

David Cameron addresses the Conservative Women's Organisation

Addressing the Conservative Women's Organisation in London today, David Cameron will say:

(Please check against delivery)

“Just over five years ago Lindsay Armstrong was a bright, happy and vivacious sixteen year old schoolgirl, enjoying a night out with her friends. On her way back home she was approached by a fourteen year old boy. He dragged her into a local park, knocked her down and raped her. With incredible bravery, Lindsay went straight to the police and reported this grotesque crime.

The attacker was arrested, but for the next nine months, as she waited for the case to come to trial, Lindsay was tortured with fear and anxiety that I cannot even begin to comprehend. When the trial did begin she suffered a brutal cross-examination, spending an entire day in the witness stand, being forced to hold up her underwear at the time of the attack and detail her sexual history. In the words of her loving parents who tried to care for her at the time “she was shaking and crying uncontrollably”.

The boy was found guilty. But thirteen days later and before he was sentenced, Lindsay could no longer cope and committed suicide. This was, and remains, a truly harrowing story.

But why mention it again now? Because, first and foremost, we must never forget stories such as these. We always run the risk in this country of shock and outrage one day – as there was five years ago – turning into a shrug of the shoulders the next. By keeping the memory of Lindsay Armstrong alive – as her parents do through their support group – we can make sure no one forgets the need to end sexual violence against women.

Which brings me to the second reason why I have mentioned this story. When it comes to ending sexual violence against women, we still have so far, too far, to go in this country. And to get to grips with the problem, I think we need to focus on three things.

First, convictions and sentencing. Second, victim support, and third, cultural change in attitudes towards women and sexual violence. Let me take each in turn.

First, convictions and sentencing. According to the British Crime Survey, one in twenty adult women in the UK have been the victim of a rape, and a recent Government report estimated that at least 75 percent of these are never reported to the police. Of those that are reported, just 5.7 percent result in a conviction – down from 33 percent in 1977. Of course, comparative statistics must be treated with care and more work needs to be done to understand discrepancies, but in Italy, it's almost 50 percent, and as new analysis commissioned by the Conservative Party shows, England and Wales have the lowest rape conviction rate of any leading European country. Taken together, this means just fifteen in every thousand women who get raped in England and Wales see justice done.

How can any civilised country, that sees the sanctity of consent to sex as a vital right for every woman, accept these facts? And what about when the perpetrator is convicted? The average custodial sentence handed to rapists in England and Wales has fallen over the last three years for which there is published data to around 80 months.

Given all this, we have a situation where.. rapists think they can get away with it, while victims fear not being believed and wonder what's the point of pursuing the criminal process. This represents a real challenge to the British criminal justices system. Of course, this means doing all we can to help the police catch criminals. That's why we've laid out extensive plans for reform of our police. It means doing all we can to help victims, by understanding the harrowing circumstances so they don't feel intimidated when presenting their evidence. And it means making sure the length of sentence is proportionate to the crime.

That is why I can today announce that the Conservative Party's review of prisons and sentencing, led by Nick Herbert, will look at this specific issue, and provide recommendations on changes to sentencing for rape convictions.

But rape is much more than bald statistics about recorded crime and conviction rates. It's about the emotional trauma, the mental suffering and personal tragedy that stories such as Lindsay Armstrong's so starkly demonstrate. Which brings me to the second point I wanted to raise: victim support. Here, the work of rape crisis support centres are vital in helping women overcome what has happened to them. In 1984, there were 68 such centres in England and Wales. Today, just 45 centres remain. Indeed, seven have closed since 2005 alone.

Even the rape crisis centres that have remained open – like so many other

charities - are plagued by volatile and short-term funding, with funding decisions often made mid-way through the financial year. As a result, these centres are forced to survive hand-to-mouth and often face the threat of imminent closure. All this has led to an appalling and tragic lack of support for the victims of rape. For many women, the nearest centre is one hundred miles away. And waiting lists for counselling can be seven months long. The rape centre in Croydon has had 67 women at a time desperately trying to get through to just two phone lines.

How can any civilised country, that recognises the sheer emotional and psychological toll that sexual violence has on women, accept these facts? We need to ensure that rape crisis centres receive the government support they need. So I can today announce that a Conservative government will replace annual funding decisions with three-year funding cycles for these bodies. This would give these vitally important public services the certainty and stability they need to help victims of rape.

The final thing I want to talk about is our cultural attitudes towards women and sexual violence. A recent Amnesty International study of young people in the UK found that one in four think it is acceptable for a boy to 'expect to have sex with a girl' if the girl has been 'very flirtatious'. And studies have shown that as many as one in two young men believe there are some circumstances when it's OK to force a woman to have sex. In my mind, this is an example of moral collapse.

We need widespread cultural change, and addressing this moral failure represents a real challenge to British society: to families, schools, local communities and businesses. We have to be honest: the past decade or so has seen the growing sexualisation of our society, where sex is aimed at an ever younger audience and it's cool to treat women like sex objects. As I've said before, we need those that work in the media and music industry to exercise their responsibility in how they present female role models.

And we need our schools to talk about consent to sex when they teach sex education. I know there are some parents who have concerns about sex education, and they should reserve the right to opt their child out. But I believe that sex education, when taught properly, is extremely important. It should not be values-free. That must mean teaching young people about consent: that 'no' means 'no'. At the moment, this is not even compulsory in the sex education curriculum. This has to change – and it will change with a Conservative government. This will be an important step towards encouraging greater responsibility and helping tackle one of the root causes of rape and sexual violence.

Conclusion

Review of sentencing. Providing greater stability for rape crisis centres. Making sure teaching consent to sex is in the sex education curriculum.

I am proud that the Conservative Party is taking the lead on the issue of sexual violence against women. But I want us to do more. I want to make sure that when we come into government, we have an integrated strategy to tackle all violence against women.

Over the weeks and months ahead, the Conservative Party will be developing an integrated strategy to tackle violence against women – and we will be consulting leading experts as we do so. This is an issue that is vitally important to me. It's about public attitudes towards women. It's about making people responsible for their actions. Ultimately, it's about the sort of society I want Britain to be.”

Ends

Notes to Editors:

Rape

- **The Conservative Party is taking the lead on ways to prevent sexual violence against women. We are developing an integrated strategy, informed by experts, to tackle all violence against women which we will implement in government.**
- **At present, too many Government departments are producing contradictory policies and failing to develop a coherent approach to violence against women.**
- **We will review the sentences given to convicted rapists to ensure that the sentence fits the crime; ensure long-term, stable funding for Rape Crisis Centres; and we will make the teaching of sexual consent a compulsory part of the sex education curriculum, to empower young people to say ‘no’ to sex.**

Background information

- In 2006-07, a total of 13,780 rapes were reported to the police in England and Wales. Of these, 12,630 (92 per cent) were rapes of a female, and 1,150 of a male (Home Office, *Crime in England and Wales 2006-07*, Table 2.04). In 2005/06, the total figure was 14,443. But just 796 people were convicted of rape in England and Wales in

2005 (*Hansard*, 19 February 2007, Col. 148WA).

- The most recent Home Office analysis of the British Crime Survey (data from 2001) on sexual violence estimates that there are 47,000 female victims of rape every year (Home Office, *Domestic violence, sexual assault and stalking: Findings from the British Crime Survey*, March 2004, p.vi).
- New analysis from the independent House of Commons Library shows that we have one of the lowest conviction rates for rape in Western Europe. The conviction rate for England and Wales is just 5.1 per cent, compared to 59.3 per cent in Ireland, 48.8 per cent in Italy and 20.1 per cent in the Netherlands (*Rape Offences*, 7 November 2007).

Our proposals

- **Review of Sentencing for Rapists.** The length of fixed-term sentences for convicted rapists is falling. The Conservative Party's Prison Reform Review will look specifically at sentences for rapists, taking into account the effect of indeterminate sentences, to ensure that the length of sentence handed down for a rape is proportionate to the crime.
- **Long-term, stable funding for Rape Crisis Centres.** Currently, funding decisions for Rape Crisis Centres are often made half-way through the financial year and funding can be cut off with little notice. We will replace annual funding decisions with three-year funding cycles, giving crisis centres financial stability and certainty, and the ability to plan ahead.
- **Teaching on 'sexual consent' to be compulsory element of sex education.** We need our schools to talk about consent when they teach sex education, to help empower young people to say 'no' to sex. At present, this isn't a compulsory element of the sex education curriculum. We will make it compulsory.