

WFWP Scotland Conference on the Dignity of Women

Scottish Parliament, 12th December 2012

(In association with the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women)



This was the Women’s Federation for World Peace’s first conference at the Scottish Parliament. A lively audience of 50, including members of Scottish Parliament (MSPs) from 3 parties, filled Committee Room 1 for this evening event.



Christina McKelvie, MSP for Hamilton, Larkhall and Stonehouse, and co-convenor of the Parliament’s Cross-Party Group on Men’s Violence against Women and Children, welcomed us all, briefly introduced the WFWP, and then set the tone by telling us of her memory of an exhibition photo of Palestinian women sharing their culture, before reading a few words from “Light a Candle for Peace.”



Mukami McCrum, Minority Ethnic Women’s Issues policy manager, began by saying how struck she was by the way WFWP works – “the warmth and the welcome.” She then pointed to the differences in common perceptions of dignity for men (state, power, control) and women (good, clean, demure, gentle), before turning to talk more specifically about violence directed at women. She called for a change in terminology from “traditional” practices (when referring to such violence as genital mutilation and honour killings) to “harmful” practices, pointing out that many traditional practices are not

harmful, while these particular, harmful ones do not deserve the name “traditional.” She added that in many societies women don’t question such practices because they have been normalised.

Before moving on to introduce the next speaker, Christina McKelvie reminded us that Mukami had been more than modest about what she does, pointing out that she works with the Scottish government, giving valuable advice on various issues, and has also been awarded the M.B.E.



Carolyn Handschin, International Vice President for Europe of WFP and deputy director of WFP International’s UN office, speaking briefly about recent events in Brussels and Rome, treated us to some of the history behind the International Day for the elimination of Violence against Women. Showing a postage stamp from the Dominican Republic, she told the story of 3 sisters who were assassinated in that country in 1960. Imprisoned and tortured for speaking out against the country’s then dictator, they refused to be quiet when released. Their assassination galvanized the nation, the dictator was deposed, and the 3 sisters became national heroes.

Mrs Handschin then turned her focus to the theme of leadership, pointing out that women need to see themselves not just as victims but as problem-solvers and developers. Pointing out that, worldwide, only 13% of women are parliamentarians, she commended the Scottish parliament for managing 37%. As a mother of 7 and grandmother of 3, with a loving husband “who often accompanies me to WFP events”, Carolyn acknowledged the short-term value of aggressive feminism but expressed a preference for another model, “where men and women work together, as in a well-functioning family”.

For 16 years, WFP has been holding annual conferences for peace in the Middle East, and Mrs Hanschin has been involved with the coordination of these for the past 10 years. She was struck by the strength of the women of the Middle East, who manage to maintain their femininity even as leaders, managing big families and also working for the community. One session in 2002 included a woman at the UN who had lost a relative in an incident in Gaza the previous day. What began with incredible tension led to women from both sides speaking openly about their pain and – following a necessary break – ended up as an incredible discussion about reconciliation. This element of depth is missing usually when such issues are discussed. “Women *need* to be part of this process”, Carolyn concluded.

Turning to human rights, which she described as “one paradigm” through which to work for peace, Mrs Handschin shared a favourite definition from Kofi Annan: “the principles by which we create the sacred home for human dignity.” Rights, however, are accompanied by corresponding duties, and we have a duty to create a culture whereby people do not need convincing of such duties. The key to such a culture is the family – not a patriarchy, and not a matriarchy, but a “familiarity” where every component of the family has a role to teach and learn from the others.



Christina McKelvie had a tough job bringing things to a close. There were many questions and comments, but her own ones gave us a good sense of the value of the evening: “Events like this fill me with hope,” she said, adding: “Here we have a saying that goes, “Work as if you’re in the early days of a better nation.” Maybe we should work as if we’re in the early days of a better humanity.” Tea and mince pies were enjoyed by those who could drag themselves away from the general after-chatter.