



Press information

Authoritarianism on the rise – Women for Peace and Democracy

International Zonta Conference in Osnabrück, Germany's City of Peace

(Osnabrück, 07.10.2025) Building a better world for women and girls is the stated goal of the international human rights organization Zonta.

Over 250 women from Zonta clubs in Belgium, France, northwestern and eastern Germany, Luxembourg, and Ukraine gathered in the peace city of Osnabrück on the first weekend of October for their biannual district conference, which this time was held under the motto "Peace – Democracy – Women."

Around 40 participants traveled by bicycle: after a three-day tour covering 320 kilometers, the Belgian women arrived punctually in the early afternoon of October 3 at the colorfully flagged OsnabrückHalle. There, at the invitation of District Governor Ria Matthijssens and the host Zonta Club Osnabrück Westfälischer Friede, three days of lectures and workshops highlighted the current challenges of our time and the important role that women play in them.

Club president Lidia Wübbelmann, conference chair Maaïke Luttkik, and governor Ria Matthijssens welcomed guests to the festive opening ceremony, including Zonta International vice president Sandy Venn-Brown from Australia, president Salla Tuominen, who joined via video link, and Osnabrück's mayor Katharina Pötter. Pötter pointed out that the Zontians could not have chosen a better place for their conference than the Peace City of Osnabrück, where, in addition to the history of the Peace of Westphalia, 120 orange benches are now a visible sign against violence against women.

Peace and democracy at risk

Dr. Julia Schwanholz, political scientist and democracy expert at the University of Duisburg-Essen, outlined the main focus of the conference in a comprehensive keynote speech: She noted an increase in autocracies worldwide and also in Europe, and assessed this as a threat to peace. Autocrats often come to power through democratic elections, but

then undermine the system from within: “Freedom is democracy's weak spot.” To counteract such abuse, citizens must be aware of their shared responsibility in shaping their democracy: “Democracy must be a desired way of life, not just a system of government,” said Schwanholz. Democracy must be practiced and exercised every day. Only strong democracies can guarantee the protection of women's rights. “Women's rights are human rights,” said Schwanholz, which is why improving the situation of women and girls goes hand in hand with strengthening democracy. And she quoted Hillary Clinton: “There can be no true democracy unless the voices of women are heard. There can be no true democracy unless women are given the opportunity to take responsibility for their own lives. There can be no true democracy unless all citizens are able to participate fully in the life of their country.” Schwanholz received much applause for her keynote.

What to do when human rights are no longer respected?

The report by Ukrainian human rights lawyer and Nobel Peace Prize recipient Oleksandra Matviichuk, who documents human rights violations and war crimes in Ukraine for the International Court of Justice at the Center for Civil Liberties, was very moving. Matviichuk relentlessly cited examples of appalling brutality by Russian aggressors. Torture, rape, countless child abductions, and mass graves bore witness to a level of violence that even the UN has been unable to stop so far.

“Nevertheless, our individual efforts to end the war are indispensable,” Matviichuk emphasized. It is important to actively fight for the dignity and value of every single life and not allow ourselves to be pushed into the role of victims. “Many lives have been shattered,” said Matviichuk, “but we must not give up hope that peace is possible.”

The long applause and some tears can be seen as a sign of solidarity with the victims.

Passion for democracy

At the end of the conference, Dr. Debbie Stoll, a linguist and democracy coach who, due to her South African background, has a unique perspective on the struggle against apartheid and for equality, made an impassioned plea for democracy: “Democracy is a mindset,” she told the Zontians. Democracy must be learned. To this end, she recommended the following three lessons: “Observe, don't judge, stay open!” as well as “Follow your inner ‘star,’ your conviction” and thirdly: “Remain strong and dignified in crisis.”

The topics covered at the opening ceremony were explored in greater depth in twelve workshops on Saturday. And there was some time for socializing too: the women had a wonderful time singing and eating together in the cultural center Lagerhalle, which is also hosting an exhibition about Zonta until the end of November, and enjoying a festive gala dinner followed by dancing at the Alando. They will meet again in two years' time in Beaune, France.

Photos

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Around 40 of the participants traveled by bicycle: after a three-day tour covering 320 kilometers, the Belgian women arrived in Osnabrück on Friday afternoon.



In her lecture, Dr. Julia Schwanholz warned that increasing authoritarianism poses a threat to peace. She said that the fight for democracy is also a fight for a better world.



Human rights activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Oleksandra Matviichuk deeply moved the audience.



Dr. Debbie Stoll delivered a passionate plea for democracy and explored the topic in greater depth in one of the twelve conference workshops.



Conference chair Maaïke Luttik (left) and Governor Ria Matthijssens opened the conference.



Several Zonta awardees (front left) were honored during the opening ceremony.



The Vice President of Zonta International, Sandy Venn-Brown from Australia (left), and District Governor Ria Matthijssens from Belgium also enriched the conference with their experience and many inspiring ideas.



Mayor Katharina Pötter (left) and President of the host Zonta Club Westfälischer Friede Lidia Wübbelmann agreed: there is no better place than Osnabrück for the conference on the topic of "Peace – Democracy – Women."



At the beginning of October, the host Zonta Club Osnabrück Westfälischer Friede welcomed over 250 women from six countries to the German city of peace.

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