

Armstrong says there's still more work to be done for women's rights — even in Canada

By **KIM ARNOTT**
Special to *The Champion*

As a journalist, Sally Armstrong has travelled to some of the most oppressive countries in the world — countries where women are routinely denied basic human rights and dignities.

Just last month, she visited Afghanistan, where the iron-rule of the Muslim fundamentalist government has turned the clock back decades for women.

Women are no longer allowed to work or attend school, and can be publicly stoned to death for being in the company of a man who's not their husband, brother or son.

Many health care services are no longer available to females, who must spend their lives hiding behind blackened house windows and in head-to-toe clothing.

Women subjected to horrors

In Afghanistan, as in other countries around the world where women are subjected to such horrors as honour killings and female genital mutilation, the subject of the treatment of women is taboo.

Many practices are simply defended on the basis of culture, says Ms Armstrong, an award-winning journalist and former editor of *Homemaker's* magazine, who has brought the stories of women around the world back to Canada.

"I call it playing the cultural trump card," she told a group of about 300 Halton women Thursday. "I sometimes wonder why no one ever asks the women how they feel about having to carry the cultural key in these places."

Abuse here in Canada, too

But while she's often horrified by the status of women in many of the countries she visits, Ms Armstrong added she's also angry about the abuse suffered by Canadian women and children.

"I'm ashamed that a country with so much opportunity can spend so little of it on the status of women," she said.

She urged the audience, gathered at Rattlesnake Point Golf Club to celebrate International Women's Day, to speak out against injustices they see both locally and internationally.

"People who don't intervene when things are amiss are giving tacit approval," Ms Armstrong said.

"In the absence of a protest, evil is

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SALLY ARMSTRONG

nourished."

As part of the celebration of International Women's Day, a local voice of protest has been revived.

The Women of Halton Action Movement (WHAM), a feminist lobby group founded 20 years ago, has been officially re-launched.

Bev Le Francois, one of the founding members of WHAM and a co-director of the Halton Rape Crisis Centre, told the audience that the group is needed

to battle for a national childcare program, pay equity and affordable

housing and against child pornography, rape and environmental degradation.

"Canadian women are hearing that this is the best place in the world," said Ms LeFrancois.

"Who is it best for? People of privilege, in the main."

The need for WHAM is becoming essential in today's political climate, where social programs that protect vulnerable members of society are being eroded by various levels of government, added Joey Edwards, executive director of the Halton Social Planning Council.

"The circumstances of women demand we struggle and march again for equality, peace and justice," she said.

WHAM will hold monthly meetings for all interested members. The first meeting will be held April 17 at the Rape Crisis Centre at Hopedale Mall on Rebecca Street in Oakville.

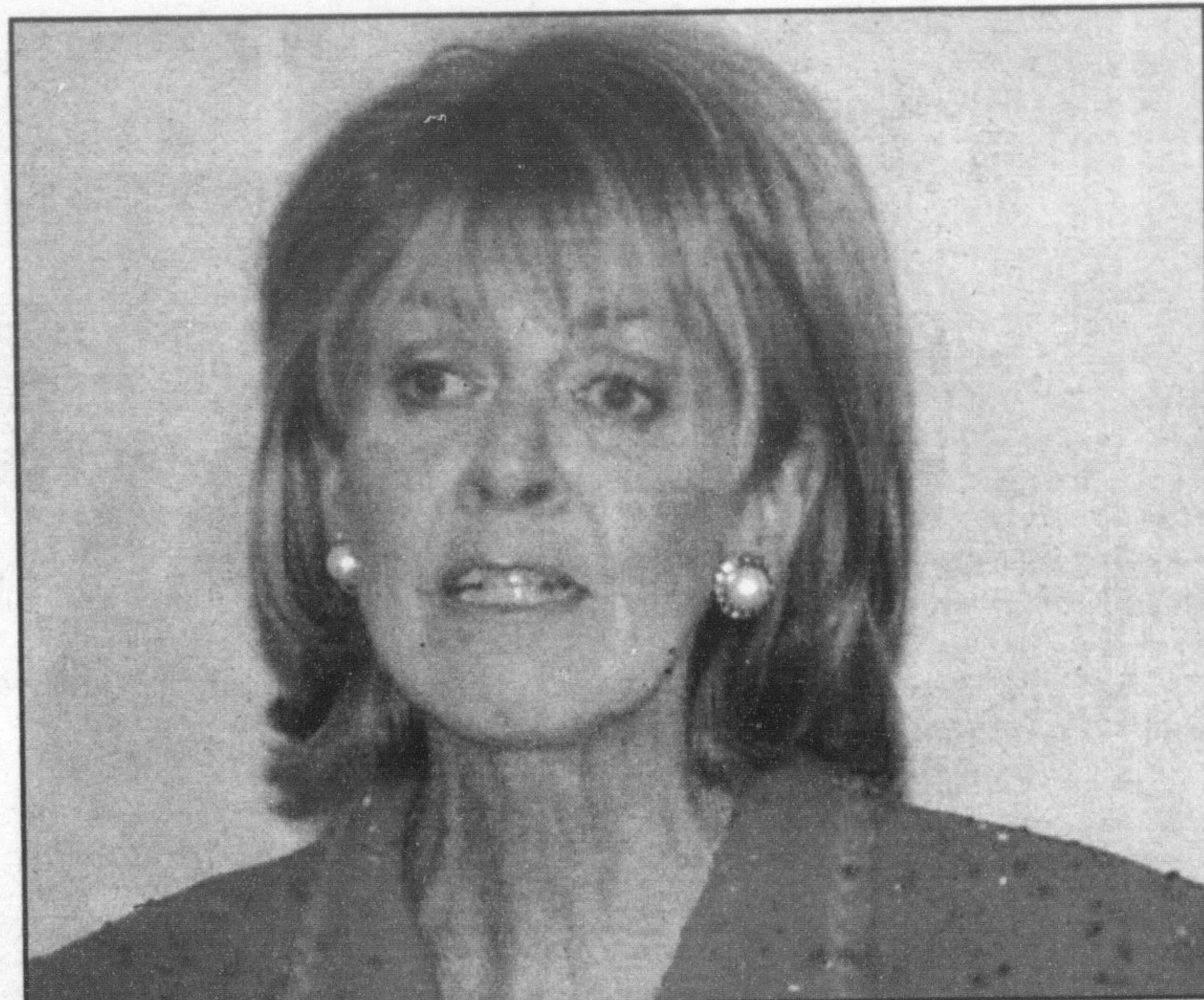


Photo by ERIN RILEY

Sally Armstrong, editor at large of *Chatelaine* magazine, was the keynote speaker at Thursday's International Women's Day celebration at Rattlesnake Point Golf Club.



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The Raging Grannies performed at the International Women's Day event at Rattlesnake Point Golf Club Thursday.

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