

## #IWD2015 Empowering Women, Empowering Humanity: Picture It!

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International Women's Day 2015

23 March 2015, House of Lords, Committee Room 4

Hosted by Rt. Hon. Baroness Verma, Under Secretary of State for Energy and Climate Change, and Seema Malhotra MP, Shadow Minister for Preventing Violence against Women and Girls

### Speakers

Brita Fernandez-Schmidt, Executive Director of Women for Women International UK

Rt. Hon. the Baroness Garden of Frognal, Lords Spokesperson for Women and Equalities

Councillor Kate Anolue, Former Mayor of Enfield

Dr. Asmaa Soliman, PhD in Political Studies, Sociology and Cultural Studies from UCL's Centre for Multidisciplinary & Intercultural Inquiry and Youth UPF Member

Jeevan Ravindran, President of the Human Rights Society at Saint Olave's School.

Tally Koren singing 'Free Will'



“Every day should be International Women’s Day,” opened Baroness Verma. The resounding applause that followed highlighted Baroness Verma’s firm insistence that “we all [must] work together as it takes people to bring people together.”

Women were not the only members of the audience, but “enlightened men.” The men in attendance were commended for their presence as it formed solidarity amongst those in attendance.

Baroness Verma's emphasised the need to support women anywhere in the world where there is injustice by speaking out. 'They are our sisters', she said.

Following her opening statements, Baroness Verma shared the work of UK's Department of International Development and The Energy and Resources Institute in conducting a sustainable programme to make clean cook stoves affordable and accessible in rural India. She spoke about her past trip and shared the tragic reality many of the women and children faced, one of which being the lack of access to education due to household commitments such as cooking. In one of the villages she visited “70-80% of the time was spent collecting wood and then making the fire to cook in an enclosed space.” The inefficient cook stoves as well as poor ventilation meant these women were being exposed to daily indoor smoke inhalation, which led to health problems and in some cases even death.

Despite the grim facts, there was light as Baroness Verma shared the monumental changes that were seen in the dynamics of villages that were provided clean cook stoves. During village gatherings in the past, men were seated at the front while women were at the back, but when the clean cook stoves were given and reduced cooking activities by almost half, “the women began to come forward.” This is a

moment, an example of empowerment for women, which was achieved by having been able to provide access to sustainable, affordable equipment. “Girls were able to get an education,” and seeing a young girl learn to read and write for the first time is an empathic sentiment that was unanimously felt as Baroness Verma shared one of her significant memories.



Brita Fernandez-Schmidt began her talk stating that she did not want to spend her time highlighting her past achievements as she “just really [cares] about making a difference, especially for women.” Women for Women International currently holds programme offices in Kosovo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Afghanistan, Rwanda, Nigeria, and South Sudan. Fernandez-Schmidt shared her most recent trip to Kosovo, a country which still to this day is inflicted by the overwhelming tension from 20 years ago. During her past trips to Kosovo, Fernandez-Schmidt spoke about a young woman she had gotten to know over the years. Proudly, she shared that the young woman has grown from being able to own her own livestock to becoming a trainer to empower women to now becoming the president of her own association.

Apart from sharing the story of one young woman, Fernandez-Schmidt shared her visit to an association comprised of both ethnic Albanian and ethnic Serbian women where they “can reconcile and address the extreme poverty” ailing their country. She adamantly reiterated that “you can only empower yourself and give a lending hand,” and that these women, despite their different ethnic backgrounds that have been the fuel of Kosovo’s long time tension, were able to become empowered and come together to make a difference together, as a union, as a community.



During her closing remarks, Fernandez-Schmidt shared word she received from the Women for Women office in Kabul in regards to the 22 March funeral of a 27 year old woman, Farkhunda, who was wrongfully accused of burning the Koran. She was brutally killed by a mob of men during broad daylight in central Kabul, without any intervention despite police presence. Her story unfortunately is one of many injustices the women of Afghanistan suffer on a daily basis.

Despite the existence of such circumstances, the Women for Women office in Kabul confirmed that a group of 35 women activists defied tradition in order to carry the coffin of Farkhunda. “This body belongs to us, to all Kabul women,” were one of the resounding chants made as the women bravely carried the coffin. A human barricade of men was made to protect the women. This act in itself gave confidence and as Fernandez-Schmidt succinctly said, “I know we can bring changes.”

Rt. Hon. Baroness Garden is the Lords Spokesperson for Women and Equalities, a position held since November 2014, and as such she highlighted the importance of voting during the impending elections, “Politics is the decision made by us all.” 2015 marks the 97th anniversary since ‘The Representation of the People Act of 1918’ was passed. That Act empowered women over the age of 30, who met property qualifications or were married to a man of such property qualifications, were given the right to vote. This fact in itself is a reminder of the privilege for women from democratic nations that we are able to make our voices heard. Women in the UK had to wait another 10 years, until 1928, for all women over the age of 21 to be granted the right to vote.

2015 marks the 20th anniversary of ‘The Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action.’ 189 governments signed the agenda to catapult the start of recognising women’s rights. Bringing focus to the progress made in the UK, Baroness Garden highlighted statistics and achievements: the gender gap payment is at its lowest, 9.4%, according to the Office for National Statistics’ ‘Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2014 Provisional Results’; four years since the first ‘Women on Boards’ report by Lord Davies of Abersoch, the representation of women on FTSE 100 boards is now 23.5% compared to the 12.5% in 2011, which means only 1.5% is needed to achieve the targeted 25%; £40 million of secured and protected funding was provided to establish more local support services and national helplines to assist in

ending violence against women and girls; on 8th March, 2014 the Metropolitan Police put into nationwide effect the 'Domestic Violence Disclosure Scheme – Clare's Law' in which members of the public who have concerns about their partner or the partner of a member of family or friend are given the 'right to ask' through an application scheme to carry out checks for abusive offences or any other information that shows evidence of risk; and that recently a legislation was put through to commit 0.7% of 1% the UK's Gross National Income to assist other countries in which a universal framework for gender equality and empowerment would be put into practice.



“It is important to hear the inside of the government,” Margaret Ali, UPF - UK Director, stated after Baroness Garden shared a number of the current issues revolving around Women and Equalities. From the governmental information given, Councillor Kate Anolue, former Mayor of Enfield, changed the shift of the panel by sharing her own personal life story. With over 30 years within London as a Community Midwife to 10 years of experience in Politics, her courage and fortitude helped her forge on despite obstacles. “My life started as a girl child, one of seven with five brothers.” She shared her story about her father, a prime example and prominent figure in her life, who despite criticisms, in relation to already having to fund the education of his five sons, advocated gender equality and educated Anolue. He would simply say, “If I train her she will be helpful in her husband’s house,” but education not only gave her empowerment, it gave her the skills to survive.

Anolue shared that she married young, however, before marriage her father made sure her husband would let her continue to complete her education in order to become a nurse and then later qualify as a midwife. Unfortunately, she lost her husband when they had four children, the youngest being 18 months old. Despite the tragedy, the education she had and the job she secured helped her to forge on and provide for her children. Anolue further shared that when her youngest child turned eight, she applied to become a lawyer, a complete career change, simply because she “always wanted to be a lawyer” while her father wanted her to become a nurse. “Believe in yourself.” This was a resilient statement repeated as Anolue shared that she had applied for selection to run as a candidate in the General Election. She had started as one of 108 potential candidates. Eventually she was short listed as one of three but while she had not been selected as the candidate it had given her great confidence to try again in future.

“Do not let even 1% of negativity affect [you].” Anolue shared the person who encouraged her to apply for the MP position was her youngest daughter. “If I can, yes, we all can!” A true source of perseverance and determination, Anolue showed how change can occur from a grassroots level.

Following her empowering life story, Jeevan Ravindran, President of the Human Rights Society in Saint Olave’s School, shared his work alongside his female classmates, Suzanne and Kate.

“Feminism is not just for women... women’s rights are human rights,” proudly exclaimed Ravindran. He was the example of an empowered youth who along with his classmates and members of his Human Rights Society actively use their voice to empower their fellow students, encouraging them to value their access to education as it is a privilege. Having had links with Amnesty International and Women for

Women International UK, grisly statistics and facts enlightened Ravindran and his society so much so that they began fundraising efforts to contribute what they are able to in the name of advocacy for women's rights.



Dr. Asmaa Soliman, current Youth UPF Member and part of the Youth Interfaith Council, highlighted the importance of education and shared her academic research, 'Empowering Women, a Common Project Moving Beyond the Us-versus-Them Discourse.' "[Discourses] generalise and put communities in boxes," and region and time specifications do not limit discourses. Fight is a concept too common for women that create discourses such as the existent 'us-versus-them' and 'east-versus-west.' The fight creates the discourses in gender equality and emancipation. Dr. Soliman strongly urged that women should not internalise oppressions, such as using traditions as an excuse for domestic violence.

Women are individuals, just as men are, and it is more about individuals and their thirst for control that fuel the discourses that exist today. "True empowering is encouraging women to do what they want to do, not what we want them to do," Dr. Soliman summarised. However, challenges are plenty as one must liberate themselves to move beyond discourses. She highlighted religious women who face two emancipation challenges: on one hand are patriarchal communities and on the other are feminist concepts that see religion as a

form of oppression. Sadly there will continue to be the 'us-versus-them' discourse, but as individuals it is our social responsibility to move beyond in order to make progress towards gender equality.



"Our role in coming together is to reflect on our own personal responsibilities," opened Seema Malhotra MP. Making it happen "does not mean just locally but globally" since issues such as domestic violence happens internationally. Malhotra insisted that campaigners here in Great Britain have been changing dialogue to make their voices heard abroad and that as individuals there is a sense of social and personal responsibility to

speak out on injustices. Political dialogue "is the wind that sets sails to raise issues to another level," and that can only be done when words and voices are used, especially in a democratic society.

"There is a deep issue of culture [and] attitudes towards gender." Malhotra admitted she found much of her inspiration in the number of children wanting to get involved in women's rights, gender equality, particularly in ending domestic violence as some have been witnesses to such acts. This highlighted the need to start at a grassroots level, within schools, in which sex education should be pushed to show what is right when it comes to women's rights as too often young girls have been harassed, even molested, by their fellow male classmates only to be told by teachers after reporting a culprit that "he just likes you." With this attitude, the sense of helplessness remains contained in young girls and during a visit, Malhotra shared how a young girl admitted that no one ever explained what rape was and only found out through the internet. "Every nation needs to stand up and speak out in their own backyard," urged Malhotra.

The youth look up to us, adults, to guide them and teach them what is right and what is wrong. "Our legacy is what we have the young people live in, and [we] must set for them to make a legacy [of their

own] for future generations.” This statement highlights how as society, even in a democratic one, injustices against girls and women still exist. Education is key. There needs to be an emphasis on the importance of reforming curriculum, attitudes and cultures in order to change existing perceptions of gender equality. The youth are our social and personal responsibility and we as a society must collectively use our words and voice to speak out, to make a change.



After the panel finished, there were a great number of those in attendance who had much to share and comment. Baroness Howe of Idlicote CBE commented that it was a “magnificent experience to listen [to the speakers] with empowerment.” As the first woman to serve as Deputy Chairman of the Equal Opportunities Commission in the UK, Baroness Howe certainly was a member of the audience many looked to for anecdotes and her experiences in fighting for women’s rights and gender equality. Another member in the audience shared news that in Cambridge, conservation groups representing 180 countries were teaming together to make a greater impact when it comes to women’s issues. A gentleman in the audience stood to share of his work, his research in the USA, about women holding senior level executive positions, specifically in banking. One fact he shared is that once in the position, women excelled greater than men as they were least likely to take risks, however, women also have a difficult time reaching that level because “they often give up quicker.” As such, he insisted that focus be brought onto countries in which men control the ownership of women.

Comments and life stories were shared; the evening became a platform to engage in sharing stories and views when it came to each individual’s perception of gender equality and women’s rights. A Rwandan woman in the audience adamantly exclaimed that “[we] learn from our foremothers [to] take lesson and make progress.” In addition, she shared that 67% of Rwandan Parliament consists of women yet they are seen as seat warmers as the progress for women’s rights is near non-existent, and because of this fact it is vital we stand up, unite, and protect humanity. Other members of the audience from across the globe from America to Mongolia to India and the African diaspora were present. Issues of bringing attention to women who participate in oppressive acts, like gender mutilation, were highlighted that apart from educating and empowering individuals who are susceptible to become victims, focus must be given to women who hinder women’s rights. So much was to be shared and listened yet time restricted others from sharing more thoughts.

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As a survivor of long term domestic violence, I truly felt empowered hearing the stories of women and men from all backgrounds share their thoughts and views on the issues of gender equality and women’s rights. Each person had an element to them that resonated with me. It is true that one must empower oneself before lending a hand to help empower others. From an early age I felt empowerment and it is what helped me survive, to live life. Domestic violence is not only a prominent issue in the UK, but the USA as well. Having been an eyewitness to countless beatings and often times being the recipient of various forms of abuse, help was often sought but unsuccessful due to the attitude and culture towards gender. Being raised as a first born American citizen there was a struggle to find a balance in my identity; a constant divide was felt that I was and always would be the Westerner as opposed to the rest of my family who hailed from South Korea and Japan, the East. Despite many

trials and tribulations, I hold on and try to empower myself in order to lend a helping hand. This event reminds me that regardless of having all odds against you, you can make it in life as long as you have the

power and know that “[your] will is free,” as inspired by Tally Koren’s single ‘Free Will.’

To any of those who were in attendance or simply feel strongly about the topics covered, please feel free to share your stories or comments by visiting please

<https://www.facebook.com/universalpeacefederation.uk> or email [ukupf.opinions@gmail.com](mailto:ukupf.opinions@gmail.com).

#### **Useful Links**

<http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/clean-energy-can-light-up-lives/article5087305.ece>

<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/platform/>

<http://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/case-study-the-right-to-vote/the-right-to-vote/birmingham-and-the-equal-franchise/1918-representation-of-the-people-act/>

<http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/rel/ashe/annual-survey-of-hours-and-earnings/2014-provisional-results/stb-ashe-statistical-bulletin-2014.html>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/women-on-boards-numbers-almost-doubled-in-last-4-years>

<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/ending-violence-against-women-and-girls-in-the-uk>

<http://content.met.police.uk/Article/Domestic-Violence-Disclosure-Scheme---Clares-Law/1400022792812/1400022792812>

Thank you for the photos courtesy of Erik Erxon