

Cherie Blair Speech On Human Trafficking

I feel very privileged to be with you all tonight to discuss how together we can stop the appalling scandal of human trafficking.

I also feel a little over-awed to be sharing a platform with two people who deserve huge credit for the new urgency in combating this terrible crime.

Through their determined efforts, Antonio and Steve have helped intensify Government action against trafficking around the world – and mobilised public opinion to ensure Governments keep their promises.

I am well aware in comparison that I am no expert.

But as all of you who know Steve can testify, when he asks you to do something it is very hard – actually impossible - to say no.

[I suppose we should all be grateful he found his vocation - otherwise he would have made a world class double glazing salesman.]

So I thought it best tonight if I talked about something I do a little about which is how by fighting to ensure these rights are spread across the world we can help combat trafficking.

For those who don't know my background, I come to the issue of trafficking through my work as a British lawyer specialising in human rights and my personal determination to do all I can to remove the barriers blocking the progress of women.

There is, of course, no more basic human right than freedom from slavery.

Indeed it can lay claim to be the very first human right recognised by international law.

Britain outlawed the Atlantic Slave Trade just over two hundred years ago followed by an outright ban on slavery throughout the Empire.

These actions have been followed, in the last two centuries, by something like eighty international conventions and documents aimed at stopping the vile practice of slavery and its modern form of trafficking.

They clearly demonstrate the world's revulsion at this inhumanity.

They also underline the limits of the law in stopping trafficking.

International law may make clear that those responsible for enslavement are guilty of a crime against humanity and are viewed as enemies of all people.

The appallingness of their crimes, in fact, put them beyond the protection of any individual country and make them liable - like the torturer - to arrest and prosecution by the international criminal court.

But it is a mark of just how profitable is this evil trade and the difficulty of enforcing the law that the trafficking and ownership of human beings continues on a huge and shameful scale.

I have no doubt that William Wilberforce and his fellow campaigners would be both shocked and appalled if he knew of the staggering statistics of slavery so many years after his death.

Millions of people are still tricked or forced from their communities to be exploited and abused.

At any one time, it is estimated that over 2.5 million are recruited, entrapped, transported and exploited within in forced labour as a result of trafficking within countries or between them. ¹

This trade in all in its many forms nets an estimated \$32 billion dollars² each year for the traffickers according to the International Labour Organisation and United Nations.

They estimate that US \$10 billion is derived from the initial "sale" of individuals, with the remainder representing the estimated profits from the activities or goods produced by the victims of this barbaric crime.

And as Antonio through his fantastic work at the UN can tell you much better than me, human trafficking knows no boundaries.

Almost every country in the world is affected, either as a source, transit or destination for victims.

But there is a danger that this very scale numbs our response or drives us into despair.

That is why it is important we all listen to the tragic individual stories of the victims.

It is these stories which are so important and demand our anger and our action.

¹ Source : Global Report, ILO, 2005

² Source : Global Report, ILO, 2005

It is these accounts of hopes crushed and lives ruined which must shake us out of our lethargy and despair.

And time and time again, it is the female voices we hear.

This should be no surprise. Women and girls, of course, make up the overwhelming majority of victims trafficked for sex.

Their destinations include cities and towns up and down the UK and around the world.

A recent investigation by the Guardian newspaper showed the heart-breaking fate of hundreds of Chinese girls, some as young as 11, brought to the UK where their dreams of a better life ended in brothels in our communities.

Similar stories could be told about too many communities in too many countries in our world.

But women and girls are also the majority, according to the ILO, of those economically exploited in other ways, in sweatshops or as domestic servants.

Trafficking, like poverty, discrimination and abuse of human rights, wears a women's face.

Indeed they are strongly related. It is the prejudice which women face in many parts of the world, their lack of rights and control over their own lives which helps create the conditions where trafficking can flourish.

Women – and children – are the key target group of the traffickers exactly because of their marginalisation, their poverty and their exclusion from employment and educational opportunities.

It is why we must see the urgent need to step up efforts to combat trafficking as part of the wider battle for human rights and those in particular of women.

And this is also timely. For along with the recent celebration of the 200th anniversary of the ending of the transatlantic slave trade, we have recently marked another very significant anniversary.

Sixty years ago, the international community agreed the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

It was a remarkable response to the horrors of the Holocaust and the Second World War and signalled a determination to build a better world.

Drawn up by experts from across the world, led by the inimitable Eleanor Roosevelt it set out clearly the basic rights which belong to us all, whatever our background and whatever our country, simply because of our common humanity.

Adopted in December 1948 by the founding members of the United Nations, it was a huge step forward for the world. It proudly proclaimed in Article 4 that "no one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave shall be prohibited in all their forms".

But just as Wilberforce would be shocked to see the size of the modern day slave trade, so the authors of the Declaration would, I believe, be appalled that their ambitions were so far from realisation.

Across the world, there are still tens of millions living in fear and hunger, denied even the most basic rights.

And while both men and women suffer from this denial of the basic dignity of life, the facts show that women are particularly badly affected. Seventy per cent of the world's poor are female, according to the United Nations.

Two out of three illiterate adults are women³. Less than two per cent of titled land in the developing world is owned by women.⁴

Half a million women a year die as a result of pregnancy or childbirth⁵.

The discrimination which women suffer can be seen in many forms from the cradle to the grave.

You see it in the cultures which encourage families to value boys which can lead to abortions or even infanticide of baby girls.

In those societies which limit educational opportunities for girls, forcing them to remain trapped inside the home instead of preparing them for a life outside the home.

You see it, too, in child brides, in forced marriages and in the many societies which turn a blind eye to domestic violence.

And it exists as well in the plight of widows in India and other countries who are pushed to the very fringes of society, denied the right to inherit their husband's assets.

³ UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2005

⁴ International Finance Corporation...Gender Equal Land Laws

⁵ UNICEF 2008

Gender gaps vary from place to place, but the overall pattern of women's disadvantage remains clear - and women around the world know it.

A woman in a Nairobi slum summed it up when asked by a development worker what event she would change in her life if she could, she replied "I would be born a man".

It is in these conditions that traffickers select their victims and peddle their lies.

By reinforcing a culture where women and girls are seen as commodities or possessions and lacking the worth of their male counterparts, they help create the conditions where this trade can flourish.

So by taking steps to root out these prejudices and practices, we can help combat trafficking, increase real choices for women and, importantly, improve the wealth and health of their societies.

We need to improve access to education to increase their opportunities and limit their vulnerability to the false promises of the traffickers.

The benefits of educating girls go, of course, far further than this. It is simply the best investment, as repeated studies have shown, that any country can make.

It is directly linked to higher economic productivity, better health, lower infant mortality, higher returns on investment, even higher agricultural yields.

So enabling girls to be educated to at least secondary level does more than open up new opportunities and choices for them.

It also creates a more prosperous country, combating the poverty which makes the promises of the traffickers so difficult to resist.

Education is not the answer to everything, as it must be linked to job opportunities and equality in all areas.

But it is one of the key elements in a strategy to reduce human trafficking.

By educating girls we will also give them a stronger voice within their communities, giving them more power over decisions at local and national level.

We have a long way to go. There are still five men, for example, for every woman elected to the world's parliaments.

But the greater the say women have over decision-making, the more progress there will be in bringing in policies and changing attitudes which contribute to the vulnerability of women being trafficked.

This is something specifically recognised by UN.GIFT.

I am delighted to have been asked to play a part in its new Women Leaders' Council.

The aim is to help push forward the agenda on women's rights and to provide a resource for advice and mentoring for women around the world to help combat trafficking.

If women have more political clout, it will help, for example, step up efforts to tackle violence and abuse in the home.

It is a sad fact that research has found that majority of girls and women who have been trafficked into Europe were abused as children either by their family or in their local community⁶.

Their lack of self-worth and desperation to leave makes them easy prey for the traffickers and their local spotters.

We need to create a culture where people no longer stay silent about the abuse they are suffering and where the legal systems take such violence seriously.

For if violence and sexual abuse in the home or community is tolerated, it is easier for men to see women as commodities and accept them being bought and sold.

It may seem that changing the culture on domestic violence is an impossible challenge.

But we must remember how attitudes here in the UK have been transformed inside three decades.

When I started practising as a young barrister some 30 years ago, it was clear that neither the police nor courts took domestic violence as seriously as they took attacks on strangers.

It was a reflection of views in society as a whole that what went on behind closed doors within families was not the business of anyone else.

Now the authorities and society see such domestic violence as the cowardly, despicable crime it is.

If we can see such a transformation in attitudes in the UK and in many other countries in such a short time, we can see it elsewhere.

Even in the Democratic Republic of Congo, which has perhaps the worst record of sexual violence in the world, slowly the culture is being changed.

Courageous women helped by grass-roots groups and with outside legal advice, are now standing up to help bring their attackers to justice.

UN officials say the number of rapes, though still appalling high, had begun to come down before the latest outbreak of fighting and appalling brutality.

⁶ Cathy Zimmermann and others, *Stolen Smiles; A summary report on the Physical and Psychological Health Consequences of Women and Adolescents Trafficked in Europe* (London School of Medicine and Tropical Medicine. 2006)

And by giving women more protection over their own bodies, it will also help reduce the spread of HIV/AIDS which is having such devastating impact on many countries in the developing world.

It is, of course, far harder to root out violence in the home or community if violence is all around as is the case in the DRC.

And the sad fact is that many of the countries which provide the main source of victims are scarred by conflict, ethnic tensions and civil war.

It is these conflicts and the increased poverty and despair they bring which lead to many seeking a better life elsewhere whatever the risks.

Conflict leads a legacy of lawlessness, of destruction, of economic instability and of rising numbers of orphans and widows.

It also leads to violence being seen as the norm where rape and abuse are commonplace and where the breakdown of society means the attackers are unlikely to face any sanction.

Such sexual violence has, as we have seen across the world, become institutionalised with girls and women taken captive to serve as sex slaves – as well, of course, as being coerced into fighting.

Trafficking within borders is just as evil and just as damaging as that which crosses continents or national borders.

So we need to step up efforts to tackle the source of these conflicts which lead to such increases in violence, to mass migration and economic misery.

The reality is, of course, that we are not going to stop migration. It is important for the prosperity of many destination countries just as many of the source countries depend on the money sent back from abroad.

We must work within our own countries to improve protections for migrants and particularly for women who are far more likely to work on the margins of society.

As Radhika Coomaraswamy, former UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women has pointed out traffickers fish in the stream of migration “preying on the most vulnerable to supply to the most exploitative, hazardous and inhuman forms of work”.

This must involve more than increased action against the criminals behind this trade and exploitation.

We must also offer more support to the victims including protection schemes, safe houses and assistance schemes.

We must remember that they are not criminals but victims of an appalling crime. They deserve and need our sympathy and help, not our condemnation.

Where they are returning to their own countries, we must ensure they can return in safety with dignity and support to reduce the risk of them falling prey again to the traffickers which has happened too many times in the past.

Many countries in recent years have taken major steps to putting in place sensitive assistance schemes but there is more to be done.

There is also a great deal more to do both at national and international level to crack down on trafficking, to free those held in modern day slavery and to bring those responsible to justice.

We now, in general, have the international agreements and domestic laws in place.

Well over 100 countries including the UK have now signed and ratified the UN Trafficking Protocol which calls for co-operation and action to prevent, suppress and punishing human trafficking.

The International Criminal Court has also made clear that it regards enslavement as one of the serious offences which will warrant investigation and prosecution.

We can also take heart from the recent landmark judgement by the Court of Justice in West Africa which remains one of the strongholds of slavery.

The Court in October ordered the Government of Niger to pay compensation to Hadijatou Mani for failing to protect her from slavery.

At the age of 12, Hadijatou was sold, like hundreds of thousands of others in the region, to a master.

The historic decision of the court was a strong message to other Governments in the area that they must eradicate this evil in their midst – giving hope of overdue at last to their citizens.

In the UK, too, we have seen significant steps with the creation of the Human Trafficking Centre to improve co-ordination.

This is linked to a national action plan to combat human trafficking in all its forms.

We now need to see the political will and the commitment of the police and other authorities in time and resources to use the weapons now at their disposal.

But we also have to step up our efforts to tackle global poverty and conflict and the prejudice and practices which prevent women playing their full role in their societies and provide the climate in which the traffickers can operate successfully.

Our response to the appalling misery in our midst must not simply be sympathy for the victim.

It must be indignation that such evil still exists. The indignation which fuelled Wilberforce and his fellow campaigners' long battle against the vested interests whose wealth depended upon enslaving fellow human beings.

The transatlantic slave trade was abolished, as Kofi Annan said during the 200th anniversary celebrations, because thousands of people took personal responsibility for what was happening around them.

Appealing for a similar campaign in the 21st century, he said: "We must approach today's abuses in the same spirit -- each of us seeking, not to blame somebody else, but to think what we can do to hasten their end."

"There is no evil so entrenched that it cannot be eradicated. Inspired by the abolitionists of two centuries ago, let us fight against exploitation and oppression and stand up for freedom and human dignity."

The former UN Secretary-General rallying call should inspire us all.

Our response to the scale of this crime and the depth of its depravity in the 21st century should not be despair but anger.

We must show the same resilience and passion for our cause as William Wilberforce and his fellow campaigners.

No matter how many disappointments and defeats – and there were many- they suffered, they never gave up, never stopped campaigning, educating and changing attitudes.

We need to mobilise public opinion in all our countries to see the legislation, domestic and international, is enforced.

Trafficking is not something happening somewhere else. It is happening in every community, in our streets, on our doorsteps.

We will only succeed in rooting out this misery and menace when we stand up and are counted.

When, in fact, the fight to end trafficking in our fellow human beings becomes a mass movement demanding change.

This is exactly the goal of STOP THE TRAFFIK – a global movement yes but one rooted, above all, in community action – which I am proud to support.

There could be no more fitting tribute to the brave campaigners of history or the authors of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights than for you and I to step up our efforts to tackle trafficking.

Our goal must be to build a world in which everyone, men, women and children, are free, safe and have the chance to prosper.

And if we work hard enough, we can achieve it.

Thank you.