

UNION OF REFUGEE WOMEN - exceptional women

How they empower themselves and how you can help them make a difference

By Pie-Pacifique Kabalira-Uwase

It was during the second half of the year 2001 that I slowly integrated myself in the Durban refugee community, which greatly allayed my fears and frustrations in my first months in exile. From scratch, I had to start a completely new life, with no family or relatives, no friends or acquaintances, with no money and no work. There was no choice at all but becoming a car guard. Most of the refugees were car guards in and around Durban and were able to earn enough money for food and accommodation. But something kept bothering me: all refugees were car guards. All, including those who were once students, businessmen, skilled or semi-skilled, professionals (nurses, engineers, accountants, teachers etc). Men and women, and sometimes children, all had to stand under the burning sun of summer fighting for a decent life. I kept observing how mothers prepared and sent their children to school, and some left younger children locked inside their homes, exposed to all sorts of hazards and dangers.

Besides starting what was going to be a long and hard struggle to continue my tertiary education, I had the privilege of sharing some ideas and insights with some very open-minded refugee women who believed that together, they would be able to overcome most of their difficulties, supporting each other as they had much in common. Their first act as a group was intended to help a widow, whose husband had committed suicide by hanging himself in a flat in Durban. The wife had moved to Gauteng with her daughter, and the refugee women got together to fund raise among themselves and send one of them to see the widow and her child. Unfortunately, she passed away before they finalized their intent, but they managed to send one of them to see the child who was kept in a convent. The little girl sadly died soon after.

But the refugee women did not give up. They continued to support themselves and each other, contributing from the little they made as car guards, although some of them found it heavy going and stopped soon after. Those who were determined to join their efforts did not give up, as they could see what it meant for themselves, their families and their community.

Given my passion to participate in the struggle for the well being and better future of my community, I had the honor of assisting them start their own organisation that they decided to call Union of Refugee Women (URW in short), which was later registered as a non-profit organization. I was humbled by their commitment and leadership. With vision, determination and courage, they shared excellent ideas and realized that they had so much potential and so many and various skills. Their patience soon started bearing fruits, with their very first project to create a cultural dance group. Soon after, they founded a crèche for their children. Later, they started getting some support from various groups and individuals, and some kept their ties with the URW strong.



It was in February 2002 that I had to move from the city centre to the former University of Natal where I had finally obtained a place to study, a place in residence, and was the first undergraduate refugee student to be allowed to apply for a financial aid package. I kept in touch with the Union of Refugee Women, assisting where and when I could.

In some of their meetings in which I had the privilege to participate, the tone was the same for all of us: the URW should not be an organization to just feed them, but rather to help them help themselves, finding sustainable solutions to their problems, empowering them to discover and use their potential and creativity, to develop and use their leadership skills. They have managed to maintain the same vision, as they already possessed the work-hard spirit and are selfless leaders! In addition, despite difficulties with the English language for some, a promising number of URW members are now students in tertiary institutions, some of them at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.

The URW current main projects which they have developed to empower themselves and their broader community are:

1. A crèche which takes up to 45-50 refugee and some South African born non-refugee children during school days. *[In the above picture-Germaine (far left), Elisabeth (behind) and myself with some of the children at the crèche.]*



2. A cultural dance group that has performed in various events around Durban, the most recent being on the 20th June 2005: World Refugee Day at Durban Institute of Technology. Union of Refugee Women “UBUNTU Cultural dance group” *[left Picture: celebrating the National women’s day and 10 years of Democracy, at the Resistance Park in Durban (9 AUGUST 2004)]*

3. A catering group that has served at some conferences and workshops around Durban.

4. A sewing project which produces some of the West-African and central African designs (boubous etc) together with local flavor designs (summer clothing for men and women etc). *[Elisabeth (middle, standing), wearing a boubou made by URW sewing project. Also in the picture: Anne Pratt and Pélagie.]*



Most of the challenges facing the refugee women are often perceived as attached to their refugee status, and a serious burden for them and their families is their daily survival, which traps some in a cycle of frustration and hopelessness.

“As an organization, the biggest challenges that we are facing is the market of our products and a lack of support in terms of marketing” said Jeanine, the head of the sewing project and the URW projects coordinator.

“We need a qualified and hopefully full time teacher of our children.” said Elisabeth, URW chairperson and University of KZN BCom student. “We have a serious difficulty of where we operate from which is an affordable but unsafe location” said Chantal, URW member and UKZN nursing student. They are doing extremely well, against the odds but still have much to achieve.



Recently, I was privileged to be part of the 2005 Brightest Young Minds Conference (26th June-03 July). That is where I had the honor to meet Anne Pratt, one of the leading business women in South Africa, who was one of the distinguished guests at the conference,

and I invited her to visit the URW. She accepted my invitation, and Friday, July 8, 2005 became a

memorable day for the URW members. The 2 hours meeting was a life changing experience for all of us. Anne Pratt is an exceptional motivator, a very inspiring and caring human being. "It feels like we had known each other for years" commented Pélégie, a member of URW. Anne Pratt offered and pledged a monthly contribution towards the rent of the location of their projects. "She is a great and compassionate leader" said Solange, the URW treasurer.

Although there is still a long way to go, the future of the URW looks promising and challenging. "We have so many skills. For example, some of us are now trained in catering and hospitality. But all we need is a place to gain experience, so we can eventually get jobs in the catering industry or start our own business."

It is a great privilege to be with the URW, to learn from them and to be humbled and inspired by them. I have the greatest respect for the members of the URW, and I keep hoping that one day they will achieve their bigger dreams, as they have aspirations well beyond themselves. They have the drive, the vision, the courage, the determination. What they need is support to help them make the larger dreams a reality. If you can offer any type of support or assistance in any way, to help them help themselves, it will be gratefully appreciated and received. For further contact and/or input please send them an email on saurw@ananzi.co.za or call on 031 332 6265.

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"Action may not always bring happiness; but there is no happiness without action" Benjamin Disraeli