

WFWP Canada: Wisdom from Women Leaders on Achieving Domestic Peace

Eveline Stewart
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The Honorable Dr. Jean Augustine

On Saturday, March 31, 2021, Women's Federation for World Peace Canada held a webinar to mark Women's History Month with the theme; "Achieving Domestic Peace: Women as Mediators of Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Development." Mrs. Blandine Stringer, from the Ottawa chapter of WFWP, moderated the online event. Mrs. Eveline Stewart first acknowledged the indigenous population who had been the care-takers of the territory for centuries till the coming of settlers. The gathering was then greeted by Dr. Franco Famularo, President of the Universal Peace Federation Canada, and Mrs. Angelika Selle, President of WFWP USA. Notably, interpretation in French was offered for the first time.

Our first speaker was the Honorable Dr. Jean Augustine. She was the first black woman elected to Canada's Parliament in 1993 where she remained until 2006, holding many positions in the cabinet including Minister of Multiculturalism and the Status of Women. From 2007 until 2015 she was the first Fairness Commissioner for the Province of Ontario.

Speaking about the field of security and defense on the level of states and government, she underlined how she was able to find only one female defense minister in the world. Where women had been able to participate in peace negotiations, their perspectives, experiences and their desire for social harmony led to very different outcomes.

She sees the way forward as learning from history, understanding what we do know and what we do not know, educating ourselves, questioning our biases, perspectives and not making assumptions based on our limited knowledge. She challenged the audience to "ask the right questions, be ready to get uncomfortable answers and be willing to come out of our comfort zones." As a person and as a society we have to "see where we are and where we ought to be, and acknowledge that we have a responsibility." This way we can move from "talking about peace and security to living with peace and security."

Our second speaker, Mrs. Merly Barlaan, is the International Vice-President as well as the Chief Deputy Director of the Office for UN Relations for WFWP. As the president of WFWP Philippines since 2014,

she has been involved in many educational and social programs working with civic communities, faith communities and educational institutions.

Merly had just spent the month of March being involved in the Commission on the Status of Women at the UN. Her views are that policies and resolutions alone are not enough to create a more peaceful society. In her role advocating for women, youth and communities her approach is one of soft power, stating the starting point of true peace is in our hearts and in our homes. When a sustainable loving relationship exists between husband and wife, peace and sustainability can be experienced by the children. "With the heart of a parent we can free ourselves from the confines of conflict."

As an interlude, Ms. Arooj Rajput, author and founder of Creative Initiatives Community Canada offered a poem.

The last speaker, Rev. Linda Goonewardene from the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ottawa had a wealth of wisdom to offer. Her ministry as a psycho-therapist focuses on families and parents of people living with substance dependence or in recovery.

Her observation was that women are most often the ones who take responsibility for the suffering, sadness and shame of the people in their lives. She accentuated the need for kindness and forgiveness, the necessity of acknowledging, letting go and making a fresh start. Talking about self-forgiveness she said, "it is a natural expression of an open heart and of our basic goodness."

After a stimulating question period and closing remarks we were treated to a poem written by Zohra Zoberi, a long-time collaborator of WFWP. Her poem, ["A Quiet Revolutionary"](#) was about Viola Desmond, a black woman, who challenged racial segregation in 1946. Since 2018 her face has adorned the Canadian \$10 bill, she was chosen amongst 26,000 entries. Besides Queen Elizabeth, she is the only woman to ever appear on Canadian money.

Mrs. Lilly Tadin, president of WFWP Canada spurred us on to be involved in changes, to participate, to be "present at the table."