

Murray Edwards JCR, on behalf of members of the undergraduate body, wish to express our disappointment with Dame Barbara Stocking's response to the recent allegations regarding her role in the cover up of sexual exploitation in Haiti while CEO of Oxfam. Her conduct has seriously called into question the viability of protecting students' welfare, particularly that of BME students, while Dame Barbara continues to act as college President.

In an open meeting with students held on 13th February to discuss allegations against her, Dame Barbara spoke about sexual exploitation in a dismissive manner, presenting it as an inevitability in a 'disaster zone' and comparing it to crimes such as fraud. Students have also been dismayed by Dame Barbara's demeanour during appearances on national television, with her smirking and smiling while discussing serious allegations signalling a complete lack of regard for the victims of sexual exploitation. We know there are survivors and victims of sexual assault in college. Such a cavalier attitude to sexual assault is an affront to the experiences of these students. Students have raised serious concerns about the possibility of maintaining a relationship of trust between staff and students while staff with responsibility for student welfare continue to stand by Dame Barbara as President. Some students have told us they have no confidence in College's commitment to advocating for them if they themselves were to come forward with allegations of sexual misconduct against senior staff.

It is crucial to recognise how BME students in particular have been alienated by Dame Barbara's conduct. In the open meeting mentioned above, Dame Barbara used racially charged language, constructing Haiti as an uncivilised nation, stating that 'these things happen' in places 'where there is no rule of law', moving the burden of responsibility for sexual exploitation away from its white western perpetrators. The President of Haiti himself has contested this racialised narrative, stating that Dame Barbara's suggestion that crimes were not reported because nothing would be done about them 'is really an insult to my country because you are working in a place and country which is not a forest'. For the first half of the twentieth century, the diagnosis of white colonialists with 'tropical neurasthenia' served as a powerful explanatory tool, putting the failures of the supposedly civilising project of Empire down to the local climate and population. Echoes of this colonial narrative are evident in the language Dame Barbara has used to address the behaviour of Oxfam employees in Haiti.

That the President of our college has conducted herself in such a manner has been an extremely alienating experience for BME students in college. Numerous BME students have contacted the JCR to express the distress and concern that Dame Barbara's conduct has caused them. It is important to remember that Murray Edwards is not just an educational institution, but students' home in Cambridge for the the duration of our degrees. Unfortunately, Dame Barbara's conduct has had a serious impact on students' ability to feel at home in college, where we must brush up against her in corridors and dining spaces every day. We believe Dame Barbara's lack of regard for black women's lives in Haiti is impossible to disentangle from her conduct in college and the welfare of BME students. This incident has highlighted an ongoing problem of racist microaggressions experienced by students in encounters with Dame Barbara over several years. Such microaggressions form part of the wider experience of BME students in Cambridge, who face institutional racism on a daily basis. College's inaction in dealing with this issue is a prime example of how Cambridge institutions work to facilitate what Dr Priyamvada Gopal has recently referred to as the 'genteel liberal racism that is the very lifeblood of Cambridge social intercourse'.

For college to rebuild trust with students, there must be recognition of our grievances. A serious conversation about how race affects the experience of students in college must take place, led by BME students. College must reaffirm its dedication to taking sexual assault seriously and its commitment to survivors and victims over abusers who occupy positions of power. The JCR is asking for a formal apology from the college for being too hasty to express their support for Dame Barbara, for failing to consult the opinion of members of the college first, and for implying in statements to the press that the student body is universally supportive. After all, it is we, the students, who are Murray Edwards College, not the President. Finally, we call for a dialogue about whether these processes of rebuilding trust can take place while Dame Barbara Stocking remains our President. The situation as it stands now is unconscionable. We know that many BME students and survivors and victims of sexual abuse are finding it impossible to feel safe in college. Murray Edwards must seriously address what can and should be done to redress the harm that has been caused.