Violence against women should be considered a violation of human rights, concluded experts, advocates, judges and attorneys gathered at the United Nations in New York City yesterday for the 2013 Women and Justice Conference.

Across the globe, victims of domestic violence are barely protected by a patchwork of legislation, with problematic implementation, the conference was told.

"We should be enraged before violence becomes extreme," said Cindy Dyre, Vice President Human Rights, Vital Voices, a global not-for-profit based in Washington D.C. and former Director of the Office of Violence Against Women, Department of Justice.

The one-day conference, sponsored by the Avon Foundation for Women and Cornell University Law School, attracted almost 100 participants from around the world and the U.S. Many suggested that defining domestic abuse as a "human rights" violation could strengthen and reinforce efforts to work with victims.

Discussions at the meeting focused on the state’s responsibility for eliminating violence against women, including the role played by courts and judges.

Several speakers called for technical assistance and support to governments to address violence issues in their community, in particular helping law enforcement and other professionals learn how to spot and stop it at its start.

"We need to change the behaviors surrounding the ideas of violence," said Elizabeth Brundige, Executive Director of the Avon Global Center for Women at Cornell Law School.

Judges shared stories of cases seen from the bench and spoke about how to address the tension of helping a victim without losing their impartiality.

"Knowing the laws that help victims does not mean we are impartial," said Virginia Kendall, a U.S. District Court Judge for the Northern District of Illinois.

Swati Chauhan a judge in Mumbai, India said it was important to give prosecutors information about service providers, such as shelter, health care and counseling, so they could help victims address the trauma they suffered and give them the confidence to pursue a court case. For example, she recounted how she referred a rape victim who needed new teeth to a dentistry program.

The victim returned to court with new teeth and a "new spring in her step" that helped her become more engaged in her case.

Speakers also addressed the weak implementation of laws in place to protect victims in many countries.
NGOs and advocates need to help governments conduct due diligence on how to contain and address violence in their communities, said Robin Phillips, Executive Director of the Minnesota-based Advocates for Human Rights, a not-for-profit dedicated to promoting and protecting human rights.

“We need to monitor governments to identify where breakdowns are in the system, and tell them why there are gaps even when there are laws in place,” said Phillips.

One obstacle to generating concerted global action is that many countries do not keep adequate data.

Gender-based violence is underestimated globally in some cases by 128 percent, according to a new study [http://aje.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2013/12/04/aje.kwt296.abstract] in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*.

In the study, released in September, researchers from Stony Brook University School of Medicine analyzed data from Demographic and Health Surveys from 24 countries, which revealed 93,656 women as survivors of violence.

But they also estimated that only 7 percent of women globally who are survivors of physical or sexual violence report to formal sources, including legal, medical, or social support services.

Additionally, disclosure of gender-based violence to family, friends, or neighbors of the victims was low (37 percent). In 20 of the 24 countries studied, the majority of women told no one at all.

Other speakers at the conference included: Judge Kate Pillay, High Court of South Africa, Judge Joanna Seybert, US District Court, Eastern District, and Bahaa Ezzelarab, Legal Advisor for the North African Litigation Initiative.

*Cara Tabachnick is Managing Editor of The Crime Report. She welcomes comments from readers.*