

Speech: Speech by the Foreign Secretary to the UN Human Rights Council

Your Excellencies, Ladies and gentlemen, I want to begin on behalf of the UK by thanking High Commissioner Hussein for his service and for his tireless efforts for speaking up for human rights around the world.

And I'm delighted to be here because, at its best, this Council has shone a spotlight on appalling violations of human rights in specific countries – as we've just heard – and given a voice to people who would otherwise have suffered in silence.

Britain considers this Council to be part of the rules-based international system in which we believe and that we strive to protect.

And I will say that we share the view that a dedicated agenda item focused solely on Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories is disproportionate and damaging to the cause of peace and unless things change, we shall move next year to vote against all resolutions introduced under Item 7.

But I stress that that does not mean that we in the UK are blind to the value of this Council – including the work it could do on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict under the right agenda item – and we support its emphasis on freedom of religion and expression and the empowerment of women.

Which brings me to my main point because after flying around the world for two years as UK Foreign Secretary, I have concluded that we could solve the majority of the world's most serious problems – from infant mortality to unemployment to civil war to the unsustainable loss of habitat because of population growth – indeed we could achieve virtually every sustainable development goal – if only we could provide every girl in the world with at least 12 years of quality education.

It is a global disgrace that, at this moment, 130 million girls are not in the classroom, female illiteracy in some countries is running at 60, 70 or 80 per cent, and there are bigoted fanatics who actually campaign to stop girls from going to school, including the numbskulls from Boko Haram who will raid schools, abduct children and inflict any atrocity in order to deny girls an education.

As recently as February, Boko Haram kidnapped 110 girls from a school in Dapchi and we all remember how 276 were taken from Chibok in 2014.

When I visited Borno state last year, I met girls who had been told they would be shot if they dared learn to read, as the Taliban shot Malala.

I am lost in admiration for those who press on with their studies in defiance of these threats – and for teachers who are brave enough to help – but the

problem is global. Today, almost 800 million adults across the world cannot read or write – and two thirds of them are women.

Think of the wasted talent, the appalling opportunity cost to humanity.

But just imagine what we could achieve if we turned this upside down and ensured that every girl went to school and received the education they deserve?

If all girls went to secondary school, then infant mortality would be cut in half, saving three million young lives every year.

About 12 million children would not have their growth stunted by malnutrition.

The future wages of girls would rise by 12 per cent for every extra year in the classroom and with that prosperity you create jobs and therefore you strike a blow against the Boko Harams and the maladjusted chauvinist fanatics who overwhelmingly come from countries where women are under-educated.

And the conclusion is obvious: educating our daughters with the same care that we educate our sons is the single most powerful spur to development and progress, which is why, this year, the British Government has devoted an extra £500 million to the cause of female education.

We are helping another 1.4 million girls in 15 countries to receive a minimum of 12 years of quality education.

When we welcomed the representatives of 52 countries to London for the Commonwealth summit in April, all of them endorsed that target.

And I should say by the way, in case you don't know, Britain is one of a handful of countries that has a female Head of Government, a female Head of State and a female Head of the Judiciary.

And I have joined my friend Amina Mohammed, the Kenyan Cabinet Secretary, to form a Platform for Girls Education, a group of 12 influential people drawn from across the Commonwealth who will keep up the momentum.

But resources and political will are not the only constraints: even when schools and teachers are available, girls may still miss out.

If physical or sexual violence are commonplace, if dormitories are unsafe, if sanitary facilities are inadequate, then girls will be deterred from entering the classroom.

If they are married at an early age this may deprive them of the chance to go to school and the reality is that one girl in every 12 in the developing world is married before the age of 15.

Today, there are about 700 million women who were married in childhood and if the prevalence of child marriage remains unchanged, then that number will rise to nearly 1.2 billion by 2050.

All of these problems – including the prejudice and sexism that hold women back – will need to be addressed if we are to achieve the goal of universal female education.

I would respectfully appeal to every member of this Council to do whatever is necessary to eliminate child marriage, whether by passing new laws or enforcing existing ones.

And I would urge every country here today to sign the joint statement of principles on girls education and support resolutions during this session that condemn female genital mutilation and violence and discrimination against women.

And we should remember that mere attendance in school is not enough: we have to ensure that girls actually learn when they get there, which means that teachers need to be properly trained and opportunities improved for the most disadvantaged, including disabled girls.

But all these measurable and material benefits of which I have spoken cannot be the sole or even the primary reason why we must ensure that all girls go to school.

It's not just that this ambition will make us more prosperous and expand our GDPs – though it will do all of that and more.

I am here to appeal to all the men in suits, who are so adequately represented here and in positions of power around the world – there are quite a few – to do what is right.

We can build the schools and train the teachers and surmount all of the other barriers: in the end, it is only a question of priorities and of will.

This is one cause which attracts no dissenting voice and there is no reason to question the benefits or morality of what needs to be done.

So Mr President may I say for the sake of our common prosperity, for the sake of peace and for economic progress – but above all in the name of simple justice and fairness – let us give every girl in the world 12 years of quality education.

Thank you very much for your attention this morning.