

LADY CHIEF JUSTICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND
PwC & PSNI - BUSINESS BREAKFAST ON TACKLING VIOLENCE
AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS
MERCHANT SQUARE, BELFAST
5 NOVEMBER 2025

Good morning, everyone.

Thank you to the Attorney General for her kind introduction.

I am very pleased to have been invited to join you today. I want to commend PwC, in particular Cat McCusker, and the Chief Constable for conceiving of and hosting this important event on the role of businesses and employers in tackling violence against women in Northern Ireland.

The United Nations describes violence against women and girls as “one of the most prevalent and pervasive human rights violations”. This is not an abstract policy topic and nor is it something that the criminal justice system can deal with in isolation. So, I welcome wholeheartedly the opportunity this event affords us to come together and consider the role that businesses and employers, through leadership, collaboration and accountability, can play in addressing one of the most serious challenges facing our society.

Domestic abuse, sexual abuse, or violence at the hands of strangers are lived realities for too many women across Northern Ireland, and indeed across the world. In the 12 months to the 30 June 2025, the PSNI recorded 29,751 domestic abuse incidents and 18,246 domestic abuse crimes.¹ These are not abstract figures – the people involved are our colleagues, our friends, and our family members. For those who follow the news, it will come as no surprise that Northern Ireland has one of the highest rates of femicide in Europe. But this is not just a local issue. Globally, one in three women experience physical and/or sexual violence

¹ [Domestic Abuse Statistics | PSNI](#).

in their lifetime, mostly by an intimate partner.² These figures are, frankly, horrifying.

So, what can we do? The solution, while not easy, is multi-faceted. As a society, we need to tackle not just the violence that takes place but also the reasons why violence against women and girls is endemic in our society.

One of the biggest shifts that we have seen over recent decades is that violence against women and girls is no longer something of which we, as a society, do not speak. It has become the business of us all. Identifying and tackling the causes of violence against women and girls, as well as supporting those who have suffered, is now part of the language of public life and of corporate responsibility as well as of justice.

Employers and businesses occupy a powerful position in this landscape. They can provide safety, stability, and support to those who are experiencing, or who have experienced, violence. Workplaces can be environments of empowerment or, if we are not careful, of silence. How employers respond when a member of staff discloses that they are abused can make an enormous difference.

The introduction of workplace domestic abuse policies across many organisations is a positive step. But, to have real impacts, policies must be underpinned by a culture of compassion and understanding which recognises that domestic abuse is not a solely private matter but is also a societal concern.

I see first-hand in the courts the lasting impacts that violence against women and girls can have on individuals, on family units and on communities. Cases that reach the courts are often the end point of a journey that began long before legal processes were engaged. This is why facilitating early intervention is important in every sphere, including in places of work. Employers who are alert to the signs of abuse and who create supportive, informed environments can facilitate

² [WHO Violence against women.](#)

the provision of support and help prevent further harm. In that sense, the work you do complements the work we do in the courts: both are about protection, accountability, and restoring dignity.

From the perspective of the judiciary, our responsibility is to ensure that the court system responds to violence against women and girls with both rigour and humanity. Every case concerning violence against another person involves more than the facts of an offence – it represents a breach of trust, dignity and safety, which reverberates through families and communities. The courts have a duty to uphold the law and to ensure that justice is delivered. That means recognising the seriousness of these offences through appropriate sentencing within the relevant parameters, by recognising aggravating factors such as coercive control, and by ensuring that proceedings are managed with sensitivity and fairness.

I am conscious that public confidence in the justice system depends not only on outcomes, but on how people experience the process itself. Justice cannot undo harm that has been caused, but it can acknowledge it. It can restore dignity, affirm responsibility, and demonstrate that the rule of law stands firmly on the side of protection and respect. To this end, we are continuing to work to improve how the courts support those affected by abuse. In Northern Ireland, complainants in domestic abuse cases can now give evidence from Remote Evidence Centres, away from the physical presence of the defendant. Feedback from those who have used these facilities has been overwhelmingly positive. It is a clear demonstration that practical innovation can make the justice process less intimidating and more humane, without compromising fairness.

What a judge says when sentencing an offender who has perpetrated violence speaks not only to the offender and the victim in that particular case, it reaffirms society's shared values of accountability and protection. In the Court of Appeal, we have taken the opportunity to reinforce the message that violence against women and girls will be met with sentences that reflect society's condemnation of such behaviour. This is one of the reasons why transparency around

sentencing is so important. I am particularly pleased that the Minister of Justice has now agreed to remove the legal barriers to broadcasting some court proceedings, including sentencing hearings in the most serious cases.

Recent legislative developments have further strengthened society's response to violence that particularly affects women and girls. Northern Ireland now has a specific offence of domestic abuse. Coercive and controlling behaviour is recognised as criminal conduct. Those of you who have watched the most recent series of Blue Lights will have followed the domestic abuse storyline and seen the disturbing scene involving non-fatal strangulation, which is now a stand-alone criminal offence in recognition of the harm it causes, particularly at a psychological level.

The judiciary's role in tackling violence against women and girls includes a responsibility to ensure that the court system itself does not inadvertently perpetuate harm. Through the Judicial Studies Board for Northern Ireland, I am ensuring that our judges are trained in and aware of issues such as how trauma can impact victims. I issued Guidance recently setting out the approach the courts will take in family law cases where domestic abuse is, or may be, a factor. The Guidance is designed to support those involved in navigating the complex, and often distressing, realities of domestic abuse in family law proceedings and it is particularly important where there is a question about where a child should live or what contact a child should have with a parent or other family member where domestic abuse is a factor. The Guidance is designed to ensure that such cases are dealt with expeditiously using a uniform and child-centered approach.

I mentioned earlier about how society needs to tackle the causes of violence against women and girls. I believe education from an early stage is key. That means education of perpetrators, through domestic abuse perpetrator programmes, and ongoing age-appropriate education of our children and young people from an early stage about healthy relationships.

To conclude, I want to leave you with this thought: Violence against women and girls is not inevitable – it is preventable. But prevention demands a shared sense of responsibility. Employers, educators, policymakers, the voluntary sector, and the justice system each form part of the solution. When these efforts align, real and lasting change becomes possible.

The law has its limits. It can punish wrongdoing and safeguard rights, but it cannot, on its own, transform attitudes or rebuild trust. That requires something deeper: collective will, informed leadership, and an unwavering commitment to equality in every sphere of public and private life. Ending violence against women and girls calls for a whole-system response. Partnership is essential – between employers, government, voluntary organisations, and the justice system. The roots of this violence run deep, grounded in inequality, silence, and power imbalance. Tackling it means investing in education, early intervention, and a shared sense of purpose.

I am encouraged by the leadership that PwC and the PSNI have shown in convening this event, and by the engagement of everyone here today. Each of you plays a role in shaping a society where women and girls can live and work free from fear. As Eleanor Roosevelt once observed: *“Where, after all, do universal human rights begin? In small places, close to home.”*

As we look ahead, let us remember that progress is built step by step – through law, through education, through example. Hope for the future lies not in words but in actions: in every employer who listens, in every colleague who intervenes, and in every institution that chooses to lead by doing what is right.

Thank you.