

## Undiluted: New House IVAWA Legislation is a Welcome Break from Previous Watered-down Versions

Last week, Representative Jan Schakowsky (D-IL) introduced her latest version of the [International Violence Against Women Act](#) (H.R. 5034), also known as IVAWA, in the House of Representatives along with 72 cosponsors. Although there has been a tendency to streamline—or, quite frankly, water down—the IVAWA legislation in recent years, Rep. Schakowsky’s latest bill does quite the opposite. For the first time, this version of IVAWA provides a definition of gender-based violence (GBV), codifies the existing [U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to GBV Globally](#) and resurrects critical language from previous iterations of the bill. Together, these changes have created a far more comprehensive piece of legislation on this issue than we’ve seen in years.

A decade ago when the bill was first introduced in the House, it presented a robust and detailed set of program activities to be supported by the United States government in order to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls. Subsequent versions of the bill in the House and Senate became increasingly less prescriptive, instead focusing on broader goals for various sectors and referencing the GBV strategy developed under the Obama administration, which could provide the necessary details. The current Senate version is even further diluted, making hardly any mention of specific sectors and failing to explicitly codify the Obama era strategy.

Instead of introducing a bill identical to that in the Senate, Rep. Schakowsky has taken a different tack. She introduced a bill that is in many ways reminiscent of those early iterations, laying out specific program activities in key sectors for preventing and addressing violence against women and girls. The bill recognizes the crucial role of the health sector in these efforts. As such, it promotes the “integration of programs to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls in programs addressing child survival, women’s health, family planning, mental health and HIV.” It also calls for:

- Training of health care workers on screening and assessing clients who have or may be experiencing violence;
- Developing and strengthening safe and confidential referral systems for additional services or assistance (including in other sectors) and information gathering systems; and
- Developing and enforcing with accompanying resources national health policies and strategies that seek to prevent and respond to violence against women, in cooperation with ministries of health.

Similarly detailed activities are listed around increasing legal protections and justice, improving economic and educational opportunities, and working to change social norms and attitudes that underpin violence and discrimination against women and girls—including child marriage and female genital mutilation.

IVAWA is also directly tackling the issue of violence against women and girls in humanitarian crises for the first time in many years, building on, and complementing, U.S. leadership in this area. This is vital given the unprecedented numbers of individuals impacted by conflict or natural disasters who require humanitarian assistance and protection. Additionally, women and girls face increased vulnerabilities to sexual and other forms of gender-based violence in these crises, often at the hands of other community or family members, armed groups, or even aid workers. The bill requires proper training for humanitarian workers (contractors, grantees and governments) carrying out U.S. humanitarian assistance programs so they can prevent and respond to GBV, the addition of specialists in disaster assistance response teams, inclusion of capacity-building within U.S. assistance for local partners to respond to GBV, as well as availability of assistance to provide medical and psychosocial care, legal services, education and economic opportunity programs for survivors.

Furthermore, recent versions of the bill in the House and Senate—including several of Rep. Schakowsky's prior iterations—shied away from including definitions of “violence against women and girls” out of concerns that it could be too politically fraught. However, the current bill lays out a strong definition that recognizes not only the many types of violence women and girls face, but the various situations and environments in which this violence is commonplace. It also provides a definition of “gender-based violence,” which acknowledges violence based on adherence (or lack of adherence) to socially-constructed norms of masculinity and femininity, as well as real or perceived sex, gender identity or sexual orientation. This addition to the bill aligns more closely with the existing U.S. GBV strategy and helps to reinforce an understanding that violence against women and girls, the most common form of GBV, is deeply rooted in gender inequality and gender norms.

As in previous versions, the bill would codify some of the gender infrastructure in the U.S. government, including an Office of Global Women's Issues (GWI), led by an ambassador-at-large and the position of a senior coordinator for gender equality and women's empowerment at USAID. Bolstering the infrastructure where U.S. government leadership and its mandate to address gender equality is housed is highly important amid continuing discussions of reorganizing the Department of State. While there is a Senior Coordinator—Michelle Bekkering, who also serves as senior deputy assistant administrator of the Bureau for Economic Growth, Education and Environment (E3)—in place at USAID, the Trump-Pence administration has failed to nominate anyone for the ambassador position. Late last year, Penny Young Nance, the CEO of Concerned Women for America, was floated as the [administration's rumored nominee](#). However, she was criticized for her severe lack of qualifications, opposition to the existence of the GWI office itself and her extreme views on the rights of women and LGBT individuals. It is imperative that whoever inhabits an important position, such as an ambassador role, is aligned with the mission of the office and not working to undermine it.

Representative Schakowsky's 2018 International Violence Against Women Act is refreshing and invigorating. In a political climate where the White House openly disregards women and the issues that impact them, Rep. Schakowsky and her House colleagues have recognized the importance of having a strong piece of legislation that protects the gains made over the past decade and ensures that U.S. GBV

programming continues to be inclusive and comprehensive by directing the activities and priorities of the U.S. government. As the Representative said in a [“Now This”](#) video released with the bill, “Across the country and around the globe, women are standing up and saying: Enough! Enough to unfair and unequal treatment, enough to sexual harassment, enough to sexual assault and gender-based violence.” The House version of IVAWA makes it known that those women’s voices have been heard and that the time for action is now.