

UN COMMISSION



Jubanti Toppo from the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre was one of 12 Canadian delegates for the 63rd United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women, in New York March 11 to 22. **CONTRIBUTED**

Toppo a Canadian delegate

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Jubanti Toppo's many different hats of community involvement, in regards to social issues for women and girls, made her an ideal choice to be part of the Canadian delegation for last month's (March 11 to 22) 63rd United Nations (UN) Commission on the Status of Women.

Amongst Toppo's roles is her position with the Antigonish Women's Resource Centre (AWRC) as the immigrant support program co-ordinator.

"I'm also the co-chair of the Antigonish Community Health Board, the chair of the Antigonish Town and County Mental Health Family Support group, I sit on the advisory committee of the A Roof Over Your Head project, and I'm a registered social worker with the Nova Scotia College of Social Workers," Toppo said, in an interview with the Casket April 2.

She noted the federal Department for Women and Gender Equality were looking for delegates from "civil society organizations" from all different sectors

and the AWRC put her name forward.

"Our organization felt I was capable, so our staff and board members from the AWRC nominated me and, luckily, I was selected and invited," she said, adding she was one of 12 delegates from across the country and the only one from Atlantic Canada.

Toppo talked more about the commission.

"A global policy making body for the world dedicated, exclusively, for promoting gender equality and the empowerment of women, which are in alignment with the United Nations," she said.

"This year's priority themes were social protection systems, access to public services and sustainable infrastructure for gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. So, in alignment with the priorities, we were to think about our objectives, what we would like to put forward in the discussions."

RURAL CHALLENGES

Toppo said she went in with the objective of representing women and girls in more rural

settings since the AWRC serves that type of jurisdiction, and she was one of the few bringing that perspective.

"Addressing some of the issues the rural women and girls we work with face, in areas of gender-based violence, sexual violence, and things like that. And, more specifically, because I work with immigrants and refugees," she added, noting another perspective she was able to speak to, which was unique.

Many of the challenges in rural areas can be summed up in one phrase, Toppo explained; "access to services."

"Healthcare, education, employment ... it's mostly about access. We do not have public transportation, for example, and what we do have it's very minimal," she said, noting areas like the Guysborough County and the District of St. Mary's. "So I wanted to bring forward those types of things."

Toppo said it's a reality that "women can be most vulnerable in places of extreme need."

"From an organizational perspective, when a woman experiences gender-based violence, rural communities don't have access to

shelters or transition houses. Especially when they're immigrant and refugee women, it can be especially difficult for them," she said.

"Affordable housing is another one which is a big concern for poverty stricken women and their families; it's more like a crisis. And the main area is childcare; it's another big concern in rural communities. Women and families don't have access to daycare, or affordable daycare I should say, or early childhood development for kids. Many women are not able to participate [in programs, services] because of a lack of childcare facilities. There are many activities initiated by the women's centre here but many women are not able to participate because of a lack of childcare."

"So I wanted to bring all of this from a regional, a provincial and a rural perspective to our discussion table."

The input provided by the delegates was worked into conclusions.

"Those conclusions would go to the negotiation table in the global platform, and they'll come

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With conclusions for the United Nations," Toppo said, noting, eventually, a report will be issued.

DIFFERENT SESSIONS

She said there were mandatory sessions for the delegates, where the discussions and conclusions would take place, as well as optional sessions a delegate could choose because it related to their work.

"Side events co-hosted by different countries and we could choose which ones we would like to attend," she said. "We were 12 delegates and all from different sectors; I was from a rural com-

munity and also representing immigrant and refugee women. Others, probably, representing the LBGT community, women with disabilities, from more research backgrounds — more in terms of creating a think-tank ... so whichever sessions were relevant to us, we would participate in those."

Now back in Antigonish and at the AWRC, Toppo said she can share what she gained from her experience with the women and girls she works for, as well as co-workers.

"I'm sharing my experience and knowledge towards gender equality," she said.

"I'm also sharing my experiences with staff, without whom, I would not have been there in the

first place. I think they're learning a lot from my experience and what other countries are doing.

"The Caribbean countries, for example, are working very closely with their justice system, their police services, creating guidelines where they can work together. I think these are some of the take-backs we can initiate. And learning from the Nordic countries; Sweden, Norway, Denmark, they have 50 per cent representation of women in the government ... it's legislated."

Toppo said Canada is doing well on some of the issues in comparison to other nations.

"From a G-7 discussion I attended, France really considers Canada as a good example," she said. "They take our programs and

policies into account when creating their own ... that kind of a thing."

CLOSING THOUGHT

A final message Toppo was echoing after her experience is that men need to be allies in helping deal with the issues.

"That this is our fight; ours as in men and women, everybody together, for basic human rights ... it so simple.

"When I was there, it was very inspirational for me to see the [UN] General Secretary António Guterres announce, publically, that he is a feminist ... it was very inspiring. We all just want a world where it's a just and equitable society; where all human beings are treated with dignity and respect."