



Ending Violence in Early Childhood

Working Together with Religious Communities

Report of side event at the margins of the 37th session
of the Human Rights Council, March 2018

Brief report of the side event at the margins of the 37th Human Rights Council

“Ending Violence in Early Childhood - Working Together with Religious Communities”

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Co-organized by Arigatou International Geneva, Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children, World Council of Churches, World Vision, World Health Organization and UNICEF, and co-sponsored by the Permanent Delegation of the EU, Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco to the United Nations, Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Slovenia to the United Nations, and Permanent Mission of Uruguay to the United Nations, in Geneva.

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PANEL



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INTRODUCTION



On 8 March 2018, at the margins of the 37th Human Rights Council session, Arigatou International Geneva office co-organised a side-event titled Ending Violence in Early Childhood: Working Together with Religious Communities, together with the Office of the Special Representative of the Secretary General on Violence Against Children, the World Council of Churches, World Vision, UNICEF, and the World Health Organization. The side-event was co-sponsored by the Delegation of the European Union to the United Nations in Geneva, the Permanent Mission of the Kingdom of Morocco, the Permanent Mission of Uruguay, the Permanent Mission of Mexico, and the Permanent Mission of Slovenia to the United Nations.

Around 65 participants, including representatives of the Permanent Missions in Geneva and civil society organisations, engaged in reflections about the impact of violence on early childhood and the need and importance of addressing its causes;

looking at how religious communities could help challenging social and cultural norms that justify violence in child bringing. The panelists shared good practices from the Eastern Orthodox Church and examples of the leadership of H. E. the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew; as well as practical examples from Islamic Relief and UNICEF collaborations with faith-based organisations in different parts of the world. The need to increase investment and ensure the inclusion of religious communities and faith based actors in programs and in collaborations with government actors were also discussed. It was emphasised the need to continue prioritising laws to ban corporal punishment and provide interventions that look holistically to early childhood development.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PANEL



MS. MARTA SANTOS PAIS

Q1. In your annual report you have stressed that violence prevention must start in early childhood. You have also just launched a new report on this topic. Why is investment in early childhood important and why has it been difficult to place it as a priority in State's policy agenda? What can be done about this?

After thanking the panel and event organisers, Ms. Marta Santos Pais started by acknowledging the importance of joining hands with religious leaders and communities. She highlighted that the collaboration with religious leaders for the prevention of violence can bring the message closer to families and communities around the world as well as overcome the perception that sometimes violence is needed to discipline or to correct children. "As we have heard from religious leaders there is no religious scripture or principle that can condone or legitimise the use of violence."

Violence prevention in early childhood is critical for the sound development of children. A recent UNICEF study has found that it is common to shout, to scream and to yell at kids below one year of age. The study also highlights that there are at least 300 million children between two and four years of age who endure very serious forms of physical and psychological violence.

Scientific research shows that early childhood stress — including exposure to violence — compromises children's health and education, with long-term negative mental and physiological consequences. Violence can alter the developing brain's structure and function, which can impact language acquisition and cognitive functioning, resulting in social and emotional competency deficits and an increased tendency to maladaptive behaviour.

Alterations to the brain resulting from childhood violence can also shape later adult behavior. Longitudinal studies show that children exposed to violence are more likely to be victims of violence later in life and become

perpetrators themselves; use violence as adults against domestic partners and their own children; and, be at increased risk of engaging in criminal behavior. Breaking this vicious and devastating cycle of violence — for the child, the adult and for society — requires that every child lives free from abuse and neglect.

Ms Santos Pais continued to discuss the costs of violence in early childhood: “As you know, \$7 trillion is lost every year due to violence in early childhood according to some studies. But we cannot forget that by investing in the prevention of violence in early years, we can ensure that the child will develop better, more happily, will feel better included, will achieve better outcomes in his or her life and that societies will be improving in their status. And we know that by each dollar we invest in early childhood, it brings a high return of at least \$8.

There are, however, many challenges and unfortunately this is not at the top of the policy agenda of all countries around the world. I believe the first reason is because we haven’t disseminated what we are learning from experiences and scientific evidence. Another major obstacle to ending violence against children is the perception of early childhood as being primarily a period of transition and evolving capacities towards adulthood — and only then is a person a fully-fledged human being with inherent rights. This perception must be challenged: the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises all children as rights-holders who must be respected and protected, rather than being treated as ‘not-yet persons.’

The Special Representative emphasised that the first 1,000 days of a child’s life are the foundation for a person’s whole future development. Violence in early childhood is a stressful,

painful experience for a child in the immediate term, with the further risk of mid- and long-term consequences. The optimum physical, intellectual and socio-emotional potential of children depends on receiving loving and nurturing care from the very beginning.

Recent findings from research show that when children have a poor start in life, the GDP expenditure by countries in health and education may be lost twice. “If we invest in good quality services that support families, children, and quality education, then certainly we will not have to face the dramatic consequences of violence.”

Ms. Santos Pais then proceeded to provide concrete recommendations to prevent violence in early childhood:

1. Legal prohibition of all violence against children, including within the home: Legislation sends an important message to society about practices that are acceptable or non-negotiable, helping to shape attitudes and behaviour. The protection of children in their early years begins with the enactment of a comprehensive legal ban on all forms of violence in all settings. Today, more than 50 States have adopted such an explicit legal prohibition on the use of violence as a form of discipline, correction or punishment, including in schools and the home.



2. Implementation of policies to support families in their child-rearing responsibilities and to prevent child abandonment and placement in institutions: Public policies are not neutral to children. Investment in young children provides an important entry point to strengthen families' nurturing and protective role, to prevent child abandonment and placement in alternative care, and to support children at risk of violence. Parenting skills programmes that go hand in hand with social protection interventions help to reduce the risk of social exclusion and deprivation, prevent family stress and tackle social norms that condone violent forms of child discipline.
3. Promotion of integrated and cohesive actions by relevant sectors responsible for violence prevention and response: Violence is a multifaceted phenomenon that can be addressed only through a multidisciplinary and multi-stakeholder approach. Strong, effective cooperation is needed across sectors, including health, nutrition, education and social and child protection, to address the multiple risks faced by young children and their families.

Strong political leadership is key to ensure the best start in life for every child and the elimination of violence in early years. We cannot expect NGOs, civil society organisations, religious leaders or committees to replace the leading role that governments need to undertake.

Religious communities are critical partners in this process of raising awareness, challenging the culture of silence, empowering children and supporting families. In all regions, religious leaders are working to create protective environments for children, challenge social and cultural norms that justify

violence against children, and self-examine their own theological interpretations that can influence the upbringing of the child.

H. E. ARCHBISHOP JOB OF TELMESSOS

Q2. How can churches work to support caregivers in providing positive nurturing to children in their early years. What can religious communities do to challenge social and cultural norms that justify violence in early childhood?

His Excellency Archbishop Job of Telmessos began by expressing the happiness of His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarchate Bartholomew, regarding the collaboration established between UNICEF and the World Council of Churches (WCC) for the development of the Churches' Commitments to Children.

He explained how in early childhood (between 0-3 years) children are the most vulnerable, as they cannot speak to anyone about the violence they may experience. His Excellency remarked that, "being exposed to domestic violence during that age can leave scars which last a whole lifetime."

As a representative of His Holiness the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, H.E. Archbishop Job passed on the Ecumenical Patriarch's message about calling upon orthodox communities to do their utmost for the protection of children from violence, in order to be the faithful to their organic mission. He explained how pastors witness the challenges of being a parent to young children everyday, and that church communities can support parents during this period through spiritual support, parenting

groups and mentoring programmes. H.E. Archbishop Job also passed on a message to the hearts of children, encouraging them to find strength through their faith whenever they face a difficult situation. Church communities can help children who were victims of violence to find resilience through spiritual support.

The protection of children through Church communities should be the most natural commitment of Christians, especially considering that in Christianity, the purity and innocence of children is given as a paradigm. As H.E. Archbishop Job emphasised, “protecting children from any kind of abuse is the most natural message of Christianity.”

Unfortunately, child abuse still occurs within the Christian community, so H.E. Archbishop Job called upon Christian communities to not only protect children from child abuse and psychological violence in the society, but also within themselves.

Through the “Churches’ Commitments to Children” initiative, the WCC and UNICEF are now providing support to ensure that effective safeguarding measures are in place in all churches. In collaboration with governments and authorities, churches and church-run facilities can raise awareness on how to prevent violence, how to respond to violence against young children, and provide guidance on where exhausted parents can find help.



H.E. Archbishop Job continued by giving 3 examples of how religious leaders have challenged certain culprits which are responsible for violence against children:

1. In December 2016 in his Christmas encyclical, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, called “to respect the identity and sacredness of childhood.” He called upon churches to protect children from the plague of child mortality, hunger, labour, abuse and psychological violence. On that occasion, the Ecumenical Patriarchate declared the year 2017 as the Year of Protection of the Sacredness of Childhood, inviting everyone to recognise and respect the rights and integrity of children.
2. A Forum on modern slavery, co-sponsored with the the Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, took place in Istanbul in February 2017 under the auspices of His All-Holiness Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew. Trafficking not only affects young adults and older children, but young children as well. Traffickers may persuade parents in extremely difficult situations to give their baby up with the promise of a better future in another place. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew stressed “True Faith is a source of permanent struggle against the powers of inhumanity.” Together with the Church of England, he encouraged state leaders to “find appropriate and effective ways of prosecuting those involved in human trafficking, preventing all forms of modern-day slavery, and protecting its victims in our communities and promoting hope wherever people are exploited.”
3. Climate change and environmental degradation is a root cause of violence in early childhood, as it brings high risks for the health of newborns. It is also a

strong source of fear among children of all ages. When water becomes scarce because of drought, the poorest children and families are most likely to resort to unsafe water sources. In low- and middle-income countries, inadequate drinking water, sanitation and hygiene accounts for around 1,000 under-five deaths per day. The youngest children are the first victims of air pollution, diarrheal disease and malnutrition. Therefore the Churches’ Commitments to Children promote church initiatives with, and for children, that urge behavioural change that protects the environment.

H.E. Archbishop Job concluded by emphasising the importance of spiritual values in determining environmental ethics and action. On this matter, the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church has stated: “The approach to the ecological problem on the basis of the principles of the Christian tradition demands (...) a radical change in mentality and behaviour, but also asceticism as an antidote to consumerism, the deification of needs and the acquisitive attitude. It also presupposes our greatest responsibility to hand down a viable natural environment to future generations and to use it according to divine will and blessing.”

These efforts related to preservation of creation and spiritual care are as important for a safe early childhood as churches’ initiatives in support to positive parenting.

DR. ETIENNE KRUG

Q3. From WHO's perspective, what has worked to prevent violence in early childhood, and what is WHO doing to foster nurturing care in early childhood?

Dr. Krug began by emphasising that we are talking about an extremely important set of topics today: early childhood, violence against children and the role of the Church and the community when addressing violence against children. Dr. Krug highlighted that 1 in 2 children in the world are affected by violence every year, having long term consequences in mental health, anxiety, depression, as well as change in behaviours later in life including a higher risk of smoking, alcohol abuse, physical inactivity, unsafe sex practices, which in turn are risk factors for cancer, cardiovascular disease, HIV, unwanted pregnancies, resulting from violence. When violence occurs in early years, when the brain is developing, the impact is even worse.

Dr. Krug remarked: "I am pleased to be here at a very opportune time. The world has never paid so much attention to addressing violence against children. Just last month, Marta and I and many others were in Sweden where the Solution Summit to addressing violence against children took place with the Queen of Sweden, Prime Minister, the heads of WHO, UNICEF, and ministers from all over the world to discuss how to scale up action in addressing violence based on what we know.

For years the different UN agencies and NGOs provided technical assistance to governments around the world in a rather fragmented way. This time is over. We have now agreed on a set of interventions that we all know work, based on the best possible science. This is called

the INSPIRE package and each letter of that word has a meaning. The first word is about Implementing and enforcing law. Second is Safe environments, making sure that the environments where children grow up in are safe, giving parents and caregivers support, income economic strengthening, responsive services to those who have been affected by violence to minimise the consequences and ensure they don't grow up with perpetrators of violence, and education and life services."



Dr. Krug then continued to underline the important role religious communities can play in preventing violence in early childhood as well as the steps WHO has taken to achieve this shared responsibility. He observed that, "religious communities can do so much to advocate and make sure that we have the right legislation in each country, to make sure it contributes to norms and values change, to make sure there are safe environments, particularly when church is in charge of a school, of a hospital, of an orphanage, of a neighborhood, parental and caregiver support, economic strengthening, response services and education.

We still don't know enough about the importance of the early years; and we have approached this area in often a fragmented way. WHO is working together with UNICEF in a Nurturing Care Framework that will be

launched in May 2018 at the World Health Assembly. It's a package that works on conditions that promote health, nutrition, safety and security, responsive care giving, and opportunities for early learning. This framework is being led by UNICEF in collaboration with many partners, some of them are here in this room, and using a whole of government and all of society approach that strengthens the nurturing care of young children. It includes the guiding principles, strategic actions needed, as well as milestones which are essential to the progress. WHO is organising online consultations, which will be on the website. Dr. Krug encouraged all participants to contribute to this online consultation. This framework will be a first opportunity to come together on agreeing what's needed, and how we can collaborate on addressing all the issues that are important in early childhood, including preventing violence.

Finally, Dr. Krug finished by reflecting on the progress and potential of the work being done by the international community to prevent childhood violence: "Never before did we have a target agreed by all governments to end violence against children. Never before did we have a partnership, did we have a special representative, a secretary general, did we have a set of interventions that we all agree on are the way forward. I think now, two years have passed, we have achieved a lot in those first few years of the Sustainable Development Goals, we have now to focus on implementation. It's only if we focus our attention and our resources now and really address the needs of countries, communities, religious places, neighborhoods, and by implementing strategies that work, that we will be able to address violence against children.

MS. NEELAM FIDA

Q4. Today we talked about Church as one example, we want to talk more broadly about religious communities and religious leaders. Could you share a good practice of working with religious communities to protect children from violence during childhood? And also what do you see as the main challenges and possibilities?

Ms. Neelam Fida started by thanking the organisers and guests for the opportunity to express the practices of her organisation, Islamic Relief. "Islamic Relief is a faith led humanitarian and development organisation established in 1984, and we are currently based in over 40 countries. We have a faith angle and use a community-based approach when working with human rights, and we go by the principles of 'do no harm' and 'leave no one behind.'

Ms. Neelam Fida described the different approaches Islamic Relief has adopted to create change. "We take a multi-faceted approach to eradicating violence against children by working with stakeholders at all levels. Our advocacy and field teams work strategically with governments to ensure all forms of violence and abuse are criminalised, that legislation is enforced and that there is real, meaningful change." The ways that Islamic Relief have been able to create change include:

1. Partnership and coordination with World Vision: "We use faith as part of the solution in recognising the critical role faith groups play in the humanitarian sector. By partnering with faith and community leaders, we can empower, mobilise and build existing competencies and create a structure in which we can move forward. The Channels of Hope

methodology, developed by World Vision and adapted by Islamic Relief has been able to put this into practice within our organisation, by empowering faith leaders with tools, skills and knowledge when tackling harmful practices and other issues that put children at risk.”

2. The production of training packages for religious leaders and communities: “We developed a training package which we debuted in Kenya, and as a result, we saw faith leaders developing Friday sermons incorporating the core messages from this package. Friday sermons can attract anywhere from 5 thousand to 10 thousand people in their congregation, so the reach is quite wide. These sermons were designed to tackle early and forced marriages, corporal punishment, and female genital mutilation, all of which are difficult issues to try and resolve.”
3. Creating an open space for women to participate and mobilise communities to take action against violence: “Female faith leaders were also able to get involved and take a more proactive role, such as through the implementation of community based reporting mechanisms that were proven to be effective by actual cases coming through. For example, when a 7 year old girl was sexually abused by a teacher, and she was too afraid confront her parents, so she went to her female faith leader and reported the assault. This resulted in a multidisciplinary response mechanism, which involved police, community activists, health service providers. In the end, she was able to get the support she needed, and the necessary action was taken against the teacher. Now, this isn’t possible in all settings and situations, but having a community mobilising mechanism has proven to be very effective.”

4. Adoption of an Integrated Approach: “through engaging faith communities around gender based violence and child protection. We piloted this initiative in Mali, Niger and Pakistan, and we focused on empowering the communities, particularly the survivors, in coming forward in a culturally sensitive way and to seek existing help. Now, there have been many services provided to do similar work in an attempt to reach out to these communities, but they lack the ‘know how’ and the traditional sensitivities that made it difficult for survivors to come forward. By having key local stakeholders invest in these approaches and create awareness on a local level through community-based action teams, we were able to mobilise champions who opened these spaces in a safe and secure way for survivors to come forward.



“We engage this on a local level because if the survivors don’t get the necessary support they want or need, there’s a repercussion on the unity and structure of the family, which then has an impact on the children. This approach was unique because it created dialogue through religious scriptures and enabled faith leaders to create a safe space for the survivors. It was important to address these concerns in a sensitive and respectful way with the local communities and understand their traditions, encourage debate, and tackle the root causes to

empower the communities and honor this program. When conducting the community awareness sessions, it became apparent that the worst majorities of the communities were not actually aware of the impact that gender based violence was having on them or family structure. As a result, we began looking at developing programs which were designed around positive parenting. We recognised that the limited support the parents had impacted how they could create a safe and secure environment for their children, so we developed a partnership with an organisation called Approachable Parenting.

Approachable Parenting utilises standard teachings on positive parenting, compassion and nurturing. There are different courses to address the different stages of a child's development, but we were keen to engage on the ones working with women in the early stages of pregnancy, and giving them and their partners techniques to support pregnancy, birth and the baby's development. It was helpful to educate the parents on these techniques to promote brain development and to enable babies to reach their milestones. From this initiate, the lack of male engagement to support females during this period became apparent. Faith leaders were able to play a crucial role by sharing this message within their platforms, mosques and addresses to make men own their role within family structure and provide protection and an inclusive environment.

Ms. Neelam Fida continued by discussing the challenges Islamic Relief faced mission. "When you are engaging faith communities on sensitive issues there are challenges. The first challenge we encountered was the trust and loyalty needed to address these sensitive

issues within these communities. We found organisations had previously come in to try and address these issues, and had created some waves that prevented our messages from penetrating the core communities. As a result, we had to step back, look for key players within their communities to be our voice, and give them the knowledge to distribute the messages effectively.

Another challenge that we've encountered is the time it takes to make a meaningful change on behaviour and attitude. There is also an issue with a lack of funding to support initiatives that go over a period of a year or two. Because of this, we are looking for solutions to bridge these gaps, which will also create a space to provide evidence regarding the role that faith communities play in creating change."

Finally, Ms. Neelam Fida finished her remarks by emphasising the importance of faith leaders: "Engaging faith leaders and communities is critical in dismantling myths of religious and cultural misinterpretations that support abuse and violence against boys, girls and women. Faith leaders are best positioned to educate, inform and influence policy decision in local communities. The development of community-based action teams, which function through volunteers, are designed by the community, for the community. This builds on trust, loyalty and tolerance. This approach has been effective in addressing the root causes of violence against early childhood, but it also moves towards long term behavioural and attitude changes. Thank you."

MR. AARON GREENBERG

Q5. How is UNICEF working with religious communities to end violence in early childhood? And how can this work be strengthened?

Mr. Greenberg started his intervention by highlighting the scale of violence against children, considering nearly 300 million children between the ages of 2-4 experience some form of violent discipline at home. The long term impacts of adverse childhood experiences on both physical and mental health are momentous; the risk of suicide is 12 times higher in adulthood, and life expectancy can be cut by a decade or more, depending on the violence experienced as a child. These adverse childhood experiences include physical,

emotional or sexual abuse, divorce or instability in the household, and mental health issues and substance abuse problems with caregivers.

Mr. Greenberg stressed that adverse childhood experiences affects more than just the children, and remarked, "I think that at the heart of this issue, there is a spiritual journey for us to go on... this isn't about them; this is about us." It is our responsibility to work together to help end this atrocity, and there is a enormous role that religious communities can play.

Mr. Greenberg then continued to outline a few of the projects UNICEF has been involved in regarding ending violence with children. To start, in Tanzania, UNICEF has worked with the Christian Council of Tanzania, the Catholic secretariat, the National Muslim



Council of Tanzania, and the Office of the Mufti to sign a declaration to promote early childhood development, focusing particularly on the role of fathers, on early stimulation, and violence against children. Those heads of Churches have since reached out to other leaders within their faiths, orienting them on preachings regarding responsible parenting, the important role of fathers, and messages about early childhood development.

In Guinea Bissau, between 100 and 140 million girls and women worldwide have undergone some form of female genital mutilation or cutting. In some regions, nearly 71-99% undergo some form of female genital mutilation, some of which are under the age of four. Mr. Greenberg discussed how UNICEF and UNFPA joined forces with the national network of religious leaders, supporting the abandonment of these harmful practices. Since then, 895 religious leaders have declared publicly that there is no link between religion and female genital cutting. In 2017, 170 religious leaders adopted a policy condemning the practice, and with UNICEF support and through the work of these religious leaders, 166 communities have publicly declared the abandonment of female genital cutting, child marriage, and violence against women and children. As Mr. Greenberg

stressed, “These religious leaders have been central to that change.”

In Iran, in October 2011, the first national interreligious conference on the role of international religious leaders in preventing violence against children was held. Over 100 religious leaders with various faiths were in attendance, as well as experts, intellectuals and policy makers. This triggered widespread discussions on the role of violence and early childhood. Mr. Greenberg made a point to highlight the essential role religious communities play in promoting change, and remarked, “the power of convening various religious leaders cannot be understated.”

In 2011, UNICEF, in collaboration with Egypt’s Al Ahsa Al Afa University, successfully trained 35 religious leaders in Egypt to be master trainers on child’s rights. The UNICEF guide on child’s rights in Islam was used extensively in training and the 25 master trainers conducted 34 workshops, training a total of 3,500 religious leaders across the country.

In Cambodia, a national violence against children report done in collaboration with the government of Cambodia was released in 2013. In preparation of the launch, UNICEF collaborated with the ministry of culture and religion, and Buddhist leaders across Cambodia to draft messages about Buddhism in regard to violence against children. The messages were presented during the launch, and formally adopted during the annual monk congress of December that year. The work then supported the development of advocacy materials, which were distributed amongst Buddhist novices and informed the development of a comprehensive training on child protection, targeting Buddhist monks.



In Chile, UNICEF, partnered extensively with Catholic Universities, namely the Jesuit Alberto Hurtado University, to organise training sessions for lawyers and justice workers on child rights.

In Montenegro, UNICEF engaged the national heads of the Serbian Orthodox Christian and Montenegrin Orthodox Christian, Jewish, Catholic and Muslim Congregations in a nationwide foster care campaign as part of a broader child welfare for the institutionalisation and response to violence in early childhood reform. All the religious leaders engaged in disseminating foster recruitment materials through their congregations and promoting the campaign through their sermons.

Mr. Greenberg stressed how difficult it was to choose these specific cases out of the hundreds of cases UNICEF has been involved with. He remarked how it helped exemplify the depth of the relationship between UNICEF and religious organisations, institutions and platforms from around the world. It also reinforced to him the importance of partnership to overcome the barriers that people face every day in their lives.

MS. MARIA LUCIA URIBE

Q6. What is your organisation and the Global Network of Religions for Children is doing to mobilise religious communities to end violence in early childhood? What are the challenges and opportunities?

Mrs. Maria Lucia Uribe began her intervention by introducing the Global Network of Religions for Children. “Arigatou International leads and supports the only grassroots network of faith-based organisations and religious communities, working exclusively

for the well being of children worldwide.”

In May 2017, the Fifth Forum of the network took place in Panama under the topic: Ending Violence Against Children — Faith Communities in Action. The forum brought together more than 500 participants including religious leaders, governments, United Nations, and civil society representatives, as well as children and youth. The Forum produced a declaration that committed participants to double their efforts to end violence against children.

The 10 points of the Panama Declaration, Mrs. Uribe explained, “make clear commitments, among others, to strengthen local communities by offering education in positive parenting and ethical values to help families and children develop empathy, become more resilient, and grow spiritually; as well as to identify and challenge patriarchal structures and practices that perpetuate violence against, and sexual exploitation especially of girls.”

Mrs. Uribe discussed how the Forum and Declaration marked an important milestone in mobilising religious communities to contribute to ending violence against children. However, she also highlighted that the participants at the Forum have recognised that there are certain shortcomings in religious communities, as some have misused to “legitimise, justify and even perpetuate violence against children.” The Forum participants accept the accountability for these issues, and asked for forgiveness as they continue to stand together to “reject and speak out against all forms of violence against children in every setting.”

Mrs. Uribe stressed that working with religious communities to end violence in early childhood

is surely an important imperative, but it has also challenges. She highlighted three main challenges based on the experience and work her organisation has been doing:

1. 55 states have achieved prohibition of corporal punishment in all settings, including the home; governments of at least 56 other states have expressed a commitment to full prohibition. There are also discussions in many other states to achieve prohibition in all or some settings. However, despite the existence of legislation in some countries that forbid corporal punishment of children, some religious communities contest these laws and support these negative practices. In some cases, and she quoted the Hindu theologian, Anantanant Rambachan, "The use of corporal punishment is based on certain interpretations and theological views about human nature. These views believe the child is inherently predisposed to wrong behavior because human nature itself is flawed and intrinsically broken. Consequently, the only way to rectify this behavior is by pain, fear and physical punishment." She followed this by stating that it is crucial that religious communities create spaces to engage in self-examination of their religious traditions to challenge those theological understandings and interpretations.

In order to deal with these issues, the speaker explained how Arigatou International has been organising a series of roundtable discussions to bring together religious leaders, UN agencies, government representatives and civil society organisations to discuss the role of religious communities in ending violence in early childhood. They have seen across the board, religious leaders welcoming the reflections from early childhood practitioners and using those reflections in

their own practices and religious sermons.

2. Mrs. Uribe also underscored the distrust between governments and religious communities. She believes this is a main hindrance in involving religious communities towards ending violence against children in early childhood. It is known that religious communities play a critical role in supporting families, providing moral support and guidance and can contribute to challenge cultural and social norms.

However, despite this important role, there is little collaboration between governments and religious organisations. While there might be instances where religious interpretations are used to justify violence in early childhood, it is also true that many sectors within religious communities are working hand in hand for the well-being of children.

Mrs. Uribe continued by providing an example from last year in April 2017; female clerics issued a fatwa against child marriage in Indonesia in an effort to stop young girls becoming brides. The fatwa, though not legally binding, is an influential response in the Muslim community.

In addition, every year, during the 20th of November, Arigatou International mobilises religious communities and people of good will to celebrate the Day of Prayer and Action for Children. In the past 10 years, they have seen the movement grow in more than 50 countries with increasing support from religious leaders and interaction with UN agencies and civil society organisations to end violence against children. It mobilises religious leaders to advocate for positive parenting, organising workshops for families and caregivers, challenging child marriage, and corporal punishment, in countries like Bosnia & Herzegovina,



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Brazil, Colombia, Comoros, India, Nepal, Malaysia, Panama, Pakistan, among others.

While these are great initiatives, Mrs. Uribe explained that they, “need the involvement of governments to capitalise on these efforts, to scale up awareness and enact laws.” In addition, there is a need to create more spaces for interaction between governments and religious communities and faith-based organisations, like the Partnership on Religion and Sustainable Development, initiated by the Governments of Germany and the US, bringing together governments, inter-governmental organisations and faith based to harness the positive impact of religion and values in sustainable development and humanitarian assistance, particularly in light of the Agenda 2030.

3. Her final point involved the lack of research on the role of religious communities in challenging cultural and social norms. It is known that the ecosystem of the child is determined by several factors, but one in

particular is the macro environment, which is influenced at large by the social and cultural norms. This macro environment is, in many ways, influenced by dominant beliefs and ideologies that influence parents’ expectations about how they think they should raise their children and how their children should behave or relate to others.

During the last years we have seen an increase in the development of the evidence base on what works to prevent violence against children. However, very little has been researched on the role of religious communities, particularly with challenging social and cultural norms that justify violence in early childhood or the positive and critical role that religious communities play in fostering values and spirituality in children and supporting families in creating safe environments. Mrs. Uribe explained how, “these values, that are a sine qua non for building peaceful and inclusive societies, can only be fostered in environments that are free from violence and through parenting practices that foster

respect, nurturing and protect the dignity of the child — as an individual in his/her own right.” Religious communities have played an important role with this, and can continue to do even more.

There is also momentum and interest from religious communities to contribute more purposely to end violence against children. Through initiatives like the Churches Commitment to Children by the World Council of Churches, the Global campaign to end violence against children launched by World Vision, national programs on mindfulness for families and schools for the prevention of violence in Sri Lanka, and a new initiative to be launched by Arigatou International on Strengthening Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood, the role of religious communities to contribute to end violence against children in the family can be seen.

Mrs. Uribe concluded by discussing the future. She remarked, “The 2030 agenda presents us with the unique opportunity to create genuine partnerships to leave no one behind, and we should ensure that no partner is left behind either in this important endeavor to end violence against children in early childhood. This is a call to collaborate with religious communities and to capitalise on the important moral resources that religious communities offer.”

QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR:

The first question posed to the panelists came from a former representative of the Aga Khan Foundation. She inquired as to whether there should be more of an emphasis on addressing the underlying causes of violence against children during these discussions. She feared there was too much blame placed on the parents for not being good enough, when

there are a lot of external factors causing a lot of stress and pressure for parents to be perfect, when in fact they are in extremely difficult situations and doing the best they can. She wanted to see more emphasis in the strategies and discussions regarding childhood violence to be placed on the “appalling and increasing disparities that we are seeing in the world,” in order to help change norms and values.

Mr. Aaron Greenberg replied: “The interventions that have been proven to work by identifying children who have experienced violence, abuse, exploitation, deprivation through the health system primarily, is to surround the family. It’s not just a health intervention, it’s not just a housing intervention or a social protection, it’s the whole package.” He explained they are looking for a “team approach” to address these issues, and while there are many ways to tackle the problem of violence against children, a commitment to a multidisciplinary approach to assisting families is the best way to address the issue.

The former representative from Aga Khan shared a parenting programme which the Aga Khan Foundation has been supporting for years in Afghanistan and Northern Pakistan. While she commented that there is some value with addressing parenting methods, she stated, “Actually by far the most important benefit, which indeed helped the children, is that these women got out of the home in a way that is culturally acceptable and valued. They have a chance to have conversations with other women who weren’t their immediate family members, and because rates of maternal depression is so extraordinarily high in so many places, I think

that fits right in with what you were saying about it's 'the whole package.'

Ms. Marta Santos Pais then stressed the importance of creating a nurturing, caring environment for the child, in a way that provides the parents the opportunity to do what they dream of doing. She emphasised that they are not blaming the families and the parents for violence against children. "I think that's also why we consider that investment in social protection to be so fundamental because the stress around the family and the stress within the home, then creates stress in the brain of the child and creates a continuum of violence which doesn't allow kids to develop to their full potential. So that's why we believe so much in the opportunity of investing in early childhood because if the convergence of high quality services come together in the right manor, then in fact we can have a high return for everyone, including the most deprived families."

Next, a representative of the Permanent Mission of Bulgaria highlighted the importance of ending violence in early childhood and proceeded to identify areas where Bulgaria has made progress in this field. "Early childhood development policies is one of the four main priorities of the Bulgarian presidency of the Council of the European Union for the first half of 2018. And this priority is in line with the priorities for reducing poverty and promoting social inclusion through child and family support, including integrated early childhood development policies." She stated that early childhood development is the most critical period in human development, so in February 2017 the Bulgarian government developed a national programme for the prevention of violence and abuse of children.

The government is working actively with UNICEF, civil society organisations, media and children themselves to create an environment of intolerance to all forms of violence against children, to promote positive parenting practices and enable the necessary change in attitudes and behaviour.

The representative from the Permanent Mission of Mexico thanked the panelist and organisers. He then chose to overlook the progress made by Mexico in the interest of asking a more personal question. "What role should we play as individuals when witnessing an act of violence towards a child?"

Ms. Neelam Fida decided to recount an experience she had as she was delivering child protection training. In Mali she addressed a group of parents on the topic of female genital mutilation. "Some of the participants became a little vocal," and so she decided to facilitate an open conversation with the parents where they felt safe to communicate and be honest, and it was clear the role of the community was vital. She discussed her challenges, since, "as a British Pakistani I came into their context, speaking and using religious scriptures and advocating against a practice that was part of their lifestyle, that was part of their structure. So that automatically created barriers for us. But by creating that safe space, and for me to try and get them to see a situation from a different perspective, planted that seed at that point." The results were much better as a result, and the community members were much more willing to cooperate.

The representative from the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children posed a question to Ms. Frederique Seidel concerning the efforts made by the World

Council of Churches. “I think the World Council of Churches has done such an incredible job providing a platform where churches can get help from other churches. It would be great if you could maybe mention a few words about that. She also mentioned that the report of the GNRC Panama meeting provides many concrete lessons to be learned and shared.

Ms. Frederique Seidel replied by detailing the progress and action taken by the World Council of Churches. She described the creation of an online platform where viewers can find all the churches who have worked with ending violence against children, or have expressed a wish to do so, but need help actually implementing their goals. She encouraged everyone in the audience to visit the website, especially if they wanted to offer

support to church communities in ending violence against children.

Ms. Elena Gaia, a representative from World Vision International, made two statements after thanking the panel for their interventions.

1. Research conducted in Bangladesh and Myanmar found that displaced children found prayer to be very comforting in unsafe environments, underlining the importance of the role of religious communities.
2. Young people are playing a greater role in advocacy. We should be encouraging greater youth participation so that young people have greater opportunity to voice their situations and concerns.



She then continued to pose questions concerning these statements: “World Vision really wants to support the participation of children in the movement to protect children from violence. What can we do to mobilise children of older ages to speak for the younger children and their cohorts? And on the other hand, how can the religious communities and leaders become spokespersons to help give a voice to these younger cohorts that do not have a voice that is recognised?”

Ms. Frederique Seidel asked the panelists to share their final words. Mrs. Maria Lucia Uribe began by expressing the necessity to invite religious communities to programs, events or campaigns organised to help end violence against children. She remarked, “You will not only find an ally that can help

multiply the message, but will also have a moral authority that can help and provide support.” She recognised that there can be a fear of working with religious communities, but there is a lot that religious communities are doing in ending violence, and they can do so much more.

Mr. Greenberg discussed the logistics of taking all the evidence they have with working with religious communities, and translate it in a way that can have an impact on policies. He underscored what Mrs. Uribe mentioned about measuring the impact of religious community work on these outcomes.

Ms. Neelam Fida recommended that all interventions to end violence against early childhood by governments, civil society, organisations, local leaders and



community members are based on extensive understanding of how and why certain practices exist in targeted communities. This will allow appropriate engagement and tailored interventions that will challenge actions in a culturally sensitive, effective and sustainable way.

Ms. Marta Santos Pais offered three recommendations:

1. Individuals should try to disseminate and raise awareness about the issue of childhood violence.
2. Beyond having an agenda and targets including early childhood development for all children as a requirement for all countries, we need to consider what are the most important milestones we should focus on.
3. We need to communicate with children at all stages to learn how to support them and prevent violence going into the future.

H. E. Archbishop Job of Telmessos reiterated that church communities are already doing a lot with helping prevent violence against children, helping prevent violence against women, and helping parents through their natural pastoral care with families. He pointed out that churches are playing an important role with helping early childhood education, and are financing to help implement more programs. Some churches have expressed their desire to do more, but sometimes can't because they need some practical help in implementing programs or ideas, and lack the sufficient financial support. H. E. Archbishop Job concluded by stating, "These are the two areas that we can definitely look at to need some more action."

Dr. Etienne Krug thanked the organisers of the event once again, and mentioned that early childhood years "are the most important years where we can empower a child for life and avoid giving them a huge burden they have to carry for the rest of their life." He believed there is already ample evidence on what works to end violence against children and the focus should be on implementation of new policies now.

Finally, Ms. Frederique Seidel concluded by thanking the panelists for their final call to action and recommendations. She stated how urgent it is to prevent violence in early childhood. She summarised the discussion regarding the huge cost and lifelong consequences of violence at an early age.



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