

29th Council of Europe Conference of Ministers of justice
“Breaking the silence – united against domestic violence”
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SPEECH

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Introduction

First, may I join with others in offering our hosts sincere congratulations on the organisation of this Conference, and our warm thanks for their hospitality. I would also like to welcome your report which provides a good context for our discussions and the aims of the draft resolution on preventing and responding to domestic violence. I look forward to hearing about how other member states are tackling domestic violence.

Domestic Violence

The subject you have chosen for the conference is one which is clearly a priority for all our countries. As we know there has already been valuable work by the Council of Europe through their *Campaign to combat violence against women, including domestic violence*. This work continues through their Ad hoc committee on combating violence against women and domestic violence to prepare a convention containing provisions aimed at preventing and combating this violence.

All of us here know that domestic violence is a devastating crime that impacts across all communities. But we all know that domestic violence is significantly under-reported. It is essential that victims have the confidence to report abuses committed against them. We need to be encouraging them, and those close to them, to come forward in the certainty that they will get the protection and support they need, whether that be in the civil or criminal justice arena.

Victims of domestic violence come from all sectors of our community and its manifestations can take many forms. Crimes committed in the name of honour, female genital mutilation and forced marriage may all be manifestations of domestic violence and must be challenged. We therefore welcome the work being done by the Council of Europe's Ad hoc committee on combating violence against women to draft a convention that covers all of these forms of abuse.

The UK Government is fully committed to improving our response to domestic violence. Since 1997 we have risen to the challenge and brought about a step change in how we address domestic violence. In England and Wales, that includes including improving access to legal representation by enabling all eligibility limits to be waived for victims of domestic violence, while in Scotland the limits still apply but we have more than doubled the upper income limit so that around three-quarters of the population will be financially eligible. The development of special law, prosecutors and courts has enormously increased our ability to tackle this problem.

All our devolved administrations have developed strategies for tackling domestic violence. Their approaches focus on the prevention of domestic violence, protection and support for victims and their children and the prosecution of perpetrators.

Over the last ten years our Government has worked alongside voluntary organisations to deliver a package of measures to protect women from violence and to support those who have suffered violence. Multi-agency working and the combination of legislative and non-legislative changes have made a significant difference in the lives of those affected. It is by working together that we have been able to make a difference.

However, we know there is more we can do. In England the largest ever, cross-government consultation on, 'Together We Can End Violence Against Women and Girls' has just finished. Through this consultation we aimed to raise awareness and to encourage discussion and debate on how we can prevent violence through educating people, how we can identify violence at the earliest point, how we provide services and support and how we protect victims and potential victims from abuse. Our objective, across all government departments, is to end this violence.

Mutual Legal Assistance

The effective co-operation of Member States to provide mutual legal assistance in criminal matters is essential to ensure that we can, together, tackle transnational crime. We support the aim of Resolution 2 in furthering cooperation in mutual legal assistance in criminal matters and continue to appreciate the Council of Europe's important work in this area. Indeed, the European Convention on Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters continues to provide a useful basis for mutual legal assistance between Member States and we would like to congratulate the success of its 50 years of operation.

Rule of law

Lastly, let me say that we naturally welcome the work the Council of Europe in helping States adhere to the principles of the rule of law. I know this is one of the core missions of the Council, and its proven track record will I am sure stand the organisation in good stead to continue this important role in the future. We therefore welcome Resolution 3.

Let me close by once again congratulating our hosts on alighting on such a vital topic for this conference.