Gathering Point

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Transforming, empowering and engaging women in peace creation
Welcome to
Gathering Point
NEWS FROM CREATORS OF PEACE

I am grateful for the 88 Peace Circles engaging over a thousand participants in 21 countries in 2018! I celebrate each one of our facilitators for their passion and steadfastness.

The behind the scenes work which goes on for weeks, months or even years to host a Peace Circle is often underestimated. Getting the participants, finding the right location, fundraising, support team, after Peace Circle care and more is worth acknowledging. The transformation, friendships, testimonies and empowerment of participants is well worth it!

One of the things that make a Creators of Peace Circle an enduring experience is the level of care given: creating a space safe for participants to listen, reflect and entrust their stories to one another with the understanding that each one has something unique to offer. I am grateful to Jean Brown who initiated the idea of Creators of Peace Circles, to the trainers Shoshana Faire and Kate Mokhouse for ensuring that the ethos and standards are maintained and to the facilitators who are the light bearers in their communities, cities and neighbourhoods. The facilitators are trained to be sensitive to the needs of participants. Each Creators of Peace Circle is unique.

I look forward to more incredible encounters with our teams around the world, for access to women and men for whom our programme is the right next step. I ask your thoughts and prayers as Creators of Peace prepares to host a gathering at Asia Plateau, the IoF Centre in India in February 2020.

Amina Dikedi-Ajakaiye, President, Creators of Peace International
I would like to share my joy at our second ‘Peace in Practice’ gathering in Caux, Switzerland this Summer. We were from 28 women from 16 different countries at our Annual General Meeting. This reflects both the huge levels of commitment and enjoyment we share in doing this work. Each person has taken time away from family, work and community, then dedicated finances and/or holiday leave to making their way around the world to be together. And it is fun when someone walks into the room who you have not seen for two or more years!

Once together again, we can share news and celebrate all that we have accomplished together back home in our communities. And we can pool wisdom and generate ideas to strengthen Creators of Peace into the year ahead. But it is not always easy, and it is only made possible by others who take on additional childcare or professional and community responsibilities, as well as our generous donors who sponsor travel and accommodation costs. This newsletter captures a little of why this team time is so important.

Kate Monkhouse, Executive Director
One participant of a Creators of Peace Circle shares their personal journey towards inner peace.

“This autumn, I attended a Peace Circle, during one weekend in Switzerland. I accepted the invitation because there was so much turmoil in my life and I felt I needed some help to find inner peace. There were around 20 of us, we spent most of the weekend sitting in a circle, sharing and listening to stories. Besides inner peace, the weekend was also focused on forgiveness. How do we forgive? Why should we? More importantly, how do we forgive a person who doesn’t ask for forgiveness and doesn’t even think there is something to forgive? All these questions came up in the Peace Circle and also during the breaks for lunch or dinner, when we would sit together and continue sharing stories, feeling like a family, wrapped in a sense of comfort, trust, and understanding.

There were stories which were heart wrenching, stories of inconceivable pain, which at the same time were stories of great inspiration, because these people managed to forgive. For me personally, it was touching but I didn’t feel a big change within at that moment.

I went home, back to the routine of everyday life. Then, 4-5 days after the Peace Circle, thoughts and memories started popping up in my mind for no reason. They were all related to a specific person who hurt me a lot. At this point in time, I had moved on and didn’t feel
hurt any more. However, I realized that I had placed this person in the archives of my heart and mind. But doing that didn’t equal forgiveness. I went for a long walk in the forest and decided that I would not repress these thoughts; I would let them come to the surface and be there. The further in the forest I was going, the more I felt overwhelmed by the memories, but at the same time I noticed I felt lighter, too. As if a weight was slowly starting to lift up and I could breathe better. After all the memories came questions: what was behind the acts of this individual who hurt me? How painful was it to see me in an excruciating pain? Is that why this person ran away so quickly? I answered to myself that there must have been so much that I didn’t see, because I was blinded by pain and seeing only the surface. Moreover, I came to the conclusion that a human being who causes pain and suffering must feel hurt too, deep down in their heart. Even if they don’t know it.

At the end of my walk I came across a church. It was small and simple, and quite dark. Although I usually don’t go to church, I felt the need to go in. I had the urge to light a candle. As I was lighting it, all the pain from the memories came out in tears and I was thinking “I forgive you. I wish you all the best, and I send you my love. I hope you will find your peace someday. And I will be there for you if you will need help to find it.”

I was in peace.

And I understood why the Peace Circle was focused on forgiveness – because in order to find inner peace, we need to forgive. Once again, I learnt that everything starts from us, from what we have within.

I feel it is our responsibility as inhabitants of the Earth, as parents, as friends, to look inside of us and work on what is there. There is no other way to change the world.
Completing Training Track at 'Tools for Changemakers' at Caux Forum 2019
Humbled by Courage

Vinitika Lal, who is part of our International Committee, reflects on her journey as a facilitator

“Story is far older than the art of science and psychology, and will always be the elder in the equation no matter how much time passes.”

Clarissa Pinkola Estes

It’s been close to four years since I had the good fortune of becoming a part of the Creators of Peace network and it has been one of the most enriching, awakening and empowering journeys I have ever been on.

In this piece of writing, I aim to capture some of the important learning, revelations and celebrations from two Peace Circles I have been facilitating here in India. One of the groups is a group of women in prison and the other is group of women in the process of transition from sex work as a profession to a different livelihood, in this case, a community kitchen. Before I dive into the details of the experience, I would like to mention why I chose to work with these groups specifically: very simply put, because women like these are off the map as far as anything to do with wellbeing and emotional healing is concerned and the dominant narrative is replete with stories about what they ‘deserve’ and ‘don’t deserve’. I have been meaning to work with women who are on the fringes of society for a long time and the Creators of Peace appeared to be a meaningful process to engage with them. I am hoping to work with homeless women for the next Peace Circle.
One of the things I realized during the initial conversations with these groups was that they would find an ongoing format with weekly or fortnightly interactions more useful, as opposed to a one-off workshop format for a number of reasons, the primary one being their lack of exposure to speaking about their lives and their assumptions about its worth. There was also a fair amount of resistance along with a desire for healing the pain and suffering in their lives. Most of the women had never been to school and a few who did have not gone beyond grade five. This required the design to exclusively utilize art and music instead of written training material. I also used a combination of non-violent communication, narrative and movement therapy methodologies during facilitation since a lot of the times, language and verbal sharing were becoming a challenge for some of the participants.

As a facilitator, I found myself vacillating between hope and despair at times, especially when I would hear them talk about not wanting to talk about the past – the memories were too painful for them. The most challenging work for me (continue to be work in progress)? was to be able to detach myself from the ‘outcomes’ and trust that the ‘work’ was happening at some deeper level even though it was not visible. I was deeply humbled by the authenticity and courage that these women brought to the conversations and one of the questions I keep asking myself is that: if I had been through what these women have been through, would I be able to even consider doing the work that they are attempting to do in order to change their narratives? I don’t know and that gives me a huge sense of freedom, ease and ability to empathize without judgment.

Some of the reflections shared by the women might give a better sense of their experience... At our closing session in the prison, the women spoke of feeling calmer despite all the tears, feeling grateful for having heard each one and been listened to, feeling connected and a sense of belonging. They all talked about how they had never experienced such a process and what value it brought to their lives:

'I am able to look at my life differently; I would never have imagined that I have the freedom and ability to create the life and future that I dream of, but being a part of this space has shown me a way.'

'I am feeling calm and happy, haven’t laughed like this in a long time.'

'I have spent such a long time with these women, but today was the first time I really shared what was in my heart.'

“When we start climbing a ladder, we do not realise how high we have climbed until we look down – that’s what happened with me.”

‘When we start climbing a ladder, we do not realise how high we have climbed until we look down – that’s what happened with me.’
Today was the first time in the last eight months that I could really be present, and I completely forgot all the horrible thoughts about lawyers, courts, family etc. It felt relaxing and peaceful. Let me add another short story from the other group… Each session began with a lot of moaning and groaning around how painful it is emotionally and even physically for them to reflect on their lives. It would take about 30 minutes or so to do a couple of ice breakers and trust building exercises after which they would be a little more willing to get into the session topic. There was one particular participant who would complain of a physical sensation of choking and breathlessness as soon as it was her turn to talk. I would, each time, invite her to stay with the feeling and listen to it. I respected her choice to not share in the group.

She said she did not want to tell her story to anyone ever. This continued for about 3 sessions (three weeks) and I was also beginning to question my skill set as a facilitator.

When I walked into their home for the next session, I was surprised to have her come running to meet me and give me a big hug - she couldn’t hold her excitement and kept saying: “I have something to tell you. Come with me to the other room”. Then she sat me down and told me: “Didi, I went to the Big University yesterday- they came to invite some of us to tell our story to the students at a big seminar on injustices and women. No one agreed to go, and I said yes. She had tears in her eyes as she told me the rest of it: “I had no ideas why I said yes and when I reached, I saw a hall packed with at least 400 young people and I froze. They had cameras, microphones etc. I told them to switch off all cameras and recording of any kind which they agreed to. And then Didi, I thought of you and told them my entire life story - I choked a few times and each time I would think of you and go on. I spoke for an hour and a half Didi, it felt so good to tell the world my story. And you know what I realised as I was speaking? The way you keep asking us to look at the other side of the story… I was full of blame, shame and guilt about my life and in that moment, it suddenly dawned on me: why should I be guilty and shameful? I was sold by my parent at the age of 12! I told them – you as a society should be ashamed – a society that does such awful things to its daughters. I am actually proud of myself, at what I have accomplished and done with my life despite all of that!!” I don’t have the words to describe the mix of emotions that came up for me – awe, respect, gratitude and a river of tears…

Later that day, she told this story to the entire group and they all said how they were so proud of her. And her closing words were: “Didi, I would not have been able to do this if you had not showed up week after week sitting here with us and waiting for us to speak and gently pushing us. When we start climbing a ladder, we do not realise how high we have climbed until we look down – that’s what happened with me”.

For me, the wisdom and beauty of people, literate or illiterate, rich or poor... the ‘knowing’ that we all have and keep forgetting that we have was and continues to be the most precious part of these experiences.
ENGAGE

Reaching Around the World

Creators of Peace celebrates 88 Peace Circles engaging over 1,000 participants across 21 countries in 2018

The 2018 Creators of Peace Data Report found that across 21 countries, ranging from Cameroon and Mali to Lebanon and Australia, 88 Peace Circles were held in 2018, engaging over 1000 participants. Following one-to-one interviews with each country’s representatives, the evaluation team, Lena LePoullennec, Manu Granados, Neichu Angami and Shoshana Faire, were able to assess the international reach of Creators of Peace like never before.

Regionally, the majority of Peace Circles were held in Africa (51/88), with over 800 people taking part. Notably, South Africa and Burundi held 13 and 10 Peace Circles respectively. 17 Peace Circles were held in the Asia-Pacific region, 10 in Asia - with Nepal holding 8 Peace Circles with 114 participants, 6 in MENA, 3 in Europe and 2 in South America.
The evaluation team also recorded other activities that the Creators of Peace teams had organised outside of Peace Circles throughout the year. Most significantly, the Creators of Peace team in Delhi, India collaborated with an NGO working with women in prison and conducted an extended form of Peace Circle with 25 female prisoners, most of whom were illiterate. Following this, the team vowed to continue to explore developing tools for illiterate women and use of creative processes. Similarly, the Creators of Peace team in Burundi also focused on visiting women in jail, as some of the most vulnerable and at-risk women in society. Conversely, a number of countries, including Mali, Australia, Nepal and the Ivory Coast focused on engaging children in Peace Circles and related activities. For example, after receiving a Community Harmony Grant, the Creators of Peace team in Australia were able to hold Peace Circles in schools across Melbourne, and in Nepal, the team collaborated with an NGO working in the education sector and conducted 12 Peace Circles in schools across Nepal, reaching 90 student leaders. They formed support groups and Peace Circle clubs for students to join to address various issues affecting young people in Nepal, and successfully managed to get the school authorities and teachers on board in supporting them to make their schools free from nicotine and tobacco use, and to make bullying of any form unacceptable.

There was also a growth of cross-country collaboration, notably in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, and Syria and Lebanon. A historic Peace Circle, in conjunction with Fighters for Peace, brought together Lebanese and Syrian women for the first time. With a long history of war between the two communities, the Peace Circle provided the women with the invaluable opportunity to sit together and process difficult emotions and reactions. The Creators of Peace team in Kenya also worked closely with the Ugandan team throughout the year, visiting twice, as well as facilitating a Peace Circle in Tanzania, with 17 women. Initiatives of cross-country collaboration is something the international committee seeks to expand over the coming year.
The report also assessed the impacts of Peace Circles and related activities on the communities, finding many stories of inspiration and success. For example, in Mali, a refugee woman who had attended a peace in Mauritania has now become a Touareg women leader. She now works extensively on issues of peace and security for the implementation of UN Resolution 1325, commenting ‘Thanks to the Peace Circle, I have been able to open the world that lies ahead of me.’ In New Zealand, Salaam, a group comprising of Muslim women from different countries living in Wellington, was born from two women’s inspiration after participating in a Peace Circle, giving the women a safe space to talk and share their own experiences and worries about living in New Zealand. Also, in New Zealand, the report found the story of a conservative Samoan Christian woman who had never met a Muslim woman before participation in a Peace Circle in 2013. After taking the time to educate herself about Islam and meet with more Muslim women, in 2019, she took food and flowers to the mosque following the Christchurch shootings on her own initiative.

Overall, the report highlights the exponential growth of Creators of Peace internationally and illustrates just how vital the work is across a plethora of communities. Subsequently, the evaluation team is focusing on how to streamline and expand data collection for 2019.
At the Creators of Peace gathering in Caux this year, “Team Care” was the focus for a skills-sharing session. The lively group of active Creators of Peace women together addressed these 3 questions:

1. Who do you see as your teams and support networks?
2. Why is caring for each other important?
3. What are some related practices we can implement in our teams?

Our rich conversation and sharing left us with the following:

1. We discovered that our teams and support networks included family members, supportive friends, our local Creators of Peace group and Creators of Peace Circle participants, the Creators of Peace International team and international working groups, local community organisations, and mentors.

2. How is team care important? It certainly is part of the DNA/culture of Creators of Peace that “peace begins with me” and the work of peacebuilding does not simply happen in isolation - it happens in interaction with others, in collaboration which requires working with friction and building on differences. We felt that caring for each other is about support and is also about building a community and sense of belonging. It is key to both ‘sustaining the work which is big’ and to ‘maintaining our inner sanity and wellbeing’ at the same time. It is empowering each other by learning and growing collectively. Team caring can ‘recharge our batteries’. “To go further we need to feel surrounded and not isolated”
3. We identified key practices which firstly included being clear and explicit about care and support being part of the team ethos, then having agreed practices. On our list were:

- having regular check-ins, and face-to-face meetings
- having inclusive leadership with the sharing of roles and tasks
- continually working on improving communications
- recognizing and dealing with conflict
- having a ‘buddy’ that ‘knows’ you
- debriefing and support of facilitators was emphasized - practicing gratitude, and celebrating
- getting together for fun and fellowship and doing things together
- sharing about our personal lives
- being vulnerable
- being clear when you can be giving and when you are needing caring
- and HUGS

There was a sense that although we came from many different places, we were facing same challenges and struggles and that we are in this together. We left inspired to raise the above questions with ourselves and our teams and support groups with the purpose of continually building and nurturing the caring component into our teams and relationships.

I went away from it with an expanded awareness and appreciation of who are part of the teams in my life, and a renewed validation of the importance of paying conscious attention to ensuring our teams are places of safety, support and caring. And aware that this takes effort and commitment to giving it attention from each of us and establishing and agreeing on what are valued behaviours and norms.

An article that came my way recently was about how Google wanted to identify what behaviours made the best workplace teams. After extensive research the researchers eventually concluded that what distinguished the ‘good’ teams from the dysfunctional groups was how team-mates treated one another. Google’s data indicated that psychological safety, more than anything else, was critical to making a team work. In terms of behaviours the two most important came down to: firstly, that members spoke in roughly the same proportion, and secondly, that there was high ‘social sensitivity’ i.e. skill at empathy and tuning it to how others felt (based on their tone of voice, their expressions and other nonverbal cues).
Asia Plateau 2020

This gathering for Creators of Peace women from across Asia and beyond will explore what it means to be an “advocate for a new story” 20 years after the United Nations mandated the role of women in peacebuilding.

17 - 21 February 2020, Panchgani, India
For more information: creatorsofpeace@iofc.org

Facilitators’ Training

We will hold a training to get you started as a facilitator of a Creators of Peace Circle. For those who have already participated in a Peace Circle and who are committed to run one in their local community.

1-3 November 2019, London, UK
For more information, or to register: creatorsofpeace@iofc.org

International Women's Day

2020 will be a very special year for the women, peace and security agenda. The international community will be marking 20 years since the United Nations asked nation states to commit to the representation of women with peacekeeping processes at all levels. Each country has to report on national action plans of how they are working to uphold a vision of women having greater inclusion and input into peacebuilding initiatives. Women and peace networks around the world are already advocating for more progress.

Find out more on social media via #WPSagenda #WPSin2020 #UNSCR1325 #beyond125 and #MeaningfulParticipation to see what they are saying and join the conversation.
TAKE PART >

ADVOCATES NEW STORY >
Watch new videos to explore what it means for different CoP women to be “advocates for a new story” in the world today. See www.iofc.org/creators-of-peace

TRANSLATORS NEEDED >
We always need translators and to support us in disseminating our materials to encourage participation. Please let us know if you can give your skills in this way.

EVALUATION >
We are continuing to develop new ways to document and celebrate the impact of Peace Circles. Let us know if you need any support or ideas.

NEXT NEWSLETTER >
The deadline for the next CoP Newsletter will be 31st January 2020. Please send ideas for articles or reflections that you would like to see included.

SOCIAL MEDIA >
Follow Creators of Peace on Twitter and get regular news and inspiration from many other women’s peace initiatives and ideas for action.

WEBSITE NEWS >
Each month we add a new story of a Peace Circle from around the world. Please do send us your report... writing guidelines are available on request.
As an international programme, a key part of what we do is bring women together. Women who are dedicated to work in their local communities benefit from the opportunity to meet with and share experiences with other peacebuilders from different contexts.

In February 2020, we will be gathering women from across Asia for a 4-day programme in India. This opportunity will provide moments of reflection, precious refreshment, skills learning and intercultural exchange.

To make it possible for some to attend, we are setting up a travel bursary fund to support those who otherwise could not participate.

To contribute please make a donation online. www.iofc.org/creators-of-peace-donate
Who inspires you? Tell us which women from history continue to be role models in life...
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Initiatives of Change

Initiatives of Change is a worldwide movement of people of diverse cultures and backgrounds who are committed to the transformation of society through changes in human motives and behaviour, starting in their own lives.

In the UK, Initiatives of Change is a registered charity No. 226334 (England and Wales).

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