Statement by Minister Rabbitte to Dáil Éireann on Violence Against Women

From Department of Health

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It’s 3am.

I am in my bed.

Alone.

The phone rings.

I shake off the sleep and answer.

A man’s voice. Violent and determined.

"We know where you are. You need to back off the lines. We will get you".

My voice catches in my throat. I can’t breathe. I say nothing.

"Are you hearing me?”

"We will get you".

Then silence.

Just me, on my own and the darkness.

Safety robbed, security violated. Should I wake my children? Are we safe? Will the guards take a phone call seriously?
Not all men. But all women will identify with the feelings that come following these encounters.

Not all men, but all women know them well, because they are not rare.
Not all men, but all women grow up knowing we are not safe.
Not all men, but all women learn to text our friends when we arrive home safely, because for us, it is not a given that we will.
Not all men, but all women know the feeling that creeps up your back when you hear steps behind you, and you have to check.
Not all men, but all women stay away from the darkness between streetlights, sprinting from one bright pool to the next hoping to be ok.
Not all men, but all women look for parking spaces with CCTV cameras facing them, knowing that unlocking and getting into a car is one of the most vulnerable actions.
Not all men, but all women take the long way back, no shortcuts or alley ways.
Not all men, but all women know to keep keys between our fingers ready to defend ourselves.
This is the fight of our lives.
And it is exhausting.
Not all men, but all women watched Ashling Murphy’s story play out and felt: “there is no reason that one day it might not be me on the news.”
We need men to help us through this pandemic of violence against women and girls.
Now is not the time for cynicism and hopelessness. There is political possibility here. We can move forward in a way that makes us a global leader.
Let’s look at how we try rape and sexual assault in this country.
Let’s look at the hoops women have to jump through to get justice for assault.
Let’s look at creating a clear message to all men that protecting women will be celebrated and violence against them will not be tolerated at any cost.
While my colleagues work to bring forth legislation that will severely penalise abusive and threatening behaviour, we cannot do nothing. This is the fight of our lives.

Programmes like Seas Suas in NUI Galway can make a real difference if funded at third level. At its core, it is an Empathy, Bystander Intervention and Well-Being Training Programme.

Students have already said they have used the skills developed in the programme to effectively intervene in crisis situations.

Can we get rid of the shadows that support male violence? By literally increasing visibility with LED Lights in areas I know I would feel safer.

Could the Department of Sport introduce a condition on funding allocated to sports clubs where they have to work to increase the awareness and protection of women in the clubs and communities?

We need to tackle the abusive online culture that has developed. It can’t just be seen as just part of the modern political life. I need to wind the clock back to last week. I was on The Tonight Show speaking about Ashling Murphy, and I was told on Twitter that I need to ‘shut up’ while another tweet said they wanted to punch me - although they used language I’m not allowed repeat in this Chamber.

Only yesterday, after speaking to Radio 1 about being threatened by a man in my office, I was told I ‘love an old yarn’ and that I ‘make up stories’.

What makes matters worse is that for some women, they fear they will be seen as weak or whinging if they speak up. So we say nothing, and the abuse continues.

The simple fact is that changing a toxic culture is not easy.

Can I ask everyone here to just look at their own lives, their own sphere. Are you contributing to, or condoning an anti-female sentiment? And if the answer is yes, are you willing to change?

Have you seen tweets about your female colleagues? Have you intervened? Have you seen distasteful jokes in Whatsapp groups and said nothing?

We need you to say something.
Whenever you see it, call it out.

WHENEVER you see it, call it out.

There is opportunity in every moment. Please help us.

Because it is not all men, but it is all women.

It will require great humility, courage and strategy but I believe a change is possible.