

# News story: Opening Statement to CEDAW Committee

Madam Chair, members of the Committee.

Thank you. As head of delegation for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, I am delighted to be in Geneva for this important dialogue with the Committee, and I would like to thank the CEDAW Committee for facilitating the UK Government's participation.

I would like to re-affirm from the outset, the UK's commitment to advancing gender equality, and the important role the CEDAW Convention and your Committee play in helping us to drive forward this very important agenda. The UK Government takes its obligations under CEDAW very seriously and we come here today to actively engage in a meaningful exchange, and to benefit and learn from your collective expertise.

Madam Chair,

We all agree that the power of #MeToo – and many other emerging campaigns – that advocate for the protection of hard-won rights on gender equality, has generated a global debate.

And it remains the UK Government's ambition to use this pivotal moment to strengthen its compliance with the Convention. I therefore want to assure the Committee, that the UK Government continues to strive to meet the obligations set out in the Convention.

Madam Chair,

I would like to introduce the members of my delegation. The UK Government is responsible for equality legislation, and is accountable to CEDAW for equality across the UK. However, there are some powers that have been devolved by the UK Government to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, including several that relate to equality. I am delighted therefore to share this platform today with my colleagues from the devolved administrations.

From the Scottish Government, we have Lisa Bird, Deputy Director for Equality, Human Rights and Third Sector Division, and Lesley Cunningham, Gender Equality Lead.

From the Welsh Government, we have Alyson Francis, Deputy Director of Communities, and Rhian Thompson, Equalities Legislation Manager.

And from the Northern Ireland Department for Communities, we have Carol McCabe, Head of Gender and Sexual Orientation Policy and Noel Griffin, Gender Policy Lead.

The UK Government has adopted a gender mainstreaming approach to its implementation of CEDAW. Therefore, I am also joined by colleagues from a

number of central government departments here in Geneva who will address the implementation of CEDAW across all areas of government. These are:

- My policy colleagues, Charles Ramsden, Shelly Dowrich and Nengi Ayika, and legal advisors Anna Burne and Irène Solomon, from the Government Equalities Office.
- Fiona Rutherford, Deputy Director of Legal Aid Policy at the Ministry of Justice;
- Beatrice Fannon, Head of Universal Credit Managed Migration and Natural Migration Policy, and Caroline Pearce, State Pension and Fuller Working Lives Team Leader at the Department for Work and Pensions; and
- Chris Lomax, Teresa Levigne and Verity Robson from the UK Mission in Geneva. The delegation present here today will also be able to address issues with respect to the Overseas Territories and Crown Dependencies.

I am delighted that members of civil society could join us today and commend our independent A –status national human rights institutions, who are also here today, for sponsoring so many of them to travel and participate in this important dialogue. Their passion and commitment to this agenda is inspiring.

Madam Chair,

Before I proceed to share with you our achievements and challenges in implementing CEDAW, I would like to explain the constitutional and political structures in the UK and how they ensure we live up to our obligations under CEDAW.

The United Kingdom has a long tradition of protecting human rights and liberties domestically, and of meeting our international human rights obligations in this regard. We have strong human rights protections within a comprehensive and well-established constitutional and legal system. In domestic law, rights are protected through the common law, the Equality Act 2010, the Human Rights Act 1998 and the devolution statutes, as well as other legislation across the UK.

The United Kingdom's devolution settlement means that the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland take primary responsibility for observing and implementing the UK's international obligations in areas of responsibility in areas which have been devolved to them. As such, by convention, the UK Government would not normally invite the UK parliament to legislate on devolved matters without the agreement of the relevant devolved legislature. Devolution has been a positive and empowering process. It has provided more responsive structures for governing regions and countries whose people have much in common, yet who take pride in the diversity emanating from their different histories. Devolution can give rise to diverse outcomes across the UK, but we think that generally, this makes us stronger as a nation because we can learn from each other.

There is a common equality legislative framework across England, Scotland and Wales, with only certain areas being devolved, such as the specific duties under the Public Sector Equality Duty. The Public Sector Equality Duty, is the key lever for achieving gender mainstreaming in England, Scotland and

Wales, which requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation when conducting their day-to-day work— in shaping policy and delivering services.

For Northern Ireland, the Belfast Agreement – itself an international agreement – was reached in 1998 and created devolution settlement in NI. It contains three strands, all of which have underpinned the peace process in NI over the last 20 years. The first of these strands is that there shall be a democratically elected Assembly in Northern Ireland capable of exercising legislative and executive competence over devolved areas of the law. These devolved areas include equalities, health and crime. The Northern Ireland Assembly, established in 1998, has been suspended since January 2017 and the absolute priority of the Government remains the restoration of devolved power sharing government in Northern Ireland. Accordingly, while continuing to deliver vital services in Northern Ireland, the NICS is limited in its ability to make policy decisions until NI Ministers are appointed.

The UK Government does not believe that the current situation in Northern Ireland should dislodge the principle that it is for the devolved administrations to ensure human rights compliance in relation to devolved matters. Progress in Northern Ireland on some areas of the Convention will be subject to the restoration of the Northern Ireland Executive, and therefore the UK Government view is that Northern Ireland needs its elected representatives back in Government at the earliest opportunity, with Ministers taking important decisions on a range of issues that affect the people of Northern Ireland.

Such unique circumstances underline the importance of having effective co-ordination and monitoring mechanisms in relation to CEDAW amongst other international human rights obligations. The Government Equalities Office convenes a Gender Directors' Network, which brings together those responsible for gender equality from all the nations of the United Kingdom. This forum ensures collaboration and sharing between the administrations.

The Overseas Territories are constitutionally not part of the United Kingdom and therefore, the protection and promotion of human rights is primarily the responsibility of the Overseas Territories governments.

The United Kingdom is responsible for the defence and international representation of the Crown Dependencies. The Crown Dependencies are not part of the United Kingdom but are self-governing dependencies of the Crown. This means they have their own directly elected legislative assemblies, administrative, fiscal and legal systems and their own courts of law.

Madam Chair,

In the United Kingdom, we have retained three Ministerial posts to deliver on UK Government's women and equalities agenda across Great Britain, including one at Cabinet-level – Penny Mordaunt, Minister for Women and Equalities, Victoria Atkins, Minister for Women. And Baroness Williams of Trafford, Minister for Equalities.

The Ministers for women and equalities are held to account on progress by the UK parliament.

In addition, the House of Commons Women and Equalities Select Committee was established on 3 June 2015, to monitor the performance of the Government Equalities Office, as well other equalities issues.

Since our last examination in 2013, the women and equalities brief, has been transferred to a number of different Government Departments. To provide stability moving forward, the Government Equalities Office will become part of the Cabinet Office on 1 April, sitting at the heart of government. A move that will provide continuity, help to accelerate action across government and co-ordinate a national mission, working with business, civil society, citizens and local government, to tackle inequality.

Madam Chair,

I would like to take this opportunity to highlight some of the areas where we believe significant strides have been taken to improve women's lives within the United Kingdom and its jurisdictions in line with CEDAW.

The UK Government, working in partnership with Territory Governments, has increased the territorial application of the Convention from three to seven Overseas Territories. This marks an important step towards the UK's fulfilment of the CEDAW Committee's 2013 recommendations. This provides over 70,000 women and girls in Anguilla, Bermuda, Cayman Islands and the territorial grouping of St Helena, with increased protection from discrimination and violence.

Legislative changes in the Overseas Territories for example, Bermuda's Defence Amendment Act (2018) – which ends male conscription in the Royal Bermuda Regiment, signals a strong and active commitment to advancing women's rights and promoting gender equality. We are pleased to announce, that in view of the introduction of legislation ending male conscription, and following a formal request by the Bermudian Government, the UK will be considering removing the relevant reservation relating to Bermuda that was lodged at the time of extension of CEDAW.

This UK Government has a strong track record in promoting women's economic empowerment and as a result:

- There are close to a record number of women in work, with 71 % of women aged between 16 to 64 in employment;
- We now have the lowest ever national gender pay gap of 17.9%;
- There are also around 1.2 million women-led businesses – the highest since records began;
- We have extended the right to request flexible working to all employees;
- We have introduced shared parental leave; and
- We have improved the childcare offer.

These outcomes were achieved through a combination of innovative reforms and ground-breaking measures which will transform women's lives and provide more

help for families.

In 2017, we introduced regulations requiring large employers to make public their gender pay gaps. We are proud that in the first year of reporting, over 10,000 employers reported their data. This has been the catalyst for a national conversation.

In Northern Ireland, the Employment Act requires that regulations be made and that a strategy and action plan is published on eliminating differences in pay of male and female employees.

In the 2017 Spring Budget, the government committed £5 million to support people who have taken time out of employment for caring responsibilities and want to return to paid work.

In November 2018, we announced a further £500,000 of funding to support those with additional barriers to participating in the labour market. This may include people with complex needs or multiple barriers such as substance abuse or homelessness.

In 2017, in England, we doubled the childcare entitlement for working parents of 3 and 4 year olds, from 15 to 30 hours a week. The most disadvantaged 2 year olds are able to access 15 hours a week of free early education. Similar provision has been put in place in Wales and Scotland.

From August 2017, every newborn baby in Scotland receives a baby box of essential items, including clothes from newborn up to 6 months.

We want to increase women's representation in all aspects of life:

In our efforts to eliminate violence against women and girls in the UK we have:

- strengthened the law on violence against women;
- Since 2010, we have seen a 20% increase in domestic abuse prosecutions and a 28% increase in domestic abuse convictions;
- In Wales, we commenced the Violence Against Women, Domestic Abuse and Sexual Violence (Wales) Act 2015, which included the appointment of a National Advisor for Violence Against Women to advise and assist Welsh Ministers;
- introduced new offences of domestic abuse, and one for failing to protect a girl from Female Genital Mutilation and forced marriage ;
- introduced lifelong anonymity for victims of forced marriage and FGM;
- created two new stalking offences;
- Introduced a new mandatory reporting duty on FGM- this has recently led to the first ever prosecution on FGM in England; and
- The Scottish Government has amended the limitation period in Scots Law to remove the 'time-bar' which prevented survivors of childhood abuse from raising civil proceedings where abuse took place more than 3 years prior.

Madam Chair,

Whilst we believe we have a good story to tell regarding our obligations under CEDAW and are very proud of our efforts to promote and protect women's rights, we are very much alive to the concerns and recommendations of this Committee and from our active civil society. We know that the UK's impending departure from the EU has raised concerns in relation to the impact of this decision on women.

The Government has made clear that the UK is preparing to leave the EU in the best possible way for the UK's national interest and is committed to ensuring the United Kingdom emerges from this period of change stronger, fairer, and more united than ever before.

The decision to leave the European Union does not change our strong commitment to recognising and respecting human rights. From the date that we leave the European Union the UK will be free to set its own priorities, including on gender equality and women's rights. We do not need to be part of the EU to have strong protections against discrimination or high standards in the workplace. The UK has often been in the vanguard of developing new legislation and policies that support women in the workplace, tackle violence against women and girls and ensure that women are represented in political and public life.

The UK already goes beyond EU minimum standards in a number of areas, such as entitlement to annual leave, paid maternity leave and parental leave. Historically, equal pay rights for women and a ban on sex discrimination were introduced in the UK, before any EU requirements were set down. More recently regulations requiring employers to publish their gender pay gap go further than anything required by the EU or existing in any other member state.

I would like to reassure the Committee and those present here today, that the UK Government has strong safeguards in place to protect the rights of all individuals, and that will not change after the United Kingdom leaves the European Union.

Madam Chair,

Recently the Minister for Women and Equalities announced her ambition to ensure that every woman has as much freedom, choice, capacity, resilience, support and protection to do whatever she wants to do. This ambition will underpin the Government Equalities Office refreshed mission on gender, and its strategy on Gender Equality and Economic Empowerment that will be published in Spring.

The strategy will set out government plans to address the persistent gendered economic barriers women – and men – are facing across Britain, at every stage of their lives. In particular, it will seek to do more for low paid and financially fragile women, and women facing multiple barriers or with complex needs.

Alongside the strategy, we are creating an engagement programme, and will provide a platform for grassroots organisations and women, particularly marginalised women, to talk about what's important to them, and to discuss

solutions and issues.

In Scotland, a £750,000 Workplace Equality Funding is helping to address long standing barriers faced by women, older workers, ethnic minority and disabled people, while investment of £5 million over the next 3 years will support around 2,000 women to return to work.

The underrepresentation of women in all walks of public and political life is a key priority for the UK Government. That is why in 2018, we marked the suffrage centenary with a national programme of awareness raising and celebration, and encouraging more women to participate in democracy.

Madam Chair,

A strong economy is central to tackling injustice in any society. In the 2018 Autumn Budget, the UK Government announced that we are increasing the National Living Wage to £8.21 per hour in April 2019. Over 60% of those benefiting from the introduction of the National Living Wage are women.

In November 2017, we published the Industrial Strategy, which provides the opportunity to increase ambition around women's participation in the labour market, and will help the UK address the productivity gap.

Madam Chair,

We are alive to the ongoing concerns this Committee and civil society has expressed regarding abortion in Northern Ireland. In particular, we acknowledge the findings and recommendations made by the Committee in its inquiry under the Optional Protocol into this issue.

The Government recognises that abortion is an extremely sensitive issue and that there are strongly held views on all sides.

The constitutional framework in Northern Ireland gives the Northern Ireland Assembly legislative competence in relation certain devolved matters, including health and social services, equal opportunities and justice and policing. By convention, the UK Parliament would not normally legislate with regard to devolved matters, except with consent from the devolved legislature or in cases of genuine urgency.

The Government's absolute priority remains the restoration of a devolved government, so that the people of Northern Ireland, and locally elected representatives, can decide what is right for Northern Ireland on sensitive devolved issues, including on abortion.

Ministers have been clear that it is not for Westminster to step in while this process is ongoing, but this position is being kept under review. The UK Government has already committed to providing a substantive response to the findings and recommendations contained in the Committee's report once political structures are in place to authorise and approve the response.

The Committee is reminded that in 2017 the Government put in place arrangements to support women normally resident in Northern Ireland to have

access to safe abortion services in England. Separate arrangements are in place in Scotland and Wales.

Madam Chair,

We are unified in our belief that gender based violence remains a pervasive and dangerous feature of our societies, and any efforts to accelerate its elimination are welcomed.

In the United Kingdom, we have undertaken a great deal of work to tackle violence against women and girls, in all its forms including harassment and unwelcome advances that intimidate, degrade or humiliate. We have made protecting women and girls from all forms of violence, and supporting victims and survivors, a key priority.

We are committed to ensuring that victims are supported, perpetrators are brought to justice, and that we do all we can to prevent these crimes happening in the first place.

We have pledged increased funding of £100 million through to 2020 to tackle Violence Against Women and Girls, including protecting funding to Rape Support Centres, two two-year funds for refuges and a new £17 million Service Transformation Fund, to promote early intervention and prevention.

In 2016, we published the most recent cross-government Ending Violence Against Women and Girls Strategy, which sets out our vision for bringing these crimes out of the shadows, supporting victims, and bringing perpetrators to justice. This strategy encompasses work from across the UK Government, as well as making reference to the work that the Welsh Government is doing with devolved bodies to support this agenda.

In Scotland, Equally Safe: Scotland's national strategy to prevent and eradicate violence against women and girls was published in 2014 and refreshed in 2016. The strategy explicitly recognises violence against women and girls as a cause and consequence of gender inequality.

Domestic abuse affects almost 2 million victims every year, and the devastating consequences that it has on victims is such that it necessitates a comprehensive programme of cross-Government activity. That is why on 21 January, we published our draft Domestic Abuse Bill, a landmark piece of legislation aimed at supporting victims and their families, and pursuing offenders. This is complementary to the actions being taken in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

We believe that having a specific programme of work focussed solely on domestic abuse gives us the best chance of achieving our aims of raising awareness, and preventing abuse.

Madam Chair,

Noting your recommendations, we have reviewed our approach to women in the criminal justice system. In June 2018, we published our strategy for female offenders, which builds on the principles set out in Baroness Corston's



report, and sets out our vision and plan to improve outcomes for women in the community and custody. In Scotland, plans for the future female custodial estate include a smaller national prison for women with the most complex needs. In addition, up to five new community based custodial units are planned. These custodial based units will allow women to be located as close to their communities as possible.

Madam Chair,

In these opening remarks, I hope to have given you a précis of the UK Government's commitment, and that of the devolved administrations, Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories, to ending all forms of discrimination against women, and assured you of our commitment under CEDAW.

Once again, we are delighted to be here with you today and welcome the opportunity to learn from you and discuss further with you, our progress to eliminate discrimination against women. We hold the CEDAW Committee in the highest esteem and recognise your collective world-leading authority on advancing gender equality as we commence today's proceedings.

Published 26 February 2019