

## **Listen to the voices of youth – delivering on the expectations of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights?**

**By Elisa Gazzotti, Co-Chair of the NGO Working Group on Human Rights Education and Learning, and UN Representative for Soka Gakkai International.**

As a young person engaging in global debates at the UN on human rights education, I often feel I am trying to lift a heavy weight.

Despite growing attention on the “millennials” and on the need to protect and respect the rights of youth, so much more needs to be done to ensure that each young person can truly feel empowered, have a space to make their voice heard and a sense of ownership of their rights, and can develop the courage to make concrete change in their environment.

Only when every young person truly lives the reality of their universal human rights, can the lofty objective of the UN of “leaving no one behind” be said to be achieved.

There are around 1.8 billion young people between the ages of 10 and 24 in the world today: the largest youth population ever. The great majority live in countries where violence and conflict are still a daily reality. Many are forced to leave their own country, embarking alone on dangerous routes and facing enormous challenges to start a new life in a completely different – and sometimes hostile - places.

Young people face human rights abuses specific to their age, interweaving with their nationality, race, ethnicity, place of origin, sex and gender, religion, sexual orientation, ability and economic and social status.

Some work in exploitative and dangerous conditions, sometimes akin to slavery, and their voices are almost always under-represented in the decision-making processes that concern them and the denial of the chance to realize their full potential, causing frustration and isolation, are often at the root of the failure of efforts in promoting peace.

Media portrayals of young people only as vulnerable actors or victims need to change. We must be recognized as fully equal actors of change. Looking at history, many human rights struggles have been initiated and sustained through the power and passion of youth. Mahatma Gandhi and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.,

among the world's greatest champions of human rights, both became active in their twenties.

A few weeks ago, at the UN in Geneva, Switzerland, I had the chance to meet with Sophia Pierre-Antoine, a powerful voice and advocate for young women's rights, now co-chair of the Board of the FRIDA Young Feminist Fund. Born in 1991 in Haiti as a *coup d'etat* unfolded, she grew up experiencing violence and conflict around her. At a crucial moment, she decided to do something about the situation she was in. She started to work in a youth centre in one of the poorest neighborhoods in Haiti, teaching young women about their rights.

Sophia saw that through human rights education and training these young women began to feel empowered and little by little could make real changes in their lives. A few months ago, she addressed the UN Security Council in a debate on "youth, peace and security" urging States to support young people *"fighting racism, xenophobia, religious intolerance, homophobia, transphobia, sexism, and discrimination towards people with disabilities and ensure youth diverse participation at all levels."*

Sophia's story is one example of how young people under the harshest circumstances can bring forth their full potential, and in deciding to stand up for their and others' rights, create a change in their immediate environment and ultimately in society.

In the year of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, where does the international community stand in regard to young people's rights?

The UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres recently stated that - *"The hopes of the world rest on young people. Peace, economic dynamism, social justice, tolerance — all this and more, today and tomorrow, depends on tapping into the power of youth."*

This year in September, the Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland, adopted a Resolution identifying youth as the target for the next phase of the World Programme on Human Rights Education – an initiative to advance the implementation of human rights education programmes in all sectors - starting in 2020. In the same month, the UN General Assembly in New York launched a

youth strategy, aiming at “achieving a world in which the human rights of every young person are realized and that ensures every young person is empowered to achieve their full potential; and that recognizes young people’s agency, resilience and their positive contributions as agents of change.”

One of the five top priorities is to increase the UN’s efforts to promote human rights education and training for youth, as well as global citizenship and sustainable development education, civic awareness and participation and volunteerism.

At a time of war, discrimination, xenophobia, exclusion and global warming, investing in ensuring that young people’ voices can be heard and listened to, and in creating spaces where young people, recognizing commonalities with their peers and respecting diversity, can unite and take the lead to protect the dignity of the lives of all people and fight injustice could be a turning point.

It is not enough to depend on the UN and wait for governments to act. All of us can play a role wherever we find ourselves. We can each encourage one young person, helping them to build confidence, locate resources and navigate their way through this complex world.

Starting from our own respective families, communities and societies, we can generate a new momentum and build a stronger solidarity to close the gap between the expectations that the 70 year-old Universal Declaration of Human Rights still invokes, and reality.

The 9th International Conference on Human Rights Education, to take place from 26-29 November at Western Sydney University, will include workshops open to local youth participants where direct encounters and exchanges can take place with human rights activists from all over the world. See: <http://ichre2018.com.au/>