



**UNITED KINGDOM OF GREAT
BRITAIN AND NORTHERN IRELAND**

Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination
against Women

55th Session

Opening Statement

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Madam Chair, members of the Committee.

Thank you.

As head of delegation for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, I am delighted to be in Geneva, for this dialogue with the Committee.

At the outset, allow me to re-iterate that the UK Government holds the CEDAW convention and your Committee in high esteem. The UK Government takes its obligations under CEDAW very seriously and have ensured that the recommendations from the last examination have been acted upon. We come here today to actively participate, listen and learn from this experience too.

Madam Chair,

CEDAW sets a critical benchmark for women's human rights. Since it was formally adopted in 1979 the world has become a better place for women and girls in many important respects.

However, no country in the world has yet reached true equality between women and men and achieved the standard set for us by the convention. The UK Government continues to strive to meet that standard and we look forward to our discussion today about how we can continue to do so.

At this stage, I would like to briefly introduce members of my delegation and explain why I am delighted they are here in person or at the end of a VTC line.

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The UK Government is responsible for equality legislation and accountable to CEDAW for equality across the UK. However, many aspects of equality policy and delivery is devolved and so I am joined by colleagues from the devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

From the Scottish Government we have Lesley Irving, the head of the Gender Equality and Violence Against Women team. From the Welsh Government we have Amelia John, Deputy Director of the Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Division. And from the Northern Ireland Executive we have Fergus Devitt, the Director of Good Relations.

The UK Government has adopted a gender mainstreaming approach. Since CEDAW covers all areas of government I am also joined by colleagues from a number of government departments here in Geneva.

These are:

Barbara Collins and Paul Howarth, colleagues from the Government Equalities Office

Christian Papaleontiou, Head of the Interpersonal Violence Team at the Home Office

Patience Wilson, Deputy Director, Equalities, Social Care Directorate, Department of Health

Tammy Fevrier, Deputy Director, Family Policy Division, Social Justice Directorate, Department for Work and Pensions

Sarah Haywood, Deputy Director, Europe and Participation Policy , Department for Business, Innovation and Skills

Chris Lomax and Theo Rycroft from the UK mission in Geneva

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We also have representatives from a range of Government Departments and representatives from two of our Overseas Territories, Bermuda and the British Virgin Islands joining us via VTC in London.

Members of civil society are also observers at the London end to watch the proceedings so they can feedback to their organisations. I can assure you and them that we will work closely with them on following up on the recommendations from this Committee.

I would like to thank the CEDAW Committee for allowing the UK Government to fully participate in this way.

I would now like to outline the governance structures in the UK and how they ensure we live up to our obligations under CEDAW.

In the United Kingdom, devolution has been a positive and empowering process. It has provided more responsive structures for governing regions and countries whose people have much in common, yet who take pride in the diversity emanating from their different histories.

In this context, CEDAW provides continuity and coherence, establishing overarching human rights principles which underlie all our equality legislation. To ensure this happens and in response to previous CEDAW recommendations we have taken action to work closely together through the Gender Director's Network. This network brings together those responsible for gender equality from all the nations of the United Kingdom.

There is a common equality legislative framework across England, Scotland and Wales, and devolution does not in any way mitigate the requirement to observe and deliver the equality duties. However, it gives the flexibility to

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interpret and implement the equality duties in a way which meets local needs and requirements.

The situation is different in Northern Ireland, where comprehensive, integrated equality provisions cover nine equality grounds and include anti-discrimination duties in respect of age and race.

Madam Chair,

I would like to begin by referring to the Ministerial team that has responsibility for the Women and Equalities agenda within the UK Government. As you are aware there has been a transfer of the equalities brief from the Home Office. I think it would be helpful for me to clarify the changes and affirm that the UK Government's commitment to equality is as strong as ever.

The Ministerial responsibility for equalities remains at Cabinet level with Maria Miller, Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport and minister for Women and Equalities. To support the Cabinet Minister, where previously the Home Secretary had only one Minister at sub-cabinet level, there are now two.

Jo Swinson has responsibility for women and growth, the equality duty and body confidence. She is also a Minister for Employment Relations and Consumer Affairs in the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills,

Helen Grant has responsibility for equality legislation and violence against women and girls. She is also a Minister for Victims and the Courts at the Ministry of Justice.

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In the Department for International Development, Lynne Featherstone's ministerial responsibilities include eliminating violence against women and girls overseas and ensuring that gender equality and the rights of women are at the heart of the UK's approach to international development.

The Home Secretary, Theresa May, remains the Minister with overarching responsibility for Violence against Women and is supported in that role by a cross government inter-ministerial group.

Our Ministers for Women and Equality are uniquely placed to ensure that government has a gender equality perspective at a strategic level, in all its work. They sit on, and contribute to, a number of high level Committees, and this enables us to influence policy development and the delivery of public services that impact on gender equality. The minister for Women and Equalities also chairs the Inter-ministerial Group on Equalities.

The Ministers for women and equality are held to account on progress by the UK parliament when they answer questions from members of parliament. The whole ministerial team attend parliament every 5 weeks to answer questions about any of their policies.

We are also active in Institutions such as the European Union and the United Nations, where we contribute to the inter-governmental mechanisms for the advancement of women and gender equality.

The Ministers for Women are supported by officials from the Gender Equality Policy Directorate, which I head up, within the Government Equalities Office.

Allow me now to set out some examples of where we believe we are living up to and exceeding our CEDAW obligations.

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The UK Government is committed to building a fair and equal society, and to breaking down the barriers that prevent too many people from reaching their full potential. As such, we published the first ever UK Equality Strategy in 2010 and published a progress report in May 2012. The strategy gave a commitment to building a strong economy and a fairer society built on two principles; equal treatment and equal opportunity.

The government has taken measures to promote gender equality. We have established the Women's Business Council to ensure that the Government gets the best advice on how to ensure that women can fulfil their full potential and also achieve economic growth. The Council published its recommendations in June and the government has responded, welcoming the recommendations and announcing a series of early action for government, which will make a real difference in the four key areas identified by the Council.

Ministers will be working together and will publish an action plan in the autumn setting out the plan for delivery in more detail. The Council will continue to monitor progress.

We have put in place major reforms to flexible working, childcare and parental leave. I will elaborate on these throughout this introductory statement.

The UK also mainstreams gender equality through a number of structural measures. One such measure is the Public Sector Equality Duty, which requires public bodies to have due regard to the need to eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation.

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In Northern Ireland, CEDAW concluding observations are being implemented via the Gender Equality Strategy. The Strategy is monitored by a Gender Advisory Panel which includes key gender equality stakeholders and experts who oversee implementation and advise on progress.

Madam Chair

We therefore believe we have a good story to tell regarding our obligations under CEDAW and are very proud of our wider efforts to promote and protect women's rights. But we are of course alive to the concerns and suggestions of this Committee and from our vibrant civil society. I would like to turn to some of these now and explain what progress we are making:

We know that media representation of women, especially images or text that are sexually objectifying, is of great concern to many people. The Government is active in a number of areas where the harmful impact of such images can be reduced, without restricting the activities of a free press.

For example, the Government's Body Confidence Campaign seeks to reduce the burdens that popular culture can place on individual self-image and self-esteem. It works with industry across the media, advertising, fashion, beauty and retail sectors to develop voluntary approaches to increasing the diversity and realism of media representation. It also supported the development of a resource developed for use by parents and in schools.

The Government has also worked with regulators to launch the new website "Parentport" which provides a single point of access where individuals can find out about media regulation and how to take action about something they have seen.

Madam Chair

Following election in 2010 the Government decided to abolish a number of non-elected public bodies. This created a fair degree of debate in the UK and I would specifically like now to talk about the closure of the Women's National Commission.

The Government wanted a more direct and accountable process in its place.

As such the government established a dedicated engagement programme aimed at women and women's organisations.

This Women's Engagement Programme is managed from within the Government Equalities Office and we work closely with other government departments and the devolved administrations.

We have a programme of 20 roundtables in 2013 covering topics including women in law, sport, violence against women and girls, black and minority ethnic women, body confidence, young women, women in persistently disadvantaged groups, and older women.

We use a wide range of media to reach the widest number of women in our communication. This includes our Women's engagement newsletter which covers news from across government that is of interest to women. We estimate this newsletter reaches one million women.

I would also like to mention and pay tribute to the excellent work of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. The International Coordinating Committee of National Human Rights Institutions (the ICC) has conferred an 'A' status rating on the Equality and Human Rights Commission as an

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independent NHRI. Being independent the EHRC sets its own activities and priorities on women's rights.

The EHRC is currently working on a number of strategic and focussed equality and human rights priorities which include working with business to identify the barriers to developing a more robust pipeline of female talent; and to identify a potential programme of practical improvements and working to tackle the causes of human trafficking in Scotland.

The devolved administrations also have systems in place to consult with women. In Wales, funding is provided for an all Wales Women's Network. This network recently reported on the impact of welfare reforms in Wales.

Madam Chair,

The underrepresentation of women in all walks of political life continues to be a challenge for the Government and all political parties. The Government has implemented the provisions in the Equality Act 2010 which enable political parties to use positive action, should they wish to, to encourage participation in politics among under-represented groups. In addition the Government has extended the ability to use women-only shortlists to 2030.

The UK Government is working with the main political parties to voluntarily collect and publish diversity data on their election candidates.

To increase the representation of women in senior roles in the public sector, the UK Government aims to ensure that at least half of appointments to public boards by 2015 will be women and will shortly publish an action plan setting out how this will be achieved.

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To further this aspiration, the Government has established a Centre for Public Appointments in the heart of the UK Government.

Ministers in the Welsh Government are working to increase the number of women in public life. The Sport Wales Case Study published in December 2012 demonstrates how with determined effort and commitment, more women will come forward for public appointments.

The Commissioner for Public Appointments for Northern Ireland and government departments are currently working together to identify and develop measures to address underrepresentation of women, including women with multiple identities, within public life. The report will be published later this year.

We are also fully committed to working to ensure that women are not disproportionately affected by the current economic climate and live up their potential in the labour market.

Like most countries affected by the financial downturn, the UK Government has had to take some difficult decisions about how to reduce the deficit. The Government believes that this situation must be tackled so that generations to come will not feel the full negative effect of the current financial climate. That said, the Government has seen no evidence to suggest women's services and the voluntary sector have been unfairly affected by reductions in government spending.

The Government recognises the challenges that the voluntary sector is facing however and has put in place a range of funding programmes to get more resources into the sector. This includes The Advice Services Transition Fund, Transforming Local Infrastructure Fund and Community First. Women's organisations are well placed to benefit from these.

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As I mentioned, the UK Government is committed to a fair and flexible labour market that draws on the talents of all. The number of women in work has risen by more than quarter of a million over the past year to over 13.8m. There are more women in work in the UK than ever before.

We believe that direct UK Government action has helped achieve this and we remain committed to building on this.

For example, through the National Careers Service the UK is making high quality advice available to women and girls aged 13 years and over in England to help them make more informed decisions about learning and work. This scheme also seeks to break down any gender specific barriers to employment.

The UK Government has announced £1.6 million over the next 3 years to support rural women's enterprise.

Since we were last examined in 2008 the gender pay gap for all employees, based on median earnings, has fallen from 22.5% to 19.7%. In order to reduce it still further, the Government has launched a voluntary initiative on gender equality transparency. "Think, Act, Report" asks private and voluntary sector employers to make things fairer for women at work, through greater transparency on pay and other workplace issues. Over 117 leading businesses have signed up covering nearly two million employees.

The government has been aggressively pursuing the number of women on boards. The Lord Davies Review has energised our companies to appoint women as directors and women now account for 17.4% of FTSE 100 and 13.8% of FTSE 250 boards; this is up from 12.5% and 6.5% respectively in

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2011. There are now only 5 all male boards in the FTSE 100, down from 21 in 2011. We are on course to meet the target of 25% of non-executive directors in the FTSE 100 to be women by 2015.

We also know how important flexible working for all and child care arrangements are in ensuring women have a fair chance to realise their potential and to not feel discriminated against.

Since 2010 the Government has committed to extending the right to request flexible working to all employees by 2014. There is strong evidence that those that work flexibly are more committed, more productive and more loyal to their employer. Facilitating more flexible working gives parents more chance to strike a balance between caring at home and continuing their careers. The UK Government believes that by making flexible working an everyday occurrence for all it can end the unconscious bias against those that currently work flexibly, a majority of whom are women.

The UK is making it easier for private sector employers to consider requests for flexible working by replacing the current statutory process with a duty on employers to consider requests in a 'reasonable' manner. To support employers we have asked national experts to develop a statutory code of practice to explain what is reasonable.

The UK is also legislating for a new system of shared parental leave to be introduced in 2015 to enable parents to share their caring duties as they see fit. The current system for parental leave gives very little flexibility and assumes that the primary caring role will rest with the mother. This new system will provide flexibility and choice for working parents ending the presumption that women will take the caring responsibility and lessen the impact on women's career progression.

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Ministers are aware that the availability of affordable and reliable high quality childcare is a key concern of working families, and a major barrier to women seeking to return to the workforce after starting a family. The Government is determined to help and so the Prime Minister launched a commission on childcare to look at how to reduce the costs of childcare for working families and the burdens on childcare providers. Reforms are now in place with the Government providing parents with support through tax credits and subsidies, extending the availability of free childcare and providing grants to those wishing to start up a childcare business.

Local authorities have the funding to ensure they can meet their statutory duty to provide sufficient children's centres to meet local need. They have been given greater freedom to focus children's centres on the children and families who need the most support.

I would also like to draw the Committee's attention to the fact that the Scottish Government has increased funding for work on gender equality by 27%, focusing on new initiatives to increase employability, as well as continuing support for Engender and the Scottish Women's Convention, through which it can link women's experiences directly into policy making.

It has also:

- held, jointly with the Scottish Trades Union Congress, a Women's Employment Summit
- commissioned a comprehensive review of childcare provision and increased childcare support
- introduced provisions via the PSED covering pay and occupational segregation
- published Equality Outcomes, complementing its National Performance Framework

In Northern Ireland priority is being given to actions that will lead to economic improvements for women: the revised Equal Pay Code will come into effect on 22 July 2013 and an announcement on the Childcare Strategy is imminent. A number of initiatives have been taken forward to encourage women into Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics areas.

Madam Chair

Turning now briefly to women's health.

The UK Government's vision is for a National Health Service that offers patients much better standards of safety and dignity and respects their specific needs and wishes. Women are significant users of health services throughout their lifetime, including during pregnancy, motherhood and old age and women's health is central to this vision for a more modern, personalised National Health Service.

The Government is taking action to improve key areas where the National Health Service caters for specific issues women face, including:

- improving the choice and control women have in key areas of women's health and medicine - like maternity services;
- increasing the numbers of midwives and health visitors, focusing them on the needs of women around the time of birth and beyond, as well as the health of their babies;
- introducing new dignity standards which has resulted in a 96% drop in the numbers of people placed on mixed sex wards.
- improving services for women who suffer miscarriage or stillbirth.

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The UK Government is also committed to improving social care support and welfare for older and vulnerable women. The reforms to social care provision announced in our White Paper “Caring for our Future” will ensure that women are able to have confidence that the care and support they need now will be available.

Finally,

Ending violence against women remains a top priority for the UK Government at home and overseas.

UK Ministers have published a cross-government strategy, A Call to End Violence Against Women and Girls, and a supporting action plan. The approach focuses on the guiding principles of prevention; provision of services for victims; partnership working; risk reduction and improved justice outcomes. Nearly £40 million of funding up to 2015 has been set aside for specialist local support services including sexual violence support services, rape crisis centres, the national domestic violence helplines and stalking helplines.

The Government has announced plans to criminalise forced marriage in England and Wales; introduced two new stalking offences; piloted new ways of protecting the victims of domestic violence and sex workers; and launched prevention campaigns to tackle rape and relationship abuse amongst teenagers.

The Scottish Government allocated £15m in 2012 for work to eliminate violence against women and girls and provided additional funding to support organisations working in this area to increase their capacity and sustainability.

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The Welsh Government is legislating to end violence against women and domestic abuse. The intention of the proposed Bill is to underpin the existing integrated strategy for tackling all forms of violence against women and domestic abuse.

In Northern Ireland a new draft joint domestic and sexual violence strategy is at an advanced stage. The Rowan, a specialist sexual assault referral centre, was opened in May 2013 and at a local level domestic violence partnerships have been established in every health and social care trust to ensure that all organisations are working together.

In March this year, at the UN Commission for the Status of Women, UK International Development Minister Lynne Featherstone announced the biggest ever international investment in eradicating female genital mutilation. The new programme is worth up to £35 million, and is expected to reduce FGM by 30% in at least 10 priority countries in the next 5 years.

And we have launched our Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative which aims to break the culture of impunity for sexual violence crimes associated with conflict

Madam Chair

In these opening remarks I hope to have touched on a number of the issues that I am sure will be raised and discussed throughout the day.

I hope I have given you a précis of the UK Government's commitment, and that of the devolved administrations, Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories to ending all forms of discrimination against women and assured you of our commitment under CEDAW.

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Once again, we are delighted to be here with you today and welcome the opportunity to learn from you and discuss further with you, our progress to tackle discrimination against women.