

■ Vice President Joe Biden on Combating Violence against Women

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Summary Overview

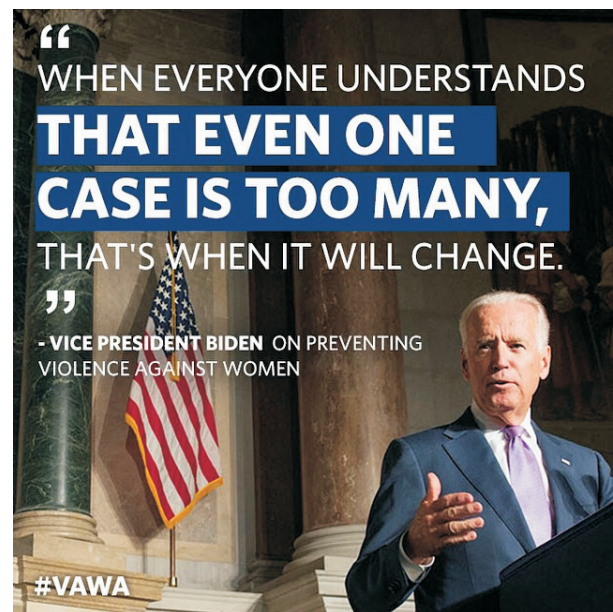
Every year at the Solidarity Awards, Vital Voices recognizes men who have advocated for the rights of women and girls domestically and internationally. The honorees in 2014 were the actor Sir Patrick Stewart, South African activist Bafana Kumalo, athlete Don McPherson, and Vice President Joe Biden. Vital Voices honored Vice President Biden on the twentieth anniversary of the passage of the Violence Against Women Act, which he drafted and succeeded in passing when he was a senator. In this speech, Biden reflects on the people who influenced him to be concerned about violence against women. Then, he goes over the process of passing this landmark legislation in 1994; finally, he expands his focus to the international situation and concludes that much more work is necessary in order to eradicate gendered violence. Biden shows in this speech how resistant governments have been to changing misogynistic statutes. It was difficult for him to pass VAWA in 1994, and there is still much work that the international community has to accomplish to provide safety globally.

Defining Moment

Joe Biden called the Violence Against Women Act (VAWA) the “single most significant legislation that I’ve crafted during my 35-year tenure in the Senate.” The beginnings of this landmark legislation go back to concerns in the 1960s and 1970s about the rising crime rate in the United States. During this time, several organizations were formed and laws passed with a focus on women’s rights. For example, the National Organization for Women was founded in 1966; the decision of the Supreme Court in *Roe v. Wade* reaffirmed the right of women to have access to abortions, and the Equal Rights Amendment was nearly ratified in 1979.

Still, a troubling situation remained. In the 1980s, researchers studied the influence of family violence on national crime ratings. The data collected suggested a connection. Researchers found that women were statistically more likely to suffer violence related to their gender than were men; they found that women were more likely to suffer violence at the hands of an intimate partner, too. Additionally, attacks by an intimate partner were likely to be more

dangerous to women than attacks by a stranger. One survey found that women were ten times more likely



An excerpt from Vice President Joe Biden's speech on the 20th anniversary of the VAWA. Photo via The White House/Wikimedia Commons. [Public domain.]

than men to experience sexual assault. As a senator at the time, Joe Biden and his colleague Barbara Boxer sought to highlight the hypocrisy of a country that was tough on crime, but considered domestic violence a private issue to be dealt with at home.

VAWA increased punishments for certain gendered violent crimes and created or improved programs that supported victims of such crimes. Among other provisions, VAWA was responsible for creating a “rape shield law,” which prevents a victim’s past sexual conduct from being used against them in court, and the National Domestic Violence Hotline, a confidential and toll-free hotline to provide support and information for people looking for help. In the twenty years since Congress first passed VAWA, intimate partner violence and homicide has decreased, more crimes are being reported and resulting in arrests than before, and protection orders against must be recognized across all state lines. Yet, as Biden recognizes in this speech, VAWA only addresses issues specific to judicial administration in the United States: a larger cultural problem needs to be addressed in the way men and women approach gendered violence domestically and abroad.

Author Biography

Joseph Biden was born in 1942 and raised primarily in Delaware. Later in his career, his love of his home state endeared him to his constituents and defined his 2008 presidential campaign. However, before he entered politics, Biden was a practicing lawyer, varying between criminal and corporate law practice. He was elected at the age of thirty to the U.S. Senate as a Democrat in 1972. As a senator, he worked on drafting several crime laws and became involved in foreign affairs (particularly the Yugoslav Wars in the early 1990s and resisting military involvement in the Gulf and Iraq Wars). In 1994, he drafted and succeeded in passing the Violence Against Women Act, which made measures to protect women from domestic violence. Biden failed to gain the Democratic presidential nomination in 1988 and 2008; he did become Barack Obama’s running mate in the 2008 elections and then vice president of the United States. Biden continued to work on the same issues that concerned him as senator. While Biden was vice president for a second term, his Violence Against Women Act was reauthorized in 2013. Biden later went on to serve one term as president, from 2021 to 2025.



Historical Document

Vice President Joseph Biden on Combating Violence against Women

Thank you very much. Sir Patrick [Stewart, also honored], I learned a while ago, you are exactly right: That until people are brave enough to step forward, to pull the Band-Aid off, shed light on this dirty little secret, nothing will happen. And Don [Don McPherson, another honoree], you're a good man. You get it. You're also a hell of an athlete. But you reflect what my dad thought was the definition of a man: someone with the courage to stand up whenever any injustice occurs. And Bafana [South African Bafana Khumalo, another honoree], I need your help. I drafted years ago the International Violence Against Women Act. The president and I have been trying to get that passed for some time. It does cut off foreign aid and assistance to countries that engage in practices that are just inhumane. And Diane [von Furstenberg], thank you very, very much for you, personally, for presenting this honor to me. It means a lot.

The fact of the matter is that if you've hung around as long as I have, you're given awards. But I measure the value of an award based on the consequence of the organization giving the award. And this award means a lot to me. You are an incredible group of people. I've had the opportunity to work with Vital Voices since its inception, and you've done so much good for so many people. And on behalf of my sister and I, my sister Valerie, my closest friend in life, that's here with me today, I want to thank her as well. Diane and I were sitting there beforehand, and she said, "Men learn from their mothers." Well, men do learn, boys learn, from their mothers, their sisters. I've had a great, great—this is not hyperbole—a great honor to be surrounded by women with backbones like ramrods. I mean that sincerely. With profound intellects, accomplished women. And women like my sister, who have excelled and exceeded in everything she's done, and excelled and exceeded more than I have.

Look, let me just say it straight: Violence against women is a stain on the moral character of a society, in any society in which it occurs. It's an obligation of all societies, particularly the men in society, to stand up and do all in their power to eradicate that stain. And it is a stain on the conscience of a country. This is an issue, that has been made repeatedly tonight, of basic human rights.

My dad said it differently. He said, "Everyone is entitled to be treated with dignity." That was my dad's favorite word, the one we heard most often. We should be attacking this virus, this stain, with a profound sense of urgency. Urgency. For as I speak, there are thousands of women around the world

being brutalized. Mutilated. Killed at the hands of those who allegedly love them and care about them.

I'm often asked, because I've been doing this for so long, why am I so passionate about this. Everyone assumes that because of my passion, it must be that my mother, or a woman in my family, was brutalized. Thank god, they have not been. But I was raised by a decent, graceful man, my dad; our dad. And he thought, and from the time we can remember, all of my siblings, this is the god's truth, my word is the bible, he raised us to understand the greatest sin a man or woman could commit is the abuse of power. And the ultimate abuse of power, the cardinal sin, was for a man to raise his hand against a woman or a child.

But unlike most people of my dad's generation, he went further. He was a gentle man, but he raised us to intervene. He taught us, where we saw it, the definition of our manhood was not what a great football player, baseball player or any of my brothers or sister were, it was to stand up and do the right thing.

I remember when my sister, my younger sister, was beat up by a young boy when she was in seventh grade. I'm older than my sister, I was two years ahead of her. I remember coming back from mass on Sunday, always the big treat was we would get to stop at a doughnut shop at a strip shopping center. We went in, and we would get doughnuts, and my dad would wait in the car. As I was coming out, my sister tugged on me and said, 'That's the boy who kicked me off my bicycle.'

So I went home, and we only lived about a quarter mile away. So I got on my bicycle and rode back, and he was in the doughnut shop with his parents, leaning down on those slanted counters, you know, those slanted counters in pastry shops. And I walked up behind him, and smashed his head against the glass. Now, I'm not recommending this. But I want to tell you about my father. His father grabbed me, and I looked at his father, and I said, "If you ever touch my sister again, I'll come back and I will kill your son."

Now, that was a euphemism. And I thought I was really, really in trouble. I thought I was going to be arrested. I went home. My father had never once raised his hand to any one of his children, never once. I thought I was in real trouble. He pulled me aside, and said, "Joey, you shouldn't do that. And I'm proud of you, son. I'm proud of you." The point was, the way we were raised, the definition of who we were, was whether we speak up. Whether it's physically engaging, because so many men are cowards, they have the physical capacity to intervene, but they're cowards, thinking they're men. Whatever it is, just speak up, and speak out.

I began focusing on this issue as a young senator, more than three decades ago, because we were largely a nation of bystanders. Our legal system at the

state and local level still reflective—excuse me, Sir Patrick [Stewart], English common law, which we inherited. Which was not until the 14th century did the English common law court say, because so many women died because they were being beaten by their spouses to death, that a man could no longer beat a woman, his wife, with a rod bigger than the circumference of his thumb. The rule of thumb.

This notion that women are chattels is a central part of our culture, inherited from our Anglo-Saxon ancestry, but also in many other cultures, and our law. I asked my staff, when I started to write the law, two men and four brilliant women, one of whom is here today, and went on to be a distinguished professor of law for 10 or 12 years, I asked her to come back and be my council. And I asked them to go out and do a survey of the laws on the books in the states to determine where and whether or not this implicit bias that somehow it's the woman's fault, somehow it's a man's right, are written in the laws.

They wrote a paper, and I'm happy to send it to any of you who are interested, because you may be. It's over 23 years old. We listed in almost every state in the nation, the application of law was different. In the state of Delaware, my home state, if you consented to go out with me, if you were a voluntary partner, no matter what I did to you, no matter how brutally I raped you, I could not be convicted of first-degree rape. If I jumped out of an alley and brutally raped you, I could be convicted of first-degree rape.

Think of the premise: You must have done something. You must have somehow, inexplicably consented somehow, to something. I could not be convicted of first-degree rape.

I could go on *ad nauseum* and list the laws that are changed now. But the fact is that no one at that time denied that kicking your wife in the stomach, or smashing her face against the wall, or throwing her down the steps in public was repugnant. But society basically turned a blind eye. Hardly anyone ever directly intervened, as my father taught us, and as he did. Almost no one called it a crime. It was a family affair. A religious matter. A cultural issue. It was none of our business.

And indeed, when I began to draft the Violence Against Women legislation, the reason why it didn't work out at first, I physically drafted it myself, because no one wanted to be part of it. There are a lot of you out there who are working like the devil to do something, but getting nowhere. Because of the incredibly talented staff I had, we put together the Violence Against Women Act. And when we did, our opponents said that what Biden was doing—I could give you all the quotes—was “undermining the solidarity of the family.” Seriously. That it would impact on the cohesion, bring about the disintegration of the American family. When we championed, and [they] now exist, women's shelters, and housing, and transitional housing, they were

characterized “as indoctrination centers for runaway wives.” This is 1989. 1990. 1991. 1992.

Senator Birch Bayh, you may remember from Indiana, back in the early ‘80s introduced in the Judiciary Committee, and got a law passed saying that a man, a husband, could be convicted for raping his wife. In the markup of that bill, the deceased senator from Alabama said on the record in frustration, “My young friend just doesn’t understand, sometimes a man has to use force with his wife.” On the record.

Even some in this audience did not support the Violence Against Women Act in the beginning, to tell the truth. No women’s organization stepped forward and supported it, until Ellie Smeal spoke about it. It was characterized as “This is just a fad on Biden’s part.” That was the phrase used. Others said that it was important but did not deserve the national response.

I had written into the law a civil-rights cause of action, which eventually was struck down by the court, that I was going too far, equating violence against women with violence against the very organization I came out of, the civil-rights movement. Everyone seemed satisfied to either keep this dirty little secret in the background, or worried that it would trump other issues, like gender equality, the right to choose, and other issues.

Finally, we had a meeting in my office, at my conference table. I can name the people there, they all remember, and I called in every major women’s organization, including the civil-rights groups. And finally Ellie Smeal spoke up, that’s why I love her. She said, “What are we doing? What are we doing? Why aren’t we supporting this?” And they all came around because of Ellie, not because of me. And everything began to change.

Because the one thing I was absolutely convinced about, and I know I am referred to in the White House as “The White House optimist,” I believe in the basic decency of human beings. And I believe part of the reason people don’t react is they think they’re not supposed to react. This cultural norm that had been imposed upon us. I was convinced we could change attitudes and gain the support of the American people if we forced them to look this epidemic in the eye. And that’s what we did with extensive hearings.

Brave women came forward, and before the whole world, in over a thousand hours of hearings, said, “This is what happened to me.” Remember that young model here in New York, whose face was slashed because she wouldn’t go out with her landlord? She and others stepped forward, so no one could pretend, no woman or man could pretend that it wasn’t happening. I was convinced once that happened, the American public would have to react. They would react. Because so many of you in this room took part in that cause, and led the cause, and were there before I and others were

there, we were able to pass the Violence Against Women Act 20 years ago. But it took four years.

And between 1993 and 2010, the rate dropped by 64 percent. But there's still so much more to do. Now, the reason I raised this with you now is because I'm convinced when we rip the Band-Aid off and force the world to look this in the eye, we can succeed. But that's what it takes. Because the same arguments we heard at home, I'm now hearing abroad.

I've now traveled a million miles as vice-president, and so many more as chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee. And those of you who are involved know there's not a country I go in I do not raise this issue. Not a single country I go in. But I'm told: It's a family affair, or you don't understand our culture, you don't understand our religious practices, you don't understand we're different. You have no right to trespass on our culture. Let me make something absolutely clear to everyone here: There is NEVER, never, a religious, a cultural, a societal, justification for inhumanity. Period. Never. Never. And don't be intimidated when you are told that you don't understand our culture. You're right, I don't understand it. They're wrong. They're simply wrong.

And we have an obligation to speak out, and be just as forceful on the world stage as we were in America for the last 30 years. In every country I visit, this is a matter of discussion. The significant measure of decency of any society is the extent to which they tolerate this abuse of power in violence against women. Those nations which continue to tolerate honor killings, genital mutilation, rape as punishment. My wife Jill just got back—I think she's the only Westerner to go into the East—the Democratic Republic of the Congo in the East—visit hospitals where over 100,000 women overall, 1,000 of them in one hospital, where rape is used as a weapon of war, and then the women are mutilated with bayonets. An uncomfortable thing to say at a dinner, but that's what happens.

Not only are these societies backward, and we should not apologize for saying what they are, they will never be able to enjoy the benefits of economic growth and stability unless they begin to empower women. What these societies have to understand is that old Chinese proverb is correct: Women hold up half the sky. And they deserve as much protection and dignity as any man.

My sister, Valerie, said in a speech she recently made, "We are all made weaker when in the name or the guise of culture, in the guise of righteousness, in the name of religion, any woman, anywhere is discounted, disenfranchised, disrespected; when one is sold, berated, beaten, we're all less." And that's the god's truth. That's the reality.

And what we're focused on now, here in the United States, and I agree what you should be focused on around the world, is to take away the excuses, the

rationalizations, the justifications on the part of men who lack the moral courage, or moral center, to intervene. Too many crimes continue to be committed, too much brutality inflicted, too much pain endured, under the guise of culture. More than 120 million women, today, around the world suffer from genital mutilation. As many as 50 percent of women in Pakistan are beaten by their husbands. Dowry killings account for more than 25 percent of all the violent deaths in India. More than 5,000 honor killings occur around the world each year.

In the Democratic Republic of Congo, 1,100 rapes are reported each month, an average of 36 women and girls raped every day. A total of 200,000 since the recent conflict began. Since 2009, at least 500 women and girls from northern Nigeria have been abducted by Boko Haram. And we are acting in the United States. It's the African Union, the Africans are not acting.

We, the president, have offered everything from our special forces to all that we have available. Right here in America, an average of three women a day are murdered by abusive partners. Across the globe, nearly one in three women has experienced physical or sexual violence at the hand of an intimate partner. As many as 38 percent of murdered women are killed by an intimate partner.

Just imagine—imagine if all that was happening to men. The mutilations, the beatings, the rapes, the murders. How many men are absolutely outraged when you hear about the rape of a man? The indignity that it causes at the hands of another man. It's time for men to speak up, to stand up, to put themselves in the way. In the way.

Freedom from fear of violence is a basic human right. And the obligation to intervene is a basic moral obligation for every man, one that transcends national boundaries, and religious concerns, and cultural differences. This change is not beyond our capacity, for god's sake. Especially in the world of communication today, instant communications.

Now that we have spoken up as a nation, we have much more to do, because of all the pressure you have placed on your government. All of you in this room have applied, and continue to apply, significant pressure, and now the world is beginning to respond. Just like early on in the fight here, just beginning to respond.

At the United Nations, Ban Ki-moon, the secretary general, made the UNITE to End Violence Against Women campaign a top priority, organizing a network of men and leaders to highlight the important role men can play in changing the culture of this issue. In Ireland, Edward Kenny, a fine man, recently helped launch an action campaign to reduce violence against women, calling on his fellow countrymen to “challenge any cultural acceptance of or blindness to the violence in all sectors of our society.” In the heart of the Balkans,

the Croatian president has called together a national summit to urge men to fight against domestic violence. In Sudan, where 88 percent of the women and girls, 15 to 18, are reported to be subject to genital mutilation, 74-year-old Sheik Mohamed Saeed is calling for an end to the practice. "How can a man be a leader," he asked, "without taking such a challenge and fighting for positive change?"

I'm taking too long, I apologize. I will end by saying I accept this award in the hope, and the expectation, that the person you give this award to ten years from now will be able to talk to you about the progress. How many women have been saved around the world because of the action you've taken between now and the next ten years. That we will have made significant progress through the fundamental change in attitude that must take place if we are to win.

Don [McPherson], I'm always asked, What constitutes victory? Because there will always be violent crime, throughout all societies, like a wave, a wave moves on, but priorities remain the same. But what constitutes success? Success will occur when the day comes that no woman in the world who has been beaten, brutalized, raped, ever, ever, ever, consciously or subconsciously asks what so many women ask today: What did I do? What did I do to deserve this?

When I was a young lawyer, I was a public defender. I was told by a senior trial lawyer, picking my first jury in a rape case that I was assigned, "Pick men, don't pick women." I thought that was counterintuitive. Because women blame women. Young Marla, whose face was slashed, was asked, "What did they say, your mother, your friends?" And they learned, they said, "Why were you in a bar? What were you wearing? What did you have on?"

It's not only the culture of men in America we have to change, we have to change the culture of our daughters. My daughter, my sister, have been raised to understand that it is never, never, never, never, never, never, your fault. I got in trouble in the hearing, when I was doing this hearing 20 years ago, I said, "If a woman got up stark naked, walked out of this room, and walked across to the Capitol, she'd be arrested for indecent exposure. But no man, no man, would have a right to lay a hand upon her." I got more hate mail than you can imagine. No man, no man, has a right, and no woman should ever question what did she do to deserve this?

And the second cultural change that has to take place is when no man in America, or the world, thinks that he ever has the right to raise a hand to a woman in anything other than self-defense. Never. Never, never, never. It's that simple. It's that absolute. It will still happen, but we have to end the ability to rationalize that I had some right, that was my woman, that was my wife. You never, ever, have the right.

Ladies and gentlemen, until the whole world accepts that no means no, or even more, that ONLY yes means yes. Only yes means yes. Ladies and gentlemen, I mean this when I say it, with your help, and your continued passion, we can actually change the cultures around the world, and continue to change our culture. Our civilization, the measure of our civility, depends on us doing a whole hell of a lot more. Thank you all, and may God bless you.



Document Analysis

Vice President Biden is not only known for his work on the Violence Against Women Act in 1994, but also for his distinctive speech-giving style. This speech is an example of Biden's gregarious and folksy way of speaking when he is engaged in political events. Since Biden can and has used a speechwriter, this choice of style must be deliberate. This style has been helpful for Biden in his many senatorial and presidential campaigns when he needs average Americans to support him; he also uses this same method of persuasion at the 2014 Vital Voices so as to encourage more action for social justice from his listeners. In this speech, it is possible to isolate Biden's specific style for campaigning for important issues through his use of personal memories.

First, Biden often draws on his own history in order to create familiarity between himself and the audience. This rhetoric of familiarity is meant to instill pathos in the audience and make Biden appear more trustworthy. After Biden thanks the appropriate people and introduces the subject of gendered violence, he immediately delves into his personal history. He poses to the audience the supposition that he must be related to a woman who was the victim of violence to be so passionate about eradicating it; he says: "everyone assumes that because of my passion, it must be that my mother, or a woman in my family, was brutalized. Thank god, they have not been. But I was raised by a decent, graceful man, my dad; our dad." Biden could have elected a different rhetorical strategy; for example, he could have said that a person did not need to experience tragedy to have empathy. Instead, Biden begins an anecdote about how he, as a young boy, stood up for his sister who was kicked by another boy. He continues by outlining all the opposition he faced when he was drafting VAWA; in the process, he offers several anecdotes where he remembers the direct speech of an aide or opponent offering advice or criticism to him. Biden also refers to his experiences as a lawyer and a speech he heard his sister recently make. Biden's custom of referring to his own personal experiences is used to persuade his audience emotionally that violence against women is still an endemic cultural problem.

Finally, it is possible to understand why Biden would choose to tie his own experiences closely to his argument by considering the following: why should an audience listen to what Biden, a man, has to say about women's safety? Biden, a habitual political campaigner as well, recognizes this gulf could hamper his connection to the audience. Consequently, he uses his personal history to create familiarity and trust with his audience. By constantly referring to his own emotions about VAWA and international gender violence, Biden reveals his true purpose in making this speech. He is not simply thanking the crowd for an award. He is urging the audience not to become complacent and continue fighting for women's rights.

Essential Themes

The Violence Against Women Act was first ratified in 1994; it was reauthorized again in 2000, 2005, and 2013. This act is noteworthy for increasing the punishment for acts of gendered violence in the United States as well as creating several services to support victims of such crimes. Biden's VAWA was among the first pieces of legislation to make a substantive difference in the way the criminal justice system approached crime between intimate partners. VAWA made crimes against women a responsibility of the state and federal government rather than the domestic sphere. Finally, it was written law: women and girls were not supposed to bear responsibility for being beaten, assaulted, or stalked.

Although the version of VAWA that the government enacted in 1994 reduced national crime levels, this legislation was not a universal solution for all women's issues. Biden recognizes this limitation in this document at the same time as he recognizes that VAWA created an improvement in many women's lives. The first version of VAWA was not detailed enough to encompass the different issues that affect different ages, races, and sexualities, but future reauthorizations attempted to increase protection. Biden's draft of VAWA covered protection of women based on gender, but increasing recognition of intersectionality (the study of how different oppressive institutions like racism, sexism, and homophobia interrelate) has improved the original version of the

legislation. When Congress reauthorized VAWA in 2000, provisions were added to protect foreign nationals, disabled, and elderly women. In 2005, VAWA strengthened penalties for repeat offenders and was offered more protection to Native American women. When it was proposed to extend VAWA's protection to same-sex couples in 2013, the reauthorization of VAWA experienced more trouble in Congress; this version of VAWA was eventually passed in its extended form.

The expansion of VAWA's provisions can offer protection to men who suffer intimate partner violence, individuals in same-sex relationships, and transgender people. Additionally, local police forces and judicial systems still have issues in prosecuting crimes against women, especially those who come from minority backgrounds. Biden's speech stresses

the need to continue working towards protecting those who cannot protect themselves.

—Ashleigh Fata, MA

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