

## 55th Session of the Committee on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women

UN Geneva 15 - 17 July 2013

### Introduction

The UK Government was examined on 17 July 2013 at the UN CEDAW in Geneva on its women's rights record and the problems impacting on women's equality in the UK. The UK Government reports to CEDAW around every four years on their progress and were last examined by the UN CEDAW Committee in 2008.

CEDAW is a unique opportunity for women to raise issues they are facing in the UK with the UN CEDAW Committee, who can ask questions of the UK Government directly as the UK is bound by the CEDAW to uphold women's human rights as a signatory of UN CEDAW Convention.

The Women's Resource Centre (WRC), together with a working group and women from over 42 UK NGO's produced over the last two years, an extremely comprehensive report which was highly praised by the members of the CEDAW Committee. The report brought together issues and realities impacting on women and girls in the UK in the [CEDAW Shadow Report 2013](#).

For the first time the Shadow Report mentions non-State torture (NST) as a form of VAWG.

In February 2011, at a WRC Shadow Report meeting in Newcastle, I spoke about the reality of non-State torture VAWG, including ritual abuse-torture, that women and girls/children suffer in the home and/or other places within the UK.

Non-State torture had not been mentioned as a form of VAWG in the UK's Government's Action Plan on VAWG (2010), and yet women and girls in the UK who have suffered torture harms are reaching out for support, for example to NGO support services for women and girls such as Women Against Rape and through specialist services aimed more specifically at present in supporting survivors of State torture for example: The Helen Bamber Foundation and Freedom From Torture.

Torture suffered in the domestic realm as a girl or woman, is a genderised form of violence against women and girls. Women and girls in the UK suffer torture violence harms in the home, in other private spaces, and/or through being forced into captivity, through being trafficked, through extreme domestic violence, through prostitution and through suffering FGM. Also many women and girls who are asylum seekers in the UK have suffered torture by non-State actors, as well as State actors, before they arrive in the UK.

There are tragically unknown numbers of women and girls who suffer extreme domestic-based torture violence in the UK and do not survive these harms. They are tortured and murdered.

There are few if any statistics on numbers of women or girls who have suffered torture by non-State actors in the UK because non-State torture is not recognised in the UK as a form of VAWG.

In the UK, and globally, we need human rights specific recognition, understanding, support and care for women and girls who have suffered non-State torture.

Human rights defenders and grass-root supporters Jeanne Sarson and Linda MacDonald of [Persons Against Non-State Torture](#) in Nova Scotia, Canada who have been advocating for non-State torture to be included in the Canada's criminal code for the last twenty years wrote a report about non-State torture which was included as Appendix 34 to the UK CEDAW Shadow Report 2013.

The 2013 [The UK CEDAW Shadow Report: Women's Equality in the UK: A Health Check](#) includes under: **General Recommendation 19: Violence Against Women and Girls**: a specific section on Non-State Torture. See Pages 170 (19.1) and 193 (19.86) on non-State torture and links to **Appendix 34: Non-State Torture**.

[Appendix 34](#) on non-State torture is referring to the [CEDAW 1992 General Recommendation 19](#), violence against women, paragraph 7(b) which says..."the right not to be subject to torture.."

Women's rights in the UK are being reversed. Government policies and austerity measures are disproportionately impacting on women, and rights that have been fought so hard for are now being cut back or eradicated.

This means that for women and girls trying to escape from violent domestic realm torture environments or who are trying to recover from years of torture harms; these women and girls now face even greater struggles of discrimination and suffering as they are already invisible citizens of torture harms.

To name and criminalise non-State torture along the extreme end continuum of violent crimes would be to begin to recognize these harms and crimes.

### [Going to the UN](#)

The delegation to Geneva included the CEDAW Working Group from women's NGO's from around the UK who highlighted specific issues relevant to their work and the women they work with as well as bringing issues from organisations in the UK who weren't able to be there in person.

I went with the delegation, accredited by National Alliance of Women's Organisations (NAWO).

### [Sunday 14 July](#)

I flew to Geneva and made my way to Lake Geneva in the evening to meet everyone. We all met and shared a meal together while planning and preparing for the meetings at the UN in the days ahead.

### [Monday 15 July](#)

On Monday morning I set off to the UN Palais des Nations and met up along the way with Charlotte Gage from the WRC and women from the North East Women's Network, The Angelou Centre and Southall Black Sisters. As we walked along towards the entrance a couple of us stopped to look at the statue of Ghandi and take some photos.

I noticed the motto underneath "life is my message" and it gave me courage and hope. I knew I was standing up for our human rights as women and girls, including the right to life and freedom not to suffer torture.

Altogether our whole delegation of NGO's from the UK including Scotland and Northern Ireland was around 40 persons.

The CEDAW Committee members met with NGO's and three national human rights institutions who briefed them on the situation of the rights of women in Cape Verde, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and the United Kingdom. The reports of these four countries would be examined by the Committee during the week.

At lunch time I met up with our delegation in the UN restaurant to support Charlotte and women who worked together on the final details for their statements for the Oral session in the afternoon. Women prepared to answer questions that could be raised by the CEDAW Committee members during the session. Charlotte had only three minutes to read the UK's oral statement.

The Oral Session began in the afternoon. Short three minute presentations were spoken by England, Scotland and Northern Ireland. Charlotte read out the [Oral Statement](#) to which some of the CEDAW Committee members asked questions and women from our group of NGO's answered.

I was struck by one comment from the Committee member who asked for more information about the cuts to legal aid and spoke that it was "alarming" to hear that legal aid was being cut so drastically, therefore prohibiting women from having access to justice.

## Tuesday 16 July

Charlotte and I went into the Committee Room and listened to Cape Verde's examination to see what we could glean from the questions and responses.

Then we went to the room the lunch time briefing was being held in. The room was very hot. Geneva was having a heat wave too and no-one could be found to activate the air conditioning. Charlotte provided welcome drinks and fruit for the Committee members. The table was soon filled up with information and postcards from NGO's about all the issues impacting on women and girls that people wanted to voice and that UK NGO's who couldn't come to the UN in person had entrusted to the CEDAW Working Group to make sure the CEDAW Committee members would see.

Women put posters and postcards on the walls. I put my [Create 4 the UN poster](#) on the wall.

14 of the CEDAW Committee members came, which felt very supportive. The room was packed.

One woman spoke to the Committee members in the lunch time briefing that .....

*"we are here in our numbers, we are a big delegation because we are so desperate about the effects the austerity measures are having on women's services and rights ..impacting on all women's issues..."* (paraphrased)

I had prepared a sheet of information, including a quote on NST from the Shadow Report with the Recommendation underneath. The visibility of the information on NST on the table with everyone else's information I felt was important, as it gave NST a place and voice on the table.

## The meeting on the stairs

Later, we all met with our Rapporteur Dr Ruth Halperin Kaddari on the stairs outside the Committee Room. Women voiced and explained the issues in detail and the Rapporteur asked people lots of questions so she could understand.

She asked if anyone else had questions or comments so right at the end, encouraged by a woman from our delegation on I spoke a question for Committee members to ask the UK based around Jeanne Sarson's and Linda MacDonald's [question that the CEDAW expert asked the Canadian Government in their CEDAW examination 23 October 2009](#)

*"I would like to know...that as some violence against women and girls in the domestic realm is torture, could the UK Government be questioned on whether it has looked at and responded to this specific violation of non-State torture... as it is in Appendix 34 in the Shadow Report?"*

The Rapporteur nodded.

I learned from conversations with delegation members that it would be unlikely for a question to be raised specifically on non-State torture by a member of the CEDAW Committee during the examination, unless the question could be linked to an issue raised around for example trafficking and exploitation and violence against women and girls, as the questions to be raised had been discussed in the October 2012 meeting at the UN in Geneva.

## Wednesday 17 July

The morning session was from 10-1 and the afternoon session began at 3 and concluded late at 5.30 pm. The sessions were on live [video](#) stream. Click link for video recordings.

The members of the CEDAW committee asked questions taking the Articles of the Convention a group at a time, in order. The questions raised were fielded by the UK Government and other official representatives both from within the Committee Room in Geneva and by live video link from London.

Our delegation made an impressive impact in our sheer numbers present in the Committee Room. We could not respond directly but spontaneous exclamations reverberated around the room when the responses being returned to the CEDAW Committee members' extremely good questions, were *not* hearing of the human rights feminist language that spoke to UK women's human rights.

I listened intently to all the questions and was very impressed and moved by the way the issues impacting so extremely seriously on women and girls in the UK were being expressed so very clearly by the CEDAW Committee members who questioned and articulated and spoke so fervently on our behalf.

I know hope and wishes and activism aren't necessarily going to make wishes come true, but even so, I had quietly hoped and wished all day that domestic torture of women and girls would be mentioned, and at the end of the day when it hadn't been, I felt very sad. But I had carried a truth of domestic torture suffered by girls and women to the UN.

However, VAWG in all kinds of contexts such as through domestic captivity, trafficking, prostitution and FGM was brought under scrutiny by the CEDAW Committee members who were very vigorous in their questions about the reality of the socio-legal discrimination issues around these crimes of violence against women and girls. Here is the [UN Press Office press release on the UK Government's examination by CEDAW](#).

After the examination, the CEDAW Working Group worked to summarise and collate:

*"Recommendations for concluding observations from the UK CEDAW Working Group - focus on England and Wales"* which was sent to the CEDAW Committee, who a short time later produced their Concluding Observations.

The Recommendations for the Concluding Observations included a sentence under General Recommendation 19 - Violence against women and girls:

"Use the UN CEDAW definition of VAWG and include non-state torture in this definition."

This recommendation wasn't included in the 2013 UK [CEDAW Committee's Concluding Observations](#).

Elizabeth Gordon

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