

UN International Women's Day 2013

Robin Marsh
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'I was not into women's issues when I was elected as an MP at age 29. I was passionate about global poverty, peace etc. That lasted until I was about one hour in Parliament. Then I realised I could not keep quiet', Baroness Oona King explained last night, as the Universal Peace Federation celebrated the International Women's Day 2013 in the House of Commons. There were a number of prominent women figures speaking including Lady Fiona Hodgson CBE, Baroness Sandip Verma, Parliamentary Undersecretary for Climate Change, Baroness Oona King and Baroness Meral Hussein - Ece OBE, Seema Malhotra MP, Charlotte Simon, Co-Founder of Mothers of Congo, Cllr. Mrs Mimi Harker, Mayor of Amersham OBE and Brita Fernandez-Schmidt, Executive Director of Women for Women. We are grateful for Mr Virendra Sharma MP for hosting the event.



(Photos are available from <http://tinyurl.com/a545pyl>) Lady Fiona Hodgson CBE, who had just returned from New York where she had attended the Commission on the Status of Women. She described the intensity of her time there. She explained that the conference was the second largest in the United Nations but many at the conference believed that the CSW does not get the media focus it deserves. She explained that there were still negotiations ongoing to come to a common position on the topic of violence against women. She was concerned that this would not be realised. She revealed that while the UK was liaising with other nations especially in the EU there were some problems with some conservative EU nations. Lady Hodgson also commended the initiative of the Foreign Secretary William Hague to promote the Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict and Post-Conflict Situations Initiative that will be a focus for the G8 during the UK Presidency. She emphasised that the Foreign Secretary wanted to shatter the culture of impunity that has developed from the poor record of convictions in the Balkans conflict. (Photo Right [L- R] Charlotte Simon, Lady Fiona Hodgson CMG, Virendra Sharma MP)

Baroness Sandip Verma explained that the culture she grew up in led her to believe her brothers could do so many things that she could not. She gradually became rebellious to challenge this unfairness. She commented that it was tragic that it needed a 'horrendous incident in India to stir people to make a change. The poor nurse suffered horribly but despite the reaction to this terrible gang rape and murder in India there are still rapes of young girls being reported there.'



'It is bad enough in our nation that one in four women suffer domestic violence during their lives in other nations it is much worse. There has to be a partnership with men to solve this problem. Men must stand up with us and make this stop!



Baroness Verma continued to say 'one mother approached me in the corridor in the House of Lords to say her daughter had attended a UPF (Universal Peace Federation) event and it led her to decide to enter into politics to make a change!'

Baroness Oona King recounted the horrors of visits to Rwanda and the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). She is the Chair of the All Party Parliamentary Group for the Prevention of Genocide. When she saw the reality in Rwanda and south Kivu of eastern DRC she was horrified. She told the story of a classroom in Rwanda where all the children had one leg cut off. The attackers of the village had decided to catch the adults first so crippled the children so they could not run away! She shared that she had visited south Kivu where that had been terrible mass rapes of the women of a community in order to break those communities. There were huge numbers of reported rapes but very few arrests let alone convictions. She went to a hospital where she saw a nine month baby girl who had been raped with a bayonet. There is a lot of talk about preventing 'Violence Against Women' but little has really changed in places like Congo. She was so shocked that in the 21st century this is still happening. Being Jewish she also noted that the number of people who had been reported as being murdered in the eastern DRC during the last 15 years was over six million. She added that despite hearing Charlotte Simon speak of the situation in eastern DRC you can never really know what women there have really been through. She apologised for 'being depressing this evening' but felt that it is outrageous that in the 21st century that this is still happening. She looked forward to the G8 that will make a declaration that rape is not just a weapon

of war wbut a war crime.



Baroness Oona King continued saying, 'Impunity for rape is a big problem. In 2005 in south Kivu there were 14,200 documented rapes, (there were probably many more that were not able to be documented) but only in 2% of cases were the perpetrators brought to justice!' She commented that 'security systems must be put in place to protect women' but if rape does occur 'a woman must not be forced to have the child' because the life for that child is awful. She added, 'I have talked to children in that position who know the circumstances of their existence.'

'I am a Parliamentarian in Britain so this is where I will focus my efforts. But you guys are universal! I am relying on you to take the message around the world. Thank you for giving me time this evening. It is amazing the events you and Robin organise. I will stay to hear Charlotte speak.'

Charlotte Simon thanked Universal Peace Federation for providing opportunities for her to speak about the plight of eastern Democratic Republic of Congo on a number of occasions. She emphasised that the painful tragedy is going on now even as we are meeting. The slaughter of the Congolese people by Uganda and Rwanda has been going on since 1996. 'The culture of mass rape, torture and exploitation of the natural resources of Congo has become a part of everyday life for Congolese civilians.'



Mrs Simon continued to explain that since the invasion of Congo (in 1996) there have been more than 10 million deaths, 5 million displaced and 3 treaties signed but none were respected. In 2005 the International Criminal Court found that the Uganda army had committed human rights abuses against the

Congolese people and had illegally exploited Congo's natural resources. Yet no action was taken against the President Museveni of Uganda or his Government.

She stated that Laurent Nkunda, who was the Chief of Staff of the Rwandan army in 1998 under Paul Kagame, slaughtered a million Congolese people but he is still at large in Rwanda. He is under supposed 'House Arrest' in Kigali. In President Kagame's own words, 'Laurent Nkunda is our guest.'

Mrs Simon explained that, 'Genocide is an international crime but it does not seem to apply to protect the Congolese people. 1948 UN General Assembly enforced in 1951, 142 countries ratified the convention. There was an official Government statement, 'Britain cannot turn away. We will not spare any efforts in saving life's.' But, she asked, why does this not apply in the case of Congo?

She concluded, 'As Baroness Oona King stated in an article in the Times 9th August 2012, 'Let's stop supporting Kagame's war mongerers'. Mother's of Congo cannot wait. We must work for the women who have been raped. We must put pressure on the British Government to work to stop the rape, stop the murder and stop British corporations from trading in blood minerals!'

Chris Yates asked Baroness Oona King why this is not in the news. Why is Syria in the news and Congo not in the news? Why are some lives worth more than others? Tatiana Giroud said that there is more news now than before.



Baroness Meral Hussein-Ece similar to Baroness Verma was the oldest in her family. She explained, 'Well behaved women do not make any changes or change the world.' She continued saying that she had rebelled and left home to go to University and then be a community worker. She later became an accidental politician! She explained that it was the domestic violence in the Turkish community that was so widespread that she became drawn into campaigning on this issue. Her domestic violence case load was so huge that they had to respond. They went to a large Turkish community centre in North London to discuss this problem and to talk about how the centre could educate the men that domestic violence was illegal in the UK. But in that meeting the men turned on them accusing them of being lesbians and of trying to take their women away from them!

She noted that the Mother of Parliaments here in the UK still has only 22% women. Women have to be a bit assertive to make their voices heard. She commented also that there are laws in many nations to prevent domestic violence but they are not implemented because there are often men in the positions in power who do not understand the issue. There are some good men around who are aware but we need more women politicians. She added that women often need to be asked or encouraged to step into politics where men do not need that encouragement.

'International Women's Day is one of my favourite times of the year. It symbolises something incredibly important. It is not just a time to think about the journey of women but to think about how we work together to achieve progress internationally.

To hear of the daily experiences of some women, simply experiencing terrible things just because they are women, in difficult countries can be very harrowing but it shows us how women and men in developed nations have to stand up and support their efforts to develop.

One way to look at the position of women is to consider the access to power. That only 22% of parliamentarians in the UK are women is embarrassingly low. It is amazing how women have been able to change the conversation even with this small percentage.

We talk about why the issues of sexual violence does not come up enough. One reason is that it is not a life experience of men or something they feel able, or confident to speak about. When women come through in politics it is an issue they can connect with better, remember and speak about more effectively. There is so much on our schedule that just remembering that Foreign Office questions are coming up and it is an opportunity to raise the issue of sexual violence in conflict zones is a big effort.



As a constituency MP it is important to remember and support the women who are recovering from attacks in conflict zones. They are putting their lives together again often while caring for a child on their own. They can be regaining their health, still carrying those wounds and unable to work. They need to know how to access resources and to get support of different kinds. I have met women from Afghanistan and Iran in this situation. Even when they are here the men leave and they are bringing up children on their own. They are trying to get the finances together. One woman is in temporary accommodation and her daughter, who is on anti-depressants, had to leave college because she had no access to the internet. We need to support and empower those women because once they have got through this themselves they will be the women who help others to do the same and become the mouthpieces of the campaigns to tackle these problems in future. We need these people to come through because they pressure us to help solve the problems in their countries.

William Hague has been very impressive in this area. He has not been afraid to talk about issues of sexual violence. However it is the lack of accountability after these resolutions are agreed if they are not adhered to. This is where I honestly believe that our voices need to be so much louder. That so few perpetrators are brought to justice means there are no consequences and the international community is unable to implement these agreements. Where it does not work we need to keep up the pressure at the UN or the G20 and help those men in power to know what it means to women to suffer sexual violence. I went to Palestine and I could see the importance of media reporting on these issues frequently. I hope that we in our generation do not just have the 'can do' spirit but that we have a 'will do' spirit to continue these campaigns to make a difference.'



Cllr. Mrs Mimi Harker OBE said “there is a lot of depressing though very important talks about the tragic

situation of women subjected to sexual violence in conflict. Now I want to give you some bright news of successes of women of amazing ability to bring women to the forefront of things..” announced Cllr Mimi Harker, Mayor of Amersham and for two consecutive years. She also added that we should do things right locally to have good results nationally. Many male colleagues stood for mayor but I succeeded in becoming the Mayor of Amersham for the second term.

Brita Fernandez-Schmidt, the Executive Director UK , Women for Women, really appreciated the UPF statement on the Status for Women 'because it is Peace and it is Women. It is wonderful. I am really excited to be here to be honouring International Women's Day. It is a really important moment. The work you do as Universal Peace Federation couldn't be closer to my heart.'

'I feel passionate about women. Poverty exacerbates the experience of inequality of women in particular.' She continued, 'There is nothing more important than peace. Nobody wins in war. Having had the opportunity to travel to many conflict nations I can say that the trauma of conflict is so horrendous. The impact is so huge. I am more passionate about peace than even about women because of the severe consequences war has on women. Women for Women International reaches out to women affected by conflict and who are socially excluded. They often have not had basic education and they do not know how they are going to take care of their children or to survive. We are in places like Congo, South Sudan, Iraq and Afghanistan.'



'Women for Women try to accomplish four key things:

- 1) There is a huge isolation in conflict so we have to ensure that women know they have safety nets. They feel like they are the only ones who are suffering so we make them know they are not on their own.
- 2) Women being well. We teach them how to make the main steps that they and their children are well.
- 3) Women are decision makers. We provide opportunities for them to stand up to their husband or local community leaders to take control of their lives. Women have hope even amid the most despairing situation because they have children and families. They must have hope.
- 4) We teach them vocational skills so that they can stand on their own feet. A wonderful example is that of a lady who learned how to make bread and then got to such a standard that she could teach others to do the same.

This is a one year programme that does not treat women as victims but as individuals who have a choice.'

A documentary filmmaker, Ajay Rai, who as part of a team has dedicated the last four years in researching and filming in the eastern Democratic Republic of Congo mentioned that they have already uploaded a short video on www.congojustice.org. They are about to complete a longer documentary to participate in international film competitions. He commented that he saw this as one way to highlight the tragedy in DRC and compensate for a lack of news attention.

A UPF Statement on a previous Commission on the Status of Women was read by Margaret Ali highlighting the essential value and central role of women in peacebuilding and human development.



'UPF affirms the need for women to serve in leadership positions throughout the world in all sectors of society.

UPF recognizes the equal value of men and women. Their absolute value derives from a common origin, God. God is the origin of both men and women, and all of God's creation manifests complementary masculine and feminine aspects.

Men and women are extensions and manifestations of God's harmonious masculinity and femininity. The complementary relationship between men and women expresses the wholeness of human experience. Thus, there should be no gender discrimination but rather harmony of the sexes through love.



Throughout history, women have taken the leading role in cultivating families as the dwelling places of peace and love, in shaping the individual character of children, and in fostering harmonious social relationships. In the family, both father and mother are equally entitled to reverence and honor. The path toward establishing global peace begins with strengthening families.

The ideal of peace is at the core of all religions. Through dialogue and mutual understanding, there can be peace among religions, and peace among religions is a necessary prerequisite for world peace. Women can and should play a central role in promoting interfaith understanding and cooperation.

UPF emphasizes the essential importance of women in addressing issues of peace and development in all sectors, including politics, business, culture, and religion. Women must be encouraged and empowered to assume leadership roles in the resolution of conflict, peacebuilding, and sustainable development.'

Tally Koren offered a song during the proceedings. Her website is www.tallykoren.com

Thank you to James Tang for the photos of the event.