



### **BUILDING BRIDGES: Taking steps not to forget**

On the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Cuba's Literacy Campaign, as photojournalist I interviewed 40 women who had lived and worked amongst illiterate peasants for about eight months in 1961. As these literacy "brigadistas" taught their peasant hosts how to read and write in 1961, as a lateral exchange the young "teachers" also took note of the immense hardships endured by Cuba's rural poor. The nature of this learning between young brigadistas from Havana and the disenfranchised in remote areas of the island forged bridges of knowledge; informally, experientially, and in enduring ways. Forty years later with my very basic Spanish I asked very basic questions of these former brigadistas. In 2001 Cuban women still believed in the role they had played to rebuild their country; and how their actions were critical to reinstate dignity in their people. As I extended their stories into a broader forum visually, my PhD was a forum to then historicize them.

As evidence of one such exchange, this photograph depicts "Nuria" and myself meeting up a few years after my initial research. Recalling her time as a brigadista validated Nuria's contribution to literacy initiatives, one of the many ways in which Cuban women were central to develop constitutional priorities and project civil society.



Fast forward to January 2018. When I arrived at Chulalongkorn University, Fatma Ibnouf was the first Peace Fellow I met from Rotary's Class 24. Affectionately known as "Tata" by her young nephew back home in Sudan, Fatma teaches undergraduate, post-graduate, and training-style courses at her alma mater, University of Khartoum (UofK). Weeks later over a halal shawarma in a nearby restaurant, she described how her mother, herself illiterate with five

daughters, had been a prime motivator for Fatma to realize her own potential by becoming educated. As Fatma refers to her professor-husband as a “gentleman,” he too is proud of her accomplishments and supports her travels abroad. First as student and then as scholar Fatma has since visited about 25 countries on her own, Sudanese women otherwise expected to travel with a male family member.

Fatma thus obtained her B.Sc in Agriculture Sciences at Ain Shams University, Egypt; her M.Sc. from UofK in Sudan; and then in 2008 defended her PhD at the Center of Development Studies at University of Wales Swansea, UK. Her thesis focused on the “Role of Women in Providing and Improving Household Food Security in Western Sudan.” In very striking ways challenges faced by women in the Darfur region have differed from those in Fatma’s home city of Khartoum. With the entire western region of Sudan faced with dramatic climate change, these conditions have since fueled strife amongst nomadic tribes and farmers; midst spillover conflict from Chad, Central West Africa, and Libya.

Fatma’s scholarly work has illuminated the role of women as caregivers toward conflict resolution and peacebuilding. Unique to her research is her lens on how women have also contributed to human security during periods of immense strife and conflict. Her work in this landscape began with women living in camps for internally-displaced persons (IDPs) out of the Darfur conflict. From the onset Fatma had to work around the authority of camp leaders responsible for selecting the women that she was permitted to interview. To navigate these channels in “creative” ways, she reached out to colleagues in the Department of Peace Studies and Community Development from two universities in Darfur State, who then accompanied her to the IDP camps. Knowing that the camp leaders were male and one way or another scrutinizing her presence, Fatma’s research questions cleverly focussed on food security, otherwise interpreted as “women’s work.” This opened up ways of broadening caregiving as critical to peacebuilding and recovery. This next photograph shows Fatma with several women at one of the IDP camps in 2016, some years after I photographed Nuria in Santiago de Cuba.



As Rotary Fellows we contemplate ways to engage and implement peaceful practice. If poised to ask the “right” questions, women “as women” begin share stories from their own lives. Recognizing the potential of testimonies she collected as living history, following her initial interviews Fatma asked the same women to return with their sisters and mothers to partake in more integrated focus groups. Again, because their work as caregivers was typically dismissed as something that only women would do, Fatma was able to manoeuvre around what could have been institutional barriers. She then initiated space for two women out of the original group,

Nafessa and Fatima, to take on more formal roles as research assistants. In profound and deeply moving ways, both Nafessa and Fatima came to realize their broader capacity as care-providers. The two were further empowered as peacebuilding representatives for displaced women at the Darfur Internal Dialogue and Consultation (DIDC) Conference in Khartoum in October 2017.

On the nature of stories women shared with her in the IDP camps, Fatma later described how she could not have imagined the trauma that they endured while living and working in conflict zones. As they walked for weeks to where the IDP camps were located with their children, the elderly and the dying, for extended periods they were all without food and water. En route women relied on indigenous plants to provide basic nourishment and feed those around them, critical to their very survival. They delivered babies and they buried the dead. Victims of rape found themselves impregnated, now burdened with child of the enemy. When they arrived at the camps, women were then given plastic with which they built makeshift homes to provide for their dependents and extended family. With 75 per cent of the IDP camps comprised of women and children, at the time of Fatma's research many had already been there for years.

In the range of roles they took on in causal ways, Fatma explained women as critical actors to ensure the security of their families. In the "normal" process of their work as women, their caregiving efforts were central as a course of action in immediate and broader ways toward peacebuilding. Relative to capacity building, their provision of moral guidance to their children reflected their efforts to end violence and toward reconciliation. As Fatma reminds, when we consider the contributions of women and then invest in our girls, we will reap the benefits of a better future for all.

Honoring their roles as caregivers and at once peacebuilders thus blends with their convictions as women who persevere and as lives are lived. Inspired by the dignity and efforts of those she interviewed, Fatma's upcoming blog will be dedicated to one young woman named "Aisha," whose memory she carries here to Bangkok. From my work in literacy and consciousness raising to Fatma's in caregiving toward peace, together we share and historicize the contributions of all women, those who give light to illuminate their surroundings.

As we draw upon their stories, we celebrate their voices; those of which history may have otherwise neglected or overlooked.

In building these bridges amongst our other Peace Fellows, we all take steps not to forget.

Joanne Elvy, Class 24