

‘The End of Impunity for Violence against Women? The Istanbul Convention in Europe.’

LSE, 7 March 2013

Professor Chinkin, fellow panellists, ladies and gentlemen,

Thank you for inviting me to join this discussion today.

I’ve been asked to speak from the perspective of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office on our topic. We’re asked to consider the significance of the Istanbul Convention. Does it mark the end of impunity for violence against women?

Like Elda, my answer is not a resounding “yes”.

On the other hand, again like Elda, it is certainly not a definite “no”.

Discrimination and violence affect the lives of millions of women and girls worldwide. They impede the full participation of women and girls in society and prevent them from realising their full potential.

One third of girls in the developing world marry below the age of 18.

Medical complications from pregnancy and child birth are the leading cause of death among 15-19 year old girls worldwide.

In 11 countries, the testimony of a woman in court carries less evidentiary weight than that of a man.

One in three girls and women will be beaten or raped in their lifetime.

The UK believes that equality is fundamental to building strong economies and fairer, more stable societies.

However, as is clear from indicators and as we are constantly reminded in the news, barriers to full equality remain and discrimination and violence against women continue.

The UK's ambition is to end all forms of violence against women and girls – and for us that also means seeking to end impunity for violence against women. Accountability is not the only way to prevent human rights abuses. But it is a fundamental part of it.

It is essential that governments continue to take a strong lead internationally as well as domestically on this issue. We believe that Europe as a region is doing that.

There have been real gains in gender equality and combating violence against women in Europe over the past half century. Both in absolute statistical terms, but also that stopping violence against women is so prominent in the national and international debate.

It is now accepted in most of Europe that violence against women is unacceptable. If it does occur it's not because it is believed to be the norm or socially acceptable, but it happens in violation of social norms and the law.

As a region, Europe is ahead of the rest of the world. The Istanbul Convention is the latest reflection of that.

I want to be clear that the UK Government recognises that discrimination and violence against women and girls are not problems unique to other places, overseas, far away. All countries and all societies suffer from them. We all need to take action on them.

And from my perspective, it is certainly important that the UK acts on its own domestic problems if it is to speak and work effectively and credibly on the international stage.

The Istanbul Convention accords with our strong commitment to combating violence against women and girls and promoting women's rights more broadly. It requires a comprehensive State approach to tackling violence against women.

The UK signed the Convention on 8 June 2012. We are now working towards ratifying and implementing it.

The UK Government's commitment is detailed in the action plan "A Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls". This encompasses both domestic and international priorities.

We recognise the progress that has been made, and Europe is in the vanguard of that progress. But the effort that the Government is collectively putting into promoting gender equality and combating violence against women and girls recognises that there is much more to do.

Women's empowerment and gender equality are a key focus of the Department for International Development, as the Secretary of State for International Development, Justine Greening, made clear in speech on Monday at Amnesty International, in which she said:

"I intend to target DFID's efforts relentlessly on improving the lives of the poorest girls and women around the world."

And among the many strong reasons she advanced for this focus was "This is a matter of universal, basic human rights. It is about girls' and women's right to... live a life free of the fear of violence."

I won't quote further, but I do commend the whole speech to you.

Also this week, DFID's Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State, Lynne Featherstone, has been leading the UK Government delegation to the 57th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, whose theme this year is tackling violence against women and girls.

CSW is the principal global policy-making body dedicated to evaluating progress on gender equality, identifying challenges and agreeing global standards.

Ms Featherstone, who is also the Ministerial Champion for Tackling Violence Against Women and Girls Overseas, is supported at CSW by officials from the FCO, DFID, the Home Office and Government Equalities Office in a shared endeavour to secure a strong and progressive outcome from this crucial forum.

Worth noting, too, in the context of the action plan on violence against women and girls that I mentioned just now, that Lynne Featherstone is Women's rights, with a focus on gender equality and women's empowerment, is one of the FCO's six global thematic human rights priorities.

As such it is one of the focal areas for our Human Rights and Democracy Programme Fund, which provides small grants for niche projects in countries of human rights concern, usually working with local civil society organisations.

This year, we are running 12 projects on discrimination against women with a total budget of £734, 000, which is about 14% of our total allocation. Of these, six – worth around £363,000 - are focused on tackling violence against women and girls.

We carry out a huge amount of diplomatic lobbying to promote and protect the rights of women. We do this bilaterally, to encourage other countries to fully implement their international commitments, and we also work multilaterally.

We have run a vigorous and targeted campaign in support of a strong outcome from CSW. We also work hard to secure positive outcomes in negotiations in other UN fora. Most recently, we were instrumental in securing good resolutions at the UN General Assembly in December covering a number of women's rights issues.

And we played a leading role in the creation of UN Women, which came into operation in January 2011. The UK is the second largest donor. We welcomed UN Women's announcement of its intention to make violence against women a priority issue and strongly support the leadership it is showing through this year's CSW.

We also work through the EU. The UK was at the forefront of negotiations on the EU External Action Service's (EEAS) Human Rights and Democracy Strategic Framework, adopted in June 2012.

We are pleased that it includes a commitment by EU member states to support initiatives against harmful traditional practices, particularly FGM, and against gender based violence.

The UK is now working with the EEAS, the newly created EU Special Representative on Human Rights, Stavros Lambrinidis, and other EU member states to take this forward.

And of course we work in the Council of Europe. Although the UK is still in the process of ratification, we remain keen to see the Istanbul

Convention widely ratified and will look for opportunities to work more closely with the Council of Europe to promote its adoption.

We are also keen to help develop resources for member States, such as guidelines and best practice manuals, to support meaningful implementation of the Convention.

And we were pleased that the Council of Europe ran a side event to promote the Istanbul Convention at CSW this week. An important opportunity to raise awareness of the standards and commitments it embodies.

The Foreign Secretary launched an initiative in May last year on preventing sexual violence in conflict.

This is not solely an issue affecting women – sadly men and boys are victims of sexual crimes too. But the large majority of victims of rape and sexual violence as a tactic of warfare are women and girls.

And in many parts of the world impunity for these terrible crimes is the norm rather than the exception.

To give just one example, in Bosnia and Herzegovina up to 50,000 women were raped during the war in the 1990s. But only 30 people have so far been convicted of these crimes.

The Government believes that more can – and should – be done to put an end to this appalling situation. The preventing sexual violence initiative aims to:

- address the culture of impunity by increasing the number of perpetrators brought to justice;
- to strengthen international efforts and coordination; and

- to support States in building their own national capacity to prosecute acts of sexual violence committed during conflict.

The initiative supports UN Security Council Resolutions on Women Peace and Security, and the Government's existing work including the Building Stability Overseas Strategy.

We are working closely with other countries, NGOs, UN agencies and experts to define how the UK and the international community can step up action on this agenda. It is a key focus of the UK's Presidency of the G8 this year.

The Foreign Secretary will be convening the G8 Foreign Ministers in April with the intention of securing a clear political statement of the G8's determination to make real, tangible progress on combating sexual violence in conflict.

We are also seeking a wider set of practical commitments to overcome the barriers to effective implementation of the existing international legal framework.

And we will seek G8 endorsement of a new, non-legally binding international protocol on the investigation and documentation of sexual violence in conflict. It will build on existing guidance and best practice and will help to improve the evidence base from which successful prosecutions can be achieved.

Since May 2012 we have used events and activities at the UN General Assembly and Human Rights Council, an expert level conference in November and the 16 Days of Activism against Gender Violence campaign that ended on International Human Rights Day, to build alliances and awareness and gather input for our plans.

We have provided £1 million to the Office of the UN Secretary General's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict and £1 million over two years to the International Criminal Court's Trust Fund for Victims.

And we have recruited a 70-strong UK team of experts to deploy to conflict areas to help support local efforts to investigate allegations of sexual violence and gather evidence.

The Foreign Secretary describes confronting the scourge of sexual violence in war as a generational challenge to shape our world for the better. And he is determined that we should match the courage of survivors in our resolve.

Finally, the FCO runs the Government's Forced Marriage Unit, which reported this week on the cases they have dealt with in the last year. The youngest victim they helped to rescue was under 5, the oldest over 70.

So there is a lot of work going on and a huge amount still to do to combat violence against women and girls in all its forms, wherever it occurs.

CAHVIO in and of itself cannot end impunity for violence against women and girls, even in Europe. But it is a landmark development that recognised the State's responsibility to prevent and protect women and girls from violence by State actors or private individuals.

And we are working with the grain of history. For all the tragic and horrific stories we hear every day, there are beacons of light. It should not have taken the brutal gang rape of a student on a bus in India to provoke the outrage of ordinary people in India.

But it is hugely important that they are speaking out against impunity for violence against women and that the case awakened so much public interest around the world.

Talking about the challenges, putting an end to the idea that violence against women can be swept under the carpet, that it's a private matter, is vital.

And in Europe we can be proud of the laws, policies and practices that stand as a model of what can be achieved when society agrees to take action.

The Istanbul Convention is not the end of impunity for violence against women. But I think it signals the beginning of the end.