



COOPERATION CIRCLE PROFILE

Hands and Hearts Initiative

Faiths /Traditions Represented: 7 members: Christian Catholic, Christian Protestant, Islam Muslim

Location of CC: AFRICA-HORN, Nairobi, CBD

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Key Areas of Focus: Women rights advocacy

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Summary

Hands and Hearts Initiative is a new CC located in Nairobi, Kenya. They primarily work with Christian and Muslim women, offering vocational training as a way of ensuring economic independence. In addition to trainings, their CC organizes discussion forums where women from different religions and tribes can build relationships and encourage each other to stand up for women’s rights in their communities. Their work aims to provide women of all faiths equal rights and opportunities in what they identify as a patriarchal and discriminatory society.



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

Hearts and Hands Initiative is a new organization that is just starting off its work on women rights advocacy in a deeply patriarchal society. Poverty levels are high in certain areas and this does not make things easy in an ethnically and religiously polarized country. Discrimination against women is particularly rampant due to adherence to traditional patriarchal practices- some of which are in direct conflict with acceptable standards of women's rights. The commonality of these practices is evident in the social and mainstream media.

Women from different religions and ethnic groups face similar problems. As an interfaith group, with some of us being law students, we believe that grassroots women from different faiths are a resource in campaigning for women's rights. We reach out to schools, especially those that are poor and have been neglected in terms of funding for forums on equality and human rights. Our partners (we sometimes call them whistle blowers) on the ground also inform us about incidences of gender-based violence for us to take action such as reporting to various responsible authorities and follow-up to ensure action is taken in the course of justice.

Religious polarization has become even more rampant with the ongoing radicalization to violent extremism in some parts of the country - sending wrong signals of religious intolerance and stereotypes in the rest of the country. In the areas where we operate—Kariobangi, Nyeri and Kiambu--people are aware about such developments and depending on their own perceptions and how the information is framed, they could react in either positive or negative ways. Ethnicity and religion are sensitive matters in Kenya as a whole, particularly when politicians mobilize their "own" against others. Intercultural relations are calm but a lot remains to be done due to the silent mistrust amongst different ethnic groups - an indication that things may not necessarily be stable.

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

Interfaith and intercultural bridge building is essential in any diverse society and in this case, it is because the common religions here (Christianity and Islam) can be effective advocates for justice. In the poor suburbs where we operate, and the entire country, discrimination based on ethnic and religious affiliations is the cause for conflict. Kenya is one nation, but people relate differently in different parts of the country. Even in Nairobi, which is considered cosmopolitan, ethnic stereotyping is common. Whether it is amongst different ethnic or religious groups, stereotyping is due to the fear of the other/unknown as witnessed in recent violence, and we believe that there is a need for dialogue so that people can know each other better at the human level. This will help to counter political mobilization that is prevalent especially during election periods.



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

We plan to engage in entrepreneurship training for women from different faiths so that women are financially independent, which is one way of preventing gender based violence. We also plan to continue holding forums for creating awareness on women's rights especially in schools, as well as incorporate intercultural dialogue in our forums.

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

Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (although we are yet to have a Hindu member in our CC). Also, multiple ethnic groups/tribes such as Kikuyu, Luo, Luhya.

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

During the discussion forums that we hold, we organize our event such that we ensure intermingling and that people with similar backgrounds do not group together. Our attendance list is a good mechanism to use. Also, during sports and culture shows, we enforce a strategy of intermingling. In this way, people are able to learn something by getting to know a new person.

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

As women's rights campaigners, we are encouraging the creation of a changed society where women are viewed as equals and where they are respected. This is the foundation for peace. We also enhance awareness for "zero- interfaith and intercultural hatred" by enabling people to know each other and understand the importance of being ones brother's keeper. It is through reaching out and including as many types of people as possible in our work that we see this happening.

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

We are able to create awareness about women's rights while at the same time promote interfaith cooperation through discussion forums. Also, when gender based violence victims meet and share their experiences with others who are not from their ethnic and religious groups with common problems, their humanity "sisterhood" grows.

Human beings are the same, regardless of race, color, ethnicity, religion sex etc. Women from different religions and ethnic groups in our operation most likely face similar problems, just as they have many similarities. It is these similarities that we capitalize on and make people understand that their respective religions promote peace and so they should be the custodians. We discuss about the



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common aspects of misuse of religion and culture that subject women to violations of their rights and so when they realize this, most of them change their minds. Enhanced cooperation means that even children of highly polarized parents can play together. In the future, our plan is to have resource centers that will be managed by women from multi-faith/ multicultural backgrounds hence increased cooperation in tackling their problems.

8. *How is the work of your CC helping to prevent religiously inspired violence or transforming conflicts? (as this in areas with open conflicts)*

Women are seen as the backbone of the society. When they know their rights, they respect each other regardless of ethnicity or religion. Women tend to have a double-edged role in conflicts - either as peace builders and champions for peace or mobilizers to violence. Since our work is focused on women's rights advocacy, when women know their rights and value in society, they tend to respect each other across existing artificial boundaries and in so doing the peace-building role is achieved in the process. Also when women cooperate, they mostly manage to persuade their husbands to take the right course of preventing violence. This has been evident particularly in the current period of religious animosity in Kenya.

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

Communities that we have engaged with are cooperating and undertaking communal work together such as attending each other's ceremonies and forging new friendships. We however wish to expand our scope and make sure that people in Nairobi and throughout the country feel live side by side is a positive thing as opposed to segregated communities in different suburbs. We have also witnessed diversity in our forum participation.

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?*

Maybe not inspiring but more a lesson: Lynn once went to give a talk in Kariobangi, Nairobi and no sooner had she started talking than a young boy in the audience asked her to declare her ethnicity. She did so but once they heard she was a Kikuyu, they disapproved of her — triggering negative stereotypes about her ethnicity as well as her work as a feminist. Nevertheless, she managed to remain strong and vowed never to back down despite the hardships involved sometimes. The lesson to learn here is that ethnic and religious animosity is common even among people that are least expected. It is important therefore to expect challenges, but remain calm and never quit.



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11. How is your CC's work helping to achieve the mission or URI?

We work to ensure we achieve URI's mission is achieved by building cooperation between women of diverse backgrounds and embracing the Golden rule principle of: "treating others the way you want to be treated." As previously mentioned, when gender based violence victims meet and share their experiences with others who are not from their ethnic and religious groups with common problems, their humanity "sisterhood" grows.

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

So far our personal relationships towards each other are good, perhaps because we are all like-minded and brought together by the quest for justice for women. However, people have different religious and cultural orientations/upbringing hence some peculiar situations are a learning process for some of us. Some of our members come in with their own reservations about others but with time, they tend to change for the better. In this case, we look out for training to make sure our members have the capacity needed to positively transform the society.

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

Through mentorship URI feels almost like a classroom for interfaith dialogue. When we attend URI events such as the upcoming interfaith prayer in KIBRA, we feel like members of a larger family. The Golden Rule also acts as a guide for us and our activities. It is during these activities too that we get to meet resourceful people from URI or other CCs who might be helpful or vice versa.

14. Aside from funding, how can URI better support your CC in reaching its goals?

URI can offer us training opportunities particularly on women's rights issues and interfaith work. Through URI's network, we can also access resources and penetrate areas that are beyond our territory, whether for funding or to expand our work.