



UNA-UK

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Rt Hon Nicky Morgan MP
Minister for Women and Equalities

6 March 2015

Dear Minister,

Ahead of International Women's Day on Sunday 8 March, I am writing to you and Gloria De Piero, Shadow Minister for Women and Equalities, on behalf of the United Nations Association – UK (UNA-UK) to call for renewed UK commitment to the fight against gender inequality.

As you will know, 2015 has the potential to be a momentous year for women and girls. In March, the 20th anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action – the global “blueprint” for women's rights – will include an assessment of its implementation. The sustainable development goals, due to be adopted in September, must finish the job of the Millennium Development Goals, which did not go nearly far enough on gender equality. A review of UN Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 in October, meanwhile, will scrutinise 15 years of international efforts to address the unique experiences of women in conflict zones.

For many years, the UK has been a steadfast advocate for gender equality at the UN. It takes the lead on women, peace and security issues at the Security Council and has done crucial work on sexual violence in conflict. Its focus on women and girls in development is an example to others. And it has consistently championed women's rights at the Commission on the Status of Women (meeting over the next two weeks) and the Human Rights Council.

Despite these laudable efforts, gender inequality continues to blight the lives of women around the world. Indeed, by the Government's own admission, the issue is still prevalent in this country, as it is in every country. Political gains made at the global level have been hard won, slow to achieve and inconsistently applied. Governments and civil society are increasingly concerned by the repeated attempts of a determined few to halt, or even reverse, this modest progress. Issues that typically attract major resistance are what Secretary of State Justine Greening describes as “choice, voice and control”: women's control over their own bodies – particularly sexual and reproductive health and rights, recourse to justice and access to economic resources.

UNA-UK believes there are three vital areas for the UK to champion in each of the upcoming UN negotiations:

- **Including women's rights:** any discussion or agreement around gender issues must include strong language on the promotion and protection of women's rights. It is widely acknowledged that denying women their human rights – specifically because they are women – has been a major contributing factor to the lack of progress in implementing the Beijing Platform, the current Millennium

Development Goals and UNSCR 1325. The realisation of women's rights should be seen as a valuable goal in itself and not just as a catalyst for security and prosperity.

- **Tackling social norms:** structural barriers – and the lack of political will to address them – are a serious impediment to women realising their rights. Social norms and discriminatory practices, such as favouring sons' education, normalising violence against women and burdening women and girls with the majority of domestic care work must be addressed at the root by the introduction of transformative targets.
- **Ensuring participation:** women must be able to participate fully and effectively in decision-making processes at all levels. It is unacceptable that 20 years on from the record-breaking number of female delegates at Beijing, and 15 years after UNSCR 1325 urged states to ensure women's inclusion in peace talks, women are still sidelined. From grassroots networks to national politics to global institutions, women must be represented, supported and heard – able to take decisions and implement them. With scant representation of women at a number of its recently hosted summits, the UK must ensure that it too abides by these standards.

These goals will not be achieved overnight. They will require sustained and painstaking commitment for many years to come.

It is therefore vital that, whatever the outcome of May's general election, women worldwide can count on the UK to take a strategic, coherent and persistent approach to these issues at the UN, this year and beyond . Women's rights and gender equality are not the preserve of any one political party but should be a priority for all.

We look forward to seeing the UK build on its record by fighting to protect the gains of the last 20 years, and by setting out a progressive vision for the future realisation of women's rights and gender equality.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'N. Samarasinghe', with a long horizontal stroke extending from the end of the name.

Natalie Samarasinghe
Executive Director, UNA-UK