

**UK Statement CEDAW Examination 10<sup>th</sup> July 2008**

**By Deputy Minister for Women and Equalities Barbara Follett**

**Madam Chair and members of the CEDAW Committee**

It gives me great pleasure to be here with you today at the United Nations as the Head of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland Delegation for the CEDAW examination, and to have this opportunity to outline measures that the Government in Westminster and those of the Devolved Administrations, Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories have taken to eliminate discrimination against women.

We will introduce the members of our 30 strong delegation shortly but may I start by thanking you, Madam Chair and members of the Committee, for allowing some members of the UK delegation to participate in this examination via videolink from London.

The UK Government has adopted a gender mainstreaming approach and since CEDAW covers all areas of government, the videolink has enabled participation by officials from a wide range of government departments.

I am pleased to note that I am also joined by officials from the Devolved Administrations, and representatives from the Crown Dependencies and Overseas Territories. In particular, I note that my fellow Minister the Honourable Dr Lillian Boyce from the Turks and Caicos Islands is with us in New York today.

The Governments of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have also welcomed the opportunity to join the UK delegation. They have taken a close interest in this Committee's important work and join me in underlining the importance we attach to CEDAW as a reference point for matters which are of concern to women right across society.

The representation of the Devolved Administrations and Overseas Territories is essential because many of the issues addressed in the various Articles in the Convention, are devolved matters.

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, the CEDAW framework provides continuity and coherence, establishing overarching human rights principles which underlie all our equality legislation.

There is a common equality legislative framework across

England, Scotland and Wales, and devolution in no way removes the requirement to observe and deliver the equality duties. However, it gives the flexibility to interpret and implement the equality duties in a way which meets local needs and expectations.

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

Madam Chair,

CEDAW, as a globally agreed statement of women's human rights, sets a critical benchmark for all 185 signatories of the Convention.

It is now almost 30 years since CEDAW was formally adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1979. Since that time, the world is a very different place for women and girls in important respects.

In the early 1970s, for example, it was legal in the UK to discriminate against women in job selection and to pay women less than men for doing the same work.

Today, it is clearly illegal to discriminate against women at work in both job selection and pay, and just 10 days ago the UK Government announced new Equality legislation that will allow positive action to further strengthen the position of women.

We know from experience everywhere that women's rights have to be fought for.

Last week, we celebrated the 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary of women's suffrage in the UK.

Women were jailed, force fed and died to get the vote in the UK. We are very aware that women in other parts of the world still risk their lives today to get the freedoms that CEDAW sets out as theirs – theirs not as a privilege but as an inalienable right.

No country in the world has yet reached true equality between women and men and achieved the standard set for us by CEDAW.

As Ministers for Women and Equality, Harriet Harman and I are privileged to lead policy agendas designed to improve the lives of women in the UK - which in turn, we know, will improve the lives of men, children and the wider society.

We sit on a number of Inter Ministerial Committees, in key areas such as family policy, and tackling violence, enabling us to ensure that women's perspectives are integrated into policy development and the delivery of public services.

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

This includes the follow-up to the Beijing Platform for Action and the Beijing plus five and Beijing plus ten activities within the United Nations.

As the UK is an elected member of the UN Commission on the Status of Women, we also play an active role in promoting women's rights and supporting gender mainstreaming principles through policy and programme development

Since the UK was last examined, we have made considerable progress.

In April 2007 as part of the Equality Act we introduced the Gender Equality Duty. This requires all Public Authorities to promote equality between men and women in everything they do, and to eliminate discrimination and harassment between men and women. All public bodies are required to draw up three year gender equality schemes detailing specific goals as well as gender impact assessments of all new policy and legislation. This is a significant development and we will be monitoring the process closely to ensure rigorous follow up and judge the outcomes for women.

The devolved administration in Northern Ireland have committed in their future Programme for Government to implement the Gender Equality Strategy for 2006-2016. All government departments have prepared 3 year gender-specific plans with plans for monitoring the strategy.

The Scottish Government is taking forward its work under the Duty. Scottish Ministers have a duty to identify strategic priorities for the advancement of gender equality and will report on them in 2010

The Welsh Assembly Government is developing a Single Equality Scheme which will identify strategic objectives and outcomes.

Madam Chair

We have committed the UK government to high level, cross-government targets - Public Service Agreements- on both gender equality and more recently, equalities.

The first gender equality Public Service Agreement, agreed in 2002, was groundbreaking in its approach as it signed-up the government (for the first time) to a specific objective to deliver real improvements for the lives of women reflected in departmental spending plans.

Since the last CEDAW examination, UK Ministers for Women have consistently prioritised the following areas as critical to tackling discrimination and realising women's rights in the UK.

- increasing women's economic participation;
- supporting civic and social inclusion,
- and reducing violence against women,

More recently we have seen the introduction of an Equalities Public Service Agreement, which builds on the progress of the original gender targets and reaches further to tackle discrimination and disadvantage.

In particular, for the first time, it strengthens work to narrow the gender pay gap through a broad programme of work across government and commits the government to addressing the under-representation in public life of women and ethnic minorities.

As Ministers for Women we identified three priority areas in July 2007 for urgent action based on the status of women in the UK and our consultations with women's organisations. We will be reporting to Parliament on our progress next week.

In particular, we have focused on supporting families; particularly as they bring up children and care for older and disabled relatives.

We remain committed to tackling violence against women and improving the way that we deal with women who commit crimes.

And we also want to empower black and minority ethnic women to build cohesion within their communities and act as a bridge between communities.

We will be setting out our future plans shortly, but you can rest assured that we will continue to strive, through a range of measures, to eliminate discrimination and promote equality.

We want to take this opportunity today, to share with you just a few examples of the action we have taken to tackle discrimination against women, since we were last examined in 1999.

First, I want to share some figures with you to show why we have focused on the priority areas I have just outlined:

In the UK we have seen a steady decrease in the pay gap between women and men. It remains the case, however, that a woman's full time pay is still, on average, 12.6 per cent less per hour than a man's pay;

And again despite rapid progress, on present trends it will be 40 years before women and men are equally represented in British Boardrooms;

In 1997 a record number of women entered the British Parliament but despite this women currently make up less than 20% of Members of Parliament. Britain, as one of the oldest democracies has been overtaken by a large number of the newer democracies in the world on female representation. In Wales and Scotland devolution resulted in greater representation of women in the Assembly and Parliament respectively.

As a woman Minister, I am only too aware of the difference it makes to both the political agenda and the culture of politics to have women in positions of decision-making. I was proud therefore that my Government legislated to permit political parties to take positive measures to improve representation of women.

Therefore although the UK is a more prosperous country than many that come before the CEDAW committee, gender equality is an unfinished project everywhere including the UK and we remain focused on closing the gaps.

All our governments represented here today, remain committed to enabling women to have real choices about the way they live their lives, particularly on how they balance their work (if they wish to work) with their caring responsibilities, and making sure that women's talents are properly used and rewarded.

Existing legislation has made a vital contribution to reducing the gender pay gap, however the Equal Pay Act only addresses one aspect of the causes of the gender pay gap –that of unequal pay.

It does not tackle issues such as job segregation, differences in education and qualifications, discrimination and the cultural barriers faced by some women returning to the labour market.

In 2005 therefore the Prime Minister set up the Women and Work Commission bringing together employers, unions and other experts to make recommendations on tackling the gender pay gap.

In 2006, the Government issued an Action Plan, based on the recommendations of the Commission including:

A five hundred thousand pound fund to increase the availability of quality, part-time work;

National standards for careers advice to ensure that all young people receive careers information, advice and guidance which is free from gender stereotyping.

To promote gender equality at work we have since our 1999 examination:

Given over 6 million people (parents of young or disabled children) the right to request flexible working;

Doubled the level of maternity pay and introduced paternity and adoption leave and pay;

Introduced a National Minimum Wage which has impacted on the gender pay gap for lower paid workers; and

Invested over £21 billion in early years and childcare services.

Considerable progress has also been made in addressing pay inequality in Wales: through a partnership campaign led by the Welsh Assembly Government with the support of the then Equal Opportunities Commission and the Wales TUC.

We also remain committed to addressing violence against women, in all its forms, which are breaches of the fundamental rights to life, safety, freedom, dignity and physical and emotional integrity.

Considerable progress has been made since our last examination in 1999 but sadly, violence against women is persistent and takes new forms. We therefore continue to work to tackle issues such as domestic homicide, rape and trafficking for sexual exploitation.

We have introduced the Domestic Violence and Crime Act (2004) which includes a range of measures that provide additional protection and support for victims and help to bring perpetrators to justice.

We have passed the Sexual Offences Act 2003, which modernised the legal framework for sexual offences, and made it easier for prosecutors to meet the legal requirements of their case.

As part of the ongoing delivery of the National Domestic Abuse Strategy in Wales, the three year Forced Marriage and Honour Based Crime action plan was launched on 1 April 2008, raising awareness of this often hidden issue.

When we published our priorities last July, something that featured strongly was our commitment to addressing the appalling crime of human trafficking for sexual exploitation.

Britain is a major focus for the global trade of sexual exploitation of women by traffickers; many of who are tricked and forced into prostitution.

We recently published a report, 'Women Not For Sale' focusing on advertisements for personal services in local newspapers, which can fuel the demand for trafficked women.

We have committed to working with Ministers across Government, and the Devolved Administrations, with Ministers in Europe and UK members of the European Parliament and with the European Union's neighbours, to ensure that the Council of Europe Convention Against Human Trafficking is implemented.

We will shortly be ratifying the Convention, because we want to put an end to this modern day slave trade.

We are currently working to deliver the UK Action Plan on Human Trafficking which aims to strike the right balance between protection and assistance for all victims of trafficking, together with prevention and enforcement activity, to crack down on criminals.

In fact, I took the opportunity to press for greater cross-border co-operation and commitment to tackling this trade, during Informal Meeting of Gender Ministers at the Portuguese Presidency of EU last Autumn.

We must work together to help the victims and stamp out this criminal activity.

As the CEDAW Committee recognises, women are not a homogenous group. In England, for example, we have 2.3 million ethnic minority women from a diverse range of cultures and religions. One of our recent focuses has been on the role Black, Asian and minority ethnic women within their communities.

Genuinely empowering women from these groups means taking action to ensure that they have opportunities to work and participate in wider public life.

Recently, we have made a new commitment to address under-representation in public life as part of the new Equalities Public Service Agreement.

We also launched a Task Force to find practical ways to increase the number of women from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic groups becoming local councillors. We know that many women start their political careers in local politics.

The UK is, and always has been, a champion of gender equality in public policy and in representation at democratic institutions.

Our extensive discrimination laws over the years have helped us to make progress on equality, particularly for women, but society evolves and laws must be updated as times change.

We therefore recently announced plans for a new Equality Bill for England and Wales, building on the work of a Discrimination Law Review and an Equalities Review.

The Bill is intended to strengthen protection against discrimination and advance equality, and therefore its aims are entirely consistent with the CEDAW.

A new Equality Duty on public bodies will form part of the new package of measures which, as well as encompassing race, disability and gender, will also include gender re-assignment, age, sexual orientation and religious belief.

Importantly, the Duty will also extend positive action – so that employers can take under-representation of disadvantaged groups (in many cases women) into account in selection.

We also intend to extend the permission to use women-only short-lists in selecting Parliamentary candidates to 2030, and we are aware that this is something that the CEDAW Committee takes very seriously.

The Bill will also enable us to drive progress in the private sector where the majority of people in the UK are employed.

Through the new Equality Duty we are looking at ways to help public bodies comply with the duty more effectively by encouraging greater transparency among private sector contractors as a way of contributing to the delivery of our equality targets.

In addition, the Equality Bill will outlaw pay secrecy clauses, and make it unlawful for employers to stop employees discussing their pay. We believe that greater transparency will help women negotiate more equal pay.

I would like to add that although the obligation to implement CEDAW rests with government we are fortunate in having vibrant and committed women's organisations to support us and keep us on our toes.

We recognise the role and expertise of the women's movement through the support that Government gives to the Women's National Commission, which acts as a two way communication channel between women's organisations and government.

I wish to take time at this point to pay tribute to and express our thanks to the many UK NGOs that have contributed to the shadow reports for this examination. We have read them and will be following up the points made in them through the Women's National Commission.

Madam Chair

In these introductory remarks I have only had time to touch on some of the issues that I am sure we will discuss with you in more depth later today.

Once again, I am delighted to be here with you today and welcome the opportunity to listen to your observations and share with you, the measures that we are undertaking in relation to the Convention. I am sure that we will learn a great deal from you today as gender experts from a range of countries and professional backgrounds.

In the years that have passed since the UK signed CEDAW, the life chances and opportunities of women in the UK have improved considerably.

But at the same time, new challenges for women have arisen that we did not foresee.

We have also seen a growing backlash internationally against the rights that women and girls have attained, enshrined in global agreements such as those made in Beijing and Cairo. Those of us in developed countries who take so many things for granted need to be continually aware of the human rights abuses experienced by women in other countries on a daily basis. We are helping to address these through the work of the UK Department for International Development and our Foreign and Commonwealth Office.

We must be ready for new challenges that we cannot as yet foresee. I said earlier that historically women's rights have not been given, they have been fought for, generally with the blood and bodies of women themselves.

Sadly, we have seen examples of countries where women's rights have gone backwards almost overnight - and then taken decades to recover. It is critical therefore that we remain vigilant and ready to defend what we have achieved.

In a fast changing world, it is essential that CEDAW remains constant as the universal charter for women's human rights - an international benchmark by which we judge ourselves and by which UN member states will judge each other.

I have my role to play as a Minister for Women at national level and I commend the role you play as part of the United Nations machinery in calling governments to account and acting as the world's conscience on behalf of women who might otherwise have no voice.