

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

**SPEECH**

**Mr Sean AYLWARD, Secretary General of the Department of Justice,  
Equality and Law Reform, Ministry for Justice, IRELAND**

Mr Chairman,

I welcome Norway's initiative in bringing us together for this forum on domestic violence and I congratulate him on the very comprehensive report presented to us. Thank you also for bringing us to this beautiful part of your country for this Conference – it is very appropriate that we are here in the 'Land of the Midnight Sun' to bring light to bear on the dark phenomenon of domestic violence. Coming from a small administration like yours, I know what a burden it is to host an international conference like this.

I am in agreement with many of the points raised by Minister Storberget. I especially note that your report recognises that victims of domestic violence are not homogenous and that measures to address the situation must be capable of adapting to individual situations. It has been long recognised that domestic violence is an issue that substantially has its roots in the historical gendered development of our nations and that a substantial element in tackling this scourge lies in developing a more gender-balanced society. However we must also recognise that severe domestic abuse can affect an individual male victim as well as an individual female victim. While recognising that the great majority of severe domestic violence is perpetrated by men against women we must always be aware that male victims must be acknowledged, recognised and assisted without discrimination. Let us be careful that in developing broad approaches we do not create further problems by overlooking the problems of the individual and the minority categories of victim.

It is essential that we are open to the use of a wide range of measures to find the right and just solution for each family affected. This indeed is a problem that affects the entire family and in many cases the extended family too. The Minister poses the question of the use of restorative justice in domestic violence cases and reaches sensible conclusions in noting the conditions that should be fulfilled before going down that route.

I am pleased to see that the Minister's report emphasises a broad approach to developing solutions to the problem because that is the approach that Ireland has taken.

The Irish Government's commitment to tackling domestic violence is reflected in the establishment in June, 2007 of Cosc, the National Office for the Prevention of Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence. I am accompanied here at this conference by the Executive Director of Cosc – Ms Eimear Fisher and she would be delighted to share with colleagues her experiences in setting up this Office.

Cosc provides a dedicated, resourced office at Central Government level to deliver a properly co-ordinated, whole-of-Government response to these forms of violence. Its

remit covers domestic, sexual and gender-based violence against women and men, including older people in the community.

Cosc is an Irish word meaning to stop or prevent, and it reflects our vision of reducing the incidence of this abusive behaviour in Irish society.

Cosc supports and works closely with service providers (both state and non-governmental organisations) that support victims and treat perpetrators. This work includes: raising awareness about the level and impact of these crimes; developing strategies of prevention; developing standards for service delivery; putting in place positive actions which work with perpetrators; as well as activities relating to research and legislation.

The work outlined above concerns domestic, sexual and gender-based violence as experienced by adults. The Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs has responsibility for the development of policy and legislation in relation to child welfare and protection. Cosc links with that Office in relation to the care and welfare aspects arising from domestic violence and sexual violence involving children.

In relation to the theme of this conference “Breaking the Silence, United against Domestic Violence”, we in Ireland have also been attempting to bring a greater sense of the need for the community in general to take a more responsive role in ending this form of destructive behaviour in our society. In October of last year, our Head of State, President Mary McAleese hosted a forum on the theme of 'Domestic & Sexual Abuse against women and men, including older people in Ireland'. She posed the question to the nation at the forum: “ what can we do as a civic society, as a community to help further an ongoing national debate around domestic abuse and help turn the tide of this repulsive blight in our land, bringing reassurance and vindication to victims, bringing accountability and the opportunity to change to perpetrators?” In developing a response to the question and guided by the results of a survey in 2008 on a representative sample of the Irish population, Cosc has developed an awareness raising campaign encouraging the general population to find out how they can help victims of violence by becoming more informed of the support services available. The “tag line” of the campaign is “Your silence feeds the violence”. That study showed the problem was far more pervasive than we thought and confirmed enormous levels of under-reporting to the police, the UK representative also referred to this factor.

Cosc's current priority is to produce a National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence. This strategy, which is at an advanced stage, will set out Irish policy on addressing these forms of violence and will include preventative and responsive actions to be taken by a broad range of organisations to ensure that a well co-ordinated system is in place.

In developing the strategy Cosc is mindful of the developments in the United Nations and in Europe and especially of the work being undertaken in the Council of Europe. The development of the UN Secretary General's Database on Violence against Women and the Activity Report of the Council of Europe on work in the Member States are valuable resources in terms of establishing what is effective and what can be replicated or adapted to the cultural and legislative parameters of each State.

Monday last 15th June was designated World Elder Abuse Awareness Day. It is important that this week, at this Conference, we should remember that domestic abuse is not age specific and that we have a collective responsibility to address the

serious problem of domestic abuse involving older people. Belgium in its intervention also referred to this issue.

In Ireland, there has been an increased focus on this problem in the last 10 years. Currently, 11% of our population are over 65 years of age and this figure is expected to double over the next 20 years. While we celebrate increasing life expectancy, we are concerned that the level of elder abuse may increase. Under-reporting and lack of disclosure is a central problem with domestic abuse, but it is particularly complex for older people where the abuse may be perpetrated by a carer or a close family member. The issue of dependency, often a factor in domestic violence, is particularly acute in the case of the elderly.

Some good work has been done in Ireland in recent years in this area. Our Health Service has set up structures across Ireland to tackle elder abuse through initiatives such as appointing elder abuse officers in all regions, setting up a dedicated helpline for those concerned about elder abuse, and linking up with the police and the financial sector. The Health Service produced a report earlier this year which showed that in 2007, the first year records were maintained in this respect, in our country there were a total of 927 referrals of reports concerning elder abuse. In 2008, the number of referrals had almost doubled to 1,840. In line with international research, in the vast majority of cases, the alleged abuser was a family member. Like other forms of domestic abuse, the majority of victims are women, the allegations include psychological, physical and sexual abuse but, perhaps uniquely, in elder abuse situations, a very significant proportion of cases also concern financial abuse.

We would welcome an exploration of these issues with our Council of Europe counterparts with a view to increasing our knowledge of this problem and learning of effective methods of prevention and intervention. I would suggest that this will be an area of increasing concern to all of us and would be an area for fruitful collaboration.

Finally, Chairman, Ireland looks forward to working with the Council of Europe in developing the standards to improve our service to victims, to confront, punish and educate perpetrators, and most importantly, to change the way society as a whole tolerates this pernicious form of hidden criminality.

Thank you.