



HOUSE OF LORDS

Sexual Violence in Conflict: A War Crime

The report of the
Select Committee on Sexual
Violence in Conflict

“In no other area is our collective failure to ensure effective protection for civilians more apparent ... than in terms of the masses of women and girls, but also boys and men, whose lives are destroyed each year by sexual violence perpetrated in conflict.”—UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, 2007

“Sexual violence in conflict represents a great moral issue of our time. This crime, in its utter destruction of the individual and the pervasive way in which it undermines the prospects for peace and development, casts a long shadow over our collective humanity.”—Madame Zainab Hawa Bangura, Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General for Sexual Violence in Conflict, 2014

“We were held in a tiny room with a small window. They told us we were their sex slaves. They raped girls as young as six, as well as adults.”—A 16 year-old victim of sexual violence in conflict, 2015

Summary

For far too long sexual violence has been regarded as just one of those things that occurs when there is conflict. It is not; it is a war crime, which must not, under any circumstances, be overlooked or condoned. Like genocide, slavery, torture and piracy, it must be eradicated. The long-term aim of the UK Government, indeed of the whole international community, should be to rid the world of this scourge.

Sexual violence in conflict ruins lives, destroys families, breaks up communities and prevents societies from achieving sustainable peace. Anyone who doubts the appalling nature of these crimes need only read the stories told to us by survivors. These people spoke of the injuries they had suffered and the deaths they had witnessed. They told us about the stigma that still shrouds sexual violence in conflict, and the damage inflicted on individuals and subsequent generations. However, they also said that action by the Government can support survivors and help vanquish stigma, and they shared with us their hope that the world would hear their stories and act to prevent further abuses.

The UK Government was totally correct in making the prevention of sexual violence in conflict an important policy priority, and should be applauded for doing so. It did this through the Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative (PSVI), launched by Lord Hague of Richmond and Ms Angelina Jolie Pitt in 2012, which set out to end impunity for sexual violence in conflict and hold perpetrators accountable. The PSVI recognised that prevention hinges on women’s full participation and highlighted that men and boys are also victims of these crimes. It helped to shine a spotlight on sexual violence in conflict and



Left to right Baroness Hodgson of Abinger; Baroness Young of Hornsey and Baroness Nicholson of Winterbourne (Chairman)

prompted states to commit to take action through the General Assembly endorsed Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict and the 2014 Global Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict. These are solid foundations, but there remains much more to be done.

The Government has said that it remains committed to the PSVI. It must demonstrate this commitment and set out the strategic goals and operational plan for the Initiative—without this, momentum will be lost. The role of the Prime Minister's Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict has been shown to be an important one, and requires support from the highest level. Furthermore, the PSVI must remain adequately resourced; efforts and activities by all parts of the British Government must be strengthened and properly coordinated.

Today, sexual violence in conflict is being committed in at least 19 countries. It is crucial that the PSVI does not narrow its ambitions to just addressing the situation in the Middle East. Preventing sexual violence in conflict requires long-term commitment and resources to bring about the necessary attitudinal and behavioural change. The Government cannot do this alone but must work with likeminded states, international bodies, non-

governmental organisations (NGOs) and local groups. In its prevention and response activity, it should seek to work with other inter-governmental organisations, such as the Commonwealth and the EU, and bodies with expertise such as the British Council. It must ensure that sustainable funding is accessible to NGOs and local organisations, and that the values of the PSVI and the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda imbue all military training with which the UK is involved. It must lobby for the international monitoring of the implementation of the G8 Declaration on Preventing Sexual Violence in Conflict and the General Assembly endorsed Declaration.

Those that commit sexual violence in conflict must be left in no doubt that they cannot evade justice. To achieve this, national justice systems, including domestic legislation, must be strengthened and international law implemented far more effectively than has yet been the case. The Government can assist by expanding the remit of the UK Team of Experts, developing the International Protocol on the Investigation and Documentation of Sexual Violence in Conflict and by working to galvanise political will. We received a great deal of evidence on sexual violence being committed in the conflicts in Iraq and Syria and we urge the Government to

ensure that all those who have perpetrated these crimes are brought to justice. In relation to Iraq, the UK should use its influence to encourage the government of Iraq to become a party to the Rome Statute, or alternatively, agree to a 'hybrid tribunal' to consider the crimes of sexual violence perpetrated on its territory. The Government should also make clear that, in its view, there is prima facie evidence that crimes such as sexual violence, torture and genocide have also been committed in Syria and that those who committed them must be brought to justice.

Sadly, those who are sent to protect the vulnerable have, on occasions, committed sexual violence and exploitation (SEA), very often without redress. We believe a new tribunal is required to ensure accountability for SEA by all peacekeepers. We ask the Government to ensure the incoming UN Secretary-General gives a high priority to leading the campaign against sexual violence in conflict in all its forms.

If women are excluded from conflict prevention, peace negotiations and decision and policy making positions in post-conflict societies, a sustainable peace is less likely and the probability of further conflict and sexual violence increases. The Government should promote the WPS Agenda in all relevant international fora. It must seek to ensure the equal and meaningful inclusion of women in all peace negotiations—including the ongoing discussions on Syria—and provide funding and support to enable women's groups to achieve meaningful participation.

Survivors of sexual violence in conflict are not a homogenous group and the PVTI should be mindful of this. In particular, it should tailor responses to the specific needs of women, men and children. There is limited research into the causes of sexual violence in conflict, and little evaluation of prevention strategies and the support offered to survivors. The Government should seek to address these evidence gaps. Finally, it is important that the Government demonstrates good practice in its domestic and foreign policy. With this in mind, we urge the Government to ratify and implement the Council of Europe's Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (the 'Istanbul Convention') at the earliest opportunity and to expedite the changes to the asylum screening process.

For too long sexual violence in conflict has gone unacknowledged and unpunished. Only recently has this begun to change, but there remains much to be done before we can mitigate its effects and look to its eradication. Unless the UK and others act, sexual violence in conflict will only increase. The Government must redouble its efforts to prevent sexual violence in conflict. Only then will we begin to address this war crime and answer the hopes of the survivors we met and of all those damaged by these horrendous crimes.

The victims of these crimes deserve no less.

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Select Committee on Sexual Violence in Conflict

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