



Combating violence against women and girls around the world

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International Women's Day is marked on 8 March every year. The theme for 2013-14 has been 'time for action to end violence against women'. For 2014/15 it is 'inspiring change'.

Gender-based violence is present in every society in the world. Globally, one in three women will be beaten or sexually abused in their lifetime. Girls and women in developing countries are vulnerable to particular abuses including early marriage, female genital mutilation and sexual violence in conflict. As well as being a violation of their rights, violence holds back women's contribution to poverty eradication and economic growth, and it undermines women's potential and ability to effect change in the world.

Violence against women and girls has been referred to as "[the missing millennium development goal \(MDG\) target.](#)" Efforts are underway to ensure that the targets replacing the MDGs—which expire in 2015—make a fuller attempt to tackle violence. As co-Chair of the UN High Level Panel on the post-2015 goals, Prime Minister David Cameron put his weight behind a [standalone target](#) to eliminate violence against women and girls. The Working Group on the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals will put forward specific proposals in time for the UN General Assembly in September 2014.

Other efforts are taking place elsewhere within the UN system. The Human Rights Council will hold a high-level dialogue on sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) this month. DRC warlord Bosco Ntaganda has recently been charged with war crimes, including ordering fighters to rape women and recruit child soldiers, by the International Criminal Court. As a result, the issue of sexual violence in conflict will be of primary importance at a high-profile trial for the first time.

The UK Government has also increased its efforts to tackle gender-based violence around the world. Foreign Minister William Hague launched a cross-departmental [Prevention of Sexual Violence in Conflict Initiative](#) in 2012. The Initiative aims to address the culture of impunity in many countries by bringing perpetrators to justice; and strengthening efforts—both national and international—to prevent and respond to sexual violence. Its activities include the creation of a team of 73 multi-disciplinary experts that are deployed overseas to support efforts to gather evidence and testimony for use in investigations and prosecutions. So far, experts have been deployed to Syria, DRC, Bosnia-Herzegovina, Libya and Mali.

The UK has put forward a [Declaration of Commitment to End Sexual Violence in Conflict](#), which was endorsed by 137 countries in New York in September 2013. In June 2014, Hague and UN Special Envoy Angelina Jolie will chair a London-based conference on sexual violence in conflict. The UK will launch its International Protocol on the Documentation and Investigation of Sexual Violence in Conflict at the event. This will coincide with the launch of the next 3-year phase of the UK's [National Action Plan on Women, Peace and Security](#).

DFID has also increased its focus on violence against women. It is taking steps to ensure humanitarian operations prioritise the protection of women and girls, so that refugee camps become safer and lifesaving services are available to survivors of rape. DFID has programmes in many countries where gender-based violence is highly prevalent, including DRC, Somalia and Pakistan. Early marriage is classified as a form of violence, as it is closely linked to higher incidence of domestic and sexual abuse, as well as poor reproductive and maternal health outcomes for girls—with knock-on effects for their ability to go to school, care for their families and enter the productive economy. In Ethiopia, where nearly two-thirds of girls are married by 18, DFID has provided £10 million of funding for the 5-year [End Child Marriage](#) programme in partnership with the Government of Ethiopia.

DFID has made women a strategic priority in Afghanistan, said to have pandemic levels of gender-based violence. Non-governmental organisations have [said](#) that, to be effective, the strategic priority should include sustainable funding for women’s organisations and women human rights defenders. But the context is challenging. A [new Afghan law](#) introduced in February 2014 that allows men to attack women without fear of judicial punishment has, according to campaigners, undone years of slow progress in tackling violence in a country where so-called "honour" killings, forced marriage and domestic abuse are commonplace. Afghan presidential elections in April 2014 are likely to shine a spotlight on women’s participation in peace, security and politics within the country.

In 2013, DFID launched a £35 million fund to tackle female genital mutilation (FGM) internationally. It is estimated that [100-140 million girls and women](#) globally have been subjected to some form of FGM. One-fifth of young girls in sub-Saharan Africa are affected. The practice is also widespread in some Asian countries and in the Middle East: for example, 91% of women and girls in Egypt are affected.

Used to control women’s sexuality, FGM involves removing or otherwise cutting the external female genitalia. Usually performed on children, it is generally carried out by unskilled practitioners with unsterilized instruments, risking potentially lethal infection. Other consequences include severe pain and psychological trauma. DFID’s new funding aims to reduce FGM by 30% in at least 10 countries in the next five years by supporting community-level social change programmes, generating research, and engaging in policy change.

A 2013 [report](#) by the International Development Committee said that the UK risked undermining its credibility in ending FGM internationally because of its failure to tackle the problem within its own shores. An estimated 66,000 women in England and Wales have undergone FGM, and over 24,000 girls are potentially at risk of undergoing the practice. This is despite the fact that the UK has specific legislation banning FGM since 1985.

There has not been a single prosecution for FGM within the UK. In November 2012, Keir Starmer QC, then Director of Public Prosecutions, published an [Action Plan](#) exploring ways of improving the UK’s prosecution record on FGM, including using alternative means of prosecuting. This was [updated](#) in October 2013. The CPS is currently considering [is currently considering](#) six cases of FGM to advise the police on lines of inquiry and charging advice. However, the Met Chief, Sir Bernard Hogan-Howe, [told](#) the Home Affairs Committee in December 2013 that the police do not get sufficient referrals either from education or health, that there are “cultural sensitivities” that hinder police efforts, and that “the whole system needs a shake-up”. The Home Affairs Committee is beginning a new inquiry into FGM that will start to take evidence in March. The Joint Committee on Human Rights has launched an inquiry on [violence against women and girls](#) based on a similar timescale.