

UPF UK: Keith Best - Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls - 2023

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Keith Best TD MA: Chair of Universal Peace Federation UK Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls

I spoke here on 9 March in support of International Women's Day and it is an honour to be with you again on the theme of the Elimination of Violence Against Women and Girls so close to its UN International Day on 25 November.

It is also highly appropriate twenty years after an Iranian woman, Shirin Ebadi, who devoted her life to defending in court women political activists, won the Nobel Peace Prize, that another Iranian woman was awarded the Peace Prize last month. Nargess Mohammadi, an Iranian woman activist currently serving a ten-year term in Tehran's Evin prison, is a relentless activist and lawyer, who has for the last 25 years defended human rights and political activists and members of religious minorities unjustly victimized by Iran's judicial system. The Norwegian Nobel Peace Prize is a recognition not only of Narges's heroic efforts but also of the continuing struggle of Iranian women for their rights, for equality under the law and their work against a regime hostile to women's place in society and for four decades has sought to restrict women's choices, degrade, and humiliate them. She encapsulates why we are gathered today. One of Narges's main achievements, along with other women activists, has been her campaign against the death sentence in Iran, where capital punishment is common. She is also the vice president of the Defenders of Human Rights Center, founded by Shirin Ebadi in 2003. Together with other Iranian women activists, Nargess launched in 2006 the Million Signature Campaign aimed at repealing discriminatory laws against women. Even in her prison cell, Nargess has remained outspoken about the miserable physical conditions in Iran's prisons and the suffering of Iran's women prisoners.

Last month she issued a statement from Evin prison regarding the case of Armita Geravand, a 16-year-old girl who, after a confrontation with a 'hijab enforcer' in Tehran's metro train, was seen on video being dragged unconscious out of the train and was subsequently taken to a military hospital where she has been lying in a state of coma since. In her statement, quoted in the Wall Street Journal, Nargess said: "The government's behaviour indicates an attempt to prevent the truth about Armita from coming out."

The violence against Armita Geravand seemed like a horrific reenactment of another confrontation over the hijab with the morality police last year that led to the death of yet one more young woman, Mahsa Amini, and has resulted in a public outcry and revulsion. Bystanders say a hijab policewoman confronted Armita after boarding the metro because she was not covering her hair. After the following argument, Armita was pushed to the floor and hit her head. She was bleeding when she was removed from the metro. The official version, as usual, avoids any responsibility. The government claims Armita fell due to a fall in blood pressure.

Some years ago when I ran the charity Freedom from Torture I worked closely with Lord William Hague, as he now is, when Foreign Secretary and Baroness Joyce Anelay who was appointed the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict. Angelina Jolie has been prominent in its cause. I was pleased that the British Government took this initiative which is led by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (FCDO) as a cross-departmental approach which includes working with UN agencies, and international and local organisations in countries affected by conflict-

related sexual violence. It sits in the FCDO's Office of Conflict, Stabilisation and Mediation. Experts are deployed to conflict-affected countries, mostly to support national and local bodies with medical, legal, security, and psychological expertise. At the London 2022 conference, 54 countries signed [the political declaration on conflict-related sexual violence](#) and made [national pledges](#). Sierra Leone, for example, committed to "design programs to respond to the psychosocial needs of survivors and children born out of such acts."

At the time of the setting up of the initiative the eyes of the world were very much on the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Rates of sexual violence in DRC are alarming. Although reliable data is scarce, a comprehensive 2011 study places the figure between 1.69 and 1.8 million women having been raped in their lifetimes. The epidemic of rapes seems to have started in the mid-1990s. That coincides with the waves of [Hutu](#) militiamen who escaped into Congo's forests after exterminating 800,000 [Tutsis](#) and moderate Hutus during [Rwanda's genocide](#) in 1994. The most vicious attacks had been carried out by Hutu militias. Today, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, particularly the eastern region of the country, is known as the rape capital of the world. Rape in the Democratic Republic of Congo has frequently been described as a "weapon of war", and the [United Nations](#) officially declared rape a weapon of war in 2008. As stated by the UN Human Rights Commissioner's Office, [war rape](#) makes a particularly effective weapon because it not only destroys its physical victims but entire communities as well. There are Presidential elections there next month and we shall see if firm action can be taken under a new regime.

Sadly, violence against women is not confined to Iran and the DRC. It is now rife in Afghanistan.

I have described the situation in other countries and in time of conflict but much of violence against women is occurring under our noses in domestic situations both here and abroad. the [Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women](#), issued by the UN General Assembly in 1993, defines violence against women as "any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life." Violence does not have to be physical alone but can be psychological and I am pleased that we are reminded on radio and television through a number of different vehicles of the incidence of "gaslighting." So, Article 2 of the Declaration includes "Physical, sexual and psychological violence occurring in the family, including battering, sexual abuse of female children in the household, dowry-related violence, marital rape, female genital mutilation and other traditional practices harmful to women, non-spousal violence and violence related to exploitation." We have a major educational need to overcome deep-seated cultural and religious practices that tolerate and even advocate appalling abuse of women.

As is set out on the UN website "The adverse psychological, sexual and reproductive health consequences of VAWG (Violence Against Women and Girls) affect women at all stages of their life. For example, early-set educational disadvantages not only represent the primary obstacle to universal schooling and the right to education for girls; down the line they are also to blame for restricting access to higher education and even translate into limited opportunities for women in the labour market.

While gender-based violence can happen to anyone, anywhere, some women and girls are particularly vulnerable - for instance, young girls and older women, women who identify as lesbian, bisexual, transgender or intersex, migrants and refugees, indigenous women and ethnic minorities, or women and girls living with HIV and disabilities, and those living through humanitarian crises.

Violence against women continues to be an obstacle to achieving equality, development, peace as well as to the fulfilment of women and girls' human rights. All in all, the promise of the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) - to leave no one behind - cannot be fulfilled without putting an end to violence against women and girls."

The prejudice against women, thousands of years old in a male-dominated culture, is unnatural, unrealistic, uneconomic, unpalatable and shameful but goes back to biblical times and has even been enshrined in law. It is to be hoped that the current emphasis on discrimination against women means that not only are we becoming more civilised but also more determined to root it out for the misery, unfairness and waste of human resources that it involves. When that translates into physical violence against women it become insupportable.

The Declaration itself enjoins all states to "condemn violence against women and should not invoke any custom, tradition or religious consideration to avoid their obligations with respect to its elimination. States should pursue by all appropriate means and without delay a policy of eliminating violence against women" and sets out a list of what states should do to achieve this. As citizens we have a duty not only to half of humanity but also to ourselves to call out not only our own Government but also those of other states where violence against women is still practised. It is not enough to claim that we cannot achieve change - indeed we can all do so both individually and collectively. This has to be a call to action for us all.