

WFWP Women's Peace Meeting in Birmingham

Birmingham, United Kingdom, 2. December 2013



Introduction.

Annually, November 25th marks the 'International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women' and is the beginning of the 16 days of 'Activism against Gender Violence Campaign'. Historically, the date arises from the tragic 1960 assassination of the three Mirabal sisters, political activists in the Dominican Republic; the killings were ordered by Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo (1930–1961). In 1981, activists marked November 25 as a day to combat and raise broader awareness of violence against women; on December 17 1999, the United Nations (UN) adopted the resolution making November 25 the official date.

Child / Forced Marriage.

Child marriage resulting from physical and/or emotional force is a form of violence. Child marriage is an unacceptable violation of the rights of children, especially adolescent girls with long term negative consequences on their health and well being. It denies these children their childhood, disrupting their access to

education, limiting their ability to participate in economic and social spheres, and jeopardizing their health – including increasing the risk of dying from complications during pregnancy or childbirth. It renders girls and young women more vulnerable to intimate partner violence, including sexual violence and can increase the risk of HIV. Globally, an estimated 1 in 3 young women aged 20 to 24 were married before the age of 18 years. If present trends continue, by 2020 an estimated 142 million girls will be married by their 18th birthday (UNFPA 2012).

Peace Meeting.

To discuss the topic of 'Forced Marriage', we invited Jasvinder Sanghera, founder of Karma Nirvana, to address the 5th and final Women's Peace Meeting of 2013. I had been trying to invite her to speak to our group for some time, and she was finally able to come on December 2nd, just a few days before receiving the CBE award 'for services to victims of forced marriages and honour based violence'. Prime Minister David Cameron has been quoted as



The Lady Mayoress - Our guest speaker, Jasvinder Sanghera

saying that "...she (Jasvinder) turned my head on the issue of forced marriages."

One hundred and twenty five women, from 45 different countries of origin gathered together, from all our faith and cultural traditions, and representing the entire spectrum of social standing. Two women police officers kindly agreed to attend, along with lawyers, doctors, teachers, social workers, leaders of local religious communities and civic organisations, but also some women were present who are currently seeing refuge in our city, and waiting to hear if they will be allowed to stay in the country. Given this diversity, and the breadth of experience in our meeting, it was very fitting that we had the honour of our city's 'first lady', the Lady Mayoress, joining us. She is a very special person, of such simplicity and depth of heart, enjoying the challenge of attending so many events as she supports her husband, the Lord Mayor.

Jasvinder spoke for about 40 minutes, sharing some of her personal story which she has eloquently detailed in 3 books, *Shame*, *Daughters of Shame*, and *Shame Travels*. Her moving testimony created an atmosphere of intimacy which provoked so many of us to then want to share our viewpoint, on what is a very sensitive topic, including the personal stories of several women in the room who have gone through similar, related traumas in their lives. From 8.00 until 9.15pm we passed the microphone from one to another, sharing sometimes passionately but always with a sense of respect for one another, listening carefully to the different perspectives, particularly Jasvinder

who guided the discussion in a very sensitive, caring way. She expressed that she this was one of the most open and honest experiences of sharing together that she has been part of. Jasvinder's desire is to bring what has been a largely hidden, submerged issue to the surface of people's awareness in such a way that it can be addressed appropriately and respectfully, to help people and communities move forward, especially with the right kind of education in this area. She quoted, for example, one school where 130 girls had simply 'disappeared' without trace, and no-one had really said much or known what to do about it. As a result of our meeting, there have been several offers for her to come and speak to individual communities, in mosques, gurdwaras, etc. [The issue of forced marriage is not a religious issue per se, but there are religious and cultural components which need to be taken into consideration in making progress.] Hopefully, this will fulfill one of the aims of our Women's Peace Meeting which is to provide a platform for women to speak about current issues of the day, and in so doing open up possibilities for further progress, bringing together those people who share the same concerns. On a larger level, we can feed reports from meetings such as this into the United Nations through our office in Geneva, with WFPW having Consultative Status at the UN for many years now.

We collected donations during the evening, and could offer Jasvinder £320 to help support the work of Karma Nirvana. She was also able to sell (and autograph) a number of her books, with many women being genuinely moved by her life story. As we concluded the evening, enjoying



food and refreshments together there were, needless to say, many continued conversations and a lot of good networking. It was almost 11.00pm before the final goodbyes were said, and the last ladies made their way home! Both after the meeting and subsequently, I have received many comments from women who were moved, saddened, shocked, and yet inspired, empowered and uplifted by Jasvinder's incredible journey. Several said it was one of the most memorable experiences of their life, and something they could not possibly have imagined beforehand.

Belgium !

Another wonderful development during 2013 has been the effort of my sister, Christiane, in Brussels to hold a similar Peace Meeting, on the same evening as our meeting in Birmingham, bringing together both men and women to reflect and pray about the same topic. It is very empowering for me to know that this is happening, and we send Christiane a report to distribute to her friends, by way of saying 'Thank

You' to them. In fact amazingly, and as some of you know, this is how the Peace Meeting originally began in 1993 when WFWP organised a 40-day chain of prayer by women in countries all over Europe, trying to find a way to end the conflict in Bosnia.

POSTSCRIPT. We had also announced a collection of items, that evening of December 2nd, for the ongoing relief effort for the people of the Philippines who had suffered at the hands of Typhoon Haiyan. Many ladies brought bags of clothes, shoes, toiletries, pots and pans, canned food, and other useful items. The following Sunday, we took around 50 bags to the Philippino International Christian Fellowship centre in Bartley Green, where they were gratefully received. WFWP has been very active, in chapters all over the world, to raise funds and emergency supplies which can be sent to assist people who lost so much, again an expression of the compassionate heart of women towards those in need.

