

Step it Up!

Local groups want province to increase efforts to end violence against women

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Flynn was front row centre at a Thursday morning press conference at SAVIS' Hopedale Mall office where SAVIS -- backed by nearly a dozen other local organizations, and not just women's groups -- sat across the table from Flynn and the audience to outline a 10-point list on how to do it.

The 10 points include:

- Understanding that violence against women is an equality rights issue.
- Recognizing that male power is upheld by rape and sexual harassment.
- Stopping racism/oppression; make Ontario accessible.
- Ending poverty now.
- Creating and maintain housing, non-profit childcare, training now.
- Providing fair access to justice for women.
- Holding violent men accountable for their actions.
- Stopping the criminalization and psychiatrization of women.
- Demanding secure funding for women's organizations.
- Listening to survivors and women's advocates, they are the experts.

The message helped kick off Sexual Awareness Month in May.

"I didn't feel like I was being picked on" said Flynn, who expressed disappointment other Halton government officials were not present. "This message is for Big G government of all levels who have ignored this issue."

SAVIS and many of the associated groups at the conference recognized Flynn as a supporter for their cause.

The press conference was preceded by a breakfast supported by Hopedale Mall's Tim Hortons and Fortinos at 173 Lakeshore Rd.

The groups that supported the SAVIS message represented a wide berth in the community.

They outlined solutions that involved a broad spectrum from human rights issues and addressing poverty, job training and childcare, to equitable access to immigrant services, legal and judicial systems.

Jacqueline Benn-John, executive director of SAVIS said the Step it Up! message was given to mark Sexual Assault Awareness Month and noted it is unfortunate such an awareness month must still be held.

She also said it was to raise awareness of the need for governmental improvement of sexual/women abuse prevention measures.

Bev LeFrancois, a founder of Women of Halton Action Movement (WHAM) 25 years ago, said that male violence against women must be identified and dealt with accordingly. She said violence against women is a gender issue and that part of the answer to its elimination is in the eradication of its root cause, the socialization of boys.

Nicole Pietsch, of SAVIS, cautioned against allowing any element of the community to deliver the message that women are not valued or protected in the community.

Donna Reid, of The Women's Centre, spoke to the need for funding and noted the centre provides myriad counselling, advice and support to those abused, those leaving an abusive situation and those needing assistance after leaving -- all on a \$150,000 annual budget.

Abi Salol, of the Halton Organization for Pride and Education (HOPE), noted that for every gain made by women in the elimination of violence, progress will be achieved in other communities, such as the gay or lesbian communities, whose members are also victimized through violence based on sexual orientation or gender.

"To break the cycle of violence, it cannot be done alone," said Shanaze Zarazue, of the Halton Multicultural Council (HMC).

Deborah Stinson of the AIDS Network spoke about the face of AIDS changing from the gay male to the young woman aged 15 to 29. She noted negotiation skills must be available when it comes to sexual consent -- skills that won't be available in the absence of equality.

Stinson also noted that women with AIDS feel alone because they have fewer community resources and support available to them.

Donna Sanderson, of The Body Shop in Oakville, was also present to support SAVIS in its message and to lead by example outlining the programs the shop has in place to support eliminating violence against women.

Anyone wanting more information can visit www.stepitupontario.com or savisofhalton.org.

The Province of Ontario needs to Step it Up! to end violence against women. The Sexual Assault & Violence Intervention Services of Halton (SAVIS) delivered that message to Oakville MPP Kevin Flynn last week calling for better, faster government action on a number of fronts.