

# Senator an inspiration

PATRICIA MASSEUR GUEST COLUMNIST

In a time of public criticism and scandals surrounding the Canadian Senate, it is inspiring to talk with our own B.C. senator, Mobina Jaffer.

She is a woman of many accomplishments. Admitted to Canada as a refugee in the 1970s, she and her family fled the brutal regime of Idi Amin in Uganda. She obtained a Canadian law degree and was the first South Asian woman to do so. Her legal practice and the values of equality and justice her parents instilled in her, made violence against women her first point of action.

Appointed to the Canadian Senate in 2001, she is the first Muslim and the first African-born senator. During her tenure as a senator, she has held the post of special envoy representing Canada in the peace process in the Sudan. Senator Jaffer currently serves as the chair of the Senate's Human Rights Council and continues to pursue her life-long commitment to human rights issues and the inclusion of women in development issues.

"Without women and their realistic views, their rootedness in the life of the community and region, peace will not be possible," she says with absolute certainty.

Whether sitting down with regional officials or with the village men, her first question is always, "Where are the women?"

"Women offer a perspective that is grounded in their lives," she says, reinforcing her views. "It's not about power struggles but about how they can access clean water, how they can keep their children safe."

She maintains this dialogue is the basic building block for community development and grass roots democracy.

She spoke publicly against the mandatory burqa in Afghanistan because she believes this form of dress works against peace and the development of community. She emphasizes that the burqa is a visible sign of separating women from society.

"It doesn't allow them to see or be seen, to play a role, to even literally watch over their children and see where they go. This absence of women ultimately leads to the deterioration of a community and halts progress."



Senator Mobina Jaffer

When asked about the same controversy in Canada, she was emphatic.

"You can't regulate what people wear in a democratic society. We need to see the controversy is not about regulating a burqa, it's about whether and how we integrate refugee and immigrant women into Canadian society. The most important place to start is language. You can't integrate into a society without speaking English or French fluently enough to communicate with your neighbours. We need to make sure learning the language is encouraged and easily available because it serves as a first connector to other Canadians."

Last month she spoke in Duncan to the Queen Margaret's School graduating class and outlined in graphic detail how having a world of cell phones and electronic devices has cost other women and girls their safety, their livelihood and often, their lives. She used stories of real people she had met and tried to help, to compare our electronic benefits to their real life cost. It was a powerful presentation.

Responding to recent Senate controversies, Senator Jaffer said it is discouraging. Still, she remains optimistic that her current work on human trafficking, a malaria free world and the inclusion of woman will lead to important improvements in Africa for women and children. She feels privileged to be a senator and have a platform from which to work for a better life for others.

At a time when it feels like responsibility and integrity seem to be all but forgotten, Senator Jaffer leaves us with insight, hope and the encouragement to fight for a better world for all of us.

Patricia Masseur is a student at Queen Margaret's School in Duncan.