



Ending Violence Against Children

The Contributions from Religious Communities

Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the
Convention on the Rights of the Child

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INTRODUCTION

On 6 March 2019, on the margins of the 40th Human Rights Council session, Arigatou International, the Office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), UNICEF, the African Union ECOSOCC, KAICIID, the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities, World Vision International and the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD) co-organized the side-event titled “Celebrating the 30th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child: The Contributions from Religious Communities to End Violence against Children”.

The event was co-sponsored by the Permanent Mission of Germany to the United Nations, the Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations, the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations, and the Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations.

As we commemorate the 30th anniversary of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most ratified international treaty ever, the event provided an excellent opportunity to both celebrate the achievements made to protect and promote the rights of the child and also reflect on the challenges ahead, focusing specifically on the role of religious communities. Religious communities have worked closely with the United Nations and UN member states in the implementation of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child during the last 30 years.

The discussion offered the opportunity to present concrete and practical actions implemented by faith communities and religious leaders to create safe environments for children and protect them from all forms of violence, including early marriage, female genital mutilation, corporal punishment, and online sexual exploitation and abuse.

A central part of the discussions focussed on the critical role of faith leaders, as key influential actors, who provide the necessary guidance to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence against children. Discussions also reflected on the key role of faith communities in influencing policies at the national level protecting children from any form of violence and abuse.

The panel discussion was followed by a reception to present the Interfaith Alliance Exposition on Child Dignity Online, that was created with the goal of raising awareness about online sexual abuse and exploitation of children and the role of religious communities.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS



Ms. Maria Lucia Uribe, Director of Arigatou International — Geneva, opened the floor stressing how crucial this year is in terms of both celebrating the achievements on improving children's rights around the world, while at the same time joining forces together to end violence against children. She highlighted that one in two children in the world are affected by violence every year, suffering long term consequences in mental health, anxiety, depression, as well as increasing the risk of aggressive behaviors later in life¹.

She continued by emphasizing that millions of children are affected by harmful practices that are condoned by customs, traditions and often by religious interpretations of scriptures. Ms. Uribe stressed how religious communities

have the responsibility and the concrete means to influence and take action to end all forms of violence against children.

In today's world, where about 85% of the population identifies or is affiliated with a religious group², religious communities are crucial for fostering human solidarity and for building bridges of respect and acceptance between people of all faiths.

As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the convention, Ms. Uribe recalled the ongoing multi-religious study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, a collaboration between Arigatou International together with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children, KAICIID, World Vision International, UNICEF and other

¹ UNICEF 2017, A Familiar Face: Violence in the lives of children and adolescents

² Pew Research Center 2017, The Changing Global Religious Landscape

partners. The study brings together experts on child rights, and religious scholars and leaders to conduct a review of the CRC since its adoption from an interfaith perspective taking into account the role of faith communities towards its ratification and implementation, as well as some of the objections (entered as reservations) that have been raised by religious communities and leaders over the years.

The summary note of the study can be read [here](#).

Ms. Uribe continued, thanking the many organizations that have joined efforts to co-organize the side event. She concluded by providing the rationale and objectives of the discussion.

Ms. Uribe gave special thanks to the office of the SRSG on Violence against Children, as well as thanked the International Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), for the support through its work to contribute to the realization of Goal 16 on Inclusive and Peaceful societies, and to end all forms of abuse and violence against children.

The opening remarks were delivered by H.E Ambassador Omar Zniber, Permanent Representative of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva.

The discussions included the participation of Ms. Marta Santos Pais, UN Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence against Children; H.E. Dr. Nedžad Grabus, Grand Mufti of Slovenia; Rabbi Diana Gerson, Associate Executive Vice President of the New York Board of Rabbis, and Steering Group Member, Interfaith Alliance on Safer

Communities; Ms. Renate Winter, Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child; Prof. Mohammed Abu-Nimer, Senior Advisor, International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), and Professor, American University; and Rev. Christo Greyling, Senior Director Faith and External Engagement, World Vision International.

H.E. Mr. Obaid Salem Saeed Al Zaabi, Ambassador Extraordinary and Plenipotentiary, Permanent Representative, Permanent Mission of the United Arab Emirates to the United Nations Office and other international organizations in Geneva delivered the closing remarks while H.E. Metropolitan Emmanuel of France provided the concluding remarks.

OPENING REMARKS



In his opening remarks, H.E. Ambassador Omar Zniber celebrated the achievements of current efforts to end violence against children and recalled the fundamental role played by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, which provide landmark opportunities for protecting and upholding children's rights at an unprecedented scale.

His Excellency proceeded by emphasizing the importance of working with faith communities to foster a culture supportive of children's rights at the grassroots level: faith leaders possess influence and can be the drivers of change to end violence against children. Ambassador Zniber recalled the crucial role that faith leaders of all denominations are playing in Africa and around the globe to raise awareness on HIV/AIDS, for example.

He continued by highlighting several important initiatives of the Kingdom of Morocco which

constitute concrete measures to fight violence against children, including by strengthening inter-ministerial cooperation and international cooperation efforts. He cited the National Plan for the Promotion and Protection of the Rights of Children, including the national policies for child protection with a specific strategy for the years 2016-2020. The Ambassador also recalled the enactment of legislative measures to criminalize acts such as ill-treatment of children, child sexual violence and abuse as well as the assaults perpetrated by parents, teachers or any other person exercising authority over the child. The penalties for the crime of forced marriage of minors have also been increased in the new legislative framework.

Mr. Zniber closed his remarks by discussing the importance of state institutions, civil society actors and faith leaders to work together to end violence against children.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PANEL



Ms. Marta Santos Pais

UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence against Children

Q1. As we celebrate the 30th Anniversary of the CRC, what have been the main achievements in children's rights and their protection from all forms of violence, and how have religious communities contributed to those? What are the challenges ahead?

Ms. Marta Santos Pais opened her intervention by reflecting on the paradigm shift that the CRC has represented. The CRC envisaged children as full citizens with full rights and not as adults in the making: "we need to respect the views of children, including through ensuring their participation in decisions that affect them". The CRC provided a universal legal framework guaranteeing an adequate standard of living

for all children, an important dimension of which is their spiritual development. From the outset, the CRC has always promoted inclusive implementation, inviting UN member states, UN agencies and all other competent bodies that have a key role to play in the promotion and protection of children rights to join forces and work together for the full implementation of the Convention.

Among the many achievements of the last three decades, Ms. Santos Pais mentioned the important legal changes achieved in some countries that have given effect to the provisions of the CRC, including through their incorporation at the constitutional level³. She also highlighted positive examples of legislation currently being re-thought to take into consideration and include the views of children⁴.

3 2018 incorporation of the (CRC) into Swedish law, and 2019 draft bill for incorporation in Scotland

4 Tanzania and Zanzibar

Ms. Santos Pais continued by highlighting the importance of inter-ministerial cooperation, cross-party collaboration in Parliaments and the promotion of state policies that prioritize decision-making based on the best interests of the child. Ms. Santos Pais welcomed a number of initiatives from UN member states aimed at understanding and capturing the magnitude of violence against children in order to drive the policy agenda and respond effectively to these violations.

Faith leaders have played and continue to play a key role in promoting and upholding the rights of children. Ms. Santos Pais cited some concrete illustrations: the 2006 fatwa from the Grand Mufti of Egypt condemning female genital mutilations, the 2018 initiative promoted by Indonesia's female clerics against child marriage and the fatwa raising the minimum age for marriage, and the efforts from the faith leaders in Cambodia committed to promoting non-violent forms of discipline among families.

Ms. Santos Pais mentioned several landmark interfaith declarations including the 2006 Kyoto Declaration, the 2017 Panama Declaration and the 2017 Declaration of Rome; these commitments by faith leaders and faith communities recognize

that there is no religion nor religious practice that justifies violence, and that religion cannot be used to condone and perpetrate any form of violence against children.

The UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General on Violence Against Children concluded by thanking Arigatou International and its partners for the ongoing multi-religious study on the CRC.

H.E. Dr. Nedžad Grabus **Grand Mufti of Slovenia**

Q2. Despite the many advances and progress made in terms of advancing children's rights and protecting children from violence, we know that there is still a lot to do, that violence against children is still prevalent in many forms around the world, and at times it has been condoned and even justified in the name of religion. What can religious communities do to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence against children and to prevent harmful practices?

H.E. Dr. Nedžad Grabus opened his remarks by highlighting that the promotion and protection of children's rights are at the core of Islam. His Excellency quoted the Hadith

narrating how the Prophet interrupted His prayers as He heard a child crying, so He made His prayer brief not to cause hardship to the child's mother.

The teachings of Prophet Muhammed in the VII century, placed a great emphasis on the respect and inviolability of children from all forms of abuse including moral, physical and intellectual. In this context, His Excellency warned against



the misuse of religion in order to justify some harmful practices including female genital mutilation, violent discipline and early marriage. All these practices are contrary to the Prophet's teachings. These practices are not acceptable and have no justification in the Muslim faith.



H.E. Dr. Grabus invited Muslim communities around the globe to take a stand and find new approaches to tackle these issues and encourage their communities to speak loudly against any kind of violence and abuse committed in the name of religion, and to take action to end violence against children.

His Excellency praised the ongoing work of KAICIID that has united young Muslim leaders across Europe and Africa to join forces and raise awareness about these topics, promoting a new paradigm and a new discourse that challenges violent practices and promotes ending violence against children in all settings.

The Grand Mufti of Slovenia continued by highlighting the importance of redefining the way faith leaders work to end violence against children, seeing as negative practices such as early marriage, female genital mutilation, and others are not approved by Islam and have

no base in the Koran nor in any Hadith. He continued by stressing that this is also the case for any form of discriminative practices against girls. Dr. Grabus, therefore, called on relevant stakeholders to develop comprehensive strategies and action plans that will provide all children with equal opportunities.

He continued by recalling that the only form of "positive discrimination" that is justified by the scriptures is the one that accords a preferential treatment of children with disabilities so that they can have the additional support they need from their parents and caretakers, and that will allow them to flourish despite their disability.

H.E. Dr. Grabus concluded his remarks with an invitation to join forces, inviting faith leaders with influence in their communities to create a new paradigm and take action against violence.

Rabbi Diana Gerson

**Associate Executive Vice President
of the New York Board of Rabbis, and
Steering Group Member, Interfaith
Alliance for Safer Communities**

Q3. What has been the experience of religious communities and how is the work you are doing to promote children's rights and protect them from violence in the US? If you have been involved in advocating for the ratification of the CRC in the US, please share.

Rabbi Gerson discussed the crucial role of faith leaders that are in many cases the first responders in case of violence and abuses against children. She recalled how faith leaders are, often time, "the first person to go to" for parents and children themselves when they



need to confide the abuses. She also mentioned that in many cases, spiritual leaders encourage the families and the children to report to the competent authorities.

However, Rabbi Gerson also highlighted how in some cases, the violence and abuses occur in the place of worship, a space that is expected to be safe. She continued by emphasizing that crucial it is to empower members of the faith communities with child protection policies and protocols in order to prevent and respond to abuses and ultimately to create safe places for children within the congregations.

Rabbi Gerson discussed the importance of child protection training programs within the different congregations and how crucial these training and dialogue spaces are to create safety around children, including by creating a moment of interfaith dialogue and cooperation. These training programs and spaces are unique opportunities for different faiths to come together, and to join hands to improve child protection systems in different communities, to raise awareness among the congregations, the parents, the teachers and all those adults that are in daily contact with children and are directly responsible for their safety and well-being.

Rabbi Gerson continued by discussing the role and responsibility of faith leaders when

it comes to influencing policies and politics at the national level, including fostering a culture of encounter and respect, a culture of trust in a common humanity.

She concluded by inviting faith leaders to take action and to work together across different faiths to end violence against children and find concrete ways, together with state authorities, to improve child protection.

Ms. Renate Winter Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child

Q4. The Committee does a very important job in monitoring and promoting the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child with UN member states, what are some of the main challenges you see in terms of commitment and implementation by governments (please share any obstacles in terms of reservations made to the CRC by governments at the time of ratification), and how can the child rights' agenda be advanced?

As Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, Ms. Winter focused on the monitoring role of the experts from the Committee and explained the multiple challenges of working with UN member states to guarantee the implementation of the Convention. In particular, Ms. Winter shared that UN member states often argue that the gaps in their child protection legislations and policies, hindering the full implementation of the Convention, are justified by customs, traditions and cultural and religious practices that are preventing the state to fully comply with the Convention.

Ms. Winter continued discussing the interpretative declarations and reservations to the Convention on religious grounds (16 reservations made by Islamic countries and 1 from the Holy See). She explained that while the reservations on specific articles (often article 14 on Freedom of Religion) allow space for progress towards improving the rights of the child, those reservations concerning “all dispositions of the Convention that are incompatible with Islamic Law”, present a number of challenges. In these latter cases, dealing with such “global” reservations is very problematic for the Committee and poses serious threats to the advancement of child rights in that specific country.



Ms. Winter highlighted the importance of challenging those interpretations of Islamic Law that justify violence and discrimination against children, concretely mentioning, for example, the case of inheritance law often being very discriminative towards girls.

She continued by stressing the need to create child-friendly spaces within the different spiritual communities; spaces where children are able to speak and participate and be active, places where children feel safe and are not afraid to be punished by violent or humiliating

means. Ms. Winter recalled how crucial it is to join forces towards the elimination of any form of violence and humiliating practices in school settings and within the families and homes.

Ms. Winter closed her intervention by recognizing the crucial role of faith leaders and citing positive examples of the fatwas against female genital mutilation and child marriage and made a call for assistance and action against those misinterpretations of religion that justify and condone discrimination and violence against children.

Prof. Mohammed Abu-Nimer

Senior Advisor, International Dialogue Centre (KAICIID), and Professor, American University

Q5. We know that the promotion of children's rights is a *sine qua non* for the prevention of violence and for the creation of peaceful and inclusive societies. Religious communities play a critical role in promoting a culture of respect for children's rights; however, we also know that violation of children's rights including their right to freedom of religion and belief, or through the use of corporal punishment, female genital mutilation, or their manipulation into extremist narratives of hate about the other have been used in the name of religion. What can be done in religious communities and working with religious actors to promote a discourse and action that protects children's rights and protect them from violence?

Prof. Abu-Nimer, building on the call for action and assistance to faith leaders launched by the Chairperson of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, recalled how many religious leaders

are often caught in the web of traditional and cultural practices, despite the fact that religious narrative and teachings clearly prohibit such practices.

He continued by highlighting that in these instances, a concrete practice that has proved successful to engage and mobilize faith leaders to take a stand, is to bring faith leaders and faith communities together to dialogue and come to recognize their common problems, and finding constructive ways to respond to these problems. In these processes, it is of utmost importance that faith leaders are empowered and protected, including by the international community, and that they are not instrumentalized.

Prof. Abu-Nimer continued by insisting on the importance to find contextualized approaches to respond to violence against children. These approaches include a shift in the way we think about awareness raising and sensitization for example, as we need to work closely with local communities on the identification and problematization of the issues, which need to go beyond basic awareness programs and look at the root causes of violence (such as: systems of discrimination and exclusion, corrupt and ineffective governance policies; militarized and security approaches to economic and social problems; etc.)



Only this local ownership of the issues can translate into empowerment and implementation of effective home-grown tools and frameworks to address violence against children in the name of faith and cultural traditions.



He highlighted that religious leaders have an important role to play in preventing abuses against children because they have direct access to the children's families and communities, and are often the first responders to violence. Religious leaders are influential in their communities and can speak out against violent practices that have no base in the scriptures.

He pointed out that the approach and methods of certain human rights advocacy groups and activists of exclusively blaming and shaming religious agencies is ineffective in engaging them in such processes. He suggested extending a hand of dialogue and respectful exchange, especially on core controversial issues. Such dialogical engagement can produce tangible results when common understanding of the problems are reached. KAICIID is an organization that can help in convening such dialogue between policymakers, advocates, and religious agencies.

Prof. Abu-Nimer closed his remarks with a call to the international community, including international organizations and non-governmental

organizations, to reach out to faith communities and to join hands working together with religious leaders to identify the issues, and to promote local ownership and home-growth solutions to address violence.

Rev. Christo Greyling

Senior Director Faith and External Engagement, World Vision International

Q6. Civil society organizations and faith-based organizations have contributed a great deal to the development, ratification, and implementation of the CRC. Can you share a challenge and a good practice of your work in mobilizing religious communities in protecting children's rights and preventing violence against children? How were the challenges overcome and what makes it a good practice?

Rev. Christo Greyling opened his remarks by sharing the story of a Pastor in Uganda taking a stand against child marriage. His community struggled to understand his decision and he was challenged by his congregation for his refusal to marry the child off. Eventually, the community opened up and also took a stand against early marriage. This Pastor brought about a great change in his community. His personal journey is also the end of a process of dialogue and discovery about the issues of violence against children affecting his community, and it is at the end of this process that he felt informed and empowered to take a stand.

Rev. Greyling stressed World Vision's commitments to the CRC, but also highlighted that it is crucial, when working with local faith communities, to utilize approaches that incorporate cultural and faith sensitiveness. He

continued by presenting "Channels of Hope", a methodology developed by World Vision, that creates a safe space for faith leaders to discover and explore the issues affecting their communities in a faith-specific approach, allowing for self-identification of issues and for the possibility to find local solutions to their problems.



Rev. Greyling concluded with the story of an imam from Nepal that started a local leadership group in his community to talk about child rights. He has taken a stand to promote and protect child rights in his community and personal transformation is impacting hundreds of children in his congregation and madrasas.

Before opening the floor for discussion, the panelists shared concrete recommendations to accelerate action on children's rights and their protection from violence.

Ms. Marta Santos Pais highlighted the opportunity provided by the forthcoming High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), which will review the progress made towards the realization of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

including Goal 16 and its specific target to end all forms of violence against children (target 16.2). Fifty-one countries will report to the HLPF in July 2019 and this will also provide an extraordinary opportunity to report and celebrate interfaith initiatives protecting and promoting children's rights: these examples can build bridges and inspire others to take action.

H.E. Dr. Nedžad Grabus, Grand Mufti of Slovenia, recalled the importance of continuing to support interfaith dialogue on these issues, working together to end violence against children. He also stressed the importance of creating spaces for dialogue and training that can be trusted by local faith actors, and that provide opportunities to encounter people from all faith to mobilize for these issues.

Rabbi Gerson insisted on the importance of raising awareness on child protection across all religions and faith traditions. She emphasized that the multi-religious study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child intends precisely to stress the support of faith communities to the CRC as the principles of the CRC are deeply rooted in all faith traditions, bringing up concrete examples of how faith leaders can contribute to promote and protect children's rights.

Prof. Abu-Nimer emphasized the importance of creating opportunities for successful interfaith dialogue based on responding to concrete and common problems of people of faith who share the same space. These spaces for dialogue need to be safe spaces and the engagement with faith actors needs to be sustained over time, fostering processes that are conducive to ownership and for the development and implementation of home-grown tools.

Rev. Christo Greyling noted the importance of creating spaces to work with faith communities that are built on trust. He cited the work of the International Partnership of Religion and Sustainable Development (PaRD), the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI), the Faith Advisory Council of the United Nations Interagency Taskforce on Religion and Development and the Faith Action for Children on the Move: Global Partners Forum as concrete examples of successful partnerships mobilizing faith communities, states and multilateral agencies to join forces towards the achievement of the SDGs, including working together on target 16.2.



DISCUSSION



During the discussion, key interventions were made by the Permanent Mission of Germany, the Office of the High Commissioner of Human Rights (OHCHR), UNICEF, UNFPA, the Lutheran World Federation, and the Women World Summit Foundation. The interventions highlighted the critical role that faith communities are playing to end violence against children, providing further examples. OHCHR recalled the Faith for Rights Beirut Declaration; UNICEF cited the ongoing work to engage more closely with faith communities for social and behavioral change,

while the Mission of Germany highlighted the importance of the Resolution on the Rights of the Child of the ongoing 40th session of the Human Rights Council.

The panelists responded briefly to several comments from the floor and highlighted the need to understand and engage faith communities, building trust among the different actors and using not only the language of human rights but also the language of faith and shared values.

CLOSING REMARKS AND CONCLUSIONS



H.E. Mr. Obaid Salem Saeed Al Zaabi delivered the closing remarks by highlighting the crucial role of faith communities and faith leaders in ending violence against children. He recalled that by mobilizing and taking action, faith leaders can challenge the use of violence against children in all settings and contribute to end violence against children.

Ambassador Al Zaabi recalled the crucial role of the Committee on the Rights of the Child, calling all stakeholders to work together with the Committee for the advancement of children's rights.

He closed his remarks by highlighting the commitments of the UAE, the first country of the Arab region to join the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children, to protect and promote the rights of the child and to end violence against children. Ambassador Zaabi continued presenting the current efforts of the UAE for the promotion of interfaith collaborations and he cited the work of the

Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities to protect children, particularly from online sexual exploitation and abuse.

The panel concluded with the final remarks delivered by H.E. Metropolitan Emmanuel of France.

His Eminence focused his remarks on the emerging forms of violence affecting children in the digital space. He recalled that one in every three Internet users is a child⁵:

He stated that while the digital world is often seen as a crucial resource and an opportunity for children, it is also a great source of danger, violence and abuse for children. Faith communities and faith leaders need to be aware of these emerging forms of violence and they need to take action. To this end, interfaith collaborations will be crucial in promoting child dignity online.

His Eminence continued his remarks by citing the historic declaration of fraternity signed by Pope Francis and the Grand Imam of al-Azhar,



5 UNICEF 2017, The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a digital world

calling for peace between nations, religions and races, in front of a global audience of religious leaders from Christianity, Islam, Judaism and other faiths.

He continued his intervention presenting the Interfaith Alliance Exposition on Child Dignity Online, which was developed with the goal of creating awareness about online sexual abuse and exploitation of children and the role of religious communities. The Exposition will be presented globally to reach the largest possible audience and raise awareness on the means to fight these crimes.

His Eminence Metropolitan Emmanuel of France closed his remarks, insisting that it is crucial to raise awareness on the threats faced by children in the digital space, and emphasizing that it is critical that faith leaders inspire and lead by example: children will reproduce what

they see. We all are the driving force of change and peace, as peace begins with us, and we have the responsibility to inspire children and to guide them, including by safeguarding the digital spaces.

The panel discussion was followed by a reception to present the Interfaith Alliance Exposition on Child Dignity Online. Mr. Ernie Allen, Chair of the WePROTECT Global Alliance and leading expert on online crimes against children including sexual exploitation and abuse, in his opening of the reception, highlighted the dark side of the Internet and the exploitation of children online. Mr. Allen presented concrete data and recalled important initiatives such as the WePROTECT Global Alliance and the work of the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities, that bring key stakeholders together to protect children from online sexual exploitation and abuse.





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**"May every day find every
one of us continually
embraced in growing peace"**

*—Rev. Keishi Miyamoto, President of Arigatou
International, September 21, 2015*

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