

# 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.

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## **Press release: Boris Johnson: US Human Rights Council withdrawal is regrettable**

The United States' decision to withdraw from the Human Rights Council is regrettable.

We've made no secret of the fact that the UK wants to see reform of the Human Rights Council, but we are committed to working to strengthen the Council from within.

Britain's support for the Human Rights Council remains steadfast. It is the best tool the international community has to address impunity in an imperfect world and to advance many of our international goals.

That's why we will continue to support and champion it.

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## **Press release: PM hosts Local Enterprise Partnerships Council**

A Downing Street spokesperson said:

The Prime Minister began by thanking the Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP) Chairs for their valuable contribution to business and innovation in the UK developing skills, delivering infrastructure, and securing investment.

She noted the steady growth of the economy in recent years and the record levels of employment, crediting this progress to the joint efforts of LEPs, Government and private sector entrepreneurs in driving growth across the country.

Co-chair Mike Blackburn OBE, Chair of Greater Manchester LEP, praised the strong track record of delivery seen from LEPs so far. He welcomed the enthusiasm of the Chairs and the opportunity to build on the success of recent years by furthering the close collaboration between LEPs and government, particularly in delivering the modern industrial strategy across the country.

Guests discussed the particular strengths that LEP business leaders bring to the table, including their ability to broker new partnerships and connections, their importance in delivering the objectives of the industrial strategy within their communities, and their role in fostering strong collaboration between local institutions, individuals and government.

Attendees also reflected on recent successes such as the HS2 College in Doncaster – supported by Sheffield City Region – which is equipping local young people with the skills they need to build our future railways.

Attendees agreed that LEPs have a particularly important role to play in connecting the business and educational sectors. They emphasised the value of the partnerships LEPs bring in helping to enable people of all ages to develop the modern skills that our businesses require to thrive.

Welcoming the government's ambitious technical skills agenda, they also praised the opportunities for local innovation that the industrial strategy has launched.

Looking ahead, the business leaders considered key growth areas for the UK economy, highlighting the example of the medical technologies sector as an area where LEPs can help drive this expansion.

There was also discussion around the LEP review, announced as part of the modern Industrial Strategy last year. It was noted that it would be an opportunity to identify where government can strengthen and support LEPs further in their work across the country.

The Prime Minister stressed the importance of ensuring that LEP

leadership truly represented the communities they served, pointing to the progress made in the number of women on FTSE100 boards as an example to follow.

She also noted that this council will serve as a regular occasion for Chairs of LEPs to come together and talk openly about how they can work more closely with government to achieve shared aims.

The Prime Minister concluded by reflecting on the opportunities ahead to maximise the convening power of LEPs in delivering the modern industrial strategy for all.

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## Speech: We need to knock down the wall of silence around Syrian women: by Lord Ahmad

Today the world marks the International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict. Around the world, sexual violence continues to be used as a weapon of war on a scale that is truly appalling. This is particularly true of the tragic war in Syria: according to a UN Commission of Inquiry report earlier this year, “no one had been unaffected by sexual and gender-based violence during the Syrian conflict”. This horrifies us all – based on the UN’s findings, we are talking about a whole generation of people affected mentally and physically by these violent crimes.

However individuals and communities, with the UK’s assistance, are working to give voice to survivors and support them to secure justice and we are at the forefront of the international community’s efforts to secure justice for survivors, shatter the culture of impunity, and tackle the stigma faced by survivors. In 2014 we hosted the largest ever summit on preventing sexual violence in conflict, bringing together governments, NGOs, experts and survivors to begin to change global attitudes to these crimes. In Syria, we have given £10 million through our Conflict, Security and Stability Fund to support gender-related projects since the start of the crisis, including supporting Syrian organisations to raise awareness of women’s rights, to treat survivors of sexual violence, and to document medical evidence for use in any future prosecutions. We have also provided £30 million to the UN Population Fund in Syria to help reduce and mitigate gender-based violence, and provide life-saving sexual and reproductive health services.

The lawyers and doctors working on the ground in Syria to support survivors and bring their cases to light deserve all of our admiration. Their stories, shared here for the first time, reveal the importance of documenting sexual violence in conflict to build up a body of evidence for prosecutions, to hold perpetrators to account, and to help deter future sexual violence. On this



International Day for the Elimination of Sexual Violence in Conflict, we honour their dedication in seeking justice for survivors.

## **A lawyer working on documenting sexual and gender based violence in Syria.**

All our work documenting sexual violence cases is confidential. Names are kept concealed, and files are codified. The documented cases constitute a file on which legal action could be based in the future. It is the right of these women to have justice done, and to punish the perpetrators of these acts. There is a real fear of attack or threats to doctors involved in documenting these abuses.

There is no denying that there were acts of violence, rape and sexual abuse before the revolution, but numbers then were meagre as there was law and punishment in place then. Since the revolution, huge numbers of cases have been reported from the detention centres. Most of the documented cases are of female detainees held by the regime. The acts of violence ranged from sexual harassment to forceful stripping of clothes to rape and further worse instances. Sexual violence was practiced in some areas as a weapon to intimidate a particular group to move to another area. There were also cases from the refugee camps because no accountability system was in place.

We focus on educating women on their rights. We need to try to change stereotyping in the community, to knock down the wall of silence of women and rid them of the social stigma attached to victims. When a son is detained and then released, society tells the father "be proud of him and keep your head high because he was a detainee" Why not so when the detainee is a woman? She was detained, and she could have done nothing to prevent it. And when she was abused violently outside jail, she was the victim, not the perpetrator. We need to alter the way society views these women.

## **A Doctor providing medical treatment to survivors and documenting evidence in Syria**

The organisation I work for specialises in documenting cases of sexual violence that have taken place in detention centres. This not only includes regime detention centres but also those that belong to other armed groups that are present within Syria. We also receive cases that require medical, psychological services or legal assistance, and we try to help them with that too, referring them to other organisations who can help.

I do this work in my spare time, usually a day or 2 a week. For security reasons I cannot discuss the nature of my work with anyone, even those closest to me are unaware of what I do. Just by meeting with someone who has just been released from a regime detention centre I am putting myself in danger.

Due to the stigma surrounding the issue, women who have suffered from sexual violence whilst in detention often have no one to support them, and are often

turned away by their families. They hear about us through other survivors, nurses or first aid centres. They do not tell anyone about what has happened to them as they worry about the community's perception. We are most often the only people who have heard what they have been through.

During the year and a half that I have been doing this, there are two cases that have really touched me personally. When I was receiving my training, I attended the case of a woman in her fifties who was gang-raped by teenagers. She said they were the age of her children. The second case was of a woman who had just been released from a Daesh run detention centre. She told me that you could be walking in the street and suddenly they pick you up, beat, whip you and undress you on the street. She eventually ran away with her children, leaving her husband behind. Their words still echo in my ears and I cannot get the images of them out of my mind. Each story I have heard is painful. These stories must come out to the public. These injustices must be stopped once for all.

Syria has been under tyranny and oppression for 20 or 30 years. I do not want my children to go through the same thing. There are individuals who have been in jail for months or years, in unimaginable conditions. I do not want us to continue to live under fear of torture and violence from the police-state regime – not being able to raise our voices in protest. One day I hope that we will be able to live freely like a normal country.

Sometimes I feel like this hope is a bit far-fetched, but when I look at other countries which have experienced civil wars like us, or even when I look at the First and Second World War, places where people's lives eventually came together again, I regain some hope.