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September 29, 2010

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the American Bar Association, with nearly 400,000 members nationwide, I write to urge you to support S. 2982, the International Violence Against Women Act (IVAWA). As you know, this legislation would incorporate efforts to prevent and respond to violence against women and girls around the world into U.S. foreign policy and foreign assistance programs.

The ABA strongly supports programs and initiatives to strengthen protection and assistance for victims of gender-based violence within the United States and abroad. The ABA's Commission on Domestic Violence works to increase access to justice for victims of domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking by mobilizing the legal profession throughout the United States. In addition, the ABA's Rule of Law Initiative (ABA ROLI), which provides technical legal assistance in nearly 40 countries around the world, works to assist both government and nongovernmental entities in addressing women's rights issues such as domestic violence and widespread gender-based violence, including systematic rape in post-conflict situations.

The IVAWA supports a coordinated strategy and comprehensive approach to assist victims, hold perpetrators accountable, and prevent gender-based violence. The legislation would provide assistance to support a number of broad-based program activities, including development and enforcement of civil and criminal legal and judicial sanctions, protections, training and capacity. Despite international efforts to address gender-based violence, victims still face many obstacles to achieving justice. Such obstacles often involve the absence of legal protections, the degree to which victims know of their rights and have access to legal services, and the prevalence of untrained or biased legal institutions.

Our experience has shown that assistance directed toward legal services and justice sector reform can be extremely effective in combating gender-based violence and can show tangible results. As an example, since the inception of our program in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) in January 2008, ABA ROLI has been working hand in hand with our Congolese partners to

investigate and prosecute cases of gender-based violence. To date, ABA ROLI and its partners have provided legal counseling to more than 1,800 victims and/or their families, and have filed roughly 1,355 complaints against suspected rapists. ABA ROLI has been directly involved in 281 rape trials that have resulted in 225 convictions. This 80% conviction rate represents one of the single most effective blows against the pervasive culture of impunity with respect to eastern DRC's rape crisis. While this is significant progress, far more needs to be done in the DRC and around the world.

Enhancing efforts to combat gender-based violence globally is not only the right thing to do; it is the smart thing to do. The consequences of gender-based violence are not limited to the individual. Violence against women has a destabilizing effect on societies as a whole. Gender-based violence has high social, health, and economic costs, and serves to perpetuate further violence. By instilling fear and insecurity in women, perpetrators of gender-based violence stunt progress toward equality, development, and peace. Enhancing the United States' efforts to end violence against women and girls around the world is in our foreign policy, economic, and security interests.

The ABA has long been committed to promoting international human rights and access to justice. Gender-based violence is a pervasive violation of human rights throughout the world, and increasing victims' access to justice is a critical part of expanding the rule of law. The American Bar Association requests that you join in the effort to combat violence against women and girls around the world by supporting the International Violence Against Women Act.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Thomas M. Susman", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Thomas M. Susman