

## Peace Hero: Mobina Jaffer, The Canadian Senator Who has been Championing Women in Peace and Security for Years

Mar 8, 2018



Senator Mobina Jaffer in ICAN's Forum in Sri Lanka 2016

When she was 23 years old, Mobina Jaffer was forced into exile from Uganda and became a refugee. Decades later she returned to her first home as a senator of her second home. Since 2001 Mobina Jaffer has represented the province of British Columbia in the Canadian Senate. She is also the Senate's first Muslim, first African-born and first senator of South Asian descent.

Since her appointment in 2001, she has been a steadfast champion of the Women, Peace and Security (WPS) agenda, often a reminder to the world that in 2000 Canada had been a leading voice in the UN Security Council and a pioneer on the global stage.

To commemorate International Women's Day, ICAN's Peace Heroes series honors Senator Jaffer, whose life and career capture the spirit and essence of the day. Aya Nader

spoke to her about her experiences as a female envoy and mediator and her persistent struggle to ensure women's participation in peacemaking and security issues.

**You were one of the earliest supporters of the WPS agenda, and particularly committed to elevating the voice of women peacebuilders – even during the years that the Canadian government was less engaged – what motivated you to keep the light burning?**

The women themselves who are active in the conflict zones, trying to sustain and make peace in the most pragmatic ways. They have always been my inspiration and give me courage.

**What difference does it make to have women involved?**

My experience in Darfur proved the point clearly: women have intimate knowledge of what is happening in their communities, and are crucial to peace processes. In 2005, while the Darfur negotiations were going on, the men were arguing about a river, and one of the women got up and said “I don't know why you are arguing about this. As a little girl I remember going to the river and fetching water. Since I have been married the river has dried up”. The men were debating food routes, and a woman firmly stated that they would never use a certain route as it is full of mines. Women are the doers, they know the community like the back of their hand, and they bring a perspective into the negotiations that the men are not aware of. This woman's perspective is pushed on the men, whether in Sudan or Canada. There was some resistance, but in the end people were working to get out of the situation. Also, between 1983 and 2009, there was a civil war in Sri Lanka between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who claimed to represent the minority Tamil community and the government that was dominated by the majority Sinhalese. Canada was very involved in the peace negotiations, and I was one of the people insisting that women be at the table. The men refused. They did appoint a number of women as advisors, they were academics and from women movements. The LTTE had women combatants working side by side with them. It was the women from the Sri Lankan side who would tell the women combatants what messages to give to their leaders. It is not an issue of how they react to women, but how much power you give to women. If a woman is a full delegate at a peace process, the men have to talk to you because they need your vote.



***Women are the doers, they know the community like the back of their hand, and they bring a perspective into the negotiations that the men are not aware of.***

**You were nominated to be Canada's Envoy to Sudan in 2002. What did you do differently?**

During the North-South peace process in Sudan, Canada was present, but I came in late. There weren't many women envoys then.

When I would ask where the women were, people said "If you introduce women now you will break the process. This is a touchy process and we cannot do this now." I was unhappy but I was not able to do too much. I attempted to find ways to include women indirectly.

Then the Darfur process started and I was appointed as Canada's envoy. Right from the beginning I said we have to have women present. The former President of Tanzania, Salim Salim, was leading the process. When they decided to send planes to pick up men in exile, I asked "Why don't you send planes to refugee camps to pick up the women as well?" Salim Salim supported me, so the UN sent a plane and brought in 17 women. The Europeans and the UN had lots of resistance to the WPS agenda. I built up rapport with the Africans and with the Arab League. They are more inclusive. In the end it was the African leaders who supported me to bring women into the peace process. The dynamics of the process changed.



Senator Mobina Jaffer with Sudanese women leaders  
in Khartoum, Sudan

**You are also extraordinarily multicultural – Asian and African, British and Canadian, Muslim – Has this pluralism in your own identity helped in your work as an envoy and as a politician?**



My multiculturalism gives me an immediate in, because I know the languages and cultures. In Egypt, I was able to go directly to Amr Mousa, who was the Secretary-General of the Arab League. Former Security Chief Omar Soliman would personally brief me.

Senator Mobina Jaffer flying to rebel areas in Darfur,  
Sudan

Because I know how to work with various cultures, I was able to get more for Canada. Things don't happen because of who *Mobina* is,

but my identity makes a difference and can be a catalyst. A great relation was built between Canada and the Arab League. When Canada wasn't included in a process, the Arab League would ask for its inclusion, and we would do the same. Because of my many different identities, and the languages I speak such as the various languages of India and Swahili, it helped me to relate. It helped me bring different parties together. I used to go to Nigeria where nobody was allowed to see the top Tijani religious leaders. They would give me an interview any time because I am Muslim.

**Canada launched its new WPS National Action Plan in November 2017 – what do you see as the major advances since 2000? How does this NAP improve on the previous one?**

Prior to 2006 in Canada we had a very good process in place with both government and civil society working involved, and parliamentarians too. We were doing a lot of work around the world. Canada was a model on this process. But after 2006, when the government changed they did less and gave more lip service. With the new government in place since 2015, the build up was slow at first, but the new Women in Peace and Security National Action Plan is more robust. They have put in more resources. Canada is also committed to a feminist agenda for their foreign policies – this is important. I hope this will make Canada be more proactive.

**What are the challenges that Canada will face while implementing the new NAP?**

First, they have been out of this space for some time, so they have to re-establish credibility amongst women groups. Secondly, they have to play catch up. People will criticize me and say Canada was always there, well it was, but the focus was different. The big challenge that Canada will face is how serious it is about its commitments. For example, we say we believe in having women at the peace table, but will foreign ministers genuinely commit to bringing Syrian women in for the peace or ceasefire or humanitarian negotiations?

**What words of caution would you share with the current government, your colleagues and this new generation of WPS supporters?**

My advice is to avoid a cookie cutter approach. I have observed many peace processes, and every one is different. If a government wants to support women, their job is to ensure that those women – especially the peacebuilders get access and have presence so they can speak for themselves. Governments and international actors should not be telling women what to do, nor just speaking for them.

It would be a very big mistake for the Canadian government to think that they know what needs to be done. I always listen to the women and try to heed their advice; I do not live their reality. We have the resources and are able to get them access but we have to back off and let the women tell us what needs to be done. We cannot be paternalistic or maternalistic and assume we know. We have to be a good partner. They know about their communities, we only read about them.



*If a government wants to support women, their job is to ensure that those women – especially the peacebuilders get access and have presence so they can speak for themselves.*

### What do you see as the key areas where Canada can make a difference in supporting the WPS agenda globally?

Canada's strength is in insisting that at least one-third of those at any peace process should be women. Second we should use our resources to support women. Thirdly, Canada should make sure women have access. Canada can play a pivotal role in achieving peace, but it will only be sustainable if women and civil society are part of it. Force and violence has its limitations. I have seen it in Northern Ireland. You can fight, you can do whatever you think with your arms and machinery. But in the end you have to sit down

and talk. And it is the women and civil society – the people who care, whose homes and communities are affected- that will work to sustain and nurture the peace, so Canada has to enable them.

Another role Canada can play is to ensure that at least one third of its peacekeepers and armed forces when deployed , are women. It





makes such a difference when women are amongst them. As an example, Canada went to Darfur when the fighting started. I arrived in Al-Fashir, the women in charge of the camps was a Canadian armed forces person. The first thing she did was set up schools. People were living under plastics, they did not even have tents or enough food. When I heard this I thought, "Oh my God what are we doing?" I was so embarrassed because there was nothing in the camp. But as soon as I got off the plane, the Darfurian women were thanking me. They said keeping the children occupied means the children will have hope. And it was a woman who thought of this different way of doing things.

Senator Mobina Jaffer in a UN refugee camp with Darfurian women

**There have been some criticism about the fact that Canada's real international assistance funding has declined in recent years, yet there was an increase in planned military spending announced last year – Can you comment on this?**

The military also needs the funds. You need a strong, well-financed military because so much of what the Canadian military does, is working with the communities. This has to go hand in hand with foreign resources we give for bringing about peace. Many times it is the military that goes in as peacekeepers to help create the conditions to implement the peace processes. I used to go in with our military to conflict zones to find ways to work on peace. Both have to be resourced well.

**What have you learned are effective strategies to get your fellow Senators interested in WPS issues?**

I'm a storyteller, so every time I came back, I would tell a story about what I heard on the ground. I am vice chair of the Standing Senate Committee on National Security and Defence, which is male-dominated. I used to be the chair of the Senate Human Rights Committee for many years. It was important but it did not enable me to speak directly with the military and security forces. If you want to make change you have to be there and see what is being discussed in those committees. Having committee members listen makes a difference. I have talked about the women in peace and security agenda for so long, in the end many of my colleagues have accepted it. So I have great support from most of my colleagues – not all of course – but most – and they support me, and this agenda.

**You are a long-time Canadian Senator –a pioneer in many ways – have you seen any changes in how the Canadian Senate deals with women's rights issues?**

It's completely different, like night and day. When I first came here people used to tell me "If you talk too much about women's rights, it will marginalize you." Now if you talk about women's rights, it empowers you. Another big change is there are so many more women in the senate. This helps as well.

**You have been involved in the terrorism committee and you have a deep understanding of security concerns in Canada. One of the biggest challenges is how we deal with those returning from Syria and elsewhere, and were affiliated with extremist movements? What do you think should be done about this issue?**

This is one of the things I have learnt from the International Civil Society Action Network (ICAN) alliance partners. Many of these women have been working on this issue for years. They have strategies and approaches. They know what works. We should not do this alone, we must learn from the women who have been doing it for years, like Pakistan.

**You have been the President/Chair of the Board of Directors of ICAN for some years now? You are a busy woman – what inspires you to continue this work?**

It's the women. I have given up all my board commitments but it's an absolute privilege for me to be Chair of ICAN. it fills my heart with admiration of women I work with, and the unselfish way they strive for peace, many times so few resources at their hands, and working at their own disadvantage. ICAN's network partners in the Women's Alliance for Security Leadership (WASL) women are my food, my inspiration. Every woman I have met at ICAN brings so much strength not only to ICAN but to their communities. We could write books about every woman. It is an honor just to be able to observe what they do.



*We should not do this alone, we must learn from the women who have been doing it for years*

**Are there women peacebuilders that have inspired you or transformed you in anyway? Who?**

There are so many like Visaka Dharmadasa in Sri Lanka whose son was in the army and went missing. She channeled her grief towards trying to end the violence for everyone. She walked into the jungle to meet the LTTE face to face. Mossarat Qadeem in Pakistan is working with women and youth who were extremists. She gives them religious literacy and psycho social support, and training to earn incomes. And Sanam Anderlini who co-founded ICAN and Rana Allam who I met in Egypt. She gave up her very active life as a journalist in Egypt because of her values and commitment to human rights and justice, and has brought her talents and courage to us in Canada.

I am a Muslim woman and many of us are brought up with this message that defines us in certain ways, telling us what we can and cannot do. But through the ICAN network I have met so many women that challenge and subvert those limitations. Najlaa Sheekh who is Syrian has really inspired me. She became a refugee in 2001 and after coming to an ICAN forum she was inspired to set up her center in Turkey and help other Syrian women. Her work has expanded exponentially. It reminds me again, that we are as equally capable as our men. People underestimate us. I get such strength and faith from seeing what Muslim women and other women are doing on the ground in many conflict areas despite the social constraints and the security threats. It is not easy for me as a Muslim woman, even though I have access to so many resources and family support. Many of these women have don't have either, but they do not give up. Every day they prove that people should not underestimate us.

**In this moment, what gives you hope for the WPS agenda? What advice would you give to young women?**

What gives me hope is that you cannot turn back. There is no government or force that can stop our progress whether it is to be at the peace table or being equal partners. Everything is now transparent, if something happens in Yemen, we know about it the next morning. A young girl in Yemen may think she is alone, but the whole world is watching, and many of us are there to help out. She may think that nothing is being done, and the wheels may be turning slowly, but they are turning. There were times when the world would not know anything about you, those days are gone. I tell young women to be passionate, be fearless and courageous.

*This interview was originally published on Ms. Magazine*



## More Interviews

### Rodolfo Domínguez Márquez , Fights Femicide with Accountability in Mexico

Let's celebrate the feminist men who fight for women, Rodolfo Domiguez Marquez courageously fights Femicide with Accountability in Mexico

[Read More](#)

## Related Posts

- [Mobina Jaffer](#)
- [Elusive Peace, Pervasive Violence: Sri Lankan Women's Struggle for Security and Justice. \(Spring 2013\)](#)
- [Sri Lankan Women's Agenda on Peace, Security and Development](#)
- [Women, Peace, and Security Act signed into law](#)
- [Women's Efforts for Peace in a Divided World](#)

Start Here

[The Issues](#)

[Our Strategy](#)

Take Action

[Share Our Stories](#)

[Support Our Work](#)