

Women's Worlds summit focuses on abolition of prostitution

Laws aren't working, delegate says

BY MARIA COOK, OTTAWA CITIZEN JULY 5, 2011

A Norwegian feminist group that wanted to outlaw prostitution once published posters of male politicians under the heading "Is this man a buyer of prostitutes?"

"They became quite angry about it," recalls Asta Haaland, of the group called Ottar. "But it was effective in getting a discussion going."

Haaland described the group's actions on Monday at Women's Worlds, a feminist conference taking place in Ottawa with more than 1,600 delegates. It is considered the largest gathering of women to take place in Canada.

The session, attended by about 50 women, was called Strategies for Action Towards the Abolition of Prostitution.

A wide range of other talks covered issues such as the representation of Muslim women in the media, justice for missing and murdered aboriginal women, human rights and pornography, and preventing and ending violence against women.

In 2009, Norway passed laws making it illegal to buy sexual services but not to sell them. There is a \$5,000 fine. Pimping, procuring and operating a brothel are also illegal.

In Nordic countries "women have more equality and respect," Haaland said. "We still live in a patriarchal society, but we can breathe more easily."

Haaland attributes the pro-abolitionists' success to making men the focus rather than seeing women as the problem.

"Prostitution is actually about men," she said. "It's about men's power, money and will."

It also helped that after Sweden pioneered a similar law in 1999, organized crime declined in that country. That won over the Norwegian police and in turn, right-wing politicians, she said.

Prostitution is "slavery," she added. "It's violence."

There are currently two legal challenges to prostitution laws in Canada. If successful, they will end the legal prohibition.

"We have laws that aren't working," said Clea Brown, of the Vancouver chapter of the University Women's Club which advocates abolition.

"They don't prevent prostitution and they don't protect prostituted women and children."

Also at the conference, a session on Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission examined the legacy of abuse of Canada's residential school system, including the overrepresentation of aboriginal

women and girls in prisons and detention centres.

The commission was established in 2008 as part of a settlement agreement with the Canadian government that includes payment for survivors.

The commission has a five-year mandate to learn the truth about what happened in the schools, the last of which closed in 1996, and to inform Canadians.

"Next time you see one of our people in the street I ask you to have compassion," said Viola Thomas, a commission spokeswoman.

Many of the 150,000 children who attended the 130 schools suffered emotional, physical, psychological and sexual abuse. About 80,000 are still alive.

"The result has been a complicated cycle of abuse that impacts multiple generations," said Mandy Wesley, a commission lawyer.

Thomas, who grew up in Kamloops, B.C., was sent to residential school at age five, where she wasn't allowed to talk to her brothers and sisters.

"The hard part was that loneliness you felt as a young girl."

She recalls a nun dunking her head in a toilet as punishment because she thought Thomas had lied; the child told her she thought she saw the devil when it was just the glowing eyes of a cat in the dark.

"For many years I hated white people," she said. "I blamed white people for what happened to us."

Fiona Cook, of the Native Women's Association of Canada, said many aboriginal women in custody are survivors or children or grandchildren of survivors.

Of particular concern are aboriginal girls who make up 44 per cent of all females in sentenced youth custody even though they account for six per cent of Canada's female population. And the numbers are growing while youth crime in general is declining.

"We think there is a national crisis in justice," Cook said. "We need a national dialogue on this issue."

One study of aboriginal girls in trouble with the law found that 81 per cent had been in foster care, on average had lived in 13 different places, and had a history of childhood trauma including physical and sexual abuse and a family history of mental health problems and addictions.

For true reconciliation to take place, "there have to be concrete changes" Cook said, including within the justice system.

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