

Speech: 'We champion the rights of women and girls around the world'

You may be thinking why am I here speaking to you today.

I'm a middle-aged man. I have 2 sons. You could easily describe me as 'part of the patriarchy'. Why am I here today talking to you on the International Day of the Girl Child?

This is a day to think about how to tackle issues that contribute to gender inequality, and the challenges that young girls face everywhere on a daily basis.

There are 1.1 billion girls today (aged under 14) – this is a powerful constituency for shaping a sustainable world that's better for everyone.

We all need to be invested in empowering them to reach for their dreams and build better lives for themselves and their communities. This is not just for girls and women. We all have mothers and grandmothers. We all have a female relation, and some of us have sisters and daughters.

I also come from a different culture. I was educated in the Western, Christian tradition. I studied the bible, and learnt Christian ethics and morality from the New Testament which recorded the life and wisdom of Jesus Christ.

Wisdom does not necessarily come with age. Nor does it come with gender. Nor does one religion have a monopoly on wisdom.

In preparing for today, I wanted some wisdom from local religions. I don't have such a knowledge or understanding of the Hindu tradition, but we have just celebrated Durga Puja.

Ma Durga is the warrior goddess, who combats evil and unleashes her forces against wrong, oppression and evil. She is worshipped not just as a mother or a daughter but also as a leader and a fighter. The message is strong here that girls can be anything they want to be.

India is also the cradle of Buddhism. And in the teachings of the Buddha, there is relevant wisdom from the Dhammapada, in a text on 'punishment' (translation by K Kaul):

Punishment and death
Are the bitter fruits
Of evil deeds
Done in ignorance of reality
So bear in mind
That everyone lives in fear
Of punishment and death

Loving life as you do

So do unto others

As you would have them do unto you

... if you seek happiness

In doing noble deeds

That bring happiness to others

You shall be happy in this life and after.

Being happy. Treating others as you would have them treat you. How can we do that? Let me talk of 3 things.

First – language. It is by our own words that we condemn ourselves.

We communicate in many different ways. We talk, and words come out of our mouth. There is the tone of what we say, the context, the facial expression when we speak, and so on.

But when we speak, someone is listening. When we transmit, someone will receive. When we express ourselves to an audience, others will be trying to make sense of what we are saying.

And what I mean with the words I use, may not have the same meaning to my listeners. Some listeners may understand, agree and identify with what I am saying, others may not. And we have a great choice of the words that we use.

In our daily lives, we all like to laugh. Life is better when you are laughing. The best medicine in life is laughter. Laughter releases good hormones that reduce stress and increase feelings of well-being and pleasure.

What if you make someone else the object of your laughter?

It perpetuates gender discrimination and inequality. We all need to make a conscious effort to put a stop this.

What can we do?

Diplomats constantly seek for reaction. We want to know what others think of our countries (by that I mean what they think of our governments). In our ordinary lives, it would be boring if we went around the whole time asking how others feel about us.

But we can ask about our words, our languages and our jokes. The best feedback is when people speak up without asking. Easily said – but what should we do?

Secondly: behind the choice of words we use, lie stereotypes.

Sexual stereotypes – such as women being the weaker sex – are rooted by the age of 14. This is the case whether you are in a rich or poor country.

From an early age the messaging that girls are vulnerable and boys are

stronger and independent are being reinforced from all parts of society – parents, relatives, siblings, classmates, teachers, clergy, coaches, social media, TV and other media.

Boys are more likely to be encouraged to spend time outside of the home unsupervised. Girls tend to stay home and do chores. The role of the mother here is important – does she treat her son and daughter equally or is she finding comfort in the patriarchal hierarchy?

UN Women has set up the #HeForShe solidarity campaign for the advancement of women. Its goal is to engage men and boys as agents of change by encouraging them to take action against negative inequalities faced by women and girls.

Grounded in the idea that gender equality is an issue that affects all people – socially, economically and politically – it seeks to actively involve men and boys in a movement that was originally conceived as ‘a struggle for women by women’.

We fear being the odd one out. But we have a responsibility to speak up especially if we want to put a stop to them and change things for the better.

Finally outcomes on equality of opportunity. Let me talk about my organisation.

My parent ministry – the Foreign and Commonwealth Office – is a global institution with over 12,500 staff. As an organisation, we advocate for diversity and inclusion around the world.

A third of our staff are UK based – diplomats like me, but also staff who work only in Britain – and 2/3 local staff. Overall 43% of UK Based staff are female, and 42% LE staff are female.

Britain’s first female ambassador, was Anne Warburton, in Denmark. She was appointed in 1976. By 2008, we had 22 female Heads of Mission (Ambassadors, High Commissioners, Governor’s General, Consul Generals and Heads of Diplomatic) out of around 280.

We now have 54 female Heads of Missions around the world.

We champion the rights of women and girls around the world, and in February appointed Joanna Roper as the UK’s first ever Special Envoy for Gender Equality.

In India, we offer the Chevening Scholarships for studying for Masters in the UK. Almost exactly 50% of the scholars selected are women.

We also offer several Chevening Fellowships in different fields. 40% of the fellows selected are women. In fact almost half of the Chevening Alumni in India are women.

To return where I started, I am here speaking to you today on the International Day of the Girl Child because I am a man. I have a mother and sister and I have sons. ‘I am of woman born’.

I want to make the world a happier place. A place where everyone laughs. And where everyone can speak up and be heard.

That is why it is my role, just as much as yours, to work for gender equality.