

Speech by Hon. Emma Bonino, Vice President of the Senate of the Republic of Italy, at the International Conference on the Protection of Women's Rights, Istituto Italiano di Cultura – New York, Friday 24 September 2010

A worldwide ban on female genital mutilation: ending a violation of the human rights of women and girls

I would like to start with a few words in French:

*On vient de dire qu'on est ici dans une capitale multiculturelle, et alors je me permet de dire quelques mots en français: c'est une façon aussi de remercier les activistes qui sont ici aujourd'hui de leur présence, activistes qui viennent, par hasard, des pays francophones... mais la prochaine délégation sera anglophone*

As it has just been pointed out that we are in a multicultural capital, I would say a few words in French: it is also a way to thank the activists who are here with us today for their presence; coincidentally, they all come from francophone countries... but the next delegation will be English-speaking!

*LA CONFERENCE est une partie du programme financé par le gouvernement italien, avec la contribution aussi du Ministero delle Pari Opportunità, Madame Carfagna, la publication que vous voyez est faite grâce à la Province de Rome pour témoigner combien l'Italie, le gouvernement local et national sont engagés sur cette question.*

The conference is part of a wider program funded by the Italian government, including the contribution of the Ministry for Equal Opportunities. Minister Carfagna, the brochure you have before you was published with the support of the Province of Rome: this shows how engaged Italy is on the issue, at the local as well as at the central government level.

*Madame le Ministre, NOUS n'avons pas le temps, mais je voudrais que vous saluez et remerciez la présence de mes amies que j'espère pourrons devenir aussi vos amies...Je vous prie de vous lever et de saluer l'assemblée pour que les gens vous reconnaissent.*

Thus, Madam Minister, though we do not have much time, I would like to invite you to join me in welcoming and thanking my friends and partners, who I hope will become your friends, too... I ask the group to please raise your hands so that the participants to this conference can identify you.

*Elles ont fait un long voyage, une réelle épopée...*

I want to emphasize that they all have travelled a long way to come here... it has been a real journey for them...

Dear Minister, they come from Burkina Faso, Senegal, Djibouti, Benin, Sierra Leone, Guinea, and Togo. Also present is the representative of Euronet-FGM, the organisation in Europe that brings together all immigrants and activists fighting against female genital mutilation. Khady Koita is its founding president: I don't know where she is, she usually disappears...

So I will now switch into English, with apologies to our guests.

Minister Carfagna's overview was a broad and historical one. This allows me to skip the historical part and focus on the Campaign that we have now undertaken together, which is a result of the historical analysis she provided. As the Minister said, and I strongly agree, the road to securing women's rights has always been a difficult one for women in Parliaments, and it should not be taken for granted, either in developing countries or in ours.

And I was particularly pleased, Madam Minister, when you said that while we are all in different places, we all have a long way to go. Thus, joining forces does not mean an imposition of foreign values. To me, joining forces means creating a partnership in the methodology to follow. I think this is the most effective way to work together. We share a general objective: to stop violence against women; we all develop different campaigns to solve specific problems. But the main goal is to stop violence. Violence against women takes many forms: it can be physical brutality, psychological harm, discrimination, stalking. I think it is up to communities and countries to decide which priorities they want to emphasize, all the while sharing the fact that we have a common goal: to treat women as normal human beings - as actors in the world. This is the framework.

While discussing these issues with our partners in Africa, we decided - they decided, in fact... and I'm proud that we have been working with them for some time - to focus on female genital mutilation; others focus on honour killings and child marriage. I think that all of these battles are important; my contributions have been to the campaign against female genital mutilation.

What is innovative about their campaign? Their approach - one I share - is to focus on female genital mutilation as a violation of the fundamental human rights of the girls on whom it is committed, instead of thinking primarily of the health and social aspects of the practice. The point is not simply to do FGM in a "clean way", as has been done in some countries. What they said is "No! The point is not that we want a "proper" mutilation. No. We want mutilation to be stopped." This is because, as Minister Carfagna also said, the starting point is that female genital mutilation is a violation of human rights. The consequences are, of course, problems in childbirth, infections, and psychological troubles. But these are the consequences. The cause, the root, is that it is a violation of human rights.

Ours has been a long road...*Très longue: pour elles et pour moi...* Very long, for them and for me. Twenty-six years, and I joined ten years ago, when we started our joint Campaign in Cairo, moving then to Kenya, Djibouti, and most recently Senegal, with stops in Mali, Eritrea, Sudan, Mauritania, Gambia, Burkina Faso...so it has been a long way, we are not starting from zero. And now, working together for a UN General Assembly Resolution calling for a worldwide ban on FGM, is very important - for all the countries.

Why is it so important? First of all, it is important for the victims: this is why we have to continue to keep this battle alive.

I have years of experience in politics, and I know well that the agenda in the United Nations is different from other agendas, that it is more complicated. I think therefore that it is important to take a cohesive approach to encourage the political will to overcome any obstacles, particularly the ones that are most dangerous: the ones that are not made public.

No one dares to say that they are in favour of this practice. Some are simply not vocal: they keep quiet and are not willing to expose themselves. I believe that the Italian government, parliament, and civil society can have a role, by providing encouragement to bring everybody onboard together, to empower this movement, lead by whatever country (western or not) takes the forefront. The activists are the ones leading this campaign, and our role here is to support them.

So, all in all, recognising all the difficulties, we strongly believe that it is possible to reach this goal. We have a commitment to help overcome the obstacles that we know exist. Joining forces, I think it is possible. When our work started, many people didn't even feel free to say the words "female genital mutilation"; that wall of silence has been removed, and the issue is now a part of the public debate.

We therefore remain committed to helping this happen, without any intention of taking a leading role, because we know that we are fighting for the good of children and women worldwide. I think we have to focus on this goal. And there is one other important thing we cannot forget: if we attain this goal, this extraordinary network of activists will be energized to address other issues that confront us: I know that some of you are now talking about campaigns against child marriage, forced marriage and other violations. This can create a snowball effect that rolls and rolls and rolls. And our campaign to end FGM has started it all.

*Dunque signor Ministro, non so come ringraziarla per questo impegno. So che sara al Cairo lunedì, non appena tornata da New York, dove incontrerai un'amica importante per questa campagna, Moushira Khattab (Ministro della Famiglia in Egitto).*

Thus, Madam Minister, I do not know how to thank you for your commitment. I know that you will be in Cairo on Monday, coming from New York, and you will meet an important friend for this campaign, Minister Moushira Khattab, Ministry for Family and Population in Egypt.

In this Campaign, we have had the privilege of receiving the help of many First Ladies. Yesterday, at the event that was organized to launch the Campaign for a Worldwide Ban on FGM, the First Lady of Burkina Faso, who presided over the event, contributed with her unparalleled and commitment and energy: she made the trip just to demonstrate her support for this Campaign. We know that we can also count on the First Lady of Djibouti, as well as Suzanne Mubarak, the First Lady of Egypt, with whom we have worked in past years. I would like to end by saying that the battle has not been won yet. October will be a significant month and I ask you all for your support: we have launched an Appeal, which we encourage everybody present to sign and then to distribute upon your return to your countries and to your offices to help spread the word as widely as possible: this is definitely a worldwide campaign.

Thank you.