

Cherie Blair
Patron of the Children's Legal Centre
Accepting The Gandhi Foundation International Peace Award
14th October 2009

Good Evening Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am very honoured to be accepting this prestigious award on behalf of the Children's Legal Centre.

For those of you who don't know about the work of the centre, it is a remarkable organisation which strives for equality, respect and access to justice for all children and young people irrespective of background. It is also an organisation which has the stamp of its extraordinary director all over its work. Without Professor Carolyn Hamilton's tireless dedication and unquestioning belief that change is possible and achievable - qualities reflected by her entire team - the centre would not be what it is today and the children would be without a champion. From help lines and advice to strategic litigation and policy advising, the centre is dedicated to upholding children's rights in the UK and throughout the world. So as well as having a large legal aid practice in two offices in London and Colchester, it is also currently working in 20 of the world's poorest countries as a consultant for UNICEF.

Tonight's award is being given particularly for the Centre's work with refugee and asylum seeking children in the UK and juvenile justice reform in Central Asia. But the truth is that all its work deserves praise and recognition.

Many of the centre's clients, for example, are migrant children who have been smuggled or trafficked here, far away from their families and anything familiar. Perhaps Mahatma Gandhi would have understood this sense of loneliness when he first walked the corridors of the Inner Temple. Yet despite their trauma and fear, they can find themselves denied the support and affection they need and seen as some sort of offender rather than a child and victim. In these cases, the Children's Legal Centre works to ensure they are treated as children rather than immigrants. It helps them access services, such as accommodation, education and healthcare, and strives to raise awareness about their rights and entitlements. It would be nice, of course, to think that such work - at least here at home - is unnecessary.

We are fortunate in this country in having a comprehensive set of rights for children which reflect their vulnerability and dependence on adults. But we also know from high profile cases and our own experience that abuse of these rights is widespread and often horrifying in its impact.

There are those who are pregnant and thrown out by their parents or sexually exploited or forced into a marriage. These are just some of the young people that the Children's Legal Centre offers a vital lifeline. For we also know that law remains the most effective and sustainable tool we have to fight injustice in society. The centre represents children at all stages of the legal processes and is excited to have two cases due to appear in the newly established Supreme Court.

Let me briefly draw your attention to just two cases - one here in the UK and one abroad.

In May this year, a young girl - we will call her Asma - after being locked in her house for days, was forcibly taken by her father to Heathrow Airport. His intention was to put her on a flight to Algeria where she would enter a forced marriage to an elder distant relative. Her father hit her when she tried to get away at the check in desk, but the brave girl finally managed to escape and found safety with airport security. She could have been returned to her father, but the Children's Legal Centre took on the case and was able to have one of the first ever orders made under the then new Forced Marriages Act.

As international consultants on child protection and children's rights, the Centre has also worked in the Central Asian country of Tajikistan for the past five years and has had unprecedented successes. The centre's local social workers found that 15 girls were being detained in a boys' prison having failed the state- run-virginity test. This test is administered to girls as young as eight who have entered an orphanage. If they fail, they are then detained under prostitution laws in a boys' prison. The authorities believed this was safe and appropriate because sexual abuse 'doesn't happen' in Tajikistan. There are photographs of some of these young girls at the back of the room.

After working with the Tajik Government, the Children's Legal Centre was successful first in gaining duty of care over the girls in the boys prison. They, then, won support to change legislation to prevent any girls being referred there in the future. The result is that these girls are now living under the care of the Children's Legal Centre. There they receive psychological help, legal, medical and educational support with the aim that they will be able to rejoin their families and communities.

This is the practical difference the Children Legal Centre is making to the lives of children now - and in the future. It shows how legal work has the ability to improve lives, tackle inequality and shape the future for good. It is a campaign in which we all should play our part and in which the Children's Legal Centre is setting a lead.

I am honoured to be here this evening to accept the award on behalf of all the Centre's solicitors, front line workers, social workers and staff. There could be no more worthy recipients of this award.

Cherie Blair

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