

Kerry Women's Centre – 2023 Conference on Eliminating Violence against Women and Girls

Introduction

As part of the **United Nation's 16 Days of Activism** against gender based violence, The Kerry Women's Centre held a conference in the Rose Hotel on the 30th November 2023 – on eliminating violence against women and girls.

The conference was attended by a diverse range of women and men from different age groups, cultural backgrounds and community organisations. It was very clear from the knowledge, expertise and history of the work and support undertaken by the speakers at this conference that it is **now time for deeper analysis and action** on what is being done and *what needs to be* done within the communities themselves and the support given to the communities, to safeguard and prevent violence against women and girls.

Speakers

To open the conference *Rita O'Sullivan* from the Kerry Women's Centre welcomed *Pauline Russell*, a Health and Wellbeing Practitioner who led the group in a meditation. Pauline highlighted a characteristic of women, that we are intrinsically connected. When we see another women hurt, we feel their pain, when we see joy, we celebrate it with them. It is our nature to nurture and such is the nature of the support services that are available to those who seek them.

Marian Relihan spoke about uniting in the activation to end violence. She highlighted the need to change the culture in our society, of the acceptance of violence. She spoke about the language that is used within our society and the fact that it is tolerated - *when it shouldn't be*. A questionnaire on *How we understand violence* was given to the tables and it was very clear from the answers that everyone was in agreement. Derogatory words, shouting and threatening physical abuse against women is violence. Feeling safe when out alone and fear for their daughter's safety? Unanimously agreed that no they do not feel safe, and yes they fear for their daughter's safety. The understanding of coercive control and pornography were equally understood as violence and abuse. How the law deals with violence towards women – all agreed it was too lenient and not substantial.

The members in the conference had a chance to speak for a moment about their views on this questionnaire and it was highlighted and that the use of derogatory statements towards women is still very active in our society and that they had major concerns being out and about on their own, mostly at night however during the day time was also a concern for their children.

Niamh Corkery from Garda Service Victim's Unit, Castleisland, went through each of the orders and procedures that are in place following domestic abuse or violence. She spoke about coercive control and how this is now a new area for the Garda and about a new law that has come into place which covers leave in the workplace for domestic violence – Work Life Balance Act 2023. A question from the members of the conference asked – why in the case of domestic violence, was it always the woman who had to leave the home? ***This question highlights an issue that needs attention***. The women who leave the home due to domestic violence, may lose their entitlements to housing, their place on housing lists and could lead to homelessness. These are factors - that giving attention to this particular issue could prevent.

Catherine Casey Manager at ADAPT Kerry Women's Refuge and Support Services - spoke about the fact that domestic violence was a gender-based issue and not a 50/50 issue. She said that in their service they could have up to twenty women in one given day all presenting with different domestic violence or abuse. She said that there needs to be a more **effective protection system** in place and that separation between people *does not* in fact end domestic violence. It can lead to additional issues such as coercive control in children. The housing issue itself and increasing the number of units available, needs to be a priority, as pointed out earlier by a member – that it is usually the woman who leaves their home – leading to homelessness due to the lack of available units and/or losing their place on housing lists.

She said that at ADAPT Kerry, it is their job that the women can rely on them and that their world is bigger when they leave.

Mary McDermot of SAFE Ireland – stated clearly – there is no freedom where there is no safety. Domestic abuse means – domesticated and isolation. She also reiterated the inequality in housing and the very lengthy and multi-factor process that a woman has to endure in order to leave a domestic violence situation. She spoke of how a lot of the issues within our society stem from domestic violence.

She pointed out that now it is the time to look at how to create a whole infrastructure in Ireland to aid the prevention of domestic violence. She said that we need to answer this problem structurally and to pull out the roots of the problems that we have in our society. There needs to be an initiative whereby the entire country is involved – similar to that of the Tidy Towns – Safe Towns would be an initiative to provide the prevention and protection against violence towards women and girls in our communities.

It is clear from the conference itself, through the knowledge and expertise of the speakers and the experience and opinions of the people attending that now is time for action. It is clear that change needs to be implemented at a level which provides preventative support to relieve reactionary support.

Looking at the Tidy Towns initiative and how it is implemented, shows that a Safe Towns initiative is a workable solution. Tidy Towns involves the entirety of the community - local authorities, community groups, business networks and households. There is a structural approach on how to enter and compete in this scheme with modules that **must** be completed – an overall development approach and five year plan, looking at the built environment etc. There is also the Local Authority Prevention network which is a cooperative programme between the local authorities and the Environmental Protection Agency to support the communities involved. Using an approach such as this would provide a structural guideline with objectives that the towns/ communities need to meet.

Whilst these are geared towards the improvement of local environments – they showcase a system that can be used, which could aim to involve *everyone* in the education, prevention and action against abuse of women and domestic violence, in order to allow for the overall feeling of safety and support of women in the community.

#SafeTowns – needs to be spoken about and become an equally, if not more important objective to everyone in our communities.