

Testimony of

## Salma Hayek

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Good morning, Senators Specter and Biden (and \_\_\_\_\_). Thank you for inviting me to testify before the Committee on the Judiciary today about domestic violence. I am glad to have an opportunity today to talk with you about violence against women. We cannot tolerate a world in which one in three women is or will be a victim of domestic violence.

Domestic violence, sexual assault, dating violence or stalking shatters our society. Instead of having a relationship of love and respect, the victims of these crimes are betrayed by jealous and controlling violence of their intimate partners. These are stories that should not happen in the United States or anywhere else in the world. The United States has been - and should continue to be - a leader in reducing these crimes.

This is not a subject I had much personal experience with - until I learned that a friend of mine was being beaten by her husband. Though I tried, I was not able to convince her to leave her husband - even though I knew, and she knew, what kind of damage domestic violence was causing her. At the time, I considered that a personal failure.

I was completely outraged - that women could endure such pain. I could not help my friend, but I decided I could help others. I visited domestic violence shelters and listened to the stories of other battered women. I saw the impact that domestic violence had on their children. I began to see why it was so hard for them to leave. So, in 2004, I joined the Avon Foundation in their campaign, Speak Out Against Domestic Violence. Avon has committed more than \$1 million to educating communities about the terrible cost of domestic violence. I began speaking in public about this crime because I believe that we all have an obligation to help save our friends' lives.

This country has had a sad history of crimes of violence against intimate partners.

Gladys Ricart's story is just one part of that terrible history. She was murdered on her wedding day, September 26, 1999. Her bridegroom, James Preston, wanted to give her a life of love and respect. But a former boyfriend, Agustin Garcia, would not let her have this happiness. She had ended her relationship with Garcia months earlier, because he had been abusive, violent, and had been stalking her. He tried to break into her house one night - and after that, she begged family members to stay with her, because she feared what Garcia might do next. On the happiest day of her life, when Gladys stood radiantly in her wedding dress, surrounded by her bridesmaids, Agustin Garcia pushed his way in and shot her. If he couldn't have her, then nobody else was going to.

Gladys Ricart tried to leave. She did just what we ask all victims of domestic violence to do - and even though she was surrounded by loving and supportive family and friends, she was still killed. Agustin Garcia said he had to shoot her because she "betrayed" him. But it was Garcia who betrayed her. He thought he owned her. When she tried to leave him, his only thought was to regain control over her. This is not love. It is a crime.

I am lucky. I have never been a victim of such abuse. But that's one of the dangers with this issue - most of us just say, "That's not my problem." In reality, it affects our whole society because we are all connected. Witnessing domestic violence in the childhood home is the most common risk factor for becoming a batterer in adulthood. We cannot afford to raise another generation of abusers. We cannot bear to see any more pictures of young women, like Gladys Ricart, buried in their wedding dresses, their dreams shattered.

I could not change my friend's mind. She stayed. But since then, I have learned why women don't leave their abusive partners. Many women lack the job skills or financial strength to move out on their own, especially if they have children. And if they have children, the abuser is likely to take the victim to court to fight about them - about who should have primary custody of the children and how the children should be raised. Many abusive partners will keep a victim from seeking help through threats to kill her or threats to kill the children. Studies show that the most dangerous time for a victim of domestic violence is when she attempts to leave the abuser. As the abuser feels control slip away, his threats will escalate, as will his violence. A woman who wants to leave may be convinced that it truly is a matter of life or death - and that the only way to protect her life or her children's lives is to stay.

And this violence really begins as violence against girls. We know that high school girls experience verbal and physical violence from dating partners and over half of all sexual assaults reported to law enforcement are to minors. We need to support programs that bring services to these girls and prevention programs that help them learn about their right to be safe.

This is why it is so important for victims to know that their friends, family and the community will support them as they struggle to survive the violence. You can't look the other way just because you have not experienced domestic violence with your own flesh. We have a duty to help heal the pain of our sisters and our mothers and our friends.

So many victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking do not know about the many services communities now offer them. It is imperative that we continue to provide public outreach and education--to the many cultures and communities that flourish in the United States - in their own languages and in ways that are respectful of the worlds they inhabit.

We need to make sure that law enforcement and the courts hold every single perpetrator of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault, and stalking accountable for their crimes. The Violence Against Women Act has done so much to meet this goal. Thousands of police officers, prosecutors, judges, lawyers, victim advocates and social workers have been trained to understand the nature of these crimes - and how best to stop the violence. The Violence Against Women Act has supported the creation of specialized courts and police units. It has funded the shelters and counseling programs that help victims heal. The Violence Against Women Act has changed the mindset of this country. Now, instead of saying, "Perhaps he loved her too much," we know enough to say, "We cannot let these crimes continue".

But the work is not yet done. These crimes still occur every day. We must continue training helping professionals to understand how these crimes occur. We must have the protections available to victims that will allow them, finally, to leave in safety.

Your unwavering support for the Violence Against Women Act on behalf of the victims of these crimes has made an enormous difference, Senators Specter and Biden. Your courageous efforts to take on these terrible crimes have put trained police officers in communities that need them. You have supported the work of prosecutors dedicated to holding the perpetrators of these crimes accountable. You have funded programs that bring committed judges to the bench, and you have helped communities in the poorest and sometimes the most remote places to create a sheltering environment for the victims of these crimes. I am very proud that the Avon Let's Talk Beauty Tour is supporting your

efforts by collecting cards of support for this Act's renewal from thousands of men and women across the country this summer. This grassroots effort will underscore the importance of renewing and strengthening this pioneer piece of legislation. Your belief in this work means that victims everywhere in this country will someday become survivors.

I said earlier that the most important thing we can do for victims of these crimes is to let them know that their friends care what happens to them. Victims of domestic violence, dating violence, sexual assault and stalking should have no doubt who their friends are in this room - it is you, because you care enough to keep the good work of the Violence Against Women Act flourishing.