WOMEN OF URI

In recognition of International Women’s Day, we asked a few of URI’s women leaders to talk about what it means to be a leader, a woman, and a peacemaker.

What inspired you to start taking a leadership role in your community?

Lee Ziv, Musaïque CC, Israel: The need to support the community we are living in, knowing that we are responsible for our lives. Leadership is something I am still trying to digest inside myself—to find out what that role is and to be in leadership with other leaders around me. When we first met, Charles Gibbs said, (I think it was a saying from Africa) “If you want to go fast, go alone. But if you want to go far, go together.” This is like a mantra for me. I cannot do things alone. To be a leader today is to be in a network of leaders carrying the same vision—not just local, but global.

Despina Namwembe, URI-Great Lakes Regional Coordinator: Losing my mother at an adolescent age was the biggest stimulating factor for me to be a leader. My mother nurtured us with a lot of self-reliance. [When she died] I had to stop behaving like an adolescent and put into practice what my mother and grandmother always taught us: to work hard, support and take care of others, show generosity and wish for other good things in life through supportive actions.

Qutub Jehan Kidwai, URI-West India Regional Coordinator: I belong to a family that was involved in India’s freedom struggle and laborer and farmers’ rights. I was in my first year in college when we witnessed the communal violence after the demolition of an historic Mosque, and incidents continued for months. I asked my father, “What makes men become so atrocious that they could not see people pleading for life?” He replied, “We are religious but not spiritual.” The wisdom in his reply brought an upheaval in my soul.

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Dear Friends,

When I was a young woman starting my career in theatre in the mid 1970’s, there were almost no women in prominent positions within the theatre community. For women of color, the opportunities were even fewer. I learned at a young age that as a woman I needed to fight harder to have my voice heard, so I started a multi-cultural theatre company with two female colleagues. It was one way to address a void that still persists decades later.

After nearly 20 years in the arts, a change in my life circumstances left me alone to raise a child. That experience led me to a deep calling to be in service to low income and immigrant communities, which eventually led me to interfaith organizing, and a little over two years ago, to URI. Along the way I have benefited from being mentored by strong women, among them two Catholic nuns who found a way to lead in spite of the lack of opportunities within the church hierarchy.

I am drawn to URI’s Principle 8, “We practice equitable participation of women and men in all aspects of the URI.” URI has many strong women, more than I could possibly mention. And I am inspired daily, sometimes moved to tears, by their courage and creativity. At 90 years young, Rita Semel, URI’s first Global Council Chair, is a tireless advocate for interfaith cooperation and social justice. And, of course, Yolanda Trevino, URI’s current Global Council Chair, is a leader not just in the URI community, but among women of spirit all over the world. Her vision and leadership in bringing the Indigenous and their wisdom into URI is well known in our network.

Even as we celebrate the accomplishments of URI’s women leaders, we must acknowledge the barriers that women leaders still face every day from the United States, where gender stereotypes of leadership still prevent women from breaking through the “glass ceiling”; to India and China where girl infanticide is still in practice. And while women’s active role in the Arab Spring brings hope, it is bound to bring new challenges for women’s leadership.

As we celebrate International Women’s Day on March 8, with the theme of Connecting Girls, Inspiring Futures, it’s time to revisit Principle 8 and redouble our efforts to ensure that the strong women in our network are mentoring younger women; that we support Cooperation Circles dedicated to educating girls; and that we recognize there is much work to be done in ensuring that women are equal participants, not just within URI, but in every country in the world.

I am inspired daily by women in URI, sometimes moved to tears by their courage and creativity.

Musaique

In Concert - One Night Only!
Friday, March 23 at 8pm
Jewish Community Center - San Francisco
Tickets available at www.jccsf.org/arts

Musaique is a URI Cooperation Circle and acclaimed group of musicians and peacebuilders from throughout the Middle East, breaking down boundaries between religions and nations through music.

Visit www.uri.org for more information.

Made possible in part by a grant from the Koret Foundation.

Debra Ballinger Bernstein, Associate Executive Director
Rosalia Gutierrez
Rosalia is very active in URI’s CC de los Pueblos Indígenas de Argentina, which helps indigenous young people from rural Argentina integrate into city life without losing their “essential wisdom,” and has brought Indigenous voices into international interfaith and environmental conversations.

Rita Semel
When Rita turned 90 this year, the mayor of San Francisco declared Rita Semel Day, and City leaders turned out en masse to celebrate her legacy. From helping found the San Francisco Conference on Religion and Race during the civil rights movement, to leading the San Francisco Interfaith Council CC into the post-9/11 era and her instrumental role in the birth and growth of URI, she is one of the interfaith movement’s most dedicated leaders.

Lee Ziv
Lee is an Israeli peace activist and co-founder of URI CC, Musaique, devoted to peacebuilding through music. With members from all over the Middle East, representing a diversity of faiths, Musaique is an honoree at this year’s Circles of Light. Lee is also part of the Tamera community, a peace research village in Portugal.

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Rosalia Gutierrez, CC de los Pueblos Indígenas de Argentina: My spiritual name is Spirit of the Wind, and from that you know who I am because we know what the wind is. Life inspired me because I am from an indigenous Kolla family. I was inspired to stand up when I noticed our community was accustomed to being silenced. My father told me stories about how he had suffered when harvesting sugar cane, and other terrible stories.

But I was inspired and encouraged by the happiness of my people. I learned to celebrate life. Recognizing these two realities, suffering and happiness, I could structure my life.

Rita Semel, first URI Global Council Chair, USA: We bring compassion and we bring juggling. Women juggle their husbands, their children, their jobs, all at same time. We bring the ability to work in coalition and by consensus. We don’t feel the need to always be right.

Lee: We understand the quality of giving birth, of taking a vision and manifesting it in reality. From this process we have a lot of compassion, a very high feminine quality. It creates a space for containing. In a leadership role, you need to be a person who can listen and contain the other. Even the enemy who thinks so different - has a place in your community too. We are able to find ways to communicate and build spaces of trust.

What unique qualities do women bring to peacebuilding?

Rita: We have children. I have yet to meet a mother who wants her children to go to war. Most of us don’t have that need to fight it out.

Qutub: A woman has the heart of the nurturer. The nurturer cannot become an agent of destruction. As a peacebuilder she can envision a world where her children and those of others will be safe and can live a dignified life. A creator knows the value of creation. A mother knows the value of life.

Despina: Most women’s leadership is more about service than ego and competition. Women feel a lot of work satisfaction if they are able to transform a community. It is an intrinsic love that means supporting, nurturing and working for the betterment of humanity.

As a woman leader, have you faced any roadblocks within your faith tradition or in dealing with people from other faiths?

Anqa Zarish, URI Youth Ambassador, Pakistan: In East Asia women can’t do anything. I was unable to go to the Malaysia Young Leaders Training. I am not allowed to travel alone. I have to take my father or brother or someone else with me to go to programs. But my father and mother are really supportive; they help me go anywhere I want. Many colleagues are not allowed to go anywhere.
Qutub: Being a woman and not being challenged is impossible. I have been working on the legal empowerment of women, and must continually challenge misogynist and patriarchal dictates. That invites the wrath of religious leaders. The irony is I am promoting the truth given in the scripture. I was fortunate enough to be trained in Quranic interpretation and legal reforms so that the religious leaders of my community would not be able to counter my knowledge.

Lee: It is not always easy in the Middle East. Sometimes you feel pressure from men, but it is about the courage of the woman and believing in her place in the world. Jewish, Muslim, Christian, it doesn’t matter. It is the culture of the Middle East for men to lead. I respond by continuing to do what I believe as a woman, and not being afraid to write and say what I think, but do to it with a lot of respect and sensitivity.

How did you get involved with URI and what has URI done to nurture or inspire you?

Anqa: Sister Sabina [Coordinator of the URI-Pakistan Women’s Desk] came to our church and talked about her work. I got a chance to visit India for the URI assembly in 2008, and I got training from the Young Leaders Program, which was really helpful and a big step for me. I am an organic chemist by profession and never thought I would be provided with such a platform to be a young leader.

Despina: I was working as an intern at the Uganda Joint Christian Council when I was invited to a URI meeting in Nairobi in 1998. When we came back, we formed what we called the URI Uganda Committee and since then, I have been involved with URI first at that local level, then as a Trustee for two terms and currently as Regional Coordinator for URI Great Lakes Region. URI has taught me to value my faith but also respect people from other faith traditions through appreciating them as individuals first, then the rest follows.

Rita: Whatever the setback, just keep your eye on the goal: to repair the world. You aren’t going to get to the big goal, but every victory, no matter how small, gets piled on the other victories and eventually will get to the goal. Everyone stands on someone else’s shoulders. You aren’t the first and you won’t be the last, but you do have your own place.

What message do you have for other emerging women leaders in this field?

Anqa: We should have tolerance within us and tolerate criticism of ourselves. And we should always believe that we can change this world.

Qutub: I would like to quote Gandhiji: “My life is my message.” Truth brings courage, so behold truth and march forward to achieve peace and justice. Your leadership skill has divine qualities and anything divine is always a blessing.

Despina: To appreciate life, others, and what you have, one step at a time; to work not because there are quick rewards, but to work towards having a strong satisfaction in serving others.
new cooperation circle spotlight

A SEED OF PEACE FOR A NEW NATION

There are few places in the world where the work of URI is needed more than South Sudan, where in the six months since its independence from Sudan was greeted with national jubilation, latent ethnic rivalries have resurfaced in a wave of violence that has killed thousands and displaced thousands more.

Last fall, shortly after the independence vote, URI-Africa Director Mussie Hailu visited the capital city, Juba, to introduce URI to religious, political and civil society leaders and, with the support of Juba’s mayor, initiate a peace council to build trust among different ethnic and religious groups.

URI welcomed the first Cooperation Circle from the new country, the Coalition of Civil Society Organizations of South Sudan, in December 2011. The group, a coalition of 45 civil society organizations working in peacebuilding, climate change, reproductive health, HIV/AIDS, social development, good government, human rights and more, vows to “contribute to the development of our new country through peace building and promoting social harmony given the tribal and religions diversity in South Sudan.”

May peace prevail in South Sudan!

For more on these and other stories from the URI network, contact Tripp Mikich, URI News Desk at newdesk@uri.org