

Today is the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women.

Around the world 35% of women and girls will experience some form of physical or sexual violence during their lifetime. More than 700 million women alive today were married as children. 250 million of them were married before the age of 15 and it is estimated that worldwide, over 130 million women and girls have been subjected to female genital mutilation.

Ending this violence against women is a matter of the utmost urgency.

Every day, from every corner of the world, horrific stories emerge of atrocities and violations, of perpetrators walking free while survivors are shamed. Women and girls fleeing violence - such as that perpetrated by ISIL, and the abuses of the Assad regime in Syria, are now reportedly facing sexual violence as they move through Europe desperately seeking safety.

In the face of the scale and complexity of this problem, it is easy to become disheartened and believe that these issues are too difficult or too sensitive to challenge.

The strength and spirit of the survivors of sexual violence I met in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Iraq, Kosovo, and Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the passion and commitment of the people working alongside them, have hardened my resolve to bring an end to impunity for sexual violence in conflict and to do more to end gender-based violence.

At the root of the abuse women experience - both in peaceful societies and in those struggling with the chaos of conflict – are

often ideas of women as second class citizens; as objects or property controlled by men. This must end and we must support women as they rightfully assume positions of influence and leadership, helping to shape a more equitable world.

While such attitudes are notoriously difficult to change, education is the key. I am pleased that this year's 16 Days of Activism against Gender-Based Violence campaign, which also starts today, focuses on the issue of education.

In September, I hosted a panel in New York covering this subject. One of the speakers, from CARE International, described the inspirational work they are doing in the Balkans. For a number of years, CARE has run a program called Young Men's Initiative. Through peer education and workshops they look at stereotypes of masculinity, and create a space where boys can explore issues of inequality and violence. By highlighting the impact of these issues they work with the participants to become allies in the promotion of gender equality and the prevention of violence.

I have also been delighted this year to work with a number of faith organisations, including the coalition "We will speak out" on the role of faith leaders particularly in the education of communities on supporting survivors and those around them to rebuild their lives.

The military are another key ally in education efforts to prevent and respond to sexual violence in conflict. I am proud of the role that the UK has taken in helping to teach UN peacekeepers and national armies about issues around sexual violence. When I was in Iraq two weeks ago, I met some of those who have trained over 800 members of the Kurdish

Peshmerga forces on how to respond sensitively to victims of sexual and gender-based violence.

The International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women, and the 16 Days campaign continue to educate us all on why we must push ourselves to do more. They inspire us with examples of leadership, courage and innovation which are changing the lives of vulnerable women and girls every, single day.

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