

October 09, 2006

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## Women as a force for change



*The Ponders End United Reformed Church Hall is no shiny conference centre with padded seats and hi-tech public address system. With all due respect to the minister and congregation, it reflects the reality of Eastern Enfield: a little run down, rather gloomy and altogether lacking in the ironic cool of modern design. But with one vital ingredient it can be made to work far better than the orchestrated party conference or corporate AGM. On Saturday (7th October) the Church Hall got what it needed: fifty or so people who really wanted to listen, and debate something they cared deeply about.*

Organised by a coalition of local groups - Enfield Women's Centre, the UNA, the African Women's Welfare Association (AWWA) and Amnesty - the topic was the role of women not so much in a changing world as in changing the world. It was a real attempt to connect with each other and also to link the global with the local: the big struggles around the millennium development goals (MDGs) being fought out at the G8, World Bank and UN, the small struggles at the local level, and domestic violence within the home itself.

The international scene was set by *Juliet Colman*, president of UNIFEM UK ([click for more information](#)). Worldwide, women are twice as likely to be poor, while two-thirds of illiterates are women. There was some progress on implementing the MDGs (all of which affect women, whether in terms of poverty, health, education or political role), and 16% of parliamentarians are now women: but was there really a cultural change? Ban Ki-moon was hot favourite to succeed Kofi Annan as UN Secretary General, but who in the Security Council knew his views on gender equality, or cared?

*Martha Osamor* of AWWA brought history and the reality of women's lives together with graphic force. Why, in resource-rich Africa, were its people and particularly its women so poor? Slavery, colonialism and now unfair trade and debt were all part of the background to a world where access to water was not about pressure in the tap,

but about women physically carrying it distances unimaginable in the West. She conjured up the scene in a Nigerian market as local tomatoes - organically, painfully grown, warts and all - were undercut by heavily subsidised EU tomatoes. The face of poverty was a woman's face, but women were fighting back and had an agenda, linking women in the South with women in the West. Women in the African diaspora had a special part to play.



Discussion ranged from Jack Straw's comments on the veil (which can express a cultural choice, but also hide bruises) to the suffering of Darfurian women, from promoting education for girls to the exploitation of Canada's Inuit people. And in a raging HIV pandemic, how exactly do you ask your husband to use condoms, assuming they are available?

Then came the themes of violence and abuse. *Heather Harvey* pointed out that women in conflict zones were subject to rape and murder often for political reasons, as in Darfur. States themselves had to accept responsibility. Amnesty's Stop Violence Against Women campaign (which Heather heads: [click here for more](#)) was therefore demanding "due diligence" of governments in protecting women. An audit of UK government departments awarded them collectively a ringing 1 out of 10: think asylum, think the impossible position of women without leave to remain trapped in violent arranged marriages. Extraordinarily, the British government refuses to sign the European Convention against Trafficking in Human Beings.

Six hundred women a day undergo some form of genital mutilation. *Kaltun Abdilahi*, of the Samafal Somali Women's Group, described the psychological trauma and medical consequences of undergoing it, including possible death from septicaemia, and the social consequences of refusing it: exclusion and unmarriageability. That's why women collude: men demand it, including restitching after childbirth. Kaltun castigated a Muslim religious establishment which would not declare FGM no part of Islam, and the police in the UK for failing to get across the illegality of the practice. A local midwife stood up to describe the practical results.

The same theme - a police force failing to enforce legislation to protect women - emerged from *Anna Gaunt's* work on female infanticide in India. The law there has

banned foetal gender determination since 1994, but services are openly advertised. There are now about 925 newborn girls to every 1000 boys. Anna, of Enfield Women's Centre ([click here for more](#)), called this "unsustainable", but once again the driving force is cultural, buttressed by the dowry system. And yet just because it is cultural, it *can* be changed.

*No need for voting: those assembled in the URC Church Hall seemed agreed. Whether it is poverty, education or health, the issue is women's control of their own lives and bodies. In the global picture we must remember the individual injustices and horrors; and if we are to act effectively on individual lives, we must pay attention to the global issues of development and empowerment.*

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