

AROUND THE WORLD IN 50 VOICES



Kirthi Jayakumar

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Dedication

To Patti:

You aren't here to see it today, but you sat with me when I did each interview. I miss you.

To Amma:

You are the greatest woman I know. I love you.

To You:

Because I am who I am because you are who you are



Afra Jalabi

Aligning herself with the unheard and the oppressed, Afra is one of the most powerful activist voices denouncing the current Syrian regime and its brutally oppressive policies.

HOLDING OUT HOPE

Afra Jalabi

Afra Jalabi is one of the most powerful voices against institutionalised oppression in the Syrian context. When the Arab Spring began in 2010, Tunisia and Egypt were the first to encounter vox populi with such powerful overtones that a regime change became inevitable. Libya and Syria followed suit. But the Syrian narrative would wind longer than its counterparts as the civilians would stand strong in their struggle against an oppressive government.

Born in Damascus, Afra left Syria when she was five. She spent her growing years in Germany, Saudi Arabia and Canada, visiting Syria very often, and even staying there for a few years during childhood so that she along with her siblings got some exposure to Arabic and Arab the way of life. Living at the moment, in Canada, in Quebec, a French-speaking province, Afra has made it a point to stay rooted to her culture and language, teaching her children who were born and raised in Canada to speak Arabic as well. Deeply rooted in her love, loyalty and affection for Syria, Afra sees herself as a citizen of the planet, sympathizing immensely with those who are oppressed. She believes humans act against the backdrop of specific contexts, which enables them to be part of the larger universal struggle for justice and dignity.

Afra's uncle, Jawdat Said, a well-known intellectual, who influenced her thinking, has been writing about non-violence, social justice and Islamic reform for over half a century. Inspired by his universal, humanistic and non-violent principles of Islam, and emphasis on the study and understanding of history, Afra learned how important it was to know the past, and this realization had a great impact on her. With avid readers in her family, Afra grew up surrounded by books, authors and study groups, peppered

with constant debates and discussions. There was a great deal of repression in Syria, even before she left, and from faint memories of her early childhood days in Syria; Afra recounts when her father, Khales Jalabi, and uncle Jawdat were imprisoned. The women in Afra's family were all out-of-the-box thinkers—strong, independent and motivated. Her mother, Laila Said, who passed away in 2005, impacted the lives of all those who knew her. A woman of depth and a formidable mind, Afra narrates, her presence was immensely stimulating. Laila was a great mother who lovingly taught her children the love of nature and instilled in them environmental conscientiousness as early as in the 1970s just as her father's reading habits instilled in them an insatiable appetite for reading.

Spending most of her life outside Syria did not take the country away from Afra's thoughts. She lived in the country in 1982, when the Massacre of Hamah occurred, after which the world re-accepted the Assad regime. The daunting thought of all the people in Syria living under abnormal conditions always worried her—a state of melancholy that was only deepened by growing up between the Middle East, Europe and North America. The recurrence of another repression of Syrians still remained a distant dread, when in the Middle East, the conspicuous presence of the *Mukhabarat* or the secret police literally stealing creativity from people's lives and squashing humanity by restraining all natural social networks and sparks for innovation and movement. Afra's family on her mother's side came from a village in the Golan Heights, in the neutralized zone under UN protection. Her grandmother's village, Ein Ziwan, located inside occupied Golan is an Israeli settlement today. Conscious of the notion that those oppressed in the past are becoming oppressors in the present, in light of the numbness of Israeli's policies towards Palestinian suffering despite everything they had endured and witnessed in the holocaust, she is fully aware of the danger of darkness to take over the yearning for wholeness and freedom.

'That very darkness lurks within – in the hope of reincarnating our enemies from the debris of our own shattered identities.' The combination of these multiple contexts influenced Afra abundantly, sensitizing her to strive for justice, equality and the preciousness of our journey as human beings.

After the death of his father, Hafez al-Assad, who had reigned over Syria for 30 years, Bashar al Assad was initially positively received by Syrians, who momentarily wished to forget the years of the 'father'. But complete disappointment soon set in, as more and more people were beginning to believe that they were losing Syria. In her heart, Afra was getting divorced from the country though she didn't want to lose hope. With Assad's tight-fisted security measures in place, Afra's cousin got arrested for three years over some lone emails, and many of her friends were arrested for civic actions that included cleaning up the neighbourhood and anti-smoking campaigns in Daraya, a suburb of Damascus, besieged since 2011. Afra was disillusioned about her homeland. In 2008, members of the Damascus Declaration approached Afra in Canada to make her a signatory. She accepted, especially after noting that the president of the Declaration, Fida al Hourani, had been imprisoned along many women activists, doctors and writers. The Damascus Declaration was an umbrella group and an attempt to bring different opposition figures in the political spectrum to create a gradual movement towards democratic reform and change in Syria. But the regime did not leave a small margin even for something as soft as this.

Working with the intention of being aligned with the oppressed, Afra found that her challenge lay in being emotionally wrapped on the side of the oppressed. That took its inevitable toll. Afra had to learn that the best use of her energy and empathy was to sublimate the sense of indignation into action and positive work and also to challenge herself to think in proactive ways instead of reacting to events. The journey of justice and compassion on the planet still has some mileage ahead of it and none of us should

underestimate whatever we do in being part of the journey that is leading towards justice and equitable and dignified distribution of resources. To Afra, it is an honour to contribute to the momentum of change even if by taking small steps and new creative directions in thought and behaviour. When the Syrian Revolution started, Afra realized that the search for signs of sanity, or a glimmer of light in the dark was on. It turned out that many people of Syria knew about each other and their writings and activism was actually resonating with the cumulative resentment against the present political scenario. However, as Afra explains, they couldn't create enough of a momentum for reform-based thinking, nor a solid ground for a non-violent paradigm of change and action. There was hardly any change and the people naively thought that they were beyond the bloody years of Hafez al-Assad and were not prepared for a movement. However, Afra asserts that the events in Syria need not be interpreted as a reflection of a movement but rather more of a natural phenomenon like a tsunami—a collapse of plates under a society. There had been so much oppression, corruption and injustice that the plates of Syrian collective consciousness had indeed erupted, which is why perhaps it has lost leadership and has become unstoppable.

Afra grew up in a family where being a woman was valued. Her mother's inherent feminism and her understanding of an egalitarian world for men, women, rich, poor, educated and uneducated people inspired mutual respect and a sense of parity amongst all members in the family. They were sensitive to gender issues and understood the value of respect and dignity for all men in Afra's family took the women around them seriously. That strengthened Afra's feminist sensibilities as she came to realize that not all girls beyond her family had the same experience as she had it. This firmed Afra's resolve that all women deserved to be treated as human beings and should not be subjected to any form of discrimination from a young age. To Afra, being a woman implies feeling womanly, thereby fully human. There are no rigid definitions and existentialist notions for Afra on what it means to

be male or female. She quotes Susan Sontag, who explained that the most beautiful thing in the most feminine woman was something masculine and that the most beautiful thing in the most virile man was something feminine. As Afra puts it, we contain both, but it is because we have come to live in a world that privileges one gender that we have turned into a one-eyed monster, where we are not truly benefiting from the larger spectrum of being human in both its male and female manifestations.

Being an activist Afra intends to amplify the muffled scream of a mother, from within the earth, pleading, 'Stop! Stop killing our children and destroying our homes!' Afra believes that women have not gathered their momentum just yet as there is so much anger and yearning suppressed within them. This needs to be channellized into a creative force globally and to put an end to a dead institution like war. In the age of nuclear weapons, war is obsolete and armed resistance is futile as she learned from her late mother and uncle. The big nuclear powers can no longer afford to fight amongst each other. Afra says quoting her uncle 'And therefore the small powers give up their causes to those big power brokers when they resort to arms.' For her, armed struggle is now a closed door for all, and all those who care about justice and our future, should unite in announcing the death of this idol. Afra is in awe of the Syrian women and their role in the struggle for freedom but her heart also goes out to them, especially for the heavy price they have paid and for the many losses they have endured.

While in the short run, end of Syria seems to unfold before Afra, the long run shows hopes of walking on the path of reason, reform and creativity which are inevitable since escaping from Reality (with a capital R) is not an option. We do not get to choose to design the rules of existence. Just as we cannot change the laws that make water in H₂O, we also are unable to alter the laws from within— laws that say we are a species free, creative, curious and loving. When we go against this, we cause so much harm to ourselves and others. When asked about her vision for the future of Syria, she says, 'Syria is a vision in itself like the natural cultural Amazon

forest of human consciousness.' This, as she explains, is why the vision of Syrians after independence from the French was a reflection of the nature of Syrian society and history. It is disheartening to see that a country which was inclusive, diverse and welcoming to all newcomers, opening its floodgates to welcome refugees, exiles and all kinds of people, this little Mediterranean entity is being torn and neglected, and made the playing field of Iran, Russia and other regional powers who are at the least concerned about what Syria represents.



Angela Gorman

When she saw a documentary about the lack of access to healthcare in Chad, she decided to do something about it.

The result?
Life for African Mothers.

NURSING NATIONS BACK TO HEALTH

Angela Gorman

Influences that can catalyse action flow in from all directions. For Angela Gorman, had she decided to switch off the television one evening, using the remote that lay beside her, she would not have had anything to do with African Mothers.

A qualified nurse for over 30 years, Angela worked on the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the University Hospital in Cardiff. After a long day at work one day in June 2005, Angela came home tired. She spent some time watching the news on BBC, and as soon as the credits began rolling, she got up to turn off the television. Just then, the newscaster began to announce the next programme, a BBC Panorama documentary titled 'Dead Mums Don't Cry', featuring one woman's fight to stop women dying in childbirth in Chad. Angela watched the programme. She watched as the documentary showed her the difficulties that women in Chad faced, while going through pregnancy and childbirth. She watched as Dr Grace Kodindo crusaded for the cause of these women.

At the end of the programme, Angela looked at an Atlas, and learned where Chad was located. She felt helpless knowing of the situation that women faced in Chad, and immediately visited BBC's website, and contacted the show's producer expressing her desire to be a part of any endeavour that could help alleviate the plight of the women in Chad. The producer soon wrote back, connecting Angela with other people who wrote to him from different parts of the UK. By and by, a lot of people dropped out, leaving behind a small group of passionate people, which began do their bit by sending medication to the women in Chad.

In November 2005, Angela travelled with the group to Chad. They visited the hospital they had seen on television, and met a woman who was grappling to survive.. But with the medication they had sent, she had made a speedy recovery. The BBC had a production team travel with them, and as they filmed the resurrection and the miraculous upswing in the lives of several women in Chad, Dr Grace Kodindo was filled with hope, particularly because until then, she had only seen women dying around her all the time. At that point, Angela's organization was co-founded as 'Hope for Grace Kodindo'.

With time, they realized that they could help more women not just in Chad, but in other countries, too. They began sending medication to other countries where women were facing challenges to their lives with childbirth and pregnancy. At that point, at the request of Dr Kodindo and considering that they were working beyond the region she was engaged in, as well as opening up a possibility that she might wish to start a foundation in her own name, they changed the name of the organization. With saving mothers across Africa as their aim, the organization came to be known as 'Life for African Mothers'.

When the group returned to Chad in February 2007, they saw how much life had changed for women. They realized that the incidents of mortality had reduced considerably owing to the medication they had sent in, especially for women who suffered from p-partum haemorrhage and eclampsia. When she came back to Cardiff, Angela had an email from two members of the United Nations Populations Fund (UNFPA), who asked the organization to help out with hospitals in Liberia and Sierra Leone. Taking the plunge, the organization also narrowed down on its objectives while expanding its geographical reach. After advice from the UNFPA and their own obstetricians, the organization decided that they would focus exclusively on providing medication to address eclampsia and post-partum haemorrhage, so that they could serve more women across several countries. Angela visited Liberia to assess the situation in the subsequent year. The situation was dire. When in the UK, the lifetime risk of mothers in

childbirth is 1 in 8,700 cases, in Chad, it was 1 in 11. In Liberia, it was 1 in 8, and in Sierra Leone, it was 1 in 7. ¹Angela went back to the UK and sent out medication to a trusted pharmacist in Monrovia, Liberia. When she visited the country on an invitation from Oxfam, she came to understand that Sierra Leone was the most dangerous place to be a mother, owing to the lack of healthcare facilities and security for women. The invitation opened up a new avenue altogether, where Angela's organization began supplying medication in collaboration with the Princess Christian Hospital.

Born to a large family, with four brothers and two sisters besides her, Angela is the first in her family to take to the field of nursing and neonatal care. When she visited the hospital each time while having her two sons and a daughter, Angela came to like the idea of being a nurse. When her children were still very young she embarked on training to become a nurse. From then until 2010, she remained unstinted in her service, which culminated in her becoming a senior sister at the Neonatal Intensive Care Unit at the University Hospital in Cardiff until January 2008. The strange thing, Angela notes, about all of this is the uncanny resemblance that she bears to her grandmother. Ironically, her grandmother passed away during childbirth, when Angela's father was just three, a phenomenon that she is now fighting to avert for many women in the world.

With time, Angela collaborated with Dr Charles Ameh from Liverpool. A person who conducted midwife trainings in Nigeria, he had experience in the region and understood the needs of the women in the country. He advised Angela that it would suffice if Life for African Mothers could send magnesium sulphate to Nigeria.

¹ UNFPA 2007

Subsequently, Angela saw a significant diaspora community in Cardiff was reaching out and helping women from Somaliland; she also agreed to send out medication to the region. She was briefed by Dr Ameh that the doctors in Somaliland had experience enough to handle medication and administer it well. Within one week of sending out medicines to Somaliland, Angela had heard back on the impact. A person in Cardiff came to her and said that his sister in Hargeisa, Somaliland, was in a coma, and her baby had died. He told her that the doctor had asked his family to get medicine from the bundle that had arrived from the UK – little did he know that it was his friend Angela's organization that had sent them there in the first place. With the dose of magnesium sulphate – medication that helps to cure seizures in mothers that are suffering from eclampsia - she had recovered. Life for African Mothers soon began sending medication to 11 countries that included within its fold Chad, DR Congo, Ghana, Liberia, Northern Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somaliland, Tanzania, Uganda and Zimbabwe.

With 23 visits to Africa under her belt, Angela has seen the extraordinary side of Africa. Besides the commonalities that unite the different countries, there is also a characteristic element of uniqueness in each country. In addition to supplying medication by air freight, Angela's organization also helps provide opportunities for midwives and doctors in the UK to go to Africa, and offer trainings and skill-sharing workshops under grants. Though this has been largely fruitful, the main focus of the organization remains in supplying medication. The process of supplying medication is usually undertaken under two conditions, namely, first, women are given the medication free of cost, second, women must not be told where the medicine comes from, so that they enjoy the benefits under the notion that the medicines are provided by their government. This is especially significant because there is a general tendency amongst women in Africa to accept mortality during pregnancy as normal and Life for African Mothers hopes to change this conception. The only exception that was ever made to the non-disclosure of the organization's identity was in the case

of a woman who recovered while she was on her deathbed. Desperate to thank the lady who ensured that her children would not become orphans, she sent word to Angela. She wanted to personally thank her. One other time, Angela remembers a text message she got from a doctor, thanking her for the medication she had sent in, as a woman who was haemorrhaging was saved with a dose.

Though the path is rewarding and heart warming, especially where hope is restored where it was lost, there are several challenges. Angela notes that there are so many demands, but they do not have funds enough to meet them. Considering that governments and international organizations have all the funds they need to make the free supply of medicines for those in need a reality, it is a wonder that they do not seem to be taking it up. She explains that it is not a difficult thing to do at all – just a couple of phone calls, emails, and wherever necessary, a visit or two is all it takes. She wonders why something that is so rewarding and cheap is difficult for bigger organizations to handle; women contribute to 75 per cent of the productivity of developing countries, and no country can afford to lose that opportunity. A second challenge lies in the lack of impact assessment. Though the element of trust prevails, it is often difficult for the organization to evaluate the extent of impact it has had on the lives of women. This could be a problem that is bound to infrastructural and logistical concerns on the one hand, and the sheer difficulty in including correspondence as a priority among survival concerns. In the few places that they have been able to assess impacts, there is plenty of data to show that the supply of medication has been rewarding. For instance, in Liberia, in December 2012, where there would have been 38 deaths, there was not even one death from eclampsia or postpartum haemorrhage all the way from September through to December inclusive, after the supply of medicines reached them.

Angela has travelled through most parts of Africa, and it has always occurred to her that the death of a woman is so easily acceptable to the masses there. Once, while addressing a gathering of 40 people, comprising 15 men and 25 women, Angela asked the group two questions that made them see the lack of logic in their perceptions. She asked the women, 'If 300,000 men were dying every year, would someone have sat up and done something?' They answered in the negative. She then asked the men, 'If 300,000 men were dying every year, would someone have sat up and done something?' It took some time for the men to respond, but most nodded their heads, embarrassedly. She didn't mean to offend them, nor make them feel inferior, she only wanted them to think, and begin to change their perceptions.

Being a woman, Angela has seen that she has been central to the things that happened in her family. Undaunted, never intimidated and unfazed when it comes to speaking her mind, Angela feels empowered within and without. She dreams of a time when her work would come to an end and no longer be necessary but that is too distant a possibility that she knows cannot happen soon.

Angela crusades for the cause of the many women in need of medical attention and hopes that more governments would be involved and begin to care for the women in their countries by providing for their needs.



Arundhuti Gupta

Not everyone is privileged enough to enjoy the best of facilities for their advancement. Arundhuti decided to reach out to those in need through her mentorship program, Mentor Together.

MENTORING MANY FOR A BRIGHT FUTURE

Arundhuti Gupta

'It only takes a spark, to get a fire going, And soon all those around, will warm up in their glowing', are the opening lines of the hymn *Pass it On*. The anthropomorphic version of these words is Arundhuti Gupta, who has lent the spark that got the fire going, changing many lives in the process.

While pursuing her undergraduate degree at the Mount Carmel College, Bangalore, Arundhuti was largely academically oriented. She benefited amply from the mentorship of Dr Rajeev Gowda, a Professor in the faculty of economics and social sciences in the Indian Institute of Management, Bangalore. His mentorship showed Arundhuti a path towards honing her leadership skills, and towards evolving beyond the rubric of academics. Under his watchful guidance, she volunteered with several organizations, and began her foray into development as a career. One of the activities she participated in was hosting and organizing career fairs at colleges, but they were not the run-off-the-mill career fairs that told students that they had certain options, given their education. They spoke to students on the philosophical tangent, reaching out to them on evolving soft skills and honing their ability to lead. At that juncture, Arundhuti realized that mentoring had a huge role to play in reaching out to youngsters at the brink of their future. She learned that it was a powerful concept, with far-reaching positive consequences for those on the cusp of their career choices. Hoping to find a means to pass on the assistance that benefitted her, Arundhuti took the first step and ideated with Dr Gowda and his team, in his own NGO, the Resurgent India Trust. The idea didn't go further, at that point.

Arundhuti finished her Bachelor's degree in commerce with five gold medals in tow, and went on to work at Goldman Sachs, Bangalore. All through, she remained engaged with the idea, which stayed with her entirely, though she did not consider formalizing it. Following that she went to Manchester, where she did her Masters in business administration on a Commonwealth scholarship. Much of what she studied at the undergraduate and post-graduate level was largely different from what Arundhuti went on to do. After returning from the United Kingdom, she started Mentor Together in November 2009.

Arundhuti's idea germinated in a very organic manner; there was no single turning point, but rather a cumulative culmination of many days of ideating and conceptualizing. The focal point was to find meaningful ways to fund support for youngsters from their elders, through building useful and reliable contacts. Mentorship is a word that is often bandied without much attention to the nuanced significance it can have on the life of a youngster. She realized that youngsters do not have the benefit of a mentor all the time, they tend to turn to peer groups as influences from members of the same age group tends to be stronger. There wasn't enough of an older presence in the life of many youngsters to guide them and tell them how the world out there is, especially after treading a path that a youngster wishes to tread.

When Arundhuti began Mentor Together, she identified a couple of groups of economically weaker and disadvantaged youth. She built a network of volunteer mentors, screening and training them, for this was not something they were going to do in their spare time, these mentors had to be hands on in their involvement with the youth they mentored. What followed was a rigorous matching process, where mentors and mentees were identified and matched. The mentors were trained to take on a set curriculum, and to handle two or three meetings a month, with their mentees. In doing so, Arundhuti revived a very ancient tradition in India—the gurukula system—where a close relationship was built between the guru, or teacher, and his young student.

Reinventing this in a manner that is suitable to the needs of the present day, Arundhuti brought together mentors from some of the biggest corporate houses by building alliances with their corporate social responsibility wings.

Starting a full-fledged non-profit organization when she was just 23, Arundhuti's largest challenge lay in the lack of sufficient networks to build an organization. In a way, it was a positive challenge because it gave her a chance to learn hands-on, while remaining on the field/job. Transitioning to a more stable organizational setting was a goal she worked on. That apart, the process of mentoring itself presented a very intellectually stimulating challenge; the whole process of transferring one's own accomplishments to the mentee is not textbook or doctored learning process, but rather, experiential and hands-on.

Through Mentor Together, Arundhuti's network of volunteer mentors have supported destitute girls in Mysore and urban poor children in Bangalore in improving their language skills, developing life skills, and pursuing their academic and career goals.

To Arundhuti, being a woman posed no obstacle. More a boon than a bane, Arundhuti found that she was in a better position to understand and empathize with underprivileged girls that she worked with. She was also able to forge a bond with them, hoping to understand what their thoughts were. That an underprivileged girl was faced with challenges and issues unique to her social ethos was indeed a different thing to understand altogether. Arundhuti believes that gender is not, and should not be an issue whatsoever. According to her, gender should not be a basis to divide or discriminate, and in that sense, everyone should be treated equally. Arundhuti feels that life needs to be approached with a policy of 'double blind review', a policy followed in academic publications, where a person's work is evaluated blindly, without knowledge of who they are or where they come from. In such a

setting, their work speaks volumes for themselves. In some ways, being a woman presented itself with many advantages to Arundhuti when it came to choosing her career, as well.

With her parents' support and being willingly explorative, Arundhuti realized that had she been a man, it would have been different. A man is expected to pursue a stable career rather than explore. However, generally, a woman is succumbed to several societal taboos and is given fewer choices, which even at times are not made by her, but are been told to opt for by others. Arundhuti saw this operating up close when handling a particular cohort. The brightest child in a group was a girl, and her mentor tried to get her to see that she could have a bright future if she took up further education. But an uncle of hers that ran a wine shop somehow convinced her to drop out of school – which she immediately did. Her mentor was devastated. The experience showed Arundhuti the significance of how family and peer influences are much stronger than a mentor's, but the equation had the potential of change. The incident gave Arundhuti a reality check of how society is so deeply entrenched in a certain understanding of what women should do and how they should behave. The mainstream media tends to portray women in a very parochial manner, and such an image is highly impressionable on the masses.

For her venture, Arundhuti was one of the 20 recipients of the Global Youth Action Net Fellowship 2011–2012 from the International Youth Foundation, in the United States, a fellowship that is awarded competitively to social entrepreneurs aged under 30 with proven track records.

For the long term, Arundhati has a goal she hopes to achieve. She hopes to establish Mentor Together as an organization that thrives in more ways with an identity beyond her own; that the world around her recognizes Mentor Together as her organization;

and that her brainchild acquires an identity which should cast it aside, she hopes. Seeing how the youth of today are largely spoiled for choices, so much so that it can be confusing for them to arrive at a decision about their future on their own, Arundhuti realized that there is plenty of potential in pursuing mentorship. Arundhuti sees that there is a tangential difference in the youth of today in comparison with the youth of yesterday.

Walking the extra mile by engaging the youth in action, rather than just talking them down and by getting them to evolve and go closer and closer to their goals by pushing the envelope are factors that have huge rewards. Arundhuti hopes to keep on the path of mentoring youngsters, empowering as many as she can.



AsherJay

The environment
and the animal
kingdom around her
inspired her since
the time of her
earliest memory.
Bridling her love for
art and activism for
wildlife, Asher Jay is
an inspiring fighter.

BEING A VOICE FOR THE SILENT ONES

Asher Jay

When Asher Jay was just about to be born, her mother adopted a dog so that she had a soul mate to age with. It isn't a wonder, therefore, that she has felt a profound connection with animals ever since she can remember, the bond growing deeper and more meaningful over time.

Growing up with her fluffy white Spitz, called Leander, Asher went through 14 years of her life with a furry friend by her side. He would unfailingly keep her secrets, get into trouble with her, indulging her when she made him the sixth member of her club 'The Six Secret Seekers', a misguided effort to blend *Scooby Doo* with Enid Blyton's *Secret Seven*. That they never found a mystery to solve was never a concern; the duo bonded so deeply that Asher saw him as a sibling rather than as a pet. During her growing years, Asher had other animals in her care by then. Any animal that was sick, injured or orphaned was brought home for nourishment, medical care and rehabilitation. Asher's mother welcomed wildlife with open arms, and would tell her to get to know 'her relatives' better. Through her growing years, Asher got to interact with animals—whether it was through pictures or puppet shows, television shows or in actual form. When she got to see a large picture book of deep sea creatures, an irreversible love for ocean life was kindled. This intense passion took her to the enthralling world where creatures thrived and flourished with such fantastic beauty.

But soon after, she came to realize that they weren't as untouched by man as she would have imagined, but rather, these creatures were suffering under the brunt of thoughtless human action. Asher saw a dead dolphin, a bloated juvenile male bottlenose. A fatal injury had left him stranded on the shoreline. She felt the pain from internalizing the devastation, as it took over and made it impossible for her to function. It numbed her to see how people shamelessly hurt animals, and just left them to die without any compunction.

In the midst of her passion for animals, Asher took on modelling assignments, as a hobby. She was a model with a heart, refusing to endorse fur or leather. With time, she left the world of fashion as a model and flew into it as a fashion designer. Through her initial years at the course at the Parsons School of Design, her heart was never in apparel construction. But towards the end, she saw how design was all about creation, and that academic principles stopped at being mere guidelines. One needs to know the rules to be able to break them well, so she stuck with the art and graduated with a degree in fashion and textile design. While working with prints and colours most, Asher got to work on custom items that could never be replicated in exact permutation of fabrication. Everything that went into her collection centred around important 'green' or socio-economic memos, using the silhouettes and tailored details to deliberate marginalized concerns or factions. Of her repertoire of work with which she silkscreened wildlife sketches, one of her clients loved a particular piece of artwork that Asher had laid over the side-seam of a shift dress she purchased. She wanted it for her study, and asked if Asher could sell her the piece.

There was no looking back after that. Asher began drawing, painting, working with found objects, sketching on napkins, cup holders, notebooks and digitally on her laptop. Graphic design quickly became a huge passion and she learned it on the job. Given that all creative disciplines come from the same source, it was easy for Asher to understand, imbibe and take on the art form.

When the deep-water Horizon Rig exploded on 20 April 2010, the resultant oil spill catastrophe brought the oceans to Asher again. With a volcanic eruption of emotions within her, as the disastrous consequences of the explosion came to light, Asher found herself gushing back at the world that she wanted to be a part of. She heard about large pods of dolphins asphyxiating on Corexit and crude, and it left her sobbing in her bed for days. This time, however, she found the need to express her anguish. She decided to offer an observation on the problem through art. She began illustrating conceptual two-dimensional graphic campaigns, following C-span broadcasts regularly. Reading every article, chopping her tresses short for the spill response booms and signing every petition she stumbled upon, Asher came to a point where that wasn't enough. She wanted to participate in the dialogue and help incite change.

At that point, she came to know about TEDxOilSpill. Asher actually sketched the campaigns upon following C-Span addresses, and then took her artwork to Washington DC with her. At the event, Asher met the likes of Susan Shaw, Sylvia Earle, David Gallo, Carl Safina and others. Sylvia Earle, an American marine biologist, explorer, author, and lecturer told her then, 'A picture is worth a thousand words, but an artwork like yours is worth a thousand pictures!' This motivated her to create such graphic campaigns for conservations. She really inspired Asher when she needed it the most by getting what her work was about in a single glimpse. She

was floored by the love these activists harboured for the sea. For the first time, she had come to know of others who felt as she did, except that they weren't crying about the issue, but actually addressed it.

That was when Asher Jay, the activist with art as a medium, was born. She decided to show the world the dark underbelly it chose to ignore. She used art to convey strong messages, telling people how their actions could cost a life—the life of an animal, but a life no less. When that transition happened, for the first time, Asher felt empowered. Her calling had finally embraced her, and had come to her in a way where she got to be in a place where she both wanted and needed to be in. To Asher, animals are true, because they revel and flourish in the present tense. The human animal, however, swings between that which is no more and that which may never be, losing out altogether on that which is.

Raised with animals for siblings, as equals, for Asher, animal rights have always been an implicit part of her experience and vocabulary as an artist, a woman, and a human being. This ubiquitous awareness ultimately led to her becoming an activist. Humans are animals, and we seem to think we deserve certain inalienable 'rights'. By not extending these 'rights' or 'freedoms' to other life forms that co-habit this planet with us as living markers of our own evolutionary and biological development, we ultimately deny ourselves the full potential of these rights.

Unfazed by any colour affiliation save for blue or green, Asher does not appreciate systems or structures that demarcate between people or separate people from nature. The story of being human includes the story of the universe, the earth, the single-celled life forms that burgeoned in the primordial soup, the dinosaurs and the mass extinctions, all the way to the dwindling count of rhinos, tigers and tuna in the present day. Wildlife conservation and sustainable development matters to Asher significantly, for, by

conserving them, she preserves herself. This led her to found a country of her own in 2011, which she called the United Flotsam of Garbagea, to raise awareness through parody about our current paradigm of subsistence. Garbagea was Asher's way of taking responsibility for all the waste in the world, rendering refuse a tangible concern. In placing a claim, she made it her problem, and in creatively contributing to or collaborating with Garbagea, others make it their problem too. When a problem is owned it can be solved.

A media brand, Sea Speak Sphere is a creative diaspora that promotes oceanic preservation. Under this banner, Asher gave rise to Message in a Bottle, which is a conceptual, cooperative art installation that offers individuals who hail from a variety of disciplines the opportunity to express their concerns and hopes for Planet Ocean on de-coupled, hand-illustrated PET bottles. It serves as a visual petition and a time capsule for the years that it documents. Asher also gives visually vibrant talks as a creative conservationist and entertaining stage performances as the Dumpster Empress of Garbagea to instill awareness in youth at academic institutions and awaken adults at conferences. In addition, she works on creating propaganda art for conservation along with public speaking engagements. Asher produces campaigns for various conservation groups that will go up on mainstream media ad spots, like billboards in Times Square or along the river in Shanghai, in subways, bus stations, buildings, newspapers and magazines.

Without anyone to take her under their wing, Asher was her own master, and her own agent. She discovered that actions that stem from an internal balance often do not harm other beings and do help advance society as a whole. One will still commit mistakes, fail at certain projects, and be rejected by people, disapproved by institutions and maybe even be an outlier to society, but if they

are willing to apologize, remain open hearted, non-judgmental and keep at it for long enough, things begin to coalesce and tantamount to something larger than life. When Asher was just 24, she lost her father. Disillusioned by it because of the sheer magnitude of the loss and the tremendous impact it had left on her, she saw his passing as a rude wake-up call. Forced to be an adult, Asher was for the first time in her life, entirely in charge of her decisions and outcomes. She had to take responsibility for what she did and said, and even had to take over her father's company. Unsure of the corporate vernacular, Asher found that she had to work with significantly older people who saw her as a child.

But even as life threw curveballs, Asher was strong. Her work had a fan following of its own, as many people felt moved by her art and presence to begin to take a stand for conservation. To her, life is a wonderful journey. Never regretting anything that life has had to offer her, or even so much as questioning it, Asher has come to accept that things just happen the way they do and one has simply got to adapt and survive. If one is malleable enough, they learn to have a lot of fun flowing with the go, but there's no security or stability in that, or in anything anyway – it is just that people like to think certain choices lead to a more assured existence.

Aspiring to either re-wild (the process of introducing animals or plants to their original habitat or to a habitat similar to their natural one) or die trying to re-wild, Asher is on a path to reach homeostasis in human-animal conflict zones and ensure sustainable un-fractured ecosystems that afford opportunities of growth and survival for both factions.



Atiaf Alwazir

Showing the world that Yemen and its people are not antagonistic to peace, Atiaf Alwazir also shows a side of her country that the world has largely overlooked.

SHOWING THE WORLD THE TRUTH

Atiaf Alwazir

Oftentimes, it is the image of a place that is projected by a mainstream outlet that is taken to be its true image. But the prevailing reality might be quite something else. Showing the world that Yemen and its people are not antagonistic to peace, Atiaf Alwazir also shows a side of her country that the world has largely overlooked.

Atiaf comes from a family that values education. Consequently, much of the focus in her upbringing involved a great emphasis on education. Her father would push her to read as much as possible. While he himself does not have an official 'degree' to his credit, Atiaf's father happens to be one of the most educated people she knows. The amount of books he read, the tutelage of knowledgeable scholars that he gained from, and his insatiable appetite for information have culminated in the expanding of his educational horizons. Atiaf's father was in prison as a young man, when his father was one among many that headed a political opposition to the regime at the time. His time in prison was spent gleaning knowledge from the guidance of scholars who were also imprisoned with him. In 1948, Atiaf's grandfather was beheaded for his participation in a failed constitutional revolution in 1948. Her father and uncles were imprisoned because of his involvement. Atiaf grew up in a political family that always taught her and her other family members to speak up against injustice. Because of her family's political opposition, they had to leave Yemen. They lived in many different countries which had greatly contributed towards enriching Atiaf's upbringing and made her see that fighting for freedom was a worldwide desire not simply one nation's struggle. Atiaf learned that it was a human need. Atiaf's

education was largely focused on international relations. She did her Masters on women in prison in Yemen, and since then, she has been working with non-profit organizations on different issues related to social justice in the Middle East and North Africa.

When the waves of the Arab Spring began to blow over Yemen, Atiaf fearlessly joined the revolution believing it was a responsibility she owed to her country. She quit her job and began documenting the revolution through photos and writing. Since then, she began blogging, writing and doing research as a freelancer on the revolution.

The first thing that Atiaf noticed was that there was not much information in the international media regarding the Yemeni revolution. Yemen is often a neglected country and only news on “militants” tends to reach the international media. The peaceful struggle in Yemen against the government was underreported and the many positive initiatives that had mushroomed in the country were ignored, as well. Atiaf tried to write more in English in order to show the world what was happening in Yemen. With that, she and a friend of hers, an artist who was part of the revolution, and a group of friends together co-founded the SupportYemen campaign.

With that, Atiaf began putting up information on her blog. During the revolution she had everything from information to photos documenting violations against peaceful protesters, from positive and creative artistic expression, to commentaries about the current political situation. The blog enabled her to connect with many international journalists and researchers, and some of the information was reposted in various media. The first video for SupportYemen was met with great feedback and groups such as Amnesty International, which even posted the video on their website and showed it in one of their conferences. It was a way to

reach a wider audience. The video on women created an internal debate in Yemen, and was helpful to get that conversation started. The obstacles Atiaf faced as SupportYemen was that they were not a 'registered entity' and hence it tended to become more and more difficult to raise funds. Without a working space, the group was often forced to find space to meet, make videos and exchange ideas.

SupportYemen conducted a training programme on digital security, which was largely welcomed by many young people who had never received the benefits of such training. The video on women wound up doing very well, especially because it began a debate on the topic of women's rights in the wake up of the upcoming national dialogue and constitutional amendment. Atiaf's group received many emails of support from people all over the world who offered to translate the videos to their own languages as a support for Yemen. On a personal level, the blog enabled Atiaf to connect with many people and allowed her to reach a much wider audience by attending conferences and writing in other blogs or media outlets.

To Atiaf, the line between activism and professional work has been a challenge. Most times, a lot of her work has been unpaid. Yet, at the same time, the need to get paid to live was a huge issue that needed addressing, so finding a job that allowed her to continue her work as an activist was the most difficult task. Consequently, Atiaf had to resort to the role of being a consultant, which fast became a good temporary solution. Balancing activism and her personal life posed a challenge in itself, too. During the period of revolution, Atiaf gave all her energy to Yemen's political transition, and hence neglected some of her personal commitments including social obligations and her marriage. While she has an extremely supportive husband, it was a difficult situation to

balance the two because of the intense two years of political life that Yemen had. With time, Atiaf has worked hard at trying to learn how to do that in a better way.

Being a woman in the field of activism wasn't easy. On many accounts, Atiaf was told that her political activism especially as a 'married' woman was 'too much' and that she should be focused on keeping house instead. She was also the subject of a media smear campaign by some individuals and instead of them criticizing her work, they used personal information such as the fact that she was married to a 'foreigner' to suggest that she was less 'Yemeni'. That was one of the many attempts to assail her reputation. Yemeni male activists were never attacked by people with questions of who they were married to. In addition to Atiaf, her husband was also made an easy target of defamation.

Being a peace worker in Yemen posed its own challenges. Atiaf says that it was a harder task than anything else because when people are wronged the first reaction is to be reactionary. To seek revenge was the course of action most knew, rather than peace. Peaceful resistance requires strength and patience. In the long run it is the best solution. To Atiaf, being a peace worker means believing in the peaceful struggle, in voicing opposition to injustice in various ways without picking up violent means. It may encompass conflict resolution, peaceful demonstrations, strikes, or even awareness of the other and the need for tolerance. Irrespective of what method it takes form, the belief in peace is the most significant factor. Although recognizing that it was writing that showed the world the events that transpired in Yemen, Atiaf explains that writing is great for a certain group in society, but activism in the grassroots is needed to connect with the rest of society.

Atiaf explains that a lot of conflict was a consequence of misinterpretation of facts. Having grown up in the West and the East, with such an understanding, Atiaf finds herself often being the ambassador to both. When she was in the United States, for example, she was always trying to deconstruct myths and stereotypes about Arabs. When she was in Yemen, Atiaf was always trying to do the same about the United States. Atiaf recognizes that all human beings ultimately want a decent life and that all of us are united by the fact that we want to work, eat, live a dignified life. The ability to understand another person's ideals from such a perspective should not be difficult. Politics is something independent of the citizens of each country. While people can critique politics, their views should not colour their ideas about the people of the country concerned – people criticize their own governments too, and that criticism is truly no reflection of their own identities. One example she tells people in Yemen while talking about this, is the time when her family prayed a Friday's prayer in a church in the United States, because there were no mosques and the church opened its doors for them. This usually surprises them, as the Yemenis generally thought that Americans did not like Muslims. Hence, Atiaf seizes the bull by the horns and deconstructs the stereotype through open discussion. On the other hand, Atiaf often tells Americans that a majority of Yemenis aren't extremists, and don't want an Al-Qaeda leadership. She also tells them that a majority of Yemenis didn't even know about Anwar al-Awlaqi, an American and Yemeni imam and extremist. And needless to say, this surprises many, but opens the door to open discussion.

Being a liaison between the two worlds she has been a part of, Atiaf aspires to have a world where mutual respect will thrive between the communities and citizens of the East and West.



Ayla Schlosser

To be the change you want to see, the first step is to accept your own narrative and be vocal about it in a way that empowers you.

Allowing powerful stories of triumph to resonate in the face of adversity is synonymous with Ayla Schlosser, the founder of Resonate.

RESONATING WITH TRUTH

Ayla Schlosser

Mahatma Gandhi said, if you want to effect change, you must be the change you want to see. To be the change you want to see, the first step is to accept your own narrative and be vocal about it in a way that empowers you. Allowing powerful stories of triumph to resonate in the face of adversity is synonymous with Ayla Schlosser, the founder of Resonate.

While still a little girl, Ayla was convinced that she could do simply anything that her brother could do: from climbing trees and playing new games, to trying to join the football team when he did. It never occurred to her that she and her brother might experience differences in treatment or opportunities that were afforded to them, thanks to her parents and the community she lived in that reinforced the idea. But as she got older, she found that she had to fight to hold onto that notion. With each new phase in life, there came a new set of expectations and limitations that were heaped on a growing number of qualifications about what it meant to be a woman. Right after college when Ayla started her career, her eagerness to prove herself and do meaningful work gave her the determination to do everything right, and to advocate for herself and get what she deserved. Ayla was not one to fall into the statistical demarcation of women who get paid less and do not get promoted because they do not negotiate. At each appropriate turn, she made sure to ask for her due – a raise or a promotion – and within a year, she managed to get two promotions and increased her salary significantly. Although she was proud of herself, it was to her great disappointment to learn that only at this point had she begun earning close to what her male colleagues did. It wasn't that they were doing better work, but that they had been taught to value themselves higher and expect more.

These experiences taught Ayla plenty. As a middle-class white woman from the United States, she realized that her struggle, though difficult in its own right, was comparatively easy to navigate. In many countries in the world the struggles that women face are not about body image or salary levels, but about human rights, health, economic independence and safety. The common thread that runs through it all though is an underlying challenge that women are expected to be a certain way and live up to expectations and fulfill certain social roles that are often very different from what they would choose for themselves. Women are rarely given the option to just pursue their dreams. They have to fight against the imposition of gender norms that dictate what women should think, feel, act and look like. Ayla met one of the biggest turning points of her life when she realized that no one knew better than she did about who or what she wanted to be. If she didn't speak up for herself, no one else could, or would. She felt powerful when she corrected someone's assumptions about who she was for the first time. It made her realize that she had the ability to define herself, and that she was willing to fight so that others could do the same. That led her to found and launch Resonate.

While working as a community organizer, Ayla would work to recruit and train fellows, staff and volunteers. She would help prepare people to be leaders in their own communities—working with the notion that one should aim to organize themselves out of a job. Getting it right means engendering local leadership to the point where the community is sufficiently equipped to take on and run community initiatives and campaigns on their own. Through this process, Ayla first became involved in training and leadership development, and quickly learned that developing local leaders was something she most enjoyed. Of the many elements that it involved, Ayla was drawn to personal storytelling after she saw how transformational it was for people to be able to take

ownership of their own narratives. They found a sense of power in being able to articulate who they were, what they cared about, and what their goals were in a way that was compelling, dynamic and on their own terms. Ayla saw potential in the incredibly powerful tool, and wanted to use it to elevate the voices that most needed to be heard—the voices of women in the developing world. She realized that she had come across a gap that needed to be filled, and she moved to Rwanda to start Resonate.

Resonate is an organization dedicated to harnessing the power of the individual voice. Learning to tell one's own personal stories, and define ourselves in a way of our choosing, makes people stronger, more authentic and more effective. For women, the ability to have confidence in who they are rather than conforming to who the world asks them to be is the first step toward their own success. It is also the first step toward creating communities that respect and celebrate each individual – regardless of background, race, religion, or gender. Resonate empowers women and girls through storytelling, working with them to build confidence, agency and leadership for change. Using a collaborative approach Ayla partners with organizations on ground to offer the training as a way to complement and enhance existing programmes.

Resonate differs from a typical public-speaking course in many ways, most notably because it is rooted in storytelling. The women who participate in the course develop a narrative that draws on their past experiences, and tells a story about how the choices they have made in their lives lead them to where they are today. Through this process, women are asked to open up—to themselves and to each other—about the challenges they have overcome. They are asked to identify their areas of strength, and present those strengths through the story they tell. The curriculum not only asks women to view themselves as strong and confident, but it helps others see them that way, too.

Founding and launching Resonate was the best decision Ayla counts on ever having made, but it has also been the most challenging of the lot. From funders to family members, there were many who openly doubted that she could find the resources, partners, and constituents to achieve her ambitious goal. When you hear others begin to doubt you, it is difficult not to let that seep in, especially when self-doubt is already lurking in the shadows. Fighting against just that through Resonate, Ayla is a stellar example of how one should not let other peoples' opinions or perceptions fuel their own hesitation and keep them away from what they really are capable of or passionate about achieving.

Ayla's first workshop in Rwanda was with a group of 54 women who were in college, just weeks shy of graduating. After being in school together for three years, the week at Resonate brought them closer and made them empathize with each other on a whole new level. They knew each other's fears and they knew each other's struggles, and their ability to share those things with one another changed the dynamic of that group. During another workshop, a young woman named Benigne was inspired to get involved in her community in a new way as a result of the course. As a journalist, she spent her days telling stories about other people, yet she was rarely called upon to tell her own story. By the end of her time at the workshop, she was speaking incredibly eloquently about how she had struggled to pay off her secondary school fees to achieve her dream of going to the university. Benigne found the course so useful that she told the other journalists she worked with about the framework, and is eager to use her own story to inspire others. When Ayla met with her after the workshop, Benigne told her that she played the recording that Resonate made of her story over and over to herself, to help remind her of what she has accomplished, and what she still hopes to achieve. One of the practical benefits of the training is that it helps women become better advocates for themselves in all aspects of

their lives. It helps them stand up for themselves at home, be influential in their communities, and communicate their unique values and skill sets in a professional context.

Ayla looks back at her life thus far and reflects that it was a privileged one: she grew up in a loving family, attended a prestigious college and found meaningful work after graduation. Yet working internationally and as a community organizer taught her that her own liberty and happiness are tied up in the freedoms of others. Her work is driven by the notion that each person deserves to live safely, prosperously and with dignity. That is not yet the world we live in, and the path toward that goal is rarely clear and is never easy. To Ayla, being a changemaker means recognizing your own ability to influence and effect change, and using all of the tools within your power to do so. A changemaker is someone who leaves no stone unturned in their path towards creating a more empathetic, inclusive, and just world.

The best paths forward for international development are through empowering women by providing education and according them with economic independence, all of which are essential. But, the challenges that women face are not strictly material. To take advantage of new opportunities, women also have to believe that they are capable and deserving of those opportunities. This will only come as women are also able to increase confidence in themselves, and in each other. Resonate is trying to take that next step and bridge the gap between access and empowerment.

Ayla is working from the premise that it is not enough just to ask women to speak out, but that we must provide the tools and support they need to make their voices resonate.



Beena Sarwar

For many people, some conflicts in the world will remain a constant, being as old as the hills since their inception. But for many others, no stone must be left unturned in the pursuit of peace, to restore what has eluded from the communities involved. One such illustrious person is Beena Sarwar.

FIRE IN THE BELLY

Beena Sarwar

For many people, some conflicts in the world will remain a constant, being as old as the hills since their inception. But for many others, no stone must be left unturned in the pursuit of peace, to restore what has eluded from the communities involved. One such illustrious person is Beena Sarwar.

Hailing from an educated family that comprised members, who mostly came from Allahabad or Pratapgarh to Pakistan, after the Partition of India, Beena was fortunate to experience a somewhat progressive-minded upbringing. Her father, Dr Mohammed Sarwar, had been the leader of Pakistan's first student movement, known as the Democratic Students Federation while he was still a medical student. His older brother, Mohammad Akhtar, was a well-known journalist who unfortunately died young, not before founding the Karachi Press Club and the Pakistan Federal Union of Journalists. Beena's mother, Zakia Sarwar, is a teacher and an adept in training English as a Second Language (ESL), focusing on teaching large classes with limited resources.

Beena's tryst with journalism began when she was an intern with *The Star*, an evening newspaper in Karachi in 1980–81, before she left to attend college in the United States of America, where she did her undergraduate degree with a double major in Studio Art and English Literature from Brown University in 1986. When she returned to Pakistan, Beena began working in advertising as a designer with Bond Advertising in Karachi, returning to *The Star* as assistant editor of the magazine division. Following her marriage in 1988, Beena moved to Lahore where she joined *The Frontier Post*, a respected Peshawar-based daily that set off it

publication from Lahore in 1989, as the features editor. In 1993, Beena joined *The News* to start a new weekend paper called *The News on Friday*, which is now known as the *News on Sunday*. With this initiative, Beena was part of an endeavour that effectively broke new ground in areas of format and reporting/editorial and set new standards that other papers tried to follow. The Chevening Scholarship took her to study documentary filmmaking, culminating in a Masters' in Arts in Television Documentaries at Goldsmiths College, University of London. Beena then took on all the issues that she was following throughout her adult life. Encouraged by her dear uncle, Mushtaq Gazdar, who was one of Pakistan's pioneering filmmakers, Beena grew from strength to strength – although sadly, while she was still doing the course, he succumbed to a sudden heart attack.

A journalist, editor and writer, Beena works with an interest in many areas that are broadly related to human rights: not just limited to human rights violations, but extending also to child rights, education, health, environment, gender, peace, and socio-cultural expressions. With an approach to writing about politics from a very people-centric and democratic angle as opposed to using the lens of party or power politics, Beena's journalistic endeavours have also extended to cultural reporting and commentary that includes the likes of theatre and art reviews and interviews of cultural personalities.

On 1 January 2010, an initiative for peace between India and Pakistan, called *Aman ki Asha* (translating to mean Hope for Peace) was established as an initiative between two media large groups of India and Pakistan – The Times of India and the Jang Group of Pakistan. Beena took on the role of an editor for the website's content, originally starting off as a full-timer, and then taking on the role as a part-time editor after moving to the United States of America in 2011. Following her earlier involvement with the

Pakistan–India Forum for Peace and Democracy (PIPFPD), which was a people-to-people dialogue that had begun in November 1994, Beena was also involved in other media programmes for both the countries. Within a few weeks of its launch, *Aman Ki Asha* asked Beena to handle the editorial part of the website from the Jang Group too. Working on South Asian and regional cooperation issues, Beena has been actively involved with Himal Southasian, a Kathmandu-based monthly publication, as a member of the Editorial Board. She also held a position as a member at the board of advisors at the Panos South Asia, based out of Kathmandu from 1997 until 2010. Beena was also a part of the South Asia Foundation, an initiative of the UNESCO goodwill ambassador, Madanjeet Singh, towards the promotion of regional cooperation in peace and education since November 2001. Besides, she has also held positions at the Human Rights Commission of Pakistan since 1991 and at the Joint Action Committee for Peoples Rights (JAC), an anti-nuclear sub-group based out of Lahore from May 1998 until 2000. Beena's activism also extended towards addressing gender issues, which led her to don the role as the founding member of War Against Rape (WAR), a Lahore based collective that works in collaboration with WAR Karachi.

To Beena, wearing many hats on the professional front as an activist at heart came naturally. It was her true calling, and answering to it never felt like work or anything cumbersome. However, the challenge lay in effectively juggling her personal and professional life as an activist, trying to be more organized and scheduling her time better while still being more attuned to the needs of her loved ones tended to be a bit demanding. Nevertheless, Beena had a way out when it came to dealing with it. Through constant introspection, discussion, efforts that remain ongoing, as well as re-thinking strategies and approaches where they seemed most appropriate, she has been able to rise above her demands and maintain a balance between her work and life. Devoted to her family

and her daughter, Beena refused the offer to become the editor of *The News*, more than once, because her daughter was very small and she did not want to put in the kind of hours a full-time editor would require. Being the editor of a weekend paper was less demanding in many ways and she chose to adhere to that work profile.

Through her many efforts, Beena has kept her activism alive and strong. Besides editing films or artworks and setting standards for publications, Beena's work has also been a rather significant linchpin in obtaining justice for individuals, in improving the lives of many people and has perhaps even helped save some lives. She worked on Jagannath Azad's *tarana* (Persian word for Song) for Pakistan, a poem whose full text was made available in Pakistan, reviving it after over 60 years— an effort that culminated in Shahvaar Ali Khan composing the song. To Beena, her identity starts with being a human first, and of course, being a woman is an element that has shaped her incredibly. Being a woman, to Beena, has been a part of her identity that allowed her to have the kind of experiences she had and form the kind of relationships she has formed. It is because she is a woman that she is a mother. Being a woman, to Beena, allows her to relate to other women in ways that she appreciates and cherishes. Sisterhood is truly global, as she puts it.

Beena feels that being an activist and a changemaker means trying to do whatever she can to bring in positive change whenever possible. To be a bystander, outside on the fringes, observing everything that's happening within from outside is not an option for her.

Crusading for the greater causes that can go on to making the world a better place, Beena labours without an end goal. She sees life and its struggles as a process, and believes that if by the end of it all, she has successfully made a positive difference to some people's lives and thoughts, it would be a journey that is well worth every effort.



Binaifer Nowrojee

For years, sexual violence and rape carried on in war fronts unheard of by the rest of the world. Until the historic judgement was made in Prosecutor versus Akayesu, before the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, for the first time in the history of criminal jurisprudence, rape was pronounced as a crime of genocide. One among the many that helped this happen was Binaifer Nowrojee.

MAKING THE UNHEARD HEARD

Binaifer Nowrojee

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An East-African Indian by ethnicity, Binaifer calls herself an international gypsy of sorts after having travelled across the world. She went to Harvard Law School in the pursuit of her interest in justice. Fast disillusioned with the emphasis on law rather than justice, Binaifer walked out of legal practice into the world of human rights. She almost dropped out of law school itself, but two internships reinstated her faith on the path she had chosen. In her first year, Binaifer got to work as an intern on human rights issues in Rajpipla, a small village outside Ahmedabad, Gujarat, in India. In her second year, she interned with the Lawyers' Committee for Human Rights in New York, ultimately getting her first job there as a Staff Attorney working on Africa. In her career trajectory thereafter, she worked with several different international organizations devoted to human rights, researching and documenting human rights violations in Africa, including Human Rights Watch for 11 years, an international non-governmental organization. Working at a time when a lot of conflict happened in Africa, Binaifer found herself researching and documenting human rights violations and gender-based issues in Liberia and Rwanda, among other countries. While working on these issues, Binaifer's interest in women's rights grew, taking her to a position that would revolutionize women's rights jurisprudence.

When Binaifer worked with Human Rights Watch, she began with the Women's Rights Division, working on issues of violence and discrimination facing women. In the course of her work, she met and interviewed as many as hundreds of women who were raped in course of conflict. Binaifer came to understand that women were targeted as part of a political objective, or an inherent intention to spread terror as part and parcel of conflict, and not an unfortunate by-product of war. Around the time that Binaifer began working in the field, the myth was slowly beginning to be debunked by the truth that workers like her showed the world. In that profile, Binaifer began talking to survivors of rape and sexual violence, taking down their testimonies. and she gradually understood that reaching out to women who were survivors of sexual violence was a difficult task. For any woman who suffered violence in conflict, there was the additional threat of stigma, the threat to their status in society, the adverse impact that sexual violence would have on their perceived eligibility for marriage. Consequently, very few of them would come forth to testify or offer statements. In comparison, Binaifer recalls, calling for reports of torture and testimonies of other crimes was easier as a request at a community meeting would bring forth many of them. For rape and sexual violence, the need of the hour was to approach trusted interlocutors that worked with the women themselves. Sometimes, one survivor would lead her to speak to another, but to get this newly found person to speak out was not an easy task. Binaifer understood that the best way to reach them to collect their testimonies was to approach people they trusted. While speaking to them, these women would speak about all the other things they faced, the other losses they had incurred and everything else, but the rape or sexual violence they faced. It would take some time for them to come around to rendering a testimony on the sexual violence that they suffered. The topic of sex and the use of explicit terminology even to express parts of the human anatomy would often be a challenge for them, and they would

seek recourse to euphemisms. As a listener and investigator, Binaifer had to be observant, understanding and clear in making her deductions, given that their language would not always be direct in conveying their messages.

When Binaifer went to Rwanda to begin collecting testimonies, she began with Kigali. What was to be a process in the hope of pursuing justice started with a huge push-back. Even as Binaifer went with the promise of justice for these women in tow, they always wanted to know what she was offering them. Here were these survivors of sexual violence, forced to face a difficult life because they had families to look after, houses that were crumbling, abject poverty and a life of glaring need for medical aid and education, none of which a human rights researcher could possibly offer. Testifying was not really a priority for them.

In the course of her work as a women's rights worker, Binaifer found it rewarding to arouse hope for justice amidst these survivors of sexual violence or rape and assure them that their voices would no longer be forgotten. But it was frustrating that this was a long neglected goal, one that needed a lot of work to be put in towards its fulfilment. She served as an expert witness for the Office of the Prosecutor at the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda (ICTR), and testified about the horrific sexual violence that had occurred during the Rwandan genocide. With the widespread rapes that occurred, virtually every case at the ICTR should have contained rape charges, but unfortunately, the lack of political will and shoddy investigations meant that few women received justice from the ICTR. Through systematic and unrelenting advocacy as a women's rights advocate and as an expert witness, Binaifer fought to ensure that rape charges were not forgotten. In the decision of Prosecutor versus Akayesu, for the first ever time in the history of the world's criminal jurisprudence, rape was seen as an act of genocide. The decision, passed by a bench including Navanethem Pillay, had far-reaching consequences.

After 11 years of work as a legal counsel with the Women's Rights and Africa Divisions of Human Rights Watch, Binaifer went on to found the Open Society Initiative for Eastern Africa (OSIEA), in Nairobi as part of the Open Society Foundations network. What started with just her and a cell phone has now grown into an institution with a good 40 people and enough money to assist grant making for affected communities, fight for human rights and help governance organizations working in Eastern Africa.

Being a woman on field, Binaifer has never been less stunned by the extent of discrimination, inequality and unabashed violence that is perpetrated against women across the world. To see how easily such a massive proportion of the earth's population is being mistreated and violated without compunction only on the grounds of gender is mind numbing. Although she was blessed to enjoy quality education and a comfortable life, Binaifer has never failed to empathize with the lesser fortunate women around her. If anything, she counts on herself as being lucky. As a women's rights worker, Binaifer believes that women across the world are deserving of equality, equity and respect, and a life without the obstacles that challenge women at every age from being a little girl to being an old lady.

In the long term, Binaifer hopes to find a world where all people count equally, not just in rhetoric, but in reality. That epoch-making era began on 25 June 1993, at the World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna, where for the first time ever, the world recognized that women's rights are human rights. It was a ground-breaking beginning, but the world is still in need of concerted effort to see the end of that journey.



Chris Crowstaff

Building alliances through the power of communication and connection, Chris walks on a very powerful path: a path to build A Safe World for Women.

A SAFER WORLD FOR WOMEN

Chris Crowstaff

From a very young age, Chris always felt that she was different from other people. She was beginning to realize that it perhaps had to do with being a woman living in a macho world—a feeling that she probably shared with many others like her. Her mother's family was never afraid of being seen as being different, and that led Chris' mother encouraging her not to mind what others thought of her. On her father's side, inspiration came to Chris through her Nana—her paternal grandmother—who when young, would stand up for girls who were ostracized. With Chris' mother's family having a tradition that went back generations, of being pacifists and missionaries overseas, and her father's family having lived in London in the midst of the Second World War with bombs dropping all around them, Chris had a sensitized upbringing. Spending much of her time as a rather shy child, Chris wound up sitting quietly and watching other children, or sitting on a tree and watching nature, or even spending time with animals. The first few years of her adult life were spent as a gardener, an artist and also working in a wild-life park.

Chris then moved to Ireland, where she lived a simple life for several years. During her stay in Ireland, her son was born in a caravan: they lived without electricity, car, television, computer or a telephone. Dabbling actively in artwork, Chris would paint book covers often times while feeding her son. A few years later, she moved to Cornwall, England, where her daughter was born. For the most part, her life revolved around her children, as she home-schooled and naturally nurtured them. After studying natural nutrition through distance learning, Chris taught yoga and worked as a natural nutritionist until a life-changing event happened.

While in Ireland, Chris had spent much time reading, meditating and contemplating about the world. She read spiritual books on various perspectives on life: everything from yogic philosophy, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita to Krishnamurti, Mahatma Gandhi and Chang Tzu. She came to see how the modern-day world was very male-oriented, and disrespectful of feminine values such as mothering and nurturing. This trend, she learned, did not benefit men, either. Chris increasingly understood that men were not necessarily comfortable with feeling like they needed to be macho. Reading the *Tao Te Ching* and Tsultrim Allione's *Women of Wisdom* affected her greatly at that time. The most poignant message she derived from Tsultrim Allione's work was a beautiful message in the preface, where the author spoke of often receiving appreciation for her work, but seldom for motherhood—something she personally considered as her biggest achievement.

When Chris' son had just turned nine and her daughter five, she gave birth to her third child, Roderik. Practically still-born, the little child remained trapped in his body for just over two days, with various tubes keeping him breathing. On the third day, his life support was withdrawn. Roderik's short life made Chris view life very differently. She began to value life more, gaining the courage to get out there in the world, and to make a difference. Shortly after Roderik's passing, Chris began a course in a form of Tibetan psychotherapy, called the Tara Rokpa therapy, which involved short retreats and workshops but was mostly geared towards home-study and meditation. She also took on the role of coordinating her batchmates and arranging venues for the workshops. However, during this time, Chris's relationship fell apart and she became homeless, with two children and a dog in tow. Chris had a chance to move into a women's shelter, but that would have meant losing the dog, which had always helped them to cheer up after Roderik's demise. Instead, they went 'woofing', where they helped out on organic farms in exchange for food and accommodation. Chris applied for a grant to set up a not-for-profit natural health organization. She went into business with a

colleague from the school where she had studied natural nutrition, and soon, things began to pick up. Finally, being able to rent a house was a relief for her and her children, and the social enterprise was in itself quite successful. She managed to bring in a couple of qualified doctors on board, and an integrated natural health centre was set up. However, Chris still didn't feel like she had been impacting the world significantly enough. It was around the time when she met her husband, Andrew, with whose mother Chris would chat about women's contributions to the world. Chris began to see her new initiative taking shape in her mind: this would focus on women's issues throughout the world, with the aim of empowering women and thus bringing more emphasis on 'feminine values' to the world. Chris set up the initiative with a bequest from Andrew's mother. This was called Women for a Change, subsequently to become Safe World for Women.

Passionate about working with women's groups at the grassroots level, Chris would spend her time talking with and learning from, people who are 'on the ground'. . Following their wedding, Chris and Andrew went to rural Uganda and the Middle East, spending time with women's groups and activist endeavours. Enjoying the amplification of the voices of women across the world, Chris spends time publishing articles written by women and men about issues relating to the rights of women and children, online. She also assists in fundraising online for their grassroots partners. Her husband Andrew has continued to support the whole initiative, working all day every day on the crucial website design and maintenance, and everything technical.

Chris' journey had its own share of obstacles. Wishing to do more and help more people, Chris also finds that the promotion of feminine values of empathy, cooperation and nurturing in a male-oriented world comes with challenges. There is often a women-trying-to-be-like-men syndrome that prevails, and she would seek to get away from it as much as possible. Promoting respect for 'feminine' values is a major part of Chris' ongoing work, and that of her partners. Steeped in faith, Chris believes that faith of some

kind is a valuable driving factor for any woman: not necessarily in a religion, but rather in the acknowledgement of the fact that we come to the path that we are on, through circumstances beyond our control and, somehow we still conduct ourselves as it is destined for us. Chris is driven by the positive feedback from all her supporters and field partners, which satisfies her and convinces her that her work is needed. Though the amounts raised are small compared to the amounts raised by large charities, the funds her initiative helps to raise make a significant difference to the work of grassroots groups. Though only one participant child from her grassroots group could be sent to school she feels happy that at least something could be done, and this makes her efforts all the more worthwhile for her. Chris notices that for the grassroots groups themselves, it is more than monetary help that makes a difference; it is the knowledge that people around the world know about them and are willing to reach out for them. Some of these groups exist only because of Chris' initiative, such as COFAPRI in the DR Congo, established in the rural mountain villages of DR Congo. Chris had 'met' a Congolese husband-and-wife-team, Mugisho and Bahati, on the internet which set off the formation of this group.

In July 2013, Chris was invited to the United Nations in Geneva to receive the Katerva Award. For Chris, it was true validation of her work by those who are in a position to influence change.. When she was just a child, sitting in the car, Chris had a sudden realization that she was not her dog or guinea-pig, and that if her animals were ill or suffering, she wasn't ill or suffering: it was a revelation and quite liberating. Being a changemaker, Chris seeks to empower women by amplifying the voices of the oppressed with the support of the grassroot-level groups which are trying to bring about positive change by trying to minimize gender disbalance and sanction women's rights. To her, being a changemaker is not about her changing the world by herself, but rather, about bringing people together: the people who are already doing wonderful work and will be able to do even more by connecting

with others, having their voices heard. It is about listening to what people are saying that they need, how they feel and what they think needs to be done.

Aiming for a time when she will no longer need to take on activism anymore because the landscape would be different, Chris labours, together with a big team of volunteers, with the hope that she can help create a peaceful, safe, happy, healthy and fulfilling future for her children and all children. She hopes to create a world where children, childhood and mothering are valued and a world which is not constantly being destroyed. Building alliances through the power of communication and connection, Chris walks on a very powerful path: a path to build A Safe World for Women.



Deborah Ellis

Giving back with what one knows and can do best is perhaps the best way by which one can revolutionize the world around them. To Deborah Ellis, her writing is a means to give children and women in difficult situations a voice.

CHAMPIONING CAUSES THROUGH WRITING

Deborah Ellis

Giving back with what one knows and can do best is perhaps the best way by which one can revolutionize the world around them. To Deborah Ellis, her writing is a means to give children and women in difficult situations a voice.

When Deborah was a child, her parents were friends with a lady who had gone to school with Jean Little, whose works brightened the lives of many children across Canada. Through this connection, Deborah and her sister were able to access the premier writer's literature. She would get Jean's newest books for Christmas each year, and eventually, she even got an opportunity to meet her. The encounter with a living writer gave Deborah a sense that she might just be able to learn to do what Jean did. By and by, as Deborah grew up, she came to understand that her desire to write was something of a saving grace for her. Being less popular and keeping to herself often, Deborah would love spending a lot of time alone at home. Her parents were both from working backgrounds. While her mother's father worked in a factory and had fairly little money to spare, her father's family lived with even greater poverty, on the rural outskirts of Brockville in Eastern Ontario during the Depression. Deborah's father was the only one in his family to have finished high school—a feat he achieved by working in the local graveyard, mowing lawns and digging graves to pay for his books and to help the family out with food.

Deborah's parents valued public service, seeing it as an important way of life. As much as she can remember, Deborah recollected that her parents always volunteered to do something to reach out to others who might be lonely or having a hard time. Often they would do this quietly, without an organization around them. Her father would clean out gardens and mow lawns for people who

were too old or ill to take care of their yards themselves. Her mother was always making casseroles and cookies for shut-ins, and visiting folks in nursing homes. There was not a lot of extra money in Deborah's family, and volunteering was a sort of recreational activity. They were part of an active community that was always working to improve itself and the world around it, and Deborah and her sister spent their growing years participating in such activities. Her sister has continued this tradition in her work as a psychiatric nurse, while Deborah tries to continue it in the work that she has been able to do. Since Deborah was 17, she took up the cause of campaigning against war in one form or the other.

With the Taliban takeover in 1996, the confluence of war, challenges to women's rights, foreign intervention and war created a hotbed of impunity that needed attention in Afghanistan. Together with a few women in Toronto, Deborah began to raise money for women in the refugee camps. She then went to Afghanistan in 1997, where she began to help in refugee camps. An interface and encounter with a mother in a refugee camp gave her the inspiration she needed to write out the first episode of the *Breadwinner* trilogy. This slowly led to two more books, as Deborah explored the life and times of a child surviving in Afghanistan. She remained steadfast to her cause of volunteering, as a peace activist and a humanitarian worker on field. Whether it was against a backdrop of poverty or war, squalor or illness, she became the voice of myriads of children for whom those backdrops were both real, and causes for marginalization.

As a writer, Deborah had reached several milestones. Achievements and plaudits poured in from every quarter, as she grew from strength to strength, becoming an internationally acclaimed author of a number of award-winning titles for children. Her body of work includes within its repertoire *Looking for X*, a tale that followed a young girl in her everyday life in a poor area in Toronto, which won the Governor General's Literary Award for the year 2000; and *Lunch with Lenin and Other Stories*, which explored the

lives of children who were affected directly or indirectly by drugs. Other works include *The Heaven Shop*, which chronicles the tales of a family of orphans in Malawi who struggle with sudden displacement owing to HIV/AIDS. There are plenty of other books to her credit, and many more to come. Her list of accolades include the Jane Addams Children's Book Award (2004), the Vicky Metcalf Award (2004) for a body of work, an ALA Notable, and the Children's Africana Book Award Honor Book for Older Readers (2005) among others. In 2006, Deborah was named to the Order of Ontario.

Deborah's earliest tryst with social activism started with showing films on nuclear war at high school. With time, she explored global themes and mainstream concerns that challenged the lives of many children. Whether war or HIV/AIDS, drugs or life in poverty, Deborah's books have explored them all. Through the vehicle of the written word, she has managed to take stories of harsh realities and brutal lives to the drawing rooms of readers across the world, inspiring them to take action. She believes that by writing for the youth she can usher in changes since the youth still have a chance to make their own choices and chart their own part.

When royalties from her books come in, Deborah donates them all to organizations such as the UNICEF and Women for Women International, in Afghanistan. Through these selfless donations of money, Deborah has been a beacon of light for many women and children by putting them to work and education, respectively.

To Deborah, being a woman has been both a challenge and a blessing in her journey so far. She often found herself wishing she could live two lives—first, a life that would help to get wise enough to figure out the present and how best to deal with it, and second, a life to be led with all the wisdom one has gained from the first. Looking back, Deborah remembers that it seemed to take

her an awful lot of time to gain confidence and anything approaching wisdom, and having received it after years of hard work, she feels that there is so much more to be done yet very less time at her disposal. Being a woman was a blessing for her as whenever she travels, she finds that she is welcomed into the world of women and children in a way that would be difficult or impossible if she were a man. With all the experiences and first-hand encounters of that world, Deborah is sure that it is a wonderful world to be a part of—a world where work is done, people are cared for, and there is a collective knowledge of what it means to survive and be strong in a world governed largely by male violence.

Deborah's repertoire of books of interviews is inspired by the work of the American journalist Studs Terkel. Through them, she tries to provide a small vehicle through which stories can be told that the world might otherwise not have the opportunity to hear. Deborah's stories chronicle the true stories of children talking about what it is like to be in a living room, crowded with family members while bombs are falling around their neighbourhood; what it is like to have a teacher who makes racist comments in the classroom; or what it is like to visit a father in prison. There are women too who talk about them being beaten up by men because they did not behave the way the men wanted them to. Though we get to know of certain grim facts through the media, these are stories that perhaps we really need to hear. While decisions are undertaken by those in power, there is also a necessity to include ordinary people—either through their direct participation or through their indirect apathy. The world needs to know the impact of its decisions so that it can work to make better ones.

Deborah works with the understanding that art can be a significant and galvanizing force to catalyse revolution. Recognizing that, often, every despotic government has come down heavily on books, music, painters, writers and poets. Deborah recognizes that art helps people envision a world that is better than the present, and can show us what we are doing in a way that makes it difficult for

us to shut our ears or turn away our eyes. That said, she also explains that art is not a substitute for action, but rather, a tool for activists. In fact, art opens up for the people a means to deal with their fears by instilling courage in them and allowing them to deal with difficult times.



Dominique
Vidale-Plaza

Being a beacon of light
for the many women she
hopes to serve,
Dominique walks the
mile to Build Hope,
through her efforts at
her organisation,
Channel Initiative.

BUILDING HOPE

Dominique Vidale-Plaza

Born and brought up in Trinidad and Tobago, Dominique was the older of the two children in her family. They did not belong to an affluent family, but they never complained about anything, because as she puts it, it is hard to miss something that you don't know exists. Dominique was a voracious reader, reading everything from Nancy Drew to Charles Dickens and from The Chrysalids to Shakespeare. Her aptitude took her to places, as she blazed through spelling bees and got placed in classes with older students. She nursed the ambition of studying abroad, and even wanted to go to school in the UK, but it turned out to be too expensive a dream. Though she did get a scholarship from her government, it did not look like an affordable prospect to go abroad to study. But life had its own ways and just when it seemed like her dreams of travelling were dead, Dominique received an incredible scholarship offer from a small Christian college in Virginia. Jumping at the chance and scraping money together from every source Dominique made it to the United States. She finished her coursework early from that college with honors in business management, and spent, what would have been her last semester, volunteering in the Democratic Republic of Congo, where she worked with rape survivors.

Dominique realized that her heart was in international relief and development during a short trip to Haiti after the earthquake in 2010. When she heard about the earthquake on the news, she felt that God was calling her to go there that same night. Vivid memories of the destruction still remain etched in her memory. Dominique was moved, feeling the deep sense of loss and pain, as she watched something so devastating unfold so close to home. The experience broke her, and drove her all the same. Her initial

thought was to just pack her bags and go to Haiti, but before she knew it, she was co-leading a team of thirteen students to go and work with orphanages and pastors. While there, her experiences drove her. Vivid memories from the scenes in Haiti are still etched in her memory.

In her sophomore year at college, Dominique learned about the DR Congo. In an introductory International Relations class, Dominique was supposed to research an issue of international relevance. She did not know what the professor was expecting out of her, but ended up writing about conflict-based rape, specifically in the DR Congo. She learned about the Panzi Hospital. She sent them an email with an inquiry which in all probability got lost amid all the other inquiries that they constantly receive. The assignment touched a chord, striking Dominique in a deep and dark place in her heart by the stories of the women. She read about them with more than just a morbid fascination, it was almost a compulsion. As Dominique read their testimonies, pored over articles and dabbled with research online, she came to a spot where the paper did not matter to her. She knew, but also did not really know, that her life had changed forever. Her research took her to an organization with whom she wound up volunteering. When a free semester came her way, Dominique was offered an opportunity at the organization to start their programme in partnership with the Panzi Hospital. It was serendipitous—the opportunity was meant for her.

While in Bukavu, DR Congo, Dominique was exposed to the multitude of deeply rooted challenges that women face, not just there, but in so many other developing countries. It was not only rape or abuse; there were other tragic crimes against humanity, both the manifestations and causes of a host of other issues. The transition from working for the cause of only women who had been raped to serving women as a whole was not difficult or confusing, it was natural and inevitable.

After Dominique finished her work with the organization, she decided to take the plunge and begin her own venture. She created Channel Initiative, the umbrella organization, under which her first project Build Hope was initiated. Working to improve access to health care for women in rural communities, the project initially worked towards serving mothers and making reproduction safer for women. Dominique covered all angles of maternal health, seeking to train traditional birthing attendants and providing seminars to women on birth-spacing and menstrual hygiene. In addition, Dominique also drew up plans to resource women and birthing attendants to implement what they would learn. She started with the unshakeable feeling that those who were taught at the present moment would themselves become teachers on the subject in future. Looking back, Dominique's biggest obstacle had been to keep up with and stay ahead of things she did not understand. For a business and government graduate to lead a health-focused project, was a challenge. In addition Dominique spent longer hours trying to educate herself on health, medicine and the aspects of women's empowerment that go along with these. She aims to pursue a postgraduate degree in Public Health. On the personal front, though, the challenges had been bigger. There were times when she wished she were at home to be with her family.

Dominique has also seen how intercultural relations can make aid work challenging at times. When she first went to Congo, being a black woman, she was treated far differently than her white or male colleagues. At first that bothered her and definitely affected her work, though it gave her an incredible personal pride and impetus which motivated her to steer through the challenges. Dominique realized, though, that though she was initially treated as less or sub-par to her Caucasian colleagues, she was accepted unconditionally by the Congolese women whom she had come there to serve. She would ask herself who she wanted to relate better—her aid and development peers, or the people she had come to serve. From that moment, the differential treatment did not matter.

Dominique recognizes that intercultural dialogue is incredibly important, whether it is among aid workers from different nations or races, or between the aid worker and the client. When Dominique first started doing international aid work, often the first few weeks and months would be spent only in working to gain people's trust and eliminating their unfounded suspicion. In the DR Congo, for example, Dominique spent months assuring their local partners that she was not there to make a name for herself or to destroy their hard work. They intensely distrusted her, because she was not the first aid worker they had seen come in and make grandiose promises, or who seemed to have only good intentions but later it was evident that they had merely come to capitalize on their sufferings. Dominique believes that the best way to handle this is to make an effort to understand that some of the fears and suspicions toward Westerners and aid workers is justifiable and if not, at least understandable. Such an understanding went miles in helping her dispel any negative feeling that could have undermined the building of successful relationships and partnerships. She insisted that there can be no successful partnership if both parties do not operate with mutual respect for each other as collaborators rather than just competitors.

To Dominique, being a woman is a driving factor. Infuriated and moved by the struggles she knows that Congolese, Haitian, and other women around the world endure, because she is one herself, she is spurred on to fighting for her sisters world over. When Dominique hears of rape, she doesn't just think it is terrible, she thinks of how debilitating, destructive and terrifying that experience must be to be torn into, as if a woman was nothing more than just a vagina, that she was less human, less worthy, and less important than the abuser. At one point, Dominique would be disbelieving when she read stories of Congolese women saying that they would *prefer death to rape*. She grew to understand how difficult surviving brutal, animalistic, organized rape must be. Being a woman prompts her to make her work even more personal, more urgent and more radical than it would have otherwise

been. It is living as part of a sisterhood that transcends colors, cultures and nations. It means living with incredible weakness and vulnerability and being stronger because of it. It means loving, experiencing, living and laughing, all while knowing that one is among a precious few number of sisters who have the freedom to do so.

Having worked thus far in conflict-riddled zones, Dominique sees the peace worker that she is, as a person burdened and driven to action by the injustice and evil that prevails around the world. In the long run, Dominique aspires to scale the Build Hope programme in other rural communities of the DR Congo, and support communities in several other countries. Being a beacon of light for the many women she hopes to serve, Dominique will walk the mile until Hope turns into reality.



Elaheh
Zohrevandi

Oscar Wilde said, 'Be yourself, everyone else is taken'. It isn't always easy to be oneself: for the continual need to seek approval in the eyes of the world often makes man subservient to what he wants another to perceive him as. But to Elaheh Zohrevandi, being anyone else but who she really is, is not negotiable.

TEACHING, CARING AND SHARING

Elaheh Zohrevandi

Oscar Wilde said, 'Be yourself, everyone else is taken'. It isn't always easy to be oneself: for the continual need to seek approval in the eyes of the world often makes man subservient to what he wants another to perceive him as. But to Elaheh Zohrevandi, being anyone else but who she really is, is not negotiable.

A writer, a teacher, a biologist and an activist, Elaheh puts one identity of hers at the foremost: that of being a woman. Ela has a Bachelor's degree in cellular and molecular biology, and is an earnest and passionate fighter for causes that are closest to her heart. Ela's fortitude comes from having a very supportive, nice and one-of-a-kind family. Her parents married when they were very young, and were not affluent when they had Ela. She grew up without the fancy things that some of her peers were used to yet feeling that she was very special to her parents. Having been raised by a mother who inculcated in Ela the attitudes of tolerance and prudence that a child could have, she grew up believing and knowing that women are powerful. As a small girl, she believed in herself simply because everyone around her believed in her.

Firmly rooted in the understanding that her shortcomings were her strongest points, life's complexities were never too much of a challenge for her. Ela was dyslexic and hyperactive as a child, often with a short attention span, easily forgetful of the real world. She was ambidextrous, even, sometimes ambivalent about which hand she had to use for even simple tasks like drawing. Ela was born when the Iran-Iraq war ended, but the country was still recovering, and health and education was not of good quality. In that

backdrop, getting an IQ test or evaluating a child with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) to a specialist was not something her parents could afford. Consequently, Ela attended school dealing and coping with the small yet very challenging things in life. Her life passed in a dream, as she saw herself aspiring to be a teacher —an instructor, providing a bit of help to children and people like her.

Driven by her love for the sciences, Ela went on to take up a degree in cellular and molecular biology at the University. At that point, she decided to teach at a non-governmental organization (NGO) in downtown Tehran, one of the poorest districts of the capital city of Iran. Most children and teenagers there are Iranian and Afghan child labourers, children with parents who were into substance abuse parents, or children who have been abused. Ela began as an English teacher but the children made her someone more than just a teacher. She became close to most of them and got to know their world. Life was much different in the eyes of a child labourer. Always observant and analytical of every situation or event happening around her, Ela always questioned gender inequality, wondering why women were always considered inferior to men who were placed in a pedestal, or why homosexuals were considered less important and subjected to ill-treatment. . This drove Ela to begin putting her questions down through writing, especially fiction, memoirs and short stories that speak of equality and human rights.

Living in a rather reserved country, where one cannot quite speak her mind if it is against the government's policies, Ela decided that her work would speak of reality, but through fiction, novels and fantasy stories. The first story she published in print was a very subliminal reflection of one's life in her country. The lack of freedom in speech made writers like her restrict their creativity to

fiction. The challenge of turning words into a hidden context needs a kind of talent which is very rare. Ela was chosen for two years in a row, in 2011 and 2012, as one among the annual list of the top ten Best Young Writers, by Hopewell Publications. It gave Ela the confidence of stepping into a whole new world. Ela also chanced upon an opportunity to work with Delta Women through the UN Volunteering system, an experience that gave her many wonderful friends. In 2012, she won the Presidential Award which pushed her towards seeing herself as a more effective person.

The most confusing and unresolved issue in Ela's life has always been gender discrimination. Working and living in Iran, an Islamic democratic country, Ela naturally expected things to be different for men and women. But she found that people rarely 'accepted' others belief systems or religions, sexualities or opinions. She used to be bullied by people around her for her beliefs. Ela's unshakeable faith in herself turned out to be an obstacle in her personal and professional life, for people outside her family were not very kind towards her. Ela lost many of her young years suffering from borderline disorder. When she entered university, Ela was a young woman with big dreams. But then she saw herself changing: as her peers expected her to be in conformity with what they thought was normal. She was being anorexic, moody and confused, and life was not easy at all. The only things that saved her were her family and the people she worked with. Ela met such extraordinary and friendly people in Delta Women, she could not see herself anywhere close to being different from any of them. She decided that she would never stop believing in herself as then for life would be fabulous for her, with the constant support of the people she had the opportunity to know, and the ones she could meet in the future. Ela realized that a time would come when the world will not be the same old dark place it was. At that point, she resolved that she would never stop being herself.

When she once travelled to the United States, at the airport, she was interviewed by an officer. During the whole 20-minute conversation, it was obvious that he was treating Ela like a second-rate citizen. But she did not retaliate rudely. The smile on her lips never disappeared. She did not let him put her off. She instead talked to him for 10 more minutes and in the end, he was not that same aggressive officer trying to belittle her, but was one human being talking to another human. Today, Ela is confident that he will never treat people the way he treated her that day.

At Delta Women, Ela manages and produces the monthly *E-zine*. Her work has been revolutionary. She receives emails and phone calls from people saying that her magazine has made a huge change in their lives. Contributors of the magazine have stories from their past that keep haunting them every day and when Ela publishes their stories, they make peace with their past; it is the biggest outcome of her work. As a teacher, Ela has tried to be more of a friend to her students, and is a great listener. Even when she cannot do much to help her students, she is at least there for them by just listening to them.

Firmly rooted in the belief that one is not defined by how others treat her, and that mistreatment happens because fears exist, Ela understands that most people do not trust the power of love. While we hate, fear and despise, we never try to love. We are deeply affected by the image created in our minds; we do not like to explore and experience the simplest and most natural thing in this world—that is, love. As making the bold boundaries of hate invisible is not a global issue, but a personal one, Ela understands that she should just be herself, and respect the next person for being herself. She remains an all-time warrior, crusading boldly for causes close to her heart.



Elsie Ijorogu Reed

Few have the courage to battle personal difficulties and odds and emerge successful. Still fewer have the courage to turn those very difficult experiences into sources of inspiration for the birth of a movement that can change the world. Sitting among that select few is Elsie Ijorogu Reed, the Founder, Director and CEO of Delta Women, a non-governmental organization that works for women's rights.

TURNING ADVERSITY INTO ACTIVISM

Elsie Ijorogu-Reed

Few have the courage to battle personal difficulties and odds and emerge successful. Still fewer have the courage to turn those very difficult experiences into sources of inspiration for the birth of a movement that can change the world. Sitting among that select few is Elsie Ijorogu Reed, the Founder, Director and CEO of Delta Women, a non-governmental organization that works for women's rights.

Born in London and brought up for the most part in Nigeria, since she was four, it was but natural for Elsie to take to something that related to her home country. But what she went on to do for Nigeria was a cumulative consequence of several experiences when she grew up. Having undergone suffering herself, and having witnessed the suffering of others, Elsie used all of her difficult experiences to catalyse progressive action for those people who lived in need, and for those who were deprived. As a wise person rightly said 'Once you have stared poverty in the face your life never remains the same'. Elsie's tryst with life's toughest experiences and pains, and with being witness to the suffering of many people, has been her motivation and passion.

When Elsie was very young, she was forcibly subjected to circumcision by her own grandmother. For years and years, later, Elsie carried the pain with her, still smarting under the emotional wounds she was delivered that day. She couldn't help but feel violated and betrayed by her own kith and kin, and the magnitude of the harm that the practice had the proclivity to cause to girls world over made her fight the malpractice. Elsie realized that what her grandmother did to her was something many girls like her were

facing all over the world. This opened her eyes to what was reality for many women: the gross deprivation and disrespect of their rights.

Having lived in and grown up in Nigeria, Elsie was no newcomer to understanding Nigeria's culture. She realized that the cultural mindset had certain ideals that were considerably deep. She learned that practices of rape and female genital mutilation (FGM) thrive in the community because nobody talks about it. From that moment on, Elsie made sure to work for the cause of women's rights.

Despite surging forward unfazed, resistance to her work and threats to her person have always been around for Elsie. She faced challenges from the victims and their families, as they believe it is best to remain silent than be laughed at by people. When dealing with rape victims, families of the victims beg the organization to stop the legal proceedings or keep quiet to avoid further embarrassment. Elsie understands where that comes from—the ease with which a society stigmatizes a victim instead of offering solace. Resistance in the case of FGM victims is different. Women believe that an uncircumcised person is unclean makes them wayward. Changing such a mindset is really challenging, for Elsie, and remains a work in progress. The continued patriarchal domination in every household leads to the imposition of their ideas on the rest of the family. If a father believes that circumcision or early child marriage is the way to go, the woman cannot oppose it, for fear of being thrown out of the house with no livelihood.

Starting Delta Women for the women of the Delta state first, Elsie slowly expanded the spectrum of activity to addressing concerns challenging women globally. Through a blog and a monthly *e-Zine*, Elsie had a band of volunteers coming together from all over the world to speak about issues that women faced. From rape to sexual harassment, from FGM to obstetric fistulae and from

domestic violence to unsafe and forced abortions, Delta Women addressed the lack of awareness on several issues by sharing short informational blog posts, interviews and personal stories of women.

On field, Delta Women held rallies and campaigns to spread awareness on sexual harassment, egging people to speak up and speak out against the crime. The organization held cervical cancer screening camps, eye-check camps and health drives to ensure that women were aware of the things that their health was vulnerable to. The free eye-health camps and check-ups conducted in Nigeria involves Delta Women bringing experts to the field, and checking people's health needs to give them treatment for free.

In addition to this, Elsie also pursued a cause that was closest to her heart: education of women. Engaged in educating women through online teaching and skill inculcation, Elsie aims at reaching out to as many women the world over as she can. The inculcation of skills is done with the intention that women are made less vulnerable. In-house studies have showed that some women allow the window of vulnerability to leave them exposed to harm because of poverty or lack of skills, Elsie realized that women consequently go into prostitution; allow and accept abuse or violence; and even opt for monetary settlement after rape because they have no choice. To support such women, Elsie offer on-ground vocational training at the centres and micro-financing facilities.

Through Delta Women's blog, Elsie told the world her own story: where she survived FGM. The story which she titled *Edirin's Story*, woke a slumbering world into action, as emails and letters of solidarity and support poured in from everywhere. Elsie was then invited to speak in Ireland, where she addressed a gathering with her personal story, on the occasion that congratulated the Irish government for officially outlawing FGM.

While working in the Delta state, Delta Women rescued rape victims, in the process discovering the inconvenient truth about how their families and police officials pressurized the victims to settle for nothing. At the outset, it was hard getting support from anywhere on rehabilitating them, but Delta Women fought strong. Elsie explains that even today, there is only one shelter home which is situated in southern Nigeria, in Lagos. The resistance has been mostly attitudinal. People in Nigeria tend to believe that a woman's place is to be subservient, to be the kind that does the man's bidding in entirety. There is an oft-repeated claim from men that a woman is raped because she deserves it, or asked for it by her conduct. Delta Women goes ahead anyway, and works towards spreading awareness, to try and change this very attitude. Sometimes in response, people have insulted and threatened Elsie online and through emails. She has remained unfazed.

Elsie came to realize that much of the situation could be remedied by opening the eyes of the masses to what really is, rather than the way they believe it to be. To Elsie, the quintessence of empowerment lies in being aware, being educated, and being able to take things into one's own hands. Since educating a woman is the equivalent of educating a family, it can revolutionize a society and alter warped ideologies. No matter what the nature of a society may be—matriarchal, patriarchal, equal—it is the woman's effort that keeps a family together, and helps it run smoothly. Having seen instances of peacetime and wartime up close through her work, Elsie notes that this is the main reason why women are targeted in wartime, to break the society's backbone. By educating women, individuals who are strong and capable are created. Educated people will not be afraid to question what is wrong. Many women do not question because they simply do not know that they can. Brute force and might is one thing, but even the strongest proclivities towards violence can be defeated with an educated mindset.

Elsie realized that this logic is not something that will work only for Nigeria but for the world at large. That helped her firm up her resolve to pivoting work towards ensuring that every woman in need would get her due.

Understanding that much of the work needs sensitive handling, Delta Women has been very conscious of the work it puts up. Using social media tools, Delta Women built up a fgroup to help fight Sexual Harassment with about 14000 members, and expanding by the day in terms of membership. Using the group as a medium, Elsie ensured that Delta Women spread awareness, chatted with survivors and policy makers, other organizational heads and organized events in Nigeria. Using these forums, Elsie encouraged people to speak out, whether privately to her and publicly to the whole group, and through this, they educate themselves and their families and friends.

Tangible impacts accrued aplenty. People come back to Delta Women and tell Elsie how their lives have changed because of the information her organization offered them and the help that her organization gave them. People have told her how they averted greater danger in their lives with the good help of knowledge. Women in the state of Delta have also contacted Elsie when they suffered harassment or rape. Elsie used social networking during the Abia university rape – an incident where a girl in Abia, Nigeria, alleged rape on part of her professor, to bring the news to the forefront and force reaction from the authorities.

Elsie's efforts have expanded beyond the realm of women's rights at times. Delta Women intervened to demand a school for the village of Okoijorogu. Up until then, the children of the village in Nigeria had to brave the heavy traffic on roads, impossibly difficult geographical reliefs and their own fatigue, to travel all the way to the next village to study. Elsie's efforts have paid off with the Ministry of Education who has promised a school for the children, and has begun to work towards it.

Elsie's efforts have been unparalleled to say the least. She remains unaffected by the opposition she faces, sailing purely on one motivational factor: her own pain. Elsie works with a simple wish at heart— every girl to know that she is not alone in her suffering, and that she will be supported by Delta Women always.



Gulalai Ismail

With the inspiration that Gulalai continuously found coming in her life, she set about to start her own initiative, called Aware Girls, a young women-led organization working in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The initiative seeks to fight for the empowerment of young women by strengthening their leadership skills, enabling them to act as agents of change in their communities for peace and women empowerment.

BUILDING PEACE, ONE GIRL AT A TIME

Gulalai Ismail

Gulalai was born in Marghuz, in Swabi, Pakistan. Her father was a lecturer at the time, being strongly engaged in political activities, reform movements and movements for social and economic equality. Being an educationalist and reformist, he valued education and equality for all despite the difficult circumstances that they were surrounded with. Her mother was the first woman entrepreneur in their village, working with her own business of embroidery. Right from her childhood, Gulalai saw women coming to her house. They would spend their time sharing their stories with her mother while they worked. Most stories were about domestic violence and the reverence attached to the culture of silence surrounding these harsh realities. Gulalai was educated in a local government school, until she was nine, when her family moved to Peshawar in pursuit of better education. With that, she went on to study at the Peshawar Model School which was then, one of the best schools in the area. Hoping to be a scientist, Gulalai went on to study biotechnology, and later completed her M. Phil in biotechnology from the Quaid-e-Azam University in Pakistan.

Sensitive to violence from a very young age, Gulalai lost her ability to speak when she saw her father angry when she was just two. With medical advice in favour of giving her a comfortable environment, she got back her speaking ability. An introvert as a child, it is an amazing turn of events today that the little Gulalai of that day soon grew to become the most outspoken of the lot in her family and community. With her father's activism taking on a more lively fervour, there were magazines and newsletters of different organizations coming home. Gulalai would devour each magazine, and slowly enriched her knowledge with the

understanding that many women, minorities and the poor in her country were struggling. The most striking among the lot that she read and heard about was the discrimination meted out to women and girls, hindering their ability to fully participate in their communities. Gulalai felt that women were prisoners, as the restraints on them kept them from enjoying their potential to the fullest. Their value was reduced to that of a commodity that could be bartered away.

With the inspiration that Gulalai continuously found coming in her life, she set about to start her own initiative, called Aware Girls, a young women-led organization working in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province of Pakistan. The initiative seeks to fight for the empowerment of young women by strengthening their leadership skills, enabling them to act as agents of change in their communities for peace and women empowerment. It also seeks out advocacy for pro-women legislation, besides providing a platform for young women who otherwise do not have access to leadership forums due to cultural barriers. The platform's work spans over several thematic areas that include human rights and young women's leadership, addressing gender-based violence, political empowerment of young women and strengthening democracy, economic empowerment of young women, sexual and reproductive health rights including HIV/AIDS and countering extremism and building peace. Their initiatives in these thematic areas are created using three major strategies, namely, group formation of young people especially young women, capacity-building of these groups and young women and advocacy and campaigning.

Through sheer persistence and hard work, Gulalai's efforts culminated in many tangible successes. In the rural areas of the North West of Pakistan, Aware Girls is actively developing 'Girls Power Clubs', which groups young women who have limited access to education and other opportunities. These groups then go through capacity-building trainings on issues of human rights, leadership and addressing gender-based violence. These girls strengthen their leadership skills, equipping themselves with ample knowledge

of the systems and laws that protect their rights. In addition, they also use these groups as platforms to raise voices on varied issues and rights in their communities. In a bid to empower them, these girls are encouraged to develop their own campaigns on addressing any human rights issue of their choice. Some of them work with men to change their attitude towards women and women's rights, while some have established watch committees that monitor incidents of violence against women in the area, and offer counselling towards attitude transformation. There are also some groups that work to facilitate access for young women to shelter homes, legal and medical aid and other assistance in case of violence.

In addition to these activities, Aware Girls also works to develop digital stories towards raising awareness about issues of gender-based violence. With the assistance of a helpline called *Marastyal*, Aware Girls also provides information, counselling, and referral services to victims of gender-based violence. With over 80 per cent of the women suffering domestic abuse, there are only a few systems for redress, leaving women in a state of helplessness. With the helpline, Aware Girls tries to change the system, and break the culture of silence prevailing around the crime. More and more women in Pakistan are being progressively vociferous in peacebuilding, notwithstanding the danger that it portends. Through the Youth Peace Network, Aware Girls has also created a platform for young peace activists, both men and women, to strengthen their skills in peacebuilding and countering extremism.

Gulalai's fiery desire to fight every instance of discrimination against women helped her fight all odds. The biggest obstacle in the journey so far was being heard. Usually, young people are not taken seriously—especially being young women—the struggle to be heard was more. Even within the human rights movement, it's not easy for new emerging activists and organizations to get space. Following repetitive attacks of militants on women who work as human rights activists, the field has become very dangerous to

work in. Those who raise voice to change the power structure and to empower women often wind up being silenced through guns. But Gulalai braves on, hoping to continue working in and for Pakistan to help make a better community.

Working hard to effect change, many of the developments in the legal landscape in Pakistan is attributable to several organizations for women's rights, including the one run by Gulalai. In 2006, the Women Protection Bill was passed, and in 2010, the laws against sexual harassment were passed. Before these laws, it was in 1961 that any pro-women legislation happened in Pakistan. For over 40 years, the parliament could not pass any laws for the protection of women, but only discriminatory laws against women such as the Hudood Ordinance thrived. Gulalai's efforts haven't gone unrewarded. In 2013, she received the Democracy Award from the National Endowment for Democracy, USA. She was invited to Barack Obama's Civil Society Summit in October, 2013, besides also being added to the list of 100 leading global thinkers by "the Foreign Policy" magazine in the USA.

Being a woman gave Gulalai the strength to stand up for the rights of women in life, risking situations of every kind because she knew the pain of being oppressed, and has been aware of what a woman with wings can achieve. It gave her the strength to stand up for young women around her, to speak with them and communicate with them on all kinds of issues that need attention. However, there were a lot of challenges too: being young, there was the added obligation to build her credibility; being a woman, there was a need to be careful about what she says, speaks about and chooses to do. That said, to Gulalai, if there is ever a chance to be reborn, she would always like to be born as a woman. Being a woman makes her feel more at ease, though she has to struggle with patriarchy and discrimination. It gives her a sense of responsibility towards the world and towards humanity. Being a woman in a world that is largely oppressive towards women, Gulalai has found herself being sensitized towards the complex consequences of discrimination and inequalities. Her struggle is not just equality for women, but equality for everyone.

Being a peace worker to Gulalai, means to be respectful to everyone including those who are against her mission. It means to be responsible towards building a society where human rights are respected, where peace is a priority, and where the root causes of conflicts are addresses. Being a peace activist also means to make sure that everyone's voices have the space to be heard and where everyone can live their lives according to their own dreams. It also means to build a society where everyone can live without the fear of being killed either for no reason or for having an opinion.

She is labouring with a long-term goal of achieving equality for everyone, where no one is discriminated against on the basis of their gender, race, economic status or the choices they make in life. Gulalai dreams to build a society where everyone, especially young women, has the right to have dreams, to live their life according to their dreams, to access education, to access employment and to be being able to decide about themselves.

Being the bastion of hope for many girls around her, Gulalai is undoubtedly one of the strongest voices of the young generation.



Heera Kamboj

Heera is on a mission to improve the lives of as many women and men as she can, through her work as a diplomat in the Foreign Services at the US Government.

LIGHTING CANDLES OF PROGRESS

Heera Kamboj

In the 1950s, a young Indian left his country behind and went to the United States of America, for his Masters' degree. At the heart of the civil rights movement, the young man made his way into Wyoming. Not New York, not California, but right at the heart of the United States of America. When he finished his degree in engineering and went back to India, his heart was set on the US, which welcomed and cared for him with open arms. After a few years of working with the Government in India, he went back to the US, with his family in tow. He spoke six languages, and travelled on the way back to India to several countries in South-East Asia.

Years later, his first granddaughter was born. He passed away when still young, she was just 6 months old. Little did he know that this girl would grow up to chart the world's waters just as he had, with the same spirit of wanderlust that he had. That girl is Heera Kaur Kamboj.

A young diplomat working with the US government, Heera has travelled far and wide. While her mother wanted her to be a doctor, and serve as positive role model, her capacity as being the oldest of the 11 cousins born in America, Heera realized that she simply wanted a way to give back to the United States, as much as she could. In the seventh grade, she realized that she had a love for languages, and wanted to do something with that for a career. Her teacher told her to think about the US foreign service, but little Heera misunderstood it to be the foreign legion. In high school, Heera was an award-winning volunteer with several tolerance groups and poor communities, and was also the editor of the school newspaper. At that point, she wanted to be a foreign

correspondent. She almost had gone to college in New York to study journalism, but wanted to move away to a new city and try something different. Heera applied to ten different colleges all at once. She was absolutely sure of making it having a great academic record, undertaken advanced classes, a good record in sports, volunteering, and a great SAT score. In one day, she received five rejection letters—a painful and humbling memory. Choosing between George Washington University and Boston University, Heera picked the former, attending the Elliot School of International Affairs, located in Washington DC. Studying at the hub of all governmental activity, she was in the midst of a world where she saw policymaking and diplomatic work taking place right before her.

In the last week of August 2001, Heera began college. Two weeks later, midway through her comparative politics class, her classmates' cell phones began ringing non-stop. The teacher was annoyed by the disruption and ordered everyone to turn off their phones. When the class ended, Heera and her classmates walked out to a scene where people were crying, standing numb in shock, or talking in whispers. Two planes had crashed into the World Trade Center and another into the Pentagon that morning in an incident that the world would soon know as 9/11. Heera felt her knees buckling: her father worked as an engineer at the World Trade Center. She tried reaching him, for hours at an end, but the telephone networks had crashed. Eight hours later she learned that he was safe, as he was not scheduled for work there that day. When Heera left for her dorm by shuttle, a reporter came on the radio reporting that a car bomb had exploded at the state department. Her shuttle-bus always went past the state department as the GW was located literally next door. Heera got off the bus and ran three miles to her dorm, fearing that the bomb was probably still there. The experience firmed Heera's resolve: this was a field she would continue to work in.

With time, Heera began volunteering all over Washington DC, especially on community development related to children and homeless women. In 2002, realizing her younger brother would start school soon and her parents would have to pay for two private schools tuitions, she started researching scholarships. She chanced upon the Thomas R Pickering Foreign Affairs Fellowship. She applied to the fellowship, with about nine others. This time, the odds favoured her, and she won four of them. She wound up selecting the Pickering Fellowship, and from that moment, there was no looking back.

From a point when as a child Heera would cry because she missed her parents while at camp, to a point where she was happily cruising across the world, Heera kept pushing the envelope further. Realizing the worth of all the money that went into her education, she ensured that she did full justice to her course, taking on extra credits and filling her time with work to do. In her senior year, she took up peace studies as a minor, at the end of which she wrote out a paper on feminine peace theory in the Middle East. She attended a conference at Harvard in her senior year, a programme on women, peace and security, run by Ambassador Swanee Hunt. Heera finished her course with a minor in peace studies and a dual major in political science and international affairs. After graduating with her undergraduate degree, Heera attended the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University. One of the classes she took at Harvard during the winter semester was with Ambassador Swanee Hunt.

On the first day of that class, students were paired to introduce their neighbour to the class. Heera introduced herself to her neighbour naming all her milestones up until then. When the woman introduced herself to Heera, she was left speechless. Her neighbour was only 27, and one of the only two survivors of the Rwandan Genocide in her family, who served as a judge in her country's reconciliation court. Heera counts that class as a life-changing experience, as she bonded with women across cultures.

After graduation, as part of the orientation programme for her new career as a US foreign service officer, she went first to the Mexico City, handling visas. The two years thereafter were a rigorous learning experience. Her next assignment took her to Afghanistan in June 2011—which was a dream come true. She got to work on women’s rights, religious freedom, and later on, press freedom. It was an exciting and new job for Heera, but at times stressful. With the Bonn Conference scheduled to happen in December, she was asked to speak with women’s groups and civil society groups there and their planned participation. She got to speak with women and factor in ways of ensuring that women’s voices were not left unheard in the conference. Some of her reports spoke about women who wanted to go to Bonn, for whom the dream became a reality, as they went forth and participated.

In July that year, someone from the Finnish embassy called and said that it was the US embassy’s turn to chair the Women, Peace, and Security Working Group. Heera was wary of taking on such a huge responsibility, but her bosses supported her. She networked with several civil society organizations and grass-root groups for women’s rights. Heera got to work with women and write interesting reports on women’s rights, the legal system, women’s shelters, and civil society advocacy. Heera came to understand that though it is a conventional thing to show women as victims, in reality, they are change-makers themselves, and it is as true of Afghan women as it is true of women across the world. While there, Heera was one among the six people chosen from the whole US mission to speak with Hillary Clinton, the then secretary of state.

Women’s rights in Afghanistan have remained and do remain something that the world takes notice of, and the international community is working alongside Afghan women on such issues. The key, though, Heera noticed, was not in keeping or pursuing the cause of women’s rights in isolation, but in integration with everything else. Women’s rights are human rights and for the world to progress women need to have access to their rights.

While working there, Heera did not think much of what she was doing in terms of a personal milestone. It felt great to do work that was fulfilling, certainly, but she never once considered that she would be nominated for an award, much less win it. Her immediate supervisor nominated her for the Swanee Hunt Award for Advancing Women's Role in Policy Formulation. This was included in her evaluation report by her supervisors so that even if she did not win, she could still be credited for being a nominee. When Heera had just arrived at her next assignment in Chennai, India, she heard that she had won the award. Everything had come full circle: the professor whose classes inspired and influenced Heera had been the one who created the award at the US Department of State. But Heera did not think she won it alone: she thought that the award was a product of the efforts of her colleagues, international working groups, development agencies, law enforcement agencies, NGOs, policymakers, civil society, parliamentarians and religious leaders—and that the award truly should have gone to the women of Afghanistan. The award was from former Secretary of State Clinton and came with a cash prize, part of which Heera donated to Women for Afghan Women and another part to a Sikh charitable organization.

Being a woman to Heera was never challenging, but it let her see how many of her counterparts across the world were not as lucky as she was. Driven by the feeling that she has an obligation to do more for those who do not have that much Heera hopes to make the lives of others better. If she can leave this world having made at least two people happy—'herself plus' as she puts it, she will be the happiest person alive. For her personal goal, Heera hopes one day, to make her fellow Americans more aware of who Sikhs are. As a Sikh woman, Heera wants to change the perspective from 'American Sikh' to an 'American, who happens to be a Sikh'.

Heera is on a mission to improve the lives of as many women and men as she can, through her work.



Helen Mack

In May 2013, chants of *Si Hubo Genocido* rose across the world. It was a grave truth that genocide did happen in the 36-year-long civil war in Guatemala. One of the strong proponents of justice for the crimes committed during the civil war in Guatemala is Helen Mack. Yes, there was genocide.

FIGHTING CRIME AND DEMANDING JUSTICE

Helen Mack

In May 2013, chants of *Si Hubo Genocido*² rose across the world. It was a grave truth that genocide did happen in the 36-year-long civil war in Guatemala. A tribunal declared President Efraín Ríos Montt guilty of having sanctioned genocide, but before long, a constitutional court nullified the judgement on the ground of procedural irregularities. One of the strong proponents of justice for the crimes committed during the civil war in Guatemala is Helen Mack.

Born in the department of Retalhuleu, Helen is Guatemalan and of Chinese descent. A business administrator by profession, she was educated at Monte María from the Mary Knoll sisters. Her parents are Chinese immigrants, and Helen is the third of the six children. Her tryst with fighting for justice began when a rather painful event shook up her life. On 11 September 1990, Helen's sister Myrna was killed with 27 stab wounds by a Special Command Army. Devastated by the incident, Helen began a fight to clarify her sister's murder and did everything to ensure that it was not left unpunished. The murder of her sister turned her life around. Many new commitments, new contacts and new experiences—all of which led her to put her abilities to the service of others—emerged. Helen learned of laws and realized that her struggle was the same as that of many other people who were seeking justice for the disappearance and death of their loved ones. With Myrna, Helen's family saw death up close, and that affected all of them deeply. When Helen had to recognize her body she promised her sister in her mind that she would not rest until her murder was clarified and justice obtained. Helen was very inspired by the work that her sister did for the needy, for

² Yes, there was genocide.

people who had been uprooted from their place of origin because of the armed conflict. In her research Myrna was one of the first to receive and document the testimonies of many people who suffered forced displacement from their homelands by the massacres that the army was carrying out as part of the counterinsurgency policy. She helped prove that what happened in Guatemala was genocide. The pursuit of truth and justice also prompted Helen to go ahead. The fight for truth proved powerful. In July 2014, the Attorney General's Office captured three of the former police for the killing of José Miguel Mérida Escobar, a police investigator who identified Myrna's murder. A hearing before the Court led to the adherence to the accusation levelled by the prosecutors.

In the process, Helen faced the state apparatus as she demanded the crime to be investigated, justice be administered and that her rights be enforced. What started as a personal crusade for justice soon turned into a common struggle for the community and society around her. Helen's efforts were not unrecognized—she won the Right Livelihood Award in 1992, which is considered the alternative to the Nobel Peace Prize.

In Myrna's case, it was clearly established that extrajudicial execution was the result of an intelligence operation, whose employers responded to the application of counterinsurgency doctrine of national security. The killer responded to the hierarchical structure of the army and the chain of command was clear. He did not act for personal drive but received a direct order to kill her. During the internal armed conflict, state policies to eliminate populations perpetrated slogans like 'remove the water from the fish' or 'scorched earth'. In the discussion that has taken place on the subject some argue that in every war there is 'excess' and that's what happened in Guatemala. The Criminal Code of Guatemala in Article 376 defines genocide as being an offense committed with the intention to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic or religious, causing either death of group members, or injury that seriously impairs the physical or mental integrity of members of the group, or inflict on the group or members thereof, conditions

of existence which can produce its physical destruction in whole or in part; or the displacement compulsive children or adults in the group to another group; or, impose measures to sterilize group members or otherwise prevent their reproduction.

There are plenty of records during the Guatemalan Civil War that show that every one of these things happened. Numerous massacres, injuries that revealed a viciousness like nothing before in the manner in which they were committed, the creation of development poles or model villages for population control and the brazen attacks on pregnant women as their bellies were opened to kill unborn children report the horrors of genocide that came alive in the course of the war. Helen worked on the understanding that there were numerous indications that genocide happened in Guatemala, and that those responsible must be brought before the courts.

Working against a difficult background, Helen had a lot of challenges to face. In Myrna's case, there were obstacles in every form, ranging from threats and kidnappings of relatives to the use of legal means to prevent the case from being investigated and prosecuted. There were 14 years of hard work, both exhausting and sometimes, frustrating. In the Inter-American system of Justice, denial was precisely one of the factors that helped convict the state of Guatemala. On the personal front, Helen often found herself having to face a whole system that was heavily co-opted by hidden powers, of course, with rare exceptions here and there. She was often branded as crazy or even communist. But being a woman of strong character and despite the fear and frustration, she found that she could and did go on.

With all of her hard work, Helen has officially started a fight against impunity. The creation of a foundation with Myrna's name came in next. Helen recognizes that from that point onwards a lot of work remains to be done. Amidst all of this, Guatemala has

changed little. The country often finds itself challenging any search for truth and justice, and the full establishment of human rights remain an issue still requiring attention.

Through her work on Myrna's case, Helen noticed that many themes emerged for the first time ever—themes that were not considered, much less debated or discussed before. Some of these included the role of the prosecutor, death penalty, corruption and lack of judicial independence, 'state secret', military tribunals and existence of hidden powers and criminal structures within government institutions. Helen's perseverance also led to the enactment of a new penal code and the formation of several fruitful partnerships such as the Guatemala Forum, the Alliance against Impunity and the Movement for Justice among others. These fermented relations led to the coordination of many issues of common benefit.

Helen finds that there is a gradual opening up of spaces in Guatemala. Not affected adversely because of being a woman in this field of work, Helen noticed that being a woman has helped her to say things clearer upfront, and to have the determination to act on it to make things right. A firm believer in the need to say things with solid arguments if she needs to make a difference, Helen has always worked hard to crusade against the wrong.

A woman, from the time of conception develops and fills in different roles in life. She is a daughter, a sister, a wife, a mother and a grandmother. No matter what 'position' she holds in life, the most visible among the repertoire of roles that a woman plays is her procreative side—whereby a woman is seen as being exclusively reproductive and nothing else. Helen asserts that it is always important to remember that women account for a fair share of the world population, that women are the force that moves the world. For centuries together, women have been seen as second-class citizens despite the valuable support they give to society. In

women's hands lie the gift of education and wisdom that is imparted to future generations. The most advanced societies in the world are those that facilitate equity and better living conditions for women. Very proud of being a woman, Helen notes that in Guatemala, women have always made a difference. They are outstanding in all fields. Often, the most dangerous and critical decisions have been carried out by women, whether it is in the judgements on human rights trials, or in drawing up reports of human rights violations, defending civil and political rights and the like. Having been a peace-worker and a fighter for justice, Helen notices that doing all that is necessary to keep the fight alive is a great responsibility and a huge commitment. One has to be consistent with their principles and values. Through their actions and efforts, people represent others who trust them completely as being one who can help. Unfortunately in countries like Guatemala, notes Helen, human rights work is frowned upon.

Working hard to achieve her dream that in Guatemala, some day, all will be equal before the law and consolidate the rule of law, Helen walks on along her path of being the harbinger of a paradigm change in justice and security.



Hina Noureen

Fighting against conservative and unjust practices and emerging successful in that fight is one thing, but to keep that flag flying by encouraging other girls to do the same is a different ball game altogether, for the crusade is not for oneself, but for the big picture; Hina Noureen of Pakistan essentially lives to realize such objectives.

SPREADING THE LIGHT OF EMPOWERMENT

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Hailing from a third world country of a developing economy, with considerably low socio-economic indicators, Hina grew up in a society deeply entrenched in rigid customs and stifling orthodox traditions that tended to limit accessibility to human rights in general and stifling rights of women, children and religious minorities in particular. Through her growing years, Hina realized that the conservative set-up in the name of religion often emphasized on unbearable and unjustifiable practices. Most such practices were antagonistic to women. She learned that in certain homes a girl-child is treated as an 'unwanted guest' from birth. She is made to lead a life riddled with disparities and discriminations that are wedded to her gender identity. From deprivation to harassment, and living in fear of sexual assaults to facing injustices, a woman was always treated as chattel.

Hina was fast to understand that there is a need to bring localized solutions, addressing and confronting the problems specific to her community.

Hina joined a women's rights organization called Baidarie in 1995 as a trainee at the skill training centre. While undergoing her training, she developed a deep interest in the organization's women's development programme and enrolled herself as a volunteer.

As a volunteer, she would facilitate the implementation of organizational activities for the socio-economic empowerment of women. The experience taught her that backwardness and deprivation were not an inevitable reality for women, and that such situations could be changed for the better, provided women were united, organized and determined to make the way forward through affirmative action. In 2000, as a mark of recognition for her services for the cause of the organization, Hina was elected to the post of general secretary of the organization. In 2003, she was made the head of the organization in which capacity she currently serves.

Hina has been deeply entrenched in the fact that women need to be enabled to play a leadership role in their communities. Through the encouragement of group formations among women and taking up activism on issues of peace, democracy, fundamental rights, social development and the promotion of peace initiatives through non-violent solutions and alternatives, Hina has been at the helm of a transformation movement of the women around her. Her work involves the formulation and implementation of gender-responsive policies, the management of organizational activities aiming at knowledge building, arousing awareness, sensitizing issues, mobilizing stakeholders for the protection of basic human rights of women and providing guidance to the team for mobilizing human, technical and financial resources. From 2004 to 2013, almost 1,632 cases of torture on women were reported to Baidarie. Hina and her team tried hard to keep the families united by resolving their conflicts through psycho-social counselling. Among the many cases that were reported, Hina handled cases of sexual assault, honour killings, murder attempts, instances of acid throwing, stove bursts, divorce, physical beatings and acute mental and psychological torture.

In her work, Hina met several obstacles. The many efforts to provide succour to the women who survived violence often provoked anger, retaliation and passion for vengeance among the perpetrators of violence. Her endeavours to provide legal and medical aid,

increasing accessibility to recourses of rehabilitation for women and girls were never smooth sailing. On many occasions, Hina was at the receiving end— people threatened to kill her using sniper fires or perpetrating bomb blasts at her organization's many offices. But Hina remains absolutely unaffected. Her dream is to stand her ground and make her region a peaceful haven for all, especially for women.

A staunch believer in learning by doing, Hina materializes her vision, setting an example for others to emulate. With continuous efforts towards creating replicable models of successful social interventions to combat violence and discriminatory practices against women, Hina has tried to influence policy makers in her society. Between 2004 and 2009, with the technical and financial support provided by British High Commission, the European Commission-European Initiative for Democracy and Human Rights (EC-EIDHR) and CIDA-Program for Advancement of Gender Equality Islamabad (CIDA-PAGE), Baidarie tried to make people understand that women are human beings deserving respect and a right to access opportunities for their personal growth and accomplishment. In addition to these activities, Hina would visit families to interview them, hold discussions and help solve their disputes amicably.

Among the myriad tangible results of her perseverance, Hina has found a shift in attitudes taking place before her. The ones who perceived women as nothing more than symbols of familial honour and pride began accepting that violence against women is a crime against humanity at large and social resistance against the gross infringement of women's rights was activated. A robust dialogue on women's rights and peace ensued. With time, more and more voices joined in the movement that denounced ill treatment of women. They came together to engage in raising awareness, creating room for social mobilization, offering service for the advocacy of pro-women actions and policy decisions. The organization succeeded in creating a batch of peacemakers and

human rights defenders all across the district, each of whom are busy advancing the cause of fostering respect for fundamental rights, democratic values and norms and women's rights. Baidarie has grown to become an icon of women's struggle for their rights. Wherever in the district, whenever there occurs any violation of women's rights, women use Baidarie's helpline to seek the necessary support.

To Hina, being a woman is to be brave and strong. A woman is capable of creating major outputs with every minor input. At any given time, a woman is a mother, a sister, a daughter and a housewife, and at many instances, she is all of it at the same time. A woman's roles are not verbal names relegated to identities: her roles are fulfilled unconditionally, as she holds up a family and allows it to thrive. A woman, to Hina, is a hard worker, a scion of sincerity for her family. She is the face of many sacrifices made for the well-being of her family. Hina counts on herself as lucky for having been born as a woman. She did not face major problems in her life despite being in a community that tends to be antagonistic to women. With liberal parents who loved her and cherished her unconditionally, Hina sometimes found that they worried for her safety as they didn't want her to go outside the house alone for study or work. But walking on by and by, she tackled all these problems with the passage of time.

She hopes and evinces the coming of a time when her region will be rational enough to frustrate any mischievous design against the social and religious harmony and peace.



Inshah Malik

What one sees and imbibes in their childhood can have a profound impact on their future—be it in the choice of a career, or in the shaping of one's personality. For Inshah Malik, it was the ethos that surrounded her from birth, consequent to being born into a turbulent life.

BRINGING PEACE THROUGH WRITING

Inshah Malik

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Inshah was born to a struggling lower middle-class family in Srinagar, Kashmir. While her father worked in a government company of handicrafts, her mother was a teacher in a private school. Both her parents struggled hard to make both ends meet, at a time when the armed insurgency against Indian Rule in Kashmir had begun to unfold. While her counterparts across most parts of the world had memories of playing with dolls and revelling in dollops of ice-cream, Inshah's childhood was peppered with stories that smacked of the stark reality that challenged her people.

It is not surprising that Inshah was sensitized to the world around her, as it came crumbling down around her ears every now and then; death, bullets, bomb blasts and mourning were to be accepted a part of their lives. She remained, experientially, a firm believer of history. Steeped in the notion that the world's present and future remains intricately linked, Inshah understood that though one may want to be just about anybody, if they were sensitive enough, they could become a part of a crucial moment in history. With her eyes set on supposed freedom, Inshah was besotted with the life that the world beyond Kashmir could offer her. She left Srinagar and headed to Bombay, as it was then called, carrying with her an aspiration of forgetting everything about

Kashmir. She was leaving behind her homeland, Kashmir, which was at war with India as it sought its complete freedom from the dominion of India. She was leaving behind a Kashmir, which in those days, received very little international attention. She was leaving behind not just a home, not just a family, but the homeland that she knew of, but now replete with army camps, gunshots and barbed wires. She was leaving behind the land that is home to a population with 90 per cent Muslim majority, but is often positioned as a 'concentrated minority,' as against the 'dominant majority' of the Indian mainstream.

When Inshah reached Bombay, there was a twist in the tale that destiny had woven for her. The warden of the hostel where she was to be housed was called Inshah, a Kashmiri Muslim terrorist and a anti-national.

At that precise moment, much as Inshah was taken aback, she tried to reflect on the coincidence and embarked on getting to know herself better. She introspected about who she really was and what she really should defend. Inshah's journey into research began. She realized that Kashmir was militarily occupied, and the 100,000 people of Kashmir who were killed had not evoked any humane understanding amongst Indians about the plight of the common people living there. Inshah came to understand that there was a huge disconnect between the rhetoric on Kashmir that India used internationally and the perception that prevailed among the masses in the society that existed within the nation. Indians had not quite absorbed or perceived the Kashmir narrative as being part of their own. Worse still, it was disheartening for her to note that the knowledge of the Indian people on the situation in Kashmir was frugal at best. It hurt her to see that Indians did not see the people of Kashmir as individuals with their own identities and narratives, having meaningful exchanges with the world.

That was a defining moment for Inshah. She realized that she could educate and spread awareness, on her part. She began writing articles, using the written word as a vehicle to convey descriptions of the reality that was true of a Kashmiri. Her body of work grew from strength to strength, and with time, Inshah had written extensively on Kashmir, women, occupation, and the freedom movement. She also realized that women could be huge stakeholders in and bear a great impact on the conflict resolution process. Her sole concern had always been to enrich, educate and improve the self and bring about conflict awareness amongst Kashmiri women. The purpose of doing so was to successfully enable and induct them into the resolution process and make them 50 per cent shareholders of the final resolution of the conflict.

Being a writer meant that she was producing content that the world was not necessarily comfortable with. Through her writing, Inshah was questioning, critiquing and evaluating the mainstream understanding and the power dynamics that underlay them. Through her writing, Inshah invariably became a fringe in the whole process. But more than an obstacle, it was a boon for Inshah to be in that spot, as she knew that any change would come from the very fringes, and not necessarily from the majority. The trajectory of becoming a change-maker had its own challenges for Inshah. Right from leaving her family behind, thousands of kilometres away, to get educated, and in the process prioritizing her goals and deciding to dedicate her life for a cause, as well as helping her parents come to terms with it, Inshah's journey was peppered with situations that were not easy.

From the obstacles she had to overcome, Inshah learned over time that wisdom and patience are the only real values that help one curb the hurdles that life throws in one's path. Her conscience has been a very intriguing phenomenon, as she puts it, for it had always challenged the world and the self with equal fervour. That helped her continuously take on a life of self correction, a fact that, in turn, had helped her understand situations much better, providing her with the necessary wisdom to overcome them. Inshah is not alone in her activism for Kashmir. The activism that she has been a part of has had its own rewards. All the tangible changes that Inshah has seen in the way in which Indians have begun to engage with Kashmir, as they question and see the truth as it exists beyond their national rhetoric, are outcomes of the collective struggle and willingness of the people to learn and use different methodologies of bringing change.

Strengthened by the people of Kashmir, Inshah looks upon her identities as a significant catalyst for her activism. For her, as she has always said, she has three stars quite like the men in the army do. The three stars are her three identities: that of being a Kashmiri, a Muslim and a woman. Though the three identities have strengthened her, they have also been the causes of discrimination. Being a woman, Inshah notices, that it is as much a struggle against oppression on one's community as on the woman itself, which particularly provokes her as a woman to further strengthen her crusade. Womanhood gives Inshah the status of an onlooker of the chaotic world around her and to see herself as being more privileged to analyse the world better.

To Inshah, activism is an extension of the manifestation of being able to put others before oneself, to demand for the rights of others just as one does for oneself, to be able to wish and hope for others just as one wishes and hopes for oneself. Despite the pessimism

that sometimes tends to engulf her as things on ground keep getting worse in Kashmir, Inshah is hopeful. Firmly believing in the fact that we are in an age of propaganda-based warfare, she understands that to diffuse lies, the existence of truth is very necessary. The need to keep writing and getting the truth heard is the least people can do, even if they may be powerless in defending cultural and military occupation.

The most violent injustice of all that has been done to the people of Kashmir is misinformation. Inshah believes that the crisis of solving 'Kashmir' has been a lack of feminine voice and women's opinion. In the dominant discourse between India and Pakistan, Kashmiris often rendered to be a 'dispute', in effect reduced to a de-politicization process for its inhabitants. She explains that the dispute is sought to be resolved outside the human agency of the population. Such an approach to Kashmir has thus oppressed, first the voice of the people of Kashmir and then, among others, their women. Given the complex landscape in India, the fate of millions of residents of Indian and Pakistani administered Kashmir has been sealed by the vague imagination that the phrase 'border dispute' evokes which is represented by nationalistic jingoism of both countries. In this problematic terrain, retrieving Kashmiri women and their political-cultural agency is akin to negotiating a thorny maze. Muslim women across India and the larger world remain immersed in shrouds of mystery and misinformation. In this regard, as Inshah succinctly puts it, communication and cross-cultural engagement is absolutely necessary. Propaganda machinery and the media have often been exploited to demonize, spread a sense of distrust and fear. Inshah draws comparison in the post-9/11 situation where the propaganda war had targeted Muslims selectively. Inshah understands that the people's consensus is important in keeping Kashmir militarized and for that consensus to be generated, propaganda is often deemed necessary. She hopes that the Indian

people work to question their media about Kashmir, and must keep busting the lies it creates about the 'other' cultures and identities.

Her name is a prefix for an oft-repeated term: Insha'Allah, meaning God Willing. An anthropomorphic version of what her name means, Inshah is ever willing to walk the extra mile to explode the myths that the world has about Kashmir.



Jean Sasson

Writing can be powerful; a tool that can catalyse change without much effort. There are in the world as many stories as there are people. Many of them need telling, and still more need remembering. Jean Sasson has been a conduit for many women world over, telling their stories through her beautifully written novels.

THE PEN IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

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Having grown up in a tiny town in what forms the United States of America's 'deep south', Jean spent her childhood in a very conservative region of the country. Her family was financially not affluent, but was wealthy when it came to honing and nurturing learning, with an insatiable thirst for knowledge. With avid readers aplenty on her father's side, Jean had relatives who were school teachers passing along their love of learning to their children and grandchildren. Jean was a happy child with a wonderful mother who spent enormous time with her; this helped her start reading early. She would check books out from the 'Book Mobile' which came by her home, from where she was allowed to get three books per week. Without fail, Jean would always read them all.

Reading books about Herman Wouk and Leon Uris as a child, Jean remembered reading one of their books while sitting in the swing, lazily swinging, and thinking that she would, one day, write books about people from other lands. It was in her heart, the

core of her very being, that she had decided to write and tell the world the stories of some of the bravest women she would encounter in the future.

When Jean finished college, wanderlust got the better of her. She travelled to Saudi Arabia just to be able to experience something different, something new, and something enticing in an exotic land far away. She would carry these experiences with her, later, to write about them and share them with the world. After living in the Middle East for 12 years and travelling all around, when Iraq invaded Kuwait, Jean grew very emotional about the invasion and the plight of the people in that country. She bravely travelled to the region and interviewed the people who had escaped and wrote a book titled *The Rape of Kuwait*.

From that point onwards, Jean's authorship grew by leaps and bounds. Living in Saudi Arabia helped her tell the world the story of Princess Sultana. Owing to her position at a royal hospital in Saudi Arabia, Jean had the good fortune to meet some members of the royal family. In those days, westerners were more accepted and friendships were possible, although not common. Jean worked for the Saudi physician who was the head of the King Faisal Royal Hospital in Riyadh. The physician, Dr. Feteih, was very close personally to King Khalid, and with this connection, Jean met King Khalid and Crown Prince Fahd. Later, Jean met the woman that the world came to know as Princess Sultana, after Jean told her story through her famous Princess trilogy. The books about her life have changed many other lives, impacting young women worldwide to take a look around and to try and help others. This is a wonderful legacy for Princess Sultana, who still spends a lot of time, energy and money to help educate young Muslim women.

When the books about Princess Sultana were published, Jean had carved her own niche: she became known for writing in the genre for the 'Arab brave woman'. In the midst of all this, Jean wrote *Ester's Child*, a painfully poignant rendition of how one small action changed the course of the lives of an Israeli Jewish Family, a Palestinian Arab family and a German Christian family. The story chronicles events from the Second World War, presenting to the reader the stark realities of present times a legacy that had been inherited from those times.

Even after Jean left Saudi Arabia, she toured the Middle East extensively. She went into Iraq in 1998 and met a woman, very dear to her and of whom she wrote later in her book, *Mayada, The Daughter of Iraq*. In 1999, Mayada was arrested by Saddam Hussein's secret police, on allegations that she had produced anti-regime pamphlets. She was confined in Iraq's brutal Baladiyat Prison for over a month, subjected to torture and imprisonment. Mayada was imprisoned with 17 other 'shadow women' whose lives had similarly been interrupted with false allegations and hardships.

After writing that book, one of Mayada's cousins read the story, and then wanted to meet Jean so that she could write about his sister, who was half-Kurd and had married a Kurdish fighter. That story soon came to be, and was called *Love in a Torn Land*, telling the story of Joanna Al-Askari, a brave heart who lived in one of the most trying times in Iraq. The tale narrated the difficulties Joanna faced as a Kurd in Iraq, and as a refugee in Iran, and then her courageous journey to escape her difficult fate. Joanna was one of the victims of the chemical bombing of Kurdistan by Saddam's cousin, nicknamed, 'Chemical Ali' due to the chemical attacks ordered by Saddam Hussein.

Jean deviated mildly from her usual route of interviewing and telling the stories of women. An unexpected call requested her to write the story of Omar bin Laden, Osama bin Laden's son, in February 2008. Jean was unsure back then, given that her writing went largely towards telling the story of women, and that her readers were all interested in books about women. So Jean decided to ask Najwa bin Laden, Omar's mother and Osama's wife, to hop on board so the narrative could tell the world her story, too. Omar asked his mother and came back to Jean with an affirmation. *Growing up bin Laden* came to be telling the world the truth about the two of them and their lives.

With time, Jean's doors were knocked on again, when an Afghan woman, Maryam Khail reached out to Jean through one of her friends. *For the Love of a Son* was the product of this meeting, outlining the difficulties of a mother fighting for her firstborn, who was brutally kidnapped and brainwashed into hating her by his own father.

Inspired by people who are courageous enough to stand up for their beliefs, by people who unconditionally help other people, and people who will not give up when they realize that others need them to come to their aid, Jean truly represents those about whom she writes. She has travelled to 68 countries across the world and met so many delightful, interesting people. Jean's take home is a priceless treasure—the knowledge that irrespective of nationality or religion, language or ethnicity, humans are mainly alike. Jean is firmly rooted in her belief that most people are good, and that most people want the same things—a good life and safety for their families. Add to the mix the odd exception: those who are vicious and do nothing but try to harm others, including everyone, from dictators to ordinary people, who only care for themselves. Jean grew privy to understanding another simple facet of human

beings—that there exists in each person, an inherent goodness that causes a person to forgive those who have harmed them. This is indeed a feat that cannot be easy, and yet, many people have that goodness in them.

The singular factor that helped Jean brave against all odds is her inherent unshakeable nature. No human being brings any fear to her heart, though the odd spider and high places can send shivers up her spine. But this does not mean that Jean's life has been threatfree. While in the past, Jean did receive a few threatening telephone calls, they have stopped, perhaps because she always keeps an unlisted telephone number. Besides, threatening letters came about, though nothing affected the fiercely courageous author. Jean was stalked too by two stalkers—one male and another female, both of whom it appears had psychiatric issues. The internet carries claims of Jean's stories being hoaxes or falsehoods and plenty of other lies, but she remains undeterred. A voice for plenty of women world over with true stories that involve important and serious subjects, Jean knows that her work is respected by thousands across the world, as their lives are impacted positively through her narratives.

Experience has showed Jean that there is no 'one size fits all' when it comes to the 'status of women' in the world today. She notes that there are some countries where women's lives are improving greatly, and there are others where women are going backward, such as today's Iraq, where the situation of women has worsened beyond the days of Saddam Hussein. Jean acknowledges that Afghanistan is the worse place for women on earth. Statistically, more women commit suicide to escape brutality in Afghanistan than any country on earth, while small villages in Pakistan are hotspots for the grand-scale violations of women's rights. In the neighbouring country, India, Hindu bride killings for dowry payments and the institution of child marriage thrive. Jean notes with

a catch in her voice that too many positive things are happening in India for the government to pay attention to as well as accept the occurrence of abuse of such practices. Jean's experience and travels have showed her that Yemen and Saudi Arabia are as much a hub of women's rights violations. While Jean admits that there is no country on earth where women have equal rights and where women are truly liberated, the key, she believes, lies in constant vigilance and governmental prioritizing.

An agent of change herself, Jean is a firm believer in the fact that a woman can be an agent of social change. While women who are educated and empowered may find it easier to bring in change, there are a number of uneducated women who nevertheless, have brought change to their countries and to the world.

The writing is on the wall: the pen is indeed mightier than the sword. Famous speeches have altered the future of a country. Books have redefined perspectives. Movies have changed lives. Rooted in her belief that writing can make a huge difference in the minds of people, which then creates change in entire countries, Jean's own story is an inspiring one.



Jessamijn Miedema

In many communities, talking about menstruation is taboo. Consequently, the women in these communities suffer silently under the burden of low hygiene and lack of healthcare and attention towards their well-being. Breaking the taboo and reaching out to many women through her initiative is Jessamijn Miedema.

EMBRACING THE TABOO

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Having grown up in a family of four children with her parents and a large acquired extended family in Sumba, one of the eastern Indonesian islands, Jessamijn had a fairly simple childhood. It revolved around the essentials, such as fetching water, bathing in a stream, cutting grass for the horses, stealing peanuts from the garden and going to a school where there was no teacher. Being with nature gave Jessamijn a strong natural relationship with all things green, and later as an adult, she understood how big a luxury that actually is. When Jessamijn worked with coffee growers in the Araku Valley, in South India, she enjoyed the possibilities that a fair and organically produced business seemed to have. It brought out the energy, the entrepreneurship in people, the wish to learn and make a change. To Jessamijn that felt like empowerment—there was no need for charity at all. When her family and she moved to Auroville near Pondicherry, India, Jessamijn got involved with Auroville Village Action Group (AVAG) and social enterprise creation for and with women in self-help groups. With Kathy Walkling, she co-founded Eco Femme. The combination of working with the people on a shared value base with women, and the potential of empowerment through self-organization and business, had plenty to offer. Washable pads were products that were practical, providing for basic needs and could have a large positive impact on the environment. That motivated her to start Eco Femme.

After a survey of 300 women to understand women's experiences, practices and needs in the field of menstruation, Jessamijn and her team conducted focus group discussions and seminars with women to share these experiences and their perceptions of different products—ranging from different disposable and washable napkins, tampons to menstrual cups—with respect to comfort, health, cost and disposal. The responses from the women were helpful and revealed the need for menstrual education and awareness programmes about the products. With the inputs in tow, the team formulated different pad designs which were tested with 800-plus women in rural Tamil Nadu. The data that was collected through this was translated into redesigning of pads and formulating ways to reach women best with these products. Though these pads are sold at cost price, it is a considerable challenge to 'get them out there' as marketing channels are not straight forward. Alongside this, the team also started a commercial range for India as well as for export, as there were women from self-help groups who could stitch and support a financially sustainable base for the team to keep doing all that they wished to do. Motivated by their international retailers, the team developed the Pad-for-Pad programme, whereby customers give one pad to a girl in India when they buy one for themselves. With these donations, the team began working along with government schools, and hold educational sessions with girls and gift pads to those girls interested. For this, the team also developed different educational materials that included booklets, posters, cycle beads and puzzles.

Washable pads are often up against the convenience of disposables and switching needs a push, an internal motivation, justifying the option either it being more economic, healthier, more environment-friendly, or a combination of these and other factors. The process often asks for some kind of an exchange or education to fuel the change in the thoughts and practice. As it is a sensitive, personal product that works best when it is personally communicated, Jessamijn finds that to work directly for each individual

involves a big challenge particularly when it comes to spreading the message. Nevertheless, she finds herself in a rather exciting phase of work where there is still so much space for creativity and learning. Her initial motivation stemmed from the need to be environmentally considerate, and she did not quite relate to the gender undercurrent that underlay her efforts. But by and by, when she began interacting and reading more on women's issues, she came to understand that there is a broad and untrammelled aggression against women everywhere. She finds herself now, being able to understand better how menstruation subtly, sometimes unconsciously, relates to a woman's sense of identity and is being widely perceived with so much negativity for the women with a sense of considering them thereby less worthy. She hopes that through her efforts, women can help each other to love themselves as women. At a more personal level, Jessamijn finds herself with goose bumps when she thinks of her sharing and educational sessions with women and girls. To her, it is wonderful to listen to their responses of relief, their interest to know, and most importantly, the happy hours they share together. To Jessamijn, these things make her feel human and connected to something bigger than her immediate circle of life.

Sensitization and awareness underlies Jessamijn's work—whether it is helping women see that they can talk freely about menstruation or about advocacy for the environment when women come to make responsible choices for their hygiene. In this, she notes, especially in India, where diversity is so high that dialogue is extremely important. Menstruation and women's health, in general, are cross-cultural issues with undertones of economics and social organization. What is nice is that the use of cloth for managing menstruation is an intercultural exchange: women have been using cloth all over the world and in India it is still a large and alive practice. In Tamil Nadu, approximately 40 per cent women only use cloth and another 20 per cent uses both cloth and disposables. Now it is being promoted from India within and to other parts of the world.

Having come thus far, Jessamijn notes the sheer joy in her work with her colleague Kathy and all the wonderful people who offer their help, particularly during sharing sessions with girls talking, giggling and learning about the physiology of their bodies and getting to experience a more open, sharing and positive attitude towards menstruation. All these accomplishments have been tangible milestones. With their current sales rate translating into 400,000 less disposables per year, Jessamijn feels that this is just the beginning. Seven women from their rural area are stitching the pads, and they all wish that this will grow.

Being a woman, to Jessamijn, is something that will always affect a woman in some way. It ultimately defines a part of who they are. Being a mother of two children, Jessamijn finds herself juggling many balls at a time where she wants to be with them as much as she wishes to be at her work. That said, Jessamijn, simply put, likes being a woman, and is connecting very strongly to it. The heavy violence against women everywhere makes her angry—an anger that does not stem from human justice values, but from being a woman.

Persevering in a way that easily and fairly combines the social and the commercial components with her line of work, Jessamijn feels these do not compromise, but rather complement each other, creating a leeway for one to strengthen the other. The feedback from customers means dealing with what women really like and want, and this makes them also more 'customer'-focused with the women they are connecting with through their social work.



Jin In

If love makes the world go round, action keeps it moving all the time. Action in a female form, Jin In, the founder of 4GGL, is a leader of a powerful movement that pivots around bold actions, beginning with ourselves, empowering the near billion girls in the developing world.

LIGHTING THE FIRE OF CHANGE

Jin In

If love makes the world go round, action keeps it moving all the time. Action in a female form, Jin In, the founder of 4GGL, is a leader of a powerful movement that pivots around bold actions, beginning with ourselves, empowering the near billion girls in the developing world.

Jin was born in South Korea, at a time when the country ranked among the poorest in the world. A girl's 'worth' in those days in South Korea was determined by the status of her father. Jin's father had passed away when she was seven. Consequently, she was deemed to be worth nothing without a father. But just as South Korea developed by leaps and bounds, Jin did, too. Today, her birth country is a model of economic success, one that the World Bank uses. The remarkable trajectory of her birth country was reflected in her own life's journey.

Jin was eight when she moved to the United States. Her mother knew the stigma and the social taboo that were attached not only to herself as a widow, but also to Jin and her older sister as fatherless children in South Korea. It was only as an adult that Jin learned about her father's family's wealth – nearly \$50 million dollars. However, this inheritance was for males, the most going to the first male. Jin says had she known about the money as a child, she might have been bitter and resentful. But being aware of the fact after working and advocating for girls and women all these years, the knowledge only confirmed her life's mission. She did not want revenge. She aspired to work for greater social justice.

Upon coming to the US, Jin met Barbara Crocker, a remarkable woman, who became her mentor for years to come. Barbara did not label Jin as a poor immigrant girl, raised by a widow. Instead, she taught her to change her world, demonstrating through actions centred on service and empowerment. She took Jin along to serve and revitalize poor communities. Jin took small steps, listening to, learning from and building bonds with the people. She especially noticed that it was the women and the girls who were most affected. However, Jin never saw it as women's work. She simply took action to change it.

At school, Jin also blossomed and excelled as her grade-school teachers gave her opportunities to let her talents and academic skills shine. This combined with skill building, hands-on experience she was receiving by working with Barbara, Jin quickly bloomed into a flower spreading its fragrance and beauty in the whole world.

Jin calls her mentors 'Sofia', which means wisdom in Greek. And for Jin, Barbara was the ultimate Sofia. So her world was rocked when Barbara became ill with lupus, a systemic auto-immune disease. She watched her sofia crumble right in front of her eyes. Though they lived in Houston, Texas, with the world's largest medical centre, ironically, nobody could cure her Barbara. It hit Jin hard to know that such an amazing woman who lifted up so many was not being lifted. So Jin went on to study medicine to find a cure, which set the foundation for her life's purpose—being a voice for the voiceless.

At medical school, Jin remembers her anatomy professor telling the class that the prototype human body is a 25-year-old, 70 kilogram man. When she asked, "What about the women?" Her professor stated that there was no prototype. Disheartened with western medicine which seemed to have left women out, Jin went on to study public health with a focus on women's health. But

even there, she learned that women were not recognized as whole beings. There was maternal and child health but she knew all too well that its focus was the child, not the woman.

Determined to change this, Jin decided to focus on an unique group, segment of the population, which she knew the world paid even less attention to, but has a powerful – if not, the most powerful – impact in societies. This was the adolescent girl. She not only researched and studied in depth about their health and positive development but she also worked with them in communities across the U.S. and heard their voices.

For her expertise and lifelong experience, Jin was hired to lead a new programme for the nation's girls at the U.S. Department of the Health and Human Services' Office on Women's Health. What was revolutionary about this programme was its approach—mind, body and spirit in a comprehensive way. Most importantly, Jin brought the voice of girls, front and centre, exactly at a time when the internet was also allowing all kinds of unheard voices to be heard.

Jin's programme was the first government health programme for girls, by girls. The girls' advisory group Jin created, called the *Sounding Board*, not only contributed to Jin's programmes but they also extended their voices to the National Institutes of Health, the Centres for Disease Control and Prevention, and other government programmes concerning girls' health and development. Jin's programme received a White House award and was ranked number one website for girls' health information by Google, MSN, Yahoo! and AOL. And Jin became a spokesperson and a champion for girls.

Jin sees girls as girls - not 'their' girls or 'our' girls but girls. She knows their life because she was one of them—the near billion girls in the developing world. Also Jin believes that our consciousness about them must change—from victims of poverty to powerful agents of change. If we value who they are and saw them as leaders, we would support and help them reach their greatness.

Jin started this mission—4Girls GLocal Leadership (4GGL)—and began the work in one community at a time. Soon, it magnified becoming a movement touching the lives of 500,000 girls around the world.

She sees every challenge as an opportunity to learn and grow. Here was a little girl growing up in South Korea defying what girls were not allowed to do; here was a young woman who realized that catalysing the process of realization of the true potential of girls across the world was her true calling; here was this inspiring woman who empowered many girls, worldwide, by helping them see that they are today's precious human beings and tomorrow's powerful changemakers. Jin also learned that her strength can be her weakness. Jin's strength always lay in her zeal to take action. To start 4GGL, she left her job and worked non-stop to reach as many girls as possible, forgoing her own basic needs and self care. In 2011, the doctors found a tumour in her thyroid with a drastic decreased level of thyroid hormone—the energy hormone. Her body had no more energy to give. She could not take action.

Rather than lamenting or wallowing, again Jin saw this challenge as an opportunity to grow. Remembering a powerful African proverb: if you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go further, go with others, now she does not go at it alone. She works with other leaders, groups and institutions like the US government and universities to ignite and fuel an even more powerful movement. And Jin focuses on hearing the voices of today's girls and young women, and developing the next generation of

women leaders where it is needed the most. She believes developing tomorrow's women leaders who will change their world is the most impactful action we can take to tackle today's global challenges.

To Jin, leadership is a journey, not a destination, and her gift is to see this in the girls even before they see it in themselves. She notes seeing and treating girls as leaders is revolutionary. Most people are working on issues - child marriage, education, sex trafficking, and on and on. And issues are like symptoms; there are too many to eradicate them all. It is far better to tackle the root cause by asking ourselves, "Why do girls face these horrible symptoms?"

Jin's trajectory has been peppered with milestones, but her greatest reward is to see the girls and young women she had worked with become unstoppable leaders. End of 2008, Jin addressed the young people at a National Youth Summit in Pakistan. She entrusted the young leaders, holding them accountable to be local agents of change. At the end of her speech, a girl came up and told her that she wanted to work with her. The girl was fighting honour killings in Pakistan, and unsurprisingly, she did not have much support from her community. Jin told her about empowerment—the power that can only come from within—and stayed in touch with her. Four years later, Jin watched her on a panel with other leaders at the Clinton Global Initiative. At that moment, she knew her work had come full circle. She had planted a seed of empowerment that grew into a power leader. Jin saw her as a leader even before the girl saw it in herself, exactly what Barbara did with Jin and what every one of us can do for girls around the world.

To Jin, being a woman is powerful. The natural ability of women —empathy, compassion, collaboration, communication, and more—to be the kind of leaders the world needs today. Therefore, being a woman is not a limitation but a gift! This awareness begins with thinking, followed by action.

Driven by the fire in her heart to empower girls around the world, today Jin is on an unstoppable path being a powerful champion and an ambassador for girls.



Karin Soweid

Anaïs Nin, the French-born novelist, once said, 'Throw your dreams into space like a kite, and you do not know what it will bring back, a new life, a new friend, a new love, a new country.' Doing her best each day to embrace all the challenges and opportunities it brings, Karin Soweid is a classic example of the flame of empowerment that has lit many candles.

EMPOWERING WOMEN TO EMPOWER THEMSELVES

Karin Soweid

Anais Nin, the French-born novelist, once said, 'Throw your dreams into space like a kite, and you do not know what it will bring back, a new life, a new friend, a new love, a new country.' Doing her best each day to embrace all the challenges and opportunities it brings, Karin Soweid is a classic example of being the flame of empowerment that has lit many candles.

Born and raised in New England, New Hampshire, in the United States, Karin was an idealist for her entire life. She followed her heart and drove into a relatively non-traditional career path as compared to many of her peers and family members, particularly that most of her experiences were with international NGOs involving travel and work based in developing world contexts. Karin pursued an undergraduate degree with international relations and French as two majors. She spent a semester in Paris as part of an experience that changed the way she looked at the world. When she came back, Karin was sure of pursuing a global career path. After she graduated, Karin was accepted to serve in the Peace Corps in Western Africa and was also accepted to graduate school. To be able to serve in the US domestic Peace Corps Program, Volunteer in Service to America (VISTA), Karin deferred her acceptance at both places. Following one year of service, Karin worked full time for an outreach programme of the school that provided international educational services to K-12 educators. During the period she also built her portfolio of global outreach experiences and programmes. When Karin took on her post-graduate degree programme, she was led to travel to the Middle East, where she worked for several international organizations, leading human capital initiatives in regions and countries around the

world. Karin has completed her Ph.D. in industrial/organizational psychology. Working from the palm of Beirut, Lebanon, Karin successfully defended her dissertation research on gender equity in the Arab workplace.

When Karin was in graduate school, she had her first official tryst with work on women's empowerment. She was recruited for an internship opportunity that took her to the US embassy in Vienna, Austria, for an entire summer. Karin was to assist with a conference in the ambassador's office. The conference was titled 'Vital Voices: Women in Democracy', where women stalwarts in business, law and politics had gathered from parts of North America, Western, Central and Eastern Europe. The conference functioned as a forum that would afford the participants a context to discuss challenges and obstacles in advancing in their professions. The conference drew women from similar professional backgrounds, but from very different parts of the world—some, even from countries that were emerging from years of war and conflict in Central and Eastern European countries. To Karin, being privy to the significant and meaningful exchange between these women from professional, emotional, social and cultural perspectives, was a tremendous experience. In hindsight, Karin remembers, not one of the women left the conference unchanged or unaffected by the exchange. The keynote speaker for the conference was former Hillary Rodham Clinton herself. To Karin, the event was a high-level experience, well outside the context of smaller scale gatherings in the NGO environments she had become more familiar with. To be oriented with the power of political figures and the awareness and action that can be created by virtue of their involvement was an eye-opening experience for Karin.

In 2011, even while Karin was working towards her doctorate goals, she began working on developing her consulting company, called SAWA Consulting. In colloquial Arabic, *sawa* translates to mean 'together', but, the name has an Anglophone link to it—as it

is an acronym which stands for Supporting the Advancement of Women's Achievement. The consultancy aims to provide services that work towards the advancement of women's achievements and in the process, serves to assist women's workforce, advancements and their overall success. Karin worked from scratch—developing the name, logo, vision, mission, website and social media presence to the services that it delivers to clients. She initially formed the consulting firm as a limited liability company in the US. Having relocated to Beirut, Lebanon, Karin is working on its legal formation there. She believed that the more she became reintegrated in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, in parallel with the completion of her research study, the more doors would open for her where she could actively offer her company's services. During this period, she also became familiar with similar initiatives in Lebanon and the MENA region and rather than compete with them she wanted to find ways to cooperate and collaborate with them towards providing services that will assist women's workforce achievements. Moving from a start-up to actively launching consulting services was quite a journey in itself, but having come so far, Karin aims to find a common space with other organizations in the MENA region to collaborate and come forth together.

Karin was also challenged sometimes, by having to find enough time in the day, week, month and year, to jump out of the frying pan of creativity, invention and innovation into direct delivery in the global marketplace. Juggling many balls as a mother, wife, daughter, sister, researcher, the CEO, entrepreneur and a curious global citizen, Karin found that she was always trying to discover new ways to adequately fulfil every identity in her life path. Discovering the right blend and balance for herself and for her path is a delicate journey, as Karin sees it. But, slowly discovering it with patience, time and sensitivity towards each situation's unique needs and interests, Karin is making a conscious effort to help overcome the challenges.

When Karin came to the Middle East in 2003, for the first time, she directly encountered attitudes about what it meant to be a woman and more specifically, an unmarried woman in the region. Though underlying it was a sense of curiosity about who she was, the seemingly superficial commentary on her marital status was initially unnerving. Karin came to the Middle East knowing no Arabic. One of the first words she learned was '*haram*' which meant 'shame'—a word used consistently with respect to her marital status and status as a foreigner remaining so far away from her own family. The use of this word is in direct contrast to how she is welcomed in the region which provides a duality to her experience. Karin met and married her husband in the Middle East and also saw how quickly the perception about her identity shifted from the independent expatriate female to the married dependent madame. It was mind-altering for her to experience this transformation of appearance and perception about her existence and role in society. Although such perceptions do exist everywhere and Karin knew it, especially since many of her friends and classmates married years before she did, she felt like the experience was amplified for her owing to the nature of her diverse experiences. With the good fortune of reflection on these personal and professional experiences during her doctoral journey, Karin has truly learned from every incident she encountered, with the added advantage that these experiences helped her to take her choices further, instead of serving as roadblocks or obstacles. No matter if her contributions are only a drop in a vast ocean, she believes in her ability to demonstrate for the benefit of her daughter, irrespective of any actual or perceived obstacles. And to achieve this, she believes that she can, will, and should utilize her abilities, knowledge and skills for the greater good. These experiences are the threads that form the fabric of her unique life path.

To Karin, being a woman on field is being a representation of strength, dignity, wisdom, nurturing others and extending compassion even when one wants to scream in despair. Karin's work has been largely geared towards raising awareness about

issues and voices that do not have a prominence in mainstream culture and media. To be a peace-worker in that sense, to her, means that she has the potential to influence a change in behaviours, attitudes and perceptions that do not allow humanity to evolve and progress harmoniously. As a researcher, Karin enjoys her chance to work in a context that allows her to continuously ask questions, rather than assume or think that she has the answers. When she hears someone expressing sentiments that indicate fear, suspicion, demonization or mistrust, she asks them questions about the how, when, where, whys of it all. It helps her to hear their answers and, in turn, she thinks that it may help them to hear themselves articulate their own answers as well. Through the media of speech, interaction, writing and involvement, Karin shares with every woman she meets, the core values that a woman needs to understand, to be empowered.

Karin hopes to become a subject-matter expert in the domain of equity at the workplace, allowing her a foot in academia for teaching and research purposes and a foot in practice, providing a context for consulting with organizations worldwide. Activities such as writing and rhetorical activism, to Karin, are foundational towards the initial stages of chipping away at the manicured surface that masks the complexities surrounding stereotypes and conflict. Karin has also helped catalysing an intercultural dialogue—augmenting the empowerment of women—with the Connection Point Dialogues at Peace x Peace. Through this experience and her doctoral work, Karin has come to realize that assigning language to the conversation allows a starting point. Providing the opportunity for participants or interested parties to take the dialogue further enables the exploration and consideration of unique and differing perspectives and analyses. To Karin, it is a human behavioural tendency to tend towards fearing what is not known. Therefore, the simple act of opening one's heart and mind to consider alternative perspectives provides a space for growth, curiosity and familiarity, overturning fear and suspicion.

Empowering women through her efforts at every turn, Karin Soweid is on a simple path—ensuring that women not only find a means to become empowered, but also that they sustain it by remaining so.



Katherine Tarazona

It is easy to shoot ideas down, lacing responses to the most creative of thoughts with pessimism. To keep coming back with creativity and optimism is a feat that only few can achieve—one among whom is Katherine R. Vasquez Tarazona, a woman of character with a solid smile on her face.

BREAKING THE GLASS CEILING

Katherine R. Vasquez Tarazona

It is easy to shoot ideas down, lacing responses to the most creative of thoughts with pessimism. To keep coming back with creativity and optimism is a feat that only few can achieve—one among whom is Katherine R. Vasquez Tarazona, a woman of character with a solid smile on her face.

Born in 1982, in Peru, Katherine was always an idealist. She grew up in an environment where her siblings provided her a fraternity of love, a safe and strong place where she still continues to find hope. Driven by her belief in change and integration, Katherine focuses on the exceptions to the rule that ideals are hard to defend even as the world is crumbling apart. She holds on to the faith that there are inspirational people craving for change, and by virtue of being thus, such people do not need any further definition. Katherine had always detested the system of labels, considering them nothing more than a provocation of language. The need to often have adjectives to define people is not something she approves.

When Katherine was 17, at High School, she started a programme where she worked with children and teenagers from an economically backward area. She spoke to a woman who told her something she would never forget: 'It is about them, you know. They have trust issues. However, they are young and filled with hope. They will trust you eventually. Make sure you understand this because once you leave them, they will lose this trust again and will become bitter. This has to be a long lasting relationship.' Katherine started the programme with the help of one of her greatest teachers. A remarkable effort, it was put together without any aid from the administration team and fellow students. As Katherine looks back, she is happy to note that the programme has been

rolling even till date. After high school, Katherine volunteered with the Peruvian 'Truth and Reconciliation Commission'. Compared to the holistic work of this initiative, her contribution was limited, but the experience was unique. Even today, when someone refers to the TRC's final report, Katherine cannot refrain from feeling that she is a part of it.

Peru suffered from a great illness—terrorism. However, Katherine, like others also knew that every citizen right had the right to have a safe living. Katherine pursued a degree in law. Even while she enjoyed pursuing the course, Katherine discovered that international affairs worked in tandem with her interests and needs. Armed with a Masters' in international relations, in 2011, she realized that it was not enough; she wanted to serve her community to help it improve. Katherine was set on her trajectory of becoming a diplomat, joining the Spanish consulate in Lima before she took on her Master's degree, as she found it to be the best way to achieve her dreams of serving her people. Her experience there changed her views on the diplomatic services and oriented her towards the private sector in the world of international relations. Having understood the relevance of the international community and the numerous actors that help states to shape their global standing, Katherine realized that her outspoken and free spirited ways did not let her take to diplomacy with as much ease, but she knew she could help shaping international policies.

After the experience she gained from her tryst with the world of international relations, Katherine had to make a plan to make her dreams come true. Figuring out what one could do is stressful at the age of 17, and gets nerve racking by the time one finishes school and certainly shocks one's nervous system at 28. When Katherine started out, she thought she wanted to work for international organizations but left the idea before getting her diploma. She began to invest faith in smaller stakeholders, especially social entrepreneurs. Within a few months of finishing her masters, Katherine joined the UN Volunteers task force, and worked with Delta Women, an NGO, on gender issues. She remained in touch with gender issues, and the experience showed her that we

live in a planet where equality is a word spoken by advocates and activists and mostly forgotten by policy makers and head of governments.

Following that, Katherine's dream soon took root. She worked her way up and is now an international affairs analyst for Contingent Security Services and an independent consultant for development projects. She is a freelance writer on international affairs, gender issues, and development, and an associate editor with the A38 Journal of International Law. In the process of developing her own social endeavors, Katherine will soon launch her own initiative. Much of what Katherine believes in pivots around the power of writing. Firmly entrenched in her faith in the power of the written word, she has wielded the pen in many creative ways through several different networks and outlets, speaking out against major issues that challenge women, the global economy and politics across the world.

Katherine has been strongly riveted to the idea of motivation, which like change, occurs from within. She recognized that quite like the law changes once society does, values are constructed and modified by the members of the community. Despite spending decades on issues such as climate change and its impact on the future generations, Katherine realized that the present generation seems to have lost track of innovation where it is needed, rather than where it can best be afforded. That was when she started to monitor change amongst a state of the status quo.

Challenges had always presented themselves: from being able to make the right decisions and choices, to balancing work and life. With a proclivity towards being a workaholic, Katherine realized that that facet of hers wound up being damaging to her lifestyle at one point. Her biggest challenge, though, was a matter of ethics. She encountered (and believes she will still see this in the

future) several situations where her integrity was at risk. Once, an employer had gone so far as to tell her that ethics should stay at school. He made a point about it not being relevant for the world. This belief was actually perceived in the work ambience. Standing in the opposite extreme, Katherine was challenged. When it comes to reality, her choices relate to one question: *Would I be able to live up to it?* That level of self-motivation has led Katherine to be aggressively harsh with herself on outcomes of her work, with an acute fear of disappointing anyone who has trusted her.

Battling her shadows, as she puts it, is amusing to her. Katherine believes that working harder helps not only overcoming doubts, but also to ensure that she does her part. It gets easier, as she puts it, when one looks around and sees people overcoming more severe and darker moments.

Katherine found herself increasingly sensitized to the cause of women—a characteristic that underlay her choice of joining Delta Women. A believer in the fact that women need empowerment, she is far from being a feminist despite craving for gender equality. Being a woman and the oldest one, Katherine sees that it does offer certain amount of expectations from the family. She had to learn how to hold a house when she was young. While traditional families used to believe that the older daughters should not get married so that they could take care of her parents when old, with traditions changing, she realized that they were more open to the idea of allowing one to study and pursue one's dreams. That invariably depended on one's family. Katherine has seen women subjected to degradation and abuse. It disgusted her to see that societies sit still, letting it all happen. She decided to be part of a different reality, part of the solution.

To Katherine, being a woman is being it all—from being a strong, feminine, smart and intelligent, diligent, hard working person to an over achieving, dreaming, inspiring, role model, a listener, a talker, a doer, a best friend, a passionate, sweet and understanding, crazy and ravaging individual. Having worked so far, Katherine finds that being a professional in the field of international relations with a yearning to work for a difference means becoming more aware and working towards giving others a voice.

When Katherine learned about the Iranian Green Movement during her Master's degree, she felt disgusted by her ignorance. She made a conscious effort to get out of her zone of comfort so that she sees and understands reality more closely. Believing in the principle of living in the present, Katherine observes that we are also the present for those who have lost hope. With this objective, she has embarked on a journey to make a difference to the lives of as many people as she possibly can.



Keren Batiyov

Walking her path to see
injustice wiped from the
face of the earth and to
see Israelis and
Palestinians living
together in one state as
equal citizens, Keren is a
force to be reckoned
with: questioning and
challenging injustice in
all its guises.

QUESTIONING, CHALLENGING AND EFFECTING CHANGE

Keren Batiyov

Learning from her every experience, Keren Batiyov's life of struggle and hands-on experience showed her the path to activism for the truth. She was the only child to a right-wing racist Christian father and a timid, but highly educated, mother. Inculcated with the belief that children had no rights, even lesser so if one is a girl, and that adult women had a few more rights than children if they were married and under the authority of a man, she was taught to believe that power and authority resided in males. As a child, Keren was told that she was never to question authority—not even her own faith or beliefs, for that was heresy. Despite being a pillar of the Christian community, her father sexually, physically and emotionally abused Keren. Her mother was only somewhat aware of the sexual abuse but felt powerless to raise her voice against the injustice. She would stand by while Keren's father beat her, begging him to stop, but in his anger Keren's father would yell at her to shut up, lest he 'spank' her as well. The force of these teachings, and the people who spoke them, was so strong that it was only natural for Keren to buy into the system, especially since she had to survive.

Not long after her marriage Keren began to question everything her father taught her to believe. Knowing that her marriage would not last, she did not want to have children but her husband did, and forbade her from having a cat that she desperately wanted simply because she wouldn't give him children. The two of them went to the pastor of the Southern Baptist Church that they were attending for counseling about her unwillingness to have children; the pastor determined that Keren was under the spell of

'demons' and performed several exorcisms. For years afterward she never spoke about the incident because of the shame she felt for being so malleable.

Two children and a failed marriage later, Keren went back to school to finish her undergraduate work at a regional extension of Indiana University and then on to graduate school. During undergraduate schooling Keren encountered two professors who took a genuine interest in her and opened the world for her. Her advisor and political science instructor pushed her to question everything and encouraged her development by assigning extra readings, engaging her in conversations, and getting her to attend events related to politics and social justice. Once, in his class, Keren watched a movie about the civil rights movement. What she saw stunned her—the police beating African-Americans as they non-violently resisted, fighting for their rights as citizens and human beings. She realized that the ideas that her father had put into her head were all lies about the movement. She had been taught that separate but equal was the way it should be, that it was what God intended, and these were just 'uppity Negroes' who did not know their place. Her father led her to believe that Martin Luther King was a communist and that the civil rights movement had to be squelched to protect the nation from communism.

Keren's other professor, her Russian language and international business instructor, also played a significant part in arousing her awareness. Exposing her to different cultures and their ways of being, he showed Keren that while other cultures were different they were no less valid and certainly not backward. He made sure she read widely and participated in cultural events. He encouraged her to enjoy the beauty, grace, and distinctive flavour of each culture. He and his wife also 'adopted' Keren's two children as they had none of their own. In graduate school Keren majored in Russian history, minoring in Jewish Studies and Women's Studies, focusing primarily on the human rights abuses that affected the Jewish community under the Czars and the

Soviets. That her own human rights were violated at an early age gave Keren the courage to advocate and speak for those whose human rights were being abused.

Following graduate school and a secondary-school teacher certification programme, Keren converted to Judaism. At 40, her decision to convert was the result of a long spiritual journey that included spending several summers in Israel volunteering on archeological excavations and doing research for graduate school projects, working for two years at Indiana University's campus Jewish student organization, the Hillel Foundation, and religiously having moved to the left in Christianity. Drawn by the emphasis on questioning everything, including God, in Judaism, Keren had a resounding 'yes' to offer at the *Beit Din* (Jewish Court) on the day of her conversion where two rabbis and a lay person questioned her about whether the conversion would be "good for her soul." After her conversion, she felt she had finally come home. Needless to say, her parents were angry and disturbed. Keren's mother told her for years that she was going to Hell and her father stopped speaking to her for many months.

Seven years after her conversion, Keren began to feel that she was not hearing the entire story from the Jewish community on the Israel–Palestine issue. She embarked on an extensive research journey, reading widely on the topic. An article by Marc Ellis, a Jewish Liberation theologian, entitled '*On the Jewish Civil War and the New Prophetic*', expressed his belief that it was the duty of all Jews to advocate for the oppressed and marginalized, and in this case, the Palestinians. His article resonated with the conclusions that Keren had drawn from her research and she took the plunge by speaking out for the Palestinian cause. The Jewish community in Harrisburg, PA, of which she was an active part, was less than pleased. Keren was threatened with the loss of her job and was made out to be an enemy of the community; one of her 'crimes' being "hugging Muslim women".

After a few years of speaking out and organizing a local Middle East Peace group, Keren knew that it was incumbent on her to do more. She searched for groups doing non-violent action in Palestine, and settled on the International Solidarity Movement (ISM), which she subsequently volunteered with in the West Bank in 2005, 2007 and 2010. She continues to feel a deep responsibility as a Jew to advocate for, and stand with Palestinians in their struggle for justice, as well as to provide Palestinians with a different Jewish face to counter the faces of the Jewish soldiers that routinely, and violently, enforce the illegal occupation.

The first time that Keren worked with ISM was during the olive harvest in October 2005. While the land in the West Bank belongs to Palestinian farmers, Israeli soldiers and settlers keep Palestinians from regularly farming their land and harvesting their crops. Keren's task, along with the rest of her group, was to accompany Palestinian farmers to their fields and act as a buffer between them and the soldiers and settlers, as well as to protect the farmers from the same. Israel gives Palestinian farmers only a three-day window to bring in their crops and that could be stopped short at the discretion of the soldiers and settlers. One of the olive groves was near Nablus where Keren was stationed. There was also a nearby settlement that was known for its violence toward Palestinians. Half-an-hour into their position on site, six Israeli soldiers came roaring up in a military jeep, to which the ISM negotiators responded by moving forward to meet them. Following a lot of back and forth conversation, the soldiers demanded that the ISM group leave at once. The group refused. Spying their Palestinian coordinator, the Israelis asked for the coordinator's ID, questioned him and told him to 'come with them'. In a jiffy, about six members of the group, including Keren, threw themselves over their coordinator to protect him from being arrested. The soldiers turned ugly and violent as their faces contorted in a rage like nothing that Keren had seen before. While the others were beaten, pushed and gouged, Keren was mostly shoved and pulled – perhaps because she was an older woman, in her 50s. Eventually the soldiers were called off by their captain and made as

if to leave. The journalists who had caught the action on their cameras were all forced to delete the prints and were violently assaulted.

A day before the incident, Keren spoke to the Palestinian coordinator who, though knowing that she was Jewish, told her frankly that he wanted all Israelis to leave their land. Keren tried to tell him that it was unrealistic to think that all Israelis would pick up and leave and that there were Israeli Jews, albeit a small minority, who were working alongside Palestinians for justice and freedom. He would not give ground, saying that he would expel them just as well. After the incident, he sought Keren out and thanked her for physically shielding and protecting him. The mistrust he had for her as a Jew evaporated. For Keren, it was a window into the world of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation. Since then, Keren has been engaged in the ongoing struggle for justice and peace for the Palestinians and derives inspiration from their resilience and resolve in the face of ongoing oppression. As Keren noted, “they put their lives on the line every day just by living another day—living well is also an act of non-violent resistance.” Despite the daily oppression and obstacles they encounter, Palestinians demonstrate an abundance of generosity and hospitality. Also inspired by the young internationals that come from all over the globe to volunteer with ISM, Keren finds that they put the lie to the belief that young people nowadays are self-absorbed and apathetic; they give Keren hope for the future by demonstrating their abiding confidence in what can be.

Besides volunteering with ISM, Keren’s efforts involved co-founding the Harrisburg Middle East Peace Group, the Gettysburg Arab-Jewish Dialogue Group, the Metro-DC chapter of ISM, and the Palestinian Gandhi Project. She has written poetry about the issue, participated in demonstrations, actions, conferences and workshops, spoken about the issue to varied groups that include places of worship, college classes, civic organizations, and peace groups. From baking challah each Friday for the lunch buffet at a

Palestinian restaurant as a way of demonstrating Palestinian/Jewish solidarity and cooperation, to running a vegetable garden called the 'Peace Garden' with the owner of the restaurant, Keren has been a supporter of the cause in her everyday living. Additionally, Keren is putting together a website that will feature the stories of Jews and Palestinians who are working together for Palestinian freedom and justice. The website will also include the voices of Palestinians in exile.

Despite the demands that her health makes on her, be it in the form of rheumatoid arthritis or fibromyalgia, Keren continues to fight with strength. Challenges also manifested themselves in the form of financial demands, as she had to raise her funds for the times she volunteered with ISM. Temporarily putting her in-field activism on hold, she is now focusing on herself, as unnatural as it feels, so that she can redeem her fitness for the service of mankind.

To Keren, being a woman is about her identity. As she puts it, it is not about her breasts—which she lost as she suffered from breast cancer in 2007. Keren never had the crisis that many women have over losing their breasts because she never saw them as her identity. Being a woman to her is bound up in the capacity to give life, both biologically and in providing service for others. Women are generally more nurturing than men and that is precisely why they are prominent in the field of human rights. This also makes women more inclined to be peacemakers and more apt to seek ways to cooperate and work together.

Walking her path to see injustice wiped from the face of the earth and to see Israelis and Palestinians living together in one state as equal citizens, Keren is a force to be reckoned with: questioning and challenging injustice in all its guises.



Lauren Wolfe

There is never a dearth of news: whether it is about a war crime in one country or a hostile war between two countries elsewhere. While most skim the news to be apprised enough of the events happening around them, there are a select few that are spurred into action. Ranking high among that select few is Lauren Wolfe.

GIVING A VOICE TO THE SILENT

Lauren Wolfe

There is never a dearth of news: whether it is about a war crime in one country or a hostile war between two countries elsewhere. While most skim the news to be apprised enough of the events happening around them, there are a select few that are spurred into action. Ranking high among that select few is Lauren Wolfe.

An award-winning journalist with a plethora of articles to her credit, appearing in *The Guardian*, *The Atlantic* and *CNN* among other major newsmedia, Lauren holds a position on the advisory committee of the International Campaign to Stop Rape and Gender Violence in Conflict. Lauren has donned many hats—having worked as a journalist for twelve years. Previously serving as the senior editor of the Committee to Protect Journalists, she focused on journalists and sexualized violence. Lauren studied at Wesleyan University and Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, and went on to win the 2012 Frank Ochberg Award for Media and Trauma Study, and four awards from the Society of Professional Journalism.

Lauren ran down stories about the sexual abuse in Catholic Churches,. she spoke to dozens of 9/11 survivors, ironworkers, and family members, and even investigated the disappearance of a strange sculpture of cherubs at the top of New York city's Flatiron building.

When Lauren was the senior editor at the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), she tended to project painful and traumatic stories. Lara Logan, the CBS journalist who was assaulted in Egypt in the peak of the Tahrir Square protests, was a board member

at CPJ. When Lauren heard the narrative, she was shaken by the reality that challenged women in every war front: the stories of sexualized violence were too many to be ignored. She wanted to document these stories, and while she was at the task, she realized that there were only a few cases already written up. She put them on public record, at which point more journalists began to reach out to her to share their stories. A Swedish journalist told Lauren about the assault she was put through when she was in Pakistan, which Lauren went ahead and documented. No sooner had she done that, than stories started pouring in from every quarter. Nearly 50 journalists shared their own stories, some, for the first time, even. One of the women who spoke with her was from Western Africa. She told Lauren about how she was gang-raped brutally for the kind of articles she wrote. It was the first time ever that she had spoken about the story—she had remained in silence, suffering great pain.

Lauren was moved by the extent of trauma these women went through – not only were they subjected to violence, but their societies forced them to remain silent because of the stigma it ascribed to them. While Lauren spoke with her, she realized that though each question tended to make the lady say that it was too painful to talk about, eventually, speaking about the incident was cathartic for her.

Lauren realized that many of these stories were not only ignored, but, also handled inappropriately by the media. There is a crucial way of putting these stories out there and we have a duty to make sure that the stories are told sensitively. This is not something that most media outlets do. When the lady from West Africa spoke with her, Lauren related to the silence that surrounded the story – it resonated with her. These were women who were violated brutally, but had to live not just with the violence, but in silence. Lauren remembers how in Guatemala, women don't tell their husbands of the rape or other sexualized violence they faced, lest they be thrown out of the house. In Sudan, women wind up leaving home and live alone in silence. Lauren came to understand

that victim-blaming was terribly wrong, and that drove her to try to represent oppressed voices through documenting true stories. That exchange made her care more about a beat than she ever knew possible, making the terrifying connection between what goes on in one's own backyard and the greater world at large.

At about that time, Gloria Steinem, an American feminist, journalist, social and political activist, began her initiative Women under Siege at the Women's Media Center. It was born out of the lessons that Gloria learned from the anthology *Sexual Violence against Jewish Women during the Holocaust* by Sonja Hedgepeth and Rochelle Saidel, and *At the Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape and Resistance—a New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power* by Danielle McGuire. Both books told horrific stories of sexual violence in two of the world's biggest wars: truths that were never spoken of, much less even known. The project came to be when the growing question was: *if we had known of such an occurrence, could we have stopped it from recurring?* Lauren became the founding director of the project, as she identified with the goal, after having documented stories on her own. Since then, Lauren has been at the helm of affairs in documenting and dissecting how rape is used as a tool of war in every instance of war the world has witnessed: whether the holocaust or the Democratic Republic of Congo.

When Lauren was still with the Committee to Protect Journalists, she spent time talking to other journalists about the incidents they encountered, and to help them cope with the difficult aftermath of suffering such things, every time they came back from a war zone. But it was when she participated in the Nobel Women's Initiative's 2012 Delegation to Mexico, Honduras and Guatemala, that over ten days, Lauren got to meet women from the three countries, seeing and speaking to as many as 25 to 50 women per day. They testified to violence that they went through in wartime. To say that the things she heard were brutal would be an understatement. One day, Lauren got to see *Granito*, a documentary movie made by Pamela Yates, who was also on the

delegation. Well into the movie, Lauren remembered she was crying, moved monumentally by the depiction. The next morning, when she got up to head to work as part of the delegation, she felt light-headed. Her heart was racing, and she felt as though she would pass out. That was when Lauren realized that she had had a panic attack. The stress from all the misery and painful stories she had heard had gotten to her. In that moment, Lauren realized that she hadn't cared for herself at all – she was so immersed in the travails of her sisters in another country.

The challenges in Lauren's professional trajectory were mainly just that: the fact that she could not, at some points, handle the trauma from listening to all the stories that came to her. Nevertheless, she makes it a point to take a break at a point when it becomes too much to bear, and with the help of two epidemiologists with whom she collaborates with for her work on documenting sexualized violence in Syria, she finds a way to counsel herself out of the trauma.

Lauren's work has touched many lives. She has addressed several forums the world over, on the issue of sexualized violence in war. Lauren was also called by the White House for her ideas on how they could improve their strategy of combating sexualized violence. But her real take-home is the gratitude she is shown. Many of the women whose stories she curated reached out to her with gratitude for the space that offered them catharsis. The West African woman, especially, explained that she considered Lauren to be a friend.

In the long run, Lauren hopes to make her work obsolete – in that such documentation would no longer be necessary, by coming to a stage with the world obliterating sexualized violence altogether. But that is not an easy goal, much less than that an individual

can achieve in a lifetime. So in the interim, she hopes to shift the way in which the mainstream media speaks about women, sexualized violence and rape.

To Lauren, being a woman is being a human being among equals. For far too long and far too commonly, a woman has not been thought of or respected in that way. It is incumbent on every woman to express in a world where she is denied her due that she too has a right to live life on her own terms. Being a woman on field had its own ramifications. Lauren had faced tons of push-backs from men. In one op-ed piece she wrote for the *Guardian* about how men go against their own self-interests in violating women. Within minutes, there were scores of hideous comments from men who completely missed the point. That evening, Lauren's personal website was hacked, and a picture of two soldiers, one a man, and the other, a woman, both pointing guns towards the viewer, with a caption saying *Get the f--- back to the kitchen!* Was posted on the website.

Lauren is undaunted by the threats she has faced. She is on a mission to keep making a difference in the field by telling the world of the stories it must know.



Lylin Aguas

Armed with a Bachelor of Arts major in economics, and working in one of The Philippines' biggest commercial banks as the first vice president for loan operations, Lylin Aguas she is an intrepid cause fighter.

REDEFINING ARMCHAIR ACTIVISM

Lylin Aguas

Armed with a Bachelor of Arts major in economics, and working in one of The Philippines' biggest commercial banks as the first vice president for loan operations, Lylin Aguas redefines the quintessence of armchair activism. While on the work front, Lylin manages an astounding record of over 200 loan personnel in 19 different loan and trade operations centres across her country, on the activism front, she is an intrepid cause fighter.

Having begun blogging and writing on women's rights, Lylin's passion for the cause makes her ensure that she sets time aside for it. Several years ago, when a friend asked Lylin to support an anti-poverty campaign called the One Campaign, she was intrigued by the fact that her contribution would make a difference. The group focused on the eradication of poverty and AIDS, through the medium of education. Focused particularly in African countries, the group endeavoured to target the most significant of problems they faced, through this endeavour. Lylin and her friend would often discuss the sad plight of people in poorer countries, seeing especially the effects such issues had on women and children. But at that juncture, it was all that they could do, because being grounded in a career and a family life did not let her go out on field to do more.

Lylin then chanced upon blogging, as a means to speak out against issues that she was passionate about. A couple of years ago, Lylin saw the famous photograph by award-winning photojournalist Kevin Carter—the image of a dying child on his knees and unable to move from dire hunger while a vulture stood watching a few feet behind him, just waiting to make him his prey. While

much of the world went back to their own lives after seeing the picture, Lylin decided that she would do whatever little she can because that picture moved her beyond words. Soon after, Lylin saw the horrific images of women caught in the middle of the conflict in Timor; women who, in the early days of the Timor conflict, were already being made and used as 'weapons of war', long before the phrase was used in present-day Libyan or Syrian conflicts. She watched, horrified and numbed as bodies of women turned battlegrounds. To this day, the memory of those images remain a constant reminder to Lylin—a constant reminder of the fact that something has to be done to make people aware of the abject poverty and atrocities in other parts of the world. At that point, Lylin wanted to try and make a difference, no matter how small. That was when she began to write, using blogs and the internet as a medium. Blogging and writing not only enabled Lylin to express her thoughts and her views, but also made others aware of issues that she found personally and socially relevant. Consequently, Lylin carved a niche for herself through the little spot in cyber space, talking about issues that challenged women in India, Afghanistan, Africa and her own country.

When Lylin started blogging, it was mostly to express what she felt about life in general, specifically addressing how events she read and heard about, and knowing and seeing people in difficult times, affected her personally. She would normally get emotional, and instead of forgetting the emotions or burying them, Lylin used to put them into words. Each article or story she wrote was personal and she expressed her emotions about each event. Lylin tried to relate it to everything around her, succeeding every time. She found inspiration to write more when even people she did not know started reading and commenting on her work, sharing their thoughts on her writing, acknowledging and appreciating what she did.

Lylin's efforts at blogging were both on her own personal platform, and also with organizations that included the likes of the UN Online Volunteering system, Delta Women and Initiative Nepal. As a Deltawomen volunteer, some of her articles were published in an online magazine that focused on Africa. Prior to that, Lylin also wrote several articles in World Pulse that got published in their online magazine *Pulsewire*. While appreciation came fast and in plenty, Lylin's crowning glory came when she was awarded with the US Presidential Volunteer Service Award, where she won a bronze medal for her efforts as a blogger with Delta Women.

Holding down a full-fledged full-time career, managing over 200 personnel nationwide balancing her family's needs, and catering to volunteer work, Lylin has found it to be a challenge sometimes—but the sheer passion to keep doing more and more of what she loves, keeps her going. Considering it a work in progress to be able to overcome the challenge, Lylin simply takes advantage of every little window of time in her full schedule, to write. Being fiercely independent for as long as she can remember, Lylin began working away from home right after graduation. That somehow influenced her being independent, both in thought and in action. If there was and still is anything that she fears, it is going to unknown places alone where she may be exposed to some danger like getting robbed or worse. Lylin has always been careful and avoided adventurism to minimize risks to herself, perhaps as an extension of the kind of sheltered upbringing she had experienced. Although her parents were protective of her and her sister more than of her brothers, Lylin never construed being a woman as an obstacle to anything. To her, being a woman is being able to stand up for her rights; to be able to make decisions for herself; and to stand on her own without being dependent on anyone else. To Lylin, being a woman is being able to sustain herself and to contribute to society like a responsible citizen.

Writing from the comforts of her home, her armchair activism, motivated, influenced and inspired millions and redefined the notion of activism. Being a peace-worker, to Lylin, means being able to reach out to people and making them aware that they can make a difference at making the world a better place to live in. The process of writing, to her is not just literally eliminating conflict or war by being in the middle of it and mediating to help resolve it but rather, it is about making people aware that major conflicts are going on in other parts of the world and can be resolved without people and nations rising up in arms against each other. It is making others aware that peace can be achieved through dialogue where the welfare and lives of people are considered of utmost importance over claims of territorial or geographical rights, power or money.

Lylin explains that it has been proven time and again that when people come together and call for unity for a cause, the world listens. With the medium of the internet, the pen is truly becoming mightier than the sword, as the reach of the written word has expanded on a much wider and faster scale. With fast-changing technology and ever-evolving platforms for verbosity, people are made aware of things happening outside the confines of their homes and in other parts of the world. Beliefs and customs discriminatory to other cultures that set back development in terms of education and economic sustainability need to change and people should be granted the rights to live with dignity. Lylin is a strong believer of the fact that such activism has become so strong over the years that its influence simply cannot be ignored. People react and take action, the nation reacts and the rest of world acts in solidarity for the cause. The underlying hope is that people should never forget the lessons learnt from such experiences.

Fuelled by the notion that intercultural dialogue is always important in any awareness-related work, Lylin deems it absolutely non-negotiable and critical to first accept and understand that each country has a unique and varied culture that can greatly influence an individual's behaviour and its society. An intercultural dialogue is a basic means to understanding our differences and controlling our expectations of others. The significance of this came to the fore during a discussion that Lylin once had with her friend about someone whose behaviour and attitude used to appear distasteful to her friend. It was an exchange about whether it was simply the person's individual nature or the kind of culture the person was born into, being from a different and very patriarchal country. While Lylin tried to understand that the differences in culture can cause a wide gap in understanding the other's behaviour, she also learned that maintaining an open mind about cultural differences can greatly help in understanding the other. With inspiring maturity, Lylin explains that sometimes it requires a really widely open mind to acknowledge that aside from culture individual upbringing and personality shows the uniqueness of each person. But, no culture can be solely responsible for one's behaviour. As Lylin puts it, this is where the individual uniqueness of the Malalas of this world come in that surpass what strong cultures dictate.

Words continue to flow from her hand, as Lylin makes an earnest plea to the readers to respond to the myriad challenges faced by humanity. Even as much of the world is focused on the disintegration of personal ties and their sacrifices on the altar of hatred and demonization, Lylin brings in a breath of fresh air and evokes hope for a better tomorrow.



Marta Rusek

You see a young lady in stunning red shoes at the grocers. She tells you that she will keep walking in red shoes until the world finds a cure for HIV/AIDS, and to educate people about the disease and the suffering that infected people go through. You are left inspired. Doing just this is Marta Rusek, the founder of Red Shoe Monday.

WALKING IN RED

Marta Rusek

You see a young lady in stunning red shoes at the grocers. You cannot help but appreciate the shoes. You tell her you think her shoes are great. She turns to you with a bright smile, thanks you and tells you that she wears red shoes every day. You wonder if you have walked into a nut. But you ask why, nevertheless. She tells you that she will keep walking in red shoes until the world finds a cure for HIV/AIDS, and to educate people about the disease and the suffering that infected people go through. You are left inspired.

Doing just this is Marta Rusek, the founder of Red Shoe Monday. With a degree in filmmaking, Marta was all set to live the Hollywood dream. But a crumbling economy and a beaten job sector left her without employment. With the economy slowing down, Marta found it hard to find a job with a film degree. Since graduation in 2007, Marta did not get to hold down a full-time job. She worked with contract positions and part-time jobs. After two years of working at Apple retail, she applied to the Peace Corps, thinking that even if she did not get through, she could be happy she tried. Following success at each checkpoint in the application process, Marta joined duty as a Peace Corps Volunteer in 2011. Today, Marta Rusek lives in the Greater New York City area, pursuing her passion for storytelling through video and social media.

Up until college, Marta had not known much about HIV/AIDS. Besides a one-week-long course on HIV/AIDS, she also saw a three-part-documentary on the PBS show *Frontline*, entitled 'The Age of AIDS'. Marta learned that AIDS originated in Sub-Saharan Africa, where the virus might have been transferred from an ape to a human when a hunter was bitten. But it was the experience at

Peace Corps that opened her eyes to the realities of the people who had the disease. Marta realized that the virus destroyed one's immune system regardless of how it was contracted. She noticed that the numbers were rising though the disease was certainly capable of being prevented and the rise was only because of a lack of awareness.

With Peace Corps, Marta worked in The Gambia, belonging to a team spreading awareness on HIV/AIDS prevention. A rather young country, with half its population aged below 14, The Gambia is one of the smallest nations in Africa. It is vulnerable to the spread of HIV owing to the prevalence of sex tourism and the prevalence of unprotected sex between married individuals and their unmarried boyfriends/girlfriends. Marta understood how minimal is people's awareness about the cause. On World AIDS Day in 2011, she was handing out pamphlets and condoms to people walking down a busy street in Fajara, along with representatives from the National AIDS Secretariat. Some people giggled at the sight of the condoms. Some others smiled politely, while walking away without taking the condoms. One man, however, walked up to Marta and told her that he was a 'good man' who would never need to use a condom, because he was 'not having sex with people like that'.

The people in The Gambia were frightened of AIDS, and did everything in their capacity to assert that they would be good enough not to get it. This man reinforced that notion, telling Marta that AIDS was something that happened only when a person did something bad. She told him that there are people in the world that were forced to have sex against their will—whether through rape or prostitution—and those women have children that may motivate them to make money through sex in order to provide for the family. In those situations, AIDS spreads and it is at no fault of those that are forced into such situations. He refused to listen to logic, and simply disagreed. Marta realized there was so much lack of awareness. She also wondered if he would have been more receptive to her message had she been a man, not a woman, telling him the same. While talking to another volunteer at Peace

Corps, Marta gathered that there were Gambians who said that they would rather keep quiet and infect their wives than speak out. Having AIDS attracts stigma and discrimination.

On the same day, Marta took a taxi to get back to the Peace Corps transit. The taxi driver began talking to her, in the hope of trying to make her his wife, or so Marta thought. This, she says, was something that happened without exception, because many Gambian men believe that marrying a foreigner would be a way out of their country where unemployment is high, and the promise of a good life in Europe or America sounds too good to pass up. When it happened before, Marta wormed her way out, lying that she was already married. But that day, it went a different way.

The taxi driver told her she was beautiful. He asked her for her phone number—when they reached the destination. As Marta opened the door to leave, she told him she could not, lying that she was gay. Almost immediately, he told her that he was gay, too. Marta asked him if he knew what he meant. He did. ‘I cannot tell anyone,’ he told her. At that moment, she did not realize that being gay could attract the death penalty under Gambian law. She would later reflect that it was a lesson well learned. Marta saw an opportunity to educate him on protecting himself when having sex with men. She told him that despite his sexual orientation, he had to protect himself from sexually transmitted infections, including HIV.

Earlier, she had demonstrated culturally appropriate condom use to a room full of high school students and adults using a rubber penis and condoms provided by Peace Corps. Her equipment from the demonstration was still in her backpack. In forty minutes, Marta taught the cab driver about proper condom use, had him practice applying the condom on the rubber penis, discussed the importance of getting tested for HIV at local health clinics, and also emphasized the importance of confidentiality, between HIV

testers and their patients. She did not see him again until her last day in The Gambia. Marta remembers that he drew his taxi up to her near the transit home, and told her, 'It worked! Everything you taught me is right!'

That woke Marta to the reality that people could change their behaviour, through honesty and proper instruction.

An unfortunate stomach infection forced her to cut her service short, because nothing seemed to work to cure her predicament. Marta went back home in the USA, when she decided to launch her very own HIV/AIDS awareness movement. When she saw that people used fashion to express themselves, such as wearing black as a sign of mourning and pink to show solidarity to the cause of Breast Cancer Awareness, Marta realized that she could do something on the same lines for HIV/AIDS awareness. Since red has been used historically to represent the AIDS struggle, Marta decided to pick one day each week to wear red shoes, and decided on Monday. With time, she decided to wear red shoes every day. Marta then decided to get more people to join her in the movement. That led her to begin a page on Facebook, called Red Shoe Monday, on 16 January 2012. She deliberately chose Monday for the title of the campaign because, in her words, 'nothing fun happens on a Monday!'

Her campaign received a lot of attention over just a matter of few weeks, to the point that once, when Marta got delayed and did not post until Tuesday she had many people asking her what happened. That was the sign for her to ensure that she would take this movement forward always. Besides posting photos of red shoes that Marta wears, each Monday, she also marries other causes with her main cause. On the International Day of the Girl Child, Marta put up a picture of red shoes the size of a little girl's foot. On New Years' Eve, she put up a picture of the Red Shoe Drop event that happens annually in Key West, Florida. Marta is not focusing on the doom-and-gloom path, but rather, on attracting supporters through fun and humour. With fashion as her medium

of expression, Marta has struck a chord with people who start off by checking out the style quotient, but stick around nevertheless for the cause they are supporting.

Marta is equally vocal about her support for the cause of women's rights. She believes that girls like Malala Yousufzai made change just by being alive. Deriving inspiration from them, Marta is a fierce fighter for equality of women.

With her goal when she started, originally, being to see if the movement would have interested followers, Marta has come a long way. Now, she is working towards extending the scope of the movement to include not just the present Facebook page, but also a blog with detailed content that would assist awareness. Marta is also looking to collaborate with organizations locally, to be able to host events, where if people attend wearing red shoes, a portion of their ticket prices will be donated to local AIDS organizations. At some point in the future, Marta hopes to have a tie-in with shoemakers so that for every pair of red shoes sold, her cause could donate a portion of the funds to AIDS organizations. That way, as she says, people will not just be buying something beautiful, but also doing something beautiful.

While at some point later the movement may seek funding, Marta is not keen on looking for monetary assistance in a big way right now. All she wants are supporters and people who understand the cause, and are willing to share the awareness they have. Sometimes, Marta encounters people who resist showing their support. They do not want others to know that they support such a cause, lest they be thought of wrongly. This stems from a lack of awareness and the huge stigmatization that emanates from a lack of understanding of the disease itself.

Marta wants more and more people to come out in a show of support for the cause. Initially, her family did not quite notice that she wore red shoes all the time. But when her cause became very significant for her and began to involve more attention, they supported her entirely. Even at her aunt's funeral, people waited to see if she wore her red shoes. And she did. Marta has a simple logic that drives her. People who have HIV have it for 365 days a year, every year, until they die. HIV-positive individuals do not have the luxury of taking a break from their condition. As they do not get a break, Marta does not take a break from wearing red shoes. And so, she has decided to wear them until the world finds a cure for HIV, once and for all.



Medea Benjamin

The character of war is changing today: whether it is the slowly dwindling human engagement, or the technology that is being used to aim at specific targets. But war is war, and comes with a catena of destructive ramifications. Fighting the very idea of war is Medea Benjamin.

CODE PINK SPEAKING

Medea Benjamin

The character of war is changing today: whether it is the slowly dwindling human engagement, or the technology that is being used to aim at specific targets. But war is war, and comes with a catena of destructive ramifications. Fighting the very idea of war is Medea Benjamin.

Born Susan Benjamin, she changed her name to Medea, after the Greek goddess by the same name. She grew up in a Jewish household, and these younger years became a formative experience in her life. While the US-Vietnam war unfolded before her in the 1960s, she found that nearly every family had a stake in the war. Young men were drafted to join the army from all over the United States. They were brothers, boyfriends, fathers, uncles, friends and acquaintances. Every face had a name, and each had a family that was worried as they bade goodbye and crossed the seas to fight a war. Everyone talked about the war, and it was all that made conversation. It hit Medea doubly when she saw people in her high school get drafted into the army, including her sister's boyfriend. He was a sweet boy, innocent to say the least. But six months after he had gone off to war, Medea remembers, he sent her sister a letter with the ear of a Viet Cong as a souvenir. It struck Medea how quick and easy it was to take a nice boy and turn him into a killer, into someone who dehumanizes enemies and considers body parts as necklaces to be worn with pride. At 15, Medea woke up to a reality. She came to understand that her government was lying about the need to go to war, and keeping the people under the threat of fear so that they would support an unjust war. She began organizing protests at her school, and then

came to realize that there was a bigger anti-war movement that she could be part of. She formally began as an activist when she was just 15.

When Medea was 17, she travelled to Mexico, where she was hit by the depths of poverty something she had never seen before. Here was a world where one had plenty, while another did not. While someone could be born into a family with privileges, another might get barely anything to eat. It seemed so unjust, and Medea was marked for life. The next year, she went to Guatemala, and studied Spanish. There, she learned about her government's actions and choices from a different perspective. From local students, she learned that the US government had overthrown their democratically elected leader in 1952, and was supporting dictatorial regimes, paving the way for US companies to take their resources.

From that point on, there was no looking back. Medea went on to study nutrition and economics. Through a major part of the 1990s, Medea's efforts were diverted towards opposing unfair trade as promoted by the World Trade Organization, and exposing the unfair labor practices of big US companies like the shoe giant Nike or the clothing company The Gap. She got millions of dollars back to pay workers and help improve some of sweatshop conditions. She also worked hard to push Starbucks and other coffee companies to start carrying fair trade coffee to guarantee decent compensation for the farmers.

Today, Medea is an author of eight books, and has been an official observer at many international elections. With over 40 years of experience in tow as an advocate for social justice, Medea Benjamin is the cofounder of two movements, CODEPINK (a women-initiated peace group) and the international human rights organization, Global Exchange.

Right after the attacks on the World Trade Centre on 11 September 2001, the Bush administration came up with colour codes to depict the degrees of danger for public awareness. Medea and her colleagues thought the colour codes were merely a ploy to keep the population afraid and justify military intervention. They decided to counter this fear-spreading tactic by starting their own colour code, Code Pink, as a jocular response to the heavily male-dominated of war-mongering. But what started in frivolous nonchalance soon grew to take the world by storm. The women who formed CODEPINK went on to travel to all the places where the United States was involved militarily, and met with peace groups there, particularly women's groups. They would put pressure on the government through creative protests, sometimes getting arrested as they would stage die-ins and interrupting meetings. Once, the women went on a hunger strike outside the office of a pro-war Senator. They remained steadfast, and on the day one of them collapsed, the embarrassed Senator begged them to begin eating whilst he would arrange to have a meeting to ensure that negotiation would be a modus operandi. With these kinds of tactics, Medea and her group helped avert a possible war with Iran. At first, they did try to be serious and linear with their protests. But the traditional-style protests seldom got attention, and did not result in change, so they became more creative. While protest constitutes one part of their endeavours, CODEPINK also has a research wing that serves to compile and offer well-documented research on conflict and peace. CODEPINK has been instrumental in training thousands of women to find and use their voices. Bringing women from all over the world to Washington DC, they help women with training that they can use to effect change when they go back to their homes.

With the changing face of war with technology, Medea has come to see a vast difference in human engagement in war. While it was easy to mobilize against the Vietnam War, since nearly every family had a stake in it, it was not so easy now with Drone Warfare. As push-button warfare replaced men on the field, there was a huge disconnect because civilians were ignorant of the

impact that these drones can have, as they kill so many innocent people and stir up more anti-American sentiments and hatred that would take years to heal. Inspired by the need to tell the real stories of those affected by remote-control warfare, Medea began researching for and writing a book. She went to Pakistan, Afghanistan and Gaza, and spoke to the direct victims. The average civilian does not see these victims: they are reduced to a mere statistic, labelled either as a militant or collateral damage. She felt that it was her duty as a citizen of the United States to get people to understand what their government was responsible for, and all that the media did not tell them.

Medea's work has faced bouquets and brickbats. In 2005 she was one of the 1,000 exemplary women from 140 countries nominated to be nominated for the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of the millions of women who work for peace across the world. In 2008, Medea took numerous delegations to Gaza after the 2008 Israeli invasion. She then organized the Gaza Freedom March in 2010, participated in the Freedom Flotillas and opposed the policies of the Israel lobby group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC). She received the Martin Luther King, Jr. Peace Prize from the Fellowship of Reconciliation in 2010, and in the next year, she was at Tahrir Square during the Egyptian uprising. A staunch supporter of human rights, she was part of a human rights delegation to Bahrain in support of democracy activists in 2012. She was tear-gassed, arrested and deported by the Bahraini government.

Some of the biggest obstacles Medea faced in her trajectory were simply the strength of the powerful lobbies that benefit from keeping the US in a state of perpetual war. Another problem as a woman was the difficulty of being taken seriously and being seen as an 'expert'. Armed with two degrees, being the author of eight books, as well as an expert on drones has not been enough of a springboard for her voice to attain the weight it deserves. Medea is outspoken and unfazed, nevertheless. As she sees pro-war

proponents who in truth have been instrumental in allowing war crimes to happen and being conferred plaudits, she tries to interrupt their speeches whenever she can, telling the audience that the speaker is a war criminal.

She ran for a Senate once. Since she considered the two-party system corrupt, she did not run as a Democrat or Republican, but as a Green Party candidate. However, she realized that in the US system, third party candidates are not taken seriously. Furthermore, the woman she ran against in office wound up being a great proponent of the CIA's drone warfare and received significant funds from the weapons manufacturers. Medea recalls that her opponent was part of the corrupt system where corporations help get people elected who then do their bidding.

Being a woman in the field of peace might bring its own challenges, but for Medea, it has its own blessings. To her, being a woman was what gave her the chance to give birth to the two wonderful daughters she has, for which she is immensely thankful. To her, being a woman means being sensitive to others and their feelings, and to enjoy the ability to have the easy camaraderie with other women that she enjoys. To her, being a woman means to work harder just to be effective in a man's world. But on the positive side, it also means that there is lesser pressure to conform to the traditional place in society that is reserved for men, giving her incomparable freedom to explore different lifestyles and interests. To Medea, being a woman allows her to easily weep at suffering, and to easily laugh at the joys of life, and it is this swing of emotions that makes one appreciate the depths of feeling that is inherent in a woman.

Waging a war against the institution of war itself, Medea Benjamin is on a mission—a mission that will hopefully see the sun rise and set on a world that is peaceful and capable of resolving its differences without resorting to war. Until then, CODEPINK will remain the colour of activism, protest and an undaunted fight for change.



Melanie Blanding

If actions speak louder than words, and a picture is worth a thousand words, freezing reality in pictures is a very strong action, indeed. Melanie Blanding, a photojournalist with a heart, captures reality on film.

FREEZING MOMENTS IN TIME

Melanie Blanding

If actions speak louder than words, and a picture is worth a thousand words, freezing reality in pictures is a very strong action, indeed. Melanie Blanding, a photojournalist with a heart, captures reality on film.

Born and raised in Roanoke, Virginia, it was while she was in senior year at high school, that Melanie's interest in photography began in earnest. Until that time, she was interested in writing and joined the school newspaper team. Since they did not have a staff photographer, they told her that she would have to shoot her own photos if she wanted her work published. Undaunted, Melanie borrowed her parents' camera and photographed the varsity football team in action at a home game. With those pictures, something changed. She simply could not go back to writing after that night. Photography had her hooked and she took on the role of the staff photographer for the remainder of the year, culminating in pursuing photojournalism at Western Kentucky University.

Working first in the United States, Melanie gradually began to work overseas as well, starting with documenting marriage practices in the Comoros islands, off the east coast of Africa. Following that, she worked all over east Africa, parts of Europe, the Dominican Republic, Ireland and the United Kingdom. After Melanie worked in the DR Congo, documenting violence against women using photography, her work was used to raise awareness for the challenges that the women faced in the crisis. The photographs were recognized by a group called the Alexia Foundation in the US, which offered her a scholarship to study photography in London for a semester. A journey of photographing presidents in the White House, securing fellowships and

grants, attending conferences and working in over 23 states followed. Melanie has come to learn and understand so much about her own country, culture, economics and politics, as also of other countries thanks to her involvement with photojournalism.

On Melanie's first trip to the DR Congo in 2005, she was part of an advance team sent by a humanitarian group seeking ways to invest resources from their organisation to meet needs in the local community. The team travelled to South Sudan as well as the DR Congo. Mainstream media in the USA had extensively covered the impact of violence in Darfur; however, with limited coverage of war in the Congo, Melanie was unprepared for the stories she would hear about violence against women in the DRC. Like many Westerners at the time, she presumed that the region was comparatively peaceful and well on its way to recovery from the 1994 genocide, something that had occurred 10 years back. But she was so wrong.

Learning about the experiences that women had with gender-based violence—especially with the knowledge that she was of the same age as many of the survivors—opened her eyes to a new possibility. She decided to use her camera to communicate and reach an international audience for Congolese women, victims of war. If nothing else, at least the women would know that they had not been forgotten. Hearing the stories of victims of sexual violence and realizing the extent to which families and communities were affected by extreme atrocities, Melanie was determined to return and contribute in a way that could alleviate their sufferings and help women rebuild their lives. Melanie returned to eastern Congo in 2006 with her filmmaker brother and their friend, a writer. She decided that she would document the impact of rape as a weapon of war in earnest.

Melanie was initially concerned that the women might be reluctant to speak out about the nature of their attacks because of taboo and stigma against the victim. Once she began working on the project, she was overwhelmed by literally hundreds of women who

wanted their stories on record. By word of mouth, women came to Melanie from surrounding villages when they heard that she was in the area, and about how she was hoping that going public with crimes against women could help bring about change and an end to the violence so many women had suffered. Silence had been eastern Congolese women's greatest enemy. They would not be silent any longer.

Living and working out of a guesthouse inside the hospital compound in Bukavu, South Kivu, Melanie got to know the women casually by sitting with them and chatting while they worked on projects like sewing and weaving. With as much as three months between each surgical procedure for reconstructive care, the women spent their time learning new skills which would help them become financially independent when they returned home. Melanie played card games, learned regional dances, sang and played the drums with the women, becoming friends with many of them, and was able to learn their stories in a less invasive way. She spent time talking to women at the hospital and in the affected villages close by, explaining how she wanted to help as best as she could. She was not swooping in to document stories and then disappearing, instead she spent two months in the hospital, an unheard of luxury for a news daily. Melanie ensured that each of the women were comfortable with her, and felt ready enough to express themselves and share their stories.

Following her time in the DR Congo, Melanie's return to the USA made her realize that she was coming home to a safe, welcome environment where she did not have to worry about her survival on a daily basis, the way so many women in eastern Congo must. She struggled with guilt about being able to pack up and leave while the women she befriended and thousands more throughout eastern Congo were stuck facing the same risks and violence they have been subjected to for more than a decade. Though Melanie had been overseas before, this was the first time she had witnessed first hand, atrocities that humans are capable of committing.

She was shocked at the energy devoted to build all the tactics that could humiliate and destroy other people. It shook her to the core and raised ethical questions about the nature of humanity, her place in the global community and the personal responsibility she had now that she knew what was happening.

While in a small village in South Kivu, DR Congo, a group of survivors had gathered to share their stories with Melanie. One of them stood up in a room of over 100 women and as she spoke, she began taking her clothes off, describing the scars she had been left with after being brutally attacked by a rebel group. Since the building where they were meeting was still under construction, Melanie invited any woman who wanted to show her the physical impact of their attack into a private, empty room and let them strike the pose they wanted, to tell their story. She had time to photograph and interview about 15 women before it got too late to stay out in the village, when the risk of a rebel attack on the road was still too common.

Through her experiences, Melanie came to understand that everything from market demands to political decisions had the potential to create conflict globally and it is not possibly practical to assume that one person can set things right. A concerted national and international effort towards protecting the interests of a country in distress is a necessary precondition for change. Melanie decided that she would remain true to her personal responsibility of being a communicator, bridging the gap between the ignorant and the ones with stories the world needs to hear.

Disappointed by the lack of awareness the West had regarding its impact in conflict regions, Melanie, her brother and his friend were inspired to start the non-profit organization, Women in War Zones, as a response to their work in the DR Congo. The organization worked as a storytelling initiative that would channel resources back to Panzi Hospital, in Bukavu, DR Congo, where

much of the work was documented. Her brother, Scott Blanding and his friend, Brad LaBriola made a film focusing on victims of sexual violence as well. It all led to the creation of the Wamu Center for literacy and education in Panzi, in memory of one of the young women whose life they documented most extensively.

Studying culture hands-on inspired Melanie to take up a Masters' degree in visual Anthropology at the University of Manchester, England. Her love for the humanitarian angle of photojournalism drove her to take up humanitarian and social justice-oriented photography. Taking photos with a purpose in mind, with the intention of making a difference, Melanie worked closely with her brother and his friend to start a company called Made Known, to produce films about injustices that are hidden so that the stories of those who suffer might be made known. The intention was to enable the global community to witness secret injustices and evoke a response from them.

Working hard to build a sustainable business, Melanie finds that it is not easy to make it in documentary work and not all of the work is glamorous. Self-employed photographers spend little of their time actually creating images and quite a lot of time pitching stories to potential clients as well as all the administrative work involved in managing a small business. Work has the potential to become incredibly repetitive anywhere. There's no 'pet-of-the-week' assignment, an affectionate joke among newspaper photographers, but the stories of war, famine and poverty throughout Africa are unfortunately very common, and take an emotional toll on concerned story-tellers. Melanie spends a lot of time in orphanages and hospitals, has been working on a number of short-term assignments for organizations needing updates in annual reports, and feature stories and portraits for editorial publications, covering stories like the drought in the Horn of Africa.

Working in the DR Congo in one sense looked like a failure to Melanie as the violence was not stopping and it was difficult to get stories of such a sensitive nature published anywhere. Melanie was told that discussing sexual violence against women was not fit for polite conversation in the Congo or in the West. Melanie found herself dealing with the guilt and frustration of being unable to do enough for the women. It was not that anyone expected her to solve all the problems; she needed to give herself the freedom to do what she could and not agonize over all that she could not. She would not be able to continue covering humanitarian issues if she had not come to that realization; being overwhelmed debilitates a person and then they are not useful for the work they intended.

Growing up with three brothers, Melanie never quite thought much about being a woman or a girl, she was simply expected to keep up with them no matter what it was, whether sports, school or playing about in the neighbourhood. There were never moments where she was forbidden from doing something or expected to do something in a certain way because she was a girl. That led her to grow up believing that there was simply one truth to remember—that if there were obstacles, ‘no’ was not an answer: one simply had to find a solution to overcome them.

Living in a visually saturated world where seeing is believing, with the emphasis is doubly so because of digital social media, Melanie finds that there is plenty of room for sensitized photojournalism. Historically, misery has been capitalized upon, but with time, that has changed as humanitarian organizations are more inclined towards creating dialogue featuring images that truly depict resilience and strength of spirit. Delving into her own repertoire of memories, Melanie remembers that children were often very willing to laugh—their incredible ability to adapt and sense of curiosity act as a driving force. Having worked extensively in east Africa for the past decade, Melanie recognizes that there has been a paradigm shift in the mindset of most global communities

towards Africa. From a time when the continent was seen as a dumping ground of sorts, where the people were seen as destitute and needy, and generally unable to help themselves, mindsets evolved to recognize the incredible capacity of the local community to create effective, sustainable change from within. From the start of her work overseas, Melanie recognized and acknowledged her inability to work as a photojournalist without the full collaboration of individuals in the local community.

Working to document stories and share them with the world through her stunning photographs, Melanie walks on a path to tell the world the hard truths it should know, the truths it should be aware of, the truths it should take action on.



Mila Pilz

A career is just one angle of life. But for the lucky few, there comes a confluence of the twain, where one's core ideals of life find themselves pruned towards the notion that underlies their career choices. For Mila Pilz, pursuing a career in conflict resolution was a matter of natural choice.

BRIDGING GAPS WITH COMMUNICATION

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A career is just one angle of life. But for the lucky few, there comes a confluence of the twain, where one's core ideals of life find themselves pruned towards the notion that underlies their career choices. For Mila Pilz, pursuing a career in conflict resolution was a matter of natural choice.

Mila grew up in Lancaster County in the United States. While most others in her position might have seen it as typically conservative with a majority Amish population and a trend of Republican Americanism prevailing, Mila looked at it as her first tryst with diversity. The brush with diversity at a young age helped her see the world with tolerance and positive curiosity later in life. Studying at the Bloomsburg University in Pennsylvania, for her Bachelor's degree in mass communication and communication studies, Mila focused specifically on leadership and social influence. In the second semester of her junior year in college, she had the chance to go to London on a Study Abroad semester.

Mila learned from every experience she was privy to directly or indirectly. The most profound of these experiences was watching people fight at every level. Seeing that, Mila understood that most often, the differences rose because of miscommunication. She had the chance to intern with the New Foundations Non-Violence Center, where she met inmates in jails and prisons in Colorado. Mila was part of a team that did trainings and workshops, reaching out to prisoners to teach them how to view conflicts and to communicate with one another. She learned that prisoners were labelled with a stigmatic term of reference once they got into the system. The experience brought Mila close to the value of justice.

Mila began pursuing a Masters degree in international and intercultural communication, but midway, she realized that she was not doing what she had wanted to do. She decided to take on a dual-flexible programme that let her do another Masters' degree, this time in conflict resolution. She also pursued a certificate in alternative dispute resolution. As part of her Masters' programme, Mila was to do a thesis originally. She based it on a study of Jewish and Armenian teenagers, studying how they tended to take in what they were told by their parents and grandparents about the genocides that affected their community, how they took in what their parents or grandparents told them, and how they then formed their own opinions on the genocide, and, how they would pass their perspectives to the next generation. Half-way through, a curriculum change dismantled the need for the thesis as an essential, allowing for the option of an internship.

Mila took the bull by the horns. The next thing she knew, she was working on field with CODEPINK, a women-initiated grassroots peace and social justice movement that let her work with very progressive people. The experience was totally different as she learned that there were people who not only talked the talk, but walked the walk. It was intriguing for Mila to see how they acted to further their thoughts and ideas. These women would even get arrested or go on hunger strikes while they fought for causes close to their heart. Mila assisted in organizing a summer programme and orientation sessions, and also lobbied the US Senate and House. Interning with non-profits gave Mila an insight into the world of dedication and unconditional service. She also worked at the University of Denver Center for Multicultural Excellence, where she facilitated a group of 30 undergraduate students for eight weeks on multiple issues including race, gender, class and socio-economic status. The experience gave her a chance to see how impactful right information could be in the hands of the future citizens. Later, Mila was the Core Staff Member of the Critical Mass

Leadership Education in Denver, where she facilitated conflict resolution workshops for students from various conflict areas such as Turkish- and Greek-speaking Cypriots and other teenagers from Turkey, Germany and inner-city Chicago.

After graduate school, Mila moved to Amman, Jordan, where she was a teacher at the School of Life. Over two years, Mila taught her students English, health science and world history using the American Harcourt curriculum, besides also being a school counsellor, working to resolve student–student and student–teacher issues, and to plan and implement overall school discipline philosophy. Mila got to understand the significance of sending children the right message—that peaceful means are the only things they should work towards incorporating, in their life decisions and actions. Mila began volunteering with Soliya and Peace x Peace while she was in Jordan facilitating dialogue at the interpersonal level through the Soliya programme, helping students from Arab and Western countries to connect and come together in a mutual exchange on both their cultures.

Though she consciously made a foray into the world of conflict resolution, the journey had its own challenges, being a field that was not just relatively new, but largely undefined. Right from having to explain the seriousness of her work to people around her in the process of seeking to dispel the notion that it was a ‘hippie-fringe movement’, to working on field, the challenges were plenty. Few people took Mila and her work seriously telling her that they did not understand if what she was doing qualified as a profession. She had a hard time explaining how it worked, and how vital her work was for the future of a society. On field, her challenges took on a new form. While handling minority groups embroiled in conflict, it was increasingly difficult to make them see reason towards changing their mind. When they had an established system, a set of beliefs and a rather rigid approach towards them, it was difficult to land up before them with doughnuts, markers and papers in tow expecting them to change. Initially, there were a lot of occasions when Mila felt burned out considering the number of fights she would see around her. The key, she

realized, to being able to sustain herself, was in finding a means to build a network of people to share resources, to give each other emotional support and to collaborate with a spirit of friendship.

Coursing through the challenges had its rewards. Mila found that the most significant and tangible outcomes of all her efforts was in the ability to give people new ways, new solutions and new means to their older conflicts. Mila's work spectrum involves creating mock cases and presenting them before people, to see what they would do in those situations. Mila once addressed a Colorado prison during an Alternatives to Violence Workshop, talking about ways of resolving differences, using an analogy where the case described a person having a neighbour with a dog that annoys him. Mila proceeded to ask the people present for their thoughts on what they would do to deal with the annoying dog. One man got up and said that he would take his gun and shoot the dog. Though taken aback by the extreme step he would be willing to take, Mila explained that it was not only violence that could solve the issue. She proceeded to show him that non-violence was still an option, under which he could do many things to redress the issue. After listening to her, he seemed surprised at the fact that non-violence was indeed a possible option. The reward, for Mila, lay in that awareness and the acceptability of the awareness. She enjoys the challenge in making people see, recognize and adopt ways of peace, and is rewarded by the success of her endeavours.

Mila looks at her profession as something that women are better at doing. Acknowledging the nurturing side that is inherent in a woman, Mila finds that the ability to resolve conflict comes easier to a woman. But being a woman on field has its own difficulties—as Mila found, being the only woman handling an all-male prison audience in Colorado. She finds that situations like that can make it tougher on a woman in that she is made to work harder to be able to achieve results. Mila also recalls that in Jordan, women are typically still not taken as seriously. When working with parents of my students she learned that in general the

mothers are held responsible for the children as they are the main family contact. The only time the school would interact with the father in solving conflicts was when it reached a very serious level. She found that in Jordan, a big factor is how the student's behaviour reflected on the family. Seeing the developments she made on field, Mila understood that intercultural dialogue is truly the real way to make an impact. It is vital to understand a person's culture before being able to help them solve their conflicts. While in Jordan, Mila could not assume that all of her students and their families dealt with conflicts in the same way. She had to get to know more about their individual family, their ethnicity, their religion and related factors. The elements of mutual distrust, fear, demonization and a sense of ignorance tend to impact the process. To dispel this, Mila has learned, it always helps to have an expert with some sort of an overlapping mix of both identities that the conflicting parties are each part of, and then to have him work towards finding the common elements and address the differences.

Looking back, Mila's journey as a conflict resolution professional was made possible by one significant factor: the mindset that lets her see the need for peace not just on a career front, but in life itself. The way she viewed the world, the need for peace, justice, equality and safety and working peacefully towards these goals was what made her sustain in her path as a peace maker. In the long term, Mila is pivoting towards achieving a justice system that will be both, restorative and people-oriented. She is also hoping to achieve the milestone of equality among all—whether it is on the gender front, or in the context of some of the world's most pressing conflicts such as between Israel and Palestine. She also hopes to be able to continue working with children and teenagers, so they can be addressed early enough to look at peace as a valid option, when they are young enough to be plied.

Until the world breaks out of its misconceptions and shells of insecurity, to be willing to talk, share and exchange, Mila will keep at her task, facilitating open dialogue as much as she can.



Natasha Latiff

Interpretations of religion and its impact on society and law have often found room for gender discrimination to creep in. The world pivots towards decrying gender discrimination in the name of religion, encouraging critical thinking towards how law and society should perceive women and someone who truly follows this path is Natasha Latiff.

INSPIRING CRITICAL THINKING IN WOMEN'S RIGHTS

Natasha Latiff

Interpretations of religion and their ramifications on society and law have often found room for gender discrimination to creep in. The world progressively pivots towards decrying gender discrimination in the name of religion, encouraging critical thinking towards how law and society should perceive women and someone who truly follows this path is Natasha Latiff.

Born and brought up in Singapore, Natasha lived for different parts of her life in the United States of America and Afghanistan, and completed her higher education in the United Kingdom. Having always been passionate and driven to work with women's rights issues from a very young age, Natasha's first brush with understanding the ramifications of gender discrimination came when she was 13. She chanced upon an article about an Afghan girl of the same age as her, who was seeking education from underground schools. This led her to sponsor the education of a girl in Afghanistan in earnest. Being someone who always questioned patriarchal interpretations of law and was always critical of assumptions people made about men and women's role in society and in religion, Natasha really wanted to gear her career and interests, reading and experiences, and to channel all her energy to finding ways to innovatively tackle these assumptions and approaches to women's rights. She hoped to reform some of the mainstream thinking that has made women's roles subordinate in the family and criminal process. This led her to come up with Femin Ijtihad which means 'critical thinking of women's rights issues'. Living in Afghanistan with her husband in a little quarter in a compound in Kabul, Natasha is living her dream each day.

Femin Ijtihad is a part of a broader initiative titled 'Strategic Advocacy for Human Rights'. The organization has three main forms of activity. The first of these is legal research on women's rights and human rights in international and Islamic Law, particularly focusing on family and criminal law. The team assembles legal arguments to directly address issues lawyers and activists face in the community, courtroom, or in their efforts to lobby the government to reform domestic laws. These 'model arguments' are deployed to challenge preconceived notions on women's rights or human rights that is purported to originate from an Islamic law but which in fact are patriarchal interpretations of legal sources. This is the second limb of the initiative. It comprises legal trainings, where the team trains activists and lawyers in Afghanistan as well as student activists, researchers, journalists and lawyers across the world on women's rights in Islamic Law and international law, particularly strategic methods for advocating for those rights. The third arm comprises a network of lawyers to provide legal analysis and assist in submissions whenever requested to lawyers working on contentious cases.

A mix of anger and passion brought about the initiative. She was appalled by the way political leaders used women's rights to play on identity politics. Not intending it as a criticism of Islam or Islamic law per se, Natasha criticizes the ways in which gender discrimination has been synonymous to protecting cultural values, and protecting the integrity of Islamic law or Islam. Many countries have opposed family law reform stating that the laws are essential to preserve culture and religion. Yet law reforms of other areas of law not pertaining to women have taken place even when at odds with the principles of Islamic law.

In some countries, women have to prove insurmountable violence, defect or long-term absence by her husband to obtain divorce, whereas her husband can unilaterally pronounce divorce without cause. Women have few post-divorce rights making the right of divorce (even on just causes) meaningless. Property laws do not guarantee a woman's right to her matrimonial home. It is also

often the case that child custody is almost automatically transferred to her husband without regard to the child's best interest. Appalled by this, Natasha started Femin Ijtihad to create a platform that would bring people together where they could debate and research these issues, question the assumptions that political and religious leaders make, and debunk the claim to divinity that leaders use to justify gender discrimination. The movement gained momentum with time. She trained similarly situated activists on how to challenge these assumptions. In the process, she would help them see the references they could use, the kind of arguments they could create, train them to distinguish patriarchal interpretations from faith and then determine how best to strategize their arguments in the context of approaching an authority. Firmly entrenched in the belief that advocacy has to be strategized and situated within the context of the situation in which it is undertaken, Natasha ensured that Femin Ijtihad would be a vehicle for that strategic delivery.

One of the most challenging obstacles that came Natasha's way on this journey was the untrammelled prevalence of patriarchal and parochial ideologies. Patriarchal assumptions and tendencies are deeply embedded in many systems and cultures, in developed as well as developing countries. In Afghanistan particularly, the notions of masculinity are wrapped into the notions of violence and war over the past many years in the country, the manifestation of masculinity augmented especially by military occupation and foreign intervention. Often times, it winds up being a survival strategy or a coping mechanism of war. In the face of corruption, bribery, insecurity and the lack of rule of law, many of the approaches to women's rights are on the defensive—whether it is a place of power, or a place of religion as they call it, or a place of politics. Everything is wrapped up in a place of politics, in fact, patriarchy itself is a politic within a system of politics.

Natasha found that every time one approaches a question of women's rights, whether in a training programme or in a casual discussion, it was important to first disentangle the assumptions and basis for gender discrimination. A victim of theft or murder does not go through the same ordeal of re-victimization that a rape victim goes through in court. But when it comes to gender-based crimes, there are numerous harmful stereotypes that women are subjected to. Some of these are, for instance, claims that women tend to lie about rape or that 'immoral women' contribute to their own rape by behaving in certain ways. These stereotypes fail to similarly scrutinize the conduct of wayward men for their shameful acts. More importantly, by stating that immoral women do not deserve the same recourse to justice, these stereotypes privilege men's sexual excesses and violent behaviour over women's rights to decide what she does with her body and with whom.

Similarly, a woman who petitions a divorce and exposes private matters in a suit is considered a shameful woman and therefore cannot be entrusted custody over her children. A sister who does not waive her inheritance rights is regarded as being ungrateful. All sorts of attributes are associated with women. When they ask for rights, people question her for her demand, and sometimes claim that there should be some form of shameful conduct associated with those rights. In addition, there is also the fact that a post-conflict or a conflict-ridden society like Afghanistan can often witness a very dismal treatment of women's rights. 'Women's rights' is just a coin that politicians and leaders toss around depending on their ideological propaganda and the aid benefits they hope to receive. There is also the issue that some of the work that one does to reform perspectives towards women and women's rights, might be construed as blasphemous.

Handling the challenges on a context-to-context basis, Natasha has come to understand that it is important to gain the trust of the people she meets and speaks to. One audience may be more receptive. Another may associate gender-sensitive arguments of

women's sexual and physical autonomy as promoting immorality or decadent values. In her engagements with activists and the community, Natasha ensures to clarify her position, to try and gain trust, to try and get to know the people she is talking to. She tells them where she comes from ideologically and what she is assuming and not assuming. She also tries to paint the larger picture that her presence has come to convey, the fact that women cannot be repressed any longer in the name of religion when there are other interpretations of the same religion that can help their position to be elevated and for them to gain more power, better welfare and better family life and community. She tries to get them to see that if a woman is empowered, a community is empowered. A healthy and educated woman is more likely to teach her children aspects of religion and education better, and this can promote a better community. She makes it a point to show examples of other Muslim countries that have seen the relevance and importance of elevating women's rights for the purposes of pushing a nation forward, of also reclaiming the integrity of their religion by enhancing the respect and status of women in family law and criminal law.

To Natasha, activism is to be adamant about equality against all odds. Activism requires that we are unreasonable and uncompromising on issues of discrimination and violence. It requires us to be bold when we speak, but to be soft in our understanding. It is to be compassionate yet strategic in our work. It is to appreciate the complexities of this world and not be trampled by them. It is to know that friendship should lead our work with our peers and the people around us. It is to be inclusive and all-embracing of all whose hearts are moved. It is to appreciate that change is slow and that progress is measured by small steps. It is to smile in the face of difficulties, knowing that we are all doing our best. It is also to recognize that sometimes the real change is the friends we have made along the way.



Neema Namadamu

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this is just their
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THE HERO OF THE HERO WOMEN

Neema Namadamu

Born around 1969 in a remote area in the High Plateau of South Kivu Province in eastern Congo, Neema was the first out of her parents' four children who had survived. She was born in a society that only celebrates the birth of a son. It was no surprise that being the first and the only child, who was polio stricken, her birth was not a reason for jubilation. Her father decided to marry again. Neema's mother continued openly loving her daughter unconditionally. She supported her little girl and protected her opportunity to have a future. She would carry Neema on her back to and from school, all the time explaining and affirming to her that every child was born with a purpose, and that was true for Neema as well. When Neema was in Grade 3, her mother sent her to live with her uncle, in a city on Lake Tanganyika. Being economically disadvantaged, Neema did not have shoes, let alone crutches. She settled for a stick to vault herself along barefooted.

When Neema was to enter Grade 7, her uncle took his oldest boys to another province to attend boarding school. Girls are not a priority in her country, much less girls with deformities. No arrangements were made for Neema to enroll in school. It did not help that the closest secondary school was a couple of miles away, a great challenge for one who pole vaults herself along. But Neema went anyway. She sat quietly back behind the other children who were sitting next to their parents in their smart uniforms. When everyone else had left, a nun noticed her, and assuming she came to beg for food or money, questioned her. She spoke French, which Neema did not know, but the little girl managed to explain that she wanted to go to school. With some money that her father had sent her at her mother's insistence, Neema enrolled herself. When her uncle returned, he was bewildered at the little girl's

determination, and set off to see if she could board at the school. All she needed was a mat, and a pair of shoes for the toilets. For the first time, Neema wore a pair of shoes—flip-flops. In Grade 10, her uncle enrolled her in a boarding school in Bukavu, where she stayed until graduation. She began to host a weekly on-air programme at a national radio station, promoting awareness on persons with disabilities, when the original host went looking for a replacement while he went to Kinshasa for the National Sovereignty Conference. Just as she graduated high school, the Rwandan Genocide took place. When Rwandan rebel soldiers defeated the genocidaires a few months later, the genocidaires fled across the border into DR Congo (DRC) to avoid being caught. While in the DRC, they continued their acts of genocide against the Tutsi who lived in DRC. Since 1994, things have not changed. Neema is Tutsi and because of an agreement the UN worked between the governments of the DRC and Rwanda, she was sent to Rwanda for University. Neema graduated with an Associate's degree in accounting before returning home to her beloved DRC. Neema then enrolled in Congo's National University, securing a Bachelor's degree in accounting. Neema was often sought out to represent her tribe in many regional gender conferences. With her ongoing participation and her views well known, Neema was selected by the Bukavu City Council as a Parliament Deputy, where she served for a term. When the nation's minister of gender and family was visiting Bukavu, she spoke to the vice-governor about a position she needed to fill with someone from his province. The vice-governor recommended Neema, and so after an interview, Neema moved to Kinshasa in 2003.

In this new position, Neema was in charge of issues relating to persons with disabilities. While in Kinshasa, she co-founded an NGO called ACOLDEMHA, Congolese Association for the Liberation and Development of Handicapped Women, supporting handicapped women who suffered sexual violence. After Neema finished her sojourn at the ministry and was back in Bukavu, she found that as much as she tried, she could not get funding or attention for ACOLDEMHA. However, she still persevered as an

activist, dreaming a dream of a new DR Congo. In 2011, Neema joined World Pulse and applied for an online correspondent's training course. A year later, World Pulse brought her to the US for an 18-event multicity speaking tour, promoting the inherent potential of Congo, saying that as she was not a lost cause, neither is her beloved Congo a lost cause.

During the presidential election in November 2011, Neema scheduled an audience for her women's group with the governor who was running for a seat in parliament. However, the leading men of their community wound up taking over the event, rescheduling it to a time in the afternoon when they could be there. Just 11 days shy of the elections, these men had come to dictate their agenda while the women were expected to sit by quietly and watch. Neema reached out to a 'brother' managing the campaign of another candidate, and asked if his candidate would support their rights agenda. He thought sure his candidate would. Neema then went back to the venue at the time the men had scheduled with a new plan. Neema asked each woman present to list their name and phone number on a 'sign-in sheet', telling them that she would be calling them in a day or so about another meeting. The men and their governor, arriving three hours late, attempted to appease them with leftover sops from the celebrations of DR Congo's 50th Year of Independence, two years before.

The next morning, Neema showed the list of names and told the brother that it could become a sizable number. If his candidate was interested, she wanted him to address her women's group the following day. The candidate agreed, but said he was already booked so would send his mother, a respected businesswoman, to represent him. Twenty-four hours later, an overflowing crowd of 496 women filled the venue. Neema told the women who gathered that another candidate had tried to win their vote with a two-

year-old cloth. 'I'm tired of wearing the clothes of the past. I'm ready to put on the garments of our future,' she said, introducing their candidate as a man who supported their agenda.

The day before the elections, hundreds of women gathered to spend the night at a local church, planning to march to the polls together the next morning. While they were cooking, the leading men showed up with the minister of justice and the community president, with one last attempt to intimidate the women to vote for the governor. They made every effort to frustrate the women's intention, even trying to frighten them, telling the pastor he would be liable if something bad happened that night. But unfazed, Neema walked towards them saying: 'What are you going to do, throw hand grenades into our midst? These are your sisters and mothers and daughters.' The president angrily threw his words as Neema was now standing toe to toe, asserting that she and all the other women were going to do exactly as they were told, and were determined to vote for the governor tomorrow. With a resolve that the men of her community were far too familiar with, she grabbed her right breast with both hands and said: 'You can't tell the women who brought you into this world and gave you this to suck, who to vote for.' As the men shuffled off, the women's overnighter became a great celebration. Though their candidate did not win either, the women had made a name for themselves as a force to be reckoned with, and dealt with, when the next elections rolled around.

In June 2012, Neema's 24-year-old daughter went down to the kiosk at the end of their street to purchase a phone card. Within moments, she beeped Neema, who called her back to hear her daughter crying uncontrollably. She was beaten by two soldiers. Neema wondered what could be the cause. They were relatively new residents in the neighbourhood and her daughter was very simple. To be beaten by soldiers, men who were supposed to give their lives to service for the safety of people like Neema and her daughter, seemed incomprehensible. As she processed things, she wondered what would affect the outcome she hoped to realize.

As she considered this, a perspective came over her—a miracle—that lifted her above the situation. From that vantage point, a new lens became the filter through which she viewed these things—the lens of love. She saw these soldiers as young men who had determined that the world was full of takers and those who were being taken. Given a choice, they decided to become takers. She decided to go meet the soldiers and talk to them as their mother, someone who loved them; scolding them as necessary, but out of a mother's heart.

A couple weeks later, with the support of World Pulse, Neema opened a Women's Media Training Center to teach women narrate their stories of struggle..She rented a room of 12 laptops in a local cyber café for three hours each day.Within two months, she had introduced over a hundred women to each other, the internet and World Pulse. They named themselves Maman Shujaa, which means Hero Women in Swahili. They began drawing out of the deep water of their experience, sharing their stories and then giving witness to a new Congo they all knew was not only possible, but already taking hold within them. In November 2012, they submitted an online petition. They called upon their Hero Women counterparts in the White House—Michelle Obama, Hillary Clinton, Valerie Jarrett, and Susan Rice—to urge their president to immediately appoint a special envoy to work with the United Nations and the African Union and establish a process that would lead to a lasting solution for peace in Congo. They wanted a process that would ensure Congolese women to attain a seat at the same table with other male members. When their petition went above 100,000 signatures,they were given an appointment to present the petition to President Obama's National Security Council, where they were told byMichelle Obama's representation that their voice was heard.

The Nobel Women's Initiative sponsored these women to attend the African Union Summit in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, to add their solutions for DR Congo to the collective strategy being determined for the whole of Africa. In February, Neema finally opened their

own Women's Media Training facility. With 28 laptops online in their own office-space, they are adding new members to their numbers each day.

According to Neema, this is just their beginning. 'I'm not interested in making a little noise,' she says, 'I'm looking to change the paradigm.'



Nora Lester Murad

For a few people, being able to move on after witnessing suffering is easy; for some, it simply isn't. Nora Lester Murad, a writer and human rights activist, belongs to the latter.

Not only does she recognize her obligation to be part of the solution, she also realizes her responsibility being a part of the problem.

A FIGHT FOR THE RIGHT

Nora Lester Murad

For a few people, being able to move on after witnessing suffering is easy; for some, it simply isn't. Nora Lester Murad, a writer and human rights activist, belongs to the latter. Not only does she recognize her obligation to be part of the solution, she also realizes her responsibility being a part of the problem.

Nora was born in Hollywood and grew up in Pasadena, California. Her parents were activists, playing an active role in the implementation-phase of the Civil Rights Movement. They pushed for integration, by school-busing black children into all-white schools. Nora herself went to an all-white kindergarten, which post integration, expanded to include Black and deaf children. When Nora's father was hospitalized, her mother hired a Spanish-speaking nanny from El Salvador to help out while her mother worked. This added to the diversity Nora found herself surrounded by right from when she was very young. Nora explains that this was not the 'norm', since it was easy for a white-American to be socialized into believing that being white or being American was the regular. During college, Nora went to Egypt. The experience was not just transformational but also disruptive. She had had first-hand experience of life from the perspectives of so many people—a Nubian doorman, an old Egyptian Jew, an Ethiopian migrant worker, a freed Palestinian political prisoner and many more. When she saw the world as they saw it, she realized that she had changed in a very radical way. In all of the people she met, Nora saw herself.

In 1984, Nora met her Palestinian husband. They later moved to Boston, Massachusetts, where she pursued her Masters in intercultural relations from Lesley University, emphasizing on conflict management and training; and a Masters in human services

from Fielding University which she added to her Bachelors degree in Middle East studies from UCLA, and later completed her doctorate from Fielding University in Santa Barbara, California, focusing on social change and structural inequalities. Nora worked as assistant professor of Cross-Cultural Understanding at the Bentley University and adjunct faculty in intercultural relations at Lesley University. At the same time, Nora built a consulting practice facilitating anti-racism, intercultural relations and organizational change with different sections of society.

Nora's main work involved anti-racism and activism for Palestinian rights. Choosing the side of justice, Nora is not blinded by any preconceived notion of one side being good and the other being bad. She focuses on justice and recognizes that Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory is, as she puts it, 'a thousand per cent wrong'. In terms of racism in the US and racist policies against Palestinians, Nora saw her responsibility in the issue, and set about fighting the injustices. When her daughters were born, the obligations of motherhood added another angle to her fight—seeking to do everything in her power to have a safe, fair and respectful world for her children, with an opportunity for happiness to thrive.

Among her many jobs, Nora coordinated the Cambridge-Ramallah/El-Bireh Sister City Campaign. What was most unusual about the endeavour was that it brought an unprecedented move where a municipal government sought to frame its own foreign policy. Through the campaign, the local people of Cambridge twinned with Ramallah and El-Bireh, in opposition to the prevailing US foreign policy. The campaign was empowering, going beyond the fray of awareness and education. The city brought professors and experts from Cambridge to Palestine for learning delegations. Nora drew on her Masters' thesis—which spoke about structuring travel experiences to aid conflict resolution—to organize delegations. A teacher from Cambridge would stay with a teacher in Palestine, thereby facilitating exchange at all levels. They then visited families in refugee camps and came together every

few days to exchange their findings. The programme was structured in such a way that it was gradual, such that the difficult learning came in towards the end. They used all kinds of media—art, music, poetry, books and movies.

Nora moved to Palestine in 2004 to ensure that her three daughters could grow up bilingually, in tune and in as much comfort and competence in their father's Palestinian village as they did in the United States. Nora felt the winds of change that swept much of the United States in the aftermath of the attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon on 11 September 2001. When her oldest daughter came to her asking why she should be made an Arab when Nora did not have to be one, Nora and her husband realized that the United States should not be the only place the girls would consider their home.

When she got to Palestine, Nora was surprised at the scene she saw. As she started consulting with NGOs in the region, she realized that she had no clue about the development scenario in the region as it prevailed then—the scene had changed drastically from her earlier experiences. Following the Oslo Accords, the emphasis had shifted on to stability, rather than rights. It resulted in enormous funding and professional activism—both of which began to promote the vested interests and agendas of the donor organizations. Liberation movements were undermined. Nora began to focus on donors, particularly from the United States, the West in general and some Arab countries, and realized that their systems did not support Palestinian self-determination. They were throwing money into activities that were predominantly irrelevant to the rights of the people in the region. 'Development' became just another occupation there. With their directionless donations, she realized, they were actually helping Israel maintain the status quo in the region.

Nora then founded Dalia Association, an organization that was formed with a different position coming from a different analysis. The idea germinated in 2005. The organization functions from an understanding that Palestine needed self-determination in development, which was undermined by the prevailing donor system. The organization seeks to help the people of Palestine to support their own community institutions to ensure that the situation was improved. They seek to make civil society organisations accountable, to make local support mandatory for local communities to thrive, and to have international donors either support Palestinian self-determination, or leave. Nora served with the organization from 2007 until 2010, after which she felt burnt out.

Thereafter, she went on to work with a British NGO. With a big budget, many staff members and a decent salary, the job profile took her all over the world. Though Nora was good at what she was doing, deep down, she did not care very much about the work she did. She left the organization and told herself she was retired, calling herself that for a few weeks. Then she began calling herself a housewife, if not for anything else, just to confuse people. At that point, Nora threw herself into her dream project: writing a novel. Since then, she got into learning how to write, and then churned a children's novel, a picture book, and a draft of her first adult novel. She also returned as a loyal volunteer to Dalia Association.

Throughout her journey, Nora says that being able to balance everything she was doing was a huge obstacle. While she theoretically understood that balance had the element of being an illusion to it, she realized that she was also juggling unrealistic desires at the same time. That stemmed from the desire to be good enough and to find inner peace. Nora acknowledges that the idea of belonging to a collective unit, to be in tune with the environment around her, and to be part of something bigger was something she always hoped to achieve. She also finds that the lack of a strategy for social justice is a bit of a challenge in that there is a constant need to analyse what and why things have happened and how they can happen better. Albeit a challenge, Nora

explains that it is positive. In all her years as a change-maker, Nora has continually strived to put herself among people who support her and push her. She does not understand why people fight when they can be happily coexist.

Having studied conflict up close, Nora is suspicious of efforts that rely solely on intercultural dialogue. In most conflict contexts, there is a lot more than just cultural misunderstanding—it is real political matters that have to get settled justly. Citing the US–USSR relations back in the time of the Cold War, Nora explains that in the United States, people were afraid of Russians. But with the birth of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, people began respecting and embracing people of the other culture overnight. It happened without mass-scale ‘dialogue’ and was only because of the thawing of political hostility at the leadership level. Nora also explains that in Palestine, ‘dialogue’ has been dirtied, polluted by donors and liberals who manipulate the manner in which they are conducted. That said, Nora acknowledges that it is always good to have human-to-human contact across cultures. But that does not need a big programme, a big budget or a international financial or institutional backing. It simply needs people to walk up to each other and work towards finding out more for themselves, and then take steps to end the inequality and injustice that divides them.

Nora finds that being a woman in the field has had its own ramifications—right from people going after her viciously and directly, getting away with more because she was a woman, to constantly being aware of all the dangers that the world poses to her daughters. With the relations with women being primary in her life, Nora continuously tries to prepare her daughters without traumatizing them. Looking at the world, Nora believes that we are, in a way, still in the dark ages, with the prevalence of wars, genocide, slavery, gang-rape and poverty. She hopes to be a change-agent in every way, and to be part of making the world more humane.



Paola Brigneti

Few can see an opportunity in an obstacle. To reach out and connect with an issue needing urgent attention and to be able to craft the perfect solution for each is a talent in itself. Paola Brigneti is an embodiment of that talent.

TURNING OBSTACLES INTO OPPORTUNITIES

Paola Brigneti

Few can see an opportunity in an obstacle. To reach out and connect with an issue needing urgent attention and to be able to craft the perfect solution for each is a talent in itself. Paola Brigneti is an embodiment of that talent.

Born in Lima, Peru, Paola grew up in the country at a time when it was seen as a dangerous place to visit, owing to the Shining Path. However, being compelled to adjust under the constant threat of terrorism, perhaps has made Paola what she is today. The experience taught her not to live a life under fear and to stand up for what she think is right. At 14, Paola lost her father — another event that catalysed the birth of fortitude in her. His untimely passing threw Paola's life into disarray — when her family went from being an upper-middle class to a state when financial well-being was at stake, from a perfect loving and congenial atmosphere to regular struggles over things that were no causes of worry when her father was alive. Not one to let tough times beat her down, Paola grew in strength. A sense of freedom seemed to come through letting her lead her life less cautiously, experiencing and understanding hardships that others suffered. In travelling to the rural areas of Lima, Paola was moved in many ways. The two most significant things she carries with her is that she began admiring the people who were happy with so little and smiled so easily, and to enjoy every little basic privilege she had and enjoyed.

Paola always worked to alleviate human suffering. In her last year in Peru, she worked at an insurance company, dealing with policies for those holding high-risk jobs. She never kept the company's interests in mind. You read right: she found ways to make

sure that the people concerned in her policy got coverage. They would, in turn, show their gratitude to her—small gifts, cookies or a piece of cake would be delivered by them at her office, with ample thanks. Paola then went on to do study in the USA, in 2003, where she studied psychology with a minor in Community Violence Prevention and Intervention. Studying in a non-traditional school with several minority students and students of colour, did not make Paola feel the pinch of leaving home much. She was inspired by her teachers, in particular by Sharon Rice-Vaughn, a feminist activist, who was part of the group of women who founded the first battered women's shelter in the country.

Paola is a curious person, and prefers finding out the truth rather than assume. When she hears people saying ignorant things about other people or cultures, she simply questions their statements, forcing them to really think about what they are saying. Being the only Latina in her graduate school class, she had to learn to educate people in a way that they would accept. Paola believes that the best thing to do is make a point that no one should ever generalize their observations about cultures or peoples. Diversity is not limited between countries but it happens from individual to individual. The key to understanding this is to view people in terms of who they are and not in terms of their nationality, gender, colour or religion.

From then onwards, Paola invested her free time in volunteering. While studying, she volunteered at a woman's shelter, and in programmes involving youth development. Educating women about violence against women and domestic violence, Paola helped raise awareness among day-care workers so that they could identify the signs and help children witnessing violence at home. In the last year of undergraduate study, after her marriage to someone who shared her views on social justice, she went on to study at the

University of Minnesota for a Masters in Public Health in Maternal and Child Health. Paola got to learn more about women in the world, their struggles and needs. The more she learned, the more driven she felt about working in the field of women's rights. Having already learned about violence against women locally, at University, she learned more about issues at the global level.

Shortly thereafter, Paola and her husband went to Dar es Salaam and Arusha in Tanzania to volunteer at an orphanage. While there, she was faced with the challenges imposed by her own beliefs and cultural judgements, but she worked hard to overcome those. Despite the need she saw there, people seemed to be happy with very little. Admiring this, Paola wondered how to translate that into action to make changes in the community that would benefit all. After she graduated, Paola took the plunge with making a difference. She began volunteering online through the UN with an NGO working with women's rights in Nigeria, Delta Women. She spent hours developing and implementing advocacy strategies, activities and materials for the organization to raise awareness about sexual harassment and educate people on how to prevent it. Paola's role in fighting gender-based discrimination and issues came forth from an understanding that women are all united, that they face similar struggles, but are different as they are born in different places where the prejudice against women is materialized in a different way. Paola was rewarded with a UN award.

Besides this, Paola also conducted arts-related courses for youth at risk. In one setting, she worked with youth who had been in-and-out of the juvenile justice system. Many of these kids were victims of the inequalities of society and they were trying to cope with the given circumstances. Some did well, others got in trouble, but it was her job as an educator to help make them feel safe and welcome, and to allow them to have a space where they could be regular teenagers without worries and fears. Breaking down the walls that these kids had put up over time was a challenge, but once she did it, watching them stroll down the hallways, happy,

energized, made all of her attempts worth it.

Despite focusing predominantly on women's rights and youth development with a special emphasis on girls, Paola has also dabbled with animal rescue in New Orleans, in a month following Hurricane Katrina. Her sister is an animal activist, and she had asked Paola to join her on a week-long-trip to rescue animals in the hurricane-ravaged region. While working in animal rescue, Paola encountered people and listened to their devastating stories of survival, loss and rebuilding. She hugged them and was hugged by many strangers. She left New Orleans feeling like she was taking so much from the people she worked with.

Currently, Paola is working with the abolitionist movement that is trying to get rid of prostitution and sex trafficking worldwide. This is a rather hard battle because of the views people hold regarding women in prostitution and trafficking. Paola endeavours to move forward by educating more and more people, and by letting them have real and veritable information about the issue. However, realizing the magnitude of the problem and understanding that there is only a limit till which she could do was a huge challenge. Besides understanding people who were different from her cultural approaches made the task more arduous.

Turning obstacles into opportunities, Paola has never been struck down by her difficult moments. Being a minority woman in a country where there is racial tension, she did not have a work permit and her efforts had to be limited to only voluntary work. Despite the fantastic work she had put in through her volunteering endeavour, her work was not recognized in many professional settings because she was not paid for it as employers do not count volunteer experience as real experience. Paola is disheartened by the fact that monetary rewards are more important to people when it comes to measuring experience in working in this field.

It does not matter, though, to Paola, whether a task is a voluntary or a paid one. She just tries to stay in focus, keeping alive the very reason why she does what she does. Believing in humanity, or at least wanting to believe in it, Paola sees all the good things in the world and tries to stay focused on them.

On many occasions, kids would tell Paola about their dreams and to her that was a huge achievement because that means they were dreaming again. On the programmatic job front, Paola's research went into curriculums that were eventually used and implemented to educate about issues of violence against women. When she worked with at-risk youth, they always walked into the building dragging their feet, all downcast and with a huge attitude. After their meetings and art sessions, they would leave happily, enthusiastic about their days and acting like the kids they were.

Being a woman on field posed its own challenges, the biggest of which was to find a balance between doing good field work and staying safe. To Paola, being a woman is being unique in the way she sees the world. She feels closer to life, because as a woman she is capable of carrying life inside her. Being a woman, to Paola, is empowering.

Paola sees her work as something that is a long-term goal in itself. She hopes to start a youth development programme involving girls and art. Paola believes that the world might be worse off if it were not for activists who bring attention to issues, shedding light on to problems and educating people. She believes that the day that people stop fighting for change would be the day we would all be dead inside.



Parveen Sikkandar

Adversity can crumble one's resolve, and throw things out of gear very easily. For some, the journey back to square one can be an uphill climb. For some others, square one is not a destination, but part of a journey to something big. One among those is Parveen Sikkandar, who pioneered Damini—Artisans of India.

THE BACKBONE OF ARTISANS OF INDIA

Parveen Sikkandar

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Born and brought up in Madurai, Tamil Nadu, India, with her two brothers, Parveen's father was in the police service and her mother was a housewife. Parveen did her Bachelors in English literature. She then went on to take up a Masters in English literature, and much later, a Masters in journalism and mass communication, both of which were done through correspondence. An average student at school, Parveen was the voice for many students in her class. She would speak up and stand against bullies in school and teachers who favoured the wealthy or beautiful students. Once, Parveen lodged a complaint with the school principal about a teacher who deliberately selected only the pretty children for a dance programme. She stoutly asserted that all the children had paid the same fees and were entitled to equal treatment. The Principal, for his part, summoned the dance teacher and asked her to ramp up her conduct. With that, Parveen's spot as the 'leader' among her friends, for being their outspoken voice of reason was cemented. Though Parveen surged forward as the debating secretary at college, as a trained and well turned-out singer and as a talented and eloquent writer, she had her own restrictions. Her parents would not send her out of town to participate in competitions, nor let her go on overnight excursions with her classmates at college. She was expected to adhere to a strict dress

code, to the point that she was never allowed to style her hair or use make-up. Neatly combed and oiled hair was the norm and Parveen stuck to it. She was married off when she was just 20 to a very kind man who did everything he could to ensure that she enjoyed her freedom. Parveen led a life with him where she did not have to compromise on her individuality, whatsoever. She was treated as an equal, and enjoyed freedom like nothing before. Her husband believed that a woman should never be locked up in the kitchen and strived to ensure that she would go everywhere he got to go. With that freedom, Parveen discovered a side to her life that she knew little about heretofore. She survived a life-threatening pregnancy, and got back to her education all with the support of her husband.

But tragedy struck within four years of their move to Penang where her husband passed on owing to a heart attack when he was just 33. Parveen was widowed and came back to Chennai to start her life again. After a dose of freedom, staying with her parents was difficult. She lived alone, with her mother staying with her on and off. Though her husband's passing shattered her, Parveen was not one to be struck down. Struggling against a mountain of financial confusion, deep depression and a little son who was confused about his father's whereabouts, looking for him everywhere, every day, she had a lot to tide over. Amidst paperwork on immigration, taxes and bank accounts, her parents asked her to remarry, lest she wind up disintegrating emotionally or disillusioned with life. The sheer burden of it all, and the fact that everything boiled down to money was a difficult thing to cope with. With her husband's passing, his business in diamonds and furniture designing for a company in Sabah, Malaysia, ended abruptly. Best friends turned fair-weather friends, and duped her of plenty of money. It confused and irritated Parveen that she was dependant on so many people to carry on with her daily life. Sometimes, she would be angry with her husband for passing

away, but would comfort herself after thinking of the myriads of people across the world that have suffered in bomb blasts, been victims of abuse and much more, and count on how lucky she was.

When Parveen's father got her a job with a television network in India, she lapped it up as it fit her profile as a journalist well. She did a documentary inside the Madurai Meenakshi Amman temple, when she discovered that many shops that she used to visit to buy little traditional toys in her childhood days had gone, all owing to the advent of malls and shopping plazas. She chanced upon a tiny store that stocked and sold silk pouches, which she found very attractive. She learned that these fledgling artisans were unable to sustain their endeavours; they neither had systems to follow, nor were organized. They made huge losses as tourists would bargain with them. The large shop just next door to the artisan's store sold his pouches, but at a rate that was five times more than his rate. People flocked to buy them under the impression that they had better quality attributes since they cost more. The experience opened Parveen's eyes to the fact that people were enamoured by the aesthetics of consumerism, and in the process, skilled artisans lost out terribly.

In those moments, Parveen found her true calling. She decided to start a brand, and asked artisans to supply their wares to her, not on a consignment basis, but for hard cash. Some were sceptical, but the pouch-maker gave her 500 pouches to be sold. She took it with her to Malaysia, where at the International Women's Christmas Bazaar, she sold them for five times the price. With a great business plan in tow, Parveen realized that she could use this method to help poor street vendors and small-time business people who did not have monetary resources. But she stopped short of using their names, photos and sob-stories to market their products. She was sure that their work would speak for themselves, and in all truth, that was exactly what happened. And that was when

Damini Artisans of India was born. Still working as a journalist, Parveen would visit hamlets and source products for the brand. Driven by her own love for jewellery and her late husband's tryst with designing, Parveen made jewellery the first focus of her brand, and relegated bags and other crafts to the second wing.

Parveen worked hard to support only those artisans that genuinely had the skill, while struggling to make ends meet. She did not enjoy the idea of importing goods, but believed in selling and promoting home-based artisans in India. Marketing her brand was easy due to the non-commercial design. There was no dilution of the brand's focus, which since the inception, has remained jewellery, and a couple of small crafts. She created schemes where Damini Artisans would piggyback on brands that had great real-estate locations. Partnering with Odyssey Leisure Stores and the Landmark Tata group, Parveen expanded her brand's reach, culminating in 18 stores across the country.

With consistent sale and steady profits, Parveen ensured that all her staff would be paid on time. She has an experienced crew of staff that she counts on as her greatest strength. At some points, some vendors and artisans took advantage of her on-time payment policy, and began pushing goods from China, while claiming that they were their own. Through trial and error, Parveen moved away from them and decided to keep her focus to nothing more than supporting only a limited group of artisans, while also training and teaching her group to make different products. She also tries to buy products from self-help groups and widows, where timely payment has been a great asset. While she expanded the horizons of each of her artisans, Parveen also got her office

staff to be well equipped with the skills of trade. Hence, the accountant is also a good salesman and merchandiser. The merchandiser is great at quality control, and so on.

Alongside promoting artisans and their crafts, Parveen also tuned her endeavours to fight for several causes. She refused the use of plastic bags, relying on cloth and handmade paper bags to avoid environmental hazards. She also assumed the role of being an agent of publicity for government projects, promoting Indian government's endeavour of making elementary education compulsory for children. Parveen began printing the campaign on one side of the cloth bag herself, after other stores refused and politicians turned a deaf-ear to making the pattern compulsory.

Her work has not only supported artisans through consistent sales and plenty of orders that give them good profit, but has also brought awareness about the government's educational campaign to as many as ten thousand people. She sees that her artisans have a take-home, too, as they have come to embrace variety and understand the importance of systems. Some of them even call her regularly for help on day-to-day operations at their end. After having juggled many balls, Parveen has consciously decided to handle things only on a priority basis. With her 18-year-old son joining her team, she feels a sense of relief. A quick learner and an efficient worker, Parveen's son has done her proud by coming into the business as a bastion of unconditional support.

To Parveen, being a woman is a wonderful thing. But being a widow was a difficult burden to bear, as society's proclivity to ascribing stigmas remain despite India's progress on all other fronts. As much as Parveen surged forward, she noted that being a woman in business came with a challenge. Being male dominated, the world of business would dismiss her initially in favour of

her male counterparts. They would be welcomed to present their business plans while she stood on the side-lines. But she made her way up the ladder by relying on pure grit and determination.

Through her work, Parveen has come to understand that art and craft are mediums of expression that can bring about unity. The end product that comes from the labour of an artisan is appreciated for the beauty it exudes. No buyer decides to pick a product based on the identity or the ethnicity of the artisan behind it. Such moments celebrate a camaraderie between cultures albeit, unknowingly. Parveen has learned that art and craft simply have no nationality, no culture, no ethnicity: though these factors can influence a style; at the end, it transcends borders in the appreciation it garners.

Treading a path on her own for artisans to follow, as they hope to leave an indelible mark, Parveen continues to walk as a beacon of light for many artisans in the country.



Raquel Evita
Saraswati

To recognize that a crime against a woman is a crime against all of the world's women is one thing, but to act on that knowledge, simply because it is an actionable truth, is activism at its best. Raquel Evita Saraswati is the scion of that activism through her advocacy for universal human rights and religious reform.

THE BEACON OF ACTIVISM

Raquel Evita Saraswati

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For Raquel, taking to activism in the field of her choice was never a choice, but rather something innate. There was never a specific moment that inspired her path, because the awareness of oppression and the desire to fight it always felt like it came with her pulse and breath, built deep into her cells. Living in the United States, Raquel is in a place where she is free to express her views and is able to work on the issues she cares about. To her, that is a call to action. Driven by that notion, Raquel labours in furtherance of her belief that if she does not use her freedom to help others secure and maintain theirs, she does not deserve the precious life that God gave her. She derives her strength and purpose from the Quran, in the commandment to work for justice even in the face of great hostility. One of her favourite verses in the Quran reads: 'Believers: conduct yourselves with justice and bear true witness before God, even if it be against yourselves, your parents or your kin' (4: 135). This commands Muslims to speak out for what is right, no matter who is offended.

An American, a practicing Muslim, and an advocate for universal human rights and religious reform, Raquel's focus has been primarily on women's rights and safety. The scope and ambit of her initiatives have included combating honour violence, forced

marriages, child marriages, female genital mutilation, among other gender-specific issues, as well as issues of individual liberty and freedom. Working directly with individuals at risk for honour violence, forced marriage and other gender-based oppressions, Raquel works with organizations that fight gender-based violence and religious extremism. She also works as a regular lecturer and commentator on issues related to Islam, human rights, dissent and the role of women in transforming the Muslim world. At one point, Raquel also worked as a caseworker with HIV/AIDS patients, many of whom were homeless and/or were recently released from periods of incarceration. HIV/AIDS remains one of the issues closest to her heart.

Raquel's work is immensely important to her, and that has given her the courage, fortitude and strength to keep surging forwards. Unfortunately, she had to learn the hard way that some who claimed to seek reform within her faith community or who claimed to care about human rights were actually motivated by the desire for fame or money. Experiencing disappointment in some of the leaders, writers and activists Raquel once admired so deeply has presented her with the need to choose more carefully those individuals with whom she affiliates and to recognize when someone might be exploiting her youth or image. A difficult lesson nonetheless, it gave her a path to a space where the pain of learning that lesson dissipated as she began to be surrounded by people whose integrity, passion and faith inspire her every day. On the personal front, Raquel's greatest obstacle has been something she shares with many other women across the world: the enormous task of undoing a lot of the negative messaging women receive about their value, rights and potential. This negative messaging can impact how women handle all aspects of their lives, personally and professionally, and it can come from both strangers and those who can be trusted.

Recognizing that these challenges are not unique to her, but that they are part of a larger effort to subjugate women was an

important realization in dealing with it. Feminist organizing with a focus on anti-racism and anti-slavery work has been a significant part of Raquel's personal development, allowing her to confront and work towards dismantling systems that were responsible for oppression. She firmly believes that each person must do what they can to end oppression and that each can play a role in its demise. On an even more personal level, Raquel derived immensely from the support of male allies. Several amazing men—Dr. Zuhdi Jasser being one of them—in her life work to end misogyny and abuse of women. A someone who works specifically to end the abuse of women and as a survivor of sexual violence herself, coming to know men steadfastly dedicated to ending abuses of women was an incredibly powerful experience for Raquel.

Much of what Raquel does not culminate in immediate tangible outcomes because the focus is on the ultimate goal of ending misogyny and the many systems that promote it. However, there are many of her direct intervention initiatives that result in tangible outcomes. For example, when she is able to convince a girl's family not to compel her into a marriage, or when she is able to get a girl or woman (or in some cases, a boy or a man) into safe housing; or when her efforts help secure asylum for someone; or when she helps someone obtain legal protections from an abusive spouse or family member, Raquel makes it a point to remain in consistent touch with some of these individuals. In other cases, she makes it a point to keep herself updated on how they are doing. To be able to help another person, even in some small way, is an enormous gift to Raquel.

Being a woman has never affected Raquel negatively; as she puts it, being a woman is not a disease, a condition or affliction. Misogyny, however, has certainly had an impact on her life. The effects of misogyny are manifold. When a woman speaks about human rights abuses committed in the name of religion or culture, her statements are regularly dismissed as mere 'opinions' of someone who has had 'bad experiences', versus the informed views of an educated individual. A woman's firm positions on

contentious issues are dismissed as 'emotions', no matter how accurate and well-reasoned her position is. Further, while some men absolutely face violent backlash for their work, women are more regularly targeted with threats of violence, including threats of murder, rape and physical mutilation. Women activists and commentators are regularly harassed and even attacked. She has, on occasions, been subject to stalking, threats and harassment. While none of this compares to the horrors faced by the women and girls on whose behalf she advocates, this reality does mean that she has to take precautions while others need not.

Being a woman has its own impact on how Raquel engages with the world and how it in turn responds to her. However, she rejects the notion that all women are inclined to think, feel and believe the same things, even with regard to their own rights. When Raquel was still very young, she discovered this brilliant quote by Audre Lorde: 'I am not free while any woman is unfree, even when her shackles are very different from my own.' Firmly entrenched in her belief in these words, Raquel's learning has also included the realization that not all women do share the same thoughts.

From her experience as an activist, Raquel has come to understand a very important truth—that meaningful peace does not mean the absence of conflict. To achieve meaningful and lasting peace, it is necessary to have difficult conversations which may antagonize people. Tension is unavoidable as we expose and work to end human rights abuses. It is only through embracing and working through resistance that we can overcome them and bring about solutions. It requires far more courage to confront the root causes of oppression than to avoid opposition in the name of peace. When as a people, we refuse to make space for difficult conversations, resentment and hostility naturally follow. Raquel believes that people must really come to know, understand, and even hold one another accountable. Groups must take ownership of the ills within their own communities and actively seek solutions to solve them. She cites the Muslim community as an excellent example. Until the community pursues a real and

relentless zero-tolerance policy against gender-based violence, the claims that the community and faith both respect women will be suspect. Every time a woman is killed, 'leaders' refuse to do more than release a half-hearted statement absolving one's religion of any responsibility (if they even do that!). By not denouncing crimes against women, Raquel believes that they are not only doing women a disservice, but are also allowing others to remain suspicious of them. Any group's claims must be backed up with concrete, consistent and dedicated action to address and end violence against women and girls.

Raquel is currently working on establishing her own foundation, *The Adalah Initiative*, which will work to eradicate honour and gender-based violence, and seek sustainable solutions to extremism. The initiative will also advocate for greater representation of like-minded voices in the media with a particular focus on new media, and will accomplish its goals through awareness building, and creating tangible change through on-the-ground and digital activism. By fighting oppression, challenging religious parochialism and antagonism to human rights, Raquel wants to be a strong crusader for the right, and looks ahead to continue to be the bastion of the movement towards change.



Rebecca Cataldi

Religion has been unabashedly blamed as the basis of conflict and war. Cut back to the Crusades, or think of recent conflicts—9/11, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Middle East, Bosnia or Sri Lanka—one will be sure to have read about religion being blamed as the cause. Redefining that notion is Rebecca Cataldi.

BRINGING RELIGION TO CONFLICT RESOLUTION

Rebecca Cataldi

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Rebecca took to a career in conflict resolution and religion when a confluence of factors inspired her. Her predominant reason was her love for God and her Catholic religion. It gave her the ability to love and serve people unconditionally. Fermenting this was an already prevailing interest in international affairs and in understanding the ethos that defined other cultures. What firmed Rebecca's resolve, though, were the attacks on her country on 11 September 2001. Rebecca never wanted anyone to experience that violence, or much less perpetrate it, ever again. She wanted to work towards achieving non-violent means of settling conflict. Rebecca realized that a lot of fear prevailed among people. She gathered that countering conflict through peaceful ways was something that could begin with the citizens themselves. Her experience on 9/11 inspired her to go on to intern at the Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy, a conflict resolution NGO, and to take on a Masters' in Conflict Analysis and Resolution. She also spent three years in Japan where she studied and taught English, which she hoped would prepare herself to one day do in the Middle East as well. After 9/11, instead of turning intolerant towards other cultures, Rebecca delved deeper into understanding them, especially those of the Middle East. She travelled to Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Indonesia, Libya and Yemen. Between volunteering and studying, Rebecca met people practicing different religious faiths. Her love for and deep-rooted connection with

her own faith enabled her to relate with them, for most of them embraced their faith as profoundly as she did. Rebecca had also facilitated dialogues among students of western and Muslim countries through the Soliya programme, besides taking on freelance conflict resolution projects for different organizations. Passionate about the work she does, Rebecca looks at her professional trajectory as God's calling.

Rebecca got thinking about how religion can help peace-building, a rather radical thought because religion is often blamed for causing war. Rebecca joined and continues to work at the International Center for Religion & Diplomacy, an NGO in Washington DC. Her core focus is on peace building and conflict resolution. Her first project was in Pakistan. She was on a team that worked with teachers in Islamic schools in Pakistan to enhance education and its role in helping people find non-violent ways for solving conflict and promoting tolerance of different religions. Many of the teachers would also preach at the mosques every Friday. It was particularly relevant to incorporate a training system involving them, since they were virtually training future leaders of the country. Rebecca assisted in promoting an educational enhancement programme that hinged on pedagogical principles and Islamic values. Since most of the initial work was done with men's schools and utilized indigenous trainers, Rebecca did not teach much. When the programme included women's schools, she began to interact with the women. She visited five schools, one of which had about a thousand girls as students, whom she interacted with. When she went with a male guide, the girls were not so open. The moment he left the room, they were effusive, eloquent and very receptive to Rebecca.

In early 2007, Rebecca visited the Red Mosque in Pakistan. She had heard plenty of stories about the mosque before, of how its members carried out kidnappings and swore to carry out suicide bombings if the government did not implement their version of Sharia Law. The guide accompanying Rebecca told her that he saw her as his 'American daughter', a reference offered in respect.

When she went into the mosque, he advised her to sit quietly and not question, but listen. However, when she was introduced to the chief leader as her guide's 'daughter', she was invited to sit, and was given the liberty to ask anything and even to take notes if she wanted.

After an enriching discussion with him, Rebecca sought permission to see the women's school attached to the mosque, where she was sent with a note announcing her arrival, as male guides were not allowed. She was initially received at the school with some suspicion because they did not know in advance that she was coming. By and by, as Rebecca respectfully spoke to—and more importantly, listened to—the principal of the school, demonstrating her respect for Islam and her own religious devotion, the principal began to open up. The defining moment in their exchange was when the principal refused to let Rebecca in to see the classrooms, because she said outsiders who came wound up writing bad things about the school. Rather than immediately jumping in with her own thoughts, Rebecca took time to listen to the principal's views, concerns and frustrations, before explaining that she was there with a message of peace and respect, with a hope for understanding their views. In response to the principal and teachers' criticism of US government policies, Rebecca explained that many people in the USA, in fact, also had some disagreements with certain policies of their own government. The principal opened up, jocularly saying that people in Pakistan also had disagreements with their own government. In a remarkable turnaround, the principal then invited Rebecca to visit the classrooms, where she got to see some of the students. When it was time to leave, Rebecca gifted the principal with a plaque that had 'Peace' engraved on it. With the initial suspicion gone, the principal called the teachers who had translated earlier to return to ensure that she could understand everything Rebecca wanted to say. Rebecca later went on to work on a project that aimed at

forming a Network of American and Pakistani Interreligious Leaders. The goal was to enhance the leaders' ability to do inter-faith work and to collaborate cross-culturally, addressing issues of religious intolerance and conflict that challenged both countries.

When Rebecca went to Egypt, she realized that a lot of her friends and family members, though encouraged her ambitions to study Arabic and contributed towards a greater understanding and friendship between Americans and Arabs, also seemed to appear cautious. They told her that they were nervous for her, as many believed Arabs hated Americans. Rebecca was nervous herself, especially considering the fact that there was a lot of anti-US backlash happening because of the Iraq War. But she had nothing to fear from the people she encountered, as her experience would show her. When she went to Egypt, Rebecca saw that the people were hospitable and treated her with utmost kindness and respect. However, she also noticed that just as many Americans had misperceptions about Arab hostility toward Americans, people in Egypt also had some similar misconceptions about the United States, such as Americans hated Arabs or thought all Muslims were terrorists. This experience showed her that even when people do not, in fact, harbour hostility toward another person or group—as most Americans and Arabs do not—people often *assume* that such antagonism exists; this perception can lead to fear of interaction or reactionary hostility which prevents us from truly understanding each other and working together. That made her work towards dispelling such misperceptions and ensuring that the real voices of ordinary people were heard. When Rebecca left Egypt, one of the women she met there—an artist—shared some of her artwork with her. They were pictures symbolizing peace, camaraderie and friendship. She asked Rebecca to share the pictures with people back home in the US. When she went back and showed her friends and family these pictures, they were received with warmth. The Egyptian's gift inspired Rebecca to start her own venture, the American–Islamic Friendship Project, where she started collecting messages of peace and friendship from her own friends, members of the family and other Americans,

intended towards the people of the Muslim world, as well as messages of peace and friendship from people in predominantly Muslim countries to Americans. Although there is a web presence for her project, Rebecca hopes to put all the messages together in the form of a book, translated into many languages.

Working in conflict resolution presented its own set of challenges to Rebecca. A field that is still fairly nascent and evolving, there has not been a 'set way' of doing things that has been agreed on globally as being correct. Being a perfectionist, Rebecca found it challenging to see scenarios where she did not necessarily have all the right answers. There were moments of self-doubt, and sometimes an erosion of self-confidence. The extra challenge lay in the problem of experience as a prerequisite for field work, but one often cannot get experience without actually going out to the field. This led her to take every opportunity she found—be it in the form of volunteering, work, or study—to contribute to peace-building efforts and cross-cultural understanding. Being a person from the US had its own challenges while in this field. The continued prevalence of anti-American sentiments can sometimes make people suspicious and susceptible to stereotyping Rebecca and her colleagues. Rebecca has worked to overcome such challenges by being open and honest about herself and about the mission she is on, showing respect and living out her love for other cultures and religions, and most importantly, approaching situations with humility.

On many occasions, being a woman on field was both a bane and a boon. In projects in Pakistan, she wanted to be more involved with field work. But being a woman was often a reason why she could not work more directly with male teachers. In other cases it was the opposite, especially in Egypt, Yemen and parts of Pakistan, where being a woman foreigner, she was not always bound by the rules that her local counterparts were. She could spend time with women in places off-limits to men. She was also able to go to places and talk to men; her native counterpart might not enjoy a similar privilege.

While peace is an absence of war, there is a greater positive connotation to the term—building a sustainable future for a society on the edifice of non-violence, while providing for deeper needs of people within. Helping build sustainable ways towards conflict resolution, reconciliation of broken relations and instilling a system of values are part of the goal. Contributing to this is something is what Rebecca finds rewarding as it offers an opportunity to both serve and learn from others, and to contribute to and imbibe collective wisdom.

Rebecca's biggest learning from her journey so far has been to experience the power of 'ordinary' people to create positive change when acting on values of faith, humility, love, and respect for each other. She has witnessed the power of inter-faith and intercultural collaboration and dialogue, which is based not on persuading another that they are wrong and one is right, but deeply listening to understand with an open mind and heart, being open to understanding each other's perspectives and receptive to the other's culture. The key, she notes, is often to question one's initial assumptions and be open to having them changed through respectful listening and interaction with the other, seeking to understand people and culture in their true essence. The assumption-based hostility perception can often be shattered through simple and sincere human interaction, and as Rebecca found her fears and misperceptions dissipate as she experienced the hospitality, kindness and respectfulness of the communities she visited, she often found their perceptions change in return. Rebecca wishes to continue the journey for years to come. She hopes to see a day when the world will have non-violent solutions to conflict as its norm, and when 'ordinary' citizens will realize and act on their power to dispel misperceptions and build peace and friendship between cultures and religions. Until then, Rebecca will keep countering hatred with love and war with peace.



Roya Mahboob

With a mission to create 'citizenships without borders', the members of the Women's Annex intend to express their views freely as well as earn money. These women, are all products of a simple equation that Roya Mahboob labours with: Women's Annex Media Labs + Examer Content Creator = Digital Literacy = Communication without Borders

IGNITING MINDS

Roya Mehboob

With the help of social media, the world has become a smaller place. Just as interfaces have grown by leaps and bounds, there is space for everyone through the modicum of new media networks. More voices can be heard, more truths can be told, and the world is wider awake to the many causes that need action and attention. Riding on the wave of social networking and new-age media channels to leverage the empowerment of women in Afghanistan is Roya Mehboob. Born in Afghanistan, Roya and her family decided to leave their home country in the wake of the Soviet invasion. They left to Iran, living there until Roya went back to Afghanistan in 2003. She studied at the University of Herat in 2004, where she completed her Bachelors in information and technology. Roya also spent a semester at the University of Berlin, where her exposure to the life and work styles in a developed country inspired her to take home some ideas that held promise for new avenues. Roya began working as the IT coordinator at the Heart University from 2007 to 2010. She also worked as the project coordinator in the IT Department of the Ministry of Higher Education in Afghanistan. Alongside, Roya began to give her vision shape. She founded Afghan Development Program Organization (AYDPO) in 2008 and then set up the Citadel Software in 2010, which fast became the vehicle for the empowerment of many women in Afghanistan.

Roya's initiative, Afghan Citadel Software Co., is an IT-industry firm, working with information technology as the core focus. It is a force to reckon with, no less, employing over 50 employees and thousands of writers for Film Annex and Women's Annex—their online platforms. The company serves to develop software and create databases for private companies, government ministerial

units and the NATO. A unique concept, Roya's tryst with using information technology as a vehicle to empower women started with her own personal experience. Understanding the incredible power of social media— —a platform that allows powerful leeway for the expression of thoughts and ideas— —Roya recognized that there was tremendous potential to apply this to Afghan women to empower them to change their lives. She then began working to create ways to increment digital literacy among women and girls. Her flagship initiative addressed specific parts of Afghanistan, particularly the women and girls. As she watched these women communicating without borders, creating profiles on Twitter and Facebook, and making friends with people across the world, sending out messages and information about their school work and their dreams for the future, Roya's joy knew no bounds. Just working before the computer screens, expressing new ideas while learning the significance of storytelling had changed the lives of these women and girls tremendously.

Roya's initiative operates from the simple perspective that digital literacy is easily the most affordable form of education and training. The only hurdle, though, is stability of access to the internet, addressing which is an ongoing process. To address the obstacle, Roya began to partner with Film Annex, an online film distribution platform and Web Television Network. The fruit of their partnership was the Afghan Development Project, in 2012, which serves as the medium to project videos, interviews and news from the ground in Afghanistan. Taking Roya's initiative to another level altogether, the partnership took the World Wide Web to over 40,000 women and girls in Afghanistan, through ten internet-equipped classrooms installed for their use. Out of this number, 5,000 students got the direct benefits of the facilities offered and registered on the Examer vocational and educational software that Roya's company developed. The software offers space for content creation and development of micro-scholarship.

In addition, Roya's initiative found a great partner in Women's Annex channel with the help of Film Annex, a blogging and film forum that works with Citadel of NYC to ensure the betterment of women's economic rights, teaching them the importance of earning and finding ways to connect their selves to the figurative world, and to make their voices heard across borders. The Women's Annex functions with a pay-for-content model, allowing the women who write blog posts and project their films using the platform, to earn based on their 'Buzz Performance Scores'. Roya also serves as a funding member of the Women's Annex foundation, which channelizes the profits earned from the Film Annex, Women's Annex, philanthropic donations and other corporate, individual and governmental avenues towards the education of children in developing countries and empowerment of women across the world.

Besides inculcating literacy, investing in Afghan women and girls as communication and social media experts not only offered them the freedom of storytelling and the ability to share ideas, but also to develop and strengthen them in a manner that would bring those ideas to fruition. Using the internet also empowers them, letting them build on the cache of local talent. In addition to the feathers in her cap, Roya was listed in the *Time Magazine's* List of 100 Most Influential People in the World in 2013. She now hopes to grow her network to encompass the rest of Afghanistan, Central and South Asia and other developing countries. But the journey has not been free of its hurdles. The biggest of all challenges is the lack of support from the families themselves, when it comes to educating girls. Coupled with this is a fragile economy and a dangerous state of affairs vis-à-vis security. Overcoming the challenge has largely been the domain of dialogue, where the task has involved telling people that education is a right for everyone and that the abilities of women are only honed by education, as they can do a lot for themselves and their country by taking part in social activities.

Being a woman brought with it a series of challenges in Roya's mission. Working in a male-dominated environment, that too in a country where very few women work out of home, had its own demands, and was not an easy task. Nevertheless, Roya banked on her ability to indulge in meaningful dialogue to break her way through the glass ceiling. To Roya, being a woman in Afghanistan means to live a life where everything has already been predesigned by the men in the country. While that is indeed a reality for some women, Roya notes that she is one of the many women who are trying to chart their own paths with their own identities. Nurturance is inherent in a woman, whether in her role as a daughter, a mother, a sister, a wife or a grandmother, and to rise above struggle is an extension of that quality. Roya banks on these innate values to take on the challenges that life throws her way.

As a change-maker with a vision for her country, Roya sees her work as being immensely important. Building local talents and giving girl students in Afghanistan and other developing countries the tools they need to express their innovative ideas is a long-term goal that she seeks to achieve. The milestones have been plenty. Roya recounts the story of a journalist who wrote blog posts for the Women's Annex. Her husband did not allow her to go to work but the journalist wanted to earn money and her own share of savings. Another writer would write blog posts while nursing a dream of a career in films and acting but felt like her wings were clipped because her parents were not able to pay for her. A third young writer enjoyed the prospect of writing, but following her training under Roya's organization, she could not write because her father passed away owing to an illness, forcing her to take on the role of a breadwinner in her family. All of these women have been given ways towards economic empowerment through Roya's initiative as each one finds that her voice is indeed a precious resource that is worthy of being a catalyst for economic development. One of the women, Elaha, who Roya's endeavour empowered, has developed her own

vocational and educational platform, and heads the Women's Annex branch in Herat. With a mission to create 'citizenships without borders', the members of the Women's Annex intend to express their views freely as well as earn money. These women, the Digital Citizens or Digital Pioneers, as Roya calls them, are all products of a simple equation that Roya labours with:

Women's Annex Media Labs + Examer Content Creator = Digital Literacy = Communication without Borders



Samín Malik

Life finds infinite ways to test one's resilience. It is not always easy to fight back and emerge successful; so every time one does that, it is nothing short of appreciation. But what becomes a feather in the cap is when that resilience goes one step further—letting you become the beacon of light for many others. Samin Malik is truly the phoenix that rose from the ashes.

SOARING LIKE THE FIRE-BIRD

Samin Malik

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Samin was born in Lahore, Pakistan. When she was three, her family and she moved to the United States of America, where she grew up in Maryland in a humble home with her parents and four siblings. Samin was raised in a fairly religious way, being taken to the Sunday school

every week to learn about the unique sect of Islam that she belongs to. Though they enforced their teaching on them as children, there have been several turn of events that have made her parents into more understanding and progressive thinkers, which is what has allowed Samin to branch out and excel so much from the timid, sheltered girl that she was and was expected to be in her younger years.

In 2006, while a student at the University of Maryland, Samin started working with Imagine-Life in 2006, a non-profit organization dedicated to raising awareness on critical human rights issues. The experience gave her a more holistic perspective and a better understanding of development in emerging conflict-torn societies, leaving her craving for deeper involvement. Her affinity for

Palestine began while she studied at the University of Maryland, pursuing her undergraduate degree in Middle Eastern history. She completed her Bachelors in 2007.

Shortly after graduation, when she was just 20, Samin was married. But never in a million years did she ever think that within the twenty-first year of her life, she would be married and divorced. What could have been a happy step in life turned murky, unfortunately, as it became clear that her husband's true motivation was a Green Card, not a life of commitment and love that she had expected and deserved. As a female of Pakistani descent and Muslim religious persuasion, the concept of marriage was subliminally embedded in her mind from a young age. It was not easy for Samin to get back after the trauma of a marriage, and a divorce within one-and-a-half months of getting married. By and by, she came to realize that marriage was not the be-all and end-all, and that she had her future to reclaim. She realized that she did not have to assume the role of a victim, or a martyr, when she could use her experience and the emotions she learned to grapple with as a springboard to hone her strengths.

Around the time of her divorce, Samin started her blog as a place to reflect and finally deal with what had happened. She also used it as a platform to experience how people would respond to her goal of starting a non-profit organization that would assist women entering in or trying to leave a bad or forced marriage. Samin began using the blog as a personal diary of sorts to speak about her stance on issues presented to her—right from self-control to early marriage. Within a month, Samin had over 1,500 unique visitors.

Anxious to start over and live independently, in 2007, Samin got into the corporate world, working for a Corporate Executive Board (CEB). She was just fresh out of university and her divorce. It was a difficult time for her and she often remained depressed. Her separation had all but destroyed her self esteem and she found the line of work she had entered to be dissatisfying, as she did

not feel she was contributing to the greater good of those that truly needed it. But Samin remained dedicated to the commitment she had made to start over with a life that was her own, even if it was not the ideal one. She stuck it out with CEB until 2009, when she was laid off owing to the economic downturn. In hindsight, getting laid off from the position was a blessing in its own right, as it gave Samin a chance to do what she most wanted—going back to school.

She then completed her Masters at the School of Oriental and African Studies in 2010, earning a degree in Master of Arts in Middle Eastern politics and oriental studies. Samin focused her thesis on two of her principle interests in Palestine in a more detailed manner. Samin centred it around Palestinian women pursuing non-violence as an alternative means to support the Palestinian struggle; coupling women's issues with conflict management to achieve a more holistic perspective and better understanding of the role of women in development and conflict resolution in emerging societies. While there, Samin was able to explore a range of issues concerning the Middle East that have helped her understand the complexity of human interaction, the causes and effects of conflicts and societal progress, and the role of government and civil society in shaping the political, economic and cultural outlook of nations.

After completing her Masters' programme, Samin joined Tomorrow's Youth Organization (TYO), a job that she does not regret having taken, even for a moment. She worked in Nablus, West Bank, as the programme coordinator for the Women's Empowerment Programmes. Having worked with TYO for the past two years, Samin looks back with a sense of ambivalence about peace in Palestine, wondering if it can ever be achieved in the region during her lifetime. But what was heartwarming was that she found resolve in knowing that the grass roots work she was involved in was truly making positive impacts in the lives of the

refugee women she had the pleasure of working with on a daily basis. While at TYO, Samin wrote weekly blog posts outlining her work with the women in Palestine.

Starting The Women's Group (TWG)—a capacity-building programme—at TYO was a challenge. Samin was effectively building the programme from scratch. There were no best practices or transition documents for her to pull from, and she had to make something out of nothing. In the beginning, Samin was apprehensive about whether she was designing something truly beneficial and practical. But once the first session ended and was rated a success by the target audience and the programme director, Samin knew she was on the right track. Thereafter, in each session it became her goal to make the programme bigger and better to demonstrate continued need for it, so that the services we were now providing with TWG would continue to be sustained. Samin found comfort in her work

Though Samin knew that she would continue to face challenges in her career as she seized new roles, she also understood that such obstacles were needed to be overcome. Her time in Nablus, West Bank, was simply rewarding. Samin interacted with over a 100 women and over 200 children from refugee camps each day. The lasting bonds she forged and continues to foster after having left Nablus are a testament to the positive outcomes that her work had.

Being the youngest of five siblings and that too with a huge age difference, while growing up, Samin tended to feel as though she had six parents as opposed to two. This tended to affect her self-esteem and decision-making abilities, since her ideas, thoughts and passions were always challenged by six elders that wanted to provide the best guidance. Due to this constant battle, Samin tended to feel she was incapable of making decisions for herself, that she needed to be a martyr for others to make them happy. Samin has

come a long way from that point to today, where she has been a beacon of light for so many women, telling and reminding them over and over that they are worthy, important and are the

foundation of the future. In many ways, what she told them was a reminder for Samin. Samin's network of family and friends has given her a great support structure constantly advocating what she wants and believes in. Although she had challenges conforming to her family's expectations while growing up, once she proved herself after arising from the ashes of her divorce, they understood it was time to let her fly, trusting Samin's resilience and respecting her individuality.

Today, Samin has a simple intention. She wants women to know that their only destiny is not to be someone's wife; that they no longer have to be anxious after a divorce, fearing that peoples' rebukes will pierce through them like a sword and diminish their existence. Now, Samin runs an organic, gluten-free and vegan bakery with her sisters to promote two messages—that one lives well only by eating well and that one needs to give back to the community what one has received. But Samin still dreams of founding a non-profit organization, which would serve as a safe haven for Muslim girls who were pressurized or forced into marriage, or suffering from troubled marriages, or looking for resources or support to find a way out. Samin hopes to start a hot-line service, providing counselling, making resources available such as lawyers who knew Islamic law and Islamic law-jurisprudence, and scholarships for those in need of educational aid and other forms of monetary and non-monetary aid.

Her mantra is simple: no longer should women be kept from finding the happiness within themselves. And until women come to accept and embrace this basic truth, Samin will keep on campaigning, spreading awareness and showing the world the beautiful phoenix that she has made herself into, emerging from the ashes of adversity.



Sara Potler
LaHayne

Creative expression can prove to be a great catalyst in conflict transformation. While some take to writing, some to theatre and acting. Sara Potler LaHayne used dance as a medium to create a paradigm shift in the world of conflict transformation.

DANCING HER WAY TO PEACE

Sara Potler LaHayne

Creative expression can prove to be a great catalyst in conflict transformation. While some take to writing, some to theatre and acting. Sara Potler LaHayne used dance as a medium to create a paradigm shift in the world of conflict transformation.

A dancer all her life, Sara grew up with movement around her. Her mother is a dancer, and through her childhood, Sara went to dance classes with her mother right from the age of two. With dance, arts and musical theatre forming a very important part of her family culture, she honed her skills extensively in competitive musical and professional theatre. There was always some kind of an internal struggle about making a choice between a career in musical theatre, dance and the arts, and a career in social change on a global scale. At 15, Sara contemplated moving to New York following multiple auditions with her mother in the wings. While attending one after another cattle calls, her mother asked her if she was all set to make a choice between the two things she loved most, and if she was willing to leave high school to take her career in the arts forward. Sara was unsure. She loved high school and her friends, and could not leave it behind. Nevertheless, after multiple rounds, she did not get the part. While it ended up being a moot point, it was catalytic towards helping her make a decision between two passions and things she loved most.

Sara then took the more academic route through the University of Virginia, while still doing regional and summer theatre on the side. While watching her juggle both, a director told her to follow whatever she found happiness in, even in theatre, for making it in theatre was hard, and she could take it forward if it gave her joy. When Sara reflected on it, she realized that performing was one element that contributed to her happiness, but not the only thing. She later worked in Santiago, Chile, with the UN Economic

Commission for the Latin America and the Caribbean. Her work there showed her the sociological and anthropological clash between rural and urban, the rich and poor, and all the many divergent social segmentations that existed. She loved her work, inspired thoroughly by her efforts as one child to galvanize enough support just to be able to make other children change agents. However, she wasn't dancing.

A creative and artistic void made its way into Sara's life. Though she enjoyed all her work, she felt something was missing. She came back to the US, where she worked in Washington DC at the Organization of American States in the Department of Education and Culture. At that point, she was introduced to the concept of Peace Education. Sara was drawn to it. It felt like a powerful approach with the potential to transform urban conflict. She then applied for a Fulbright Fellowship to study conflict transformation in Colombia. Sara got to work with a great supervisor, a Colombian man with several qualifications to his credit, including an Ed.D from Harvard, and who had done extensive research in empathy education and bullying intervention. Observing how his research team went about their approach with students, Sara often saw students just sitting behind desks and reading about empathy, about emotional identification, looking at chalkboards, diagrams about anger management, conflict mitigation and diversity appreciation. Their eyes were glazed, bodies limp. They were bored, disinterested in being there. She noticed that their eyes were on the watch all the time. At the same time, these were the kids that had great fun dancing to Reggaeton music. Sara realized what she could do.

She went to the PE teacher and asked if there was any way in which she could use dance and creative movement to inspire the same academically founded social, emotional and civic competencies they were working towards in the set framework. With that, Sara first authored the 'Move This World' curriculum, piloting it through third-grade students in the outskirts of Bogota. The

children had a lot of fun. They were all engaged, and did not realize that they were all learning an amazing set of social and emotional skills. Her first attempt was a huge success.

When Sara returned to the US a year-and-a-half later, she thought it would be easy to adapt this programme to her own hometown. She thought it was going to be so easy if she could do this in a war torn place in the outskirts of Bogota. She could do it just as well in Washington. But little did she know that the exact opposite would happen. The students locked themselves in janitor closets, refusing to come out. One student threatened that he was going to stab himself with a broom in the janitor's closet and the girls told Sara that she was dancing too much like a ballerina. It was a failure. She could not understand what made it flop. Was it a case of information being lost in translation? Nevertheless, Sara was unfazed. She made her way back to the drawing board, with teachers, administrators and families.

Sara started doing additional workshops throughout Washington DC. The response was powerful. Soon, she incorporated Move This World as a non-profit organization, and held her first training in the co-operative of a Professor of Conflict Resolution at the George Mason University, in September 2010. Sara trained other people to facilitate the curriculum she authored in local classrooms in the United States. Alongside the three classrooms in DC where this happened, Sara also worked with a classroom in New York City. After finding out about Sara's initiative on twitter, a school in New York began tweeting to her, asking about access to the training and the curriculum, since bullying and school violence was a huge problem. To address their needs, Sara called on a friend, Lindsey with whom she danced while still in undergraduate school. Lindsey attended the training on her own dime, staying with her sister in Virginia, and then went on to pilot the New York City classroom. With time, Sara's initiative came a

long way. Working with over 10,000 individuals across 22 cities and four continents, her initiative has been a huge catalyst in building cultures of peace locally, and then connecting each culture and working on conflict transformation through movement.

Move This World also facilitates an initiative called HubDanceXchange, providing a virtual platform that facilitates intercultural and choreography exchange. Students use the platform as a means to experience what each culture and choreographic style feels like, for students in other parts of the world and what multiculturalism is all about in a kinaesthetic way. Though none of these students might necessarily be able to travel the world, they are, through this experience, able to feel like global citizens and global leaders.

The journey so far for Move This World has been amazing. In terms of programmes, the initiative administers training for teachers and facilitators. While working with them and with students, Sara has come to see that besides honing their ability to bring empathy to the forefront in teaching and learning—whether in anger management or in responding to conflict in an empathetic way—the students are able to offer their own anger management strategies in handling conflict. The development of Sara’s team of dedicated workers was another milestone. In the beginning, she was by herself, doing all of this at three in the morning on her couch. With a supportive family and husband, the battle was half won, but she was still on her own in handling the running of the organization. With time, as more hands came together to support her initiative, Sara found it incredibly inspiring to watch each member of the team take hold of the organization like it was his or her own child, and watch it grow and develop, and then take the organization to the next level with their leadership skills.

To Sara, dance as a means of creative expression was natural and an obvious thing to do. With extensive research in kinesthetic empathy she showed that through neurons and mimicking movement, kinesthetic learning is a more effective way of inspiring empathetic behaviour than using traditional and sedentary means. Sara found that by living these principles in our bodies, we are able to truly internalize these skills and embrace them better.

The journey had its obstacles as well. Professionally, there was often a prevalent misperception that they were a dance education programme. Initially labelled Dance 4 Peace, Sara found that a lot of times, people would pigeonhole the organization into being considered as a mere arts organization, or a dance education institution, when in reality, they would train people to use their bodies as vehicles to transform conflict and to instil empathetic behaviour. Sara's organization and team never involved themselves in assessing dance technique or physical fitness. Dance for them was just a vehicle for change. On the personal front, Sara found that it tended to become overwhelming to have such a huge dream, that it was difficult at times to compartmentalize and think about the work that she was doing, to separate each challenge and each project, all because of how connected she was to her project.

Being a young woman, and a young founder in a leadership role, had its own challenges for Sara. It was difficult because there were a lot of demands. Her conviction and dedication for her organization was so strong, and yet, there was this need to ensure that her work was taken seriously, which is because of the nature of the field, especially so in the case of peace education. Sara found that such fields were often interpreted as fluffy, soft or intangible. Women often tend to struggle to be taken seriously. While working in the space of soft skills such as peace studies or emotional development, being women, it is often true that it is even

more important that they are expected to come to the table prepared with a lot of evidence and training and quantifiable data to be taken seriously.

A peace worker at heart, Sara is always thinking about how other people could feel in any given position. She is constantly putting herself in someone else's position, and influencing change through empathy. Moving this world with such great conviction, Sara wishes to dance on until conflict is truly transformed.



Somy Ali

Inspiration for a change-making movement comes from within. What started off as a springboard of sorts, becomes the basis for a leap towards a great endeavour. Somy Ali's story as the founder and head of the non-profit organization, No More Tears, a venture that assists survivors of domestic violence, began with reading a book.

WIPING AWAY TEARS WITH LOVE

Somy Ali

Inspiration for a change-making movement comes from within. But to bring that inspiration out and to act on it, the simple task of reading a book or watching a movie can be the catalyst. And from that point, what started off as a springboard of sorts, becomes the basis for a leap towards a great endeavour. Somy Ali's story as the founder and head of the non-profit organization, No More Tears, a venture that assists survivors of domestic violence, began with reading a book.

After donning the hat of a model and Bollywood actress for a while, in India, Somy shuttled between Pakistan and India while she was still in the subcontinent. She then moved to the United States of America to pursue her Bachelors in psychology at the Nova Southeastern University in Florida. Somy worked at a local radio station, as a talk-show host on relevant social and political issues for about two years, alongside studying for her Bachelors' degree. By this time Somy began to evince interest in journalism and decided to attend the University of Miami to obtain her Masters in print journalism. In 2007, after she finished her studies, Somy found her true calling when she read Greg Mortensen's *Three Cups of Tea*. Her mind buzzing with fresh ideas after reading the book, Somy had many plans. She wanted to help children, plants, women—everyone!

As if to help her find the direction that life had planned for her she got an indication. This prompted her to create a movement that would revolutionize the lives of many women and children who were subjected to domestic violence. Somy later realized that this was precisely what she was meant to do.

At six in the evening, one day, a lady who lived in Somy's neighbourhood came to her door. What she told Somy shocked her beyond measure. This lady was brought into the USA from Bangladesh. She was abused terribly, detained as a prisoner, raped by her father-in-law, beaten brutally and treated in the most horrible way one could imagine. Somy could not believe that she did not already know of this—all of these things were happening just five houses down hers, on the very same street. She immediately called the police, recalling that she had seen the police at this house before. Although the police did come and take down a report with information from the lady, Somy realized that they were not to do anything to protect her. She then decided to take the lady into her own home. Armed with savings from her acting career that tolled up to \$286,000, Somy went about arranging for a lawyer to get her a divorce. When Somy told her brother of the incident, he told her that there could be many more like the lady she had helped.

And that was when No More Tears was born. Registering it immediately as a non-profit organization, Somy had a fire burning in her stomach to reach out and help as many of these women as she could. Over a year, she spent time studying business models and non-profit activities. She understood that many of them though offered to help, wound up either keeping the women waiting for very long, or, had too many procedures and lists that had to be handled before a woman could actually get the help she most needed.

With the glitches identified, Somy began piecing her team together. She personally met and spoke to some of the best psychologists, immigration attorneys, doctors and dentists, asking them to be a part of her team. She made sure to start with the people she knew, so she could expand the team with people she was sure of in terms of dedication and quality. Somy was very

clear that none of them would be providing free services, but would be paid, albeit at a significant discount. She also got them to commit that they would prioritize the cases of the women and children she brought to them for assistance, because expedited assistance had to be the norm. Somy assembled a team of 20 immigration and six family law attorneys, telling them that they would pay them \$1,000 flat. Although the latter lot were able to earn 25 times that amount for one divorce case, they agreed to be on board with Somy's cause. She then reached out to two psychiatrists, who agreed to charge one-fourth their normal fares. Somy's personal dentist, and the obstetric-gynaecologist she recruited to the cause, helped out with her cause for free sometimes, and at other times, at a very miniscule charge. With Somy's untiring efforts, the group became a family that women in distress could seek out in their times of need. She liaised with the police, who she won over to her side, so much so that they could be considered friends.

The next step was to generate awareness that women now had a place to turn to when they were subjected to domestic violence. Somy realized that a lot of women who were kept prisoners were allowed outside every now and then, to buy groceries or other supplies as the family needed. Somy put up posters in restrooms at restaurants, waiting rooms at doctors' clinics and in Arab grocery stores, in different languages to be able to reach out to all women. When Somy went to the mosques in the hope of putting up posters, she faced resistance. The clerics at the mosque often told her that there was no domestic violence in their culture. But she managed to get in on a Friday, sneaking in some brochures. The very next day, Somy got a call from a woman who was abused for 10 years. When Somy went in to her house with the police in tow, she was found locked inside a room. With large chunks of hair missing, weak and bruised, the lady told Somy that she was locked inside and beaten up for three whole days. When they took her outside, the lady fainted. She had not seen the sun in three whole months. The young lady was brought to the USA from

Jordan, after an arranged marriage. Her husband would beat her whenever he saw her studying, depriving her of enjoying her dream of pursuing education, telling her that she could do nothing else besides cooking, cleaning and producing children. But with the help from Somy's organization, the lady went to Somy's alma mater, graduating with a Ph.D in Pharmacy. To date, Somy counts this as a valuable milestone in her journey with No More Tears.

Somy's modus operandi is simple. With 10 to 15 calls coming in each day to her personal cell phone, it is not easy to help all of them at once. So she prioritizes and takes on the most severe cases immediately. Where it is possible, she refers the others on the list to other organizations. At the start, Somy pays for five nights in a hotel. Sometimes, the police themselves bring the women in distress to the hotel and call Somy to come by to do the needful. It does not matter what time of the day or night it is, Somy is there for them unconditionally. She plunges right in, filling out all their documentation while being a strong pillar of support, assuring the rescued woman that it will all be all right. Over the next five days, while the woman is ensured the privacy she needs Somy's organization works towards setting her free. The spectrum of activities include filing restraining orders, arranging for therapy and medical treatment where necessary, looking out for jobs the rescued woman could apply to and apartments she could live in. After the women are accommodated in an apartment, No More Tears helps them move in, and pays their rent for the first two months. Wherever necessary, the rent is paid for a longer time. Somy's underlying logic is that women by themselves are resilient—all they need is that extra push. The association does not end there; Somy bonds with each woman, taking them out to dinner or watching a movie with them on a Sunday afternoon.

Somy's path crossed with cynical thinkers and resistant people, while at work. People would not only judge the women and say that she should have just walked out on her husband, but were also ignorant of the bigger issues that these women faced. They did not realize that a majority of the women who suffered domestic violence in silence were from other countries, and feared deportation as a consequence of walking out on their husbands. The truth, though, as Somy says, is that a husband cannot use the deportation-card on them because the moment she calls the police with a complaint of violence, he loses his right to call the immigration authorities. Coupled with this lack of awareness is a low self-esteem that emanates from continued abuse, insults and ruinous statements on their appearance, things that they internalize long enough to begin believing in.

Since its inception in 2008, No More Tears has successfully rescued 254 women and 618 children as of January 2013. The rescued women are from different cultures—underlining a grim fact that domestic violence prevails in every culture indiscriminately. Though statistics claim the average woman returns to her abuser seven times, none of Somy's women have returned to their abhorrent past. Initially, the organization ran on Somy's savings. By the end of 2011, as her savings ran out, it became difficult to sustain the activities. Somy sustained herself on rental income from two properties she lets out and then reached out to applying for grants, but was sadly turned down twice. However, lending a helping hand, donations came in from different quarters, ranging everywhere from \$20 to \$20,000. Somy also has her own fashion label, *So-Me*, which sells T-shirts for a price that contributes to No More Tears. Somy's scope of activity has expanded to include women not just in Miami, but also in Virginia and Washington DC, with plans to include more places within its fold.



Stella Paul

Money, at one point, made the world go round. But with time, technology stepped in to fuel the world. There is no action in the world that functions without some hint of involvement of technology: whether it is in agriculture or in a full-blown corporate establishment. Bringing technology to be the catalyst for change in the lives of many women is Stella Paul, a journalist and trainer.

MY SISTERS' KEEPER

Stella Paul

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Born the youngest of four children to an engineer and a homemaker in a small village in the north-eastern part of India, Stella's early life gave her a cache of experiences that fomented her resolve for a career in humanitarian action. The little village she grew up in had no electricity, no modern healthcare facilities and no safe drinking water. Each year, her house would be flooded during the rainy season, and her family would be rendered homeless for days, taking refuge in temporary shelters to tide over the merciless rainfall. Stella's father, who passed away only recently, was an engineer who worked abroad, while her mother single-handedly raised Stella and her siblings. A brilliant student at school, Stella's mother had to regretfully give up on her dream to continue studying by having to drop out of school and marry early because her parents could not afford to support her education.

Every year, as many as 700,000 girl children are killed—inside the womb, immediately after they are born, or a few months after they are born. The reason—they are girls. Stella nearly became one of them when she was just 18 months old. Having fallen rather sick, Stella's relatives decided to let her die because in their eyes, there was nothing to come out of saving a girl child. But Stella was a fighter, as was her mother, who with her courage and determination brought the little girl back to life. It was not until she turned 15 that Stella came to hear of this story and in the middle of her teens, she saw her mother for what she truly was, a hero.

Her tryst with discrimination was still an experience in her memory bank, although cognitively obscure until she was told the story. Instead of dwelling on the negative, Stella decided that this would be the catalyst to the change that she wanted to inspire later, when she would grow up. She resolved to work to give visibility to the women who are often denied their due recognition as change makers.

Stella's journey as a change maker came with its own series of challenges—from having to deal with superiors with an inflatable ego who did not like being told that they needed to think out of the box, to dealing with her inability to hang on to a job that pays well but does not allow her to be the person she is. On the personal front, Stella finds that her fierce sense of independence tends to bring with it a certain amount of rigidity to do it all on her own, something that can be a bit of an obstacle to coursing ahead. Nevertheless, with a simple strategy up her sleeve: that of keeping at it and of trying and trying until she succeeds, Stella has been able to face many curveballs with ease.

Being a woman in the field had its own ramifications for Stella. Many of her male colleagues often considered her gender as a limiting factor and denied her the opportunities she truly deserved, so that they wound up going to her male co-workers. Once, when Stella was deputed to cover a live political event in Tamil Nadu as it unfolded, the editor of her assignment instructed Stella to do just a piece-to-camera only in the morning in order to add 'the color element' while the primetime signatures were to be done by her male colleagues. This was discrimination in action: for here she was, a strong force to reckon with in her own right, but being forced to stand by and watch simply because she was a woman.

While working as a trainer, Stella experienced many highs in her career graph. The crowning glory of her journey as a trainer came in the form of the release of Bhan Sahu, a grass root social activist in Chhattisgarh, India, from police detention in December 2012. She was detained for being a suspected Maoist and could have ended up as one more person among the hundreds who are arrested periodically and jailed as the police try to make a political statement from time to time. Stella had only just trained Bhan and integrated her into the world of basic internet, social media and video journalism, and the skills came into use with aplomb. In the middle of the interrogation, Bhan managed to use an application on her cell phone that allowed her to send a text message to a group. About 50 people were notified as their phones got the text message Bhan had sent out, and the group contacted the police station, arguing until they agreed to let her walk.

In 2013, Stella wrote a news article on how climate change was forcing women from poor farming families in India into prostitution. Selected as the Best Environmental Story in Asia for 2013 at the Asian Journalism Awards Stella's piece inspired a massive sea of change. Two clean-energy factories were set up, one in Andhra Pradesh, India, and the other along the Indo-Nepal border, towards rehabilitating victims of sex trafficking. Both the owners that set these establishments up were small time entrepreneurs—proof enough that a well-told story can indeed stir positive action among citizens.

To Stella, being a woman has been a great source of strength and support to her existence. Every time she was denied an opportunity, or every time she was abused or mistreated, she did not take it sitting down. Each of those incidents only made her stronger, and made her fall in love with her inner self a little more than before. To Stella, being a woman is being herself: the one who breathes, thinks, sees and speaks. As she puts it beautifully, she knows no other self of hers except the woman in her. Her gender defines her: Stella is, because Stella is a woman.

Working to effect change around her in the most persistent of ways, Stella sees her role as a change maker as something that comes from being a complete person. Every individual has an innate and inherent ability to effect change in something, whether big or small. Those who wind up not changing anything, ever, are the ones who do not even try enough to make the effort to explore their own potential.

With dreams of creating a chain of inspiration across the world by telling the stories of positive actions by and of ordinary men and women, Stella is slowly allowing her vision to unfold before her. In the hope of creating a global chain of empowered women with her eyes set on 10,000 women, Stella hopes to train these women in digital technology so that they would go on to train several more. A true scion of women's empowerment, Stella Paul is easily and undoubtedly our sisters' keeper.



Sue Burness

Peace begins from within. The inability to handle one's own demons projects hatred on to the larger picture, in the process keeping conflict and differences of opinion alive. Helping heal issues and troubles with their own demons, Sue Burness leads individuals towards finding healing themselves from within.

HELPING BUILD INNER PEACE

Sue Burness

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Working to help men and women tune into their soul and find peace within, Sue listens to their problems, tuning into their feelings to the extent she can in the process. Using a therapeutic tool called Emotional Freedom Techniques (EFT), Sue helps resolve myriads of personal issues that challenge people who come to her. Driven by the motivation that everyone must endeavour to address their personal issues to fully live their life's purpose, Sue has had the privilege of working with people who are sincerely committed to creating a more just, loving and joyful world. An individual is in a better position to honour their commitments so much more effectively and joyfully if they take some time off to take care of their emotional health. That is where Sue comes in as the impartial external support that helps address personal issues. With an educational background that comprised a melange of courses that included psychology, sociology and world religions, Sue enjoyed every moment of her studies. Though she did not finish university, she never stopped learning, deriving knowledge from every quarter around her. Sue looks at her children, her grandchildren, friends, soul mates, clients and mentors as her teachers.

An unconditional giver, Sue is never one to hold grudges or to turn a relation out of her life. With five adult children, seven grandchildren, two ex-husbands, a father, an aunt, two sisters, a handful of dear and close friends, and two cats, Sue looks upon all

of them as her family in one way or the other. To Sue, all of them present her with opportunities to both, give and receive, acceptance and love.

Rather than calling herself as a healer, Sue looks at herself as a facilitator of healing. Believing in that it is the individual and the Divine within each person that do the healing, Sue explains that she provides a safe emotional environment along with a couple of techniques, to just ease the process and help it happen along the way. Sue has always been involved in some form of healing facilitation, teaching and coaching. When on certain occasions work took the form of handling people who were identified with 'Special Needs', Sue got to learn a lot from them. Right from increasing her intuitive skills to learning how to communicate with children and adults with no ability to speak, the experiences enriched Sue's knowledge and abilities abundantly. She also worked as a personal trainer, for a few years, working towards helping motivate people to take better care of their bodies. It was only a few years ago that Sue realized her true calling, which presented itself more clearly to her. She came to understand that irrespective of what she chose as a career path, she spent a great part of her energy in deeply listening to people and supporting them, while they worked to resolve their own emotional problems. With that understanding came a certain degree of clarity of the mission she wanted to be on. To Sue, above everything else, her life has been a significant trajectory in making her work what it is. Her own path appeared to create ample opportunity or, perhaps, she co-created it all to work on healing. Sue's first husband had issues of substance abuse and anger. Though there was love, they decided to divorce when their children were still young. Sue brought them up as a single parent, with some support from their father, and with a great deal of support from her parents. After several years of being single, Sue remarried. Her second marriage was to a gentleman who was just finishing a very long prison sentence for property crimes. He was diagnosed with dissociative disorder, a condition that had him frequently suffering from episodes of

traumatic memories, which then put him into altered states of consciousness. During those episodes, he would run away for days, weeks or even months together, and Sue would barely have any contact whatsoever, much less know of his whereabouts. While still in this relationship, she gave herself totally to honing her skills as an EFT practitioner. She saw that her husband went through so many years of suffering because he was simply unable to pay for the level of help he most needed. The unaffordable cost for the treatments was far too high, obligating him to steer away from treatment.

That woke Sue to the fact that this could be reality for several people world over. So she took her first step and began by creating a Pay-What-You-Can Healing Community. Since Sue had studied EFT and their role in healing with materials produced by its founder, Gary Craig, she decided to use the method. Sue passed the Foundational Level Certification exam offered by him in 2010. Since then, whenever she can, Sue makes it a point to attend workshops led by experienced practitioners whose work she admires. Since Sue is constantly learning new ways in which to advance her skills and create a business for herself and others, these workshops have become significant to her in that they are serving the greater good and each of the people who do this work. Nevertheless, it has not been easy handling her endeavour, especially amidst the lack of understanding on part of other practitioners and even potential clients, about the Pay-What-You-Can business model.

Reflecting on her journey, Sue sees that quite like many others, she tends to tell herself things that may, or may not be there. Consequently, some of the challenges and curveballs that life throws her way—may be a thought that may, or may not be true, necessarily. That said, to Sue, one of the major challenges is that she tends to have to struggle to find the time to properly run her business, serve the world in ways that matter to her, nurture herself and spend quality time with her large family! Leaving no stone

untuned in handling this challenge, Sue finds that as long as she is open to receiving advice and guidance from other teachers, by doing EFT, and by allowing the energy of ease to flow into her days. Sue has begun creating boundaries that help her walk her talk.

With her work of facilitation of healing, Sue has helped people all over the world. From people recovering from surgery or injury who have experienced significant reductions in physical pain during sessions, immediately after and in the long-term, to clients who started out feeling discouraged, fatigued, depressed, report feelings of release, feeling lighter and more hopeful after sessions, the spectrum is wide to say the least. One of Sue's clients recently told her that the sessions and tapping were cumulative. Their growth and energy, since they began tapping and growing had lifted their daily energy considerably as their core issues were dissipating. Besides physical ailments and issues of mental worry, Sue has also helped people with building productive and loving relationships on the home and work fronts, including helping in disentanglement from those relationships that are unhealthy for both parties. Many of these clients came back to report having had increased feelings of compassion and love.

Being a woman has affected Sue's work in very positive ways. As a woman, Sue felt that she has 'life-giving and sustaining' qualities built in. Her challenge has been to learn to pay attention to her own needs, and in so doing, support others to do likewise. To Sue, being a woman means embracing the feminine qualities she has been gifted with—qualities of intuition, compassion, strength, gentleness, compassion, empathy, gratitude for her being, sensuality, sexuality, the drive to nurture, the ability to nurture and the desire to co-create positive change. It also means having to stay alert to her own desires and needs which requires vigilance, she believes.

Working as a facilitator of healing, Sue has a long-term goal of working to make personal healing available to as many as possible, by growing the Pay-What-You-Can Healing Community. She intends to do this by introducing the concept to many more practitioners and then showing them how it can be a viable business model. Peace in the world begins with peace in the self, she explains, and the more people who have that the better all will be. Pay-What-You-Can is one way in which a whole community can be healed and people can help each other to heal. By contributing more financially, those who are in a position to do so are gifting those who are not. And as those people heal, they are then able to pay the healing forward.

Anyone born on this planet is in need of some healing or the other. Sue explains that the truth is that we all have the ability to heal ourselves, given the right tools and support. When she works with people effectively, Sue finds that people are able to simply open themselves to their inner wisdom, a wisdom which they may not be hearing quite often. Sue believes that there is an onus on those who know, to educate those who do not yet know, but can benefit amply from knowing.

Energy therapy, for instance, can be best explained in a number of different ways, Sue explains. Ranging from a set of tools to help one deal with the effects of stress to much more esoteric descriptions, the terminology is only just a semantic concern. It is not difficult to translate enough to make the listener hear the explanation in terms that they can best relate to.



Susan Abulhawa

A child born in a land that has known more war than anything is likely to grow up before its time. But trying to find means to let that urge thrive on a warfront, is Susan Abulhawa, through her endeavour, Playgrounds for Palestine.

FOR THE LOVE OF A MOTHERLAND

Susan Abulhawa

A child born in a land that has known more war than anything is likely to grow up before its time. He may grow to know that toys and games mean nothing when he has to keep running away from guns to save his life. He may grow to be an adult, never knowing what it means to be an innocent child – though the urge to play and to just revel in innocent happiness all the time may be there, somewhere in the back of his mind as he grows. But trying to find means to let that urge thrive on a warfront, is Susan Abulhawa, through her endeavour, *Playgrounds for Palestine*.

Susan was born in Kuwait, to refugees from Palestine following the 1967 war, when Israel captured what remained of Palestine, including Jerusalem, where her family had lived for centuries together. Susan moved to the United States while she was still an infant, and then returned to Kuwait when she was five. After that, she lived in East Jerusalem when she was 10. While in Jerusalem, Susan lived in an orphanage and attended an all-girls school for three years. In those years in Jerusalem, Susan got to walk the streets of Jerusalem, the city of her birthright. Susan then moved to the United States of America and later pursued a degree in medical science at the Pfeiffer University in North Carolina, and went on to doing her Masters in neuroscience, from the University of South Carolina. Even while pursuing a successful career in the sciences as a writer for medical journals, Susan began publishing articles and short write-ups explaining her views on the Israel–Palestine conflict during the Second Intifada, Or the Al-Aqsa Intifada, a term used to refer to the second Palestinian uprising, a period of rather intense violence that started in late September 2000, extending up until 2005. Susan was largely upset by the biased news coverage of the plight of Palestinian people,

and this drove her to write op-ed styled pieces in several media outlets. She was laid off in 2002, and then travelled to Jenin, Palestine. Her visit to the city inspired the story for her first novel, the *Scar of David* renamed later as *Mornings in Jenin*.

The book chronicled the life and times of four generations of a Palestinian family, told mostly from the perspective of the protagonist, Amal Abulheja. Much of what Susan experienced in her time at the orphanage went into the book, the writing of which was largely autobiographical for her. Susan took more liberties with the other characters, and while she wrote, she noticed that some parallels emerging without her necessarily intending them, such as the mother–daughter relationship which has been the most profound in her own life. Susan’s own life has been impacted by motherhood amply in both, a negative and damaging way in her own relation with her mother, and in a healing and positive way with her daughter.

Susan’s book was a narrative that had the Israeli–Palestinian conflict with a perspective she collected from her own life. The rendition attracted its own opponents as people showed up at her book signings with protest boards to offer. Susan would get horrible letters, and her travel to Palestine has been made rather difficult. People have called her an anti-Semite, some have built up hate sites. But on the positive side, Susan’s work has been received worldwide with ample adulation and respect. Letters have poured in from every quarter in support and in kind and thoughtful appreciation for the plight of the people of Palestine.

Her visit to Palestine also included a visit to Jerusalem, 19 years after Susan had left Palestine. The first thing that struck her was the lack of playgrounds. The war-ravaged region was full of empty lots, filled with trash and rubble. Susan realized that what was normal for her little daughter back home—playgrounds—were non-existent in Palestine. When she went back to the United States, Susan decided that she would work towards building playgrounds for children in Palestine. Being the kind of person to dive into

things without thinking too much, she started an organization to build playgrounds for children. Susan drove into her plan with the same motivation underlying her intentions. She got down to learning things from scratch. She did a couple of courses online on web designing and built her own web presence. She then filled out the IRS papers to get her organization the status of a registered non-profit organization. Borrowing \$500, a sum that was not easy to amass since Susan was a single parent, she went about talking to friends, and getting them to be a part of the Board of Directors of her venture. She networked with manufacturers and equipment suppliers. With time, the foundation for her organization was laid.

Equipment for the first playground under Playgrounds for Palestine was acquired from the American Playground Corporation and was shipped to Bethlehem after nearly a year of preparations. Arriving in Bethlehem in November 2002, with the help of the ANERA (the American Near East Refugee Aid), it could not be erected in time for Christmas as originally planned because of closures and curfews imposed by Israel. Despite this, Susan travelled with one of the affiliates of Playgrounds for Palestine, Mark Miller, to Bethlehem to oversee its installation, which was finally completed in mid-January 2003. After a group of dedicated local contractors and labourers worked all day and night to get as much done, the first playground was laid. Playgrounds for Palestine is still operational and has built over 22 playgrounds throughout the West Bank, Gaza and other refugee camps.

To Susan, building playgrounds is not an attempt to bring peace or to solve the conflict. But they are an attempt at making the lives of children better. Irrespective of whether a child is in a conflict zone or in a place of peace, their biggest priority, even if not necessarily pursued or executed, is to be able to play. Considering that the environment in Palestine is volatile and unsafe to say the least, Susan saw that she could give the children a safe, colourful and stimulating space amidst narrow roadways and crowded streets filled with cars and a perennially looming threat to their safety. This, to Susan, and to all those who serve on the board of

Playgrounds for Palestine, was not an act of charity but an act of love, an act born out of a solidarity that she felt with her people, an act that she sought to use to respect children and their right to enjoy their childhood.

Susan pursues her campaigns and writing as part of activism in pursuit of justice and of some semblance of equality in the world. She hopes to be able to work towards creating a world that would prove to be amicable to basic human, animal and environmental rights. Susan crusades for every cause she is passionate about with the hope of making the world gentler than it was when she came into it, whether through writing articles or a book, or building playgrounds. To her, activism in every form is a sense of a life purpose, something that is her life and an inherent aspect to who she is. In the long term, Susan hopes to leave a mark of sorts by contributing to the world of literature and human understanding, in the process, tearing away at ignorance especially surrounding the Israel–Palestine conflict. She hopes, above everything else, to leave a legacy for her daughter.

Building spaces for children to give them room to be the children they deserve to be, enjoying the childhood that is rightfully theirs, Susan is on a mission to brighten as many lives as she possibly can.



Susanne Billander

An international trainer, facilitator and healer, Susanne Billander is living her dream. In love with consciousness, Susanne has a sense of calmness in her being, stemming from the understanding that there is perfection, energetics and a lesson behind everything that happens.

HELPING OTHERS HELP THEMSELVES

Susanne Billander

An international trainer, facilitator and healer, Susanne Billander is living her dream. In love with consciousness, Susanne has a sense of calmness in her being, stemming from the understanding that there is perfection, energetics and a lesson behind everything that happens. This has helped her create the space she works from. The core understanding that every experience is a result of co-creation, where each person is experiencing a situation that they have in some way or the other helped to create. Susanne acknowledges that it needs some degree of compassion to look at things so ruthlessly, as she puts it, because the moment one begins to feel like the victim, they cease to evolve.

This is the very essence of what Susanne does: helping people help themselves, helping people know what they know, and to apply that to evolve and exist in a peaceful life. Driven by the unshakeable truth that the more one tends to perceive themselves as the victim the more they fail to realize their issues, Susanne has been able to change many lives. She has helped people showing them that when they slot themselves in a spot as 'victims' of a situation, they get stuck and simply cannot take ownership of their lives.

Before January 2000, a time that she counts was something of a millennium awakening for her, Susanne barely even thought about questions of healing or God. She was just going about with life, school and football, and philosophy or questions about life were far from her mind. But when she moved to London in January 2000, people would ask her what she thought about God, and what her

ideas on philosophy were. At that point, Susanne was quite amazed at the fact that people were asking her this by the dozen, and it also amazed her that she was not only thinking about it, but actually offering answers. She recognized that there was some element of synchronicity, some element of awakening, and it was then that her true calling came to her. Susanne's understanding of the reality that was opening itself up to her was like taking the bull by the horns. And it paid off.

Back then, she was wondering what she should study, having just finished school with a splendid set of grades to her credit. She was still undecided about the university she would attend, and the course she would pursue, when one morning, she came across an article in a magazine that spoke about life coaches. It was a term she had no idea of; it was not something she had heard in Sweden. It had her intrigued because she realized that she was reading about something she herself might be good at.

Later that day, Susanne was travelling on the Tube when a stranger came up to her and began talking to her. Susanne spared no moment in trying to dismiss him, when he suddenly began telling her that he thought she would make a great life coach. Her jaw dropped. Here was synchronicity in action again. From that moment, Susanne pivoted towards spirituality in a journey that has only been developing in steady increments.

Up until then, Susanne never called herself a healer. She began training to become a life coach, in the process successfully taking that basic training into an arena that was mostly dominated by men. She went on to study neuro-linguistic programming (NLP), at which point she had her son. When he was born, Susanne's life changed. He needed her attention all the time and in the initial few months, it took its toll on Susanne when she kept fighting it. All at once, a point came when she just surrendered to the reality that her son was hers, and that he needed her at that point of time. In ten months, a healer came by and helped Susanne's son sleep,

bridling the little fellow's warrior spirit into Morpheus' arms. That was another defining moment for Susanne, who shifted from a path of transformation work to a path of healing and awakening. As well as being a coach and NLP master practitioner, Susanne trained herself with time-based techniques and hypnotherapy, healing and culminated in becoming an international meta-health master trainer, as well as a meta-health coach.

Life for Susanne began looking up with vibrancy like nothing before. At just 23, Susanne was a teacher, a coach, a person that helped people to get back on track with their own lives. She remembers wondering how the young girl that she was, with blonde hair, could make an impact and make a difference. She yearned to be ten years older so she could make a difference, but when she started to train executives from American Express who were two decades older than her, most people held their breath for the results. Susanne consistently got the highest feedback comments from all the coaching/training personnel involved. At that point, she understood that age or the colour of hair makes no difference whatsoever.

Despite having had the knowledge to heal others, Susanne never wanted to heal people. Somehow, the image of a person lying on a bed, and she working on them to heal them never went down with her. Staunchly believing in the notion that education empowers, Susanne pursued her mission of teaching people to empower themselves. This, she explains, is the core tenet of meta health, where people feel empowered when they know, and when they help themselves. Susanne counts on it as being very satisfying to teach others, educate them and make them take responsibility for their own conditions. People moving from a state of seeing themselves as victims, to a state of being empowered gave her immense satisfaction.

When Susanne began, she was among the few women in a profession that was largely male-dominated. Her position on the board of The Meta-Health Coaching Society is truly an inspiration of all female healers and coaches to head to the top. As Susanne puts it, 'What's on the inside will be translated on the outside!'

Susanne's work today spans the recognition of the gifts and talents of others. Driven by the understanding that being true to oneself is essential for one's own health, success and growth and growth of abundance, Susanne has the personal intention of not just healing the system but also to connect each person to their true being. In order to assist a quicker shift, it feels important to focus more on who a person is at the soul level. Therapies usually try to solve the consequence of living, but do not work on the 'self'. Instead of clearing the 'not good enough' feeling, Susanne believes that one could say 'it is good that you don't feel good enough in this area, because it is not who you are'. If you would simply be who you are, only then can you feel excellent because no one can do your unique talent as well as you! This understanding has made Susanne target the underlying root causes at multi-dimensional levels.

Susanne took to meta health in pursuit of the passion to spread the biological explanation to cancer and other diseases around the world. Meta health builds a bridge between science and spirituality and reinforces the mission of scientists before sixteenth century, 'to understand the laws of nature so we can live in harmony with it'. Time after time, Susanne experiences the way knowledge about natural laws exchanges the fear of diseases to clear understanding. That is the first important step to recreate health. Steeped in the conviction that all diseases are possible to heal, her belief is based on science and people in the world that shows it is possible. Susanne explains that if people understand how the body works, they can work with it to restore health.

What Susanne does is not without a long-term goal, an ambition of grand proportions. Her total vision for life is to be able to come to a time where she can co-create new ways of society and living. With experience in arts like numerology and astrology, Susanne has a very clear understanding of how the understanding of such deep-rooted knowledge can impact the world positively. Conventional education systems teach you that $1 + 1 = 2$. But in real life, $1 + 1$ can be 3, or even 4—a man and a woman having a child, or twins, at that! Teaching children to look at the same conventional idea but with the inculcation of different levels of understanding, she thinks, would make a huge difference and help to create a system that would teach and empower children in a very deep way.

The idea is to teach people what they know, and not to put them into boxes and confine them. If people grow up to be in tune with their bodies, they evolve better. They do not fall sick, they do not fall prey to negativity, and they remain successful in evolution. These are the people that the future needs. Education sets people free, and the right education can make a huge difference in impacting the world. People will be in tune with their life, if they have the right understanding: the understanding, that if you harm another, you harm yourself. Pluck a leaf off a plant, you hurt yourself when you pull it off.

Take oil from the ground, you are eroding the sustenance of the very land you live on, thereby harming yourself. Fight with another, you run the risk of eroding the very essence of kindness. Now living in Costa Rica, Susanne has bought a plot of in an Eco Villa, where she is on her way to start a conscious school there. With time, the vision is to include her own little world replete with spring water, perma-cultured veggies and 130 different kinds of fruit trees, all of which will be reality soon.

The flaws in the old school schooling mechanism lie in the fact that it is flat, two dimensional and very parochial. If the situation we have now can continue without hindrance, Susanne explains that the children of today will be living in what can easily be considered Hell, in the truest sense of the term. For their part, today's children are mature: they ask questions, and are not afraid to know. We need to give these intelligent children their due, and that's what Susanne wants to keep doing.



Swanee Hunt

There is no limit to the number of fields in which one person can induce change. From politics to peacemaking, prostitution to parity, Swanee Hunt has been influential and transformative in many a field.

INSPIRED AND INSPIRING

Swanee Hunt

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Born in Dallas in 1950, at a time in which the US was politically and economically conservative, Swanee was the younger daughter of a self-made Texas oil magnate H.L. Hunt. In the era before the dependency on the Middle East as a source of oil, Hunt owned and managed the largest oil field in the world. When he started out, people called him a 'wildcatter', punching holes in the ground to find oil. He once drilled 99 holes, all of which were dry. People used him as an example for endeavours that failed, but he was unfazed and eventually built a successful business. Swanee's mother was a devout Christian who spent only a year and a half in college, and then only because her siblings pitched in to get her there. Swanee's parents taught her one simple thing: Go out there and make a difference; it is your responsibility. Their faith in her forged who she is today.

In 1979, when Swanee was just 29, the women's and civil rights movements were in full swing. One day, Swanee decided to meet the vice president of Hunt Oil for lunch. She made a reservation under her own name at the Petroleum Club, but when she walked into the restaurant, the concierge showed her to the ladies' dining room instead. Swanee insisted that she had reserved a table in the main room and argued that she should be given the table she reserved. After a lot of back and forth, the concierge conceded and showed her to a table in the main dining room, but emphasized that doing so would put his job on the line. It hit Swanee hard that despite owning 25% of Hunt Oil—and all of this was happening at the Petroleum Club—she was facing discrimination for

being a woman. Moreover, this incident was not specific to her—women across the country were being challenged. This inspired Swanee to not only have a voice, but to make that voice be heard.

In 1979, Swanee was the Minister of Pastoral Care at the Capital Heights Presbyterian Church, and in that capacity, she spent some time working at a hospital for people with mental illnesses. She observed that the patients were often moved around a lot before being given the attention they needed, and that as a result, some of them lost their records, and therefore lost out on treatment. Swanee was inspired to change this dysfunctional system and she decided to convene the people of the community to discuss an overhaul. A meeting followed and a briefing paper was drawn up. This paper was then sent to all the mayoral candidates for the then-upcoming elections in Denver with a request for a forum that Swanee would moderate and host. Four of the candidates responded and the eventual winner went on to replace the existing system with a much stronger, more effective one.

This was just the beginning of the many transformations that Swanee would soon initiate through her non-profit organization, Hunt Alternatives Fund. Of the many initiatives that Swanee heads, one is called Demand Abolition. A campaign that seeks to abolish sex trafficking, the initiative understands the relevance of tackling demand and supply. Given that the average age of girls that are trafficked is about 15, many of them are raped thousands of times before they turn 18, at which age they are deemed to have 'consented' to sex. For every buyer arrested, as many as 10 trafficked women and girls are arrested. Demand Abolition looks at the issue with an economics lens: the supply thrives because of the demand. The goal, therefore, is to get law enforcement to focus on the demand—focus on the buyers—instead of incarcerating victims. Focusing on the victims, while important, does not dismantle the system—it is only a band-aid, doing nothing to address the cause of the wound.

Swanee also chairs the Institute for Inclusive Security, which works with a vision of a secure world where policy makers turn to both women and men to ensure just and lasting peace. With the aim of increasing participation of all stakeholders in preventing and resolving deadly conflicts and stabilizing post-war chaos, the Institute works directly with women in conflict areas, as they are the largest untapped resources for global stability. This is done through specialized training and coalition building, where women are equipped to contribute to peace processes in exceptional ways. Currently, the Institute has targeted, multi-year initiatives in Afghanistan and Pakistan, Israel and Palestine, and Sudan and South Sudan. In each of these highly volatile regions, the Institute works with a local coalition of brave women leaders and committed partner organizations.

Another initiative that has taken shape under Swanee's leadership is Political Parity, a non-partisan programme accelerating the energies of dedicated leaders, researchers and funders to change the face of US politics. With a leadership team comprising over 50 women at the top of the field, Political Parity works to elevate the number of women in the halls of Congress and governor's mansions across the country. This initiative aims not just for the equal representation of women, but also to ensure that the best shot at breaking the gridlock—more women in higher office—is in place.

The fourth programme of Hunt Alternatives Fund is Prime Movers, a programme that strengthens America's democracy by supporting modern-day social movement leaders who challenge indifference, inequity and injustice. Following in the footsteps of visionary pioneers like Susan B. Anthony, Cesar Chavez and Martin Luther King, Jr., the Prime Movers are trailblazers committed to catalyzing substantive social change in the US.

Prior to her work with Hunt Alternatives, Swanee served as the US Ambassador to Austria in 1993. During that time, everything that the world vowed to never allow to happen again after the Second World War was happening in Bosnia and Serbia. From concentration camps to torture, religious persecution to massacres and genocide, the region was a black hole of human rights. Seeing and speaking with the 70,000 refugees that knocked doors on Austria's territory had a profound impact on Swanee.

The terrible Srebrenica massacre—during which 9,000 unarmed men and boys were rounded up and slaughtered—was a pockmark in the history of the world. Their women, though, knew nothing of it. They waited and waited, eagerly hoping to see their men return to them and to their homes. No one did anything for these Bosnian women—the UN and the US returned them to where they came from during the intervention, and these women became silent whispers in a now forgotten backdrop. A year later, Swanee convened about 30,000 of them. The women got together and each sewed the names and birth dates of the men they had lost on to a bit of fabric. Swanee still carries a piece of fabric with her that one woman gave her. This woman would tremble each time she spoke of her son, whom she hoped and believed had been saved because he could run fast.

While arranging conferences to let these women be heard globally, Swanee ran into a deadlock when she was told that the US could only offer aid if Serbian women were also represented. She was shocked—the Serbians were the aggressors. How would the Bosnian mothers feel about the forced inclusion of Serbian women at the conference? Nonetheless, she approached the Bosnian woman and explained her predicament. One woman came forward and told Swanee, 'Ambassador, we are all mothers.' This statement left Swanee stunned. Here is the kind of world we need: a world where we are able to see the enemy as a human being, not as an enemy, but as a human. Swanee learned then, that humanizing the other will break war, will stop war, and will allow peace to thrive.

Having hosted negotiations and helped bring women to the dialogue table, time and again, Swanee explains that it is not about building peace, but about preventing war altogether. It is no peace at all to have all the warlords put their guns under the table and split the spoils of war. It is true peace if it is built with women involved in the process. In one of her experiences with women from Afghanistan, Swanee recalls how one of the women insisted to the Under Secretary of Defence of the USA on being made part of the negotiations with the Taliban. 'On the first day, they would stare at their shoes because they can't look at me, on the second day they would look sideways, and on the third day, they would be talking. They are our boys, they are our men,' she said.

To Swanee, being a woman means being for women, by recognizing and magnifying women's contributions to society. In all the things that women endeavour for, from raising healthy children to raising human conscientiousness, they possess innately distinct abilities to create, nurture and transform. Women must understand their power. When women get excited about their ability to change the world, it will benefit not only people in need, but also women themselves. When Swanee was a girl, she never imagined becoming a woman. She did not have a single role model. In college, she started reading about one woman or another and thought maybe, just maybe, she could be like her. Looking now to many intrepid role models, she hopes, in turn, to inspire girls around her.

Throughout her journey, Swanee has had to juggle many personal and professional challenges. She was married for 40 years, and both her husbands were always supportive of her every endeavour. Her second husband passed on due to a brain tumour, and in the few years before his passing, they had tremendous problems but wanted to resolve it so they could grow old together. The experience showed Swanee the ability to handle and tackle trauma in a way that would help her go heal enough to go back to work

for all the many people who depended on her work. Whether it is through her work or through her teaching, Swanee unfailingly influences policy and shapes generations and generations of leaders who will go out and change the world.



Tania Saleem
Palijo

Tania Saleem Palijo understood the realities that challenged internally displaced children in parts of Pakistan, following an earthquake in 2005. With her efforts, she catalysed their rehabilitation and security, and helped rebuild their lives from scratch.

PLACING THE DISPLACED

Tania Saleem Palijo

Imagine a life where your home, your surroundings and everything you know has been snatched away from you with an earthquake. Imagine unfamiliar surroundings, the pain of loss, the difficulties of rebuilding life again. Pretty hard to digest, don't you think? Tania Saleem Palijo understood the realities that challenged internally displaced children in parts of Pakistan, following an earthquake in 2005. With her efforts, she catalysed their rehabilitation and security, and helped rebuild their lives from scratch.

Tania has worked as the Country Programme Manager of The Pakistan Programme of BasicNeeds, an international NGO working on Mental Health and Development. Currently, she is chairperson and president of Save Nature Foundation, a local NGO founded by her that aims to work for the environment, psychosocial care and development with the active participation of communities affected by poverty and disaster and seeking self-reliance. Besides this, Tania is also a writer.

Hailing from a family of politicians and intellectuals, Tania's father is a prolific writer, scholar, Supreme Court lawyer and a seasoned and respected politician, who founded and heads his own party. Her mother, Naseem Thebo, was a short story writer of Sindhi language. Her maternal grandmother was the first Sindhi woman novelist of Sindh. Tania's mother inspired her to work for earthquake-affected internally displaced children, and kindled in her the desire to work in the development sector. Belonging to a feudal rural family, Tania's mother witnessed the misery of the poor and marginalized. She depicted the miseries especially of women and children in her short stories and infused that sensitivity and desire to do something for the poor and marginalized into

Tania and her sister, Dr. Anita Aijaz, who is a consultant psychiatrist and works in the field of mental health from the platform of a well-reputed NGO working on mental health.

Armed with a Bachelors' degree in electronic engineering and Masters in telecommunications and control, Tania taught for a while in her own Alma Mater. After years of teaching, Tania went on to work in the development sector. Despite having wanted to work with development for long, Tania's tryst officially began in October 2005, when a devastating earthquake shattered Pakistan, affecting millions of people in the Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and Azad Jammu and Kashmir.

With the earthquake, houses were razed to the ground, lives were taken and scores of people were forcibly displaced. Against this backdrop, Tania began working with internally displaced children. She also managed a major earthquake reconstruction and rehabilitation programme funded by a UN Agency in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa. In Azad Jammu and Kashmir, Tania was the zonal head of a prominent organization running a strategic programme in the earthquake-affected area, specifically in Muzaffarabad. While working, Tania did her Masters in gender and women's studies, and completed the coursework for environmental sciences, gaining a wholesome perspective on the inter-relations of women, children and earth.

The earthquake was labelled as the 'children's catastrophe'. An estimated 17,000 children were killed in school buildings. An estimated 42,600 children lost one or both their parents. Still more were separated from their families. Thousands of children were injured physically and psychologically. Around 23,000 acquired long-term or permanent disabilities. Following the earthquake, families were broken. Adults were traumatized to the point that they were not able to take care of their children properly. Most children affected by the disaster were in dire need of psychosocial care. The earthquake had destroyed half a century's worth of

social existence. This made it doubly important to ensure good care for the surviving children, especially for the sake of their future. Tania was on a mission: a mission to bring back the laughter in their lives. She worked to give them the psychosocial care and security, firmly driven by the understanding that love and care are the two things that children most need, especially after and during emergencies.

Tania's technical education helped her use the internet to spread awareness. She created many pages on Facebook and several blogs catering to specific issues relating to women, children, poverty and environment. Although she was able to reach out only to the masses that accessed the internet, she created a ripple, as the message reached nearly every nook of the world. Tania's work showed her a thread of similarity between women and nature: the nurturing role. With hopes to give more time to writing, bridging activism and writing, Tania wishes to successfully draw the attention of the literate classes through writing.

The biggest challenge Tania faced at work was the patriarchal norms that prevailed around her. The notion that women are supposed to remain confined within their houses, that they are not supposed to work, and should they work, they should only take up low-status jobs was a challenge to tackle. Add to the mix the discomfort from the men in society if a woman successfully climbed the ladder and attained a high position, and the discomfort at being led by women.

Consequently, when Tania took up leadership positions, she noticed how some of her colleagues were resistant to her supervisory role. She acknowledges that this is a phenomenon that exists all over the world, though is largely pronounced in her country, like in a few other places in the world. Being a woman, Tania faced a lot of restrictions. Sometimes, she would visualize wider skies for her inner bird that wanted to soar higher. Whenever she accepted the limitations put by the patriarchal society on her because she

was a woman, it always came at the cost of realization of her dreams—dreams not only for herself but for her society, for women, children and the earth.

Consequently, working on gender issues in a country like Pakistan was not easy. People were reluctant. It took time to build trust, especially when families themselves did not see it fitting to let their women come in contact with anyone outside of family. Eventually, her colleagues accepted working under her leadership. On the work front, when Tania visited remote villages where women lived in perpetual misery, they were not easily willing to speak out. With time, these challenges were overcome as trust was built.

Tania is not deterred by the restrictions. To her, being a woman means having a unique way of looking at world and society. It means having a gentle, softer view; it means to defy the injustices which are meant to be tolerated.

Tania's ability to handle obstacles came from the understanding of a simple choice. When one confronts challenges, there are always two options: to flee or to fight. Tania always believed in the latter—to fight for the right, whatever be the consequences. For Tania, the ascent and the struggle, the journey and the means are more important than the goal. She kept to her path towards self-actualization, and always kept telling herself four magical words: I can do it!

Looking back, Tania is grateful for being a peace worker. A world devoid of peace will eventually become hell for everyone. Tania sees it as her duty to put in efforts to contribute to peacemaking at any level. And yet, she acknowledges, the work of a peacemaker can be perplexing as in that one has to put aside their own emotions and subjectivities, which is a challenge in itself.

Tania also writes poignant poetry. She believes that it is the most beautiful way of expression—allowing what cannot be said through ordinary words to be conveyed through poetic rhythm. Believing that rhetorical activism does have its utility and impact, Tania also understands that it has to be supported by community-based activism and advocacy at all levels. Recognizing that stereotypes and conflicts create discrimination, deprivation and marginalization, Tania believes that collective effort is always required to uplift communities and individuals.

Through her work, Tania has come to understand that intercultural dialogue is very important to promote mutual understanding and to lessen the barriers that exist within societies. To be able to attain a state of sustainable peace, openness to different cultures and going beyond the mere tolerance of the other to recognizing a mutual space to indulge in mutual exchanges of ideas, understanding and creativity, is extremely important. Tania witnessed this first hand, while working. Pakistan has four provinces all of which have very different and distinct culture. She belongs to Sindh, and her work with internally displaced children took place in Khyber Pakhtukhwa. She did not know the languages spoken in the province she worked in, though she could understand a bit. The children usually came to know that she belonged to another province thousands of miles away from their villages. That automatically created in them the feeling of oneness with her, because to them, it did not matter where one is from. The innocence and unconditional receptivity of children inspired her abundantly.

Knowing that suspicions and mistrust that is built for ages together is not easy to fade away instantly, Tania realized that the children she worked with had a fantastic lesson to show to the world. Children in their very essence are innocent, if someone is their well-wisher, they instantly become attached to them. The children knew that Tania belonged to the places that were thousands of miles away from their villages. The fact that someone from such a remote region had come to work amongst them

and for their betterment, prompted the children to accept and embrace her unconditionally, sending a subliminal message of tolerance, recognition and respect.

To lose a home, and to be displaced, that too when being a child can be devastating. Tania Saleem saw how much of an impact disasters can have on children, and it moved her enough to make her work for them. Tania hopes to synergize her writing with her activism and advocacy. She is driven by her dream to make people realize that they have the power to change the world around them without any help from outside.



Visaka
Dharmadasa

Her son has been missing in action for as many as 14 years now. She has no news of his whereabouts, nor any information on his condition. But Visaka Dharmadasa is resilient, not by force, but by choice. Indomitably courageous and unstinting in her faith in the power of dialogue, Visaka has been one of the most significant catalysts in the peace processes in Sri Lanka.

THE RESILIENCE OF A MOTHER

Visaka Dharmadasa

Her son has been missing in action for as many as 14 years now. She has no news of his whereabouts, nor any information on his condition. But Visaka Dharmadasa is resilient, not by force, but by choice. Indomitably courageous and unstinting in her faith in the power of dialogue, Visaka has been one of the most significant catalysts in the peace processes in Sri Lanka.

Presently heading the Association of War Affected Women (AWAW) in Sri Lanka, Visaka has been the founder of this association with a view to restore peace in Sri Lanka. Since 1999, when she founded the organization, it has been carrying out work that pivots around the core aim of sustainable peace for the country that has been fraught with war for nearly 30 years among its own people. Before AWAW, Visaka founded the Kandy Association for War Affected Families with a few people who shared the same insight as her. The War was a continued affair in most of the northern and eastern parts of the country, while life carried on as normal in the rest of the country. As a result, not many people in Sri Lanka knew what it was like for these regions. Visaka's every endeavour since then, has been to spread awareness. While she was going about doing her bit, the war came to her doorstep.

On 27 September 1998, she was given news that her second son was missing in action from the battlefield. Visaka's two older sons were in the army, fighting for their nation. Her second son was an officer in the Sri Lankan army. From that day on, Visaka never looked back, even for a moment. She moved on with the firm hope at heart, to see an end to the armed conflict that engulfed her country for years together. With the drop of a hat, Visaka dusted her back and moved on. Not sitting back despite the pain she suffered as a mother, Visaka reached out to several other women who had lost their sons and husbands during the conflict in Sri

Lanka. She was not alone. There were several women who shared her vision: that of wanting the war to come to an end, once and for all. And they had one simple way of doing it: connecting with the women of the other side, the women on the other side of the divide, that is, mothers of the military men on the other side of the war. As mothers, these inspirational women knew that that was the only way to go about it, because the right to life is for everyone to enjoy.

But this is not to mean that Visaka felt no pain. Having married as young as 16, , Visaka had her sons when she was 17 and 19, respectively. To her, her sons were more like siblings, like brothers. They were there by her side, holding her hand as she went through a difficult divorce. Later, Visaka remarried and attributes much of her courage and fortitude to the encouraging support that she got from her husband, who has been her pillar of strength.

Visaka used this mindset to catalyse and spearhead the movement called Parents of Service Men Missing in Action. Owing to the war, they did not register the association. From that movement was born the Association of War Affected Women in Sri Lanka, as mothers of several young military men who were missing in action came together. The endeavour was to connect with women on the other side of the divide, to be able to dialogue with them, and to be able to find a route to sustainable peace based on the core tenets of power sharing. Mothers and wives of missing soldiers came together in an unprecedented gathering. They named their work 'building peace from the heart of the conflict, the battlefield itself'.

The members of the Association went about the country, from door to door, collecting citizen signatures on a petition to the government, asking for a ceasefire and an end to the war. Visaka and her fellow members explained to the people in the regions outside of the war that though they all wanted simple things for their families—education, good health, good jobs, food to eat and

a roof above the head—it would all be rendered pointless if the war continued without respite. The association taught people about the War and told them what could happen if it went on like an untrammelled monster. The result: they collected 70,000 signatures and the trust of myriads across the country in solidarity with their cause. The petition channelized multiple voices calling for an end to hostilities. This was then handed over with all the signatures in tow, to the Royal Norwegian government, inviting them to facilitate a process of peace building.

At that juncture, Visaka bravely led a group of seven women into the heart of the territory under the control of the LTTE (Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam), at a time when the war was at its peak. The women went in to meet the members of the LTTE in a bid to ask them about the fate of their sons, all of whom were reported missing in action from the battlefield. What Visaka and these seven women did paved the way for a ceasefire. They then launched the Conflict Transformation Dialogue, which was the only Track II level dialogue that proceeded in parallel with the main peace process. At that time, with the rising uncertainties that war proffered, trust was a rare gift, and Visaka and her association managed to win it over.

Being women was a boon for them for the courageous association. The LTTE members were receptive to their request because they saw them as equivalents of their own mothers. Visaka and all of the women in the association harboured no anger for these soldiers in the LTTE. The understanding that these young men were sons for mothers somewhere in Sri Lanka and the knowledge that no one wanted to deliberately hurt their sons was the strong foundation that built the edifice of trust. The Association does not hate, is not angry, nor is in anyway holding the LTTE responsible for their sons going missing. They are staunchly rooted in the understanding that it was all a matter of who was quicker on the battlefield. If it were not their own sons, it would be some other mothers' sons. Visaka never considered it any different and saw the LTTE as her own sons. She recognized and believed that they

were fighting for their rights, no less, but the means they chose were not acceptable. With that as their mantra, it was no doubt that the women were welcomed and accepted by the LTTE. They even called Visaka *Visaka-Amma*, an endearing term that refers to her as Mother Visaka. The ability to understand their feelings and to win their trust was something that the instinct of motherhood won over.

While being women worked to their advantage on that front, the association often found itself being labelled as confined to gender issues. If the members went to meet ambassadors or government officials, they were directed to meet personnel in charge of gender issues. This posed them a challenge to try to make others see that they were not confined to gender issues, but that they were in pursuit of a strong political solution.

Besides negotiating with the LTTE, the Association wrote letters with requests to both sides of the conflict to adhere to the quintessential rules of International Humanitarian Law and the Geneva Conventions. The challenges that conflict threw were plenty. There were physical dangers, political threats and plenty of stereotypes to cast off. The Association sent out a strongly positive message that though women were victims of conflict, they were peacemakers.

Visaka saw that the people of Sri Lanka were in need of respect for their dignity, the preservation of their inherent stateliness. There is an imminent need for solutions that hinge on and preserve human dignity. Visaka believes that Sri Lanka missed the bus in 1948, when it gained independence in finding a political arrangement that would embrace a federal structure. The establishment of a federal government would best suit a country so diverse in ethnicity, especially since the country has a people that have

evolved with a sense of racial pride. The key is to establish a political system based on power sharing—a system that accepts people as they are, and not as one would want them to be.

Visaka finds that war continues because of the economics that goes on in the background. There are several economies that thrive on the manufacture and sale of weapons, thereby keeping conflict alive. Visaka sees that Sri Lanka has all the potential to be a formidable power, but that an unending fight continues to thrive in no one's interest, curtailing any propensity for progress. She believes that women should come forward to speak out, to address pressing issues in society, and to fight for causes without backing down. After all, what use is land when your existence is under threat? It is important for the world to understand that all that it thinks is not right. Visaka firmly believes that the day women define security, and the United Nations accepts and buys that definition, that is where there will be a paradigm shift. Unless the enemy is made to feel secure, you will be insecure, she says wisely.

Visaka is guided by the earnest happiness that she converted her pain into a springboard for something productive. She functions in tandem with her core value that she has a tremendous responsibility to ensure that no one else goes through the same pain. Nothing, at any point, threatened her. Driven by the fire of concern for her missing son, Visaka has always been a firebrand, unafraid and undaunted about speaking her mind, because she firmly believed that she had nothing to fear since she was only pursuing the truth.



Yasmina
Mrabet

The greatest benefit of a mixed heritage is an inherent understanding of the importance of cultural tolerance. Ringing true in the case of half-Moroccan, half-American conflict resolution professional, Yasmina Mrabet, the confluence of both her ethnicities has had a significant impact on her career and personal trajectories.

FACILITATING DIALOGUE ACROSS BORDERS

Yasmina Mrabet

The greatest benefit of a mixed heritage is an inherent understanding of the importance of cultural tolerance. It gives one an opportunity to see the world through the eyes of two different cultures, and an ability to understand how each culture is perceived by the other. Ringing true in the case of half-Moroccan, half-American conflict resolution professional, Yasmina Mrabet, the confluence of both her ethnicities has had a significant impact on her career and personal trajectories.

Yasmina lived her life between two regions, namely, the United States and the Middle East, that shared a history rooted in conflict. Coming from an interfaith family, with her American Christian mother and her Moroccan Muslim father raising her, she felt that if her family and her identity could exist in peace bridling two very different ethnicities together, two regions could do the same, coexisting peacefully. At the University of Virginia, Yasmina pursued Middle Eastern Studies. She was particularly disturbed by the role of the United States in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. She wanted to understand how people and nations framed approaches to conflict intervention and what variables to consider in conflict intervention strategies. Yasmina’s frustration with the global status quo of social, economic and political inequality led her to enter the field of conflict resolution. She then pursued her Masters in conflict analysis and resolution at the George Mason University.

Donning many hats on her career front, Yasmina’s earlier work consisted of research and direct intervention into ongoing conflicts. Yasmina then shifted focus to peace building, where the focus was on building positive relationships based on mutual trust and respect, in order to prevent latent conflict from surfacing. She was particularly impacted by her work as a volunteer facilitator for

the Soliya Connect programme, which uses a web-based platform for dialogue between college students from predominantly Arab, Muslim and western countries.

Yasmina now works with Peace X Peace, as the Director of the Connection Point Initiative, which creates platforms for dialogue between women from Arab, Muslim and western communities around the world. The focus on women is important because as women augment their presence and activity in the public sphere, they have increased opportunities to impact relationships at the international level. The Connection Point Initiative includes a blog, focused on breaking down harmful stereotypes about Arab and Muslim women, and the relationship between Arab, Muslim and western societies. It is an alternative to the mainstream media, providing a platform for women to speak directly about issues that impact them, and to share their perspectives with a global audience. The Peace X Peace blog editing process is unique, as we make the added effort of ensuring that the women and men who write and interview with them have the opportunity to review and provide their approval before publishing. Yasmina explained that many women have initially rejected interview requests for fear of their responses being taken out of context, or sensationalized with inaccurate titles, a practice common in mainstream media outlets.

The Connection Point Initiative has also hosted in-person community dialogue efforts, with a focus on women, in Israel and Palestine, as well as Washington, DC. It has launched a web-based dialogue programme using video conferencing to bring together women from Arab, Muslim and western communities around the world for an eight-week facilitated dialogue programme. The program completed a pilot in the fall of 2012, with four groups of women, and the evaluations demonstrated a significant shift in perspectives and understanding from those who participated. A large majority (89 per cent) of women indicated that they would

recommend the programme to other women, and the programme launched the first official dialogue programme in the spring of 2013.

Working in conflict resolution as a youngster can be a challenge. Yasmina finds that in the field, a lot of times, older conflict resolution practitioners are trusted more than their younger counterparts. In meeting with new people, Yasmina finds that in speech they marvel that she is a conflict resolution professional at her youth, but in reality, they regard her youth with a hint of mistrust and suspicion. Her way of handling this professional obstacle is by letting her work speak for itself and by not allowing false perceptions of her abilities impact how she executes her work.

While Yasmina's mixed heritage had a positive impact on her life and career, it also came with a burden of its own: the obligation to categorize her identities against social attitudes that rejected the notion of positive interaction between the two ethnic identities she holds. Yasmina finds that she is nearly always in a defensive position when it comes to her identity. The lack of an equitable sharing of power and balance between predominantly Arab, Muslim and western societies tends to put one side in the position of an educator or on the defensive. The continued perpetuation of stereotypes in mainstream media and the Hollywood industry keep the false assumptions alive and maintain the negative dynamics of the relationship between these regions.

Ironically, Yasmina finds herself working in a professional profile that requires her to encourage questioning and indulging in dialogue to get to know the other better. But, as she explains, the questioning that is encouraged and facilitated is using an approach that highlights real issues that impact the role of women in patriarchal societies around the world, including economic crises, inequalities, racism, social needs and the like. Yasmina explains that in participative dialogue facilitation, the questions

asked must work towards breaking wrong assumptions and transforming perspectives, rather than reinforcing misconceptions and encouraging patronization.

Yasmina has also found that her status as a woman living in patriarchal societies has impacted the way she interacts in social settings. As a woman, she is always evaluated on how she looks or dresses, more so than by her work and ideas. In networking and professional settings, ultimately, in ensuring that she has to get things done, she goes with the flow and tackles every situation individually in a manner it most deserves to be treated. In addition to her work in peace building, Yasmina supports other forms of work for social change, including activism in the form of protest. Yasmina explains that being a woman to her, means to have to work harder, longer and more effectively in a patriarchal context. It also means being in tune to the emotions and feelings of those around her.

Yasmina sees herself as a social change-maker. She explains that it is not about being emotional and saying things like, *'I love you even though you are different,'* although that has its value, but it is more about addressing inequalities by creating public awareness and instilling a sense of social responsibility to a global community. Yasmina says that conflict resolution is about throwing positions out of the window and putting interests on the table. Only by addressing underlying interests, can we reach an understanding that fosters tolerance and respect. Yasmina emphasizes that the work does not stop at dialogue. Dialogue should motivate action and action should result in change. She notes that one has to take into account the power dynamics in approaching any conflict situation, whether overt or latent. She also notes that it makes no sense to sweep glaring concerns under the carpet and coat under the guise of 'neutrality'. The concept of 'neutrality', she explains, is not applicable in the context of power imbalance. When a woman pushed a man off a subway platform in New York City, where he fell to his death because she 'hated Muslims and

Hindus', Yasmina explains that the undercurrent of hatred that led to this incident and many others like it in the United States, is what needs to be addressed. Yasmina also points out the media's irresponsible reporting on massacres in the United States, always taking care to never frame those committed by white male perpetrators as 'terrorism', despite the fact that they are, by all definitions, terrorist attacks; one example is the 2012 Colorado Movie theatre shooting.

Yasmina would like to impact change in mainstream messaging, which sends messages that many people internalize without reflecting. Consequently, women and members of minority communities are subject to pressures based on a false construction of their identities as perpetuated through television, magazines, movies, and so on.

Yasmina's career experiences taught her that dialogue is the first step to transforming relationships. It helps break misconceptions and helps participants reflect on their perceptions, and to re-examine the values and ideas that encourage them to take particular positions, help them to consider their role as global citizens and think about ways in which they can contribute towards positive change. Larger cultural transformation is a gradual process that will require widespread effort and commitment. Working hard to achieve the first step to cultural transformation, Yasmina continues to be a catalyst for meaningful dialogue.



Zarghuna
Kargar

Silence is the greatest form of abetment of a wrong – whether as a bystander or as a survivor. To speak up, to speak out and to speak against a wrong is a significant element in not only creating awareness, but also in facilitating bringing an atrocity to an end. To Zarghuna Kargar, being a bridge between women with real stories and the rest of the world was a natural calling.

DEAR ZARI

Zarghuna Kargar

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Born in Kabul in 1982, Zarghuna lived in Afghanistan during the communist regime, before the Mujahideen set foot in the war-ravaged country. Her father worked as a minister in the government back then. With four sisters, and a brother who was born much later, she recounts that her childhood was a happy and privileged one. She went to the best of schools until she turned eight, at which point war began with the advent of the Mujahideen, who attacked Kabul on a daily basis. With the security being shaky and the USSR's regime collapsing, the Mujahideen would enter and interrupt schools. Life changed completely for women and girls. There were no more unveiled women on the streets and public spaces. Schools began to be segregated, as there were separate classrooms for boys and girls. The curriculum changed, taking on a more religious tone as more Islamic teachings were being taught. As the civil war unfolded, jobs were lost and security became a relic. When the peak of the Soviet War in Afghanistan turned the corner, just before the Taliban came into the fold, Zarghuna's father left Afghanistan and moved to Peshawar, Pakistan. With time, she left Afghanistan too with her family to join her father.

While there, life was completely different. Zarghuna and her family were forced to live as refugees in a one-room house. There was no school to start with, and the family tried to re-establish their lives from scratch. With time, it became apparent that there was no

hope for a return to Afghanistan, especially since the war had ensured that the country was sinking in a vortex of mindless violence. Zarghuna began attending a Saudi-funded refugee school, somewhat like a madrasa¹ that offered religious instruction in Peshawar. She couldn't concentrate very much, especially since there was a lack of consistency in the subjects and the teaching. At the university that was established for refugees, Zarghuna took up a course in journalism while she was still very young. She was taught by teachers who had left Afghanistan after holding positions as professors at the Kabul University, and because of them her sojourn as a student of journalism was a fulfilling experience. In the midst of all this, the BBC World Service Trust had an internship in which Zarghuna enrolled and participated. She began working on educational programmes for children using the radio as a medium. Since there were no schools in Afghanistan, these 'Reach Programs' as they were called, filled the gaps in the system and helped educate children. Zarghuna worked as a presenter for children, writing her own stories, doing her research, visiting different parts of Afghanistan to record voices and stories, and then come back to present them.

Time showed that Peshawar was not as safe as they would ideally preferred it to have been, to make it a home. Zarghuna's father decided to leave for the UK, where he stayed for one year until he got political asylum. Just a month shy of 9/11, Zarghuna's family joined her father in the UK. With the attack on the World Trade Centre, the focus of the world shifted to Afghanistan. Since Zarghuna already had experience being a conduit for voices from Afghanistan and conversant with Farsi and Pashtu, she began working as a translator and presenter from Afghanistan. Many issues she addressed through her work concerned women's rights.

The British foreign officer made a conscious effort to fund the coverage of gender issues and women's rights on media. Zarghuna was a producer of a few radio shows at that point, and was approached to present her thoughts. Zarghuna talked of creating a programme that would aptly voice the concerns of the many refugee women and girls in Peshawar. She also came up with ideas

for possible shows that worked for the conceptual framework. Next she had to her claim 'The Afghan Woman's Hour', a version of the 'English Woman's Hour' – which was originally conceived as a woman's radio magazine broadcast program with content exclusive to women and their interests. . Zarghuna made trips to Afghanistan, where she spoke with local women and girls, and understood that they were not only keen to share their stories in full candour, but were also eager for informational shows that would tell them about health and women's issues.

Zarghuna found that she was being a bridge between the voices that the world didn't hear, and the many people that needed to truly listen to them. In the midst of all this, Zarghuna realized that she needed to do something for herself – take care of that bridge and to support itself entirely. There were several challenges – personal and professional. On the personal front, Zarghuna as an Afghan woman, found that she always had someone judging her – whether she was laughing, or talking about taboo subjects such as virginity. During the tenure of the programme, Zarghuna went through a divorce that attracted more negative attention from people of her community. People around her tended to believe that her ideals were being coloured by the work she was doing. People would tell her that her married life was not as hard or as bad as that of others, and that she had gone crazy with the programme, to have decided to go through with the divorce. She realized that part of this resistance came from the fact that the egos and culture of the people were being challenged, leading them to respond with resistance. While Zarghuna knew that she and her women were right, it still hurt her to see that there was so much resistance and antagonism.

Zarghuna's programme unfolded with the support of many women from the heart of Afghanistan. As these women came forth with their stories, Zarghuna became personally involved in her work. At a point, it stopped being her job, and became a part of her life. She found herself changing and evolving emotionally and mentally, becoming sensitized to the harsh realities of many women

in Afghanistan. She would take these stories back home with her, mull over them and try to find a way to secure justice for the women who spoke out. The telling of live stories, she found, was revolutionary not just to her, but also to the myriads of speakers and listeners themselves. A lot of the narrative about Afghanistan was often policy-centric, and people seldom got to hear about the life that thrived in the grass root.

With her programme, Zarghuna took many real stories to the masses that listened with rapt attention. Almost 45 per cent of Afghanistan's population would tune into their radios just to listen to the program. While the live stories opened avenues for a lot of dialogue, there were plenty of stories that opened cans of worms that were much too difficult to deal with. Some stories, she came to understand, were of immense value – but could not be told for reasons of security of the women themselves. Topics such as homosexuality and forced marriages of women to homosexual men to keep up appearances were dangerous for the life of the people concerned. She decided to channel those stories through an English outlet so that they would still be heard by the world. A collection of stories built up, and that led Zarghuna to write *Dear Zari*, a book that compiled many real stories of women in Afghanistan.

Zarghuna reflects on being an Afghan woman, and explains that it is simply not easy. One is often forced to listen to a lot, and is made to cope with a lot of difficulties and hardships. She realized that she simply had to walk through it all with her head held high – for finding inner happiness and being a go-getter had rewards that nothing else could offer. Zarghuna remembers talking to a woman who had two daughters. The lady told Zarghuna that she was worried for the future of her girls simply because her own life was immensely difficult, and

she knew that her daughters would face the same reality. To Zarghuna, being a woman is a special thing. To have the ability to give birth to another life, to be resilient inherently, and to keep and make families are qualities so innate in a woman.

Looking back, Zarghuna sees that the ten years of the programme's life made a lot of difference on field, and to herself. She made deep connections with each of the women she spoke with, and she learned the importance of resilience and courage – two qualities that would help her in her own life. After *Dear Zari*, Zarghuna was given the opportunity to work on *Girl Rising*, a documentary that focused on women worldwide.

Being the voice of many women and girls, Zarghuna realized that there is one cause she is most passionate about—education of women and girls. She realized that the education of a woman releases her from all challenges of life – whether in the form of economic disenfranchisement, or in the form of health issues and mortality. With the help of the awareness that her programme created, Zarghuna found that a lot of fundraising endeavours came up globally, to help bolster her cause. Ten girls got to go to school in Kabul, for the first time ever. Zarghuna is a firm believer for a generational change, and sees that the only way to achieve that is through education. Fighting hard to ensure that more and more girls from her home country will see the light of education shine in their lives, Zarghuna is truly an inspiration for women and girls around her.

NOTES

Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a Central Asian country bordered by Pakistan to the south and east, Iran to the West, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan to the north and China to the north-east. Considered the 'silk route', Afghanistan has historically been the centre of human migration from the west further into the east. It has witnessed considerable war, and was the site of much conflict since the nineteenth century. In the latter part of the nineteenth century, Afghanistan was a buffer of sorts in the 'Great Game' between British India and the Russian empire. After the 1919 Anglo-Afghan War, Afghanistan had a European-styled modernization wave sweeping it over at the behest of King Amanullah. However, this did not go on for very long due to the conservatives who stopped all reforms. Afghanistan became the ground where the US and the USSR locked their horns, spreading their influence in the country and culminating in a bloody war between the home-bred Mujahideen backed by the US and the Afghan government backed by the Soviet Union. After the USSR withdrew, Afghanistan witnessed civil war in the 1990s, followed by the rise and fall of the extremist Taliban government. War, since 2001, continues in the present days. Encumbered by three decades of war, Afghanistan has attracted much international attention in the hope of rebuilding the fabric of its society. Women in Afghanistan have faced many trials and tribulations under the yoke of the Taliban and at the hands of extremism and conservatism.

Bosnia and Herzegovina

Bosnia and Herzegovina is a country in south-eastern Europe, with Sarajevo as its capital. It is bordered by Croatia to the north, west and south, Serbia to the east and Montenegro to the south-east. With a culturally, politically and socially rich history, Bosnia and Herzegovina, since the fourteenth century, was under the Ottoman Empire until the nineteenth century. With the influx of Islam under the Ottoman Empire, much of the country's culture and social set-up underwent a transformation. Following the fall of the Ottoman Empire, Bosnia and Herzegovina were annexed by the Austro-Hungarian monarchy until the end of the First World War. During the two World Wars, Bosnia was part of the kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes. After World War II, Bosnia and Herzegovina were granted full republic status within the ambit of the then

formed Soviet Federal Republic of Yugoslavia (SFRY). In 1992, when the SFRY was dissolved, Bosnia and Herzegovina declared independence—an act that paved the way for the Bosnian War that lasted three long years. The Bosnian War witnessed many atrocities, the two of which stand out most prominently in public memory are the genocides at Srebrenica and Žepa, committed by Bosnian Serb forces in 1995, and the ethnic cleansing campaign in the Republika Srpska. The Srebrenica massacre witnessed the killing of over 8,000 Bosnian Muslim men and boys, and the expulsion of 25,000–30,000 Bosnian Muslim civilians, committed under the command and direction of General Ratko Mladić. The ethnic cleansing directed towards the Bosnian Muslims, included everything from unlawful confinement and murder to rape and sexual assault, from torture and beating to robbery and inhumane treatment of civilians. The International Criminal Tribunal for former Yugoslavia was constituted after the war, and continues to try those convicted of war crimes, ethnic cleansing, genocide and other crimes against humanity.

Chad

The Republic of Chad is a country in Africa, bordered by Libya in the north, Sudan in the east, the Central African Republic in the south, Cameroon and Nigeria in the south-west and Niger in the west. After it obtained independence from France in 1960, Chad's leader Francois Tombalbaye and his policies were resented in the northern part, which had a Muslim majority. With the population already divided according to religion into water-tight compartments of Islam and Christianity, a civil war began in 1965. In 1978, the rebellious population conquered Chad's capital city and put an end to the South's hegemonic policies. Disunity among the rebellious population culminated in many fights among the rebel commanders, until Hissène Habré defeated his rivals. In 1990, Habré was overthrown. In 2003, the Darfur Crisis in neighbouring Sudan spilled over into Chad, destabilizing the country as scores of Sudanese refugees made their way into Chad to live in and around the country in refugee camps. The country has faced plenty of political violence and many an attempted coups, leaving it one of the world's poorest countries.

DR Congo

The Democratic Republic of Congo is a Central African country, bordered by the Central African Republic and South Sudan in the north, Uganda, Rwanda and Burundi in the East, Zambia and Angola in the south and the Republic of the Congo and the Atlantic Ocean in the west, while being separated by Lake Tanganyika from Tanzania. Since the aftermath of the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, the DRC, as it is known, has faced a massive influx of refugees and militia coming in from Rwanda, culminating in the First Congo War between 1996 and 1997. In 1998, the Second Congo War began, devastating the country by drawing in the neighbouring countries and several armed groups in armed exchanges of incomparable sorts. Peace accords have been signed time and again, in 2003 to start with, but fighting has continued to thrive in the country. Against the backdrop of much armed violence and institutionalized corruption that allows the mining of conflict minerals, rape and sexual violence thrives. Many women and girls have been subjected to rape, sexual violence, mutilation and torture. Since the Second World War, the Second Congo War has been dubbed as the world's worst, and the situation concerning women has gone so far as to earn the DRC the title of being 'the world's worst place to be a woman'.

Guatemala

Guatemala is a Central American country bordered by Mexico in the north and west, the Pacific Ocean in the south-west, Belize in the north-east, the Caribbean and the Honduras in the east and El-Salvador in the south-east. After independence from Spain in 1821, Guatemala remained a part of the Federal Republic of Central America until its dissolution. After that, the country suffered much political instability until the mid-nineteenth century, after which it had many a tryst with democracy and dictatorship, ultimately culminating in a 36-year-long civil war starting in 1960, between the government under Efraín Ríos Montt and the leftist rebels. During the civil war, a massive section of the Mayan Ixil population were subjected to much violence and reportedly genocide—a matter which is still pending trial.

Pakistan

Pakistan is a South Asian country that is bordered by India in the east, Afghanistan in the west and north, Iran in the south-west and China in the north-east, and has a coastline along the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman in the south. After its independence in 1947 from British rule,

Pakistan became an Islamic Republic, adopting its own constitution. A civil war, in 1971, culminated in the secession of East Pakistan as Bangladesh. Pakistan's political trajectory has been characterized by military rule, political instability and some periods of conflict with India. Demographically, Pakistan's challenges are plenty, including poverty, extremism, corruption and illiteracy.

Palestine

Palestine is a state in the Middle East and has been controlled by different communities of people throughout history. With a predominantly Arab population to start with, and a community where people of all faiths coexisted in the early days, Palestine was the centre of much action at the end of World War I, where the Balfour Declaration set out to carve Israel out of the territory designated as Palestine. In the process, there have been many years of conflict in the region consequent to Israel's occupation of Palestinian territory—a situation which gave rise to many human rights abuses and a continuing humanitarian crisis.

Rwanda

Rwanda is a country in Africa, bordered by Uganda, Tanzania, Burundi and the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In 1994, the infamous Rwandan Genocide ensued, becoming one of the world's worst instances of human rights abuse, where the Hutu population massacred and killed a massive number of the Tutsi population, Hutu and Tutsi being two of the major tribes in Rwanda. Since the 1994 genocide, Rwanda has suffered economically, but has begun reviving its strength with time.

Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is a South Asian island state located to the South of India, in the Indian Ocean. A diverse country that is home to many religions, ethnicities and languages, Sri Lanka is known for its rich Buddhist heritage. From 1983 until 2009, there were intermittent insurgencies against the government by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (the LTTE, also known as the Tamil Tigers), which was an independent militant organization that fought to create an independent Tamil state called the Tamil Eelam in the north and the east of the island. Eventually, in 2009,

the Tamil Tigers were defeated by the Sri Lankan military. The war brought untold hardship on the people, making refugees out of citizens, bringing in scores of casualties. Accusations of impunity being carried out by both sides to the conflict have been rife. Following two decades of active fighting, four failed attempts at peace talks and the unsuccessful deployment of army units from India, there was a cease-fire in December 2001 with the help of an international mediation process. Limited hostilities began once the mediation process was over, culminating in 2005, in a fresh bout of military action against the LTTE. In 2007, the government shifted its focus to the northern part of the country, formally withdrawing its ceasefire agreement, on the grounds that the LTTE had violated the agreement. Following that, the government took control of the area previously under LTTE control with the help of an international crackdown, leading to their defeat. In May 2010, a Lessons Learnt and Reconciliation Commission (LLRC) evaluated the conflict and its implications on the population.

Syria

Syria is a country in the Middle East, sharing a border with Lebanon and Mediterranean Sea in the west, Turkey in the north, Iraq in the east, Jordan in the south, and Israel in the southwest. Syria was originally under the Ottoman-ruled Arab Levant, under control of which it emerged as one of the Arab World's largest states. After independence in April 1946, it became a parliamentary republic. In the aftermath of independence, there were tremendous military coups and attempts at coups unfolding in the period between 1949 and 1971. From 1958 until 1961, Syria had a brief union with Egypt, which was later terminated by a military coup. Since 2000, Bashar al-Assad has been the President since 2000, prior to which (since 1979), his father Hafez al-Assad was the President. Since March 2011, Syria has faced a civil war after a round of peaceful protests and uprisings against Assad's dictatorial government, seeking his ouster. However, the war continues unabated.

The Gambia

The Gambia is a country in West Africa, sharing boundaries with Senegal, apart from a short strip of Atlantic coastline at its western end. Being the smallest country on mainland Africa, The Gambia shares historical roots with other West African nations in slave trade. After independence

from British rule in 1965, The Gambia has enjoyed relative political stability, with the exception of a brief period of military rule in 1994. An agrarian economy, the country has a fairly high percentage of its population under the poverty line.

Yemen

Yemen is a country in the Middle East, sharing borders with Saudi Arabia in the north, the Red Sea in the west, the Gulf of Aden and Arabian Sea in the south, and Oman in the east. A developing country, Yemen is often touted to be what is called a 'kleptocracy' or a 'rule by thieves'. In 2011, a series of protests began as the population rose against poverty, unemployment and corruption as well as against the government's plan to amend Yemen's constitution and eliminate presidential term limits.

GLOSSARY

9/11: 9/11 is an oft-used term to refer to the attacks on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre at New York, and the Pentagon, Washington DC, USA, on 11 September 2001.

ADHD: Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder is a psychiatric disorder which involves issues of attention, hyperactivity or impulsive conduct.

African Union: The African Union is a union of states in Africa. Comprising 54 member states, it excludes Morocco. It was established on 26 May 2001 at Addis Ababa, and replaced the Organisation of African Unity.

AIPAC: The American Israel Public Affairs Committee is a lobbying group that functions as a pro-Israel policy group.

Al Qaeda: Al Qaeda is a broad term associated with many terrorist and militant outfits falling under the main title. It was founded by Abdullah Yusuf Azzam and Osama bin Laden.

Alternate Dispute Resolution: Alternative Dispute Resolution refers to a series of mechanisms aimed at settling differences and disputes without going to litigation.

Aman ki Asha: Aman ki Asha is a campaign jointly started by The Jang group in Pakistan and The Times of India in India, working towards peace and development of strong diplomatic relations between India and Pakistan. The initiative began in January 2010.

ANERA: The American Near East Refugee Aid is an initiative that helps Palestinian refugees and other poor communities in Gaza, the West Bank and Lebanon.

Arab Spring: The Arab Spring is a collective term for the revolutions comprising protests and demonstrations against existing dictatorial regimes in the Arab world. It formally began on 18 December 2010 with Tunisia and Egypt.

Audre Lorde: Audre Lorde was a Caribbean-American writer, activist and feminist.

Bashar al-Assad: Bashar al-Assad (at the time of writing this book) is the President of Syria, having served since 2000 after succeeding his father, Hafez al-Assad, who was in power for 30 years. Syria has risen in arms against his regime and remains (at the time of writing) embroiled in a civil war seeking his ouster.

Bollywood: Bollywood refers to the Hindi film industry, based largely out of Mumbai, India.

Borderline Disorder: Borderline personality disorder is a personality disorder whereby the individual depicts impulsivity and instability of affects, interpersonal relationships and self image.

Child marriage: Child marriage refers to a social practice of marrying off people under the age of 18. It is a common occurrence in a few Asian and African countries, and is often skewed in such a way that the bride is the underaged party to the marriage while the groom is often several decades older.

Christian: Christian is a term used to denote a person professing Christianity as a faith, following the principles and teachings of Jesus Christ.

CIA: The Central Intelligence Agency is one of the principal intelligence gathering agencies of the United States of America, reporting to the director of national intelligence.

COFAPRI: COFAPRI is a Bukavu-DRC-based organization, a very young project in collaboration with the UK-based Safe World for Women International. It currently travels to villages in the DRC to tell people about human rights, especially those of women.

Conflict Resolution: Conflict resolution refers to an organized method of solving conflicts and disputes. It may or may not involve litigation or diplomacy.

Corporate Executive Board: The corporate executive board is a publicly traded company providing advisory services to businesses worldwide through analyses and dissemination of insights and solutions that executives use to respond to business conditions

Crimes against Humanity: Crimes against humanity, as defined by the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court Explanatory Memorandum, ‘are particularly odious offenses in that they constitute a serious attack on human dignity or grave humiliation or a degradation of human beings’.

Darfur: Darfur is a region in western Sudan, originally having been an independent sultanate until 1916. It has been a hub of war between the Sudanese government and the indigenous populace, and has faced a severe humanitarian crisis since 2003.

Dissociative Disorder: A dissociative disorder can involve a breakdown of memory, awareness, identity or perception. Dissociation becomes a defence mechanism involuntarily, and often occurs due to psychological trauma.

Domestic Violence: Domestic Violence refers to a pattern of behaviour where abuse of any kind—mental, physical, emotional, economical, sexual or psychological—is meted out by a family member to another. It is often used to denote spousal violence.

Dr Grace Kodindo: Dr. Grace Kodindo is a Chadian OBGYN and an assistant clinical professor of population and family health at the Columbia University Mailman School of Public Health. She was awarded the prestigious Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 3 Champion Torch in recognition of her efforts to secure comprehensive reproductive health care for women worldwide.

Dr. Denis Mukwege: Dr. Denis Mukwege is a Congolese gynaecologist who founded and runs the Panzi Hospital in Bukavu, DR Congo. He works on the treatment of women who have survived rape at the hands of the rebel forces and has become one of the world’s experts on repairing internal physical damage caused by rape and sexual violence.

Drone Warfare: Drone warfare refers to war using an unmanned combat air vehicle that is used to lock and attack specific target areas.

Drones: A drone is an unmanned combat vehicle that is manoeuvred and controlled remotely using computer-based software.

Eclampsia: Eclampsia is a severe and life-threatening complication arising out of pregnancy, comprising seizures during the term of pregnancy.

Efrain Rios Montt: Efrain Rios Montt was the president of Guatemala from 1982 to 1983, and subsequently from 2007 to 2012. He has been formally indicted for genocide and crimes against humanity during the Guatemalan Civil War.

Emotional Freedom Techniques: Emotional Freedom Techniques is a form of alternative therapy that uses energy healing to aid remedying physical and psychological disorders.

Ethnic Cleansing: Ethnic cleansing refers to the systematic and forced removal of ethnic or religious groups from within a territory in order to make the territory comprise people of a homogenous ethnicity, or a 'pure' ethnicity. Ethnic cleansing can be carried out through deportation, forced transfers, genocide and mass murders.

Extremism: Extremism refers to an ideology that is outside the ambit of the mainstream attitude of a social group, often tending to go against generally accepted moral standards.

Fellowship of Reconciliation: The Fellowship of Reconciliation refers to a set of faith-based non-violent organizations largely based out of English-speaking countries.

Feminist Peace Theory: Feminist Peace Theory refers to a theory of peace that is rendered with engendered rhetoric and principles. Feminist scholars have worked gender concerns into the narrative of the academic study of peace studies, functioning on the premise that peace and conflict are affected by both men and women.

FGM: Female Genital Mutilation or FGM refers to, as defined by the World Health Organisation, all procedures that involve the partial or total removal of the external female genitalia or other injury to the female genital organs for reasons other than medical concerns. It is a cultural practice in many parts of sub-Saharan and North Africa, the Middle East and parts of South and Central Asia.

Forced marriages: Forced marriage refers to a marriage where either or both parties are married without their consent, or against their will.

Freedom Flotillas: The Freedom Flotilla was organized by the Free Gaza Movement and the Turkish Foundation for Human rights and Freedoms and Humanitarian Relief. It carried humanitarian aid and construction materials with a view to break the Israeli-Egyptian blockade of the Gaza Strip in 2010.

Gaza Freedom March: The Gaza Freedom March was a non-violent political march in order to end the blockade of the Gaza Strip in 2009.

Gender-based violence: Gender-based violence is violence of any kind that is directed against a person based on gender. Oftentimes, though the connotation is tied to women as being the victims, it is also true that men are victims of gender-based violence.

Genocidaires: Genocidaires is a French term to denote 'those who commit genocide', and is used specifically to refer to those guilty of mass killings in the Rwandan Genocide in 1994.

Genocide: Genocide refers to the systematic destruction of either all, or a part of a social group, a race, an ethnic, national or religious group.

Gloria Steinem: Gloria Steinem is an activist, feminist, journalist and is recognized as the leader and spokeswoman of the women's liberation movement in the 1960s and 1970s.

Hindu: Hindu refers to a person who is allied to the faith of Hinduism.

HIV/Aids: HIV/AIDS refers to a disease of the human immune system consequent to an infection caused by the human immunodeficiency virus.

Holocaust: The Holocaust refers to the mass murder or genocide of as many as six million Jews and gypsy population during the Second World War, in a campaign spearheaded and sponsored by Adolf Hitler and his Nazi Party.

Honour Killings: Honour killings refer to the murder of a person by their own family member—intimate or extended—in the pursuit of protecting the family's honour, labouring under the belief that the person so killed has brought dishonour upon the family through their actions.

Hosni Mubarak: Hosni Mubarak is a former Egyptian president, who served from 1981 until 2011. His dictatorial regime was toppled by the protesting masses in Egypt during the Arab Spring in 2010–2011.

Hurricane Katrina: Hurricane Katrina was a destructive Atlantic tropical cyclone in 2005, wreaking enough havoc to be counted on as the most costliest natural disaster in the history of the United States of America.

ICTR: The International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda was established in 1994 to investigate, prosecute and punish those responsible for the Rwandan Genocide.

ICTY: The International Criminal Tribunal for Yugoslavia was established in 1991 to investigate, prosecute and punish those responsible for the war crimes during the wars in the former Soviet Federalist Republic of Yugoslavia.

Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy: The Institute for Multi-Track Diplomacy is a non-profit organization working towards promoting a systems-based approach to peace building, and to transform deep-rooted social conflict through education, training and communication.

Internal displacement: Internal displacement refers to the phenomenon where a people are forced to flee their homes to another place, while

still remaining within the boundaries of their country. Internally displaced people do not fall under the definition of the term 'refugee' as it has come to be understood in international law.

International Solidarity Movement: The International Solidarity Movement is an organization focusing on assisting Palestine in the Israel–Palestine conflict. It was founded by Ghassan Andoni, a Palestinian activist, Neta Golan, an Israeli activist, Huwaida Arraf, a Palestinian–American and George N. Rishmawi, a Palestinian activist. The core tenets rest on non-violence in protesting against the Israeli military in the West Bank.

Intifada: Intifada is an Arabic word which means 'to shake off'. It has, however, come to be identified in keeping with uprising, rebellion or resistance.

Jew: A Jew is a person professing the faith of Judaism.

Katerva Award: Awards given in recognition of efforts and initiatives that promote sustainability. It is awarded by Katerva, an organization founded by Terry Waghorn, a Canadian author.

Kinaesthetic empathy: Kinaesthetic empathy is the ability to empathize through the observation of movements of another person.

Lara Logan: Lara Logan is a television and radio journalist and a war correspondent, working as the chief foreign affairs correspondent for CBS News, and as a correspondent for CBS' 60 Minutes.

LTTE: The Liberation Tigers of the Tamil Eelam, or the LTTE, was a separatist militant organization based out of northern Sri Lanka, having been founded in 1976 by Velupillai Prabhakaran. The group waged a secessionist nationalist campaign in an attempt to create an independent state in the northern and eastern part of Sri Lanka for Tamil People.

Madrassa: Madrassa is the Arabic term for any kind of an educational institution. With time, the word has come to denote institutions that deal with educating their students in Islam. In Pakistan, Madrasas have been around since the 11th Century, and function as Islamic seminaries that teach Islamic subjects. There are five main governing bodies of Madrasas in Pakistan with different schools of thought ascribed to each

Mahatma Gandhi: Mahatma Gandhi or Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was a leader of the Indian nationalist movement during the colonial rule under the British Empire. He led India to independence by deploying tactics of non-violent civil disobedience and ahimsa.

Malala Yousufzai: Malala Yousufzai is a young girl of Pakistani origin who is known for her activism for the right to education. She wrote a blog under a pseudonym for the BBC, talking about her life under the Taliban rule in Afghanistan, while staunchly making a cause for the education of women. She was shot by a Taliban gunman while she rode home on a bus after taking an exam, and survived the shooting. Since then, Malala has been actively involved in activism for education, particularly of women.

Martin Luther King Jr.: Martin Luther King Jr. was an activist, a humanitarian, a pastor and the leader of the African-American Civil Rights Movement, where his key tactics involved the use of non-violent civil disobedience by drawing from his faith.

Maternal health: Maternal health refers to the health of women during pregnancy, the process of childbirth and the post-childbirth period. It concerns itself with all dimensions of healthcare for the mother, or the soon-to-be mother.

Maya Ixil: Maya Ixil refers to a people who are indigenous to Guatemala. In the early eighties, they were the chief targets of a genocidal operation during the Guatemalan Civil War.

Meta-Health: Meta-Health refers to art, science and practice of Body-Mind-Social Health with a focus on how specific stress triggers, emotions and beliefs affect specific organ symptoms. Based on Integrative Medicine and Prevention, it is practised by all types of health professionals interested in a precise and effective Body-Mind-Social diagnosis and therapy.

Misogyny: Misogyny refers to hatred towards women and girls. It can manifest itself in multiple ways that include sexual harassment and discrimination to violence against women and sexual objectification.

Mujahideen: Mujahideen refers to a term used to describe those perceived by Muslims as those who struggle in the path of Allah. However, in the recent past, the term has been significantly associated by some in conjunction with radical Islam

Muslim: A Muslim is used to denote a person who subscribes to the Islamic faith and the teachings of Allah as recorded by Prophet Mohammed in the Qur'an.

NATO: The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) refers to an intergovernmental military alliance that comprises 28 members that are mainly European and North American countries.

Navanethem Pillai: Navanethem Pillay or Navi Pillay as she is known, is the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. She was the first non-white woman judge of the High Court of South Africa, and served as a judge of the International Criminal Court, and as the president of the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda.

Neuro-linguistic programming: Neuro-linguistic programming refers to a practice that uses communication, personal development and psychotherapy as created by Richard Bandler and John Grinder. The premise it works on is the connection between neurological processes, linguistic and behavioural patterns as imbibed from experience, and the capacity to change them towards attaining specific goals.

New Foundation Non-Violence Centre: The New Foundations Non-violence Centre is a sponsored project under the Colorado Non-profit Development Centre, in the United States of America, working towards alternatives to violence.

Nobel Peace Prize: The Nobel Peace Prize is one of the five Nobel Prize instituted by Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel. It has been awarded since 1901, to those that have done the most or the best work for fraternity between nations, for the abolition or reduction of standing armies and for holding and promotion of peace congresses.

Obstetric Fistulae: Obstetric fistulae refer to tears or holes that develop between the rectum and the vagina, or the urinary bladder and the vagina. It occurs owing to severe or failed childbirth where medical aid is unavailable or sexual violence, among other factors.

Oppression: Oppression refers to the exertion of authority by one over another in a manner that is unjust, cruel and causes the suppression or discrimination of the person who is subjected to such treatment.

Organization of American States: The Organization of American States is an inter-continental organization established and founded on April 30, 1948. It was established to create regional solidarity and facilitate regional cooperation. It comprises 35 independent states of the Americas.

Panzi Foundation: The Panzi Hospital and Foundation was founded in 1999. Situated in Bukavu, DR Congo, it specializes in the treatment of survivors of violence, particularly sexual violence.

Partition of India: The Partition of India was a policy-led division of India and Pakistan at the end of the British colonial rule of the Indian subcontinent. It led to the creation of two countries, India and Pakistan.

Peace Corps: The Peace Corps is a volunteering programme that is run by the government of the United States of America. It works towards providing technical assistance, assisting people outside the USA to understand US culture and to help Americans to understand the culture of other countries.

Peace building: Peace building refers to the use of peace in the process of intervention to prevent the start or resumption of a conflict.

Prosecutor vs. Akayesu: A decision by the International Criminal Tribunal for Rwanda, which for the first time, declared that sexual violence and rape could be prosecuted as crimes in international criminal law, with ramifications emanating from their classification as genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and torture.

Sharia Law: Sharia Law refers to the religious law of Islam, deriving from precepts set in the Quranic verses and examples set by Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) in the Sunnah.

Sikh: A Sikh is a person who professes the faith of Sikhism, a monotheistic religion originating in the fifteenth century in Punjab.

Taliban: The Taliban refers to an Islamic fundamentalist political movement that started and spread in Afghanistan at the end of the Soviet-Afghan War, ruling the country from September 1996 until December 2001. The Taliban have been considered radical extremists in their interpretations of Islamic Law, and have often been attributed to having a rather brutal and skewed view towards women and women's rights.

The Bhagavad Gita: The Bhagavad Gita is the sacred text of the Hindus, comprising a discourse rendered in a conversation between Krishna and Arjun, forming a part of the epic, the Mahabharat.

Three Cups of Tea: A book written by Greg Mortenson and David Oliver Relin, the book looks at Mortenson's efforts towards reducing poverty and promoting the education of girls in Pakistan and Afghanistan.

UNFPA: The United Nations Population Fund Activities works to create equal opportunities for men, women and children.

UNICEF: The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund as it was originally known, and the United Nations Children's Fund as it is now known, works towards the overall assertion and improvement of the quality of rights of children.
