

Lessons learnt on violence against women: a better future report

Friday 8 March 2013

Baha'i International Community Offices, United National Plaza, New York

Zarin Hainsworth, NAWO, chaired the event and opened with a few words on the topic for discussion.

Awatif Kanooh AlMustafa Issa, Al Taqwa Women and Child Organisation and Basra opened the event with 'Lessons learnt from Iraq'. Awatif began with the words: "it's better to live in a home with peace and security than live in violence and insecurity". She mentioned that Iraq now has women as social police and there is now a law against violence in the home. In the south, Awatif stated that the issue of human rights in terms of women and girls needs to be addressed. She then discussed a study taken between January 2012 and December 2012 on 1000 women. 900 of these women experienced violence, 890 were related to psychological abuse, 460 experienced sexual violence and 270 were kicked out of the home. It transpired that violence in the home has the highest rate of violence. She closed by posing the question: "What are we trying to achieve here?". The answer is "global awareness", to get help for the abused and to develop strategies for lobbying.

Sameem Ali spoke on forced marriage and her experiences. She opened her speech with her powerful story of how she was taken out of school at the age of 12, forced to marry at the age of 13 and had given birth to her child by 14. She referred to forced marriage as "stranger raping" and commented on the fact that the abuse is ignored as forced marriage is cultural. There are nearly 2000 forced marriages a year in the UK which is 5 a day on average as Sameem pointed out. It was mentioned that the elected councillor in Manchester who is a consultant to the police has ran the 'Free To Choose' campaign which reviews what forced marriage means to them and what the victims can do about it. The speech was concluded with the question of what services are available to the women and girls in a forced marriage. The answer, it seems, is clearly very little.

Tom Heathfield, member of the NAWO Youth Caucus discussed the 'Role of men and boys in preventing violence against women and girls'. He began with a discussion of what the 'macho' image is and that it needs to be dissolved. Social conventions, however, need to be celebrated and not threatened. It was mentioned that "arrogance and aggression" can be a result of the need to impress other men, to appear more 'machismo'. Tom stated that this "stereotype is destructive" and that women and girls need to be protected. 'Boys to Men' give seminars to men and boys promoting non-violent relationships and expressing that they need to respect women. However, "masculinity is so embedded into our society which makes it nearly impossible to eradicate". Tom suggested that the stereotype needs to be reviewed but cliques of men behave inappropriately. It was expressed here that it is in fact contradictory of the 'macho' image that men hide behind other men in their cliques. Schemes were mentioned, one of them being 'Give Light To Darkness' which promotes a change in

behaviour. The idea is that if one changes the rest will follow and strength is accountability. Tom concluded with the Samson's comment: "Out of the strong came forth sweetness."

President of the Global Justice Centre and human rights lawyer, Janet Benshoof, spoke next on the topic: 'Using the rule of the law to stop violence against women and girls'. She announced that "Women can be empowered by the law, but laws on paper help no one". Janet then went on to say that if laws were really enforced, violence against women and girls would not be so prevalent. She stated, however, that this does not mean that the laws cannot be strengthened and that women need to be in the judiciary. She mentioned that the international definition of rape needs to be used in the international criminal court. She then mentioned that the UK is a leading country on the topic of gender equality as women in armed conflict have equal rights. The UK has stated that it will fully implement the Geneva Conventions. Janet then went on to discuss rape. She stated that many rapes are "genocidal" and that rape is used as a tactic of war.

Jackie Jones (European Lawyers Association and Welsh Assembly of Women) was the closing speaker. Her topic was: "A convention on violence against women and girls". She briefly discussed the need for a UN convention on violence against women and girls but emphasised the need for practical articles and not to just have general principles. Jackie emphasised that she at least wants it to be discussed.

In conclusion, the event as a whole was empowering and discussed the lessons that have been learnt and what can be done to create a "better future". It was successful in mentioning men and boys, the law, and the need for a new UN convention.

Alex Wilcox
NAWO Youth Caucus