

Speech by Mr. Dermot Ahern T.D.

Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform

at the launch of the National Strategy on

Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence

2010 - 2014

Dublin Castle

9 March 2010

Ladies and Gentlemen,

I would like to welcome you all here today for the launch of Ireland's first national strategy to address the problems associated with domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. The Government fully supports the vision expressed in the strategy and is committed to the implementation of all of the strategy's 23 actions. The vision of the strategy is that:

"By the end of 2014 in Ireland, there will be:

- Clearer societal acknowledgment of the unacceptability of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence
- Greater recognition and a broader understanding of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence
- Greater confidence in high-quality and consistent services

- Increased safety for victims
 - Increased accountability of the perpetrator
1. Structured and improved planning and monitoring to ensure continued effectiveness.

The strategy primarily addresses adult victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, including older people living in the community. It recognises that the majority of and the most severe forms of these types of violence is perpetrated by men against women, but it also is significant in that it clearly recognises that men can and often are victims who must also be supported in their recovery. Children also become involved, sometimes as a direct victim, but more often as secondary victims, especially in domestic abuse situations. The specific needs of other groups such as people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, Travellers, and young people have also been considered in the development of the strategy.

The strategy is being published during a time of great economic difficulty for this country. However, the actions included in this strategy do not involve a great financial outlay but rather a new approach to working and inter-agency co-operation. This is very timely given that this is a period when all organisations are reviewing their purpose and how they work. Indeed, a successful implementation of this strategy will help to increase efficiency and effectiveness, and reduce the financial burden to the State that arises as a result of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence, in addition to the horrific personal human cost. Recognising the economic challenges, and the

current state of interventions in Ireland, the core aim of the strategy therefore is to provide a strong framework for sustainable intervention to prevent and effectively respond to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. Now is the time to come together for a common purpose.

This not a strategy for one organisation. It is the clear expression of State policy. It sets out a plan for the five year period from 2010 to 2014 for 'whole-of-government' action for a more effective system to prevent these types of violence. Six government departments, agencies such as the HSE and the Garda Síochána, and almost 100 non-governmental organisations are involved, to varying degrees, in work relevant to the prevention and alleviation of abuse. All have been involved in producing the document before you today.

In a few moments, Éimear Fisher, the Executive Director of Cosc, will give an overview of the actions and activities set out in the strategy. I have followed the development of this strategy with interest since my appointment to this post in May 2008.

Indeed one of my first duties as Minister for Justice, Equality and Law Reform was to open the conference on domestic violence which Cosc organised in the Waterford Institute of Technology in May 2008. That conference focused on international good practice in addressing domestic violence. It began the

process of engaging organisations collaboratively to enhance the overall service to persons affected by these horrific crimes.

Following some background preparatory work, the process began in 2008 with a public call for submissions on a national strategy. 48 submissions received from organisations and individuals on the key concerns, actions and priorities which were considered to be essential. The issues raised were then used to frame the themes and discussion of particular issues in regional consultations with key organisations and individuals. Cosc also met with a number of victims and survivors during these consultations to hear the first-hand experience of people accessing services and to obtain their suggestions. I know that these individual interviews were particularly valuable to the development of the strategy. The outcome of all this work was an outline strategy which formed the basis for further consultation with relevant government departments, state agencies and NGO representative groups.

This process has also been informed by research work undertaken by Cosc, and from other Irish and international sources. Work being undertaken at European Union, Council of Europe and United Nations forums on these issues has informed the strategy. International experience and standard setting will provide a continuing guide to our work in improving our response to individuals and to society in general in this area.

Throughout the work in developing this strategy the National Steering Group on Violence against Women (NSC) has provided valuable advice, experience and support. The Health Service Executive with Cosc's support has also re-structured Regional Advisory Committees to help coordinate, support and report on local and regional services, and these groups also feed directly into the NSC. Cosc has also been in ongoing contact with groups representing men, older people and children to ensure that the strategy is balanced to meet their needs and to take into account their experience in supporting victims of these crimes.

All of this action is being taken by those who work in departments, agencies and services whose work has a direct impact on those affected by domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. But we can't just leave it to them. This is a societal problem and the whole community is affected by this violence.

At a Forum on Domestic and Sexual Violence hosted in Áras an Uachtaráin in October 2008, President McAleese posed the question of "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". There was a clear view at that Forum that civic society has a vital role to play in addressing domestic and sexual abuse.

There is often a reluctance on the part of victims to disclose the violence, or to make, or to proceed with, a complaint. There are varied and very understandable reasons for this. A victim of an assault or abusive behaviour often wishes to just get on with their life as best they can, and not attract attention to themselves. Indeed as the majority of sexual offences are carried out by a person known to the victim, she or he will have conflicting emotions about the situation or may be concerned about being believed. This too is the case in many domestic violence situations.

These types of crimes often happen behind closed doors where there are no witnesses or, worse still, where the only witness is a child. Isolation is a significant issue which hinders the victim in getting help and recovering from these cruel and degrading crimes.

Victims of such sexual or domestic abuse may become confused by the complexity of their situation, or may find it difficult to navigate across the range of services to meet their needs. Regardless of their capabilities, they may lose confidence in their capacity to make the right choice for themselves and their family. It is essential that we, each person in Irish society, engender confidence in our people that not only will they be believed if they report the abuse but that we will be understanding of their situation.

Through this strategy we must endeavour to educate our society young and old, men and women and especially our children that all people deserve respect and dignity. Moreover, we need to educate our people that in undermining or attacking a victim during a prosecution process will not help an offender in the long term. Offenders who escape justice will continue to damage society through their actions.

All of us should be open to listening to a disclosure and know how to act. With the help of the various services working in this area, Cosc has developed a website showing how to and where to get help. All types of people are affected by domestic and sexual violence. You never know when you may be called on to help, let's all be ready to do whatever we can. Cosc.ie has useful information to help you decide what is best, depending on the circumstances of the situation.

This strategy is not only victim focussed. Clear action is included to deal with perpetrators and offenders also and Éimear will explain some of these actions in a moment. It is important that such action maximises prevention of these crimes, and the accountability of the perpetrator.

Through the development of this framework and the commitment of government departments and State bodies, working in partnership with all relevant services, and supported by a more engaged society, this strategy will

deliver a strong foundation for an improved system of prevention and response – Safer lives at home and in our community.

The Government has committed itself to introducing a Sexual Offences Bill which will consolidate and modernise all criminal law in the area of sexual offences in a manner which is clear, unambiguous and uncompromising in its objectives of protecting victims - particularly children - from sexual crime, and punishing the perpetrators of such crime.

The Government's Civil Partnership Bill will extend protections under the Domestic Violence Act 1996 to civil partners and other cohabitants.

Further legislative amendments may follow on from the Law Reforms Commission's Third Programme of Law Reform which will look at aspects of both domestic violence and sexual violence.

Through this strategy and associated legislative changes this government is tackling the violence and abuse suffered by women and men of a sexual and non-sexual nature both within and outside the domestic scene. As a Government we are saying No to Domestic Violence, No to Sexual Violence and No to all types of gender-based violence.

Today I launch much more than a document – I launch a vision of a society that says it will not tolerate, nor remain silent on, domestic, sexual or gender-based abuse and violence against another person in our neighbourhood and community. The implementation of this strategy provides a clear direction to achieve this vision and this Government is strongly committed to its implementation.

Thank you.