

Speech: Her Royal Highness The Countess of Wessex addresses the UN General Assembly

Thank you, Madam President. Thank you, Chair.

Madam President, Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen,

It is a privilege to be here today to join such an inspiring group of women, especially the young women leaders, to consider the crucial issues of Gender Equality and women's empowerment.

I am delighted to have this opportunity to share our understanding of the barriers that hinder women's participation and leadership – and to discuss what actions we can take to bring down these barriers. We have a responsibility to ensure that women have every opportunity to reach the highest levels of their profession and lead across political, economic and social spheres. In the societies we live in today, there is no excuse not to include women. As I suggested to an all-male board on a recent trip, if all the seats at the table are full, you just need to pull up an extra chair.

In the last year, I have encountered some extraordinary people, like yourselves, who are devoted to doing what they can to tackle the barriers women still face. I have also been fortunate enough to meet a number of women peacebuilders who have shared their stories and insights with me.

Last November, I also met the 2018 Nobel Prize Laureate, Dr Denis Mukwege at the PSVI International Film Festival in London. Dr Mukwege, a gynaecologist in the Democratic Republic of Congo, has treated hundreds of victims of rape and abuse. I was struck by what he said about the silence. He considers the silence to be an enemy of survivors of sexual violence and a crime in itself. The silence that prevents survivors, their families and communities from reporting these crimes and seeking justice and makes complicit those who deliberately enable such a situation. Here at the UN we can give survivors a voice, we can break down the stigma they face.

The positions that many of us in this room occupy gives us an enormous opportunity to support the work of these brave individuals. However, at the same time we cannot impose solutions. They must be home-grown. We must listen to those on the ground, whether it be women leaders breaking down barriers in the work place or survivors of sexual violence, and encourage support that is targeted at and appropriate for individual situations.

This is my first visit to CSW and my first opportunity to see the UN in action on these issues. It has made me even more determined to use my position to break down the silence around sexual violence and I will champion women's full and meaningful participation in peace processes, as part of my wider support for implementation of the Women, Peace and Security agenda. I

will amplify and elevate the voices of women from those in business to those working tirelessly to bring peace to their communities.

I look forward to working with you over the coming months and years, especially as we look ahead to the 20th anniversary of UN Security Council Resolution 1325 next year. Thank you.