

Speech to the Commonwealth Secretariat for International Women's Day

Secretary General, Your Excellencies, High Commissioners, distinguished guests, my lords, ladies and gentlemen,

I am deeply honoured to be invited to give this keynote address to the Commonwealth two days before International Women's Day. This event, which began in 1911, has become a worldwide event of prime importance, an official holiday in twenty-seven countries, and an opportunity for us all not only to reflect on the vital role that women play in the world, but to end the violence and oppression that mars the lives of so many. I am very grateful to Kamalesh Sharma for inviting me to speak here today, and wish to thank him for all the work he has done for women throughout the world, and hope he makes a rapid recovery. Also my great thanks to the gender team from the Commonwealth Secretariat.

I am a passionate believer in the Commonwealth and a great admirer of Her Majesty the Queen. The world can be a dark and unsettling place, and the bonds that we share – of language, culture, history – are now more important than ever. When the Middle East has descended into chaos, the global economy has been shaken by the worst crisis since the Great Depression, and tensions in Eastern Europe and the Pacific threaten the post-Cold War peace, the Commonwealth must stand together. We must work together in pursuit of toleration, fairness, justice and democracy to combat the present and clear danger to universal values and equality. This threatens us all, whether from external threats or from ignorance and insidious ideologies within. Equality for women *is* progress for all.

So what have we achieved? And what more can we do?

We must remember that the Charter of the United Nations in June 1945 reaffirmed the equal rights of men and women. The United Nations can still be a powerful force for progress: the eight UN Millennium Development Goals, whose end date falls this year, were a promising start. To eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, to achieve universal education, to promote gender equality and empower women, to reduce child mortality, to improve maternal health, to combat HIV and AIDS, to ensure environmental stability and to develop a global partnership for development: heroic aims, and the last fifteen years have seen great strides towards success. It is even more encouraging that these goals recognised, explicitly, the importance of promoting gender equality.

Great and meaningful progress has been recently made for women and girls, and the Commonwealth has led the way. At least fifteen Commonwealth countries have reached or exceeded the global target of 30% women at all levels of political decision

making, over a third of female Speakers of Parliament are from the Commonwealth, and many women now hold so-called “hard” ministerial posts such as defence, finance, and foreign affairs. Almost all areas of the world have achieved gender parity in school enrolment, and once again, the Commonwealth has been at the forefront of these sterling efforts: Bangladesh has achieved parity in primary and secondary education, and almost doubled the secondary certificate pass rate for girls; Ghana has reached 95% primary enrolment for girls; Sierra Leone has increased the enrolment of girls by 40% since the end of its Civil War.

But we have not come close to real success yet. Just over one in five of parliamentarians are women, they hold only 17% of ministerial posts, and make up only fifteen of the 193 heads of government globally. At current rates, it will be over a century before women are equally represented among the world’s leaders, and almost half a century before they make up half of parliamentarians. Only 20% of elected councillors are female, and only ten mayors of the world’s 195 capital cities. The MDG aiming to improve maternal health was one of the lowest performing, and maternal mortality rates are still at shockingly high levels. Women are seriously underrepresented in the leadership of both private and public boards, and hold only under 25% of FTSE 100 director positions.

I am a fervent advocate of the protection and promotion of women. I am immensely proud of the role my family have played in promoting women’s rights over the past 150 years, and in particular Jacob Bright MP. Immediately following the success of his brother John Bright MP’s campaign to extend the vote to unenfranchised men when he drove Disraeli to pass the Reform Act of 1867, Jacob Bright introduced the first ever Bill to grant women the right to vote, the Women’s Disabilities Removal Bill, drafted by Dr Richard Pankhurst, the husband of Emmeline Pankhurst. John Bright’s sisters, Priscilla McLaren and Margaret Lucas, and his daughter, Helen Bright Clark, were eminent early suffragettes. Indeed, John Bright was an anti-slaver, recognised by Abraham Lincoln as his foremost supporter in the civil war against the South, and was also the Parliamentary champion of those oppressed in the former British Empire. His motto was “be just and fear not”.

I myself have served in the British Parliament for thirty years, and I regard the passage of my International Development (Gender Equality) Act last year as one of the proudest achievements of my entire career. Ensuring that the £11 billion that we spend on international development is used as an enforceable legal duty for gender equality is a vital step in achieving change. It will change the lives of millions of people across the globe. I am now involved in the proposal to set up a Select Committee on Women and Equalities in Parliament following the General Election. As Chairman of the European Scrutiny Select Committee I secured a commitment in principle to the proposals in my Gender Equality Act at COSAC, which is the formal

EU forum of all the 28 Chairmen of the national parliaments of the member states of the European Union.

In relation to the vital issue of girls' education, and following the 2015 review of the Beijing declaration and Platform for Action and the Millennium Development Goals, whilst the world has achieved equality, we are told, in primary education between girls and boys, this is not the case at all levels of education. Girls are more likely to be out of school than boys among both primary and lower secondary age groups, even for girls living in the richest households, according to the United Nations. More than half of the world's out of school children live in sub-Saharan Africa, primarily because of poverty. From data across 63 developing countries, the gender gap in school attendance widens in lower secondary education. Girls are less likely to start school than boys, but once enrolled, are more likely to reach the last grade of primary school, except Western and Eastern Asia. Girls however, face high barriers in parts of Africa and Asia.

What Desmond Tutu called "the greatest human rights abuse of the 21st century", namely gender inequality, must end now. Half the world is female. Women do around 60% of the world's work, but they earn only 10% of the world's wealth and own only 2% of the land. There is no country on Earth where women have equal social and political rights to men. We have failed. So long as any nation on Earth discriminates against half its population, we have failed – that no nation should have achieved true equality is utterly unacceptable.

It is too easy to lose sight of the fact that we are not simply doing this for the sake of fairness, no matter how important that might be – equality for women truly is progress for all. When half the population is excluded from education, from work, from government, the cost to prosperity – not just for one nation, but the entire globe – is immense. The cost to growth in developing regions from gender inequality ranges from 0.38% per annum in Sub-Saharan Africa to 0.81% in South Asia, and the economic boost that tackling this issue will provide can lift millions out of poverty. When a girl in the developing world receives seven or more years of education, she marries four years later, has 2.2 fewer children, and her children are healthier and better educated. The benefits are obvious, and inaction unforgiveable.

At the 10th Women's Affairs Ministers meeting in June 2013 it appeared that not only how the issues facing women were universal throughout the Commonwealth, but how often women were the driving forces behind successful enterprises – something I noted myself back in 2009 as Chairman of the House of Commons Sanitation and Water Committee, which I founded, when I visited Mumbai and Delhi and saw how the women were the driving force behind efforts to improve sanitation and water supply. The world is in crisis, and we cannot fix it without the aid of women. We may

be closer to gender equality than we have ever been before, but are still too far from success – and the need for it is more urgent than ever.

This is why the British Government, with the strong support of Justine Greening as Secretary of State for International Development, is working hard to ensure a standalone gender goal in the post-2015 Development Agenda. The Millennium Development Goals have been a good start, but there is still so much left to do. Until gender inequality has been eradicated, we will not only be condemning billions of women, but entire nations to misery and poverty. We have built up a strong coalition of states to work towards this end, but every one of us here today can do more to end the appalling abuses that cast such a stain on the human race.

Promoting gender equality is not simply a matter of ensuring equality of opportunity. We must work to exterminate the barbaric customs and practices that subjugate women across the globe to violence, degradation, injury and humiliation. Globally, more than a third of women have experienced physical or sexual violence. Gender-based violence is present in every society in the world. None of us, rich or poor, are free of this scourge.

Recently, I fought in Parliament to amend the Serious Crime Bill to ensure greater protection for young girls at risk of Female Genital Mutilation, an issue which – I am certain you will all agree – is of utmost importance. It is thought that 125 million women in the world today have suffered from FGM. In Britain alone the number of girls estimated to have undergone FGM has risen from 66,000 a decade ago to 137,000 today, but despite being illegal since 1985 to carry out the procedure in the UK, and since 2003 to arrange for these procedures to be inflicted on a citizen or permanent resident abroad, there has been not a single successful prosecution. The Government's Serious Crime Bill makes significant progress, but more needs to be done.

This state of affairs is utterly intolerable. There is a terrible danger that we become preoccupied more with appearing to take action than with tackling the roots of such problems. Democratic governments will always be tempted by cosmetic solutions: genuine achievement is difficult, expensive and too often hard to prove. But until we learn to pre-empt, not simply to punish, we will be failing in our duty to tens of thousands of young girls and women suffering unspeakable horror. Domestic abuse, sexual violence, rape, FGM, honour killings, trafficking, forced marriage – that such cruelty should be so prevalent in the 21st century is deeply repulsive. Our Modern Slavery Act in the making is another milestone in achieving change and removing inequalities for women.

These issues should not be left to charities and individual campaigners. It is the duty of every parliament and parliamentarian every government, everywhere, for the

good of all its citizens, male and female, to root out violence and oppression wherever they are found. None of the problems that face women in the world today can be tackled by one nation in isolation. That is why I urge every parliament, every government, and every parliamentarian to enact a legal duty to protect and promote girls and women in a similar way to my International Development (Gender Equality) Act 2014, which is before you.

The Commonwealth is a unique association of countries of every level of wealth and development, and such advantages come with heavy responsibilities. Our duty is to set an example for the rest of the world to follow as we move onwards. The world has achieved great things with the Millennium Development Goals, but far more needs to be done. We now have the chance now not only to build on the successes of the past fifteen years, but to learn from our past mistakes. As we move onwards to the post-2015 Framework, we must take the opportunity to make the next fifteen years a triumph to completely overshadow the last.

In the words of Lucretia Mott, in her Discourse on Women of 1849, when there were the first stirrings of recognition of the role of women which we are celebrating and advocating today She said “let woman then go on – not asking favours, but claiming as a right the removal of all hindrances to her elevation in the scale of being – let her receive encouragement for the proper cultivation of all her powers, so that she may enter profitably into the active business of life.”

Let equality of women radiate, arc and refract through the prism of the rainbows of the Commonwealth of Nations into every corner of the world.