



Equality Hub

**Baroness Stedman-Scott**  
**Minister for Work and Pensions (Lords)**  
**and Minister for Women**

Cabinet Office  
70 Whitehall  
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House of Lords

28<sup>th</sup> March 2022

Dear Lords,

I wish to thank all of the noble Lords who attended the important International Women's Day Debate on 17th March. It was a pleasure to hear your impassioned speeches and I have addressed the remainder of your queries below, as I did not have a chance to respond during my closing speech.

Baroness Gale noted important points around ensuring that women's voices are heard in politics and decision making. I assure her that the Government continues to keep section 106 of the Equality Act 2010 under review, but remains of the view that political parties should lead the way in improving diverse electoral representation through selection of candidates. Furthermore, with regard to "all women shortlists" and the future of the sunset clause in section 105 of the Equality Act 2010, which will, in 2030, switch off the current positive action provisions in section 104, we will assess the need for further legislation at a later date. Baroness Northover also raised this issue, and I can assure all noble Lords we now have more women MPs than ever before. But as ever we must ensure women have an equal voice in the decisions that affect them. Political parties remain responsible for their candidate selection and should lead the way in improving the diversity of representation.

Baroness Gale also asked for clarity on how the Government Equalities Office communicates with women's organisations. This Government is aware of the importance of speaking to women across the UK, and the Equality Hub is working to ensure we hear from a wide range of women's voices. I lead a series of virtual roundtables with women from across England to discuss issues that affect them including access to childcare and



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returning to work. I continue to work hard to ensure that the voices of women from many different backgrounds can be heard.

I am grateful to the Lord Bishop of Durham for the important issues he raised relating to women and girls globally. FCDO continues to work with faith and community leaders, on issues such as girls' education, child marriage, addressing violence against women and girls (VAWG), sexual and reproductive health right and female genital mutilation, recognising that religious leaders can be important advocates and champions of women's rights. Through the UN Global Programme on child marriage, Girls' Education Challenge, and What Works to address Violence against women and girls, the UK has supported programme level engagement with faith leaders to change social norms and attitudes.

Many of the noble lords, including the Lord Bishop of Durham and Lord Purvis of Tweed raised this Government's spending on overseas aid. Our Spending Review 2021 highlighted that we will increase aid funding for our highest priorities, including by using more bilateral investment. That means spending aid money directly on our priorities rather than through large multilateral agencies. This includes prioritising support for women and girls, focusing on giving more girls a quality education; ending the extremely harmful practice of female genital mutilation and supporting girls' health; and ending the abhorrent use of sexual violence around the world. I can assure the House that improving economic forecasts show that HMG may meet its test to return to spending 0.7% of Gross National Income on aid in the final year of this Spending Review. In response to Lord Sikka's question on Gender Impact Assessments, the Foreign Secretary has been clear that we intend to restore funding to women and girls and to humanitarian programmes. The baseline year and timing of restoration is under discussion as part of the FCDO Business Planning process. We are bound by the UK International Development Act (Gender Equality) 2014 to ensure gender equality remains at the heart of the UK's work on international development and in humanitarian crisis.



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Noble Lords including Baroness Northover and Lord Purvis of Tweed noted the importance of women and girls being at the centre of international development strategy. I can assure the House that we will publish a new International Development Strategy later in the Spring. This will set out how we deliver our climate change and health commitments, as well as supporting and restoring funding for women and girls and humanitarian work.

As raised by Baroness Hodgson of Abinger, this Government agrees that the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda is now more important than ever. The WPS agenda responds to the disproportionate impact of conflict on women and girls and champions their meaningful participation in peace efforts. FCDO are in the process of developing the UK's next National Action Plan on WPS which will commence 2023, and is aiming to deliver real change for women and girls on the ground in conflict-affected countries.

Lord Hussain rightly mentioned human rights concerns in Kashmir. The UK is monitoring the situation in Kashmir closely and we recognise there are human rights concerns in Indian-administered Kashmir and Pakistan-administered Kashmir. We encourage all states to ensure domestic laws in line with international standards. Our human rights work, including in India, goes beyond that of the 31 human rights priority countries highlighted in the FCDO Annual Human Rights Report. Any allegation of human rights violations or abuse is deeply concerning and must be investigated thoroughly and transparently. We have raised our concerns with the Governments of India and Pakistan. The British High Commission in New Delhi and our network of Deputy High Commissions continue to work closely with Indian civil society and non-governmental organisations to promote gender equality and tackle gender-based violence.

I thank Baroness Kennedy for raising the issue of misogyny as a hate crime. Law in this area is devolved and, in the context she raised, is therefore a matter for the Scottish Government. A recent review commissioned by the Scottish Government on this issue did not recommend using Scottish hate crime law to make misogyny a hate crime, it



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instead recommended a tailor-made solution outside of the hate crime framework in order to address crimes motivated by misogyny. This Government agrees with the Law Commission's concerns on adding misogyny as a hate crime, concluding it would be "more harmful than helpful, both to victims of violence against women and girls, and also to efforts to tackle hate crime more broadly.". However we will be publishing a new hate crime strategy in due course which will take the Law Commission's recommendations into account.

I welcome Baroness Bryan's remarks on the report led by the Lord Justice Clerk, Lady Dorrian on "Improving the Management of Sexual Offence Cases" which recommends a new, national specialist Court with trauma-informed procedures be created to deal with serious sexual offence cases in Scotland. I endorse her suggestion that officials in departments across government take the time to read the recommendations.

I thank Lord Sikka for raising his concerns around both gender and ethnicity pay gaps. Under this Government, the national gender pay gap has fallen significantly and in 2017, we introduced regulations requiring large employers to publish the differences in average salaries and bonuses for men and women every year. These regulations have helped to motivate employers, and focus attention on improving equality in the workplace. However, in order to continue making progress we need to understand the real barriers faced by everyone in the workplace, and ensure everyone has the opportunity to fulfil their potential. To help with this, we are sharing our learning with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, as they develop guidance to support employers to voluntarily report on their ethnicity pay gap with further guidance on this being published in Summer 2022, as committed to in our response to the Sewell Report, Inclusive Britain, published on 17 March. I have also recently announced our plans to encourage employers to publish pay scales in job adverts and stop asking questions about pay history. Evidence shows that women and people from minority ethnic backgrounds particularly benefit when there is greater transparency in pay scales.



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To reassure the noble Lord Sikka, reforms to the State Pension have put measures in place to improve State Pension outcomes for most women. Over three million women stand to receive an average of £550 more per year by 2030 as a result of the recent reforms. Furthermore, this Government remains committed to addressing the gender pensions gap, and we are making progress, including through promoting women's progression in workplaces, the introduction of shared parental leave and mandatory gender pay gap reporting. The Treasury carefully considers the impact of its decisions on those sharing protected characteristics, including at Spring Statement 2022 and other fiscal events, in line with both its legal obligations and with its strong commitment to promoting fairness. I assure the House that the interests of those most vulnerable in society have been at the centre of the decisions taken at the Spring Statement. Young people, women, individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds and disabled people are amongst those who will benefit from the actions taken, demonstrating this Government's belief in fairness and equality of opportunity.

Baroness Northover touched on a number of important themes. The first I will address regards the Government Equalities Office moving departments. It was previously tradition for GEO to sit in the same department as their Minister. However in 2018, to bring equalities into the heart of this Government's work, it moved to a permanent home in the Cabinet Office. This also brought together the Government Equalities Office, Race Disparity Unit and Disability Unit, to create the Equality Hub, subsequently joined by the secretariat to the Social Mobility Commission. This allows teams to work more closely together to drive meaningful progress on equalities.

The noble Baroness Northover specifically mentioned this Government's global education commitments. With the G7, we agreed new targets to get 40 million more girls in school and 20 million more girls reading by 2026. The Prime Minister launched the [Girls' Education Action Plan](#) in May 2021, setting out the practical steps we will take to deliver our global objectives on girls' education. In addition, the UK hosted the Global



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Education Summit where we raised \$4 billion for the Global Partnership for Education, boosting the world's poorest countries' COVID-19 recovery. We pledged £430 million to the Global Partnership for Education over the next 5 years. FCDO is also building a new Coalition on Learning with like-minded partners to emphasise the urgency of getting children's learning on track after two years of school closures, and we are broadening the impact of our Girls' Education Campaign and mobilising our network of Ambassadors and High Commissioners to support governments to scale up efforts to get girls into school.

In response to Baroness Northover's request for a further update on this Government's engagement with Afghanistan, we are committed to helping all girls get back to school - despite the most recent setbacks since our debate - and Afghan women back into the workplace. We, alongside allies, continue to press the Taliban to deliver on this as Afghan women must have a voice in their own future. Our aid provides life-saving support to the most vulnerable, especially women and girls, minority groups, and people with disabilities. In addition we are working with the World Bank and its shareholders to allocate the remainder of the \$1.2bn in the Afghanistan Reconstruction Trust Fund for the humanitarian response and basic services. This fund initially released \$280 million in December, which helped to ensure that health services are accessible and available for women and girls, and supported households to access food, including by providing additional nutrition assistance for nearly 840,000 mothers and children.

We believe it is vital to support Afghan women's voices to be heard loud and clear and therefore we have prioritised including them at the upcoming Afghanistan Humanitarian Conference, which the UK will co-chair with Germany, Qatar and the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and will continue to explore opportunities to support them to speak up for their rights.

Several of the noble Lords, including Baroness Northover and Baroness Gale, asked for reassurance that the ratification of the Istanbul Convention will take place soon. The UK



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remains strongly committed to ratification of the Istanbul Convention, and already complies with, or goes further than, the Convention requires in many areas. The UK remains on track to ratify the Istanbul Convention before long and indeed on 21 February one of the remaining obstacles to ratification was removed as Northern Ireland implemented legislation which makes it compliant with the requirements in the Convention relating to psychological violence and the prosecutions of crimes committed overseas by UK nationals and residents

I hope this was helpful in further response to our rich and wide-ranging debate. I look forward to debating related issues in the Chamber at every opportunity. Given the many international issues covered, I am copying this letter to my noble Friend Lord Ahmad.

A copy of this letter will be placed in the House Library.

Best wishes,

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