



Opening Remarks by Rita Morbia, Executive Director, Inter Pares

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Barbara Schlifer Annual General Meeting 2010:

“The Next Twenty-Five Years: Emigration, Violence and Global Women’s Solidarity”



Thank you for inviting me to your AGM. I admire the work you do immensely and so it is truly an honour and privilege for me to be here today. There’s a lot to say about the theme you have chosen for the evening, Emigration, Violence and Global Women’s Solidarity. I will probably concentrate on the latter, but the work we do at Inter Pares definitely encompasses all three issues.

What I hope to do this evening is to engage you in a conversation about the work that you do and the work that I do and the points of connection. Sometimes it feels like one is working in a silo, and opportunities like this are rare – I will try to keep my remarks brief so that there is ample space for discussion.

I want to first take some time to describe Inter Pares.

- Inter Pares means ‘among equals’ in Latin – and conveys our philosophy, and our approach. We are a social justice organization that works with counterparts (other organizations) primarily in Africa, Asia, and Latin America but also here in Canada. Our name, Inter Pares, also characterizes the relationship we have with the groups we work with internationally and domestically.
- Now, we work with over 70 of those groups and relate to them as peers, as activists in their own context and as experts in their particular domain. They range from organizations who are very well-established, very savvy in the work they do; to others



that are smaller, less experienced. Our relationship to them is based on solidarity, not charity. Many of them have been counterparts for many years, spanning 2 or 3 decades. Our relationships are also based on trust and commitment to a joint political project.

- The way we approach our work is based upon a feminist analysis; one that acknowledges power imbalances in the world: between men and women, between rich and poor, between those who are marginalized and those who are privileged; We believe that those power structures must be challenged in a fundamental, systemic way for change to occur and ultimately for the lives of women and men around the world to improve.
- Though our activities may take different forms: financial, technical, political – fundamentally, what we do is support the agency of our counterparts internationally while also working in our own context to make change; we provide support for their program and their agenda, and in Canada, we do complementary work – that is our agenda. Because we are a Canadian social justice organization, we feel that it is key for us to work for change in our own context. Mining company example.
- We are organized internally as a co-management structure. We all make the same base salary; there is a dependents' allowance, and so those of us with children under 25 make more. All major decisions are made by consensus. At the moment, there are 13 of us working full-time, in one office in Ottawa and a recognition that actually, 15 is probably our maximum staff complement given the limits on consensus-decision making in the way that we practice it. We are made up of 10 women and 3 men. We have staff who have worked with us for 25 years, and staff who have been with us for less than a year, so there is quite a range.
- Inter Pares has a donor base of Canadians across the country, approximately 10,000. They support us financially, but we also consider them our constituency – folks



who believe in social justice and the work we're doing. They provide us with some measure of financial and hence political independence, which is increasingly important.

- We receive funding from the federal government, particularly from the Canadian International Development Agency. We don't just procure funds from government because we need to resource our work although that is very important but also because we feel that Canadian taxpayer funds should support social justice initiatives around the world and it is our responsibility to engage our government in social justice questions.
- In terms of the themes we and our counterparts work on, they include: women's rights, economic justice, conflict, migration, resource extraction, land rights, security and food sovereignty, among others. That first one I mentioned, women's rights, violence against women, women's political participation – those issues are absolutely ubiquitous in the work we do.

Illustrate three points with various stories that I think will resonate with you and that I hope you will complement with your own stories during the discussion:

- That the agency of women is real and it is powerful
- That women around the world have a lot to learn from each other
- That not taking no for an answer is a viable political strategy

I will focus on the work we've done with women from Burma.

1. The Agency of Women – The Story of the Shan Women's Action Network

Burma has been ruled by a military dictatorship for over four decades, and in fact, many of you may have heard that they held elections this week to attempt to legitimize their hold on power. There are two main groups of political opponents of the junta, the pro-democracy movement – those who were caught up in the upheavals in Burma in the



late 80s and early '90s as students and professionals AND those who are members of ethnic nationalities and have been waging a struggle for self-determination more or less since independence in the late '40s. The scorched earth policies of the Burmese junta combined with the political repression and financial mismanagement have resulted in one to two million displaced persons internally largely in the ethnic states and as refugees in the border regions. The situation has been a humanitarian disaster for about two decades. Inter Pares has worked with border-based organizations, made up of refugees for the most part, since 1991.

In this context, the Shan Women's Action Network was established in 1999. The Shan come from Shan state in Burma and have been subject to some of the most brutal policies of the Burmese junta. They began with very small-scale programs on education and health. But in 2002 they released a report called *License to Rape*, on the use of rape as a weapon of war in Shan state. The report was thorough, well-documented and extremely strategic. It came to the attention of the international community and suddenly SWAN was swamped for media interviews; the state department and UN were knocking at their door; Burmese pro-democracy leaders, who were then largely and still are largely male were talking about the issue; and most interestingly the junta responded angrily and vehemently.

Dealing with this onslaught gave SWAN confidence, credibility and expertise. It also put them in some tough situations. Because they were also inundated with folks from various state and UN agencies who wanted access to the survivors – in order to provide independent verification of the report. For the most part, SWAN refused. Most of these women who had been interviewed were still in incredibly precarious positions with respect to their security and had no access to counselling services. So SWAN also had to



deal with being labelled as gatekeepers. But they made a clear choice based on their assessment of what their Shan sisters needed at the time.

Today, many of the members of SWAN are actively involved in the Women’s League of Burma, an umbrella group of 11 different ethnic women’s organizations. They are involved in a lot of political work including strongly critiquing the recent elections in Burma and trying to bring the junta to account through the international criminal court. Through the WLB, SWAN has also collaborated closely with other women’s organizations, sharing their expertise and experience.

The story of SWAN is a powerful story of how women, “displaced”, “marginalized”, “victimized” can counter violence and learn to exert their agency, becoming a strong political force.

2. Women Around the World Learning from Each Other

a. Burma-Guatemala Exchange – Preparing for Peace

Many years ago at Inter Pares, we began hearing the exiled women’s organizations we work with on the borders of Burma speculate about what would happen when they returned to Burma. No one knew when that would be, but they wanted to anticipate and prepare for the issues they would face. How would they know it was time to return? What would the negotiations for that return look like?

Inter Pares had worked for many years with Guatemalan women’s organizations, who had been exiled in Mexico, and who had then organized while in exile and been part of the return process back to Guatemala. Now Guatemala and Burma are very far from one another and yet there were strong parallels between the women’s groups we were



working with. So we organized an exchange and I had the privilege of accompanying both women from Burma to Guatemala and women from Guatemala to Thailand where we travelled along the border meeting women from Burma who lived both in and out of the camps.

Together, the Burmese and Guatemalan women traced their histories, their personal experiences, their struggles for democracy and for respect and recognition by men in their own movements. The Burmese and Guatemalans easily related to each other's stories of violence and resistance, and the arduous journey to make their voices heard as women. They offered each other tangible advice and shared strategy as well as hope, strength, encouragement and inspiration.

Women spoke about how, paradoxically, being in refuge was "like a school" and how much they learned and were change by the experience. Burmese and Guatemalan women were both explicit targets of military violence. They sought asylum in neighbouring countries. They struggled to survive in exile and then organized as women to access services and participate in political organizations.

The Guatemalans spoke about the way they had organized politically. In most refugee situations, it is governments and international bodies who determine the conditions and logistics of refugee repatriation. The Guatemalan situation was unique in that the refugees themselves, through a coordination body called the Permanent Commissions, negotiated directly with the Guatemalan government to determine the terms of their return. For the Guatemalan refugees, this was a central achievement; they were not passively "repatriated" rather their "return" was a voluntary, organized, political act witnessed by the world.



Guatemalan women also underscored the challenges. Despite how much was achieved during the negotiation process, not a single woman was present when the Accords were signed and the specific needs of women such as the right to co-ownership of land were left out. As well, returning to Guatemala changed their struggle and effectively set it back. The material conditions upon return were poor and maintaining women's organizations was difficult. Women were geographically dispersed making it difficult and complicated to get to meetings. And they suffered a backlash from some men in their return communities who believed there was no longer a need for women's organizations and that a women's place was now within the home.

The Guatemalan women also learned a lot from their sisters from Burma; Particularly around speaking out about sexual violence in the context of conflict. One of the most powerful moments I've experienced personally was browsing at a bookstore in the Chiang Mai airport with a number of Guatemalan women and finding a copy of License to Rape for sale. The way in which Shan women were breaking the silence on state-sponsored sexual violence was truly a revelation to all of us – and that the report had become so well-known that it was sold at an airport bookstore was really awe-inspiring.

b. Second Example of Women Learning from Each Other

In a spirit similar to the Burma-Guatemala Exchange, in 2007 Inter Pares brought together counterparts working on confronting sexual violence in armed conflict. Participants were from Colombia, Guatemala, Peru, Burundi, Sudan and Burma. What resulted was a rich exchange, captured in a report, that included discussions about feminism, patriarchy, the continuum of violence against women pre-conflict, during conflict and post-conflict and the connections between all three; the also discussed justice, and working with survivors.



In both the Burma-Guatemala Exchange and the Sexual Violence Roundtable, the commonality of women's experiences from literally the far reaches of the globe sparked much interest, reflection and learning.

3. Not Taking No for an Answer as a Viable Political Strategy

So I'm going to continue the story with the Burma thread: In an attempt to engage the Canadian government in the question of Burma and to support the pro-democracy movement and the ethnic nationalities, Inter Pares has worked with years with other Canadian groups: Rights and Democracy based in Montreal, Churches, Canadian Friends of Burma and peace-based groups among others. At every turn, the government, whichever government happened to be in power, said no to our demands. Whatever those demands happened to be. And we did not take no for an answer. They said no, they couldn't enact sanctions. And they said no, they couldn't resource our programs. Well, it took years but now we have sanctions, and we have just had a renewal in funding for our Burma program for another five years, which in its present configuration is about a decade old. Persistence does pay off.

Canada has also taken an increasing number of refugees from Burma over the years. However, this is where your work comes in. Life is extremely difficult for many who have settled here, materially and socially. And we have a new proposal in Bill C-49 that is deeply unjust to those who are amongst the world's most marginalized already.

In closing, I'd just like to thank you for the work you do. I have friends in the legal clinic system and it is exceedingly challenging at the best of times, personally and professionally. But for someone like me who is not front line but who works internationally and tries to bring an international voice to domestic debates and



discussion, it is your work in the trenches along with that of our counterparts internationally that inspires and motivates. So, I hope that you take this time to recognize how integral you are to the global social justice movement. And that's how I will close, thank you.

