

A personal story from South Asia



Stuart Morton is the QPSW programme manager for Networking for Peace in South Asia. From an early age, he has been concerned to speak out on behalf of the oppressed. He feels his work with QPSW gives him a wonderful opportunity to put his beliefs into practice.

“It is wonderful for me to be asked to use my gifts to build friendships with people from other cultures and countries whose hearts are with the ordinary people caught up in poverty and other forms of violence.”

Stuart Morton: Quaker Peace & Social Witness

I have a feeling deep inside of me that all people count; each is special and sacred. When I was at primary school I did not like to see anyone left out and unappreciated.

I knew from my mother’s side of the family that people were not necessarily poor because they did not work hard enough. Many did not and do not today get the opportunity to flourish; I am aware of the industrial injury to my grandfather that brought no financial compensation and forced him into unemployment, the oppressive working conditions for my mother as a teenage shop assistant, the teachers who used their power to bully children instead of nurturing them. This was not the way it should be and I hoped that I could help to mend some of this.

The values of loving respect for all and fair play that I learned in my home, school and in the Christian Church, took on an international dimension from teenage years. Students from Germany, a country with whom Britain had been at war until the year before I was born, came to stay in our home to improve their English. Later, attending international work camps brought me into the Quaker movement, and following two years in Nigeria as a teacher trainer under Voluntary Service Overseas I gradually focussed my attention on what was then known as ‘the third world’.

I am now 60 and am grateful to have been on my life journey with Friends since 1971. The search for the deepest we know in the meeting for worship and the commitment to building a world in which more just and peaceful relationships can emerge is a great joy and also at times a great struggle.

My work with QPSW in South Asia has built on the trusted work of other Quakers. It is wonderful for me to be asked to use my gifts to build friendships with people from other cultures and countries whose hearts are with the ordinary people caught up in poverty and other forms of violence. As one elderly Indian villager said to me in 2002, “give me a leader we can trust and we will follow him”. This particularly referred to Rajagopal, the Indian leader who seeks to put Gandhi’s method into action today. If we as Quakers can support some of the many good people who are prepared to put their lives at some risk and to follow the path of nonviolent resistance and community building then we are indeed blessed!

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Ramesh Sharma is from a Gandhian farmer family. He says that 'sarvodaya' (social equality) is his life mission. He has been involved in Ekta Parishad since 1998. He has taken part in a number of 'foot marches' across India.

“Today we are facing a critical phase in the civilized world. I don't agree that this is an extended war of civilizations, but there is need for deeper thinking. We need to create a critical mass of people who can respond strongly against all violence.”

Ramesh Sharma: Ekta Parishad

I first came in contact with Ekta Parishad through a friend in 1998. I have always believed that the best way of empowering is to provide people with their due constitutional rights and a dignified life.

Ekta Parishad gave me opportunities to learn about rights based campaigning. First I was involved in a long foot march from Gwalior to Raigarh in 1999–2000. During the walk of 3,500km in Madhya Pradesh, 900kms in Birah, 200km in Chambal Valley and then foot marches in Chhattisgarh, Orissa and Jharkhand, I learnt a lot from grassroots experiences. I witnessed the pain, deprivation and suffering of the marginalised communities during our march. Thousands of questions emerged in my mind, and all the unanswered questions inspired me to become more committed. After eight years of experience in Ekta Parishad, I can count hundreds of reasons for continuing this path today.

Seeing the level of poverty and structural violence in South East Asia, I think role of QPSW and South Asia Peace Alliance has become very very important. Especially when most of the social organisations are really looking for potential partnership at regional level, perhaps SAPA and QPSW could be a means of uniting us all.

Because of my Gandhian and spiritual tradition, I gradually came to the conclusion that working against injustice is the only way to achieve social equality (sarvodaya) and justice. So this has now become my life mission.

Today we are facing a critical phase in the civilised world. I don't agree that this is an extended war of civilisations, but there is need for deeper thinking. We need to create a critical mass of people who can respond strongly against all violence.

We urgently need to demonstrate the strength of nonviolent approaches and campaign for nonviolent conflict resolution not only regionally and nationally but on the international level as well.

Today the world is facing acute problems of violence, which cross the boundaries of continents and persist at every level. I think injustice and discrimination are also kinds of violence which affect almost two thirds of the world's population today. That is why it is our responsibility to dedicate ourselves to work for peace. I am inspired by the words of Saint Mother Teresa: “...God has not provided us immense power for changing the world into heaven... but God has certainly given us little strength which we can put together for transforming this earth into heaven. We need to do this much only in our life...”

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My name is Meena Sharma. I am a member of the Institute of Human Rights Communication Nepal (IHRICON), and I work in Nepal to improve human rights.

“I realised the power of united women during conflict and their attitude for just peace, clear visions, women working as peace agents, changing society for sustainable peace.”

Meena Sharma: IHRICON Nepal

I was brought up in a patriarchal and conservative society, where social structure, values and norms are clearly determined for women, and women are treated as second-class citizens. I witnessed the discrimination around me. I wanted to oppose it but, though my parents let me do whatever I wanted, I was not permitted by the situation. I was helpless because of outer social pressures. At that time I thought that a girl like me couldn't do anything.

But after I got married, when I moved to my new house, my husband opened the door for me to move around. He is a professional journalist and has worked on political and social issues for a decade. It was easier for me then to do the things I wanted.

With the support of QPSW, we had an opportunity to see, feel and share the similar work taking place across the region. This is an energiser for all of us— their clear vision, timely support, openness and helping nature will definitely drive us very far.

First I worked as a teacher in the capital but didn't find that fulfilling. I worked for some non-governmental organisations working on children's and youth issues, in remote areas. There I got an opportunity to see the real picture of Nepal. In one way that was good, but I felt touched to witness the human rights violation cases everywhere, the increased impunity, lack of justice, and discrimination at every turn. There were villages dominated by armed groups, a growing gap between the rich and the poor, gender inequality and social exclusion, social negligence, lack of essentials, poverty and hardship, and innocent children going hungry.

This grassroots reality shook me for a long time and my inner voice kept telling me to do something. Maybe I will never get another chance to work in these sectors for the needy, poor and voiceless groups. It is the only opportunity for me to show my presence in this world; to do something extra and meaningful for the people and to empower them in every way. Hence I joined IHRICON.

Finally, I feel that the conflict in Nepal has sharpened my vision in this field. It has given me an opportunity to see how things are in a battlefield. I met an innocent schoolboy who had been shot and injured, a mother with her baby newly delivered under a tree, old people killed for nothing, children starving to death. I also realised the power of united women during conflict and their attitude for just peace, clear visions, women working as peace agents, changing society for sustainable peace. For all these reasons I want to continue this and advocate young women to join this noble sector for the betterment of humanity.