

Violence against women still a problem

By MIRAISY RODRIGUEZ and

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Eleven years ago, Jessica Lenahan's three daughters were kidnapped and murdered after Colorado police repeatedly ignored her pleas to enforce a restraining order against her estranged husband. Instead, over a 10-hour period, the police responded to a fire-lane violation, looked for a lost dog and took a two-hour dinner break.

Three years ago, a 13-year-old Miami girl abused at home took the freedom offered by a local pimp, only to endure more abuse at the pimp's hand during a year of prostitution. Just recently, a victim of domestic violence, eight months pregnant, was arrested and jailed by police officers who decided on the scene, without any real investigation, that she was assaulting her husband rather than the other way around.

Such violence, and such a response by law enforcement, is unacceptable and all too common. It's also why the reauthorization of the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) this year is critical.

March 8, International Women's Day, is a timely reminder of both the advances that we have made and the challenges that remain to protect women and girls from domestic violence and other forms of abuse. As we wrestle with these difficult problems, we must always remember that women's rights are human rights.

In January, the U.N. Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, Rashida Manjoo, visited South Florida and other U.S. cities to assess the state of violence against women in this country. At the end of her visit, she reminded U.S. citizens that, "violence against women is the most pervasive human rights violation" and we must demand our government "develop penal, civil, labor and administrative sanctions in domestic legislation to punish and redress the wrongs caused to women who are subjected to violence."

On the tail of Ms. Manjoo's visit, more than 100 advocates, professors, community organizers and legal professionals from 20 countries in the Americas gathered at the University of Miami School of Law to convene Gender Justice in the Americas: A Transnational Dialogue on Sexuality, Violence, Reproduction & Human Rights. One theme emerged repeatedly: Domestic violence is a human-rights violation and it is an epidemic in our country and throughout our hemisphere.

In the next month, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights — a human-rights body within the Organization of American States — is expected to decide the case of Jessica Lenahan (Gonzales) vs. United States, the first human-rights case brought against the United States by a domestic-violence survivor. Lenahan is demanding that a restraining order must be worth the paper on which it is printed, and that a 911 call to the police must result in a meaningful response.

VAWA is up for reauthorization this year. While VAWA is a landmark piece of legislation that has, for the past 15 years, provided needed money to domestic violence shelters and legal services, it must go further. VAWA 2011 should include robust provisions that create accountability for government officials — especially law enforcement — when they turn a blind eye to women and children in need. Many police officers are doing their best to protect these marginalized, vulnerable populations. But those who are not should be held accountable. Congress must reauthorize VAWA, specifically a version requiring the Department of Justice to initiate investigations when bad cops turn their backs on domestic-violence victims and their children.

For our mothers, sisters and friends, let us protect our human right to life — a life without violence.

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