

## **CLOSING SPEECH CEDAW EXAMINATION**

**by DEPUTY MINISTER FOR WOMEN BARBARA FOLLETT**

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**Madam Chair, CEDAW Committee members, ladies and gentlemen,**

It falls to me now to make the closing remarks at the end of a long and productive day.

Our thanks to you, Madam Chair and your Committee members for the observations and challenging questions you have shared with us. Many of them reflect issues we continue to work on diligently in our respective roles in government.

We will continue to reflect on the issues of :

Disseminating more widely information on the Optional Protocol and CEDAW ; on the issue of ensuring that gender continues to be an integral part of the work on equalities; on incorporating CEDAW into national legislation. And the many other issues raised by the committee.

As a Committee you have the opportunity to dialogue with a wide range of national delegations and women's organisations and are therefore in a unique position to understand global trends on women's rights and to identify good practice in one country that can be transferred to another. We appreciate the opportunity to learn from others that comes from our engagement with the UN system.

I must thank the members of our delegation both in New York and London. It is now late night for our colleagues in London so a special thanks for your contribution as you head home to your families.

I would also like to thank the NGOs and other partners who have been with us today and with us throughout this process contributing your perspectives and shadow reports to the Committee. As a Minister for Women the task of attaining and maintaining true equality between women and men can seem at times like a lonely and daunting task. But as a Minister I draw strength from the knowledge that there are champions for women's rights in all sectors of society – in the public, private and voluntary sectors. As Ministers, we are not alone. We are fortunate in having access to the expertise and commitment of women's NGOs, academics, employers, trade unions and many others. We may not agree on everything but we are united in the common goal of wanting the women we represent to attain the rights enshrined in CEDAW.

Madam Chair,

In the UK we have a body of comprehensive EU and domestic legislation and policies in place that underpin the rights of women and gender equality. And although this may be controversial I believe that in general we have won the argument on equality for women. We no longer spend time arguing why women should be equal to men - our discussions focus on how best to achieve gender equality? Much of our discussion today has also focused on the how - how far, for example, can and should we use positive action and positive discrimination to speed equality? Speaking with my counterpart Ministers in other countries I know that we are all grappling with these issues and we will read with interest the written advice of this Committee.

Before I close I would like to raise four key points that have been covered in our discussions today:

The first is about coherence of CEDAW implementation across the diverse administrations and territories covered by this examination. Throughout the day and in our written reports you will have noted that different approaches are being taken to implement CEDAW in different geographical jurisdictions. This is because the position of women in small island Turks and Caicos, for example, is necessarily different from that of women in Scotland. Similarly, the history of Northern Ireland is quite different in some respects from that of England and translates to different needs for women on the ground. CEDAW gives us a set of high level human rights principles to implement but how we do reach them may vary according to the needs of women in that particular context. We aim for coherence in implementing CEDAW but sensitivity to the local situation means we cannot apply a 'one size fits all' blueprint to implementation.

Secondly, I want to raise the equalities approach we are now taking in the UK. We have noted that our approach to gender equality has broadened, reflected in our establishment last year of a new ministry leading on equalities. This is a trend we have noted in other EU member states. In the past, we have treated the different components of equality vertically, having separate institutions and laws to promote gender equality, race equality and the rights of people with disabilities. In doing so we put people into boxes that did not mirror the real world. We know that women are not a homogenous group and that the same person – say, a disabled woman from an ethnic minority background – may face multiple disadvantages. We have therefore unified the institutional framework and are harmonising the law to bring together gender with other dimensions of equality: disability, age, sexual

orientation, belief and race. We believe this more effectively reflects the populations we serve. Our intention is not, however, to merge women's rights and gender equality into a general equalities melting pot. Instead it is to maintain a National Women's Machinery so that we may use the lens of gender equality to view and incorporate other aspects of equality – addressing as needed for example, the particular rights of older women or women from ethnic minorities. As I have said, taking an integrated approach to equality is relatively new for us and we look forward to reporting the outcomes to the CEDAW Committee in four years time.

Thirdly, I wanted to say a word about gender mainstreaming. Over the last decade or so since the Beijing Conference we have undertaken gender mainstreaming activities in many areas. We focused a great deal on inputs such as gender training and facilitating processes such as establishing networks of gender focal points. The imposition of our Gender Duty in 2007 and incorporating gender targets into Public Service Agreements, however, has shifted the focus to outcomes and results, and identified clearly which public authorities are accountable.

My final point is about violence against women which has been discussed at some length during this examination. As a Minister for Women I am surprised and depressed by the persistence of violence against women. I believe that in the last decade we have made real progress in the area of domestic violence. Women are now far more likely to report it and be taken seriously and supported in taking cases to court. Similarly, reporting of rape has increased markedly showing the increased confidence women have that their cases will be taken seriously

Conviction rates, however, are far lower than we would wish and a major cause for concern. Also of concern is that the increased social and economic status of women in society has not reduced violence against them. In a very real sense it has not increased respect for women's autonomy and human rights. I fear we are seeing a resurgence of gender stereotyping that we thought we had tackled decades ago.

This is a challenge we are well aware of, which is why my fellow Minister and I made violence against women one of our three priority action areas last year. And I can assure the Committee that we will continue to work to make the UK a safe place where women can live without fear.

Madam Chair

I can also assure the Committee that following this hearing we will make every effort to follow up on the points you have raised with us. First, once we receive your report we will meet as the UK government to consider the implications of your recommendations for our policies and in practice. We will then follow that meeting with regular meetings of the Gender Directors of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to share experiences and strengthen policy coherence and monitoring. Secondly, we will hold de-briefing meetings with NGOs in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to discuss how we can move forward in a spirit of partnership. We will also ensure that both the Convention and the Optional Protocol are better profiled within the UK. Finally, these actions plus others will form part of the CEDAW action plan for the UK.

I want to close with the thought I opened with this morning – that women's rights are rarely given, they have to be fought for. And once attained, constant vigilance is needed to ensure they are not eroded. CEDAW will continue to be the standard that we aim for. I would like to close this examination by thanking the Committee once again for taking the time to share your expertise with us today and leave you with two assurances:

- That in the UK we may not have all the answers but we are working hard to achieve equality between women and men, and generally, the trends are in the right direction and finally
- That you can count on the UK as a UN member state to support CEDAW and the rights for women not only in our own country but for women everywhere.