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The presents that little girls around the world really need

After a seismic year in politics, young girls and women are more vulnerable than ever to gender-based violence



Gemma Lindfield: "The most important thing for little girls is that their experience of the world is free from violence, fear and inequality"

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How many little girls around the world are too excited to sleep just now, excited for Christmas and dreaming of the beautiful shiny gifts they'll soon find under the tree?

For many girls this is an aspiration. Their hopes are far more basic: shelter, personal freedoms and protection from gender-based violence. This isn't just in emerging economies. Many of these young women under threat are UK citizens or in other progressive western democracies, but live in fear of customs that emanate from their parents' or grandparents' countries of origin.

The cross-border legal and cultural issues involved make this area highly complex and co-operation between different jurisdictions is essential if these women are to be protected. However, the prospect of the breakdown of the European Union and a misogynistic president-elect across the Atlantic will set women's rights back decades. The most important thing for little girls is that their experience of the world is free from violence, fear and inequality. So we should ask: what do we want for little girls around the world this Christmas . . .?

A Christmas spent at home

This school holiday there will be families who are planning to take their daughter abroad to be married or have their genitals mutilated by force. The elves in this story are the teachers, social workers and police officers who work to identify girls at risk, and the lawyers who go to court to get forced marriage protection orders. Every little girl should feel the gift of having her passport in safe hands and being her key to the world rather than a prison.

A special visit

Not from the big man in red; rather a revisit of the 1993 UN Declaration on the Elimination of Violence Against Women. UN Women's statistics suggest that 1 in 3 women will be a victim of violence. This hasn't changed, even though the world has changed significantly in 23 years in other ways, with the advent of the internet and increased globalisation. Although this has opened up positive opportunities it has also allowed women to be attacked online, and suggests that there is an underlying culture that has normalised the abuse of women. The 1993 declaration should be updated to face these realities and send a strong message about the world in which we want our little girls to live.

A pony

No, scrap that. Little girls should have the opportunity to buy the farm, be the chief executive, run their own business and get the pony themselves. For girls to aspire to success, the messages in the world around them need to change. The law can erode the imposed reinforcement of gender identity through advertising, retail and the media. In a district of Berlin, billboards were prohibited from reinforcing gender stereotypes.

Although many may balk at such legal intervention, we have changed many societal norms through the law, marital rape being a stark example. What about when the little girls grow up and find themselves in their chosen industry? Section 78 of the most recent Equality Act, passed in 2010, had the power to require big employers to measure whether they are paying women and men equally. This was not implemented by the government and an opportunity was missed to tackle enduring inequality for women in the workplace.

The bill

No, not the actual bill for Christmas. The little girls in your life were given an early Christmas gift when Dr Eilidh Whiteford MP's private member's bill passed the second reading to the committee stage. The bill seeks to ratify the Istanbul Convention. This will secure the government's commitment to protecting women and girls against gender-based violence. Compliance with the convention will be monitored to ensure the government remains committed to its aims. It will also, hopefully, ensure that girls learn about what constitutes a healthy relationship in school to prevent them being victims of the future. This is a gift for life, not just for Christmas.

Gemma Lindfield is a senior barrister at 5 St Andrew's Hill Chambers in London and an ambassador for the Sharon Project, a UK charity for vulnerable women

