

Speech: Penny Mordaunt: “I see a chamber filled with powerful and strong women.”

Welcome to the UK Parliament and the chamber of the House of Commons, in this centenary year of women’s suffrage.

100 years ago women in the UK were unable to run for office, or vote, or even be present in the public gallery.

If you look up you will see the ventilation shaft where women would peer through having gathered in the attic space where they viewed the proceedings below that affected their lives.

Often they would hear men voicing the widely held concerns that if women were given the vote it would be the end of everything, the downfall of the family, society, nation.

But those women knew, even then, that the opposite was true, that without their rights being secured, and their lives being fulfilled, family, society and nation could never really thrive.

Those incredible women who fought and suffered and endured to secure that right and paved the way for others.

They are heroines of our nation, their rallying cry, courage calls to courage everywhere.

They took their inspiration from the other side of the world, from New Zealand which had secured votes for women 25 years before.

And the other side of the world supported them as 50,000 British women from all walks of life marched on London to demand the franchise.

And you, who sit in this chamber today, have come to support the spirit of their cause.

I see a chamber filled with powerful, strong and courageous women, motivated by love, of your nation, your children and humanity.

You are heroines too.

Many of you have travelled here from all over the world. And some have had a much shorter journey today, but all of us have come a long way on our journey together.

One of the great joys in helping organise this event has been reading your biographies. Your achievements and your impact:

- you are passionate human rights activists,
- you have struggled against injustice,
- you have fought to protect women from domestic violence,
- you have advocated for girls' education,
- you are working to end FGM,
- and you have promoted rights for the most marginalised women – women with disabilities, women who are lesbian, bi-sexual or transgender and those living with HIV/aids.

Many of you are the first women to occupy the office you hold.

In this chamber this morning we have Vice Presidents, Ministers and shadow Ministers, a Speaker and Deputy Speakers, chairs of committees and commissions covering every possible facet of public policy.

And we have representatives from women's parliamentary caucuses and national women's leagues.

And from the UK parliament the Mother of the House, and the leader of the Commons and Chair of the Women and Equalities Select Committee.

You are great women for those public achievements, but also for the many private achievements that only you will know about:

- balancing your work with motherhood,
- juggling multiple caring responsibilities,
- the daily battle to be taken seriously,
- sexual harassment, intimidation and abuse,
- the restraint and resolve you need when constantly being patronised,
- the fight to be heard and to keep going when you are frightened.

You have brought today your ideas, your passion and determination that we will deliver for women worldwide.

And I'm delighted that one of you has also brought the baby!

And as well as all that you have done, and the u represent, you also symbolise the many women who are not here today too, those we work alongside and those we have met on our travels. I want us to think of them for a moment.

Personally I am thinking about the amazing Sisters I met when visiting the Vatican – welcome Sister Sally sitting in the gallery today. Women of faith who place themselves in harm's way all over the world to protect people.

Women serving in our armed forces, like Zara who I met in Afghanistan, after she had just won the sword of honour at their national officer training academy. She told me she wanted to shape her nation's future for the sake of her child.

The brave female ministers who I've met in my travels who risk the wrath of their senior colleagues by speaking up about family planning.

The Dalit woman from Nepal who stood for election despite having little education and no experience of leadership. She is now an elected ward member and represents her village in the local planning process.

And the brave women on peace councils, threatened, intimidated and stalked, or their partners murdered.

And then there are those who could never be here, those held captive or killed.

I am looking at the shield of my late friend and colleague Jo Cox.

And I am thinking of my colleague at DFID, Becky Dykes, who like Jo was brutally murdered.

These women worked to protect others, especially women and girls. And both have inspired foundations in their name to carry on their good works, both were heroines, both did exceptional things.

But we know that the violence they experienced was not exceptional.

If this chamber and you sitting in it were the female population of the world, and I asked all those who had experienced sexual or physical violence to stand up everyone sitting on the front three rows would get to their feet.

And if this chamber represented the female populations of some nations on earth it would only be the back rows that would remain seated.

There is much work to do.

So thank you for being here today, for all you have done on this agenda.

For all you do to enable others to and all you inspire through your example.

For representing your nations but also the billions of women and girls who want to make the world a better place and reach their full potential.

Thank you for understanding that humanity depends on them doing so.

And as you get to know each other better today, think about all that the few of us here have been able to do, and think about the possibilities if we are able to empower every girl, every woman on earth.

Just think what the world could do. And there is much we must do. 25 million backstreet abortions every year. 200 million girls and women who have undergone FGM, with 68 million more at risk by 2030. 63 million girls not in school.

So let us recommit ourselves:

*to inspire and new generation of female social and political leaders, * to end violence against women and girls, * to grant all women access to family planning, * to end the barriers to girl's education, * and to economically empower women.

We must implement the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women, we must deliver within 12 years the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals), especially goal 5.5 and UN Security Council resolution 1325.

And let us send a clear message to all those who would slow progress, whether they are in the global north or global south, that we will not stand for their nonsense.

I am so conscious as I speak to you that this very institution, the mother of all parliaments is still a hostile environment for some women who work within its walls.

I am aware that in parts of the UK not all women have access to reproductive healthcare where they live. Or marry who they love.

I understand the challenges of tackling historic failings or sensitive issues.

But tackle them we must.

And in 2018 we should not have to have a fight on our hands to get women's rights mentioned in summit documents, especially when that summit is the G7.

Enough.

Unless we enable every woman to reach their full potential, humanity won't reach its.

Unless women and girls thrive, our nations won't.

Peace, prosperity and security depend upon our task. And we should depend on each other. And meeting each other face-to-face, over these two days, I can see the interest sparking.

How can we help each other do more? How can we support each other when the going gets tough? How can we all pile in behind you when you need support?

Let's make an outcome from today a lasting connection between all of us. Whether it is a commitment to a giant sisterhood whatsapp group, or a greater interaction and collaboration around the issues we discuss today..

Because we must succeed.

Because the margin of victory is in this room.

Because courage calls to courage everywhere.

Without women's rights there are no human rights.

I mentioned earlier the shadows and echoes of the women who went before us still surround us.

Let us recognise here today that we too will become shadows and dust, but our

legacy must mean that in one hundred years a meeting like this will be nothing but a memory. Those who went before started a great movement for equality.

Let us be the generation that finishes the job.