

Empowering women, empowering humanity starts with education



By Brock Weir

Empowering women and, in turn, empowering all of humanity starts with education ? and that education can start here at home, according to local advocates.

That was a key message driven home this month by prominent advocates for women's rights at the Aurora Public Library in a roundtable discussion to commemorate International Women's Day. Bringing together Becky Big Canoe, an advocate for missing and murdered aboriginal women, Lorris Herenda, Executive Director of Yellow Brick House, economist Carole Houlihan and lawyer Tahirih Naylor, the panel discussed a wide range of human rights issues facing Canada and the world, while fielding questions from a packed audience.

In order to make a difference, it is important to recognize that knowledge is power both here and at home.

?In order for women to be free to make choices, women need to have control of their own resources,? said Ms. Houlihan, who has done extensive work for gender equality in Africa, Asia and, currently, in the Caribbean. ?When you focus only on women, it somehow implies that women are actually the problem. It's not really the women who are the problem, it is the relationships between men and women in particular and social contexts. It is really important to understand that dynamic.?

In some countries, however, marching towards equality can also lead to increases in domestic violence, added Ms. Houlihan. But, for Ms. Herenda, it is important to challenge what appears to be a perception domestic violence is limited to specific cultural groups. It is not limited to cultural groups, nor is it limited to socio-economic boundaries.

?I am always struck with the similarity in their stories,? says Ms. Herenda of the women who come through Yellow Brick House. ?It is not related to their culture, it is related to the imbalance of power and it is gender-based violence.?

Underscoring her point, Ms. Herenda said current statistics show a woman is killed every six days in Canada as a result of domestic violence and, in Ontario, the rate is every 12 days, a statistic she says ?shocks? people.

The inevitable question was asked by moderator Sandra Leonard, as well as the audience, of what needs to change.

?It seems there is a real role for education around financial issues and financial management, financial rights, as well as family law and legal rights,? said Ms. Houlihan. ?The reality is people in Canada, which is really surprising, aren't aware.?

Both young women and men would benefit from courses on financial management and how this can impact their rights. Teaching

individuals how to pay the rent and how to financially cope in the 'real world' should be mandatory in schools ' for the benefit of the whole.

'[I think] kids would do a lot better overall if math being taught had practical application,' said Ms. Big Canoe. 'After second grade, once they know how to add and subtract, we set them up in a curriculum where they have a business on paper. Almost everything comes into play when you have a business.'

With that comes a sense of purpose they said ' something that might be lacking among today's youth. One young audience member questioned the panel of their opinions of young women going overseas to join ISIS. While this might seem counterintuitive to the west to join a society that is widely seen as oppressive, in an odd way, girls might see finding a purpose in groups like these comes with a sense of empowerment, he ventured.

'We're teaching our youth it is all about them and their own development, how they look, how much money they make and that is the purpose of their lives,' said Ms. Naylor. 'Even if it is getting your own career, it is so you can be financially stable and then your life will be good. I think for many of us there is something more to life than that. There is a higher calling. There's got to be something more to contributing to transforming society and developing our inner morals, or whatever you want to call it.

'I think for some people finding something that calls them to that higher purpose, even if it is twisted and fanatical is what is attractive to them and I think it is a real cautionary tale.

'We really need to reflect on what we're teaching our youth about their purpose. We do need to develop our own inner selves, but we need to contribute to society. It is not just about creating this perfect little house where we're financially stable. It is how we build the common good in the rest of the world.'

Added Ms. Big Canoe, noting just a handful of young women and men in the audience: 'We are grandmother women. It seems as though many women struggled hard for women's equality and that isn't filtering down to the younger women. That is because the job of the grandmother women is to be there for those young women, talk to them, teach them and mentor them.'