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Late intervention has caused 'huge unhappiness'

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Theresa May, the Home Secretary, will be accused of "hypocrisy" today as it emerges that Britain is trying to water down an international agreement to protect women against domestic and sexual violence.

British officials have astounded members of the Council of Europe with a last-minute intervention arguing that violence against women is not a violation of human rights.

Documents leaked to *The Times* reveal that Britain wants the suggestion taken out of the Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence — and replaced with a weaker phrase. They also want to alter the document so that it applies only in peace time — and not during armed conflict.

Sources say the British intervention has caused a huge amount of "unhappiness" among other countries. A draft version of the agreement has taken 47 member states almost two years to negotiate and was about to be signed off. The astonishing revelation comes on the day that Mrs May launches her Government's strategy on tackling violence against women and girls. Yvette Cooper, the Shadow Home Secretary, said: "It is hypocritical for the Government to claim that violence against women is a priority and then behind closed doors to try and water action down. Britain was part of establishing an international consensus in the 1990s that violence against women should be treated as a human rights abuse. So why on earth is the

Tory-led Government ripping up this now?"

Kate Allen, the director of Amnesty International, has written to Home Secretary urging her to adopt the Convention as it stands. She said any attempt to weaken it would be a "retrograde step".

Senior figures in Europe have also reacted with alarm. Sources say only Russia supports the idea of reopening the negotiations on the draft.

José Mendes Bota, president of the Committee on Equal Opportunities at the Council of Europe's Parliamentary Assembly, said he was "very concerned about UK objections".

He warned that any attempt to block the approval of the Convention would be a "political crime".

Britain objects to the words, "violence against women is understood as a violation of human rights". Instead, it wants "violence against women constitutes a serious obstacle for women's enjoyment of human rights". The End Violence Against Women Coalition says the intervention is unprecedented.

Marai Larasi, who co-chairs the group, said: "We are stunned that the Government is now seeking to weaken the rights of women across Europe, while saying it wants to strengthen them at home."

A Home Office spokeswoman added: "Later today we will publish our detailed action plan setting out how we are going to tackle these crimes, including, for the first time the action we are taking worldwide."

"We are supportive of the work of the Council of Europe in raising awareness of violence against women and girls and keen to see the adoption of a strong convention."



Theresa May: launching strategy on violence

