

UK Gender and Development Network

**Briefing note for Andrew Mitchell MP,
Shadow Secretary of State for International Development**

Violence against Women and Girls – An International Development Issue

November 2009

Violence against women and girls has not yet been treated by the UK government as an issue that has a huge impact on both long-term development and on conflict and security.

Violence against women and girls is a leading factor in the spread of the HIV/AIDS pandemic, a barrier to girls accessing and completing education, a factor in high maternal mortality rates, and of course one of the main barriers to women's equality with men – all of which undermine achievement of the MDGs.

The UN Secretary-General has referred to violence against women and girls as the missing MDG due to its huge implications for human development and social justice worldwide, and its serious negative impacts on the effectiveness of development progress across other issues.

In conflict situations, sexual violence is routinely used as a tactic of war, and has been recognised by the UN¹ as a security issue requiring a security response i.e. a significant factor in prolonging conflict and instability. Ignoring it will mean that efforts to establish peaceful societies will be undermined.

Although the UK government is bound by UN Security Council resolutions on violence against women and girls in conflict and post-conflict reconstruction, this has not been translated into action to tackle violence against women and girls as a priority for UK foreign policy.

DFID has committed to give priority to measures to tackle violence against women within its security and access to justice work in conflict and post-conflict situations. However this falls short of the comprehensive strategy necessary to tackle violence against women and girls because it ignores the links with violence in 'peace time' – i.e. stemming from the unequal position of women in all societies.

This is in contrast to the United States, where an unprecedented piece of legislation is being developed: the International Violence Against Women Act. This will formally make preventing violence against women a priority in American diplomacy and foreign aid. President Obama has already begun work on this agenda by appointing the first ever Ambassador-at-Large for Global Women's Issues to coordinate US foreign policy on women and lead on violence against women internationally in particular. We hope a future UK government will demonstrate equally strong commitment to tackling the global scandal of violence against women and girls.

¹ Security Council Resolutions 1325 on women, peace and security; and 1820 on sexual violence in conflict.

Recommendations for a future UK government:

1. Make a high-profile commitment to tackle violence against women and girls internationally by addressing this as a foreign policy priority and establishing a high-level post on violence against women that straddles the FCO, DFID and MoD, allocating UK Ministerial resources to support this focus
2. Ensure infrastructure within government to monitor and enforce UK commitments on violence against women and girls internationally that works across the FCO, DFID and the MoD
3. Strengthen the work of DFID on violence against women and girls by recognising this as a key development issue - linking it to poverty, economic growth, education, health and conflict; and by developing a comprehensive plan for DFID's role in the implementation of the new UK Violence Against Women Strategy
4. Call for women's involvement in peace keeping and peace-building programmes to be a central requirement of any review of UN peacekeeping operations; the UK should take a lead in funding measures to tackle violence against women in conflict and post-conflict - particularly sexual violence and promoting women's inclusion in peace negotiations and post-conflict reconstruction
5. Champion greater attention to violence against women and girls in the international development arena through influencing multilateral agencies, international frameworks including the MDGs and the post-MDGs framework, and by giving full support to the UN Secretary General's Say No – UNiTE campaign to end violence against women.