

Women Leading the Way to Justice

Assétou Samaké: Teacher, scientist, and defender of seeds

It was during a visit to Bamako, Mali, in 2006 that Inter Pares staff member Eric Chaurette first met Assétou Samaké by chance. They struck up a conversation, first about the weather – it was 40 degrees outside – but then onto droughts, plants, and genetically modified organisms (GMOs). According to Assétou, GMOs and industrial

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agriculture further entrenched inequalities between women and men. It is men who have access to credit to purchase the seeds, chemicals and machinery. Monocultures also displace local varieties of plants, which are most often managed and cared for by women. These include staple crops such as millets and sorghum and the “condiments” that accompany the staples and ensure a healthy diet: hibiscus, used in juices, and other flowering plants whose seeds are used in sauces, along

with trees whose leaves are also used to flavour food. Assétou was soon called off to a meeting, and Eric was left wondering who this articulate woman was. He later found out that Assétou is a geneticist and a driving force behind efforts to protect biodiversity in West Africa.



Assétou Samaké with fellow panelists in the “Green Revolution: Whose Revolution?” public event held in Ottawa in 2007.

The following year, Inter Pares invited Assétou and two other members of the West African Coalition for the Protection of Africa’s Genetic Heritage (COPAGEN) to Canada to participate in a debate on the “Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa” (AGRA). AGRA’s approach was exactly what Assétou feared – the promotion of chemical-intensive agriculture that would bulldoze local knowledge and biodiversity. COPAGEN argued that any efforts to support agricultural development and

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María Ysabel Cedano: A lifelong commitment to women’s rights




María Ysabel Cedano (far right) speaking during an event for the campaign “A man doesn’t rape.”

Advocating for women’s control over their own bodies is risky business in a country where Catholic fundamentalists are very powerful. But that’s what DEMUS, a Peruvian feminist organization and an Inter Pares counterpart for the past several years, decided to do after a careful analysis of the state of women’s rights in their country. In Peru, groups working to achieve women’s sexual autonomy – as DEMUS describe sexual and reproductive rights – are regularly slandered in the media by ultra-conservative groups. DEMUS’s choices [PAGE 2 ▶](#)



Assétou Samaké FROM PAGE 1

food security in Africa should take the lead from African farmers and build on what is there, rather than seek to impose a model of agriculture dependent on foreign seeds and agrochemicals. Assétou shed light on the central role that women play in ensuring food security in Africa, and how this role will be undermined by AGRA.

Assétou can trace her passion for plants back to her elementary school biology teacher. She went on to study biology, and was eventually granted a scholarship to study in Russia. After completing her studies, Assétou returned to Mali in 1997 to teach plant genetics at the University of Bamako. When she joined, she was one of only three women in a faculty of 30, and the only woman to teach plant biology. Today, outside the classroom, Assétou continues to lead the fight for the protection of biodiversity in Mali. She has helped enhance several seed banks, facilitates participatory plant breeding workshops, and is a leading voice within COPAGEN. Inter Pares is honoured to work with Assétou and support COPAGEN in our collective struggle to build food sovereignty. 

María Ysabel Cedano FROM PAGE 1

expose them to harsh critics. They have prioritized advocating for the legalization of abortion in cases of rape, for the enforcement of current legislation which allows therapeutic abortion, and have played an important role in reopening lawsuits against forced sterilization of Indigenous women in Peru under the 1990-2000 Fujimori regime.

DEMUS staff are not faint-hearted, and María Ysabel Cedano, a feminist lawyer, is one of them. From her early childhood, she noticed that even her progressive family never denounced or spoke out against violence against women and sexual abuse. She sought answers on how to address this contradiction, which she found in feminism.

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María Ysabel learned about feminism while working at DEMUS – through activism, debate, and discussion with other feminists. She emphasizes how DEMUS is a great space for interdisciplinary discussion, a space where points of view can be formed, challenged and mutually influenced. María Ysabel describes herself as a lesbian feminist socialist, and her involvement in social movements reflects this well. Her activism extends to all spheres of her life, and the depth of her passion for profound social transformation has guided her major

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life choices. She realized as a young adult that roles associated with marriage and family were not for her, and accepts the downsides of these decisions.

In addition to working with DEMUS, María Ysabel plays an active role in Peru's lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) movement, in national progressive politics, and is supporting other social movements such as stay-at-home women who seek recognition for the value of their work. At one point she even joined the team of the Ministry of Women when she felt that the Peruvian president's stated commitment to social change would enable her to influence policies on women's rights from the inside.

María Ysabel contributes her expertise to the legal and media strategies DEMUS uses to expose and critique policies and practices violating women's rights. Through this holistic approach, DEMUS will continue to wear down the knots of resistance to slowly open up spaces for women's sexual autonomy in Peru. 



ALUISE PULLIAM

Dr. Cynthia discusses patient care in the Child Inpatient Department – the department treats mainly malaria, acute respiratory infection, and diarrhea.

Dr. Cynthia: Nurturing leaders

Dr. Cynthia Maung is a gentle, soft-spoken physician from Burma. Like thousands of others, she fled the 1988 military crackdown on democracy activists in her country. She travelled in the relative safety of the dark, spending seven nights walking through the jungle. As she passed through villages, she and her friends provided health care with what little supplies they carried. In the months after they arrived in Thailand, Dr. Cynthia and a few colleagues opened the Mae Tao Clinic in a dilapidated building close to the border with Burma to attend to the emergency needs of refugees.

These words were repeatedly used to describe Dr. Cynthia: committed, inspirational, focused, and role model.

Over the past 25 years, the Mae Tao Clinic has grown into a significant health service provider with over five hundred staff and an average of over two hundred patients coming to the clinic every day. In 2012, 3,319 babies were safely delivered at the clinic – just over half the number delivered at Canada’s largest hospital. Half of the clinic’s patients have travelled from within Burma to seek health care. The other patients, having left their homes in Burma, live in Thailand where they are trying to earn money to send back to their families.

Inter Pares recently created a short video about Dr. Cynthia and her leadership. These words were repeatedly used to describe her: committed, inspirational, focused, and role model. Perhaps most striking are her efforts to



REBECCA WOLSKA

encourage new generations of healthcare providers and to inspire new leadership. Cynthia has invested time and resources in programs to nurture new leaders. The clinic is also a training centre – a place where young people and health workers from all of Burma’s ethnicities come together to learn new skills or upgrade existing practi-

ces. For Dr. Cynthia, this is what the clinic is all about: “This is really crucial for young people, to feel they can be the change in their community.”

Dr. Cynthia’s dedication and accomplishments have been celebrated through a long list of international awards. In order to ensure others are afforded the access and opportunities she has gained, when invited to high-level meetings she almost always invites half a dozen community group leaders to join her.

For over twenty years, Inter Pares has been supporting Dr. Cynthia’s critical work and her vision for health-care in Burma – a sustainable and free system that is invested in its community. As Burma begins to democratize, the contributions of women such as Dr. Cynthia are immeasurable. ☺

To hear directly from Dr. Cynthia Maung and from some of our other Burma program counterparts, watch the video at interpares.ca/drcynthia

Julia Sánchez: An outspoken advocate for Canada's NGOs

On a rainy May morning in Ottawa, a room crowded with representatives of over 50 international development organizations launched into a discussion about the CIDA-DFAIT merger. The Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) and the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT) were being amalgamated and many people felt that this would result in the loss of Canada's long-standing focus on ending poverty and promoting human rights.

To monitor the effects of the merger, a coalition of Canadian organizations – the Canadian Council for International Co-operation (CCIC) – had identified seven key benchmarks of what a 'best-case' scenario would look like. They analyzed similar mergers in other countries, reached out to decision-makers in government, fielded media interviews, and prepared briefing notes. "We were only able to do this because everyone mobilized," said Julia Sánchez. "This is a confirmation that we can, as a community, move in the same direction in a forceful way, and that we can bring more groups together as we move forward."

Julia Sánchez is President-CEO of CCIC. Her career in international social justice began over two decades ago



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with a volunteer position in Guatemala. Later, living in Delhi and working on international climate change campaigns, she discovered her passion for tackling government policies that impede efforts for change at the local level.

Coordinating a coalition can be a thankless endeavour, but Julia feels she is in the right place at the right time.

She is fearless, which is essential in a sector that is being silenced, defunded, and rocked by constant flux. Her focus is on finding positive opportunities, and Julia explains that as NGOs, "we need to change because the world is changing."

Rita Morbia represents Inter Pares on the CCIC Board of Directors, and Inter Pares staff participate actively in CCIC's working groups to advocate for policy change here in Canada. Through solidarity, collaboration, and shared knowledge we can accomplish more than we could alone. Under Julia's strong leadership, CCIC will continue to represent a strong voice for the sector. ☺

Women are at the heart of social change – but they are also often marginalized because of their gender, or other aspects of their lives such as their race or economic status. Inter Pares' analysis of injustice is rooted in an understanding of unequal power relations, and we collaborate with women and men who are committed to changing these inequities. Together we work toward achieving one universal standard of opportunity and dignity for all.

Feminism has long been central to Inter Pares' work. Influenced in the late '70s by feminist collaborators in Bangladesh and subsequently by feminist staff members, our commitment to women's rights quickly grew. Today, Inter Pares' advocacy for women's rights, autonomy, and leadership is a hallmark of our approach to social justice and international cooperation. Our structure also reflects our values: all full-time staff share the management of the organization, which operates on principles of equal responsibility and equal salary, of working by consensus, and of nurturing women's leadership.

To learn more about Inter Pares as a feminist institution: interpares.ca/feminism

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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 inequities 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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