LADY CHIEF JUSTICE OF NORTHERN IRELAND

PEACEPLUS ASPIRE CONFERENCE: ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS

VIOLENCE AGAINST WOMEN AND GIRLS: A JUSTICE ISSUE AND A SOCIETAL CHALLENGE

5 NOVEMBER 2026

Minister, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen.

Thank you for the invitation to join you today.

I am delighted to have the opportunity to participate in this conference and to support the important work being undertaken through the PEACEPLUS ASPIRE programme.

I would like to begin by acknowledging the organisers and all those who have contributed to today's event. Bringing together educators, school leaders, policymakers, community organisations and practitioners from across Northern Ireland and the border counties reflects a recognition that some challenges are far too significant to be left to any one institution acting alone. This is one such challenge. The issue we are discussing today touches every part of our society. It crosses geographical boundaries, social boundaries and generational boundaries. It affects communities in urban and rural areas alike. It affects women and girls of every background. Most importantly, its consequences are often borne not only by direct victims but by families, children and communities for years afterwards.

The title of today's conference, *Educate, Empower, Protect*, captures an important truth.

When we discuss violence against women and girls, it is natural that our minds often turn immediately to the criminal justice system. We think of police investigations. We think of prosecutions. We think of court proceedings and sentencing.

All of those matters are important. They form an essential part of society's response. The public are entitled to expect that those who commit serious offences against women and girls will be investigated, prosecuted and, where convicted, sentenced appropriately according to law.

Yet the title of today's conference reminds us that the most effective response is not necessarily found after harm has occurred. The words *educate*, *empower* and *protect* direct our attention to something much earlier. They direct us towards prevention. They direct us towards culture. They direct us towards the values and attitudes which shape how people treat one another long before any interaction with the criminal justice system ever becomes necessary.

As Lady Chief Justice, I see the consequences of violence when cases arrive before the courts. Indeed, one of the most significant developments I have observed during my career has been the growing recognition, both within society and within the law, that domestic abuse and violence against women and girls cannot be understood solely through isolated incidents.

Increasingly, the law recognises patterns of behaviour, coercive control, psychological manipulation and intimidation as forms of abuse in their own right.

The justice system performs a vital role. It exists to uphold the rule of law, to ensure fair trials, to protect rights and to hold offenders accountable. But I have often reflected that the cases which come before judges represent situations where, in one way or another, prevention has already failed. By the

time a matter reaches a courtroom, profound harm has usually been done. Lives may have been irrevocably altered. Families may have been devastated. Children may have been left without parents. Communities may be struggling to understand how such events could have occurred.

That reality serves as a powerful reminder of the importance of the work undertaken by those gathered in this room today.

Recent years have provided some stark and tragic examples of the human cost of violence against women.

Many here will remember the murder of Natalie McNally in December 2022. She was twenty-nine years old and pregnant with her first child. Her death shocked the community and touched people far beyond the immediate locality in which she lived.

The courts have also encountered different manifestations of violence and abuse. In the case of *Jonathan Playfair*[1], the Court of Appeal considered offending involving the grooming of vulnerable schoolgirls, coercive and controlling behaviour, sexual exploitation and online blackmail. The case demonstrated how modern technology can be weaponised to intimidate, manipulate and humiliate victims, often with devastating consequences for their wellbeing and educational lives. It is a reminder that violence against women and girls is not confined to physical acts of violence. It can also involve patterns of coercion, psychological abuse and online exploitation which leave lasting harm. Also, the case of *R v Alexander McCartney*[2] shows how insidious offending can take place from a bedroom against thousands of young victims.

[1] [2024] NICA 21

[2] [2024] NICC 30 & [2024] NICC 36

While the circumstances of these cases were very different, they both demonstrate the profound harm that violence, abuse and exploitation can inflict upon victims, families and communities.

The courts are required to deal with such cases according to evidence and law. Judges must necessarily focus upon legal principles, due process and the fair administration of justice. Yet beneath those legal processes lies an undeniable human reality. Behind every case file is a person. Behind every prosecution is a family. Behind every conviction are lives that can never be restored to what they once were.

The significance of today's conference is that it asks an important question. Rather than focusing solely upon how society responds after violence occurs, it asks what more can be done to prevent that violence from occurring in the first place.

That is not an easy question.

There are no simple solutions to complex social problems. Violence against women and girls arises from a range of factors and manifests itself in different ways. It can occur in public spaces and private homes. It can be physical, emotional, psychological, sexual or coercive. It can be facilitated by technology as readily as by direct personal contact. It can affect women and girls of every age and background.

Precisely because the problem is complex, our response must also be multifaceted.

Education has a critical role to play within that response. Schools help shape not only knowledge but values, attitudes and behaviours. If we are serious about reducing violence against women and girls, we must also be serious about fostering cultures of respect, equality and responsibility from an early

age. That is why educators have such an important role within this conversation.

The more difficult question is how those working in schools and educational settings seek to influence attitudes and behaviours in a world which has changed dramatically over the course of a single generation.

Young people today face challenges which many of us could scarcely have imagined when we were at school. They are growing up in a world of constant connectivity. I do sympathise with young people in relation to that as they are so bombarded with online material and the digital way of life cannot be avoided. Through smartphones and social media platforms, they have immediate access to unprecedented quantities of information and opportunities for communication. That connectivity has brought enormous benefits. It has transformed educational opportunities, broadened horizons and connected people across communities, countries and cultures.

However, it has also exposed young people to new risks.

One of the recurring concerns identified by researchers, educators and policymakers is the extent to which harmful attitudes towards women can circulate online. Ideas which would once have remained confined to small groups can now reach vast audiences in a matter of hours. Content designed to provoke outrage, division or controversy often attracts greater attention than content promoting reflection, empathy or understanding.

As a consequence, some young people are encountering narratives which seek to normalise misogyny, encourage hostility towards women or present unhealthy models of relationships and masculinity.

The challenge presented by such material should not be underestimated.

Many of these messages do not present themselves as extremism or hatred. They are often packaged as lifestyle advice, self-improvement or entertainment. Yet beneath the surface may lie assumptions about women's roles, autonomy and worth which are fundamentally incompatible with the values of equality, dignity and mutual respect that underpin a democratic society.

For educators, this creates a unique challenge.

Teaching mathematics or science is not made more difficult by the existence of competing online personalities claiming that two plus two equals five. Values, however, are different. Attitudes can be influenced gradually through repeated exposure. Misconceptions can become normalised. Harmful ideas can acquire an appearance of legitimacy simply because they are frequently encountered.

In this landscape, education performs a role of immense importance.

Its task is not to prescribe what young people must think. Rather, it is to equip them with the skills to think critically, to assess information carefully and to challenge assumptions when they encounter them. It is also essential I think that young people lead the debate themselves.

Education at its best encourages young people to engage respectfully with different perspectives whilst understanding that respect for the dignity and equality of others is not negotiable.

This is particularly important in discussions surrounding relationships.

Young people need opportunities to develop an understanding of what constitutes a healthy relationship. They need to understand the importance of consent, personal autonomy, equality and mutual respect. They need to recognise the warning signs of coercive or controlling behaviour. They need to

appreciate that strength is not demonstrated through dominance, intimidation or aggression, but through responsibility, integrity and respect for others.

These are not simply social skills. They are foundations upon which safe and respectful communities are built.

As I reflect upon these issues, I am conscious that my interest in them long predates my appointment to judicial office.

Prior to becoming a judge, I practised for many years at the Bar, much of that time in the field of family law.

Family law provides a unique perspective on human relationships. At its best, it involves helping families navigate difficult periods in their lives and supporting outcomes which place the welfare of children at the forefront. However, it also brings practitioners face to face with some of the most challenging circumstances which individuals and families can experience.

Throughout those years, I encountered many cases in which relationships had broken down amidst conflict, fear, intimidation and abuse. I saw the profound impact that such experiences could have upon those directly involved. I also saw the effect upon children who often found themselves caught in circumstances in which they had no input and entirely beyond their control.

One of the lessons which family law teaches very quickly is that children absorb far more than adults sometimes realise.

They learn not only from what they are told, but from the relationships they witness around them.

Throughout my career, both at the Bar and later on the Bench, I have seen the impact that conflict, abuse and instability can have upon children. Their sense of security may be undermined. Their confidence may be affected.

Experiences during childhood can shape expectations and behaviours long into adult life.

Perhaps that is one of the reasons why this issue matters so deeply. Violence against women and girls is not simply about the harm inflicted upon an individual victim, serious though that harm is. It is also about the wider impact upon families, communities and future generations.

The consequences can endure long after a criminal case has concluded, or a court order has been made. They remind us that violence against women and girls is not solely a justice issue. It is a societal issue.

Today, as Lady Chief Justice, I continue to encounter these issues from a different vantage point. I speak to children through school visits and by encouraging court visits which hopefully explain what law means.

I also observe that whilst the cases which come before the courts vary considerably in their facts and circumstances, they frequently reveal certain common themes.

One such theme is that violence against women and girls rarely occurs in isolation. Increasingly, the law recognises that abuse may take the form of patterns of coercive and controlling behaviour rather than isolated incidents of physical violence. The introduction of the domestic abuse offence, alongside developments relating to stalking, upskirting, non-fatal strangulation and image-based sexual offending, reflects a more sophisticated understanding of the realities of abuse and its impact upon victims. The courts likewise recognise the seriousness of such conduct and the harm it can cause.

The justice system has also become increasingly conscious of the need to ensure that victims are able to participate effectively in the legal process and that their experiences are properly understood.

This has prompted important developments in the treatment of vulnerable victims and witnesses.

Across our justice system, considerable efforts have been made to reduce unnecessary trauma and to facilitate participation. The use of special measures, remote evidence facilities, intermediaries and other supports reflects an understanding that the quality of evidence and the quality of justice are enhanced when individuals are enabled to engage with the process in a manner that respects their dignity and wellbeing.

Underlying these developments is an important principle.

Access to justice is not achieved merely by opening the courtroom door.

Justice must also be accessible in practice. Individuals must feel able to come forward. They must have confidence that they will be treated with fairness and respect. They must believe that the institutions charged with protecting them understand the realities of the experiences they have endured.

Building and maintaining that confidence is not solely the responsibility of judges. It requires the collective efforts of police officers, prosecutors, lawyers, support organisations and many others who work across the justice system. It also requires us to listen.

One of the most important lessons of recent years has been the value of listening carefully to the experiences of victims and survivors. Their experiences have informed policy, legislation and practice. They have helped institutions understand where barriers exist and where improvements are required.

Progress has undoubtedly been made. However, I doubt that anyone involved in this area would suggest that the work is complete.

The persistence of violence against women and girls serves as a reminder that legal responses, while essential, can only ever form part of the solution.

The law is capable of setting standards. It can prohibit conduct. It can impose sanctions. It can provide remedies and protection. What it cannot do, by itself, is transform culture.

Laws can influence behaviour, but lasting cultural change requires something deeper. It requires communities to reject harmful attitudes. It requires positive models of behaviour. It requires individuals to recognise their responsibilities towards others. Above all, it requires a shared understanding that respect, dignity and equality are not optional values to be observed when convenient, but principles that should inform every aspect of our interaction with one another.

That is why the work being undertaken beyond the courtroom is so important.

The efforts of educators, youth workers, community leaders, parents and voluntary organisations may not always command public attention in the way that criminal trials do. Yet their contribution is fundamental. They are helping to create the conditions in which violence is less likely to occur and in which respect and equality are more likely to flourish.

In many respects, that work complements the role of the justice system.

The courts respond when harm has occurred.

The work of prevention seeks to ensure that fewer people ever need the protection of the courts in the first place.

And that is an objective upon which I believe all of us can readily agree.

The challenge, of course, is translating that objective into reality.

There are no quick fixes in this area. No single policy, programme or initiative will, by itself, eradicate violence against women and girls. The attitudes and behaviours which contribute to violence are often deeply embedded and can take many years to change.

Yet history teaches us that cultures can, and do, change. Attitudes that were once tolerated can become unacceptable. Behaviours that were once dismissed can become recognised for the harm they cause. Expectations can evolve. Standards can rise. Progress can and does occur when individuals and institutions share a common determination to bring about change.

I see grounds for optimism in the growing willingness to speak openly about issues which, in previous generations, too often remained hidden. I see it in the work being undertaken across our schools, universities and youth organisations. I see it in the increasing understanding of healthy relationships, consent and personal autonomy. I see it in the commitment of those working across the education, community and justice sectors to create a safer society for all. Most importantly, I see it in young people themselves.

The vast majority of young people want to build relationships founded on mutual respect. They want to live in communities where everyone is valued equally. They want to contribute positively to society and to reject discrimination, intimidation and violence in all their forms.

Our collective responsibility is to support them in that endeavour. We do so by providing positive role models. We do so by creating environments in which respect and equality are not simply discussed but demonstrated. We do so by challenging harmful attitudes when we encounter them. And we do so

by ensuring that young people have the knowledge, confidence and support necessary to make informed and responsible choices.

Ultimately, ending violence against women and girls is not solely about reducing crime, important though that is. It is about the kind of society we aspire to be. It is about whether every woman and girl can live free from fear. It is about whether every child grows up understanding that dignity, equality and respect are values that belong to everyone. And it is about whether we are prepared, collectively, to play our part in making that vision a reality.

In conclusion, I return to the title of today's conference - *Educate, Empower, Protect*. Those three words describe not only the purpose of this event, but the broader task that lies before all of us. If we educate, we challenge ignorance and prejudice. If we empower, we enable individuals and communities to make positive choices. And if we protect, we create the conditions in which everyone can live with safety, dignity and respect.

I thank all of you for the contribution that you make, often quietly and without recognition, to that shared endeavour. The work that you do matters. The conversations that you have matter. The examples that you set matter. And the influence that you have on the lives of future generations may be greater than you will ever know.

I wish you every success for the remainder of the conference.

Thank you.