachment from public life.

But more immediately, when policies overlook the perspectives of women, they inevitably miss a huge part of the picture. Just look at the Zika virus, whose dangers could be mitigated if more women were able to decide their own reproductive health. Yet on this issue like so many others, women are shut out of the debates shaping their lives.

That hasn't stopped many brave women in the region from making their voices heard – often at great peril.

Brave women like Berta Cáceres. For years, Berta spoke out against powerful interests for the rights of the Lenca people – her people – to protect the rivers and streams and forests from exploitation. She began receiving threats, but as a woman, those threats began to take on a more gruesome tone. Typical warnings of murder and torture were laced with horrific promises of rape and attacks on her family. The message was clear: *Be quiet woman, go home – or else*. The violence they threatened would have silenced us all. But not Berta – she kept speaking up and speaking out. “Let us wake up! Let us wake up!” she told anyone who would listen.

Last week, gunmen broke into her home and shot Berta to death. Her loss is devastating, but we still have her words; we still have her example, and we must all of us wake up. Wake up to the violence against so many women, like Berta, full of passion and purpose to contribute.

So today, on International Women's Day, let us together demand justice for Berta's murder, and for the violence against all the sisters, daughters, and mothers of the Americas.

Thank you.