

**LADY CHIEF JUSTICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND**  
**WOMEN'S AID 50<sup>TH</sup> ANNIVERSARY CONFERENCE**  
***FIFTY YEARS: HOPE FOR THE FUTURE***

**30 MAY 2025**

Good morning.

I am delighted to have been asked to speak today at this important conference to mark the significant milestone of fifty years of Women's Aid in Northern Ireland and I want to thank the organisers for inviting me to take part.

As you have heard, today's conference theme is 'Fifty Years - Hope for the Future'. It seems to me that hope for the future must have been one of the emotions felt by those who opened the first women's aid refuge in Belfast in 1975, offering a safe haven for women and children fleeing domestic abuse. Today, as the Women's Aid Federation Northern Ireland continues to offer refuge annually to many women and children, the organisation stands firm also in challenging the attitudes, institutional frameworks and systemic injustices that perpetuate domestic abuse in our society. The work of Women's Aid in delivering training and preventative education, in informing policy and in lobbying for change has had, and continues to have, a lasting and positive impact on our society.

I have said before, but it is always worth repeating, that appropriate and accessible support for those affected by domestic abuse is vital. We are all acutely aware of the worrying prevalence of domestic abuse in our society and the devastating effect it can have, not just on those directly affected but also on wider families, especially children. There is an obvious need for those affected to have support from within, and from outside, the justice system to help with signposting appropriate services and remedies and, hopefully, making an inevitably difficult journey that bit easier to navigate. The work of Women's Aid

is but one tangible illustration of the commendable commitment among the voluntary sector which is strong in this jurisdiction to tackling domestic abuse.

I have witnessed firsthand how transformational the work of Women's Aid has been. As a family law barrister practicing across the jurisdiction from the Family Proceedings Court up to High Court level, Women's Aid representatives were there for my vulnerable clients long before we had Registered Intermediaries or a full appreciation of special measures. The benefit was obvious to me because while I could explain the legalities of a case, my clients had often experienced trauma and needed a support system. As Lady Chief Justice I have engaged regularly with Women's Aid. I have been impressed with the launch of a legal remedies booklet. I have visited Foyle Family Justice Centre which is an example of the one stop model for those who need shelter, support and legal advice. These initiatives can be rolled out elsewhere if funding is provided.

Unfortunately, much work remains to be done. I mentioned the worrying prevalence of domestic abuse in our society. Tragically, one of the most pervasive threats to women's personal safety in Northern Ireland is domestic abuse. We know from PSNI figures that over the past 20 years or so, the overall trend in this jurisdiction has been one of increasing domestic abuse incidents and crimes. We know also that crimes with a domestic abuse motivation represented around 19 per cent of all crimes recorded by the PSNI in 2023/24, compared with just over 8 per cent in 2004/05.<sup>1</sup> And we know that the number of women in Northern Ireland who die each year due to domestic abuse is simply not acceptable.

One of the areas in which I think we have made progress in the past fifty years, and which gives me hope for the future, is that there is no longer the expectation that domestic abuse should be something private that is to be kept within the walls of the

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<sup>1</sup> [Trends in Domestic Abuse Incidents and Crimes Recorded by the Police in Northern Ireland 2004/05 to 2023/24](#)

family home. Domestic abuse has become the business of all of us and as a society, we have the benefit now of being able to talk about domestic abuse in an open and meaningful way and to think collectively about how we are to deal with it. There are several elements to that.

Within the wider public sector, I was heartened last year to see the Ministers of Justice and Health demonstrating their respective commitments to tackling the issue of domestic abuse with the launch of the cross-sectoral 'Strategy for Tackling Domestic and Sexual Abuse', in tandem with the Executive's 'Strategic Framework to End Violence Against Women and Girls' which the First and deputy First Minister have already spoken about. Additionally, the PSNI has a Violence Against Women and Girls Action Plan. I support the aim of creating a society where domestic abuse is not tolerated and I hope that the strategies now in place at governmental level mean that we will see real and meaningful change for the better sooner rather than later.

Within the court system, my judicial colleagues and I are committed to continuing to ensure that cases involving domestic abuse are treated with sensitivity and that appropriate support measures are in place.

By way of example, since December 2023, arrangements have been in place in Belfast for a Domestic Abuse Contest Court where evidence may be given from the Remote Evidence Centre in Belfast, saving injured parties the worry and potential trauma of being in the same building as the defendant. It is hoped that this will help reduce the rate of attrition in such cases by making the process of giving evidence less intimidating. In its first year of running, the initiative received entirely positive feedback from complainants and 22 convictions were sustained in 24 cases. While the numbers are not yet at the point that we can characterise them as statistically significant, it is my view that so far, this Court has proved to be successful in enabling victims to be supported more effectively

and in enabling justice to be delivered in some cases that might not have progressed otherwise.

I am also keen to reinforce the message that cases in the criminal sphere involving domestic abuse are taken very seriously by the courts and will attract sentences that reflect and recognise society's utter condemnation of such behaviour.

Last year in the Court of Appeal, we dealt with the appeal against the sentence imposed on Stephen McKinney for the murder of his wife, Lu Na McKinney, and we took the opportunity to reiterate that pre-existing coercive and controlling behaviour is an aggravating factor.

Earlier this year, the Court of Appeal dealt with an appeal against sentence in a case involving the relatively new offence of non-fatal strangulation. The Court took the opportunity in that case to confirm that perpetrators of non-fatal strangulation will receive higher sentences to reflect the gravity of both the physical and psychological harm suffered, noting:

"It is the duty of sentencing judges in Northern Ireland to give effect to the legislative intent of our own Assembly which brought in this legislation. It has applied a maximum penalty of 14 years to the offence of non-fatal strangulation in an effort to improve protection for victims of attacks like this. It has done so to reflect public concern that domestic violence has become such a pervasive scourge on society in this jurisdiction."<sup>2</sup>

As new offences are prosecuted I think we will see further guidance issued about sentencing in this area, more prosecutions in the Crown Court and more disposals. I

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<sup>2</sup> *R v Darryl Haughey* [2025] NICA 10.

recognise that not everyone will be happy with sentences, but it is not a one size fits all. Punishment and deterrence are part of the sentencing aim but so too is rehabilitation. In Northern Ireland we have the benefit of a strong Probation Service who can recommend on programmes which prevent recurrence. There is obviously a huge societal value to this. In particular in the area of domestic violence perpetrator programmes are crucial and should be properly funded.

Let me turn from criminal law to family law for a moment. As I had said before if you don't get family justice right you store up problems which emerge in the youth justice and then the adult justice system.

In the family law sphere, a recent important legislative change is that a court considering making a residence or contact order in favour of any person must have regard to any conviction for a domestic abuse offence involving the child. While that probably is self-evident and something that the judiciary would have been alive to, placing that requirement in a piece of legislation is a powerful message about the seriousness with which society views domestic abuse.

Additionally, in family proceedings, the governing procedural rules now ensure that there is a statutory imprimatur for the special measures of screening of witnesses and the giving of evidence by live link where there is domestic abuse, or the risk of domestic abuse, of a party or a witness. It is my hope that the specific availability of these measures makes those affected by domestic abuse more likely to engage with the family justice system where it is in their interests to do so. I have set up a Judicial Family Working Group and enlisted the help of retired judges such as Sir John Gillen with the aim of developing practice and procedure particularly as to how family courts deal with contact in domestic violence cases.

Another important element of dealing with domestic abuse is education. I have already referred to the education of perpetrators. But the issue is wider than that and goes right to grass roots and into schools.

While suffering domestic abuse is, of course, not confined to women, we do know that mainly women are affected. We know also that misplaced ideas as to

the acceptability of violence against women are a root cause of violence against women. This is why education, not just of perpetrators but also of society in general, is crucial to bring about the necessary cultural shifts.

I am sure many of you will have seen the Netflix show *Adolescence* which powerfully dramatised the extent to which negative discourse about women can permeate young men's social medias through the increasing popularity of misogynistic influencers and the use of algorithms perpetuating harmful misogynistic ideologies. These are all easily accessible to young people through smart phones which are minicomputers which contain a wide reach of information. I think that the Netflix series succeeded in portraying the importance of cross-sectorial co-operation to address the root causes of violence against women and girls. I am firmly of the belief that education of all young people is vital to tackling the root causes of domestic abuse. I know that important work is being done in this area by organisations such as Women's Aid which delivers programmes in schools across Northern Ireland to educate children on this topic.

With the need to educate in mind, it is my view that ensuring transparency and openness in the court system is key so the public can be better informed about the approach the courts take when issues of domestic abuse arise, not only in criminal cases but also in the family law sphere where domestic abuse is all too often a factor, something I know from my own experience. It is for this reason that improving openness and transparency in the courts, while continuing to protect the privacy of the families and children involved, is one of my key priorities at present.

Judicial training in the area of domestic abuse is also of great importance to me and is one which I keep under regular review. It is my experience that each case involving domestic abuse provides the judge involved with an opportunity for reflection and learning. This is underpinned by formal, structured training

delivered through the Judicial Studies Board which listens to organisations such as Women's Aid and the Commissioner Designate for Victims of Crime Geri Hanna. I am committed to ensuring that periodic training and up to date guidance is delivered in this important area.

Before I conclude, I want to mention the importance of the welfare of all those involved in the work of combating domestic abuse. This is a difficult field for all concerned and those involved in frontline service delivery, such as the staff of Women's Aid and other voluntary organisations, together with those who work within the justice system, should be alert to the importance of building and maintaining resilience. Events such as this provide an opportunity to step outside the usual daily routine of our working lives, to talk to others, to listen and to obtain perspective. I urge you all to take the opportunity today to listen carefully to our speakers and to have conversations at the edges of this event. I think that is of benefit to enable us to remain equipped to give our best in this important area.

On that note, I wish the conference every success and I offer my congratulations to Women's Aid on its fiftieth anniversary. Your work has made, and continues to make, an immeasurable positive difference to some of the most vulnerable people in our society. For as long as you continue working to end domestic abuse, there is hope for the future.

Thank you.