

**29th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers of justice**  
**“Breaking the silence – united against domestic violence”**  
Tromsø, 18-19 June 2009

**SPEECH**

**Ms Tuija BRAX, Minister of Justice, FINLAND**

I am certain that I am speaking on behalf of all the participants by thanking our Norwegian hosts and the secretariat of the Council of Europe for the preparations of this meeting. You have done excellent work. I also want to thank Maud and Knut and all other speakers for your inspiring opening remarks.

La meg begynne med å takke min kollega Justisminister for invitasjonen till å komme hit til Tromsø, som vert for denne viktige konferansen. Tusen takk!

Especially I wish to thank for this background document, which provides us all with food for thought and thus creates an excellent basis for our discussions on this important and serious subject.

You have raised vital issues such as how to ensure an effective investigation and prosecution in cases of domestic violence and the consequences that exposure to domestic violence has on children. You have also emphasized the responsibility of the state in helping victims of domestic violence.

In my own remarks I wish to tell you a few pieces of information about the Finnish situation concerning domestic violence and to give you an idea of a legislative proposal that I have received from a working group this week.

Dear colleagues,

As mentioned already, domestic violence is a problem that is wrapped in silence. It is this silence that makes it difficult to help the victims. Even so, in Finland we have a few reliable sources of information on this silenced problem.

One characteristic element of the problem of violence in Finland is the high homicide rate. Of all the homicides, one-third occur within the family. And of these homicides in the family, the typical case is where a man kills his partner.

Homicide rate of women in Finland is the eleventh highest among the member states of the Council of Europe. Many of these deaths could have been prevented, since the homicide had often been preceded by a lengthy violent relationship. A recent study shows that in almost one half of the cases where a woman was killed by her partner, the partner had assaulted her previously.

On the basis of surveys, we know that about one woman out of every ten who are living with a partner have experienced violence or the threat of violence in this relationship.

Similarly, almost one out of every ten children has during the preceding year experienced violence at the hands of his or her parent. Witnessing domestic violence between their parents is even more common. Often, it is the same children who are both victims and witnesses of domestic violence. Violence experienced and seen by children affects their psychological development in many ways.

Dear colleagues,

At the Ministry of Justice, we have sought new ways also in criminal law to prevent and respond to domestic violence.

In Finland, petty assault is a complainant offence. The police cannot investigate the offence, nor can it be prosecuted or the offender punished without the consent of the victim. A working group report submitted to me this week proposes that certain petty assaults committed by someone close to the victim be redefined as assault. Examples would be assault of a child under the age of 18 and assault of a person who is dependent on the offender and who, due to earlier actions of the offender, had reason to fear for his or her safety.

With the amendment, we want to show that society condemns all forms of violence in close relationships. The amendment would have a significant effect in practice. Once it enters into force, such acts of violence in close relationships would be offences that are subject to public prosecution. In such cases, the police must begin an investigation. With this amendment we would not anymore force the victim of domestic violence to decide whether to raise charges.