



Rights of Women 50th Anniversary Legal Dinner

Barbara Mills KC, Chair of the Bar Council

Wednesday 19 March 2025 at Inner Temple

CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

It is a huge honour to be here this evening celebrating 50 years of Rights of Women – a charity that has supported women to achieve better outcomes through the family justice system since its foundation in 1975, and that is very close to my heart.

It is my privilege to be the Chair of the Bar Council of England and Wales in 2025 and as such I represent all barristers in England and Wales. And I'm very pleased to tell you that this year I'm also leading the first all-women officer team in the Bar Council's 131-year history. I think you'll all agree – it's about time!

This evening, I would like us to take a moment together to look at how far we've come in the last half century, and to think about where we might hope to be 50 years from now.

So, let us cast our minds back to 1975.

At the United Nations First World Conference on Women, held in Mexico City in June, Australian delegate Elizabeth Reid said:

“In the world outside, we are ignored, we are invisible, we are not important ... We've got to change these attitudes toward us — smilingly if necessary, angrily if necessary, and aggressively if necessary. Otherwise, there will be no such thing as true equality.”

For the first time, women had taken hold of the microphone on the international stage and 1975 was designated the United Nations International Women's Year and marked the beginning of the UN decade of women.

It is apt, then, that 1975 is also the year that Rights of Women was founded by a group of women legal workers aiming to provide legal and financial independence for women. As the Rights of Women website puts it, “to help women find their way around the many man-made laws that affected them”.

In 1975, Rights of Women was in the vanguard of legal and social change for women in the UK, as the seeds of progress were beginning to sprout.

In February, Margaret Thatcher became the first female leader of the opposition.

In November, the Sex Discrimination Bill received Royal Assent. The new Act was a landmark piece of legislation addressing discrimination on the basis of sex or marital status. The Act stated that “a person discriminates against a woman... if, on the ground of her sex he treats her less favourably than he treats, or would treat, a man”.

And on 29 December 1975 the Equal Pay Act 1970 came into force. This groundbreaking Act aimed to eradicate gender-based wage discrimination: ‘Equal pay for equal work’.

(But of course, we’re not there yet and it’s something we continue to work on – but that’s for another speech.)

Even though only 4% of the members of the House of Commons were women at the time, Britain’s’ lawmakers were finally beginning to dismantle the wall of discrimination faced by women, brick by brick.

Despite these major legislative steps forward, in the year Rights of Women was founded, the law still heavily favoured the rights of men.

It would take years and decades of work by Rights of Women and others to bring about further change:

- Rape within a marriage was not a crime until the 1991 House of Lords judgment in *R v R* [UKHL 12]
- Women had no civil law protection from domestic violence, until the introduction of non-molestation and occupation orders in the Family Law Act 1996
- Female genital mutilation was not considered a crime until 2003
- The concept of consent was not introduced in sexual violence cases until the Sexual Offences Act 2003
- Coercive and controlling behaviour in intimate or familial relationships was not criminalised until the Serious Crime Act 2015
- A man accused of domestic abuse could cross-examine the woman making the allegations against him in the family courts, until the introduction of the qualified legal representative scheme in 2022 under the Domestic Abuse Act 2021
- Men who killed someone they had children with didn’t have their parental responsibility suspended automatically until the Victims and Prisoners Act

2024 introduced 'Jade's Law', named in the memory of Jade Ward who was murdered by her partner

These are just a few examples of how far we've come – legally and societally – in the five decades since Rights of Women was founded.

And while some of those dates might seem unbelievable – and we question how it took so long to listen to the voices of women – I believe we must always reflect on our progress to find the strength to keep pressing forward.

Rights of Women is a unique frontline charity providing free legal advice to women at risk of experiencing all forms of violence against women and girls across England and Wales and, as such, can be incredibly proud of the pivotal role it has played first in raising awareness of discrimination faced by women, and second in using evidence-based campaigns, built on the insights from frontline services, to bring about legislative change.

All the while, Rights of Women, who provide specialist legal advice in the areas of family, immigration, criminal, employment, and asylum law, has supported individual women to understand and exercise their own legal rights through the incredible staff and network of active volunteer women barristers and solicitors.

Relationship with ROW

I was one such volunteer.

My own relationship with Rights of Women began by volunteering on the legal helpline – an extraordinary service that has now grown to supporting well over 3,000 women a year.

For so many women, the legal helpline would be better described as a legal *lifeline*.

I had come to understand the power of early legal advice – especially for women – while studying law at the University of Hull.

To gain some work experience, I'd take two or three buses to volunteer at the Citizens Advice Bureau on the Bransholme estate, one of the largest social housing estates in Europe.

I saw amongst the families and individuals, the reluctance to seek help. How people got themselves into difficult situations that started small, and then mushroomed.

I came across serious domestic abuse and violence, women who had been beaten but didn't leave. They'd come into the CAB office week after week for advice and – aged

19 – I couldn't understand why they didn't just pack their bags and get out. It was so complicated.

But I also saw the positive ripple effect of help. When you helped one person – a mother or a child – you could see that *everybody's* situation just got better.

Those early experiences informed my interest in pro bono work and – like the hundreds of Rights of Women volunteers – I'm proud to be part of the journey that has brought us to tonight's celebration.

In 2021 I acted pro bono for the women's groups – including the Rights of Women – who intervened in *Re H-N and Others (Children) (Domestic Abuse: finding of fact hearings)* [2021] EWCA Civ 448.

Recognising the potential impact of controlling and coercive behaviour, the Court of Appeal agreed with our submission that 'the overwhelming majority of domestic abuse (particularly abuse perpetrated by men against women) is underpinned by coercive control and it is the overarching issue that ought to be tried first by the court.'

That introduction into the law of the dynamic which is coercive control was and will forever be a game changer.

The Court also recognised that the 1970s' approach of the Domestic Violence and Matrimonial Proceedings Act 1976 – where protective measures were only triggered in the event of 'violence' or 'actual bodily harm' – was 'old fashioned'.

Society's – and the courts' – understanding of domestic abuse and violence against women and girls has certainly evolved in the last 50 years.

VAWG now

But we recognise that progress on these issues is hard and it is slow. Sometimes we take steps back before we can move forward.

The international spotlight shone on women in 1975, but it wasn't until 1995 – at the third UN Women's Conference – that violence against women and girls was on the agenda.

Ahead of this year's International Women's Day, the Femicide Census reported on the deaths of 2,000 women since 2009 – one woman killed in the UK, on average, every three days. 60% of the deaths were classed as 'intimate partner violence' and children witnessed at least 163 incidents of femicide.

Also to mark International Women's Day, earlier this month Home Office Minister Jess Phillips read out the names of the 95 women and girls killed by men in the past year.

A National Audit Office report in January found that violence against women and girls affects one in 12 women. It recognised the critical need for a joined up approach to tackle VAWG and called on the Home Office to quickly establish the structures and incentives necessary to align all delivery partners behind the goal to reduce the harm caused by VAWG.

I am sure we can all agree with that plea and everyone here tonight will be ready to play their part in making it happen so that we can face a much brighter future.

Looking to the future

So, now I invite you to cast your minds forward 50 years, to 2075.

What does real progress for women look like? Will those who come after us be sitting together at a dinner like this celebrating 100 years of Rights of Women?

Or can we dare to dream that Rights of Women – and all charities and services in this space – are no longer needed?

I don't have a crystal ball or a magic wand but what I can do this year as Chair of the Bar Council is to set out some of the steps we can take right now to put us on the right path towards that dream.

There are so many ways in which the lives of women can be improved and must be improved. It seems to me that however our rights are improved, if we don't feel safe by choice and remains by chance, we have not moved an inch.

So we welcome the government's ambition to halve violence against women and girls in 10 years. And we've already overcome the first hurdle – I hope – which is to bring political and public attention to the fact that VAWG includes domestic abuse and, as such, the family court is engaged.

To start with that broad definition and a focus on family law is to understand that many women and girls are harmed not by strangers but by men who profess to love them and often that abuse takes place within the family home.

The challenge is changing the narrative so that *every* time people talk about VAWG, they think about the family justice system, as well as criminal justice.

The narrative must also include a strong message about prevention. If the only focus is on punishment, it is likely to fix in the mind the notion that domestic abuse is not inevitable and is preventable.

Once we take that more holistic approach there is no skirting around the fact that real change needs real investment. Criminal and family courts, domestic abuse services, and local authorities have all been starved of the resources they need to take a genuinely joined-up approach to tackling VAWG.

We want to see the rollout of properly resourced problem-solving courts – such as Pathfinder courts and Family Drug and Alcohol Courts (known as FDAC) – across the country. These courts take a multi-disciplinary approach to families in crisis and divert perpetrators of violence into well-funded programmes that dramatically reduce the likelihood of future harm.

These initiatives are expensive to set up and expensive to get right. But if we invest in them *properly* now, I guarantee there will be savings in the future. As a sector working day in, day out with domestic abuse, you all know that ‘spend to save’ really works – not just saving cost for the public purse but reducing the human cost too.

I said earlier that on our journey, we sometimes take steps back before we move forwards. The devastating legal aid cuts in 2013 mean that in the family courts today 40% of all parties are without legal representation. Our firm position at the Bar Council is that *every* complainant and *every* alleged perpetrator should have access to legal advice and representation in the family court.

We’re also advocating for child abuse support and assessment services and trauma-informed measures in all cases that come before the courts.

Sometimes it’s the simple things that we need to fix – on a visit to a family court on the Northern Circuit recently, I learned that the design of the building means that all court users enter and leave through the same door meaning it’s almost inevitable that women will come into contact with the partners they have fled. We shake our heads in disbelief that this is the reality in 2025.

This year the theme for IWD is focused on rights, equality and empowerment and the strapline is Accelerate Action. The key theme for ROW’s 50th anniversary is the importance of access to justice as a mechanism to advance rights and empower women. At a time when we are hearing that it will take 5 generations before we can hope to achieve equality, I say only if women stay still. I believe that if we each do what we can, where we are, with what we have, if we are prepared to drown out the unhelpful and toxic voices all around us at the moment that try to inspire us to despair then we will get there sooner than predicted.

As I said before, I don't have a magic wand, but what we have in this room are the people who have already brought about so much change... change for individual women and change for all women.

As the late great Maya Angelou said: "Each time a woman stands up for herself, without knowing it possibly, without claiming it, she stands up for all women."

Thank you, Rights of Women, for standing up for all of us for the past 50 years.
Onwards with courage!