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OP-ED: ENGAGING MEN AND BOYS IN ELIMINATING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN

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Ending violence against women is not the work of a day or even a year. It will require concentrated efforts on many fronts with governments, non-profit organizations, and citizen leaders all pulling together. Most importantly, it will require fully tapping the largest and most natural group of allies women have: men.

One in three women around the world will experience gender-based violence in her lifetime. In some countries, that number is as high as 70 percent. Whether it happens behind closed doors or as a public tactic of intimidation, violence against women has consequences for the entire community – men and women alike. When women are abused, businesses close, incomes shrink, families go hungry, and children grow up internalizing beliefs and behaviors that perpetuate the cycle of violence. A community that is unsafe for women is unsafe for everyone. On the other hand, protecting and educating girls contributes to economic growth and helps entire countries prosper.

So men and boys have an interest in ending violence against women. They are also uniquely positioned to help do it. In societies where women are marginalized, men can make the case for nonviolence and gender equality. They can challenge harmful cultural practices that enable gender discrimination. I often say that we need to empower women because no country can make economic progress if it leaves half the population behind. It's just as true that no country can stop violence against women with the other half of the population sitting on the sidelines.

There are stories from all over the world demonstrating how men and boys can get involved and speak out against gender-based violence. One group based in Senegal, Tostan, has taken this approach to changing the dangerous custom of female genital cutting. This severely painful practice can cause hemorrhaging, infection, increased risk during childbirth, infertility, or even death. Tostan learned that abandoning this centuries-old tradition needed to be a collective and community-led decision with the participation of male leaders. So they organized a discussion for the entire village where men and boys could hear their mothers and sisters describe the pain and health problems associated with it. Eventually, the village voted to end the practice.

But the story doesn't end there. The male leaders then traveled to other villages to explain how harmful female genital cutting is, and those villages also voted to end the practice. Within two years, Senegal's government passed a law banning it, and today Tostan has helped nearly 5,000 communities across Senegal, Guinea, The Gambia, Burkina Faso, and Somalia decide to abandon the tradition.

In Afghanistan, male civic and religious leaders are helping raise awareness and change deeply ingrained attitudes about women. The example of a local Mufti in Jalalabad is particularly striking. For years, he taught his followers that human rights were a western imposition that violated Islam. Then he attended a training workshop with 250 other local Afghan leaders focusing on the rights of women, family, and children in the context of Muslim teachings. Their discussions highlighted the benefits of gender equality and the importance of respect and tolerance for diversity in Islam. Today that Mufti has not only changed his beliefs, he frequently speaks out on rights-based issues during

Friday prayer services and on his regional radio program. He has become a powerful voice supporting women in Afghanistan.

At the United States Department of State, we are taking action on the ground: working with NGOs to ensure men's engagement in preventing violence against women, promoting women's economic and entrepreneurial opportunities, and training peacekeepers on gender-based violence awareness and prevention activities. In places like the Democratic Republic of Congo, where mass rape is blatantly and repeatedly used as a weapon of war, we are helping make sure that both men and women are working to investigate sexual violence and prioritize the protection of women and girls.

November 25th is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. It is a day to recommit ourselves to the cause of changing attitudes and ending all forms of violence against women. This year also marks the 15th anniversary of the UN Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing where the world declared the critical connection between women's rights and human rights, and the 10th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 on the links between women, peace, and security. This is a stark reminder that eliminating gender discrimination and violence against women is a long-term struggle and a commitment we must all make together. With men and women working hand in hand, we can end the epidemic of gender-based violence, one person and one community at a time.