October 24, 2011

Dear Chairman Smith:

On behalf of women engineers, please support H.R. 3146, a bill which reforms our high-skill immigration system. The bill will create American jobs and enhance our global competitiveness. It will also help correct an injustice within the current high-skill immigration system which uniquely harms women, especially women engineers and scientists.

The H-1B visa is, as you know, the primary way that international students with STEM degrees stay in the United States after earning their degrees. Because there are so few EB visas (green cards) available international students who want to become Americans after graduating must currently wait up to ten years before becoming permanent residents. These immigrants need a way to legally stay in the United States while they wait. The H-1B serves this purpose.

However, the H-1B visa comes with a catch. The spouses of workers using the visa may not be employed. This means that couples who both have degrees face a choice: either one leaves the country or one doesn’t work. For cultural reasons, it is usually the husband who works, while the wife is forced to stay home regardless of her academic credentials.

It is quite common for international students to meet their spouses while in school. Within these families, both husband and wife will have world-class academic credentials and are innovative, productive and capable of contributing to the American economy. The H-1B forces hundreds of wives in this situation out of the workforce. This rule has a painful human cost, but also real economic consequences as we force some of our
nation’s most productive people to not use their talents and ideas to expand our economy, start new businesses and develop new products.

H.R. 3146 would correct this injustice by exempting any student who earns a Masters or PhD from an American University in a STEM field from the EB visa cap. This would allow husbands and wives to get a green card within a year of graduating – freeing them to fully participate in the American economy.

IEEE WIE (Women In Engineering) is the world’s largest professional organization dedicated to promoting the interests of women engineers and scientists. We represent approximately 21,000 women engineers in the U.S.

We believe that the spousal restrictions found within the H-1B program are an anachronistic legacy of a time when women were not expected to want a degree, but rather were happy to take care of their husband’s home. We ask Congress to remove one of the last vestiges of this mindset by reforming our high-skill immigration system to allow women, and in some cases men, to fully participate in the American economy after earning their advanced STEM degrees.

Please cosponsor H.R. 3146.

Sincerely,

Ramalatha Marimuthu
Chair, IEEE Women in Engineering Committee