



The World Through a Feminist Lens



A work retreat of the Karen Women Organisation. Formed in 1949, with a membership of over 49,000 women, KWO is a community-based organization with which Inter Pares has collaborated for almost two decades.

Feminism Sans Frontières

BY RITA MORBIA, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Travelling through Eastern Ontario by train on a beautiful fall afternoon, Dr. Asha El-Karib of the Sudanese Organization for Research and Development (SORD), an Inter Pares counterpart, recounts a heartbreaking story about her closest childhood friend. As young girls, Asha and her friend were idealistic, shared a passion for learning, and constantly discussed and debated the social and political issues of their day.

One day in rural Sudan, instead of coming back to school, Asha's friend simply vanished. Against her will, she was suddenly married off. Many years later, the friends were reunited, but by then, too much had changed to renew their friendship. Asha still mourns the life that her young friend, so full of ambition, wanted to have.

This experience is one reason among many that Asha, who describes herself as being "born a feminist," has dedicated her life to advancing women's equality in Sudan and around the world. Her organization SORD provides legal aid to impoverished women in

Sudan through five centres, and works to rewrite the government policies that enshrine women's oppression.

Asha believes that gender-based oppression and violence are experienced worldwide, that misogyny and patriarchy are global. Feminism, as a way of seeing the world through power relations, provides a way of understanding these dynamics as well as a vocabulary for naming and denouncing them. Feminism challenges all of us to find alternatives. It is not a worldview invented and held solely by women in the global North. We have found over the past forty years that feminism resonates with social justice activists around the world. Whether in the East, West, North, or South, there are movements dedicated to shifting the balance of power for everyone who is discriminated against and marginalized.

Inter Pares supports many women leaders around the world like Asha – leaders who demonstrate that feminism is global, while determining how to localize it into [PAGE 4 ▶](#)

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

[TAKING A FEMINIST APPROACH](#)

Taking a Feminist Approach

BY REBECCA WOLSAK, PROGRAM MANAGER

At Inter Pares, February is filled with a frenzy of activity and collaboration in preparation for International Women's Day. For one of our Ottawa celebrations, I often spend a few evenings compiling feminist highlights and lowlights from the previous year. I use this content to create a short and hopefully entertaining video, and I find the time for reflection truly inspiring.

Last year, it wasn't until I was making this video that it hit me: three out of four federal party leaders had proclaimed themselves feminists. This year, among other things, we will need to take stock of Canada's Minister of International Development's proclamation that the government will have a feminist approach to international assistance.

This plan to apply a feminist lens was announced last May by the Canadian government in a discussion paper which launched a major review of Canada's international assistance. It was exciting to see the commitment to feminism named. Hearing the Minister and many others involved in the review speak about the importance of a feminist lens inspired us to engage with them on the details and to get concrete about what changes this would imply. As a feminist organization with over forty years of experience, we have seen the transformative results of a feminist approach and we are keen to see it widely used.

Over the past twenty years, the community groups with which we work have been helping to slowly shift this deep rooted prejudice – through elevating grassroots women's voices, challenging patriarchal values, and bringing principles of equality into the new community-based institutions they are building.

Hser Nay Moo from the Back Pack Health Workers Team with Rebecca Wolsak. The team provides comprehensive primary healthcare in rural communities in Burma. They have also led a successful initiative to promote women's leadership within the organization.



INTER PARES

At the root of Inter Pares' feminist approach is a power analysis. In my work on our Burma program, this entails looking at the structural causes of oppression, and ensuring that we are always working towards systemic change. In part because of its long history of military dictatorships and the dominant role the army still plays, Burma is an extremely patriarchal society. Over the past twenty years, the community groups with which we work have been helping to slowly shift this deep-rooted prejudice – through elevating grassroots women's voices, challenging patriarchal values, and bringing principles of equality into the new community-based institutions they are building.



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The Kuki Women's Centre uses ground-breaking restorative justice techniques to address gender-based violence in their communities in Burma's north west.

Our feminist approach has led to significant results across our Burma program, including: women advocates leading international campaigns; female journalists reporting in local languages on national issues; human rights and environmental researchers using a gender analysis; and ethnic civil society developing policies to be tabled at peace negotiations – policies which have been developed by and with women, and which address gender issues. Through a careful process of long-term collaboration, in which we are always learning from each other and from strategies explored in other contexts, our feminist programming in Burma has been, and will be, an important contribution to the country's transition to a peaceful and democratic nation.

Knowing how important and successful a feminist approach can be, last summer Inter Pares worked with a small group of organizations to create our own consultation event within Canada's international assistance

review. We brought together 50 civil society and government representatives for a full-day dialogue to develop a common understanding of feminist approaches, an assessment of challenges and opportunities in the government's current approach, and a set of practical recommendations. We then co-authored a submission, detailing our recommendations to the government for implementing a new feminist approach. We continue to engage civil servants to promote this approach, which we believe can profoundly change societies.

When we celebrate International Women's Day 2017, I am confident there will yet again be a long list of highlights to celebrate and lowlights to motivate. At Inter Pares, we will take the time to reflect on both, to learn from these, and to continue to challenge systemic inequality through our feminist approach. 

Watch 2016's International Women's Day video at www.interpares.ca/iwd2016

Feminism Sans Frontières

From page 1

their own particular domestic programs and positions. Another such leader is María Ysabel Cedano, a lawyer and director of Inter Pares' counterpart DEMUS in Peru.

Through participating in the women's and LGBTQ movements in Peru, and through debate and discussion with other feminists, María Ysabel enriched her work promoting human rights. DEMUS promotes sexual and reproductive rights through legal challenges, raising public awareness, and by enabling women affected by violence to receive support. DEMUS played an important role in pushing the Peruvian government to officially apologize for the forced sterilization of Indigenous women under the 1990-2000 Fujimori regime and to establish reparations.

Like Asha and María Ysabel, Dr. Junice Melgar was awakened to her feminism by observing the patriarchal attitudes around her and the suffering they caused countless women – in her case, while she was part of the national liberation struggle in the Philippines, during the Marcos dictatorship. It was a difficult time, ruled by secrecy, fear and violence.

As a medical student, Junice was involved in providing free medical services and had a

particular interest in women's reproductive health. She was inspired by the leadership of women in the rural communities in which she worked. These women had their own political analyses and proposed solutions. "My job," says Junice, "was to ensure that these women could speak and act on their own behalf. And that is still what I and Likhaan do today." Inter Pares' counterpart

Inter Pares supports many women leaders around the world – leaders who demonstrate that feminism is global, while determining how to localize it into their own particular domestic programs and positions.

Likhaan Centre for Women's Health provides community-based primary health programs in impoverished urban and rural communities, with a particular emphasis on women's reproductive health. Likhaan also advocates at the national level for high-quality, universal health-care in the Philippines.

Asha uses a metaphor – of all women being on the same airplane. Some are in first

class, others have it harder in economy. But in the end, all women are confined. We believe that feminism can help land the airplane safely and open the doors to achieving independent lives free of violence, marginalization, and fear. 



RITA MORBIA



DEMUS



RITA MORBIA

Our counterparts (from top to bottom) Asha El-Karib, María Ysabel Cedano, and Dr. Junice Melgar.

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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