



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Faith and Children's Rights:

A Multi-religious Study on the
Convention on the Rights of the Child

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Commemorating its 30th Anniversary

FOREWORD



Henrietta H. Fore

**Executive Director
United Nations Children's
Fund**

When the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Convention on the Rights of the Child in November 1989, UNICEF reached out to religious leaders, who joined us in urging governments to ratify it. Many faith-based leaders were already well versed in the principles of the Convention, having been involved in its drafting from the start. Due to support from the faith community and other partners around the world, it has since become the most ratified human rights treaty in history.

Thirty years later, Arigatou International's study on the world's religions and the Convention on the Rights of the Child from a faith perspective is a timely reminder of our shared, steadfast commitment to fully implementing this landmark international accord. Developed by Arigatou in collaboration with several partner organizations and advocates, including UNICEF, *Faith and Children's Rights* shows how faith in action has made a tangible difference for the world's children.

Over the past three decades, UNICEF has continued working hand-in-hand with religious leaders and faith-based organizations to protect the rights of every child. Together, we have raised awareness and shaped policies and programmes for children in need and at risk — including coordinated action to prevent all forms of violence against children.

In 2019, we can celebrate improvements in millions of young lives. Compared with 1989, more families are getting their children vaccinated. More children have access to the nutrition and health care they need, with more surviving past their

fifth birthday. More children are in school, and more have access to safe drinking water.

The moral voice of religious leaders and congregations has been one of the keys to making this progress possible. The far-reaching influence of faith-based organizations is especially important as we address sensitive social norms that deny children their rights — from ending child marriage to tackling gender bias in education to eliminating the harmful practice of female genital mutilation.

That influence is vitally necessary because we have so much more work to do.

Despite our progress, millions of children are still being denied their rights to health, nutrition, education, protection and a safe environment. Conflicts in many parts of the world continue to deny children's safety and security, and opportunities for the bright futures they deserve.

As the Convention on the Rights of the Child turns 30, children and young people still face barriers of discrimination, prejudice, poverty and violence — as well as a new set of global shifts and challenges that were unimaginable to their parents. Digital technology, mass migration and a changing climate are rewriting what it means to be a child in today's world. The needs and vulnerabilities of children must be at the core of our approach to managing these new realities.

In this commemorative year, therefore, let us make a new set of commitments: Not just to recognize that all children have rights, but to ensure that

every child enjoys those rights. Not just to advocate for children's rights, but to take concerted action that truly enables children and young people to thrive.

The 30th anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child is a unique opportunity to accelerate progress, increase visibility, build public support and showcase what we can all do as part of a global movement. It offers an opening for religious communities to advance the recommendations included in this study, working with UNICEF and a broad base of partners in government and civil society. Together, we can secure refreshed national commitments to safeguard the rights and well-being of the next generation — and beyond.

Let us take advantage of this opportunity and put faith into action like never before.



Henrietta H. Fore



Rev. Keishi Miyamoto

**President
Arigatou International**

Children are the most precious treasure humanity has; they are the bearers of the future and the inheritors of the Earth. Yet, far too many of our children are victims of all forms of violence and struggle for their very survival in deplorable conditions in many parts of the world. As religious people, it is our moral responsibility to protect all children so that they can fulfill their whole human potential with dignity. This means protecting their right to physical, mental and spiritual development. This is the conviction that drove Rev. Takeyasu Miyamoto, then President of Myochikai, a Buddhist organization in Japan, to establish Arigatou International in 1990 and to launch the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) in 2000. Arigatou's mission is to create a better world for children by working with religious people of different faiths through interfaith dialogue and collaboration and by forging partnerships with child-focused organizations. To accomplish this, we have launched four global initiatives: the GNRC, Ethics Education for Children, Prayer and Action for Children and End Child Poverty.

In 2002, Rev. Takeyasu Miyamoto addressed the Special Session on Children of the United Nations General Assembly, proposing three contributions that religious communities could make to build a better world for children. One of the three was to promote the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by mobilizing people of faith and goodwill around the world. Seeking to fulfill this commitment, Arigatou International launched the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children. Since then, on or around November 20 every year, which is Universal Children's Day and also the anniversary of the adoption of the CRC,

celebrants of the World Day around the world gather together in their local communities to pray for the well-being of children and join together in concrete actions and programs to promote the rights of the child. The World Day has been celebrated with prayer and action—for children—at more than 600 activities in over 100 countries around the world, and it continues to grow in impact every year.

This year, to honor the 30th Anniversary of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, in collaboration with the former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children and UNICEF, Arigatou International has developed this global study, *Faith and Children's Rights—A Multi-religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child*, to provide perspectives from seven religious traditions: the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and the Sikh Faith. This Study highlights the often undocumented yet significant role that the diverse communities of the world's faith traditions have played in the preparation, adoption, ratification and implementation of the CRC over the past three decades and continuing today. It also contains new ideas for collaboration and recommendations for further actions by all stakeholders to promote the rights of the child.

On behalf of Arigatou International, I would like to express our gratitude to the partners who worked with us on the Study, most notably, the Office of the Special Representative of the United Nations Secretary-General on Violence against Children, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), World Vision International, KAICIID, and all the

members of the Global Network of Religions for Children. We would also like to express our deep appreciation to all the religious leaders, religious scholars, legal scholars, child-rights experts, and children and young people from around the world who contributed much to the shaping and development of this global Study.

At the Special Session on Children, Rev. Takeyasu Miyamoto also said:

“As people of faith, we see the Divine Presence in every person, and thus it is our obligation to encourage each person, with patience and compassion, to realize the highest potential of the human heart. It is this Divine Presence—and this great potential—which are the eternal wellspring of the dignity of every child—indeed, of every one of us.”

The world of religious belief and practice is as vast as the transcendent truths religions seek. Views and interpretations are splendidly diverse. This Study represents one small attempt to discover and present some of the shining facets of faith, as they reflect the universal human hope that every child could grow up safe and sound and find a life full of peace and joy. It is my sincere hope that this multi-religious study will spark new ideas, generate groundbreaking discussions, and most importantly, prompt innovative collaborative action to deliver on the promises of the CRC.



Rev. Keishi Miyamoto

INTRODUCTION



Marta Santos Pais

**Special Representative of
the UN Secretary-General
on Violence against
Children
(May 2009 – June 2019)**

I am delighted to see the culmination and launch of this multi-religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which is presented to religious leaders and communities and more broadly to the child rights community on the occasion of the 30th Anniversary of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

I was honoured by the invitation of Arigatou International to help guide the development of this Study, which has been an unprecedented effort involving child rights experts, legal scholars, theologians and religious leaders from many parts of the world. The important consultations held with religious leaders were critical to gather insightful contributions, first-hand experiences and opinions, and valuable suggestions that have informed the shaping of the Study. And the focus groups with children and young people were fundamental to capture and incorporate children's perspectives as well.

The Study constitutes a precious reference for anyone who is committed to advancing the promotion of children's rights. Very especially, it provides a sound resource to support the efforts of religious leaders and religious communities to further expand their advocacy and action, mobilize new partners and engage even more deeply within their own faith communities to protect children from violence and promote their healthy development. Indeed, religious leaders and faith-based organizations are in a unique position to champion children's rights, asserting their moral authority to make a difference in children's lives. They command extraordinary influence and often serve as role models of compassion, solidarity

and justice. They help to bridge differences, foster dialogue, and influence positive social and behavioral change. As discussed in this Study, trust and confidence are often placed in religious leaders by individuals, families and communities, and this positions them to promote respect for the dignity of the child and make it clear that no religious teaching or tradition condones or justifies any form of violence against children.

Back in 1989, when the Convention on the Rights of the Child was being adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, and later when countries started to express their commitment by signing and ratifying this treaty, there was great hope for the universal protection of children's rights and a great belief that this could and would be soon accomplished. It was a time of optimism, and since then significant progress has been made to translate into practice the values and ideals of the Convention. Indeed, as highlighted in this Study, on the 30th Anniversary of the CRC, there is much to celebrate, for so much has been achieved over the past three decades in the field of children's rights.

During my tenure as Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children, I have witnessed the strengthening of a growing global movement for children's rights in which leaders from all walks of life play an active role, including religious leaders and communities, faith-based organizations, the United Nations, governments, civil society, the private sector, and children themselves. Over the past three decades, the world has made decisive strides towards the realization of children's rights. But a better world

is simply not good enough; we need to aim for the best world for every child!

As noted in this Study, by engaging with children today, religious leaders and faith communities can help safeguard the rights of the child and protect children from violence. They can support members of their congregations, as well as families and their children to promote non-violence and ensure that, in turn, future generations of children will happily enjoy childhood, free from neglect, maltreatment, abuse and exploitation.

This Study has a unique potential to help revitalize the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child. Let us make it widely known and used to support steady action and inspire positive change for children, everywhere and at all times.



Marta Santos Pais

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY – INTRODUCTION



On November 20, 2019, the international community will commemorate the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) by the United Nations General Assembly. The CRC has been ratified by 196 States, making it the most widely accepted human rights treaty in history. Over the past 30 years, the CRC has transformed the way the world thinks about children. It has helped change for the better how children are treated in national constitutions, national and local laws, as well as in national plans and programs. It has spurred progress in the prevention of diseases, thus saving the lives of children in many countries, and has produced important commitments to universal education and to eliminating the worst forms

of child labor, ending corporal punishment and much more.

For the CRC's 30th anniversary, Arigatou International¹ initiated this multi-religious global Study on the CRC, focusing particularly on the role of religious leaders and religious communities in promoting children's rights and well-being and in preventing violence against children. This Study was carried out in collaboration with Marta Santos Pais, then Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children, UNICEF, and the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), with the participation and support of World Vision International and KAICIID.

¹ Arigatou International (AI) is an international NGO—with Buddhist roots—that originated in Japan and engages in interfaith collaboration solely for the purpose of promoting the rights and well-being of all children. AI's overall mission is guided by the CRC.

STUDY SCOPE AND CONTRIBUTORS

The Study was shaped by a series of global and regional multi-religious roundtables and other consultations held with diverse religious leaders, child-rights advocates and other experts, as well as written contributions from scholars of religion and law. Focus groups with children were also held in seven countries (in Europe, Latin America, the Middle East, and Asia) in order to include their views and recommendations.

The Study provides for the first time perspectives from a diverse range of religious and faith traditions, drawing primarily on seven religions—the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and the Sikh Faith. In total, these traditions have more than 5.5 billion adherents around the globe.

INTENDED READERSHIP

This Study is primarily written for religious leaders, religious communities and child focused faith-based organizations. It is expected also to be a guiding reference for child-rights advocates, policy-makers, academics, child-focused organizations, as well as children's and youth groups.



CHAPTER OUTLINES

The Study consists of six chapters and a set of Annexes which are briefly outlined here.

Chapter 1. The World's Religions and the Convention on the Rights of the Child

This chapter highlights the essential role that religious leaders and religious groups have played, and continue to play, in advancing the rights of children, from the initial drafting of the CRC through its adoption, ratification and continuing implementation. It presents important achievements as a result of the CRC, as well as the significant commitments made at key global gatherings of religious leaders over the last three decades. It discusses why religious leaders who already embrace the moral responsibility to safeguard children can be ideal advocates of children's rights. It also suggests how, by using their voice and vast networks, religious leaders and faith groups can be highly effective as change agents who foster dialogue, influence attitudes and behaviors, and inspire action.

Chapter 2. Overview of the Convention on the Rights of the Child

This chapter provides a brief overview of the CRC as a human rights instrument and its three Optional Protocols and is written to be accessible to religious communities as well as a broader audience.

Chapter 3. **Commonalities Between Religious Values and Principles of the CRC**

This chapter discusses the ways in which the scriptures and beliefs of the major religions express value for the sanctity of life and the dignity of every child. It presents the striking commonalities found among the values of the seven religions studied and shows how those common values are also embedded in the CRC's principles and standards. It presents compelling reasons for using the CRC as a guiding reference in any action by religious groups that concern the care and protection of children. The important role that both the CRC and the religions ascribe to the family as the fundamental setting and support for the growth and well-being of children is also addressed. The spiritual development of the child, which is explicitly recognized in the CRC (Article 27 and Article 17), is also discussed, informed by perspectives offered during the consultations with religious leaders and scholars of religion and law. The findings suggest that religious leaders and faith groups could build upon these important provisions and encourage children to appreciate the ethical values found in the CRC.

Chapter 4. **Religious Leaders and Communities Working to Protect Children from Violence**

This chapter presents examples selected from the many distinctive contributions that religious communities have made to the improvement of children's lives and thus, to the advancement of children's rights around the world. It features a number of practices from diverse regions of the world and religious communities, along with lessons learned from each. Many of these

important achievements, in particular those aimed at ending violence against children, are not well known and are deserving of wider attention.

Chapter 5. **Frequently Asked Questions about the CRC**

Based on questions raised during the consultations with religious leaders, theologians and the focus groups with children, this chapter provides some answers to frequently asked questions about the CRC. It addresses some common misunderstandings and attempts to respond to issues that some religious groups have raised regarding the treaty. Also included are “key messages” that may be useful for the reader in communicating the meaning of the CRC with various audiences.

Chapter 6. **Recommendations for Action**

Based on the findings of this Study, this chapter lists key recommendations for action for each of the stakeholder groups addressed by the Study—religious leaders, child-rights advocates, governments, children and youth, and parents and caregivers.

ANNEXES

The annexes include a detailed report on the focus groups held with children, information on the study methodology, writers, contributors and peer reviewers, a brief overview of the CRC, a list of resources, toolkits and guides for use in promoting children's rights, as well as links to many existing activities and opportunities for religious leaders and communities to consider joining or using as examples to adapt for their own action.



Religious leaders should understand their responsibility towards us children.

– Tanzanian child from the focus group for this Study.

The Overall Impact of the CRC

The ratification of the CRC has led to national implementation and positive social change in all regions of the world. It has helped to strengthen and secure the rights and well-being of children in numerous ways including by:

- Incorporating the provisions of the Convention in their laws, constitutions, and policies;
- Incorporating child rights principles into legislation;
- Establishing interdepartmental and multidisciplinary bodies to address children's rights;
- Developing national agendas for children;
- Promoting ombudspersons for children or commissioners for children's rights;
- Restructuring budgetary allocations for the realization of children's rights;
- Interventions targeting child survival and development;
- Addressing discrimination and other barriers to the realization of children's rights, including socioeconomic disparities among children;
- Creating opportunities for children to express their views and be heard;
- Expanding partnerships for children; and
- Assessing the impact of measures on children.

Children are now widely viewed as rights-holders to health care, adequate nutrition, education, meaningful participation, leisure and to play, as well the right to freedom from violence, exploitation and abuse.



KEY FINDINGS

1. Compelling reasons for religious leaders and communities to consider the CRC an important guiding reference and advocacy tool in efforts to improve the well-being of children.

The Study identifies a number of compelling reasons for religious leaders and communities to increase their engagement with the CRC, and these were validated in the consultations with diverse religious leaders and religious scholars. They include:

- As the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, with 196 countries committed to supporting the rights of children, the CRC and its Optional Protocols have produced a genuine paradigm shift in the way children

are regarded in laws and policies. This legal and ethical framework has raised the status of children's rights higher on the agenda of policymakers and required governments to enact laws and policies to deliver on those rights.

- The CRC has produced many life-saving changes in how children are treated around the world. According to UNICEF, the CRC has heightened the status of the child and increased attention to children's rights within the health sector, which has led to greater progress in the immunization of children, in the provision of oral rehydration, in promoting better nutrition and in preventing diseases—all of which have saved the lives of children in many countries.

- The CRC has also produced important commitments to universal education—in the 30 years since its adoption, the number of children missing out on primary school has been cut nearly in half—as well as efforts to eliminate the worst forms of child labor, to prohibit all forms of violence against children including corporal punishment and much more.
- Religious leaders and faith-based organizations that are already making a difference in children’s lives could use the CRC to reinforce and multiply their actions and advocacy. The outcomes the CRC seeks are very closely aligned with the major concerns that religious communities have regarding children.
- The CRC is an important framework that provides a universal basis for cooperative action to tackle the scope and scale of the challenges facing many children today. Evidence shows that millions of children experience violations of their basic human rights on a daily basis. Every five minutes a child somewhere in the world dies from violence and there are many new threats to children’s rights and well-being. Climate change is a serious new threat to children’s rights. The moral authority, vision, and influence of religious leaders and their communities can make them an irreplaceable part of the solution.
- How do we protect children when there are groups using religion to promote violence?
- How do we bring religions together in efforts to promote non-violence, which is in keeping with our religious values and teachings?
- How can the CRC help raise the status of children in the broader community?
- How do we ensure that our places of worship are safe spaces in the most vulnerable times?

As articulated in chapter 1, this Study aims to support the vital work being done by religious communities and faith-based organizations by responding to questions like these (also see chapter 5). The hope is to provide a shared agenda for partnerships between faith actors and child-rights advocates to further the implementation of the CRC and help to safeguard the rights and well-being of all children.

2. Religious texts and the CRC share a common vision for children, including the family-centered values of both religious and rights-based approaches. There is a growing global movement among religious leaders in support of children’s rights.

From the very beginning of the drafting of the CRC, some faith communities were actively involved in shaping its content, and some were instrumental in promoting its ratification (see chapter 2). The sanctity and dignity of human life is at the heart of the world’s major religions and is also enshrined by the body of international human rights law. Similarly, the key principles of universality, interrelatedness and indivisibility of rights, non-discrimination and equality, found in all the human rights instruments, including the CRC, are rooted in values that are common to the

In the consultations with diverse religious leaders they also raised many questions about children’s rights and the purpose of the CRC, some of which are:

- What potential value does the CRC have to religious communities?
- Does the CRC envision a world different from what my religion teaches?



world's major religions. Many deeply held religious values are closely aligned with the principles and norms of the CRC (see chapter 3). Both religious groups and others committed to promoting the implementation of the CRC prioritize actions that help secure child well-being.

The CRC and the major world religions largely agree on these key points:

- A fundamental belief in the sanctity of life and the dignity of the child;
- An emphasis on the family as the best environment for bringing up children;
- The high priority given to children and the idea that all members of society have rights and duties toward them; and
- A holistic notion of the child and a comprehensive understanding of his or her physical, emotional, social and spiritual needs.

Respect for the value of human life and human dignity is a fundamental principle found in all religions. The belief that all human beings, including children, deserve to be respected and treated with dignity—without discrimination on the basis of race, ethnicity, ancestry, gender, socioeconomic status or other status—exists

across traditions. Religious texts in support of this principle can be found in all seven major religions studied.

Bahá'í Faith: "He Who is your Lord, the All-Merciful, cherisheth in His heart the desire of beholding the entire human race as one soul and one body." (*Bahá'u'lláh*, CVII)

Buddhism: Some Buddhist groups believe that "All beings without exception have the Buddha nature." (*Mahāyāna Mahāparinirvāṇa Sūtra*, or "Nirvana Sutra")

Christianity: Jesus gave very specific value to children. Jesus said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these." (Matthew 19:14)

Hinduism: "God abides in the heart of every being." (*Bhagavad Gita* 18:61)

Islam: "O people, we created you from the same male and female, and rendered you distinct peoples and tribes, that you may recognize one another." (*Quran* 49:13)

Judaism: "So God created humanity in God's image, in the image of God, God created them." (Genesis 1:27)

Sikh Faith: "Human life is a priceless diamond; neglecting its value, we trade it for a mere shell." (*Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, p. 156.)

The CRC includes rights that all human beings possess, while also recognizing rights that are fundamental to childhood: to birth registration, the rights to care and family relations, to protection from domestic violence, and to protection in adoption and alternative care settings. In short, the rights enshrined in the CRC provide a framework for ensuring that every child can develop to his or her fullest potential, and the full realization of

human potential is one of the core concerns of the world's religions.

The CRC explicitly refers to the child's "spiritual, moral and social development." The CRC thus offers more than a technical legal mandate; it represents an ethical blueprint for all sectors of society—including religious communities—to act upon.

In recognition of the deep commonalities between religious values and the provisions of the CRC, the first global conference of religious leaders addressing the CRC was held in July 1990, in Princeton, New Jersey, and was organized by UNICEF and Religions for Peace. Inspired in part by the momentum in the promotion of children's rights, the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) was launched in 2000 by 294 religious leaders and grassroots child-rights workers from the world's major religious traditions. The GNRC today is a growing network with organizational and individual members in over 55 countries, and it has held five global forums in different regions of the world designed to encourage religious leaders to join the cause of children's rights and ending violence against children.

3. The many contributions of religious groups to the realization of children's rights and well-being are not always well-known among child-rights advocates. Meanwhile, religious leaders and communities are often not familiar with the CRC and how they can use it to address their concerns.

Long before children's rights were articulated and recognized in the CRC, religious groups had

undertaken many actions for children based on the tenets of love, compassion, peace and non-violence. Many religious leaders are not familiar with the CRC, are unaware of its potential as a critical tool for improving the lives of children and for urging governments to adopt policies and programs that promote children's rights and well-being—such as in the areas of health, education, and child protection. However, as this Study shows, after becoming familiar with the CRC some religious groups consulted for this Study realized that they had been working for children's rights without knowing it and were thus encouraged to refer to the treaty to advocate for their concerns.

Some child-rights advocates and child-focused civil society organizations have not been fully aware of the important diverse contributions to children's rights made by religious groups. There is thus a vast and relatively untapped common ground—and potential for fruitful concrete cooperation—that is not adequately recognized by religious groups or by advocates of children's rights. This can in part be traced to some key misunderstandings about the CRC and, more broadly, children's rights. Some child-rights organizations have also expressed hesitations about working with religious communities and faith-based non-governmental organizations due in part to the misuse of religion by some religious groups. This Study seeks to clarify these misunderstandings, address these hesitations, and show a way forward that includes mutual respect and collaboration for children.

Chapter 4 features initiatives taken by diverse religious leaders and communities around the world in support of children's rights. (See Annex VI for a comprehensive list of faith-based initiatives to protect and promote children's rights and well-being.)

4. Around the globe today and throughout history, there are, and have been, harmful practices and actions among religious communities that are deeply inconsistent with both the fundamental values of the world’s major religions and children’s rights.

The religious leaders and scholars consulted for this Study identified inconsistencies between the values and teachings of their faith traditions and actual practices, in some cases, within their communities (see in particular chapter 3, section 5.1). It is clear that, throughout history, and still today, harmful practices in conflict with the CRC have been justified erroneously on religious grounds, whereas they are in fact a reflection of prevailing cultural norms. For example, all the religions studied endorse in their teachings the principle of non-discrimination, but the fact is that discriminatory practices, particularly based on gender, are still found among all the religious traditions studied, often related to patriarchal and other power structures in society.

Many countries have introduced laws to prohibit harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, child marriage and corporal punishment, and some religious leaders are actively working to bring their communities to understand that such practices are either not endorsed by religious teachings or are contrary to their religious values, as documented by this Study. The need for religious groups to enhance their collaboration with policymakers and child-focused organizations in the area of child protection was also acknowledged in the consultations.

5. Religious leaders can also help to strengthen the nurturing care that children need by influencing positive child-rearing policies, and fostering ethical values and spirituality that are fundamental for children’s overall development and well-being.

The combination of religious tenets and the legal framework can be a powerful argument in preventing harmful practices and advocating for positive social norms. The CRC recognizes the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development (Art. 27) and to access information for his or her moral and spiritual well-being (Art. 17). The explicit references to spiritual, moral and social development are not well known, particularly among religious communities. Religious leaders and local religious communities can play a more active role in promoting these rights by supporting the holistic development of children, enhancing education that helps to develop children’s spirituality and ethical values, as well as influencing parents and caregivers through their teachings, counseling and community work.





6. Further reflection and dialogue within and among religious groups, as well as continued study and interpretation of sacred texts, are needed in order to understand the application of children’s rights in the context of religious teachings—in particular the implications of the guiding principles of the CRC.

Religious leaders and communities are in a unique position to influence attitudes and behaviors in support of the guiding principles of the CRC. As mentioned above, all the religions studied endorse in their teachings the principle of non-discrimination, but discriminatory practices continue to exist within religious communities which call for preventive action.

A key message from this Study is that the CRC principle of the best interests of the child should apply in all actions concerning children, as it is thoroughly in concert with the teachings and values of the religions studied.

However, the meaning of the CRC’s stipulation that children’s voices should be heard and given due weight in matters that concern them and in keeping with their evolving capacities, requires further thoughtful reflection and understanding by diverse religious communities. As discussed

in this Study, the CRC strikes a balance between recognizing children as active agents in their own lives, entitled to be listened to, respected and granted increasing autonomy in the exercise of rights, while also being entitled to protection in accordance with their relative immaturity and youth. In addition, the exercise of their rights does not depend on their fulfillment of responsibilities, since the assuming of responsibilities must be done progressively, in keeping with the age and evolving capacities of the child.

Children’s right to be heard is not explicitly addressed in the scriptures of the religions addressed by this Study, but concepts in some religions concerning coming-of-age ceremonies and maturity for decision-making should be further studied in relation to the CRC’s concept of children’s evolving capacity. Children have important insights into their own lives, and their views should be granted respect by policy-makers, judges, teachers, religious leaders and other adults who work with or come in close contact with children. The meaningful participation of children in decision-making also contributes to their preparation as active members of society.

Another key message from this Study is that honoring the agency and dignity of children by according them meaningful participation in the life of their religious community is an important way to show children they are valued.

The common value placed on educating a child with life skills, potential for good citizenship, and spiritual and material well-being is consistent with religious perspectives on raising children; so too is placing duties on parents and religious leaders to listen and respond with sensitivity to the child and the realities of the environment in which he/she grows to adulthood.

INNOVATIVE PRACTICES BY RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES TO END VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN



As mentioned, religious communities and faith-based organizations were responding to children's needs long before the concept of child rights was articulated. Discussions around children's rights, however, bring a re-examination of the services that religious communities are providing: what services should be offered, how should they be designed, who is responsible for providing them, and who should benefit? In addition, the increased focus on child protection has generated new initiatives to end the many forms of violence against children. This Study features a number of innovative and effective practices by religious communities working to end violence against children, including lessons learned in those field experiences (see chapter 4 for featured practices, and Annex VI for a comprehensive list).

Some of the featured programs are local initiatives, such as the Bala Shanti program in southern India, which is addressing poverty, promoting healthy child development and discouraging child marriage, or the Mosaik program in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is focusing on preventing violence in schools and the tensions between religious communities. A featured practice from Kenya highlights the efforts of religious scholars to clarify religious teachings and present legal and medical facts to encourage communities to abandon female genital mutilation.

Other featured programs have been developed by international faith-based organizations and are being put into practice in a large number of countries. One example is the intercultural and

interfaith ethics education program entitled *Learning to Live Together* (LTLT), which was developed by the Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children established by Arigatou International, in close collaboration with UNESCO and UNICEF. The program is conducted in coordination with local faith and non-faith actors and in schools, and the facilitators' manual is available in 13 languages and has been used in over 30 countries. Another example is the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program carried out by the Bahá'í Faith in 150 communities around the world, which invites young people to help create school environments based on the principles of participation, non-discrimination, freedom of assembly and expression, and respect for the dignity of every child.

The need for prevention of sexual abuse and exploitation has begun to receive greater attention worldwide in recent years due to the large number of children affected and to a better understanding of the traumatic impact on the victims. Raising awareness, changing attitudes, norms and behaviors, and reducing the risks and vulnerabilities of children are the types of prevention where religious communities can make



a difference. For example, the New York Board of Rabbis offers a Family Violence Prevention Program to teach religious leaders how to identify and respond to family violence, as well as how to help prevent child sexual abuse and trafficking. Another program developed by the International Catholic Child Bureau in southern Cambodia provides insights into the challenges involved in addressing sex tourism. In Sri Lanka, the Sarvodaya Shramadana Movement is addressing the new forms of sexual exploitation made possible by the ubiquity of the internet by raising the awareness of children ages 12-18 years of this threat as a preventive measure.



Since the CRC was adopted thirty years ago, it has also become better understood that extreme poverty itself constitutes a severe form of violence because of the multiple deprivations suffered by children in poverty, such as a lack of access to health care, education, social services and support, and which may result in illness, limited job opportunities, stigmatization and social exclusion. The Bala Shanti program mentioned above is an example of a faith-based initiative designed to break the vicious cycle of extreme poverty. Elsewhere in the Netherlands, *Red een*

Kind works with homeless youth, assisting them to find sustainable solutions that correspond to their aspirations with an emphasis on the transfer of knowledge, talent development and the acquisition of skills.

The importance of empowering children to actively participate in analyzing their situation and proposing solutions is also becoming better understood. Listening to young people is a key component of the *Red een Kind* program, as well as the GNRC program in Argentina featured in this Study, which empowers children and youth to speak up for and claim their rights at the local and national levels.

Children on the move as a result of armed conflict, community violence, political instability, poverty, climate change and natural disasters

are particularly vulnerable to violations of their rights. The recently created coalition, Faith Action for Children on the Move, initiated by World Vision International with a membership of more than 80 faith-based organizations, is working to strengthen local action and build interfaith peace-building tools. Catholic Relief Services is using animation and puppet-based films to increase children's resiliency and to address the social and emotional needs of children displaced by armed conflicts in Syria.

The recruitment of children by armed groups also presents complex challenges. The Center for Sustainable Conflict Resolution in Kenya has developed a program entitled Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE), which seeks to prevent the manipulation of religion and exploitation of children.

Frequently Asked Questions about the CRC and Children's Rights

Religious leaders and communities have raised a number of questions about the CRC and children's rights. Children who participated in the focus groups organized for this Study also asked questions about how they could be assured their rights are respected and protected. Chapter 5 provides responses to 24 of the most frequently raised questions, arranging them under the following themes:

1. Religious Values and the CRC
2. The CRC and the Work of Religious Communities
3. The Language of the CRC Considered Alongside the Language of Religion
4. Reservations, Understandings and Declarations to the CRC
5. Parental Rights and Children's Rights
6. The Rights of Children and the Rights of Others
7. The Child's Right to Freedom of Religion
8. The CRC's Impact on Children's Education
9. The CRC on Positive Parenting and Discipline
10. Religious Leaders' Role in Ending Violence Against Children
11. The CRC on Issues Related to Reproduction and Sexuality



RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION

This Study suggests that the tenets of the world's major religions share a great deal in common not only with each other but also with children's rights principles recognized in the CRC. The commonalities offer a foundation for wide-reaching, multi-stakeholder cooperation to advance the rights and well-being of children around the globe.

Pragmatic recommendations for action are proposed for each key stakeholder group, but they are not exhaustive. These recommendations are derived from the findings of this Study and based on a thorough analysis of the consultations

with diverse religious leaders and child-rights advocates, the contributions from religious and legal scholars, and the opinions received from children in the focus groups. The recommendations are intended to be concrete and actionable and to maximize the positive impact for children, as well as to serve as a basis for further discussion, reflection and cooperation.

The recommendations for each stakeholder group are summarized below. In chapter 6, each recommendation is followed by several options, suggestions, and concrete ideas for how to put the recommendation into practice.

These recommendations were developed primarily for religious leaders and communities. Those presented here and in the full Study are not meant to be exhaustive.

For Religious Leaders:

- Become familiar with the CRC and children's rights.
- Incorporate the CRC and other relevant children's rights law into your efforts to advance children's rights and well-being in your communities.
- Convene dialogues (including interfaith dialogues) and initiate awareness campaigns in your religious community about children's rights.
- Support children and their right to be heard and to meaningful participation in all matters that concern them.
- Advocate for ending violence against children and other children's rights violations.
- Advocate for concrete strategies in your communities to tackle systemic issues that leave children vulnerable to rights violations.
- Denounce children's rights violations in your communities.
- Champion special protection and promotion of the equal rights of girls and women.
- Raise awareness about the CRC among parents and caregivers in your sermons, counseling and community outreach.

For Children's Rights Advocates:

- Identify and support opportunities to partner with religious leaders and communities to advance children's rights and well-being.
- Involve religious communities in your advocacy and in your calls to action.
- Work with religious groups for children's right to be heard and to participate.

For Governments and Policymakers:

- Increase support for children's right to freedom of religion and expression and children's right to develop to their fullest potential, including physical, mental, social, spiritual and moral development.
- Convene regional and national conferences on the opportunities for collaboration among religious groups and human rights groups for the betterment of children's lives.
- Support children and their right to be heard and to meaningful participation.
- Review any Reservations, Understandings, and Declarations to the CRC declared by your State, with a view to withdrawing such Reservations and removing any barriers to the fulfillment of children's rights.

For Children and Youth:

- Expand your learning about and understanding of the CRC and children's rights.
- Identify adult supporters and allies, including religious leaders, whom you can partner with to advance the rights and well-being of children in your communities.
- Initiate activities to raise awareness about children's rights in your schools and communities.

For Parents and Other Caregivers:

- Learn about the CRC and how it can positively impact your family and community.
- Support children and their right to be heard and to meaningful participation in decisions that concern them.



CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

Religion and children’s rights are two very powerful forces. Hand in hand, they have enormous potential to improve the lives and well-being of all children and to strengthen families and communities. This potential has yet to be fully realized—in part because since the CRC came into force religious and faith-based initiatives and children’s rights initiatives have often operated separately, rather than supporting one another. The 30th anniversary of the CRC provides an opportunity to change this by forging new partnerships based on faith and children’s rights. Although there is much that needs to be done in the coming years before any synergies between these two initiatives can be maximized, a promising foundation already exists to build upon.

Reflecting upon the rich discussions and contributions received for this Study, it is evident

that further interfaith dialogue and collaboration are needed. More efforts are also needed to present the CRC to religious communities at all levels in a positive manner with new ideas focusing on building partnerships to bridge the existing gaps in the child rights discourse.

The children of today are calling on decision-makers including religious leaders with new urgent messages asking for their support which demonstrates their deepest concerns about the world in which they live. One important message is that the “climate emergency” is defining their human rights and that it will shape their lives in every way. Another global challenge is the prevention of all forms of violence against children including online sexual exploitation and abuse of children.

Religious leaders can help to ensure that children's views are heard and thus, children's agency is fully respected including within their religious community. If their messages are genuinely heard and respected it will help to foster an open mind towards accepting children as subjects of rights, and children will be less likely to become objects that can be instrumentalized in their homes, schools and communities, and less likely to become victims of violence.

It is hoped that this Study will help to place children at the center of the religious discourse and encourage religious communities to reflect on the following questions:

- Are all children truly listened to?
- Are all children considered as individuals in their own right?
- Are all children protected by our religious leaders and religious communities?

- Are all children given spaces and opportunities to genuinely participate in the life of our communities and houses of worship?
- Are there practices harmful to children within our community that are contrary to our religious values or based on cultural norms?

This year is an important milestone which calls for reflection on the significant progress made in advancing the rights and well-being of children in the three decades since the CRC was adopted. It also offers an opportunity to evaluate ways to enhance implementation of the CRC and develop new partnerships for collective action in the future. It is hoped that this Study will help to chart a path for religious communities and child rights groups to work together to build a world where all children's rights are respected, protected and fulfilled, and no child is left behind.





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All for Children

***“Every religion preaches
that every single person is
God’s child and that we all are
one big family.”***

**—Muslim, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist children
aged 14-17 (Sri Lanka)**

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