



### **Human Rights Award: Shelley Rivkin**

Minister Oppal, Members of the MOSAIC Board, family and friends.

I am extremely honoured to stand before you tonight to accept this award. Having sat on the board of MOSAIC for five years and having participated in the discussion and selection of past nominees, I am well aware of the accomplishments, bravery and caliber of previous award winners. It is truly humbling to be following in the footsteps of your past winners, some of whom I admired from afar and some of whom I had the great pleasure to know and work with.



Very few important accomplishments are achieved by individuals on their own. They are usually the result of the collective thinking and actions of a group of committed people who have common visions and goals, each person bringing their own special gifts to the task. Some of us have the great fortune of being recognized for our roles in the process as I am tonight, while others continue on with the work without acknowledgement or honour.

There are several people in the room tonight who I want to thank for inspiring me, motivating me and cheering me on. However, I first want to acknowledge two very special women who are no longer with us, one of whom was a past recipient of this award, who made a very significant impact on me and in my own pursuit of social justice. The first is my mother, Ann Rivkin, who instilled in me a very strong belief that it was my obligation and my responsibility to speak out against injustice and to engage in actions that would restore dignity and pride to those who had been mistreated. She was an early and passionate feminist who took great interest in the social and political changes that occurred in the lives of women in the late 1960's and 1970's. The second woman is Rosemary Brown. I had the great fortune to meet Rosemary at SFU when she was the director of counselling and was just beginning to become involved in politics. I joined the first Status of Women group that she formed in Vancouver and later worked in her very first election campaign. Her eloquent anger was a catalyzing force.

Shashi Assanand and Ninu Kang – friends and colleagues who I have learned so much from. Shashi and I met over 30 years ago when we both worked in Vancouver South. I remember how patiently Shashi tried to impress upon us, that if we were to make connections and build trust with members of her community, we first had to let go of all of preconceived notions and practices of how best to work with families and replace them with approaches and methods that reflected and honoured the values, customs and traditions of the people we were working with. This was a very important lesson that I have tried to maintain throughout my work in this area. Shashi continues to teach and model, scold and praise and I am so very grateful.

Ending violence against women and children has been an abiding passion of mine for almost all of my professional life. I don't exactly know why the issue has had such resonance for me, as I grew up in a safe and loving home. I first became aware of the issue when I worked in the emergency room of one of the local hospitals during high school and encountered battered and bruised women who told me through split lips and black eyes how much they loved their husbands and that they wanted to be discharged quickly so that they could apologize for whatever they had done to cause his anger. My feelings of helplessness as I watched these women return to violent homes stayed with me for many years.

As you listen to me you may be asking yourself, just what is the connection between violence against women in intimate relationships and human rights, how do you make the leap from social services and criminal justice intervention to action to ensure human rights .

Intimate violence at its very essence is about power and control, it is about depriving or demeaning all of those aspects in a person's life that contribute to their sense of self worth, autonomy and respect. As the 1993 UN Declaration on the elimination of violence against women, states in the preamble:

"Affirming that violence against women constitutes a violation of the rights and fundamental freedoms and impairs or nullifies their enjoyment of those rights and freedoms and recognizing that violence against women is a manifestation of historically unequal power relations between men and women, which have led to domination and discrimination against women to the prevention of the of the full advancement of women, and that violence against women is one of the crucial social mechanisms by which women are forced into a subordinate position.

In 1982, the Canadian government was pressured into forming a standing commission to determine the extent of wife assault in Canada. No one at the time could have predicted the reaction in parliament when the report's findings were revealed nor forecast the long term impact of this behaviour on Canadian women. To quote MP Margaret Mitchell: On May 12th I rose in the House to raise the urgent need for government action on a serious and widespread issue. 'The parliamentary report on battered wives states that one in ten Canadian husbands beat their wives regularly,' I began. Before I could continue, an uproar of male shouts and laughter erupted, making it impossible for me to be heard. A nearby Tory joked, 'I don't beat my wife. Do you, George?'

This incident galvanized women across the country and forced government to introduce reforms in many areas including amendments to the Criminal Code of Canada. Much more significant than the reforms themselves was the fundamental shift in perception. No longer was abuse and violence viewed as a private matter between a husband and wife, it was now deemed to be a matter of public concern that required the appropriate criminal justice intervention. Yet like so many social policies: the context, the strategies and the resources were all based on the norms of the time: white, mostly middle class able bodied women. Issues of extended family, language barriers, perceptions of the police, understanding of Canadian law, sponsorship, immigration and honour and shame were just not part of the vocabulary.

More significantly, the criminal justice system had no experience working with victims from diverse cultures, particularly around family issues. Instead of trying to understand why women from immigrant communities refused to come forward or recant before charges were laid, they attributed this reluctance to cultural norms and practices. It was not long after these policies were implemented that the comments began: "What can you expect from a culture that condones violence... those women, they are never going to come forward, it is not worth our time to attend to homes of people from that culture, they just won't talk to the police, ..they pretend they can't speak English..

Three years later, I joined the board of MOSAIC and had the opportunity to hear from the staff first hand about the challenges and issues they faced in this area. As I listened to the workers describe the clients they were assisting and heard their frustration with the lack of understanding and cultural sensitivity on the part of the criminal justice system, I realized I had an obligation to try and make a difference.

One of the underlying principles , at that time, of programs designed for women who had experienced violence, was that the women would receive counselling to help them leave the relationship and that the men would be charged and convicted. Yet the multicultural and settlement workers I spoke with, told me that their clients would never leave their husbands and that their families would never allow them to report the violence. If we wanted the violence in the women's lives to end, we must find a way to work with their husbands. It was this realization that led to a dream of mine, to design a culturally appropriate program for men diverted through the courts and to offer support and assistance to the women while the men were in the counselling program. With the input and guidance of a number of MOSAIC staff I was able to write the

proposal for the first culturally appropriate treatment program for men. It was through this experience that I was enormously blessed to meet and connect with Ninu Kang. Her skills, her talent and her energy have made the program a model for cultural appropriate treatment programs throughout the Lower Mainland.

Just as the laughter in the Home of Commons in 1982, created a shock wave across the country and shaped the next fourteen years of policy and practice, the 1996 Vernon massacre where nine members of the Gakhal family were murdered by an estranged husband, brought to the light the lack of cultural understanding and sensitivity on the part of many systems.

This was the beginning of a ten year journey for me working alongside multicultural and settlement workers to change the perceptions and practices of social services and criminal justice personnel mandated to intervene in cases involving immigrant and refugee women who had experienced violence. Numerous training programs were developed and delivered, videos and DVD's produced and events organized. More recently, I had the great opportunity to initiate and manage a research project that interviewed almost 80 women in four languages about their experiences seeking help for the violence they experienced. It is their bravery, insights and vision that we all need to hold on to as we strive to end the violence in women's lives and create an environment that promotes and nurtures their safety, well being and personal development

I would like to end with the words of three women interviewed for this research.

"You don't realize when you're getting away from a violent relationship how much work it is—you are just in survival mode and you have to be in survival mode for a long time in order to make it, and it takes a lot of strength. You need to resolve legal issues, the health issues that arise from all the emotional stress you are going through, I have to pay rent, which is \$800, and my childcare is \$560.00 plus I have to pay for food and utilities and clothing for my children, I'm all alone, all alone in Vancouver, I don't have any friends, any family"

~A Spanish-speaking woman from Mexico

"You know (service providers) can only give you the tools, and that's what the police did, that's what victim services did, and what the crisis centre did. They gave me the book, it was my choice to read it.

~An English-speaking woman from India

"Now I feel that I alone can do anything, I don't need anything, I am free!"

~A Cantonese-speaking woman from Taiwan