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## Human Rights Day at the Commonwealth Secretariat

Marlborough House, London

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**Keynote address: SRSZ Zainab Hawa Bangura, “Why Rights?”**

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His Excellency Kamallesh Sharma, Commonwealth Secretary-General, Commonwealth High Commissioners, Distinguished representatives of High Commissioners, Advocate Karen McKenzie, Advocate Hina Jilani, Ms. Ann Cotton, Ladies and Gentlemen, good morning.

My deepest thanks to the Commonwealth Secretariat for the opportunity to join you today, to reflect on **a critical question for our time: “Why rights?”** I would like to focus on a theme that is particularly close to my heart, namely **women’s rights as human rights**.

Today marks the **66<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights***. This occasion, known as Human Rights Day, is also the culmination of the “16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence”. It is an important intersection. **Physical security, and freedom from violence, is both a right in itself, and a pre-requisite to the realization of all other rights.**

Yet, sadly, the universality of **women’s right to a life free from violence** is still at issue across the globe. From sexual slavery and forced marriage imposed by Islamic State militants in **Iraq**, to women facing sexual exploitation in the very camps where they seek refuge in and around **Syria**, to Boko Haram abducting hundreds of girls from their schools with impunity in **Nigeria**.

International organizations, like the United Nations and the Commonwealth, must constantly evolve to keep pace with a changing world. The **confluence of crises** that characterize this moment in history – from **rising violent extremism to levels of civilian displacement not seen since the Second World War** – cannot divert our commitment to the cause of human rights. Rather, the urgency of combating the threats posed *right now* to women’s *lives and livelihoods* must capture the world’s attention anew.

Indeed, we are meeting on the eve of a **milestone year for global policy**. As you are aware, 2015 will mark the advent of a new sustainable development agenda, the High-level Review of Security Council Resolution 1325 on Women, Peace and Security, as well as Beijing+20: the 20-year anniversary of the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* on women’s rights and freedoms. We must **seize these strategic opportunities** to close the gap between *rhetoric* and *reality*, and to turn *resolutions* into *solutions*. Because **the blunt truth is that the promise of protection is not the same as protection itself**.

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As United Nations Special Representative on Sexual Violence in Conflict, I hear – *everyday* – the **harrowing stories of survivors of warzone rape**. When you ask, “*why rights?*”, I think of a 12-year-old girl in the Democratic Republic of the Congo who told me that she dropped out of school due to the stigma she faced as a rape victim. I think of the survivor of a Bosnian rape camp who said: “*They have taken my life without killing me*”. I think of the women held in Afghan prisons for so-called “morality crimes”. *Above all*, I think of the **children born of rape** – the babies I have held in my arms – who have been abandoned and orphaned as the living, breathing reminders of brutality.

So my simple answer to the question, “*why rights?*” is that each of these women and children are *unique and irreplaceable*, and *their lives and futures matter*.

We know that **women’s rights don’t end when wars begin**. Yet it is clear that insecurity, forced displacement, arms proliferation, and the breakdown of law and order, aggravate violence against women and girls. Since antiquity, in cities occupied or under siege, rape, sexual slavery and forced marriage was **simply what it meant to be a woman in a warzone**. Rape was perceived as inevitable and universal: chronicled in every age and place, and justified in the name of power, conquest, culture or religion. Accordingly, many survivors have been **twice victimized**: once by the crime itself, and again by legal systems that silence them and trivialize their trauma. Today, **women’s bodies are still being used as battlefields in wars started by men**.

Whether these atrocities occur within your borders, in neighboring countries, or half a world away, they implicate us all. **There are no bystanders**.

It is fitting to discuss these issues here in London, as the United Kingdom, through its **Preventing Sexual Violence Initiative**, has shown **inspired leadership** in raising the profile of a crime once called “**history’s greatest silence**”. Thanks to the efforts of **champion countries** like the United Kingdom, and to a series of breakthroughs in the **United Nations Security Council**, we are no longer a few lone women calling for action in echo chambers. The relevance of women’s rights to foreign policy, Rule of Law, security, development and peace has been affirmed.

The **International Criminal Court** has also helped to ensure that rape is no longer the “**world’s least-condemned war crime**”, or **relegated to the bottom of a false hierarchy of wartime horrors**.

Overall, **the last decade has seen greater progress to end the use of rape as a tactic of war, than in the rest of human history combined**.

So how do we harness this momentum to convert a *centuries-old culture of impunity* into a *culture of deterrence*? Wherever I go in the world, I emphasize one decisive factor: **national leadership**. The **primary responsibility for protecting human rights rests with national governments**: where there is a *political will* on their part, there is a *way*.

It is for this reason that we now see **glimmers of hope**, even in countries facing colossal challenges. For instance, in the **DRC**, the President has recently appointed a Special Representative to fight sexual violence, and an Action Plan has been adopted by the Congolese Armed Forces, which has spurred new education, training and capacity-building efforts to end sexual violence. In **Somalia**, the President has made a personal commitment that survivors who report rape will no longer risk being imprisoned, and that a specialized

crimes unit and clinic will be created to deal with these cases. In **Colombia**, concerted efforts are underway to ensure that reparations are paid to survivors of sexual violence, and to train the security sector to more effectively address this scourge.

In October, I conducted my first visit to **South Sudan**. What I witnessed was a **combination of chronic insecurity, inhuman living conditions, and rampant sexual abuse that shocked me to my core**. As one survivor told me: *“It is not just about rape; this is done to break your dignity. It is done to cause unimaginable suffering and destruction”*. Rape cases are generally settled under systems of customary law, most often to the detriment of the survivor. As a local activist explained: *“Here, we live under the rule of men, not under the rule of law”*.

My visit and dialogue with the government culminated in the signing of a Joint Communiqué with President Salva Kiir to address the scourge of sexual violence. This expression of political will is an encouraging sign in a turbulent new nation.

Whenever I visit countries affected by conflict, I aim to **amplify the voices of women** so they can influence policy change. Yet, in many communities, there is still a **wall of silence surrounding rape**. It is built from bricks of shame, stigma, fear and futility. It conceals from public view the victims who are too ashamed to speak, and separates them from a society that is not prepared to listen. I’m convinced that **we can tear down that wall**. Indeed, it has been said that *“women build bridges rather than walls”*, and I have seen firsthand – from Bosnia to eastern Congo – the power of their efforts to foster new solidarity networks in the wake of war.

It is high time that all nations realize: **women not only hold up half the sky, they also shape the world**.

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My goal, in pursuit of my mandate, is nothing less than the **complete eradication of this crime**. The conviction that *this is possible* stems from my own personal history, which is deeply entwined with that of my homeland, Sierra Leone.

I stand before you as someone who knows what it means to be culturally devalued because I was born a girl, and targeted for violence as a woman who spoke out. My mother never had the opportunity to learn to read or write. She swore that if she had a child, that child would be educated. But **access to basic education did not feel like a basic right; for us, it was a daily battle**.

I also know what it’s like to be threatened by militia who vowed to rape and kill me in order to silence my critique of corruption and advocacy for peace. I know what it means to have your home looted and destroyed; to have to flee with nothing but the clothes on your back and seek asylum in a strange land. During our 11-year civil war, an estimated **65,000** women were raped by rebels, with the aim of spreading terror amongst the entire population. In our darkest moments, *we thought we would never know peace again*.

When the war finally ended, I travelled from village to village recording testimonies for the Special Court for Sierra Leone. Everywhere I went, I met women survivors who were forging networks, starting small businesses, even running for public office. So I have seen what is possible. The fact that I am standing here today, and that Sierra Leone has successfully

transitioned to democracy and development – *both against overwhelming odds* – makes me confident that **hopes and rights can be realized**.

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The **Commonwealth also played a role in this story**. The fact that Sierra Leone was suspended from the organization, when a dictator seized power, helped to **hasten the end of military rule and erode its legitimacy**. We benefitted from the support of Commonwealth **electoral observers** in the several successful elections that have been held since the conflict ended in 2002. Being part of a **family of nations** can help to heal the scars of isolation and war. The Commonwealth reminds us that **democracy is not just about votes, but about values**. It is a way to channel affinities of history and inheritance to greater common purpose. For the many Sierra Leoneans who have received scholarships, or who – like myself – attended schools and universities set-up with support from the British, the **Commonwealth connection can feel like a ladder of opportunity**.

But to fully tap the wealth we hold in common, all nations in this network must champion women’s rights. And **the greatest guarantor of women’s rights is a peaceful State**. Statistics show that **maternal mortality** rates more than double in war-torn countries; the number of women holding **legal title to land** is almost halved during and after war; the net **enrolment of girls in primary school** drops dramatically, while the rate of **early marriage** spikes. Upholding human rights can avoid the descent into conflict and chaos. So let us **leverage the power and prestige of organizations like the Commonwealth to improve human rights records**.

In terms of the **right to development**, in Africa, women represent more than 80 percent of the informal economy, and produce more than 70 percent of the continent’s food. Upholding their rights, including to education and equal opportunity, can enable women to contribute their human capital to the “common wealth”. Fairer societies mean stronger economies. After all, **half of the world’s people cannot achieve its whole potential**.

Together, we can open doors, create windows of opportunity, and shatter glass ceilings for women through a **new international architecture**. Concretely, this could mean: the appointment to all international and regional organizations of a representative or envoy on Women, Peace and Security, and efforts to embed gender-responsiveness within the culture or “DNA” of every organization, beginning with a better gender balance at all levels.

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Nelson Mandela once said: “*It always seems impossible until it is done*”. So let us be bold and set our sights on **a world free from gender-based violence**. This would be a world where no woman walks in fear of the sound of footsteps behind her at night; where no girl’s dreams are deferred because threats and intimidation prevent her from attending school; and where women are equally represented on the frontlines of law enforcement, throughout the security sector, and in the upper echelons of political power.

This may seem an elusive, even utopian goal. Yet all of these things – freedom of movement, freedom from violence, the right to an education, to equal opportunity, and participation in public life – are *obligations*, not just *aspirations*. **Every Commonwealth citizen and country can contribute to a world safe for women and girls**. In this way, the

Commonwealth will remain a **beacon and standard-bearer for human rights, inclusive democracy and development**, in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century and beyond.

Ultimately, our goal, as members of the international community, is not just to change policies and practices. *Our goal is to change lives*, and that is only possible with unity of purpose, and a level of determination equal to the scale of the challenge.

Thank you.

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