

Booth accuses male clerics of discrimination

Abigail Frymann

RELIGION AND culture should never be used as an excuse to discriminate against women and deny them their fundamental human rights, Cherie Booth, wife of former Prime Minister Tony Blair, said this week.

Ms Booth, a Catholic and leading human rights lawyer, said on Wednesday that it was usually male clerics who interpreted the teachings of their faith in ways that led to women being discriminated against and suffering hardship.

Speaking to an audience at Chatham House in London, she said the essential dignity of the individual was recognised by all the

great faiths and all the great faiths may be used as an instrument for women's empowerment. "There are those who defend discrimination ... by reference to differing cultural and religious standards. But rights can't be watered down. They belong to every one of us. Rights are a gift from God."

In a reference to Islamic law Ms Booth said: "It is not laid down in the Qur'an that women can be beaten by their husband or that their evidence should be devalued, as it is in some Islamic courts." Women in Egypt, she added, were subject to a far less efficient divorce system than their husbands, leading many to stay in abusive marriages rather than risk losing their children and ending up on the streets.

Earlier, on the *Today* programme on BBC Radio 4, Ms Booth referred to her own Catholic background when asked about the controversy over Muslim women's dress, particularly the wearing of the full veil. She pointed out that her mother and other female relatives had worn veils to Mass and that she had been educated by nuns. She said she had no problem with women choosing to dress modestly but feared that the full veil hindered self-expression.

"If you get to the stage where a woman is not able to express her personality because we cannot see her face, then we do have to ask whether this is something that is actually acknowledging the woman's right to be a person," she said.

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