

Weaponising Human Rights Discourse Through Empty Rhetoric and Imperialist Narratives: The UK Government's Commitment to Abortion

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Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak famously observed that Western military interventions in the Global South could be understood as [‘White men saving brown women from brown men’](#). Various feminist and TWAIL scholars have since highlighted the enduring appeal of this narrative, which positions Global North states (and the people in them) as benevolent rescuers of oppressed people worldwide. [Anthony Anghie and Bhupinder Chimni refer to this as international law’s ‘civilising mission’](#). Yet the outcomes of such interventions are rarely benign or civilized as such interventions **replay the colonial model by exploiting those who were being ‘saved’**.

The export of human rights norms and language similarly conforms to this rescue narrative by [juxtaposing the Global North as ‘saviours’ and the Global South as ‘savages’](#). [Makau Mutua argues that such a narrative lies at the heart of the human rights project](#), calling it a damning metaphor that ‘depicts an epochal contest pitting savages, on the one hand, against victims and saviours on the other.’

I argue that as well as reproducing this racialised juxtaposition, the promulgation of the heroic narrative is used to obscure the reality of rights issues in the UK. The reification of this narrative that situates the UK as a saviour of oppressed people is not happenstance but the deliberate weaponisation of gendered and racialised narratives that allows the UK to promote itself as liberal, tolerant, and progressive. As [a host of feminist and TWAIL scholars](#) have observed, the urge to ‘rescue’ or ‘liberate’ people in the Global South is a seductive one. One of the reasons that these rescue fantasies are so attractive is that they neatly detract from very real gendered and racialised harms that affect people in the UK by rendering those harms less significant or superficial than the ‘real’ oppression facing people in the Global South. The appeal of saving people allows the Global North (or individual nations and the people in them) to feel as though it is responding adequately to complex geo-political crises and enables the Global North to position itself as the guardian of human rights and liberal values. I argue that a further consequence of this narrative is that it allows those in power in the UK to deny and ignore racism, patriarchy, and discrimination at home. By positioning itself as the supposed custodian and exporter of liberal values and the saviour of those facing oppression, the UK seeks to make itself impervious to challenge over its failures in securing equality domestically.

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The UK claims to be a leader in promoting gender equality internationally and a supporter of reproductive rights. The [Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, for example, has championed reproductive rights](#) as a necessary precursor for eradicating poverty and promoting gender equality in the Global South.¹ In the wake of the recent US Supreme Court judgment of [Dobbs v Jackson](#), which overturned the constitutional protection of abortion set down in [Roe v Wade](#), the UK Government was effusive of its commitment to reproductive rights worldwide, with the then [Prime Minister calling the ruling a giant step backwards](#). Yet, the UK's commitment to reproductive rights domestically does not meet the gold standard it sets for others and reveals the UK as a poor example for other states to follow. Abortion remains criminalised in Scotland, England and Wales² despite the [UN and other international bodies calling for it to be decriminalized](#). Several women in England have been prosecuted and one [imprisoned for procuring her own abortion](#). Until recently Northern Ireland³ had one of the most restrictive abortion regimes in Europe where '[de facto limitations render\[ed\] access to abortion virtually impossible](#)'. Yet both the Northern Irish Assembly and the UK Government continually resisted calls to comply with international human rights obligations and reform the law to allow for abortions there.⁴ The UK Government has also stated that it [has no plans to amend the criminal law on abortion in England and Wales](#). Despite [legal challenges](#) arguing that lack of access to abortion in Northern Ireland was a human rights violation, the UK Government claimed that legislating for abortion there would threaten both the Northern Irish peace process and

¹ Similarly, [The All-Party Parliamentary Group on Population, Development and Reproductive Health](#) recommended that "DFID should do even more to support willing countries to expand access to safe and legal abortion where abortion is restricted through policy and legal reform." The UK also reviewed its humanitarian aid policy due to a series of UN Security Council resolutions that called for safe abortion services to women raped in war.

² Abortion is criminalised in England and Wales under the [Offences Against the Persons Act 1861](#) and under the common law in Scotland. Although, there is debate over whether Scots law has ever criminalised abortion.

³ The UK devolves certain areas of law (known as competencies) to its devolved nations—Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, which each have their own parliament or law-making assembly. Northern Ireland was formed when Ireland was partitioned in 1921 following the War of Irish Independence, which sought to bring about an end to British rule in Ireland. The majority of Northern Ireland's population were Protestants descended from British settlers who considered themselves British. They are known as the Unionist or Loyalist community. Those who considered themselves Irish and were generally Roman Catholics formed a minority in Northern Ireland and are known as the Nationalist or Republican community. Seeking to prioritise the interests of the Unionist community following the declaration of an Independent Irish Republic, Britain retained sovereignty over Northern Ireland, which remains part of the UK. Continued disagreement over the future of Northern Ireland and discrimination against the Nationalist community led to sectarian conflict known as 'the Troubles' between those who sought Irish reunification and those who still wished to remain part of the UK.

⁴ There are complex reasons why Westminster politicians refused to extend abortion to Northern Ireland prior to abortion being devolved to Northern Ireland. In 2008, there was speculation that the [Democratic Unionist Party \(DUP\) had received assurances from the then Labour government](#) that if they voted in favour of anti-terror legislation then there would be no attempt by the government to extend the Act to NI.

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the devolution settlement.⁵ It [similarly justified its refusal to fund abortions for people from Northern Ireland](#) by claiming that allowing pregnant people from Northern Ireland to access NHS funded abortions in England and Wales would threaten the devolution settlement and precipitate ‘health tourism’. It was only after sustained media criticism and domestic and international condemnation that the Government relented and allowed access to NHS funded abortions in England and Wales to those from Northern Ireland.

Due to the lack of a functioning Assembly in Northern Ireland between 2017 and 2020, decriminalisation of abortion in Northern Ireland was achieved via an amendment to legislation passed by the UK parliament. This was a result of the tireless efforts of Northern Irish activists, continued media pressure, and the work of cross-party MPs. Yet, the Department for Health has continued to frustrate efforts to commission abortion services. When the UN cites unsafe abortions as a leading cause of death and injury to women and pregnant people, the images this conjures are of women in the Global South. Yet, the reality is that many women and pregnant people throughout the UK, particularly in Northern Ireland have struggled to access local abortion care, [leading many to try to source abortion medications via the internet](#). Rather than being the catalyst to reform abortion laws, this has led to an increase in prosecutions for illegal abortions.⁶

Similarly, the UK has been criticised by international bodies for allowing hostile attitudes towards LGBTQ+ people to spread and that the UK [was now considered a dangerous place to be a trans person](#). Yet, simultaneously, the UK Government promoted the ‘Safe to Be Me’ LGBTQ+ conference as a first for the UK to showcase its commitment to LGBTQ+ rights internationally. The UK has previously justified military interventions abroad as missions against intolerance, injustice and homophobia, juxtaposing images of the Global South as barbaric and repressive with images of the Global North as liberal and progressive. [David Cameron drew on images of ISIS/Daesh executing gay men in Syria](#) to demonstrate the regime's barbarity to garner support for a UK military response.

⁵ The tactic of appealing to politicians in London to ‘save’ Northern Irish women from the regressive abortion regime is [one that has been hotly debated](#). O’Rourke describes how leveraging human rights law was an [explicit tactic used to embarrass both the UK and Northern Irish administrations](#).

⁶ In Northern Ireland, a woman was found guilty and sentenced to three month’s imprisonment (suspended) in 2016. The facts are narrated in [NIHRC \[89\]](#). In 2017, a mother was charged with procuring pills for her 15-year-old daughter. She was eventually acquitted after parliament repealed the Offences Against the Persons Act with respect to Northern Ireland effectively decriminalising abortion. Several [women have been prosecuted in England](#), and some imprisoned.

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Yet, the ‘Safe to be Me’ conference was cancelled after over [one hundred organisations boycotted](#) it in protest at the UK Government’s failure to ban conversion therapy for trans people. Similarly, human rights lawyers point to the numerous cases of LGBTQ+ asylum seekers who have been refused asylum in the UK and the Home Secretary recently declared that [‘being gay or a woman isn’t enough to claim asylum’](#). A [recent report](#) highlighted that LGBTQ+ asylum seekers were discriminated against and placed in dangerous situations while being kept in detention centres. Once again, there is a gap between the rhetoric of the UK as a rights champion and the reality on the ground.

These brief examples do not demonstrate just the UK Government’s hypocrisy but, the deliberate leveraging of the international image the UK crafts for itself to demonstrate its commitment to gender and equality. When the UK government’s record on these issues is considered, the rhetoric employed to promote gender equality, minority rights and LGBTQ+ rights is somewhat empty. While Governments often fail to live up to their rhetoric on rights issues, the gap here is instructive. I argue that the deployment of imagery that positions the UK as a human rights protector not only whitewashes deeply problematic uses of military force and soft power abroad but provides a convenient alibi to accusations of failure on gender equality, minority rights and LGBTQ+ rights at home. The UK is not the guardian of reproductive rights and champion of gender equality that it positions itself as when attempting to influence norms in the Global South. Yet, the power of the rescue narrative makes it challenging to dislodge imagery of the UK as progressive and tolerant when these images are so interwoven in the British psyche.

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Artist: **Indu Harikumar** who works on people powered art projects on gender and sexuality. Her artwork can be found at her Instagram page <https://www.instagram.com/individuality/>