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HUFF POST POLITICS

We Need a Violence Against Women Act That Includes All Victims Now

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In the summer of 1990, while on a morning walk in the French countryside outside Grenoble, I was jumped from behind, beaten, raped, strangled, hit in the head with a rock, and left for dead in the bottom of a ravine. From the moment I realized what was happening, I knew I was the victim of a gender-based assault. I was attacked by a man who wanted to kill me simply because I am a woman.

For a victim of such a crime, I was unusually lucky. Not only did I survive to bear witness to my assault, but my story was believed and my assailant was apprehended and convicted of rape and attempted murder. Because of factors beyond my control, such as my race, class, and the circumstances in which I was attacked, I was considered a credible victim and my assailant was brought to justice. For the vast majority of survivors of gender-based violence against women, though, this is not the case.

Before the trial, I overheard the prosecutor and my lawyer labeling rapes "nasty" (méchant) or "nice" (gentil) and agreeing that mine was a "nasty" one. I was glad to return to the U.S., which seemed to me -- and still does -- to be at least 20 years ahead of France in its understanding of sexual violence. Evidence of this was a piece of landmark legislation, the Violence Against Women Act, originally drafted in 1990 and passed, with strong bipartisan support in both the Senate and the House, in 1994. This legislation recognized rape and domestic violence, not as inevitable crimes of uncontrollable passion, but as preventable gender-based violence, and provided funding for criminal justice and community-based programs to address it.

In spite of considerable gains, however, our society is still so ridden with victim-blaming and denial that most survivors of rape and domestic violence don't even report their abuse for fear that they won't be believed or assisted. Those who do all too rarely see justice done.

Some groups are especially vulnerable and without recourse. Native American women, for instance, who are attacked by non-Native men on Tribal lands -- 86 percent of Native victims of violence against women -- are not even able to seek justice, because the only effective judicial system has no jurisdiction over crimes committed by non-Natives. Members of the LGBT community are often unable to access crucial services. And victims who are recent immigrants, for example, mail order brides, do not seek help for fear of deportation.

Although the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) was reauthorized in 2000 and 2005 with virtually unanimous support in both the Senate and the House, it expired in 2011 and must be reauthorized before the end of the year in order for the programs it funds to continue. The Senate approved a bipartisan bill reauthorizing it in April, but House Republican leaders are continuing to block it precisely because of its provisions providing help to Native women, members of the LGBT community, and undocumented immigrants who are victims of domestic violence.

You'd think Republican congressmen would have learned from the last election not to try to legislate who counts as a "legitimate" victim of male violence against women. In fact, since November, a number of House Republicans who earlier opposed the Senate VAWA have come around to supporting it. What will it take to convince the remaining hold-outs that all victims of violence -- of whatever race, ethnicity, sexuality, or nationality -- are equally worthy of our concern?

Granted, Congress is facing other pressing issues -- how to avoid the fiscal cliff and how to respond to the Newtown school shootings. The murders of 20 small children and six dedicated educators a week ago seared our hearts and sparked a national outcry against gun violence. Ordinary everyday violence against women and children, though, doesn't get national attention, even when it's fatal (although the local news is filled with it). It's so common it's invisible. But to its millions of victims, it's devastating.

The good news is that we can do something about it and we have evidence about what works. According to a recent Bureau of Justice Statistics' report, domestic violence cases dropped dramatically -- by 64 percent -- in the 18 years since VAWA was enacted. As Senator Claire McCaskill, who defeated Todd "legitimate rape" Akin in November, said last Tuesday, "I have seen how this bill saves lives And yet, this bill has sat in the House for eight months, and that's completely unacceptable."

Last week, all 12 female Democratic Senators sent a letter to the Republican women in the House, urging them to work with House Republican leaders to pass an inclusive VAWA in the few remaining days of the 112th Congress. They -- and the bill's many other supporters, men and women of both parties in the Senate and the House -- are not going to compromise and agree to a bill that treats some victims as more deserving of justice than others.

The Republican Representatives who are keeping VAWA from being reauthorized have a choice: Pass the Senate bill this week -- or do nothing and face the consequences in 2014. If compassion and fairness don't move them to do the right thing,

let's hope that self-interest and foresight will.

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