

Speech: Ending Sexual Violence in Conflict

Thank you Ambassador, your excellences, ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon.

Today we come together once again to shine a light on some of the darkest corners of human experience; to confront painful truths; and importantly, to inspire collaborative, global action. Together, we have made real progress since the time that the UK launched our campaign to Prevent Sexual Violence in Conflict in 2012. The campaign itself, across the world, has raised awareness of the horror and scale of sexual violence, as well as the need to tackle accountability, to ensure victim support, and to take action to tackle stigma.

The vital need for accountability for survivors of sexual violence was certainly brought home to me when I met directly the victims in Iraq, particularly from the Yazidi community in February of this year together with Pramila Patten from the UN. And together we heard some of the horrific abuse directly from these incredible, courageous survivors who had suffered at the hands of that despicable organisation, Daesh. The UK has actively supported work in all these areas and we know that this assistance, together with other nations and the United Nations, has had a real impact. If I may, on what is a very challenging subject, what is an issue which contains some of the most horrific accounts that one can hear, there has been some real positive progress. For example, it has enabled 13 trials of alleged abusers to take place in the Democratic Republic of Congo and Bosnia and Herzegovina, leading to 24 convictions and judicial reparations for more than 200 survivors. We have also funded ground-breaking research to improve global understanding of sexual violence-related issues; to inform policy-making; and to provide guidance to those working in this field.

Our collaboration with experts and academics continues, and therefore I am delighted to launch a report co-funded by the UK Government and the London School of Economics' worldwide renowned Centre for Women Peace and Security. It was commissioned to draw attention to a particular group of victims: children born of sexual violence in war. This report was written by Joanne Neenan, who joins us here today, a Human Rights lawyer and Research Fellow at the LSE. Joanne is with us today and will be speaking about her work in a moment. But I would like to take this opportunity to offer our governments thanks and my personal thanks to you Joanne for producing such a thorough piece of research. I am confident it will inform our approach, and that of international partners, in both the months and years ahead.

Ladies and gentleman, this report builds on the UK-led Principles for Global Action that I launched with Pramila last year during the UN General Assembly. That document broke new ground by highlighting the particular vulnerabilities of children born of sexual violence in conflict, and of course their mothers – something that hitherto had been largely overlooked by policy makers. I recognise that this is a particularly difficult subject for many to talk

about, but I want to stress how important it is that we resist the understandable temptation to resort to euphemisms. Joanne's report makes the same point, and I would just like to be clear that the term, and I quote, 'children born of sexual violence in conflict' is not a euphemism. It covers all children born as a result of rape or sexual exploitation, including those conceived – and I would like to quote the report here directly – “in coercive circumstances linked to conflict”.

Your excellences, ladies and gentlemen, a child born of sexual violence, and I speak as a parent, is like any other child. They have the same needs but they also have the same rights. And we must ensure those rights are protected. And like any other child, the circumstances of their birth are not of their making. They are as much victims of those crimes as their mothers.

Yet, as Joanne's excellent report shows, it is these innocent children, through no fault of their own, who suffer not just discrimination but most extreme forms of stigma, often by the communities, the families that they belong to. They are shunned, excluded from school, denied medical treatment, subjected to physical violence and worse. It is their stigma that can be exacerbated by insensitive reporting in the press and harmful social views propagated in faith communities. Their identity and sense of self are called into question because they are seen as a physical reminder of the enemy. Often, their very survival is at risk, due to the high incidence of infanticide.

When you consider that these children – some who have now reached adulthood – they've gone through their whole lives suffering from that stigma, suffering from that discrimination, suffering from the persecution, against a backdrop of conflict, and indeed post-conflict instability, it is clear that their chances of fulfilling any kind of aspiration or ambition are not just reduced, sometimes they are totally eradicated. Joanne's report shows that we as policy makers are not sufficiently focussed on their plight as part of our overall approach to sexual violence in conflict.

As I said, I visited Iraq recently, and in that challenging situation I did see positive examples. The declaration of support for sexual violence survivors issued by Yezidi spiritual leader, Baba Sheikh, enabled many women and girls to return safely from captivity to their own homes, to their communities, to be embraced by their families. And also most recently I welcome the UN Secretary-General's appointment of Karim Khan as the head of the Investigative Team tasked with investigating Da'esh crimes in Iraq, including acts of terrorism, violence, and armed conflict.

Currently, the needs of children born of sexual violence are not sufficiently taken into account when decisions are made about who should receive aid, psycho-social support or help to integrate into their community. This policy and protection gap means that, in many cases, children born of sexual violence are being left behind – with negative consequences for themselves, their communities, their families, their future, and indeed the outcome of reconciliation efforts. If we do not take action now, if we do not bridge this gap, these problems are likely to fester and grow.

That is why today I would like to invite all of us collectively, partners working side by side, to join us in pledging support for the children born of sexual violence in conflict. These are innocent children. The campaign to Prevent Sexual Violence in Conflict has always been about hearing the voices of the victims. These victims who have become brave survivors, and as we will hear later today, become the most powerful advocates. If their voices are not heard, they remain what is termed often as the “silent many”: women and girls, but also men and boys, people from the LGBT community, disabled people, forced mothers, and indeed children born of sexual violence. And a personal reflection from my visit to Iraq. When I heard those heinous crimes committed against mothers, what they had to go through, what they had to endure and confront in terms of the atrocities committed by Da’esh, it shakes the very foundation of your being. The voices of those survivors will remain with me for life.

And as we in the UK prepare to host an international meeting in November 2019, five years on from the Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict, we want to put them at the heart and centre of that particular event. At the first Summit, we told the world that it was “Time to Act”. In 2019 we need to show the world – we need to show the survivors – that we did just that, and we are determined to do so much more.

The meeting in 2019 will seek real commitments from governments and international organisations to accelerate the drive to end impunity; advance justice and accountability; tackle stigma by calling to action the international media and a declaration from faith leaders, and develop new ways to prevent and address sexual violence. This must also include action in support of children born of sexual violence. The recommendations in this excellent report offer a path for national and international policy makers to follow. And we will be inviting Member States from the United Nations, the United Nations Representatives directly, the Commonwealth, and our champion partner countries to put forward evidence of concrete action against these recommendations at the 2019 international meeting. We will spearhead action multilaterally, including through our role as chair of the Commonwealth, to encourage the sharing of best practice and lessons learned to build on current interventions. Working bilaterally with partners where we have shared interests is similarly key to achieving our long-term goal of ending sexual violence in conflict.

Your excellences, ladies and gentlemen, to conclude, yes we can reflect and be proud of the achievements to date in supporting those innocent victims of sexual violence in conflict, and proud of our efforts to prevent others suffering the same fate. But truthfully speaking, and speaking from the heart, we all know that we have only skimmed the surface. There is so much more, much more, to do. And therefore on this day, here in the United Nations, as we mark this important Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, let us all again come together and pledge not just to redouble our efforts, but to maximise our efforts, to support more survivors, these brave survivors. Let us hear their voices. The voices of the silent many, and take great strides forward, collectively, collaboratively, working together, to address the particular needs of these innocent children. Victims often

ostracised through no fault of their own. And if we address that priority then perhaps we can then look forward and say we have played our part in ensuring that their future, their progress, their hopes, ambitions and aspirations have been protected. And I commend this report to you. Thank you.