

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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COMMITTEE ON ENERGY
AND NATURAL RESOURCES

December 4, 2014

The Honorable John F. Kerry
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
2201 C Street NW
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Mr. Secretary:

It is a tradition that between the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women on November 25th and Human Rights Day on December 10th, advocates across the globe take action to help prevent violence and discrimination against women and girls. I write during these 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence to express my deep concern for the continued violation of the fundamental human rights of women and girls around the world. In addition, I applaud the Obama Administration's efforts to combat gender-based violence, including through critical initiatives like the U.S. Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence Globally and the National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security, and urge you to prioritize a country's treatment of women and girls in our diplomatic relationships.

According to the United Nations (UN), up to seventy percent of women experience violence in their lifetime, harming families, communities, and entire countries by severely limiting the ability of women to fully participate in public life. While gender-based violence has a number of root causes, one particularly troubling contributing factor is the presence of laws that codify discrimination against women and girls into a country's legal system. Unfortunately, we have seen in a number of countries how government-sponsored discrimination creates a climate of impunity and encourages violence against women and girls.

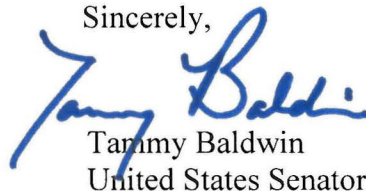
In Iran, where adultery is still punishable by death, and women cannot be in public without hijab, recent events like the execution of Reyhaneh Jabbari and serial acid attacks against women have reinforced the critical linkage between discriminatory national laws and the safety of women and girls. The case of Ms. Jabbari, who was convicted of killing a man she said she stabbed in self-defense during a sexual assault, is a chilling illustration of an Iranian judicial system that is stacked against women. It is not surprising that her trial was marked by a lack of due process and reported forced confessions when viewed against the backdrop of an Iranian legal system that is overtly hostile to rape victims and values a woman's testimony—and indeed, life—as half that of a man's. The recent spate of heinous acid attacks against Iranian women followed a parliamentary bill that encouraged private citizens to enforce Iranian “morality” laws. These “morality” laws represent a wide range of legal restrictions designed to prevent women from fully engaging in public life, and they have long served as state-sanctioned oppression against women. According to the UN, 66 percent of Iranian women have reportedly experienced domestic violence. It is difficult to see how this alarming level of gender-based violence will be

reduced until Iran eliminates laws that permit gender discrimination and promote violence against women.

Forced and early marriage of girls is another critical human rights issue that could be positively impacted by improving national laws. This is especially true in Africa, where 15 of the 20 countries with the highest rate of child marriage are located. As you know, early marriage violates a girl's right to an education, to economic opportunity, and to choose their spouse. It can also expose them to increased risk of violence, slavery and human trafficking, and health risks, including HIV/AIDS. Furthermore, high rates of child marriage are directly linked to high rates of poverty, undermining countries' development efforts. While social and cultural norms must be changed to eventually end child marriage, governments need to enact and fully enforce laws that protect girls from early marriage, including setting a minimum age of 18 for marriage and prohibiting gender-based discrimination. For example, in the case of Tanzania, where 4 out of 10 girls are married before their 18th birthday, a recent report from Human Rights Watch recommended that the government enact a minimum marriage age of 18 and a comprehensive domestic violence law that includes the criminalization of sexual violence in marriage.

Mr. Secretary, this year's 16 Days of Activism provides an excellent opportunity to remember that a country's success is directly related to how it treats women and girls. That is why it is critical that U.S. foreign policy continue to focus on eliminating gender-based violence and discrimination, including through the effective implementation of existing relevant initiatives. I look forward to working with you toward this goal.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Tammy Baldwin". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name "Tammy" being larger and more prominent than the last name "Baldwin".

Tammy Baldwin
United States Senator