

Ambassador Shari Villarosa
Opening Remarks to Intra-family Violence Conference
Tuesday, January 28, 2014, 9:30AM
Le Meridien Hotel, Balaclava

Honorable Justices, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen, I am pleased to welcome you for an important discussion on Intra-family Violence—a topic sadly too many try to avoid and, for that reason, a festering problem in the United States, Mauritius and around the world.

I am not aware that the scourge of domestic violence has been eliminated anywhere in the world. It is a challenge that we must address in order to protect some of the most vulnerable people in our nations. It will take concerned citizens like yourselves willing to redouble their efforts to build a future free of beatings and degradation for the vulnerable members of our society. It will take education and prevention; treatment and rehabilitation; investigation and prosecution—to build this better future. It is our hope that by talking together and sharing our experiences we can bring a fresh perspective and energy to combatting this epidemic. Over the next three days, we will focus on the role each of you must accept to succeed, whether by investigating a crime, prosecuting perpetrator, or providing services to victims.

Domestic violence has devastating physical, social, emotional and financial impact on individuals, families and societies. For countless women, children, *and men*, home is not a place of refuge, but a place of abuse. Every day, powerless victims are assaulted by husbands, fathers, wives, mothers, family members, and others in their community.

This domestic violence is criminal behavior, and the criminal justice system must take action. All too often, violence within the family is considered a private matter and not treated by the authorities as a crime. Most victims give similar reasons for not reporting the abuse, which is compounded by the shame or embarrassment they feel and a preference for handling the situation themselves. This is no excuse for us to avoid taking action. A major role of government is to protect its citizens, including from abuse. If government officials fail to prevent, investigate and punish such acts of violence with the full weight of the law, then they share in the responsibility for the abuses.

In 2012, 1760 cases of domestic violence were reported at the Ministry of Gender Equality, Child Development and Family Welfare, nearly 89 percent of which were against women. Though women are more likely to be victims, domestic violence against men is on the increase. Ten years ago, one of every 34 cases of domestic violence was against men, compared to one out of every 9 cases in 2012.

Recent surveys in Mauritius show that nearly 25 percent of women, almost one in four, have experienced severely abusive behavior of a physical, sexual or emotional nature from an intimate partner at some time in their lives. This is corroborated by the fact that approximately the same percentage of men admit to engaging in violence against their wives. How many more abuse their families without admitting it? The same surveys show that the prevalence of intra-family violence is at least 10 times higher than that reported to the police. According to

the Mauritius Family Planning Welfare Association, 40 cases of sexual abuse of children were reported recently in a span of just 13 days.

This is unacceptable. We have all read the reports and now is the time to act. We must work together - government, civil society, and the private sector – to put an end to further violence. The laws exist here in Mauritius. The next step is enforcing those laws so no one thinks they have impunity. Inevitably more Mauritian abuse victims will come forward when they are confident that the authorities and institutions will not only protect them, but also hold perpetrators accountable and give the victims the justice they deserve.

We must reassure people that domestic abuse cases will be handled professionally, sensitively, and seriously. We need to make it easier for victims to report, and make perpetrators of violence accountable for their crimes. We must ensure that victims of violence feel safe in seeking assistance, and that perpetrators clearly know that domestic violence is a crime and the guilty will be punished.

So I urge you to participate actively in this three-day conference. I am impressed with the stature of the participants I see gathered today. In your honor, we have brought outstanding prosecutors and police presenters from the United States who have tackled this problem in the United States and will share with you their lessons learned. I'm pleased that we have been able to assemble key people involved on both policy and service delivery. I hope that you find this conference a useful platform for the exchange of information and debate so it can spark new ways of thinking by comparing approaches implemented in other jurisdictions, like the United States. I am confident that each of you at the conclusion will return to your duties ready to offer better protection to the vulnerable citizens that are counting on you literally to save their lives.

The struggle against domestic violence holds many challenges, but it also offers the opportunity to collaborate on very meaningful work that will make a real difference to so many people by helping to prevent violence and ensuring effective responses to cases of abuse.

I wish each of you the very best in your continued work and want you to know that you can count on collaboration between the U.S. Embassy and your organizations in order to increase awareness of domestic violence, to encourage victims to report their experiences and to help improve services to those affected by these crimes. Included in your packet is a very brief survey we would like you to fill out at the conclusion so that we can provide the information you would find most helpful. The U.S. Embassy stands by the Mauritian people and will continue to offer our support so that all Mauritians can enjoy a better future.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the IJLS for assisting in the organization of this conference, and our speakers for travelling all the way here from Washington DC. Together, I believe we can create societies in which all our citizens are safe from violence, so we can focus our efforts on building peace and prosperity for all our citizens.

Thank you.