

## Westminster Hall Debate: Conflict Prevention - 9 February 2010

### Extracts on women, peace and security issues

Simon Hughes (North Southwark and Bermondsey) (LD): ...My hon. Friend knows much more than I do about Northern Ireland from his family links and so on, although I have often been there. The peace there did not happen just because Governments in Dublin and London decided that there should be peace. It did not even happen just because the political parties realised the folly of what they were doing. It happened because the communities, led by women in large measure and young people, decided that peace was necessary. The lessons for conflict prevention around the world are that if the grass roots of communities, often women and often in rural areas, are supported in taking initiatives, they can build the structure for peace. Afghanistan is a good example.

Mr. David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): I am pleased to play tail gunner and to try to sweep up some of the points that have been made-[Interruption.] Sorry about that unintentional pun.

I congratulate the hon. Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing the debate. The all-party group on conflict issues is an excellent one, and I shall mention a couple of others. I chair the all-party group on Sudan, which knows a little about conflict, and I also want to mention the all-party group on women, peace and security, which also plays an invaluable part in the work on this issue. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) on the work he has done for the Ministry for Peace. When he is not present, I end up chairing most of its meetings, and Diana Basterfield has briefed me on some of what I need to say...

...Among the issues that have not yet come up in the debate, the role of women cannot be overestimated. I am pleased to have been an officer of the all-party group on women, peace and security, which is known in the trade as the 1325 group, after the UN resolution. We can criticise the Ministry of Defence, but it has been very good about recognising the importance of training our troops in such issues as how to deal with women in a conflict zone, including recognising sad instances of rape, abuse and mistreatment. That has a lot to do with cultural awareness-raising, and we have embraced that approach.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Southwark and Bermondsey (Simon Hughes) on securing this debate. The time spent by the House debating conflict prevention pales in comparison with the

time that we spend discussing conflicts that have not been prevented. Perhaps that balance needs to be adjusted. I wholeheartedly support the idea put forward by my hon. Friend that there should be an annual debate on the subject rather than relying on the random nature of the ballot to secure debates in Westminster Hall...

...My hon. Friend also mentioned the role of women, particularly in communities. It is most important when building structures for peace. Last year, the UN passed Security Council resolution 1889, which reaffirmed the principles laid out almost a decade ago in Security Council resolution 1325. Among other things, it recognised the important role that women need to play in conflict prevention. Despite making up more than half of the world's population, women are often absent from negotiating tables and decision-making circles.

I recommend Gender Action for Peace and Security, a network of NGOs. It recently produced a short parliamentarian's guide to women, peace and security, which is most instructive. One statistic sticks out for me. Over the past 25 years, only one in 40 peace agreement signatories have been women. That shows their lack of involvement at that crucial stage, which I believe has an impact on whether conflicts recur. The UK is one of only 14 countries with a national action plan for implementing Security Council resolution 1325. I am glad about that. The plan is under review, and it will be released next month.

It is important that we take matters forward. In October, someone from the FCO told the all-party group on women, peace and security that the Department was finding it difficult to involve women in senior positions in conflict prevention resolution, including in the UK. I would welcome it if the Minister were to update us on progress on that front.

The Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Mr. Ivan Lewis):

...Several hon. Members, including the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), raised the issue of women in conflict prevention. I have two things to say about that. First, in those countries that come out of conflict, it is often women who play the most important role. They do not sign the peace treaties, but it is often women, both in local communities and at a national level, who are the biggest and most powerful advocates for peace. However, it is also women who are often the greatest victims of the dreadful violence that occurs in places such as eastern Congo, so the role of women must be central, not an add-on or marginal issue.