



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Gujrat CC

Faiths /Traditions Represented: Islam, Christianity, Different Ethnic Groups

Location of CC: Juhapura, Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India

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Key Areas of Focus: Women Empowerment, and Bridge Building among different Faiths

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Summary:

Gujrat CC is located in Ahmedabad, India. CC members work in collaboration on religious festivals that bring Hindus and Muslims together, and organize campaigns to prevent and end violence against women in conflict areas within India. Members also visit relief camps post communal violence to provide support to victims. The CC is focused on conducting activities and programs that promote the creation of a better world.



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1. *Can you please help me understand the current religious/cultural/political contexts in the area where your CC is working?*

The area in which we are working is a communally charged area. The years of Hindu fundamentalist organizations working in Gujrat have made it one of the most communally sensitive areas in India. We have Hindus and Muslims divided along religious lines. The boundaries between these two groups are fixed and unbending. The BJP which has been ruling party in Gujarat for many years has created even more fragmentation in our society along communal lines.

In Juhapura, where our CC is working, there is a wall dividing the Hindu and Muslim areas. The wall is not only a physical wall but it has successfully created mental boundaries as well, with both communities thinking that this separation is permanent and will never break. The area is known for its communal disturbance in Ahmedabad. During the Gujarat riots of 2002 there were so many disturbances in this area, and people from both the Bastis (neighborhoods) feared crossing this boundary.

2. *Why is interfaith/intercultural bridge building needed where your CC is working?*

The atmosphere is very volatile here, with both Muslims and Hindus showing extreme biases towards each other. These groups are ready to fight on the slightest pretext. In this context bridge building is very much needed, and URI has been very effective in allowing these two communities to interact and participate.

3. *Can you please briefly describe the main activities or programs your CC is doing this year?*

This year we will be organizing meetings and celebrating the religious festivals of Hindus and Muslims together. Also, we conduct programs prevent and end violence against women throughout the region. We also have CC members visit relief camps post communal violence in Muzaffarnagar, UP (North Zone), to share their experiences and to prevent other areas from spiraling into what can sometimes feel like permanent divisions.

4. *Between which specific religions or cultures are bridges being built?*

We are building bridges between Muslims and Hindus as there is constant tension between these two groups



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- 5. Please explain the method or strategy that your CC uses to bring together people of different cultures and faiths that would otherwise not interact or cooperate with each other.**

Our members work at the grassroots level. We not only organize meetings and celebrate religious festivals of different religious communities, but go house to house and make contact with people from both the Hindu and Muslim communities. Our individual interactions have helped us in removing many biases and prejudices held by Hindus and Muslims. In the beginning, it was very difficult for Muslims to accept me because I'm Hindu. However, slowly and gradually they began to accept me largely due to our outreach efforts.

- 6. Given the current contexts, you described, what does your CC hope to achieve?**

We want to tell people that everybody is a child of God, whatever name is used to reference. The religious practices of different people will be definitely different, but this does not mean that they are different by blood and their intrinsic nature. Hence, we as human beings share so much that there is no need to fight on the basis of religion or other categories that divide us.

- 7. How do you see your CC's work improving cooperation among people of different traditions?**

Before our work there was no interaction between women of Hindu and Muslim communities. When we initiated work for economic empowerment of women from both communities they came together to fight their common enemy: poverty and various disabilities that arise from weak financial support. Women were suffering the most because of various economic challenges. This issue brought Hindu and Muslim women together.

- 8. How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflicts?**

The interactions between Hindu and Muslim women on the issue of economic challenges have brought them together. Fighting day-to-day problems together allows them to understand each other's community, problems, biases and prejudices against each other. Talking about their religions in a safe and honest atmosphere where friendships are encouraged between individuals will assist them in better understanding the work of fundamentalist organizations, which are bent upon making them fight on the basis of religion. Hence, these interactions are key activities that are helping us in fighting against religiously inspired violence.



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9. *What are some indicators /observations you see that relations are improving between people of different faiths/cultures in the area where your CC works?*

When we started the programme of women empowerment among Muslims and Hindus; the number of people attached with our activity was low. After many years of hard work the numbers have increased. The numbers of women attached with our activities are more than 200 from both the Muslim and Hindu communities. We have created leaders at the grassroots level, and those numbers are more than 50. We have connected our women empowerment programs with URI's missions and objectives, and are also organizing programmes for bridge building in our area.

10. *Do you have a specific short story you can share about your work that might inspire other CCs or teach us a lesson about interfaith?*

In our programme's beginning stage, a Muslim woman did not accept me because I was a Hindu woman. They were suspicious of me. I am now talking about the rights of women in the Quran. I am teaching Muslim women about the provisions of divorce and maintenance and other rights in the Quran. Muslim women who did not accept me before are not only coming to our programmes but are accepting of a Hindu woman talking about the rights of women in the Quran. This is a great achievement, and a great example of how our CC has successfully been able to build bridges between Hindu and Muslim women.

11. *How is your CC's work helping to achieve the mission of URI? (Interfaith bridge-building)*

Our work among Muslim and Hindu women and their economic empowerment has helped us in bringing women from both communities together. After building bridges between Hindu and Muslim women we are organizing programmes that cover interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence of different religious communities. We are doing this through organizing programmes for Sarva dharma Sambahava (Interreligious Unity) and making them participate in each other's religious festivals and marriage celebrations so that the bonding between them becomes stronger.



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12. Within your CC, you have members from several different faiths/cultural traditions. How would you describe cooperation between these members? What are the challenges?

As I mentioned earlier, in the earlier stages of our CC it was very difficult to bring the two communities, Hindus and Muslim women, together. We worked patiently with them for their economic empowerment through Bachatgat and were able to get them employed in various types of household jobs. Through these efforts the women saw the benefits of cooperation and came to the realization that their problems are the same irrespective of religion. Because of this, Muslim and Hindu women started interacting among themselves. We now look back and realize that achieving this success took time, hard work, and patience.

The challenges our CC faces are many, especially Hindu communal and fundamentalist organizations who are constantly working to create biases and prejudices among Hindu women towards Muslim women. It becomes really difficult to make Hindu women immune to their communal appeal. Similarly, we have Muslim fundamentalist organizations telling Muslim women that their religion is in danger at the hands of the Hindu state and their agents.

13. How is being part of URI helping your CC to achieve its goals?

Our URI membership enables us to share resources, network and enhance our interfaith understanding. URI training programmes and other various programmes have created a sense and purpose in us with respect to peace and interfaith dialogue. Now we are mentally prepared to work for peace and inter-community living.

14. How can URI better support your CC in reaching its goals?

URI can help us with infrastructure support, networks and resources to reach the goals earmarked by URI.