

# Eliminate Domestic Violence - Rt Hon Baroness Scotland of Asthal QC

By Robin Marsh

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Rt. Hon. Baroness Scotland of Asthal QC, Britain's first black female Attorney General (2007-2010) shared her experiences in combating domestic violence in Britain. "Peace at home is a fundamental human right, which must be protected unconditionally" she stated. She encouraged all present to be involved in the elimination of domestic violence. She said in 2003 "1 in 4 women in the UK was a victim of domestic violence." While after great hard work by 2009 the figure was improved to 1 in 6 women. She saw also the positive developments of a number of international efforts including the United Nations which made November 25<sup>th</sup>, the Elimination of Domestic Violence day, and the 16 days Campaign against Gender Violence beginning on November 25<sup>th</sup> and ending on Human Rights Day, December 10<sup>th</sup>. The Council of Europe has launched a far reaching Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence against Women that has now been signed by 17 nations.

She said that December 10th being Human Rights day was a good time to reflect how far we have come in the 60 odd years since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights was signed. In the UK especially since 1998 when the Human Rights Act enshrined the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR) into domestic law. When in effect we brought those laws home, having been one of the main contributors in framing the Convention.



Baroness Scotland began by praising Margaret Ali's persistence to compel her to cancel her trip to Qatar to take part in a conference in order to sample the delights of discussing Human Rights with the foremost thinkers in Europe. She added that she thought Margaret was absolutely right.

The issues we are going to discuss today are, I believe, of critical importance. Our discussion and our debate is perhaps more needed in this time of global uncertainty, than ever before fuelled as that uncertainty is by fear of fiscal restraint, environmental challenge and the general fear of austerity.

Baroness Scotland said that she valued the points made by Lord Parekh about minority communities in Europe and is looking forward to hearing Tom Brake MP regarding the riots and civil liberties, however, she was going to add to the variety by focussing on an issue that she has been actively involved in for some time; the elimination of domestic violence.

Although it is an issue that affects all nationalities, all economic backgrounds, all races and religions, affects women and girls disproportionately and impinges, unfairly, on their human rights.

Baroness Scotland encouraged those present to be involved in the 'For the Women in My Life' campaign she is promoting in her capacity as Patron of 'Eliminate Domestic Violence – Global Foundation.'

Domestic violence, she explained, occurs predominantly in the home. Peace at home is a fundamental human right enshrined in Article 5 of the European Convention of Human Rights and must be protected unconditionally. Peace at home is not a private matter. It is the responsibility of each of us. It is the responsibility of colleagues, employers, the Police, the Justice System, Local Government and the Health Service. I absolutely agree with (UN Women Executive Director) Michelle Bachelet, who says that 'the fundamental right to live free from violence embraces the public sphere and the private sphere alike.'

Baroness Scotland added, 'This morning I had the advantage of having a very short conversation with some of our Japanese colleagues who highlighted to me the difficulties that can occur within a family when family members take different views on religion than their parents and the risks that arise from that can be very significant indeed.'



Domestic violence affects every strand of our society. Globally at least one in every three women is either beaten, coerced into sex or otherwise abused by an intimate partner in their home. According to the World Bank women aged between 15 - 44 are more at risk from rape and domestic violence than cancer, motor accidents or war and malaria. It is the greatest cause for morbidity among women and girls, worldwide. Interpersonal violence is the leading cause of death among young people and adolescents worldwide. According to a UN study on violence estimated between 133 million and 275 million children are affected worldwide. According to the data provided by the World Health Organisation family violence claims the lives of 4 children under the age of 14 each day in Europe. In our own country, England and Wales, in 2003, one in four women and one in six men were affected by domestic violence. The figure has only changed recently to one in six women and one in ten men as a result of really sustained commitment and hard work by all sectors involved. That is Central and Local Government, business and the third sector.

The countries represented in this room will have different experiences of domestic violence. It can take many forms. For example in India domestic violence can manifest itself in the form of bride burning that can occur every two hours. During my time in office I chaired the Inter-Ministerial Group on Domestic Violence and the policies we implemented between 2003 and 2010 made a significant difference in the way we dealt with domestic violence.

The journey in the last decade has taken us from dysfunction to function, from poorly coordinated support of agencies to coordinated community support. Some people here in this room worked with me on issues such as forced marriage. We were able to make a real difference. With a new legislative framework, partnership working across the private and public and voluntary sector, training the frontline services and the rollout of specialist Domestic Violence Courts, the outcomes have been remarkably changed.

By 2009 in the UK Domestic Violence had been reduced by 64 %. In 2003, when I started, there were 49 deaths due to Domestic Violence in London. When I left in 2010 that number had been reduced to just 5 deaths.

Every death cost us as a Criminal Justice System, if there were no children involved, £1.1 million at least. Therefore that reduction has resulted in a saving to London if you are only interested in how to reduce the deficit, of £44 million. In human and economic terms the change has been dramatic.

The research in 2004 by the Department of Trade and Industry had demonstrated that Domestic Violence was costing us £23 Billion. In 2009 that was reduced to £15.5 billion, a saving of £7.5 billion per year in just five years.

Sadly since the change of Government some of the policies, implemented in the last decade, have not been prioritised with the same acuity that it had before. As a result there are some indications that things are starting to go in the wrong direction. There is a great deal of fear and anxiety about the change of focus. That anxiety is highlighted by the Coalition's intention to restrict legal aid. If legal aid is restricted then people's access to their rights is restricted.

Our experience in the UK is one that could be replicated around the world because protecting the right to security and

liberty is a global matter. It is possible to eliminate domestic violence across Europe and the World but only if we work in partnership to see the change we seek. I am pleased by the international efforts that include:

The United Nations General Assembly has made Nov 25<sup>th</sup> the Elimination of Domestic Violence day.

The 16<sup>th</sup> days Campaign against Gender Violence beginning on November 25<sup>th</sup> that ends on human rights day (December 10<sup>th</sup>) highlights gender violence as a human rights issue.

Europe has taken a significant step recently in an effort to end domestic violence through the Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women, is the most far reaching legal text in Europe in this field. It contains measures to protect victims, prevent violence and punish perpetrators. The convention covers ground never before agreed upon by the international community. It recognises violence against women as a violation of human rights and a form of discrimination. It recognises several new criminal offences such as stalking, sexual harassment and psychological violence.

By 15<sup>th</sup> November 2011, 17 nations have signed this Convention. It is a deep and abiding regret that my own country, the UK, has not yet signed up to this Convention. We worked so hard to get this convention passed. We know the current Government is looking at it. If the Labour Government was able to continue we would have made this nation one of the first to sign up to the Convention.

She encouraged all present to get involved to encourage their nations to sign up to the convention.

The recipe for reducing domestic violence pioneered in the UK has been of influence in other nations and she has been involved in promoting those policies in several other countries. The empirical data demonstrates that this model is effective. On this experience Baroness Scotland founded the 'Global Foundation to Eliminate Domestic Violence' in August of 2011. Specific country assessments will begin soon. Major international figures and organisations have signed supporting documents to assist.

We have come a long way. But Human Rights need to be felt and experienced. If 50% of the world's population is suffering discrimination and abuse then we can never create the world we wish to see and want our children to live in. If domestic violence is overcome statistical evidence demonstrates that the economy of Europe will benefit by 16 %.

750,000 to 900,000 children are affected by Domestic Violence in the UK. The damage is long lasting. We can change this paradigm if we choose to do it.