

Sian Norris
Bristol Feminist Network

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Thank you so much for all being here tonight. Standing here, together in solidarity, you are showing your commitment to ending the international crisis of violence against women and girls.

Today is a day of celebration. For it is the 4th birthday of the Bristol Feminist Network. I know that I am so proud to stand here with you all today, part of a network that is buzzing and vibrant and making such a difference to gender inequality in the city and beyond. I have been with the network since it began in November 2007, in fact I was one of the organisers of Ladyfest Bristol 2007, from which BFN was born. I am so proud of the achievements of our network, and so happy to stand with you all tonight, as we say no more to violence against women and girls.

So, why are we here? What are we fighting against? The recent Bristol Fawcett report, Cutting Women Out, estimated that 130 women will be raped in Bristol each month. That means that since we began planning this year's Reclaim the Night in August, there will have been approximately 500 rapes in our city. This week in the UK, two women will have been murdered by her partner or ex partner and many, many more will have been abused. In fact, across the world, 1 in 3 women will experience sexual violence in

her lifetimes. In the UK, 1 in 4 adult women will experience intimate partner violence in her lifetime, a figure that goes up to 1 in 3 teen girls.

Surely then, these figures should be on the front page of the newspapers every day. Surely this should be a national scandal. Surely, with these numbers, our government should be investing serious money in funding support services, tackling rape myths and improving a justice system that so often lets rapists go free. And yet, instead of action to end violence against women and girls, we see cuts. Cuts to legal aid, preventing victims and survivors of domestic abuse from accessing affordable legal representation. Cuts to vital local support services for victims and survivors. Cuts to social housing, making it hard for victims and survivors to escape violent homes. When I wrote to Theresa May in April, she assured me that ending violence against women and girls was a priority for this government. But, as she said to the Women's Aid conference in 2010, it's actions that count, not words. And I've counted this government's actions. It isn't looking good.

It is very rare that cases of violence against women and girls get reported in our media. However, there have been three cases this year that have stood out in my mind and that have revealed so much about how rape and sexual violence is discussed in the mainstream. They were the accusations against Julian Assange and Dominique Strauss-Kahn, and the gang rape of 12 and 13 year old girls in Reading, where a group of men were found guilty and sentenced.

Whatever people here tonight think about the accusations against Assange and DSK, because of course we do not know what happened, one thing has been clear. The reaction to the cases was a checklist of how pervasive rape myths and victim blaming is in our society. All three alleged victims have been portrayed as liars, and have had their sex lives, politics, poverty, nationality and friendships used to discredit them. They have found themselves at the centre of conspiracy theories, and in some cases we have seen the legal definition of rape mocked and disregarded by lawyers, and by left and right wing commentators. We do not know what happened in either of those cases. But we do know that the immediate and continued reaction was to discredit and disbelieve the women. Because, in a rape culture that is almost always our reaction.

In the third case a 12 year old girl was gang raped, and her 13 year old friend was raped by one man. The men were convicted in March, but by July they were free after winning their appeal. One of the reasons given by the judge for their release was that the 12 year old girl was more sexually experienced than the men, and the convicted rapists had shown remorse. Yes, you heard that right. Our judicial system basically said that if someone rapes a child, but can then find a way that makes it look like the child was to blame, then they have nothing to worry about. Just admit it frankly, show a bit of remorse and easy. You'll be out of jail in less than a year.

In a rape culture, victim blaming, lack of justice and silence around the

levels of violence against women and girls is the norm.

But what I want to say to you all here tonight is that rape culture does not have to be the norm. Violence against women and girls is not a fact of life. It is not inevitable. It is something that can change, something that can and will end. By standing here tonight, by marching through our city streets, you have shown your commitment to ending it. The aims of Reclaim the Night, education on consent and respect, support for victim and survivor services and improving the justice system - these are all steps on the road to end violence against women and girls. Things are better than they were when the first Reclaim the Night was held in the 70s, and together, standing in solidarity together, we can make a difference and we will make a difference. I believe that. That belief gets me out of bed every day. A world without violence is possible, and by being here tonight, you are part of the movement to make that world a daily reality for everyone.

Thank you.