

#metoo, gender inequality highlighted on International Women's Day

By Brock Weir

For four years, International Women's Day has been marked in Newmarket-Aurora with a night celebrating the achievements and leadership of local women and girls and, on the surface, this was a year like no other.

Below the surface, however, various currents added a further degree of poignancy to the fourth annual Leading Women/Leading Girls Awards, hosted by Newmarket-Aurora MPP Chris Ballard at Newmarket's Old Town Hall on Thursday evening.

"This is a really special night and it is one I always look forward to," Mr. Ballard told the attendees. "We're here to celebrate 23 dynamic leading women and leading girls in our community. I [usually] keep my remarks fairly light and upbeat [but] as we counted down the days to this event, I was thinking, in an era of #metoo and following a number of meetings with my constituents, and hours and hours of debate at Queen's Park around things like violence against women and pay equity, I can't keep that normal levity in my remarks."

Instead, Mr. Ballard said it was an opportunity to make "very clear" why it is so important to highlight what our female leaders are doing to make the world a better place.

"We know that gender inequality persists worldwide and, because of that, women and girls are deprived of their very basic human rights and opportunities in too many places," he said. "Without a doubt, the healthy mind and body of an educated girl with equal access to opportunities grow into strong, smart women who can take leadership roles in their communities and their country. For a stronger future, it is important today that we focus on women and leadership."

In 2000, he said, the United Nations set eight Millennium goals to measure success in areas ranging from health, education and alleviating poverty. While there was indeed some progress ahead of the target date of 2015, there is still much to do in that women and girls "continue to suffer discrimination and violence in every part of the world."

This community is certainly not immune, and Mr. Ballard underscored the fact that human trafficking is very much a York Region problem as well.

"It is a vastly underreported crime and we all need to be aware that Ontario is a major centre for trafficking in Canada," he said.

"According to Ontario's Ministry of the Status of Women, about two thirds of cases of missing girls in Ontario are linked to human trafficking. In response to these horrendous statistics, the Ontario government implemented a strategy to end human trafficking. It aims to increase awareness and coordination of efforts to fight human trafficking, improve survivors' access to services and enhance justice sector initiatives. The strategy includes the diverse views of survivors.

"We spend a lot of time with people who have been through this meat grinder; frontline community agencies, public safety representatives and indigenous organizations. Supporting survivors, providing safeguards to those at risk of human trafficking, these are part of Ontario's vision to ensure that everyone in this Province can live in safety, free from the threat of fear or experience of exploitation and violence.

"Last year, Ontario passed the anti-human trafficking act which will increase protection for survivors of trafficking and make it easier for survivors to pursue compensation. The act enables people affected by human trafficking, including people who have been trafficked, or are at risk of being trafficked, to apply for restraining orders to protect themselves and their children from traffickers. It also makes it possible for survivors to sue their traffickers for compensation through civil court in order to help survivors restore and rebuild their lives."

Gender-based violence also remains a serious issue, with the Province responding with a new strategy to improve services and support for victims. This includes a \$240 million strategy to combat sexual and domestic violence. Measures also include funding to provide free legal advice to those looking to report assault anywhere across the Province, a further \$84 million to support community-based counselling, emergency shelters, transitional housing and more supports.

"One of the things we have been talking about at Queen's Park is around income inequality," he added. "Young girls entering our workforce and women already in the workforce really do experience income inequality. To the extent that income is distributed equally in any given country, including here in Ontario, income distribution is an important indicator of equity in an economy and has implications for other social outcomes like crime and life satisfaction.

"As a government, it is very important to develop social programs, that we tackle issues like gender wage gaps, the difference in earning between women and men in the workforce, closing these gaps and providing women with equal opportunity in the workforce is significant for the economy, including boosting Ontario's gross domestic product. Women make up nearly half of Ontario's workforce. The number of women entrepreneurs, small business owners, community workers, educators, health sector

workers, corporate leaders, continues to rise and this contributes to the growth of our economy.
?When we have 51 per cent of a country's population not getting a fair shake, we have to do something.?