Thank you so much for inviting me to launch this excellent report along with Brendan McGuigan. It is an honour. I have worked with a lot of women who have been subjected to domestic and sexual violence, starting out with the period in the early 1980s when I was one of the founders of the Belfast Rape Crisis Centre. I am very proud to have won an Amnesty award for an investigative report I wrote about the impact of such violence against women, including murder, on their children.

Strangely, when Sinead first asked me to speak today, the first story that came into my mind did not really involve domestic violence at all, or not directly anyway. Let me explain. My friend told me about an experience her sister had when driving out of Dublin recently to the small town where she lives. She was on her own in the car and she was preoccupied with thoughts of her mother who had recently died. As she exited a roundabout she became aware of a male driver who flashed his lights at her, stared angrily at her and blew his car horn. As far as she was aware she had done nothing wrong. The man pulled his car in behind her, far too close. In her rear view mirror she could see that there was a woman in the passenger seat and a small child in the back of the car. The man was clearly furious. She hoped he would overtake her but despite many opportunities he did not. Instead he kept on her tail, sometimes pulling back only to surge up close again.

When she got to the exit for the town where she lived she realised she could not go home because it was likely he intended to follow her. So she drove to the garda station. The man followed her, the woman blank faced beside him, the child in the back. She stopped her car outside. He stopped too. She got out and ran to the door of the station. He followed. She was terrified but to her relief she could see a gard inside working at a desk. The door was closed but she pressed a buzzer. The man was by now beside her, shouting abuse, threatening her. She rang and rang. Eventually the gard responded through the intercom: Look, he said. If this is a domestic you may go home and sort it out and not be wasting my time. My friend's sister ran back to her car, locked herself in and cried. The man threw a few parting insults at her, returned to his own car, and, presumably his family, and drove off.

I urged my friend to urge her sister to report this incident but she said she did not think that she would, and I can understand why. After all, in a sense, nothing happened. And yet, something did. A woman was exposed to male aggression and the police, assuming the aggressor was her partner, did not see fit to intervene. Another woman witnessed it all and did not find it possible to do anything. She was left, deeply shaken, scared, and feeling completely unprotected.

When I read the Footprints document we are launching today – A Call for Positive Change for Victims of Domestic Violence, this was one of many stories that came into my mind. I thought as well about my friend Sophia McColgan, the subject of my first book, "Sophia's Story." Sophia and her brothers and sister were physically, sexually and emotionally abused by their father throughout their childhoods, until, in 1992, Sophia, then a young adult, reported his crimes and began the long and traumatic process that ended up with him being sent to jail to serve the longest sentence ever handed down for such crimes in Irish history. He got over 200 years – he served 7 and a half. Sophia got great support from the Irish people – but there were some who questioned her mother's role: Why, they demanded, did Mrs

McColgan not protect her children? Sophia's answer was simple and devastating: "She could not protect us," she said. "She was one of us."

I also thought of a woman I met in Belfast whose daughter had been murdered by her partner, the father of her baby. His violence against her had been terribly obvious in the months before he killed her – but she was too beaten down to leave him despite her mother's passionate attempts to get her away to safety. At his trial, his lawyers implied that she had been complicit in the violence, pointing out that she had sent him dozens of texts in the 24 hours before her death. He got a sentence which, with remission, meant he would be out in 2 or 3 years. The young woman's mother was going to go on the run with her grandson. She knew his father, who had shown no interest in him before, would return to claim him. She knew he would poison the child's young mind against his late mother, and that he would try to turn him into another woman hater. When she described how this man had got her daughter into a relationship with him in the first place she said to me: "He ***wooed*** her." It is a word many associate with romance – but when she said it I knew that it was full of menace and deceit. He had groomed her for abuse. Once she gave herself to him, she could not get away from him.

Those of you who have experienced domestic violence, whether through your own exposure to it or that of friends or family members, will, I know understand the overwhelming sense of powerlessness that these stories contain. Also the damage. Damage to women and damage to children. It has to stop, and it is only through work such as you have undertaken in the "Footprints Women's Movement" that it will stop. You know what you are talking about. To quote the report: "The victim of domestic violence is not just a statistic, nor a name on a piece of paper, nor a file lying in a drawer in an office. They are a real person living in fear from a partner."

That person needs protection, urgently. There is no much that needs to be done and put in place that sometimes it can seem impossible to know where to start. We live in a country – and I include the Republic and the North since both have in this respect similar cultures – in which women are forced to stay and keep their children in situations of extreme danger because there is nowhere for them to go, and in which women in refuges are forced to go home to violent men because other women are in more urgent need of limited refuge spaces.

It is hard not to feel overwhelmed by the scale of the problems. Your report quotes the shocking statistics that there are 60 incidents of domestic violence reported every day – and we can assume that is only a fraction of the total experienced. On average 5 people die every year as a result of this violence. Reports of domestic violece account for one fifth of all recorded crime in Northern Ireland.

But what you in Footprints have done, with the support of PPR, is to start by identifying one key issue: non molestation orders, and by identifying what is going wrong with how these orders are used or not used, and what it would take to make them work - to do what the courts intend them to do which is to protect women and provide safety and reassurance and peace of mind. NMOs should be a powerful instrument of protection. It took decades of campaigning and of presenting the evidence of what women were experiencing, to have them introduced. And, as your report states – NMOs are important for what they do, but also for what they signal:

they show the perpetrator of domestic violence that they will be made accountable and that domestic abuse is unacceptable.

The work you have done is based on a simple principle: those who know best how a legal instrument works are those who need it to work for them. Your understanding, that women suffer in silence, was met by a brave decision to broach that silence. You asked women what had happened when they applied for NMOs. The details of the responses are in the report – perhaps most shocking is the finding that a large majority of the women who successfully got NMOs did not feel safe as a result, and rightly so, since in a majority of cases the orders were breached. There was no consistency in the way the orders were operated – so women cannot know what they have a right to expect, or what to do if things go wrong.

Thank you for doing this important piece of work. Domestic and sexual violence by men against women and children is a worldwide crime which puts women down and perpetuates inequality. The women of Colin in West Belfast can proudly say that they have started to fight back – not using fists or weapons – but using their intelligence, their courage and their honesty. Thank you. [ends]