



SAVE THE CHILDREN

► The wife of the deputy PM is fighting for victims of sexual exploitation

THE SUNDAY TIMES

Nick, dear, we must save the children

Miriam Gonzalez, wife of the deputy PM, is fighting for victims of sexual exploitation. She tells Caroline Scott the government should do more

Caroline Scott Published: 26 May 2013



Miriam Gonzalez Durantez is a woman of many roles: expert in

Gonzalez with her husband Nick Clegg (Pascal Le Segretain)

international and European Union trade law at the global law firm Dechert, mother of three boys and devoted — yet powerfully independent — wife of Nick Clegg, the deputy prime minister. Today, however, she is furious as she reveals the exact moment when her impatience over the government's response to child sexual exploitation properly boiled over.

Like most political households the Clegg family wake up to the Today programme on Radio 4 and Gonzalez caught a discussion about whether figures on the sexual exploitation of children had been blown out of all proportion. "All I could hear was, 'Is it really happening? Can we believe these figures? They must be exaggerated' and I was so furious I was actually shouting to the radio from my shower."

She is referring to the two-year inquiry by the children's commissioner into child sexual exploitation in

gangs and groups (CSEGG), which aims to throw light on the nature and extent of sexual exploitation of children in England. In November last year its first interim report was lambasted for suggesting that as many as 16,500 children across England could be at high risk of sexual exploitation and, since the warning signs are so often missed by police and social services, the majority of these cases may go undetected.

Senior government ministers declared it “hysterical” and “half-baked”. And where, they fumed about the report, was the focus on Asian gangs? But the issue of sexual exploitation is not just about race; 36% of the 1,514 perpetrators identified by the report are white.

“The most compelling point for me was that it seemed so many of the issues were not even being addressed,” says Gonzalez. “When something is as overwhelming as this, the human mind tries to compartmentalise, to minimise it somehow. So we talk about race, we talk about gangs, but we hardly ever talk about what is happening to our children — from every kind of background and every ethnicity. At some point we’re going to have to confront this.”

Earlier this month seven men were convicted at the Old Bailey of a series of violent assaults — including rape and trafficking — against six children, some as young as 11. “My husband was taking prime minister’s questions that week and I had the same feeling,” she says. “Someone asked, ‘Are we going to be really tough on the perpetrators?’ And Nick said, ‘Well, of course we have to be really tough on the perpetrators.’”

“And you know, I wanted to scream: but what about the children? Nobody remembers the children. Who is going to take care of them? They are just at the beginning of their lives and with some help they can learn to love again and be loved, but somebody has to do that work.”

It’s fair to say the recent convictions were secured despite the best efforts of defence barristers to portray the young victims as sexual delinquents; Sally O’Neill QC, defending 27-year-old security guard Kamar Jamil, suggested one 13-year-old was “thoroughly enjoying herself”. No wonder girls have often said they found giving evidence in court as bad as the abuse itself.

Two weeks ago details of another trial, which had collapsed in chaos in September 2011, were revealed for the first time after reporting restrictions were lifted. After a retrial seven men from Telford were jailed of the systematic abuse of a group of girls over several years. The case involved a three-year police inquiry that identified more than 100 victims and almost 200 suspects.

Having summoned the courage to testify, one victim was reduced to a sobbing wreck under cross-examination; another was labelled “wicked”, “cruel” and “a compulsive liar”. Serially exploited by men, they must have felt they were now being punished by the legal system.

Gonzalez shakes her head sorrowfully. “You won’t find many adults who can cope with cross-examination,” she says. “I think the whole judicial system at pretty well every level has to be reviewed. But we have to be realistic. It’s always going to be traumatic. It’s how you support them through the experience that’s important, so it doesn’t feel like another attack.”

Gonzalez has earned respect for her fiery refusal to be drawn into the publicity machine around political spouses. When asked if she was going to hit the campaign trail with her husband during the last general election, she replied coolly: “Listen, I don’t have the luxury of having a job I can simply abandon for five weeks and I imagine that is the situation for most people in the country.”

Spanish wives do not easily brook dissent in their men. In the week when the “groping” claims emerged against Lord Rennard, the Liberal Democrat grandee, the Cleggs set off for a holiday in Spain. The deputy PM made it clear he had no choice in the matter. “You don’t mess with Miriam,” a party official sighed.

Given the constraints on her time — her boys, Antonio, Alberto and Miguel, are 11, 9 and 4 — she supports only three organisations seriously: the Lawyers’ Circle, which she co-founded with another lawyer, Melanie Hall, in 2011 to promote women’s rights in Africa; the Anthony Nolan blood cancer charity; and for the past couple of years Barnardo’s. She is often asked to organise charity receptions

and usually says yes. “How can you say no when it’s just three hours of your life?” she shrugs. “But this is different. This I am passionate about.”

We meet at Barnardo’s pan-London child sexual exploitation, missing and trafficking service premises in north London to discuss the charity’s work. The lavender walls are covered with swirly artwork and there’s a television and two comfy sofas, but the signs that the children who use this service are permanently at risk of further violence and exploitation are everywhere. The front entrance is so discreet it’s almost impossible to find and there are no front windows. Once inside, the doors to each room can be bolted and double-locked from within – reminders that these children are never really safe from the gangs who prey on them.

Dressed in a cream top, black, ankle-skimming jeans and ballet flats with gold pointy toes, Gonzalez is glossily beautiful. She has straight teeth and dewy, olive skin, veiled in the kind of complicated make-up that makes men think you’re wearing none at all. She chats and laughs with three teenagers aged 14 to 18, all victims of trafficking. If she is unused to sitting around a table covered with cartons of fruit juice, pizza and cereal bowls filled with orange crisps, she doesn’t show it.



Gonzalez talking to girls at the Barnardo’s centre in London for victims of sexual exploitation (Vicki Couchman)

Last year this service worked with 151 cases of children trafficked within Britain and identified nine different ways that children they helped were being exploited. These ranged from older boyfriends pimping girls out to their mates to families doing

something similar to their children – 12 cases last year – and peer exploitation. As well as organised criminal gangs preying on vulnerable teens there has been a huge rise in grooming over the internet.

“Within minutes of making contact the child is asked for ‘sexy pictures’,” says Katriona Ogilvy-Webb, deputy children’s service manager at Barnardo’s. “If there’s no response they move on immediately, but if the child says, ‘Ooh, I don’t want to do that’ they start to chip away and within days, sometimes hours, he or she thinks, ‘I don’t want to be awkward, I want to be nice’ and gives in. Those pictures can be on the other side of the world in five minutes and there you have the beginning of an abusive relationship.”

Ogilvy-Webb spreads out a poster detailing the three stages of grooming from friendship to loving relationship through to “abusive stage”.

“I’ve been using this for 7 years and the number of children who’ve disclosed after seeing it is extraordinary. They’ll often say, ‘Oh my God! It’s like he used this as a manual.’ It’s a big moment for

them because, for the first time, they realise what happened was not their fault.”

A series of cards illustrating different scenarios has also been an incredibly successful tool. One depicts a young girl sitting on a sofa at a party surrounded by men. Olivia, now 18, who has been sexually exploited and trafficked since the age of 12, didn't tell anyone what had happened until she saw this card and recognised herself.

She describes being at a party in a flat with about 30 men: “It was just expected that anyone who wanted to could have sex with me.” She's quiet and poised, but the loneliness and shame she must have carried around with her are unimaginable.

When I ask who looks after her now she says: “No one.” Social isolation is the groomer's key tool. Outreach workers on this project are identifying children as young as eight and are in the grim process of adapting the cards for younger and younger children.

The number of sexually exploited children across the UK using Barnardo's services went up by 22% to 1,452 last year; the number of young people trafficked rose by 84%. “Every time a new service opens it is inundated,” says Ogilvy-Webb. “It's a massive issue. We'd like to open one in every area where there is a need. At the moment we're only able to help a tiny proportion.”

New government guidelines mean all local authorities must have a system for identifying sexually exploited children and a safeguarding plan. But they are not obliged to fund specialist support (Barnardo's work costs about £3,000 per child per year and it must compete for funding for its 24 services across the UK). A council might fund one child for six months, or none.

Gonzalez suddenly says something so obvious it leaves everyone blinking in surprise. “There are a lot of local authorities [455 in England and Wales] and there can't be one which isn't affected, yet we are relying on a voluntary service operating in only 24 places? Why isn't this a government priority?” she asks passionately.

“Pillow talk tonight possibly, Miriam?” I venture.

“Now that wouldn't go down at all well with Nick,” she purrs. But she has pledged to raise awareness: “I don't have the knowledge to identify where the money should be coming from. But as a non-expert, as a mother, the situation is shocking. I have to believe we should be looking for a different model.”

Last week the House of Lords roused itself as, one after another, speakers belatedly confronted the figures again: 2,409 children were confirmed by the children's commissioner's report as victims of sexual exploitation between August 2010 and October 2011 and these were based solely on the inquiry's call for evidence. Barnardo's believes the situation has worsened since then.



The numbers speak for themselves in terms of the scale of the problem. Police and social services will have to work to recover a situation that should never have got to this point. But Gonzalez's question remains: without dedicated help, what will happen to the children?

3 comments

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 **Brian Edwards** ▾

1 person listening

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Alex Seaward

1 day ago

This is a decent article bringing attention to something that clearly needs more support, written by a woman, so why is this part...

"Dressed in a cream top, black, ankle-skimming jeans and ballet flats with gold pointy toes, Gonzalez is glossily beautiful. She has straight teeth and dewy, olive skin, veiled in the kind of complicated make-up that makes men think you're wearing none at all"

relevant at all? Intelligent women don't need to be classified like this, and I'm interested in what Mrs Clegg is working on, not what she looks like.

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LBeagle

1 day ago

@Alex Seaward Were she not Little Clegg's Missus, who would have heard of her?

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PJS

22 hours ago

@Alex Seaward

Not to forget the headline :-)

Working with victims and reducing potential victims is crucial but seemingly unimportant vs headlines on punishing the predators we have helped by our inaction to feed.....

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