

Finding hope and strength in each other



Sheina Olita (right) and Allona Hermosa (left) began making memes when the pandemic began to help reach isolated youth in their community.

READ ABOUT THEIR WORK ON PAGE FOUR.

Photo credit: Likhaan

From COVID-19, to coups, to coerced sterilization, difficult circumstances bring communities together. This *Bulletin* shares stories of people facing dark and painful struggles by giving their energy, love and support to others. In being beacons for others, people around the world are finding their way through difficult times.

Forced sterilization: Finding light after the darkness

Content warning: reproductive violence

In Peru during the 1990s, hundreds of thousands of women were forcibly sterilized under a government program. The vast majority were Indigenous women in the country's highlands. Today, they have found healing and strength in each other. ►



Photo credit: SISAY

◀ In 1995, weeks after Victoria Saccsara, an Indigenous woman living in the high Andes, delivered a stillborn child, health workers brought her to hospital saying that they would help her recover. They told her to line up with a group of other women to receive a food subsidy. But it was really a queue for the operating room.

Victoria was forced to undergo a sterilization procedure that day. Like so many others who were forcibly sterilized during this time, she was left with chronic pain.

Victoria began to hear about other survivors of this terrible injustice and soon learned about SISAY, one of Inter Pares' counterparts in Peru.

SISAY provides counselling and training to equip survivors to advocate for their rights.

Through SISAY, Victoria met other women who had been through the same experience.

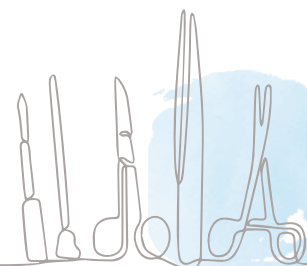
"We have the capacity to demand and achieve the implementation of policies that enable us to access justice and comprehensive reparations."

In 2016, Victoria and other survivors achieved the National Registry of Victims of Forced Sterilizations, a significant step toward finally holding the Peruvian government accountable. But there is still much to do to realize the rights of women and families affected by state-sanctioned coercive sterilizations.

With SISAY's support, Victoria has been working with other survivors to call on the Peruvian government for reparations for their inhumane treatment and better healthcare and income support for those disabled by the procedure.

Inter Pares is honoured to support Victoria and the other women in their efforts to light the way to a more just world. 

"The importance of being organized as victims of forced sterilizations, and the solidarity and support of human rights institutions as allies, gives us strength and makes us see that we are not alone."
- Victoria Saccsara



Circle of hope and solidarity in Sudan

In 2019, footage went viral of 22-year-old Alaa Salah leading Sudanese crowds in protest chants. Her image generated a global wave of solidarity for the popular revolution that would soon overthrow Sudan's 30-year dictatorship. A young woman who had lived all her life under the regime had helped change her country.

Two years later, a brief period of hope ended when the military seized power. But young women dreaming of self-determination still fill the streets. Their demands are twofold: an end to military rule – and to the discrimination they face.

“Discrimination and violence against women and girls are still rooted in the fabric of our society,” says M. Ali, founder of SWRC, a long-term Inter Pares counterpart organization.



Activists Ola, M. Ali, Ghadir (standing from left to right), Sara and Shaza (sitting) from SWRC, Inter Pares' long-time counterpart organization in Sudan.

Photo credit: SWRC

“All those who work on women's and human rights are at heightened risk for attacks and violence.”

Passionate volunteers drive SWRC's work supporting young Sudanese feminists in their struggle for freedom, dignity and justice.

“We believe that empowering young women and enhancing their sense of self-worth is key to political stability and social transformation,” says Ghadir, a member of SWRC.

But since the October 2021 coup, much of the progress towards democracy has been lost. “Under the present regime, independent civil society is facing a real threat to its existence,” says Ghadir. “We have little or no opportunity to influence the democratic process and peacebuilding in our own country.”

Despite this, SWRC's work continues – a form of hope in the face of what seem like insurmountable challenges. Women and community organizers lift each other up, find hope in one another and build young people's leadership capacity while they advocate for change in the streets.

“We are very motivated by seeing the progress among young women and how giving them support can be truly transformative,” explains Sara, a young SWRC leader. “It's a great feeling to observe how our work is helping them unlock their potential. We are surrounded with a good support network of people and organizations we trust... People that believe in us and want us to succeed.”

Inter Pares is privileged to be part of this circle of hope and solidarity. 



A flyer urges young women to join the pro-democracy movement.

Photo credit: SWRC

Speak my language: connecting through isolation with memes

The early pandemic was a dark time for everyone in metropolitan Manila – especially youth. The Philippines had one of the longest and strictest lockdowns in the world. Schools were closed and police-enforced quarantines prohibited anyone younger than 18 from leaving their homes.

For adolescents with questions about their sexualities, bodies and relationships, there were few places to turn.

Allona Hermosa and Sheina Olita are youth community outreach workers with the Likhaan Center for Women's Health, an Inter Pares counterpart in the Philippines. For decades, Likhaan's community outreach workers have gone into low-income neighbourhoods to speak to youth about safe sex, contraception and healthy relationships. But when this became impossible, they and other young outreach workers turned to social media to connect with youth.



Credit: Allona Hermosa

More than 80% of the Philippines' population is on social media but there is little information available there to young people about sexual and reproductive health. What exists is usually in English rather than Filipino, so it's harder for youth with low levels of education to understand. The content is usually text-heavy, technical and – as Likhaan puts it – boring.

In the midst of pandemic isolation, Likhaan knew that memes – visual, bite-sized and funny – could reach teens and raise their spirits,

while answering their sexual health questions. With Inter Pares' support, the team began making memes about everything from condom use, to LGBTQI+ pride, to dealing with peer pressure. They began posting them on social media to an overwhelming response: more than 600,000 views and thousands of shares.

It was gratifying for the newly minted meme-makers like Allona and Sheina.

"I get comments sometimes where people say, 'I see myself in this... thank you for sharing,'" says Allona.

They know the memes aren't replacements for face-to-face community outreach.

"It is not the same as talking to people in person," says Sheina. But they're an effective – and fun – tool for building community with thousands of isolated teens whose only source of information is online: something they'll continue to need post-COVID. 

Inter Pares

221 Laurier Avenue East, Ottawa, Ontario K1N 6P1 Canada
Tel: 613-563-4801 • Toll free: 1-866-563-4801 • Fax: 613-594-4704 • info@interpares.ca • www.interpares.ca

 Twitter: @Inter_Pares
 Facebook and Instagram: @InterParesCanada

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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