

WFWP Birmingham, UK's UN Day for Youth 2017 - Women's Peace Meeting

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Thursday 10 August 2017 saw great interest, and a full house, for our Women's Peace Meeting, discussing a very thought-provoking and emotive topic - 'The Increasing Sexualisation of our Society', connecting to the UN International Youth Day. In recent years, various aspects of sexuality have been much discussed - in the media, at the United Nations, and by governments, with consequences for, among others, developing countries, government legislation and school curriculums. Regardless of the motivation and reasoning behind all of this, a clear outcome is the exposure of children, at younger and younger ages, to sexually explicit material, some of it pornographic, with serious question marks as to the long-term impact of such exposure on human relationships, and the accountability of those people who are driving this agenda.

Well over 100 women gathered together for the evening discussion, women of all ages, representing a wide variety of societal roles : students and a university professor, city councillors and concerned parents, doctors and social workers, primary and secondary school teachers, and many more. And, as usual, representing all the different racial, cultural and religious backgrounds present in our city. We were joined by around 20 new guests this time, and many commented favourably afterwards about the range of opinions expressed, and being able to hear a number of young people articulating their concerns.

We began the evening by watching part of a video presentation by Debbie Gullery, a certified Relationship Coach, Counsellor, and Marriage & Relationship Educator in the USA, speaking to a group of young people about the damaging impact of Pornography, a global multi-billion dollar industry, on their lives and relationships. In addition to it being easily and universally available, Debbie highlighted the addictive, drug-like nature of pornography, the long-term consequences of its influence on human relationships, the unrealistic, illusory expectations it creates, and the brutal impact on, and distortion of love into something which is self-serving, rather than giving and seeking the happiness of the other. She pointed them, and any others who are concerned about the power of the internet to promote Pornography, to an organisation she's partnered with, Covenant Eyes, found at www.covenanteyes.com/. Debbie suggests that this has the best Internet Accountability and Filtering System, both to block Pornography and to help young people monitor and control their internet usage.

We also raised awareness of the aggressive agenda being promoted at the United Nations and around the world, mentioned earlier in this article, under the guise of 'Comprehensive Sexuality Education', exposing children at younger and younger ages to sexually explicit and pornographic material. This can be seen at the following sites : www.youtube.com/watch?v=687ImATre-o and www.youtube.com/watch?v=KnSVaDt5C9E .

Our first speaker, Batool, currently Head of the Islamic Society at Birmingham University, began the proceedings, stating that the treatment of women in today's increasingly sexualised world, from a moral perspective, is not only demeaning in terms of stripping away their human dignity, but is also affecting

them as women of devotion and religious practice, who believe in core principles and values such as modesty and chastity. When valued and practised, both modesty and chastity can be a part of the solution to the sexualisation so prevalent in our current society.

Growing up in Jamaica many years ago, Peaches spoke of the village as her family, and how the relationship between parents and children in the home was the first step towards making the village community, and society. She described sexualisation as the imposition of adult forms of sexuality on our children, causing psychological damage and having a negative impact on self-esteem. She observed that often in current society, the only difference between adults' and children's clothes is size. She challenged us to think of all children as 'our' children, and to be involved in their well-being and behaviour if we are genuinely concerned for the future.



Rose, who has worked with disadvantaged and vulnerable young people for many years, covered a number of valuable points, including the breakdown of the family structure with serious emotional and financial consequences for young people, and the dramatic decline of support and services available to help them due to government cutbacks. This has contributed to increased vulnerability and mental health problems in our youth, with the knock-on effect of increased homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, crime and sexual exploitation. She described one of many harrowing experiences trying to support a 17 year-old homeless female with an 18-month old baby, with no friends other than predatory males who would ply her with alcohol and cigarettes, in return for sexual favours and exploitation. Nurturing, respect and self-esteem are such valuable elements, completely missing from these young lives, and therefore with little chance of them being passed on to the next generation, creating a vicious cycle.

Dr Sarah-Jane Page, a senior lecturer in Sociology at Aston University, has carried out extensive research encompassing religious identity, gender, feminism, sexuality, youth, clergy families and parenthood. With so much to say, and contribute to the topic, she focused on one particular point - the resources, or rather lack of resources, available within religious communities to help young people, often resulting in them having no-one to turn to to discuss pornography or issues of a sexual nature. This can result in a sense of loneliness, and the feeling that their religious leaders and elders have no awareness of where they are at, or the issues they are having to deal with. One major recommendation from a research project which Sarah was part of, between 2009 and 2011, was that religious leaders, youth workers and healthcare professionals would do well to be more open about sexuality : to address the topic and remove taboos, to listen to young people more, and to create safe spaces where the latter could discuss their sexual experiences, thoughts and feelings, without the fear of being judged.

Kathleen, managing director of Approachable Parenting, who has done so much good work with Muslim families around parenting, receiving the CAN Parent Quality Mark in the House of Commons in 2014 for the 'Five Pillars of Parenting' programme, spoke about the importance of a pre-marriage programme "Me for You" which she has helped to develop and deliver. Designed for 18+ young adults, it poses the questions : Who am I?, Who am I looking for? and How can I understand my needs and values, and become confident in problem-solving? She emphasised the importance of establishing ones' values early enough, and also the importance of parents being proactive and engaged with their children, particularly in the area of sex education and pornography. She herself had the experience of persisting with the

teachers at her children's school, in order to obtain the sex education material being used in the classroom and, finding some of it to be inappropriate, pointed this out to the teachers. They were actually unaware of the content, deeming it not only unfit for Kathleen's children but for all the children, and thanked her for bringing this to their attention! Kathleen concluded by referring back to Peaches' 'village', and the need for concerned parents to support one another and work together for a better society for all of us.

Indy, who has worked on a wide variety of collaborative projects in the Creative Industries, both locally and internationally, spoke briefly of her work with women engaged in prostitution, and working with indigenous people in Australia, where 'sexualisation' provides the means to achieve things, or gain things such as alcohol, cigarettes and the money to pay bills. Growing up in a Sikh family, as the eldest of 3 daughters, she described the personal and cultural challenges she faced, and the value and importance of having honest, difficult conversations with her parents and sisters, which allowed them to discuss those challenges in a constructive way, and to stick together as a family in what can be a very difficult society for young people.

Fadmira spoke of her work and experiences fostering several children, and the incredible frustration and heartache of trying to heal and rectify the damage caused in a child's early life, a sometimes impossible, hopeless challenge, echoing the comments we saw on the video about the long-term consequences of pornography.

Finally Abrar, who has worked as a teacher for a number of years, and who has 3 grown children of her own, emphasised the crucial importance of maintaining good, close relations with ones' children, such that they feel free to talk about anything, and having the lines of communication always open, particularly during puberty and going into the childrens' teenage years.

We then opened the discussion, and heard from a number of ladies and a variety of perspectives, including that of parents, primary and secondary school teachers, doctors, social workers, carers, foster parents, young people, faith leaders, etc. Many of the points raised by our first speakers were developed, such as Nila, a senior social worker speaking about a child's early years, and emphasising the positive impact which the love they receive in the family can have, for their protection, growth and development.

One of the concluding speakers, Norma Jean Murrain, spoke about helping young people try to maintain their purity by wearing a silver purity ring, one of a number of jewellery items manufactured in Birmingham's Jewellery Quarter by the Silver Fish Company which she founded in 2002. The ring is worn as a symbol of purity, after pledging to keep a pure life until entering into marriage, or a committed relationship, when it is replaced by a wedding ring. The roots of this initiative lie in America, where the 'Silver Ring Thing' began in 1995. Patricia then mentioned WAIT UK, an affiliate of WFWP, whose origins also lie in America, which is a group of young people in London who take their message of purity and abstinence before marriage into schools, both in the UK and abroad, particularly Africa, helping promote a positive lifestyle which enables young people to avoid the scourge of HIV/AIDS and Sexually Transmitted Infections. Using music and dance, and the language of young people, the WAIT performers encourage teenagers to think about a future, committed relationship which will have added depth and meaning from having prepared themselves by striving to keep a pure mind and body.

As always, we concluded our meeting with a quiet time of candle-lit prayer and reflection, expressing the hope of a better future for many of our young people in an often dark and difficult world. This was followed by refreshments and so much informal discussion, chatting and making of new friends, each time a very positive 'antidote' to the serious nature of the discussions we have together, tackling some of the difficult issues which affect all of our communities, and which require our collective strength and commitment in order to make a difference.

What can we do?

Our coming together, as women, in this way is a very empowering experience. One possibility would be to translate this into collective action. We heard, from Kathleen, how one woman's concern and persistence, led to the teachers at her daughter's school realising that the material being used for sex education was completely inappropriate for all the children. Perhaps we can consider numbers of us approaching individual schools, and even our elected officials, to express our concerns. At the very least, as mothers, we can make the effort, individually, to check the type of material being used for sex education at our own children's school, and take appropriate action as we see fit.

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