

Belfast Club of Soroptimist International

Dear Sir/Madam,

As President of the Belfast Club of Soroptimist International, I am writing on behalf of my club to provide our full support to the introduction of the proposed legislation on the Domestic Violence and Family Proceedings Bill.

Founded in 1921, Soroptimist International is a global volunteer movement with a network of around 72,000 club members in 121 countries. Advocating for human rights and gender equality, at the heart of Soroptimist International's advocacy is its work across eight UN Centres, where our UN representatives ensure that the voices of women and girls are heard. Our work on grassroots projects help women and girls achieve their individual and collective potential, realise aspirations and have an equal voice in communities worldwide.

As domestic abuse disproportionately impacts women, it is vital that here in Northern Ireland, we voice our support for the legislation introduced by the Justice Minister. The inclusion of coercive control in abusive relationships has been recognised in English law and it should be introduced here too. Very often people in abusive relationships have suffered emotional and psychological damage as well as physical abuse.

Introduction of the legislation here, in itself, could encourage victims to come forward and escape controlling, abusive relationships. And the option of heavier sentencing where a child is a victim of domestic abuse, is also welcome. The destructive nature of abusive and controlling relationships damages individuals long-term and SI Belfast wants to see as much being done to tackle this problem in our society, as is possible.

We also support the aim to prohibit the accused from cross-examining a partner or connected person either in criminal court or family proceedings. The thought of a manipulative abuser questioning and challenging a victim when they are feeling particularly vulnerable must be extremely frightening. We support the fact that the Bill provides the court with the ability to appoint a court funded legal representative to carry out any cross-examination on behalf of the accused.

Research has shown that current arrangements in family courts can be used by the accused to further abuse and control a partner and can lead to withdrawal of charges due to fear. The changes proposed by the Justice Minister would ensure that victims of abusive relationships would no longer have to face their abuser questioning them in court. This can only be a positive way forward and is supported by Belfast Soroptimists.

Yours faithfully,

Cecelia Boyle
President SI Belfast