



DEFINING AN AGENDA FOR UK AND DRC PARLIAMENTARY ACTION ON SEXUAL AND GENDER BASED VIOLENCE IN CONGO

10 JUNE 2009

The APPG on the Great Lakes Region of Africa and the Associate Parliamentary Group on Women, Peace and Security jointly hosted a roundtable discussion in the House of Commons with Congolese Senator Eve Bazaiba, member of the Congolese opposition MLC party and chair of the socio-cultural committee in the Congolese Senate, and Nici Dahrendorf, former UN coordinator on sexual and gender based violence in the DRC. The meeting was attended by parliamentarians as well as members of the public; it was intended to identify areas where the UK and Congolese parliaments can take action to address the issue of sexual and gender based violence (SGBV) in the DRC.

Eve Bazaiba

Eve began her comments by setting out the prevalence of SGBV in the DRC. Despite this crimes being defined as war crimes under the Rome Statute – to which the DRC is a signatory – and the world knowing about the problem, it is well documented, this problem is allowed to continue. In order to find a solution, the causes, rather than the consequences, of SGBV must be targeted. The Senator identified these causes to address:

1. The war – with specific reference to the continued flow of arms, bad governance and the involvement of neighbouring countries;
2. History; and,
3. Wealth.

She pointed out that the main challenge, overriding the above, is that of good governance. There is a need to change the system of management. There are considerable social problems in the DRC and the country has been ruled largely by men for the past forty years¹. Women need to be brought closer to power and included the decision making process.

¹ Eve is one of only a handful of women in the Congolese Senate

Nici Dahrendorf

Nici began by clarifying her former role within the UN system: to form a strategy to coordinate different agencies. She questioned how we can best coordinate a response to SGBV at all levels in the DRC – there needs to be a response from all levels of government. A response is very difficult to coordinate when you do not have much of an idea of the problem you are dealing with. There is an incredible lack of data, and more resources are required to get more accurate figures. She further highlighted four areas which urgently need to be addressed:

1. Impunity – this is to include better access for victims to the judicial system, better laws against sexual violence, and strengthening the capacity of the justice system.
2. Security sector reform – requires a holistic view including the army, police and military justice system. The issue of training and vetting in the security sector also need attention.
3. Disarmament, demobilisation and reintegration programmes – currently focused towards male combatants and do not take into consideration the significant number of women in the militia groups, and their differing needs.
4. Health and psycho-social issues – all too often completely overlooked. It is important that access to psycho-social support for victims is increased, and that a national protocol is adopted and, crucially, applied at local as well as national levels.

She continued highlighting four areas where parliamentarians (both UK and Congolese) could have a real impact.

1. Government coordination – to assure that all of government are fully appreciative of SGBV and work together to tackle to issue.
2. Implementation of legislation – some good laws already exist on SGBV in the DRC, but parliamentarians need to put pressure on the government to see that these are implemented.
3. Communications – more and clearer messages should be sent, stating that what is happening is unacceptable. The question of *why* people are not being tried for these crimes needs to be tackled.
4. Capacity building – the judiciary, for example, are not informed of the existing laws which counter SGBV and if they *are* informed, do not always understand them. The judicial and security sectors require training and more women need to be employed in both.

Nici concluded her remarks by saying that there is a lot of money devoted to SGBV programmes, but this money is not well channelled.

Eve Bazaiba

Eve briefly responded to the point which Nici raised: as alluded to, there are many programmes and a lot of money, but the situation on the ground is not changing. For real change, we need to address the causes of the war and take men out of the position where they are easily able to prey on women. She agreed that there is some good legislation, but the current laws do not have the capability to suppress foreign perpetrators. The UK is in a good position to have a positive influence: as a permanent member of the UN Security Council, a prominent member of the European Union and the largest bilateral donor to the DRC. There also needs to be some provisions for the implementation of UN Security Council Resolution 1820.

Bishop of Winchester

Bishop Michael commented that from his observations over many years the DRC political class have learned very little. How can society and individual people be assisted to lead change?

Eve Bazaiba

Initially agreeing with Bishop Michael's analysis – this reinforces several comments already made. The best way to support the people for change is to assist in getting better people at the top. The local elections are currently underway, and women should be supported into social leadership positions. Donors need to evaluate the results from the support they have given since the last election. What has changed? What can we do better together?

Nici Dahrendorf

Women need to be allowed access to land; this will empower them and change the agenda for the local elections.

Eve Bazaiba

The judicial capacity of married women is reduced by Congolese law – a woman has to obtain the permission of her husband to get access to justice and land. The DRC is a signatory to the International Convention of Women's Rights, national law needs to be harmonised with these obligations.

Avery Hancock (IRC)

How will the comprehensive strategy which Nici produced during her time in DRC be operationalised?

Nici Dahrendorf

The purpose of her comprehensive strategy was to find a way to bring efforts to address SGBV under one hat. The strategy provides a framework for this to be done and has been agreed by the Congolese government - it is now up to them to implement it, it cannot be imposed from the outside.

Martha Jean Baker (WILPF)

The emphasis should not be to portray women as victims, but to seek methods of empowerment. How can this be constructively supported?

Eve Bazaiba

A platform for the implementation of UNSCR1325/1820 is already in place, as well as a strong network for women to participate. For this to be realised more fully, we need to address the causes. The registration process for the local elections is underway and people want to participate, but the war in the east is preventing many people in the east coming forward to register.

Judy Mallaber MP

Judy reflected from her own experience during the 2006 elections, it is clear that women want to participate in the electoral process; for this to happen there is clearly a need for security. MPs here should be asking the Foreign Secretary to pay more attention to security sector reform.

Eve Bazaiba

Eve thanked Judy for her understanding of this point and commented that she hopes UK ministers, when visiting DRC and through all other means, make strong representations to the Congolese government on this.

Eric Joyce MP

Eric closed the meeting by thanking Eve and Nici. He further highlighted the need for additional resources to strengthen state institutions like the parliament to keep a check on government. Characters like Eve give a lot of confidence that this is possible.

END