

Community stands together for International Women's Day



Political action takes many forms, but if you're born political?

That was the question posed to the community on Friday by Lily Poursad, a speaker at a forum hosted at Aurora Town Hall on Friday by Aurora-Oak Ridges-Richmond Hill MP Leah Taylor Roy ahead of International Women's Day.

Welcoming Liberal MPs from across York Region, keynote speakers included Poursad, Anastasia Dieieva, Malika Khimji, and guest of honour Marci Ien, the former broadcaster and Toronto Centre MP who currently serves as Canada's Minister of Women and Gender Equality, and Youth.

?This year's theme in Canada being ?Every Woman Counts' [and] it's also a time for all levels of government and all business and community leaders to recommit to building a fairer and more inclusive future with equal opportunity for everyone,? said Mayor Tom Mrakas welcoming the speakers and members of the public into Council chambers. ?A sad reality is far too many women, girls, and gender-diverse people still face significant barriers and we know that those who come from marginalized and racialized groups face even more obstacles. It's incumbent on all of us to work together to ensure all women, girls and gender-diverse people have the same opportunities to succeed? I think one important way of doing this is by having dialogues and conversations like we are having today that can inspire and empower others.?

Poursad, who ran for Federal office in Canada nine years ago, helped spur this dialogue, with some of her own experiences as an Iranian-Canadian with deep community ties.

?Women and being a woman is the most political subject matter all around the world,? said the Gender Equality expert. ?We are born political, our bodies are a political matter, the rights of our body and our rights to live and how to live are political. That is why we have to acknowledge International Women's Day. A few weeks after the Islamic Revolution in Iran, I remember clearly I was on the street with my mother, who is an advocate of women's rights in Iran, being jailed and forced into exile in the past 20 years. My grandmother who ironically was having a hijab by choice, we were all marching to the street because just a few days before that the new regime announced the mandatory hijab. I remember clearly why we were walking in the street for the demonstration. A group of revolutionary guard in front of us in huge trucks filled with stones and rocks, and they were stoning the crowd, women and children, and chanting one thing ? and my Iranian friends in this room know what the chant was: either you're going to put the hijab on or we're going to beat you on your head.

?The most important gender-equality based women-led revolution in the world started from Iran and we have to understand the

value of it because we cannot drop the ball one more time for Iranian women and women in the Region because I promise you if we get to the end of this oppressive era? the Region will be a better place to live, Afghanistan will be a better place to live, Ukraine will be a better place to live, and for women around the world.?

Watching the situation in Ukraine very closely is Anastasia Dieieva, who was a leader on equity back home and remains so in her new residence of Canada.

She shared with the audience of a beautiful sunny day playing with her son in a Kyiv park in February of 2022, going to bed, and waking up early the next morning to news of the Russian invasion.

?The very next moment I heard explosions,? she recalled. ?When I heard them, I was petrified. I looked at my apartment and my heart was full of anger because I felt like no one could ever force me to leave my beautiful home, which I built with my own two hands, the place where I was joining with my people during the reforms, solving internal issues with my hands and my desire to change this country.?

In Canada, she said she found a society where people share those same values and paid tribute to the nearly 8 million women and children who have fled Ukraine.

Able to continue her work in Ukraine remotely ? ?COVID taught us how to do it effectively? ? she said she saw examples of ?self-leadership of so many people from all over the world ? Ukrainian people who showed self-leadership, who showed that they are the role models for their kids.?

It was a lesson, she said, in how to ?transform the pain in my heart into action.?

?Trauma and pain in heart hurts the same. For those who survive the war, for those who survive sex crimes for those who lost loved ones. The most important thing we can do to each other, as women to women, as men who support women in parliament?is what we can do to help transform this pain into positive action. Actions are like flowers through the crack in concrete, how they blossom. They are persistently growing and growing. That's how Ukrainian women feel.?

Providing a different lens on the world, Malika Khimji shared her perspective as a female Muslim immigrant who came to this country from Kenya. Here, she has become the first-generation university attendee in her family, choosing to study politics in government to have the chance ?to one day be a woman like many others in this room? who are making ?vital changes.?

?My parents have played a vital role in empowering me and my sisters as strong women,? she said. ?Additionally, my religion has also taught me the importance of women gaining an education and being a voice to contribute to the betterment of society. My parents gave up their well-established lives in Kenya [so] my sisters and I could have life and opportunity in Canada where a woman's voice truly matters.

?We can use our voices and privileges to support and raise more awareness for the injustices that Indigenous women here in Canada are facing. 63 per cent of Indigenous women have experienced violence and nearly half have experienced sexual assault. This is an important reminder to us that although we have accomplished a lot as women our mission is not over yet and there is still lots to do and achieve. Together, us as women are a symbol of strength, perseverance and power. We will not rest until every woman in this world has a fair chance at life.?

The words were taken to heart by Minister Ien who said she was impressed by the voices of young women in attendance.

?That's what people are afraid of ? it's not the youth, it's the power behind it,? she said. ?Look at the diversity in this room. It's diversity in where we come from, it's diversity in age, it's diversity in experience, it's diversity on our life journeys. Look at this room. This is Canada. Women aren't just one big homogenous group. This room reflects that. There are various life experiences that have to be acknowledged and I agree. In a lot of cases, most cases, we have each other's backs but as we look forward to

International Women's Day, and I agree there is so much more to do, it's about the work. That day is about the work and it is about acknowledging the history of it.

?Being in a position where you have a microphone in front of you is a unique thing because on a daily basis you have to think about how you use it, and in my mind I was always hearing my dad, the beautiful man that he is, and my dad saying, ?Make sure you play it safe. Don't rock the boat. Your mom and wanted you and your sister to have more and be more, so you have a great pension that you don't want to mess with, you don't want to push too hard, to say too much. Just do your job and do it well.' But I wanted to say too much and I wanted to push and I wanted to rock the boat and do all of those things. It took me a while to do them but I really did them.?

Canada, she concluded, is a ?country that is inclusive for all people.?

?It is about having the courage to walk into unfriendly rooms and, whether you see yourself or not and be resolved that your presence is going to change the temperature, that you're going to push no matter what and do so knowing you're going to make a difference for those beside you and frankly coming behind you. Allyship is so important. I am thankful for each and every one of you.?

By Brock WeirEditorLocal Journalism Initiative Reporter