

# EDITORIAL: SAFETY FIRST

In this “think piece” editorial, West Side Story editorial board discusses how the deaths of two local women signify the need for structural changes in societal norms.

This past summer, the disappearance of Mollie Tibbetts garnered national attention after the 20-year-old University of Iowa student didn't return home from her evening run. After several weeks, Iowa authorities found her body covered with multiple stab wounds. The alleged murderer was a male illegal immigrant. This fall, a promising female Iowa State University golfer, Celia Barquin Arozamena, was also fatally stabbed multiple times, this time on a local Ames golf course. In this case, the alleged murderer was a white male. These events, heightened by extensive media coverage, have recently become forums for political debate after both conservative and liberal politicians used the events as avenues to support their respective political intentions. However, political manipulation and persistent coverage of these tragedies undermine the true issue at hand — women's safety.

Politicians continue to capitalize on the opportunity in front of them as a result of these two tragedies. Individuals of varying political viewpoints have taken these events and used them to further their own personal agendas. Moreover, by covering the most controversial, relevant topics, the media collects more readership and gives larger spotlights on politicians. Some conservative news outlets, for example, attempted to blame illegal immigration for the rising percent-

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ages of violence against women. On the other hand, liberal news outlets tried to emphasize the relevance of systemic sexism in today's society. These narratives in particular have given politicians a way to attract more attention, especially in the case of Mollie Tibbetts, where they have overshadowed her innocent death.

The tragedies of Mollie Tibbetts and Celia Barquin Arozamena should not fuel politicians' attempts to create controversy or support their political agendas. These incidents should serve as incentive for lawmakers to make policies to prevent these horrific developments from happening again. Instead, politicians today have polarized the media to the point in which Mollie Tibbetts's family publicly asked for time to process the information and to share their grief in private. They did not want Mollie's death to be associated with politics because she was a person, not a bargaining chip others could use for their gain. What befell these women should instead be examples of how to prevent similar tragedies, and this process starts with practical and nonpartisan news reporting without the intervention of politicians.

This past June, the United States made its debut on the Reuters Foundation's top ten most dangerous countries for women — the only Western nation to appear on this list. Regardless of political agenda, both sides can agree that securing women's safety is crucial. According to a 2014 Gallup Poll, 45 percent of women say they do not feel safe walking alone at night, compared to 27 percent of men. Additionally, Stop Street Harassment, a non-profit organization, found that 81 percent of women have reported experiencing street harassment in their lives as opposed to 43 percent of men. While women and men both face fears regarding safety, many women also have to manage fears of aggression that may come from angry men. In dire situations, women often keep silent in fear of violence, muffling their shouts of refusal in fear of public shaming for speaking up. Yet the reality is, there are not enough protective measures for women's safety nor preventive measures against aggressive harassment.

As a result of this toxic culture, women have taken it upon themselves to ensure their own safety in a society that has normalized harassment and mistreatment. Many females around the nation, including West students, carry defensive tools with them wherever they go. Rath-

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er than teaching men to respect women as people and not treat them as objects, women instead have to provide their own means of protection to fend against unwanted advancements. American culture has normalized male violence to the point where stores have entire walls of supplies designated for protecting women from potential attackers. The norm should not be reinforcing male supremacy by forcing women to find their own modes of security. Female students should not have to feel unsafe while performing actions as simple as going to school or spending time with friends.

While many look to improving women's safety as the primary solution, an additional solution is changing how men interact with their female counterparts. Society often emphasizes the need for women to act or look certain ways in order to protect themselves when it is truly toxic masculinity at fault. In order to prevent harassment and infringement upon women's safety, we need to increase awareness of systemic issues within communities across the nation. Men should be taught from an early age that forcing themselves on women is not tolerated. If this is embraced, girls all over the country will grow up knowing their worth and believing that they have the right to say no. By introducing these ideas at a younger age, children are less prone to develop characteristics that continue a tradition of patriarchal superiority and female subjugation that has endured for so long.