

Report on WFWP/UPF Conference on International Women's Day

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“The sky is the limit to what you can achieve”, declared Councillor Bernadette Khan as she spoke earnestly about the message that mothers and grandmothers should be conveying to their daughters and grand-daughters. Speaking at a conference to commemorate International Women’s Day, hosted jointly by UPF (Universal Peace Federation) and WFWP (Women’s Federation for World Peace) on 9 March at the Peace Embassy, Thornton Heath, she recalled how her family’s inspiring tradition of service and her own experiences in Pakistan led her to seek to raise women’s status through participation in politics, with the introduction of a women’s surgery as one of her key initiatives during her 15-year service as a local Councillor for West Thornton Heath.



A large audience of about 60 people had gathered to celebrate, reflect and discuss this year’s theme for International Women’s Day – “The Gender Agenda: Gaining Momentum”. Tina Baklanov, as the MC for the afternoon’s proceedings, opened by presenting the background behind this special day, which originated as the International Working Women’s Day in 1908. There followed some beautiful musical pieces by young female performers, including a soaring rendition of “Alleluia”, which warmed the hearts of the audience as they prepared to listen to the three distinguished speakers.



Following Cllr Khan’s keynote speech, the next speaker, Margaret Ali, who has been serving as a UPF director for 15 years, hailed the achievements of prominent women such as Baroness Scotland, the first female attorney general, and Christine Lagarde, managing director of the IMF, in rising to prominent positions and seeking to advance women’s role in society. She also talked about the core UPF principle of “One family under God”, which includes viewing men and women as being equal as children of the Heavenly Parent, and she advocated that women see value in themselves and thereby gain the power to also value and raise their men.



In the final speaker presentation, Nicola Bailey, Assistant Head Teacher of Archbishop Lanfranc School in Mitcham, spoke about the importance of helping women to move from the private sphere of home and family into the public sphere of work and social enterprise opportunities. She cited the many barriers to women entering public life (including apathy, feeling intimidated, cultural expectations, lack of time and support) and explained how she was assisting women to overcome them through successful training programmes she has developed.



After the speaker presentations, the participants broke up into discussion groups to reflect on the themes presented and to share their personal experiences of overcoming obstacles to becoming involved in the public sphere. The discussions held covered a lot of ground, ranging from the influence of religion and culture on gender roles and expectations to the expanded responsibilities that women face in modern society in addition to their traditional roles. Tina Coombes, one of the discussion group leaders, eloquently summed up the need for change from both the top-down perspective of parliamentary participation and legislative action and from the bottom-up perspective of family feeling and consciousness. The participants certainly emerged with much food for thought as well as encouragement to expand their arena of activity. We concluded the event with some lovely food and enjoyable fellowship following the end of the formal proceedings.