



Faith and Children's Rights:

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

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Faith and Children's Rights

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

Commemorating its 30th Anniversary





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ACRONYMS

AI

Arigatou International

AJWS

American Jewish World Service

ASEAN

Association of Southeast Asian Nations

BGR

Buddhist Global Relief

BRAVE

Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism

BRAVO

Birth Registration for All versus Oblivion

CAP

Conseil de la Paix

CEDAW

The Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination Against Women

CHAT

Community Hope Action Teams

CNNV

The Churches' Network for Non-Violence

COH

Channels of Hope

CRAVE

Community Resilience Against Violent Extremism

CRC

Convention on the Rights of the Child

CSCR

Center for Sustainable Conflict Resolution

ECD

Early Childhood Development

ECPAT

End Child Prostitution and Trafficking

FCA

Finn Church Aid

FGM

Female Genital Mutilation

GNRC

Global Network of Religions for Children

HTAC

Help the Afghan Children

ICCB

International Catholic Child Bureau

ICPH

Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness

ILO

International Labour Organization

INEB

International Network of Engaged Buddhists

IRCPT

The Inter-Religious Council for Peace in Tanzania

IRW

Islamic Relief Worldwide

ISESCO

Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

JLI-FLC

Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

JYSEP

Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program

KAICIID

King Abdullah Bin Abdulaziz
International Centre for Interreligious
and Intercultural Dialogue

LTLT

Learning to Live Together

LWF

Lutheran World Federation

MCC

Multi-religious Collaboration for the
Common Good

MEAL

Monitoring, Evaluation, Accountability
and Learning

NGO

Non-Governmental Organization

NCA

The Norwegian Church Aid

NYBR

New York Board of Rabbis

OIC

Organization of the Islamic Conference

OSCE

Organization for Security and
Co-operation in Europe

RfP

Religions for Peace

RPP

Regional Peace Program

SAARC

States of the South Asian Association
for Regional Cooperation

SDGs

United Nations Sustainable Development Goals

SRSg-VAC

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

UN

United Nations

UNDP

United Nations Development Programme

UNESCO

United Nations Educational, Scientific
and Cultural Organization

UNICEF

United Nations Children's Fund

URI

United Religions Initiative

WSO

World Sikh Organization of Canada

YOLRED

Youth Leaders for Restoration and Development



ARIGATOU
INTERNATIONAL
All for Children



FOREWORD

HENRIETTA H. FORE Executive Director, UNICEF

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

Executive Director

United Nations Children's Fund

PREFACE

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 nearly 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 the United Nations Children's Fund (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, 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

President

Arigatou International

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

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



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 the former 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 and KAICIID.

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, policymakers, 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.

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.



Religious leaders should understand their responsibility towards us children.

– Tanzanian child from the focus group for this Study

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.

This 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. These international treaties have 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. The moral authority, vision, and influence of religious leaders and their communities can make them an irreplaceable part of the solution.



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?
- 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 carried out 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 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, pg. 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 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 (Article 27) and to access information for his or her moral and spiritual well-being (Article 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

policymakers, 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 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.

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 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.

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.

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 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 deep 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 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 the 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.



ABOUT THIS STUDY



Around the globe, most families and religious communities share a common vision. They want to see a world where their children are protected from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. They want to know their children will receive the special care necessary to ensure their well-being. They want their children to be guaranteed access to the education, health services, and other opportunities they need to realize their full potential. Meanwhile children have the right to be recognized as full members of society with a right to participate in all matters that affect their lives, and to have their views taken into account in accordance with their level of evolving maturity. These universal aspirations are also enshrined in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), the most comprehensive international treaty on the rights of children.

The CRC was adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20, 1989 and rapidly entered into force on September 30, 1990. Since then it has been ratified by all but one United Nations Member State, making it the most widely accepted human rights treaty in history and serving as proof of a growing global commitment to children's rights. That commitment began, in many respects, with the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, adopted by the League of Nations in 1924. It continued in an extended form with the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of the Child in 1959. These documents were not legally binding, as the CRC. Three Optional Protocols to the CRC have also been adopted since 1989 to strengthen the treaty, and they are addressed in this Study, as well.

Like other international treaties, the CRC obligates all States Parties to take steps to implement the treaty at the national level and report on their progress. These reports are made periodically to the Committee on the Rights of the Child, an international body comprising 18 independent experts. This treaty body is tasked with monitoring implementation, making specific concluding observations including recommendations to the States on ways to strengthen implementation of the treaty at the national level, and drawing attention to the challenges that remain in building a world where the rights of every child are respected, protected and fulfilled.



On November 20, 2019, the international community will commemorate the 30th anniversary of the CRC's adoption. Recognizing the significance of this occasion, Arigatou International initiated and carried out the global study now published here, entitled *Faith and Children's Rights: A Multi-religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child*. Arigatou International is an international NGO with Buddhist roots, based in Japan. It develops and sustains multi-stakeholder initiatives designed to ensure that all children are treated with dignity, all children's rights are respected, and all children have the opportunity to freely pursue their full potential. In promoting the

implementation of the CRC, Arigatou International has been working since its establishment in 1990 with diverse religious communities worldwide, as well as with the United Nations agencies and child-focused organizations seeking to build a world where every child can grow up safe and sound. Arigatou International offices in Geneva, Nairobi, New York and Tokyo supported the development of this Study.

This Study was developed by an authorship team of experts (see Annex III) in close collaboration with the former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children (SRSG) and Office,² UNICEF, and the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), and with the participation of partners, World Vision International and KAICIID.

Consultations with religious leaders, theologians, and child-rights experts and practitioners were held in various world regions to review and validate the emerging findings and provide input to the working drafts, and several roundtable discussions were held with leading representatives of diverse religious groups to obtain their views and perspectives. Many written contributions were received from religious sources, distinguished scholars and children's rights experts (see Annex III for a list of contributors) from around the world. In addition, focus groups with children were held in seven countries as part of the consultation process, to ensure that children's voices would be heard and included in the Study (see Annex I for the key findings from the focus groups and children's recommendations).

The Study is intended for broad dissemination throughout the international community, in particular during the commemorations of the

CRC's 30th anniversary that will be held on many levels in different parts of the world. The Study celebrates the extraordinary achievements over the last 30 years stemming from an international human rights treaty that has been written about by numerous child-rights advocacy groups and child-focused organizations. However, this Study provides, for the first time, an analysis of this landmark treaty from a global, multi-religious perspective. It thus provides perspectives from diverse religious traditions, drawing primarily on the experience and traditions of seven religions—the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and the Sikh Faith.

These religions were designated for consideration in the Study because they are widely regarded as the world's major religions, based on their number of followers, the antiquity of some religions, and their leadership role at local, national and international levels. Furthermore, this selection is not intended to imply that other philosophical

or religious beliefs do not also practice the humanistic values embodied in the CRC; nor does it mean that all people adhering to these seven religions adhere to the values embodied in the treaty. The CRC represents and reflects values that are widely shared by religious faiths and belief systems around the world. However, as explored in this Study, there is often a gap between stated values and actual practices.



WHY THIS STUDY WAS DONE

This Study aims to provide compelling reasons for religious leaders, religious communities, and faith-based organizations to consider the CRC as an important guiding reference and an empowering advocacy tool for their work to protect children. The Study seeks to show how human rights principles, the corresponding legal framework and the tenets and values of seven religions can be complementary and in harmony with each other, thus providing a strong support to the realization of children's rights, and creating the basis for further collaborations for the well-being of children. When States ratify human rights instruments like the CRC, governments

have resulting obligations and must take steps to be in compliance with these human rights standards, and these are often in harmony with religious beliefs and practices.

The Study also aims to increase mutual understanding among religious groups and human-rights advocates in order to strengthen their alliances and collaboration and bridge the gap between their different discourses. Ideally, the Study will encourage further reflection and lead to constructive dialogue among religious leaders of diverse traditions, human-rights and child-rights advocates, and child protection



and other practitioners with responsibility for the special care of, and provision of assistance to, children. This, in turn, can lead to stronger collaboration and build greater solidarity in the global movement to see that every child thrives.

Key Objectives of the Study

- Present the ways in which seven major religions affirm the sanctity of life and dignity of the child and reflect on how their tenets and values

are in harmony with the CRC and can provide a supporting framework for the realization of children's rights.

- Highlight the important roles that have been played by religious leaders and religious communities, from the time of the drafting of the CRC, to its ratification, to its continuing implementation today.
- Document the significant work by religious leaders, religious groups and faith-inspired organizations that provide care and protection for children in line with the CRC.
- Address some of the issues that have been raised by some religious groups regarding the CRC, including areas of non-compliance.
- Encourage religious communities to help further the implementation of the CRC and to help end all forms of violence against children.
- Highlight the ways in which the CRC, as a key advocacy tool, can strengthen ongoing efforts by religious communities to address the significant new threats children face today such as, the impact of climate change and online exploitation and abuse.

WHO THIS STUDY IS FOR

This Study is written primarily for religious leaders, religious communities, and faith-based organizations all over the world. Human-rights and child-rights advocates—and anyone concerned with implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child—will also find it of great interest. It is designed to be useful to all who are working to promote the rights and well-being of children, and in particular, to end violence against children. This includes government entities and international organizations that

address children's issues in areas such as health, education and child protection. It is also hoped that policymakers, academics, child-focused organizations and foundations, as well as children's and youth groups, will find it a helpful reference. Child-focused organizations who seek the support of religious groups in their own communities may also benefit by using the Study in their planning and programing, as may universities and educators interested in religion and children's rights.

LIMITATIONS

This Study was developed in a process of research and multiple consultations conducted over a period of ten months in 2019. Many contributions were received—from a wide range of sources including theologians, academics, child-rights practitioners, child-rights specialists, as well as children and youth. Everyone consulted was asked to consider the CRC from his/her own religious perspective or expertise, particularly the treaty's principles and values.

The various sources and quotations from multiple religions cited in the Study were additionally validated by a number of scholars and contributors

representing diverse religious traditions. As various interpretations of religious scriptures exist in each major religious tradition, this Study did not attempt to identify what could be considered the ultimate authority on any of the religious sources and quotations selected for inclusion. In essence then, this Study aims to provide a variety of interpretations taken from diverse sources in order to offer broad, multi-religious perspectives on the CRC. There is still, however, a need for a more critical analysis in the future of interpretations and practices that negatively impact children's rights.

DISSEMINATION

This Study is available in print in English, Spanish and Arabic and on the Arigatou International website (www.arigatouinternational.org). In order to seek further contributions from religious communities, an online platform will be made available for the wider public to share resources and practices related to the CRC's implementation. Special efforts will be made to share this Study with diverse religious leaders and communities worldwide through the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), World Vision, KAIICID, and various other channels, aiming to foster greater awareness and understanding of the CRC.





CHAPTER 1. THE WORLD'S RELIGIONS AND THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD



INTRODUCTION

As this chapter will show, over the last 30 years the world's major religions—including religious leaders, religious communities, and faith-based organizations—have become more engaged as advocates for children's rights and children's well-being. In fact, some religious groups³ were actively involved from the beginning, first in the drafting and later in promoting the adoption and implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). There is also evidence that many actions supporting children have been undertaken by religious communities based on religious teachings promoting love, compassion, peace and non-violence, but not directly driven by children's rights as codified in the CRC. Many religious communities have been promoting values

that coincide with children's rights, but without referencing the CRC as a specific source. Hence, during the consultations with diverse religious leaders during the development of this Study, the following questions were often raised:

- Why should religious leaders or faith-based organizations embrace the CRC?
- What is the added value of the CRC to religious communities?
- Given the technical and legal language of the CRC, why does it make sense for a religious community to use the CRC in its advocacy as a guiding reference for actions that concern children?
- How should religious communities engage in promoting the CRC?

Meanwhile, some child-rights advocates asked:

- What do religious communities uniquely offer to further the implementation of the CRC?
- Why and how should child rights experts engage with religious communities?
- Why is it necessary to understand the language of religions in order to engage religious communities in the cause of children's rights?

At the same time, some child-rights organizations, defined as secular, noted hesitations in engaging with religious communities, referring to the misuse of religion by some groups and the concern that such engagement could be used for purposes of proselytizing—generally defined as attempts to recruit or convert people to a new faith, institution, or cause. In light of this, some consultation participants pointed out that some secular human rights defenders perceive religions as obstacles to the achievement of human rights and thus, religious groups become the targets of criticism, instead of finding a way to work together for the protection and realization of human rights. It was further acknowledged that some religious organizations may have a prejudice against the human rights movement because of the belief that human rights advocates focus on the few differences rather than the majority of convergent issues. Consequently, many religious communities do not understand human rights mechanisms or language, and some secular child-rights organizations are hesitant to engage with religious communities.

Children who participated in the focus groups raised concerns about the gap between the theory and practice of their rights, and asked how religious leaders and their communities could help to fulfill those rights. In most cases it was easier for children to name the rights that they were not enjoying in actual practice, than it was to discuss

the provisions of the Convention itself. In the consultation in Brazil, for example, a group of 12-16 year old children said, “The paper is wonderful... but the reality is different.”

According to the Pew Research Center, in 2012 5.8 billion people identified with a religious group, representing 84% of the 2010 world population of 6.9 billion.⁴ (The world population in 2017 was 7.3 billion.)⁵ Another recent study of religion in the modern world concludes:

Since the late 1970s religion has re-emerged as a public force, as a marker of ethnic identities, as a shaper of modern subjects and their ways of life, and [...] the important political and social role of religion is a global phenomenon.⁶

The religious landscape is also dynamic, and challenges posed by the changes occurring in various regions of the world make it more important than ever to promote understanding and mutual respect for religious diversity and interfaith cooperation.

The seven religions selected for this Study—the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and the Sikh Faith—represent more than 5.5 billion people. The selection does not reflect any hierarchy of importance. These religions were designated for consideration because they are widely regarded as the world's major religions, based on their number of followers, the antiquity of some religions, and their leadership role at local, national and international levels.

In the consultations with religious leaders carried out for the Study, it was recognized that these religions all have a commitment to protecting children, based on their teachings and values

focusing on love, compassion, peace, non-violence and the sanctity of life. For example:

- The Bahá'í Faith teaches the inherent nobility of the human spirit and calls its followers to strive toward a pattern of life distinguished by its respect for the dignity and rights of all people, its exalted moral tone, and its freedom from oppression and from all forms of abuse.
- Buddhism is concerned with the welfare of all beings and teaches that if everyone develops compassion, mutual respect, courtesy and loving kindness, children will not be neglected or abused.
- Christianity views human beings, including children, as created in the image and likeness of God and emphasizes that Jesus always treated the most vulnerable—especially children, women and outsiders—with love and compassion.
- Hinduism teaches *ahimsa* (“non-injury”), which means to never injure others, and under this tradition, the intrinsic dignity of the child flows theologically from the equal presence of the Divine.
- Islam views the life of every individual as worthy of respect, regardless of gender, age, nationality or religion.
- Judaism upholds the dignity of all human life because human beings were created in the Divine Image, as described in the Genesis narrative on the creation of humanity.
- The Sikh Faith teaches that all human beings are born with Divine dignity and that raising children is a sacred responsibility that should serve their flourishing.

The Study presents a number of compelling reasons for religious leaders and communities to embrace the CRC as a shared agenda to advance the protection and well-being of children. This chapter discusses the important role and impact they can

have as advocates for children at the regional and global levels due to their moral influence and authority, vast networks, and the social assets they generally possess.⁷ The potential benefits non-religious organizations can obtain by working with religious leaders and communities to influence behavior change and contribute to the promotion of children's rights are also highlighted.

It is important to underscore that, since many religious groups are not aware of the CRC and are unfamiliar with the legal terminology, they have often been left out of activities organized by child-rights advocates. As this Study demonstrates, religious leaders and communities are, in fact, powerful allies in protecting children and should be included as partners. A key message is that children's rights are critical, and that religious communities can be essential allies, play major roles, and could help advance the realization of children's rights if they were to learn more about it, self examine their practices vis-à-vis children's rights and, ultimately become empowered by the CRC.

Religious leaders and communities can be powerful allies in protecting children and should be included as partners. They could do even more for children if they were to embrace and become empowered by the CRC.

The Study attempts to provide answers to the various questions raised during the consultations, while acknowledging the need for further dialogue and reflection—particularly among diverse religious leaders and child-rights advocates—in light of the complexity of some of the issues addressed. The process of dissemination of the Study results will include efforts to encourage this dialogue.

1.1 COMPELLING REASONS FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES TO EMBRACE THE CRC

There are many compelling reasons for religious leaders and communities to embrace the CRC. First, the CRC stands out today as a widely shared agenda for the protection of children's rights and most widely ratified human rights treaty in history, with 196 States Parties committed to fulfilling the rights of children in their countries.⁸ The widespread and unprecedented acceptance of the CRC reflects a growing common vision of a world in which all children are recognized as rights-holders so that all children may enjoy a healthy childhood, develop to their fullest potential, and live free from violence and without discrimination in peace and dignity. This vision also recognizes children as full members of society with a right to participate in all matters that affect their lives and have their views taken into account.

The CRC is the most comprehensive treaty on children's rights, and since its adoption in 1989, three Optional Protocols have also been adopted, strengthening the protection of the rights of the child in certain areas. Another key message is that

this rich body of law represents a major paradigm shift that strengthens any action to improve the situation of children, making the CRC a natural starting point for any dialogue on or action in support of children's rights and well-being.

The Optional Protocols provide a good example of the specificity with which the CRC as international law addresses children's issues which are of great concern to religious communities.

The [Optional Protocol](#) on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict requires governments to ensure that minor children who have not attained the age of 18 years do not take direct part in armed conflicts and are not compulsorily recruited into their armed forces. Armed groups are also covered under this Optional Protocol and are prohibited from recruiting or using in hostilities any child under 18.⁹ The [Optional Protocol](#) on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography sets out the measures needed to protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse and to ensure that they are not abducted, sold or trafficked, including for non-sexual purposes, such as forced labor, illegal adoption and organ donation.¹⁰

The first two protocols were adopted on May 25, 2000 and have been ratified by more than 160 States Parties. The third Optional Protocol, relating to communication of complaints, was adopted in December 2011 and came into effect in April 2014. It sets out a process for bringing allegations of violation of children's rights before the Committee on the Rights of the Child, the treaty's monitoring body.¹¹



Second, over the 30 years since its adoption, the CRC and its Optional Protocols have heightened the status of the child and raised the profile of children's concerns worldwide. It has thus produced a fundamental change in the way children are regarded, putting children's rights high on the agenda of policymakers and requiring governments to enact laws and policies, draft national plans and programs, and allocate funding to safeguard the rights of children. Children across the world have been recognized as individual rights-holders, possessing those rights inherent to the human dignity of every human being or individual. Children have equally been recognized as having the right to special protections and safeguards provided by all those who are responsible in their lives and communities, starting with the State and its relevant institutions. The CRC has improved the status and participation of children; a recent study

shows that these factors in religious communities help to decrease violence against children.¹²

Most importantly, by heightening the status of the child, the lives of millions of children have been improved, according to UNICEF. Increasing attention to children's rights within the health sector, for example, 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.



With the principle of non-discrimination at its core, the CRC provides a strong foundation for the promotion of gender equality. For example, the prevalence of child marriage—which disproportionately affects girls—has been decreasing globally, with several countries reporting significant new reductions in recent years. According to UNICEF, overall, the proportion of women who were married as children decreased by 15% in the last decade, from one in four to approximately one in five.¹³ Taken together, these facts constitute unprecedented achievements for children’s rights.

A third compelling reason for religious leaders and communities to support the CRC is that it can do much to consolidate and reinforce all that they have done to improve children’s well-being over the last 30 years. One of the most persuasive arguments for endorsing the CRC is the moral imperative to bring about changes in attitudes and behaviors so that children are protected from harm and can develop to their full potential. This is where religious leaders and faith-based organizations, through their actions, particularly at the community level, are already making and can make an even greater difference in children’s lives. Their impact would only be multiplied by using the legal framework of the CRC.

Fourth, the CRC provides an important reference or tool that goes beyond a particular set of religious beliefs, and thus provides a universal basis for common action to tackle the scope and scale of the challenges facing children today.

Since the CRC was adopted 30 years ago, children have come to face a whole new range of threats caused by armed conflict, armed groups that commit acts of terrorism, gun violence in schools,

and the more frequent natural disasters brought on by climate change. It is reported that nearly 250 million children live in countries and areas affected by armed conflict and that millions more have suffered the consequences of climate-related disasters and other chronic environmental crises.¹⁴ Violence against children is further exacerbated by the climate emergency, a growing root cause of many child rights violations, including psychological violence, as documented by the increasing number of children suffering from eco-anxiety.¹⁵ Horrific acts of violence against people of faith inside their sacred houses of worship are occurring in different parts of the world, and children are almost always among the victims.



Moreover, around the world, tens of millions of children are on the move—28 million driven from their homes by conflict, violence and insecurity, and millions more migrating in the hope of finding a better life.¹⁶ Shocking images of the plight of refugee children and their families forced to flee their homes and countries due to armed conflict, gang violence and crime associated with illegal drug trafficking, as well as extreme poverty and other factors, underscore the magnitude and moral force of the challenges children face.

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 (Article 27). Children living in extreme poverty make up nearly half of the 736 million people who survive on less than US \$1.90 a day,¹⁷ whose families struggle to afford the basic health care and nutrition needed to live a decent life. Religious communities bring vital assets to the efforts to eradicate poverty. They offer the moral impetus for action, access to large constituencies, and a wealth of practical experience in helping the poor. Combined with their rootedness, legitimacy and moral authority in most parts of the world, faith actors have a natural point of entry with regard to eradicating child poverty. They can use the CRC in their advocacy and other efforts to help children in poverty.

Every five minutes, a child is killed by a violent act.¹⁸ This is deplorable enough, but the scale of many other forms of violence against children is a grave concern in all countries today. Digital technology, for instance, poses new threats which affect children worldwide, even at a very young age. Children today live in a world where online violence including sexual exploitation and abuse has become commonplace. Digital technology offers enormous opportunities, but it also poses dangers which call for the creation of new policies and practices that protect children from such harm. The second Optional Protocol recognizes "the growing availability of child pornography on the Internet and other evolving technologies." This and other proliferating forms of violence against children have been the main topic of global conferences of religious leaders held in recent years in Panama, Rome and Abu Dhabi, as described later in this chapter.

ECPAT Reaches Out to Religious Communities

The urgent need for religious leaders and communities to help safeguard children online was explained by ECPAT in its Guide to Action specifically developed for this sector, in cooperation with *Religions for Peace*, in order to combat sexual exploitation of children.¹⁹ ECPAT is a network of 90 member organizations in 82 countries with one common mission—to end the sexual exploitation of children. In 2015 the organization made a strategic choice to reach out to religious leaders to help put an end to such crimes because of their important role in their communities, particularly in influencing attitudes and behaviors. As a first step, ECPAT, together with Arigatou International and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists, presented the Guide to Action to Buddhist monks and teachers of the Mekong region at a regional workshop in Bangkok, Thailand. Encouraged by the discussions, participants decided to establish a regional network of Buddhist leaders for child protection. Although it remains a work in progress, this illustrates the potential added value of partnerships between secular organizations and religious communities.

Recent data offer a fifth compelling reason for engaging religious leaders and communities to support the implementation of the CRC. Leading child-rights organizations²⁰ recently called for a "second revolution in child rights" in a new report, *A Second Revolution: 30 years of child rights and the unfinished agenda*.²¹ The report states that it is time for the global community to fulfill the promises of the CRC and identifies the many challenges that still remain, such as:

- Over 5 million children die each year from preventable causes, and nearly half of these deaths are attributable to undernutrition;

- 95,000 children each year—70% of them boys—are murdered²² and 15 million adolescent girls report experiencing forced sex;²³ and,
- 64 million children lack access to primary education.²⁴

The same report calls on governments to take meaningful action to make the implementation of the CRC a reality for all children.

In her 2019 thematic report, *Keeping the Promise: Ending Violence Against Children by 2030*, Marta Santos Pais, then Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children, identified the toll of violence against children stating that “every year, at least 1 billion children—half of the world’s children—experience violence.”²⁵ She further described the various forms of violence faced by millions of children worldwide:

Children are intentionally targeted in politically driven processes, manipulated by organized crime, forced to flee armed and gang violence, sold and

*exploited for economic gain, groomed online, disciplined by violent means, sexually assaulted in the privacy of their homes, neglected in institutions, abused in detention centers, bullied in schools and in sports facilities, and stigmatized and tortured due to superstitious beliefs of harmful practices, including as a result of withcraft accusations.*²⁶

Another recent three-part report by the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities (JLI) on the role of faith actors in preventing, eliminating and perpetrating violence against children provides a comprehensive summary of the case for faith engagement along with examples of best practice and recommendations for action.²⁷

Given the many remaining challenges, the efforts of religious leaders and communities, who are regarded in many contexts as a source of moral authority, are urgently needed in the worldwide movement to promote and defend the rights and well-being of all children.



Characteristics of Religions Selected for this Study

Some of the major religions of the world addressed in this Study go back to antiquity. Though there is a shared heritage of philosophy, values and beliefs among some of the religions, each tradition has its own unique characteristics. The following information on the characteristics of the religions addressed in the Study reflect the research conducted and attempt to present the range of perspectives, but are not intended to be definitive.

Bahá'í Faith: The Bahá'í Faith was founded by Baha'u'llah in the mid-19th century in present-day Iran. Its followers understand Baha'u'llah to be the latest in a series of divine messengers including Abraham, the Buddha, Jesus, Muhammad, and others, by which the will and attributes of God can be understood by human beings. Members of the Bahá'í Faith believe that the crucial need facing humanity today is to find a unifying vision of the future of society and of the nature and purpose of life. Toward this end, they seek to apply the principles and teachings found in the Bahá'í holy writings for personal development and the advancement of society. The Bahá'í Faith has no sects or denominations, nor clergy. Its administrative affairs are organized by collective bodies elected at the local, national, and global levels.²⁸

Buddhism: Buddhism is based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, or the Buddha, described as "the Enlightened One," who lived and taught in South Asia around 500 BCE. Buddhism has taken diverse forms, with some emphasizing rituals and the worship of deities, while others de-emphasize those practices in favor of meditative practices. All forms of Buddhism are founded on the teachings of the Buddha, which are contained in a corpus of *Sutras* (or *Suttas*), and they all share the goal of ending human suffering and the cycle of rebirth.²⁹ This Study considers teachings from the two main branches of Buddhism: **Theravada**, which is primarily practiced in South Asia and Southeast Asia, including Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, and Thailand; and **Mahayana**, which is primarily practiced in China, Korea, Japan, Mongolia, Tibet and Vietnam.³⁰

Christianity: Christianity is based on the life, teachings and person of Jesus Christ. It dates back to the first century CE, and it has come to include various denominations.³¹ The three main historical branches of Christianity are Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox and Protestant. The protestant branch includes numerous denominations and independent churches. Christians regard the Bible as their sacred text, consisting of the Old Testament and the New Testament. The core article of Christian faith is that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, as attested to by his resurrection from the dead, and most Christians regard the Bible as divinely inspired and authoritative, while espousing different views on the nature and extent of its authority. References to Christianity in this Study include a wide variety of denominations with diverse cultural, political and theological perspectives.³²

Hinduism: The Hindu religion is not established around the life and teachings of a particular human founder. Hindus understand their religion or tradition to be based on a body of knowledge or scriptures that include the *Vedas* and *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Gita*, the *Ramayana* and the *Dharma Shastras*, as well as the teachings and examples of exemplary human beings (*sadachara*) and individual human conscience (*atmasantosha*). The word "Veda," in fact, literally means "knowledge," and the four *Vedas* (*Rig*, *Sama*, *Yajur* and *Atharva*) are regarded by most Hindus as the highest authoritative scriptures of Hinduism. Modern scholars consider the *Vedas* to be at least 2,500 years old. The Hindu tradition also reflects the extensive variation in geography, language and culture across the Indian subcontinent. Hindus affirm the existence of one divine being, named in the *Vedas* as *brahman*, who is understood

as the origin, support and destiny of all. This single reality is called by many names, masculine and feminine, and represented by numerous forms and deities. It is both immanent (existing in all beings) and transcendent (unlimited).³³

Islam: In Islam, God's final prophet and messenger is Muhammad, and God's final revelation is the *Quran*, which is regarded as the verbatim word of God.³⁴ The *Quran* is the sacred text of Islam collected within one year of Prophet Muhammad's death. Thirty years later, it was written in one *Mushaf* (copy of the *Quran*) by the third Calif, Othman ibn Affan. The *Hadith* is another authoritative collection of the Prophet Muhammad's actual sayings or actions as narrated by his companions.³⁵ *Sunnah* (also *Sunna* or *Sunnat*) is the body of traditional custom and practice of the Islamic community. It is both a social and legal text and based on the verbally transmitted record of the teachings, deeds and sayings, and silent permissions of the Prophet Muhammad. The *Quran* and the *Sunnah* make up the two primary sources of Islamic theology and law. These two authorities, along with the *Hadith*, are cited in this Study. Islam has five basic pillars that are essential to the faith of Muslims. These include: (1) *Shahada*, to declare one's faith in God and belief in Muhammad; (2) *Salat*, to pray five times a day (at dawn, noon, afternoon, sunset, and evening); (3) *Zakat*, to give to those in need; (4) *Sawm*, to fast during Ramadan; and (5) *Hajj*, to make a pilgrimage to Mecca at least once during a person's lifetime if the person is able. In addition to these basic pillars of Islam, there are six articles of faith (beliefs): belief in one God (Allah), his angels, his books, his prophets, the day of judgment and in *al-qadar* (Divine predestination). These mean that the faith of a Muslim is not complete unless he or she fully believes in all the prophets and all the books revealed by Allah, not only the *Quran*.³⁶

Judaism: Judaism, the oldest of the three monotheistic faiths, is the religion and way of life of the Jewish people. The basic laws and tenets of Judaism are derived from the *Torah*, which comprises the first five books of the *Tanakh*, or Hebrew Bible. The *Torah* tells the story of the creation of the world, God's covenant with Abraham and his descendants, their exodus from Egypt, the revelation at Mount Sinai where God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses and the children of Israel, and the wanderings of the Israelites in the desert, and recapitulates that experience shortly before the entrance to the Promised Land. Judaism teaches that there is one God, incorporeal and eternal, and that all people are created in the image of God and should be treated with dignity and respect. Following the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in the year 70 CE, Jewish religious scholars in the Land of Israel compiled the six volumes of the *Mishnah* in order to record and preserve the canon of Jewish religious legislation, laws and customs. This was later supplemented by the *Gemara*, which recorded commentaries, discussions, and debates contributed by rabbinical scholars in Israel and, previously, in Babylon. Together these two texts comprise the *Talmud*, which remains a living source of religious study, thought and commentary to this day.³⁷

Sikh Faith: The Sikh Faith was established and developed by ten Gurus during the period 1469 to 1708. Guru Nanak Dev Ji, who lived from October 20, 1469 until May 7, 1539, is considered the founder of the Sikh Faith and the first of the ten Sikh Gurus. In the Sikh Faith, the ten Gurus are regarded as the embodiment of the Divine. The *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji* is regarded as the sacred scripture that is the ultimate source of authority and doctrine in the Sikh Faith.³⁸ "Let no one think that God and Guru are separate. The True Guru is the Immaculate Lord. Do not believe that He is a mere human being; He gives honour to the dishonoured."³⁹

1.2 THE CRC'S IMPACT ON LAWS AND POLICIES

This section highlights a few of the many positive developments in laws and policies influenced by the CRC. By 2015, the CRC was fully incorporated into the national law of 48% of all countries (94 out of 197 countries), either automatically or by a separate piece of legislation. Provisions of the CRC were incorporated into the national constitutions of a number of countries, including Argentina, Benin, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, Ethiopia, Ghana, Mexico, Rwanda, and South Africa.⁴⁰ Noteworthy in this context is the fact that religious leaders and scholars influenced the process of amendment of the Kenyan Constitution that began in 1999; Article 53 covers the rights of children and was influenced by the CRC.⁴¹ Many countries in Latin America have adopted comprehensive laws or children's codes to better protect the rights of children.

Other examples include:

- Fifty-four States have prohibited corporal punishment in all settings, including the home. Fifty-six more States have committed to reforming their laws to achieve a complete legal ban.
- By 2015, almost all States had passed national laws requiring school attendance at the primary level, with over 100 States guaranteeing at least nine years of free, compulsory education.



The CRC has effectively raised awareness worldwide that children's rights should be respected and protected. Every child's right to freedom from violence is a fundamental dimension of the treaty. The 2018 annual report of the Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children to the United Nations General Assembly states:

*Close to 100 countries have adopted comprehensive national policy agendas on violence against children, and many have enacted legislation to prohibit physical, psychological and sexual violence and to support child victims.*⁴²

Other notable achievements include the establishment of children's commissioners and ombudsmen and increases in the allocation of resources in national budgets for social programs that benefit children.⁴³

Regional human rights instruments protecting children also emerged after the adoption of the CRC, including the Lanzarote Convention on the Protection of Children against Sexual Exploitation and Sexual Abuse adopted in 2007 and in force in 44 of the 47 Member States of the Council of Europe; the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child adopted in 1999 by the then Organization of African Unity; and, the Cairo Declaration on the Convention on the Rights of the Child and Islamic Jurisprudence, adopted at a 2009 conference sponsored by the Organisation of Islamic Cooperation.⁴⁴

In 2002, the Member States of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) affirmed their commitment to the CRC as they

adopted the Convention on Regional Arrangements for the Promotion of Children's Welfare in South Asia, declaring:

A quarter of the world's children live in South Asia and many of them require assistance and protection to secure and fully enjoy their rights, and to develop to their full potential and lead a responsible life in family and society.⁴⁵

Earlier, in 2000, SAARC also had adopted the Convention on Trafficking against Women and Children. More recently, in 2016, the Heads of Government of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) adopted the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Education for Out-of-School Children and Youth.

A UNICEF publication on the impact of the CRC on law reform in diverse legal systems underscores the treaty's positive impact, stating:

There are clear signs in many parts of the world that governments are paying attention to the structural and legal barriers that threaten children's well-being. Laws and regulations are being reviewed and amended; constitutions are being changed. [...] Evidence shows that legislative reform is critical to addressing discrimination and alleviating poverty and that improved legal and policy frameworks are improving education rates, maternal health, reducing child mortality, combating diseases and achieving other results for children.⁴⁶



1.3 THE ADDED VALUE OF WORKING WITH RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES TO PROTECT CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

The diverse religious leaders consulted to inform this Study asked:

- 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 do we ensure that our places of worship are safe spaces in the most vulnerable times?

One Buddhist leader asked, “What if religious people of different faiths came together in prayer and in practice to work for children? Wouldn’t this make a difference in the lives of children?”

According to the children consulted for this study, children often see religious communities as a source of physical, spiritual and emotional protection. Religions were considered by some of the children as one of the most powerful influences for changing human attitudes and behavior (Sri Lanka, 14-17 year-old children). Others said their religious communities encourage them to share their talents and to serve the community (Uruguay, 12-16 year-old children) and teach them values to learn to live together in harmony (Panama, 11-17 year-old children).

Long before the CRC existed, many religious groups and local faith-based organizations were working in many ways to improve children's protection and well-being, in both the development and humanitarian contexts and specifically in the areas of health, education and child protection. However, the important contributions they made have not been well-documented, particularly in

the field of child protection. A recent global study by the Joint Learning Initiative of Faith and Local Communities, entitled *Faith Actors' Involvement in the Prevention, Elimination and Perpetuation of Violence against Children*, states:⁴⁷

Faith communities, particularly at congregational and grassroots levels, may not have formed an organization that can be registered and identified, nor named the programmes they run with and for children. Thus, contributions of faith actors at the grassroots level who are working to protect children from violence and to support those who have experienced abuse are often undocumented.

UNICEF in particular began to develop strong partnerships with religious organizations in the 1980s in light of pressing concerns regarding child survival and development, promoting immunization, breastfeeding, primary health care and nutrition.⁴⁸ The Catholic Church provided great leadership by supporting National Immunization Days in Colombia and in war-torn El Salvador, and this partnership enabled the “Days of Tranquility,” which made it possible to vaccinate children. Similar success was reported by UNICEF in Brazil and in other countries of Latin America with promoting breastfeeding, oral rehydration therapy, and basic health and nutrition services.⁴⁹

World Vision International has been working with faith leaders on topics of child protection since its establishment in 1950 and has seen the importance of such engagement for long-term impact on the promotion of community-based child protection. According to World Vision in Lebanon, the role

of religious leaders is of particular importance in the Middle East, the region that saw the birth of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Religious leaders in the region have strong influence and reach over their communities, especially because the constitutional frameworks of most Middle Eastern countries are based on religion, with Sharia law generally given authority in many Arab States. In countries such as Lebanon, the religious courts play an important role in handling personal disputes from birth to death, particularly with regard to family matters. As such, engaging with religious leaders in such a context seems essential to ensuring the protection and promotion of children rights.⁵⁰

Overall, there is still little awareness today about the positive role many religious communities are playing in the area of child protection, and some secular organizations have even expressed reluctance to partner with them.⁵¹ One regional study from South Asia focusing on the engagement of religious leaders and communities in combating violence against children commented:

*Despite the potential opportunities presented by partnering with religious leaders, a number of concerns frequently negatively affect their relationships with secular actors, such as the fear that they may favour those with similar religious beliefs.*⁵²

On the other hand, there is today a great deal of discussion and a plethora of perspectives on the role of religion in light of the abuses that have been perpetrated by some clergy members belonging to major religions, as well as the misuse of religion by extremists groups that advocate violence in the name of religion in many parts of the world. Reports of sexual abuse of children in

religious institutions have become well known. As was pointed out by the recent study developed by the Joint Learning Initiative for Faith and Local Communities, the complex reality is that religious communities must have a role in ending violence, while at the same time some are in fact perpetuating violence against children.⁵³ In the consultations for the Study, it was commented that the reluctance of some organizations to work with religious groups is justified because: (1) some clergy have perpetrated abuses against children; and (2) some religious leaders still regard violent forms of discipline against children as necessary.

During the consultations for this Study, concern was often expressed over the many injustices committed in the world, often misusing religion, against girls and women—throughout their life-cycle. These range from female feticide and infanticide to female genital mutilation to child marriage, honor killings, dowry deaths, the banishment of menstruating girls, and the denial of women's equal rights, including sexual and reproductive health rights. Some participants maintained that in many communities religious leaders selectively cite progressive provisions of their scriptures and dismiss such injustices as not sanctioned by their religion but as mere superstitions or harmful practices with only a cultural/traditional basis. To address this, one of the specific recommendations of this Study (see chapter 6) is to encourage religious communities to proactively champion special protection and promotion of the equal rights of girls and women throughout their life-cycle, and campaign against the harmful practices, ignorance and superstition that perpetuate their unequal and unfair treatment.

One of the specific recommendations of this Study is to encourage religious communities to proactively champion special protection and promotion of the equal rights of girls and women throughout their life-cycle, and campaign against the harmful practices, ignorance and superstition that perpetuate their unequal and unfair treatment.

Despite these complex concerns, organizations such as Interpol have stated that they are unable to stop sexual exploitation and abuse of children solely via their policing methods and have called on religious groups for assistance in preventing these crimes.⁵⁴

The attacks on and persecution of people of faith and places of worship are also a cause of serious concern. In a recent statement, United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres expressed great concern over the “disturbing groundswell” of intolerance and hate-based violence aimed at followers of many faiths and called on world leaders to take action to end it. He said that houses of worship have become targets instead of the safe havens they should be and cited a number of consecutive attacks which were perpetrated against churches, mosques and synagogues in various countries. “The world must step up to stamp out anti-Semitism, anti-Muslim hatred, persecution of Christians and all other forms of racism, xenophobia, discrimination and incitement,” he said.⁵⁵

In the consultations held in various regions of the world for the Study, the difficult challenges that children face today were all too obvious. As this Study was being developed, horrific criminal acts were being committed around the world, often in the name of religion and in many cases

targeting civilians including women and children. Attacks like these took the lives of many people—including in churches, mosques and synagogues—in France, Myanmar, New Zealand, Nigeria, Sri Lanka, the United States and elsewhere.

A former Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations writes:

*I see tremendous potential for harnessing the power of religion for the good of humanity. All religions of the world, at their core, teach love, peace, solidarity and compassion as their primary teachings. But in the real world, there is an incredible amount of religious intolerance and extremism, and many wrongs are committed, injustice justified, cruelties and indifferences to the plight of women, children, and the elderly accepted, harmful traditional practices perpetuated and suspicion and hatred inculcated in the minds and hearts of believers—all in the name of religion.*⁵⁶

It has been suggested that this Study may provide opportunities for dialogue that will strengthen the protection of children by building a bridge between “religion” and “human rights,” using the widely shared values of the CRC as a unifying tool. While this may be associated with some challenges, it is a worthy goal and could make a major difference in keeping children safe from violence.

One of the goals of this Study is to clarify the misunderstanding, confusion and misinformation that serve as obstacles to ensuring that the CRC receives the support of all religious groups. In light of the moral authority and enormous influence that religious leaders have in their communities, it is imperative that they become more engaged as advocates for children's rights. It is hoped that they will play a more prominent role in promoting the CRC provisions and core principles within their own communities, especially since, as this Study attempts to show, the values and teachings of the world's major religions are largely in harmony with the CRC. It is encouraging to note that the majority of the diverse religious leaders consulted agreed that they could do more for children's rights if they were supported with the user-friendly tools and evidence-based information they need to promote the CRC.

The following comments were offered by a representative of the World Council of Churches, which shed some light on how some Christian leaders perceive the CRC and how the churches have responded to the program, *Churches' Commitments to Children*.⁵⁷

Christian ideas about human dignity and equality have strongly shaped the concept of human rights in the CRC and other human rights documents. Yet, as the language underscoring children's rights has evolved, some Christians have perceived a disconnection between theological expressions of love and compassion for children and a rights-based understanding of childhood. In certain cases, churches do not see how the CRC's language of rights dovetails with Christian beliefs and values, while some understand rights language as insufficient, or as a framework unable to capture the full scope of Christian responsibility towards

children. Still others have not heard about the CRC, nor had the opportunity to reflect either on children's rights or the churches' responsibilities towards children. By familiarizing themselves with the contents of the CRC through the Churches' Commitments to Children, churches can speak to a broader public, prioritizing children and strengthening efforts with and on behalf of children in a variety of contexts, including neighbourhoods, schools, or national and international discussions. The Churches' Commitments to Children document includes references which promote understanding of the rights of children and adolescents, and makes clear the resonance with Christian theology.



As noted earlier, the enormous value that religious leaders and communities can add to child protection efforts cannot be underestimated. They administer programs, including service delivery; are effective change agents who can influence attitudes and behaviors; inspire action; foster dialogue and social cohesion; and can advocate for children using their moral voice and much more. In Africa, for example, 74% of people identify religious leaders as the group they trust the most.⁵⁸ Moreover, houses of worship, which have traditionally served as sanctuaries for the most vulnerable and excluded members of society, often receive children in need of care and protection.

G20 Interfaith Forum, Tokyo, June 7-9, 2019

This year's theme was "Peace, People, Planet: Pathways Forward." About 2,000 participants attended this interfaith gathering, which preceded the G20 Summit held in Osaka, Japan. The interfaith forum submitted recommendations to G20 leaders. The forum offers an annual platform through which a network of religiously-linked institutions and initiatives engage with global agendas such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 goals. It also builds on the vital roles that religious institutions and beliefs play in world affairs, reflecting their rich diversity of institutions, ideas, and values. The forum over the years has considered wide-ranging agendas, including economic models and systems, the environment, women, families, children, work, humanitarian aid, health, education, freedom of religion or belief, global security, governance, human rights, and the rule of law. In this forum, Dr. Mustafa Ali, Secretary General of the Global Network of Religions for Children, encouraged participants to provide a "prophetic voice" to warn of impending disasters that, if ignored today, will be even more costly in the future. He pointed to violence against children and changes in climate as two pressing examples of such disasters. By its conclusion five areas emerged to shape the core recommendations of the 2019 forum:⁵⁹

- Work for Peace with a New Framing of Religious Roles
- Focus Sharply on the Needs of Children
- Protect the Rainforests
- Strengthen Rule of Law and Protection of Human Rights
- Combat Human Trafficking and Modern Slavery

1.4 CONTRIBUTIONS OF RELIGIOUS GROUPS TO THE DRAFTING AND ADOPTION OF THE CRC

Some religious communities were actively involved in the ten-year process of drafting the Convention of the Rights of the Child (CRC), but this history is not well-known. A core group of NGOs promoted the adoption of the CRC and contributed to the drafting process. The International Catholic Child Bureau was a member of the core group of six NGOs, along with Amnesty International, Anti-Slavery International, Defence for Children International, the International Commission of Jurists, and Radda Barnen (a member of Save the Children International). The Bahá'í Faith and the Friends (Quaker) community also made important contributions to the drafting and advocated for the CRC's adoption, as did the International Council of Jewish Women, the World Jewish Congress

and the World Federation of Methodist Women.⁶⁰ Thereafter, a number of religious leaders and faith-based organizations continued to play an active role in promoting the adoption, ratification and implementation of the CRC.

Over the years since the adoption of the treaty, many have come to the understanding that the inherent rights of the child are largely reflected in the teachings and traditions of the world's major religions. In light of the growing appreciation of the CRC's vision of a better world for children, diverse religious groups from different cultures around the world have endorsed and supported the implementation of the CRC. As just one example, a study on the engagement of faith and interfaith

actors against violence against children in South Asia, whose work was guided by the principles and standards of the CRC, reflects this understanding:

The key role of faith actors in the protection of children is based on a holistic approach, rooted in spiritual teachings from their respective faiths, and built on a shared recognition of the intrinsic dignity, value and rights of all children around the world.⁶¹

The same study also addresses the important role of religious leaders in taking action publicly to prevent violence against children, noting that “some religious leaders are promoting respect for children’s rights through the teachings of their respective faiths” and that they can “play a pivotal role in challenging faith-based justification for practices that are harmful to children by disseminating beliefs, scriptures and religious teachings in the light of children’s human rights law.”⁶²

(Chapter 4 of this Study highlights the diverse contributions that religious groups have made over the years to children’s rights, with a special focus on ending violence against children.)

Religious Groups’ Contributions to the CRC Drafting Process

The drafting history of the CRC contains five instances of faith-based organizations making independent proposals on specific articles being drafted. The five instances are: the International Council of Jewish Women (Article 2, Non-Discrimination), the Bahá’í International Community (Article 17, Access to Appropriate Information, and Article 29, Aims of Education), the World Federation of Methodist Women (Article 37, Children Deprived of Their Liberty), Friends World Committee for Consultation (Article 38, Children in Armed Conflicts).⁶³



1.5 ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN'S RIGHTS BY RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND FAITH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

The first global conference of religious leaders focusing exclusively on the CRC was held in the United States in July 1990, in Princeton, New Jersey, after the treaty was adopted unanimously by the United Nations General Assembly on November 20, 1989. This unprecedented conference, organized by UNICEF and *Religions for Peace*, gathered 150 religious leaders from 40 countries and 15 of the world's religious traditions. The main objective of this multi-religious gathering was to address the role of religions in protecting the world's children and to call on religious groups worldwide to take an active role in promoting the CRC's ratification and implementation. Participants recognized that religious communities are well placed to promote the CRC and were among the first to acknowledge that the CRC's principles are based on moral and ethical values.⁶⁴

The religious leaders at the conference issued a groundbreaking statement—The Princeton Declaration—pledging that their religious communities would examine their own practices and collaborate with social agencies and religious bodies to eliminate all forms of discrimination against children and to support their well-being. They also pledged to advocate for the ratification and implementation of the CRC, a commitment that was welcomed by UNICEF and many NGOs working with children. The value and impact of the religious voices was expected to have a positive effect, helping to ensure the quick ratification of the CRC.⁶⁵ The 20 ratifications by United Nations Member States needed for the CRC to enter into force were quickly achieved, by September 2, 1990. Ratification was not limited to Member States and for that reason States such as the Holy

See and Switzerland also became States Parties to the CRC.

Thus began a partnership between *Religions for Peace* and UNICEF, which continues today for the purpose of encouraging the voices of religious communities in support of children. *Religions for Peace* is the largest coalition of representatives of the world's religious communities dedicated to achieving peace and promoting human rights and development. The organization works in some 90 countries and includes Women of Faith and Interfaith Youth networks.

After the CRC was unanimously adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989 and entered into force the next year, it produced great momentum for the promotion of children's rights. This momentum was further strengthened by the extraordinary World Summit for Children held in September 1990, organized by UNICEF, which was enormously successful in convening an unprecedented number of world leaders to address exclusively issues concerning children.⁶⁶ At the Summit, 72 Heads of State and Government pledged their support for the survival and development of children. At a special function organized on the sidelines of the Summit, 46 of these world leaders personally signed the CRC, indicating their intent to ensure their States ratified it. This is thought to be the largest number of world leaders ever to sign a United Nations convention on a single occasion.⁶⁷

Subsequent to the World Summit for Children, a series of meetings in 1995 and 1996 among religious experts addressed a major UN Study

by Graça Machel, entitled “Impact of Armed Conflict on Children.” This Study presented a comprehensive agenda for urgent action to ensure the protection of children’s rights in times of war. One of its key recommendations was to speedily conclude and adopt the draft Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child raising the age of recruitment and participation in armed forces to 18 years. This process likely influenced the adoption of the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. In 1996, religious representatives were convened again, contributing to the World Congress Against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children, held in Stockholm, which helped to widen support to the protection of children from sale and sexual exploitation and likely influenced the adoption of the Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography.⁶⁸

These events produced joint multi-religious declarations which provided moral and ethical perspectives on the issues addressed and confirmed the commitment of religious communities to work together to address the many challenges regarding the rights of children. The statements called on governments and the United Nations system to strengthen their efforts on behalf of children facing such difficult circumstances. An important development during this period was the rapid number of ratifications of the CRC taking place all over the world. By 1995, only five years after the CRC entered into force, the vast majority of States had ratified the treaty.

Inspired in part by the CRC ratification and the global momentum for the promotion of children’s rights, the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) was established in the year 2000 by 294 religious leaders and grassroots child-rights

workers from 33 different countries and all of the world’s major religious traditions. They gathered in Tokyo to launch the GNRC at the invitation of the Arigatou Foundation (now [Arigatou International](#)). The Arigatou Foundation had been working actively with UNICEF throughout the 1990s to support child survival in emergencies and protect child rights in places such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Mozambique, and the West Bank and Gaza.

The GNRC continues to grow today, with organizational and individual members from diverse religions in some 55 countries. Interfaith cooperation for children’s rights is a major priority in the diverse programs and activities of GNRC members.

To commemorate the 10th anniversary of the World Summit for Children held in 1990, the first-ever Special Session on Children of the United Nations General Assembly, was held in 2002 in New York City. It was organized by the United Nations under the auspices of the General Assembly with the support of UNICEF in collaboration with Religions for Peace. The Special Session on Children highlighted the progress in the advancement of child rights, including a major reduction in child mortality, improved child immunization, more children in school, and a heightened awareness of children’s rights, as well as the higher priority given children in national political agendas. It adopted a strategic Declaration and Plan of Action which recognized the tremendous outreach of religious leaders and their key role as front-line actors for children to help translate the goals and target of the Plan of Action into priorities for their communities and to mobilize and inspire people to take action in favor of children.⁶⁹

On the occasion of the Special Session on Children, recalling the commitments of religious leaders at the 1990 Princeton Conference, Dr. William Vendley, Secretary General of *Religions for Peace*, stated:

*Our religious traditions summon us to regard the child as more than a legal entity. The sacredness of life, honored in all our religious traditions, founds our belief in the ultimate meaning and the value of the child... and compels us to be a voice of conscience.*⁷⁰

Speaking on behalf of the religious leaders and grassroots workers of the GNRC from around the world, Rev. Takeyasu Miyamoto, the founder of Arigatou International, addressed the Special Session:

*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.*⁷¹

Rev. Miyamoto made three pledges to the General Assembly: to develop a global program of ethics education for children, to support the implementation of the CRC through prayer and action, and to mobilize religious communities in the fight against child poverty. Arigatou International has sought to fulfill these pledges through its four global initiatives: the Global Network of Religions for Children, Ethics Education for Children, the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children, and the Interfaith Initiative to End Child Poverty.

Arigatou International convened a multi-religious gathering in Maryknoll, New York, USA, immediately following the conclusion of the Special Session on Children, bringing together 95 religious leaders and child-rights workers from 33 countries to reflect on the Declaration and explore how they could work together to implement the Plan of Action. Once again, religious leaders from Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and other traditions affirmed the support of their respective faiths for the dignity and human rights of children and called on members of their communities to build an interfaith partnership with civil society organizations and United Nations agencies to ensure that children are loved, protected and respected. They further agreed that religious leaders play many important roles, including as advocates with policymakers, media, civil society and other institutions.

A Common Prayer of Dedication to the World's Children by Religious Leaders at the United Nations Special Session on Children, 2002

The child has the breath and spirit of life. The child, present here and now, is the past embodied and the future becoming.

The child wants to survive, to be protected, to develop.

The child needs peace, with justice and freedom.

The child is life and miracle, beauty and mystery, fulfillment and promise.

Let us save the child, protect the child, care for the child.

FORUMS OF THE GLOBAL NETWORK OF RELIGIONS FOR CHILDREN (GNRC)

The GNRC has held five global forums in different regions of the world, bringing together well over 1,000 religious leaders and grassroots children's advocates from diverse traditions, along with representatives of United Nations agencies and multilateral development institutions, to advance interfaith cooperation for children. The principles and standards of the CRC have been front-and-center at each of these forums. The GNRC membership spans some 55 countries, and one of the network's global priorities is promoting the rights of children, particularly with events and programs on and around the annual World Day of Prayer and Action for Children on November 20, a date which commemorates the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child on November 20, 1989.

2000

The GNRC 1st Forum, held in Tokyo, Japan under the theme of "Prayer and Practice for the Future of Children," brought together 294 religious leaders and grassroots child-rights workers from 33 different countries and all of the world's major religious traditions to inaugurate the GNRC. The participants issued the landmark GNRC Statement, in which they declared, "Together, people of religious conviction agree that every child is promise, sacred gift, and pledge of the future. Our diverse religious visions shape our approaches to the child; they call us to repentance, hope, and commitment," and called on people of faith "to engage their deepest religious and moral teachings for the advocacy of children and the defense of their rights among their own believers and in the public at large."

2004

The GNRC 2nd Forum, held in Geneva, Switzerland under the theme of "Learning to Share: Values, Action, Hope," brought together 359 religious leaders and representatives from grassroots NGOs from 7 major religions, 68 countries in 7 world regions, including 38 children and young people. At the 2nd Forum, the **Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children** was established, and tasked with collaborating with UNICEF and UNESCO to develop an interfaith program of ethics education for children.

The Universal House of Justice

“Children are the most precious treasure a community can possess, for in them are the promise and guarantee of the future. They bear the seeds of the character of future society which is largely shaped by what the adults constituting the community do or fail to do with respect to children. They are a trust no community can neglect with impunity. An all-embracing love of children, the manner of treating them, the quality of the attention shown them, the spirit of adult behaviour toward them—these are all among the vital aspects of the requisite attitude.”⁷⁴

1.6 GLOBAL AND REGIONAL DECLARATIONS ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD BY RELIGIOUS LEADERS

As discussed in the previous section, over the last 30 years the CRC and the topic of children’s rights has motivated many religious groups to embrace the vision set out in the treaty. To a large extent this is due to the effective advocacy of organizations such as UNICEF and leading faith-based organizations around the world such as World Vision International who sought to work with religious groups and found such partnerships to have a significant impact on children’s rights and well-being. Many religious leaders were moved to action by the statements issued in key conferences in different parts of the world, several of which are described below.

2006: Rabat Declaration on Children in the Islamic World

The First Islamic Ministerial Conference on the Child, held in Rabat, Morocco in cooperation with the Islamic Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (ISESCO), UNICEF and the OIC, brought together Ministers in charge of child affairs in the Member States of the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC), along with the heads of Arab, Islamic and international governmental and non-governmental organizations. The participants adopted the Rabat Declaration, which states that the participants are guided by the teachings of Islam and stresses the need for taking due care of children and granting them full rights. Participants emphasized in the declaration that “the Convention on the Rights of the Child constitutes a frame of reference for the promotion and protection of the rights of the child” and declared their commitment “to respect and ensure the rights of each child in our societies without discrimination of any kind, irrespective of race, colour, sex, language, religion, political opinion or social status.” They further agreed to “adhere



to the general principles of child rights, *inter alia*, the best interests of the child, non-discrimination, participation, survival and development, which provide the framework for all action concerning children and adolescents alike.”⁷⁵



2006: Kyoto Declaration, a Multi-religious Commitment to Confront Violence against Children

Following the 2006 United Nations Study on Violence against Children, UNICEF joined *Religions for Peace* to initiate a process of multi-religious reflection and dialogue, which led to the Kyoto Declaration, adopted at the *Religions for Peace* Eighth World Assembly in Japan. The Kyoto Declaration is a testament to the shared recognition of the inherent dignity and value of children and calls all religious communities to join in an alliance to protect and promote the rights and well-being of children. The Declaration includes core commitments to mobilize the voice and action of religious leaders and communities to the prevention and protection of children from violence. The religious leaders gathered in Kyoto affirmed:

We find strong consensus across our religious traditions about the inherent dignity of every person, including children. Our faith traditions take a holistic view of a child's life, and thus seek

*to uphold all the rights of the child in the contexts of its family, community and the broader social, economic and political environment. All children hold these rights equally and we must ensure that boys and girls have equal opportunities to enjoy these rights, particularly education, protection, health, and social development and participation.*⁷⁶

2017: The Beirut Declaration and Its 18 Commitments on “Faith for Rights”

In March 2017, the “[Faith for Rights](#)” framework was adopted by various faith-based and civil society actors.⁷⁷ This framework provides space for a cross-disciplinary reflection and action on the deep connections between religions and human rights. The 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights” include the pledge to build on experiences and lessons learned in engaging with children and youth, who are either victims of or vulnerable to incitement to violence in the name of religion. Commitment XIII also aims at designing methodologies and adapting tools and narratives to enable religious communities to deal with this phenomenon effectively, with particular attention to the important role of parents and families in detecting and addressing early signs of vulnerability of children and youth to violence in the name of religion. Commitment XII refers to refining the curriculums, teaching materials and textbooks wherever some religious interpretations, or the way they are presented, may give rise to the perception of condoning violence or discrimination. Furthermore, commitment V affirms the right of all women, girls and boys not to be subjected to any form of discrimination and violence, including harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, child and/or forced marriages and crimes committed in the name of so-called honour.

United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, Michelle Bachelet⁷⁸

Video statement to the Global Summit on Religion, Peace and Security (29 April 2019)

"Human rights are closely connected to religion, security and peace. Religious leaders play a crucial role in either defending human rights, peace and security – or, unfortunately, in undermining them. Supporting the positive contributions of faith-based actors is crucial, as is preventing the exploitation of religious faith as a tool in conflicts, or as interpreted to deny people's rights.

Human rights and faith can be mutually supportive. Indeed, many people of faith have worked at the heart of the human rights movement, precisely because of their deep attachment to respect for human dignity, human equality, and justice. I am convinced that faith-based actors can promote trust and respect between communities. And I am committed to assisting governments, religious authorities and civil society actors to work jointly to uphold human dignity and equality for all.

In recent years, my office has been working with faith-based actors to conceive the 'Faith for Rights' framework. Its 18 commitments reach out to people of different religions and beliefs in all regions of the world, to promote a common, action-oriented platform.

The 'Faith for Rights' framework includes a commitment not to tolerate exclusionary interpretations, which instrumentalize religions, beliefs or their followers for electoral purposes or political gains. In this context, it is vital to protect religious minorities, refugees and migrants, particularly where they have been targeted by incitement to hatred and violence.

We look forward to seeing the 'Faith for Rights' framework translated into practical outreach tools and capacity-building programmes. Already, it has been picked up by a number of communities. For example, the 18 commitments have been translated into Greek and Turkish in the context of the Religious Track of the Cyprus Peace Process, to be used in human rights education projects across the island.

Respect for human rights shapes societies that are more peaceful, more resilient, more sustainably developed—more successful, across a whole range of metrics. School by school and town by town, local success stories can inspire positive changes elsewhere in the world.

We hope the 'Faith for Rights' framework will also inspire interdisciplinary research on questions related to faith and rights. Deeper exploration of the ethical and spiritual foundations provided by religions and beliefs can help to debunk the myth that human rights are solely Western values. On the contrary: the human rights agenda is rooted in cultures across the world. Respect for human life, and human dignity, well-being and justice, are common to us all.

'Faith' can indeed stand up for 'Rights' so that both enhance each other. As the 'Faith for Rights' framework proclaims, "We are resolved to challenge the manipulation of religions in both politics and conflicts. We intend to be a balancing united voice of solidarity, reason, compassion, moderation, enlightenment and corresponding collective action."

2017: Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Children

The 5th Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), held in Panama in 2017, strengthened the engagement and work of religious leaders and communities to combat the many forms of violence against children. The Panama Declaration includes 10 specific commitments related to ending violence against children (see full text in Annex VIII).⁷⁹ This forum was the

first global gathering in which religious leaders from a broad spectrum of traditions specifically discussed what more they could do to protect children from violent extremism, gang violence and organized crime, as well as sexual exploitation and abuse. They also discussed their role in nurturing spirituality and ending violence in child upbringing. In bringing religious communities



together, the 5th Forum also aimed to foster contributions to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially target 16.2, “End abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children.” Other Sustainable Development Goals and targets the Forum sought to address include ending violence against women and girls (targets 5.2 and 5.3), “prohibition and elimination of the worst forms of child labour, including recruitment and use of child soldiers, and by 2025 end child labour in all its forms” (target 8.7), and keeping children safe in schools and communities, and promoting peace and non-violence (targets 4.a, 4.7, 11.2. and 11.7).

The Panama Declaration makes a strong statement about the important role of religious communities in promoting the CRC:

Building upon the GNRC’s 17 years of service to the world’s children, we affirm the fundamental dignity of every boy and girl. We reaffirm the moral imperative to protect children from harm, as enshrined and protected in the teachings of all of the world’s religious and spiritual communities and in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its Optional Protocols. We believe in the power of interfaith cooperation to transform the world.

2017: The Rome Declaration – Child Dignity in the Digital World

A global conference was held in Rome in October 2017 under the theme of “Child Dignity in the Digital World.” Participants acknowledged the numerous benefits and opportunities presented by the internet, but focused on finding solutions to the detrimental impact of pornography and other crimes committed online that harm children.

These crimes include sexual abuse and sexual exploitation of children, as well as cyber-bullying, harassment and sextortion, all of which have become commonplace online. In addressing the participants at the conference, Pope Francis stated, “A society can be judged by the way it treats its children.” The Rome Declaration makes an appeal to “leaders of the world’s great religions to inform and mobilize members of every faith to join in a global movement to protect the world’s children.”⁸⁰

2017: Churches’ Commitments to Children⁸¹

At the 10th Assembly of the World Council of Churches (WCC) in 2013, a working group of 38 churches developed a joint declaration, “Putting Children at the Centre,” which called on member churches to place a greater focus on children and encouraged the WCC to assist churches in doing so. In response to this declaration, the WCC and UNICEF signed a global partnership to build the capacity of churches and ecumenical partners to promote children’s rights. In 2017, after an 18-month consultative process involving 235 experts, a consensus was reached among WCC member churches on the question, “How can churches best use their influence to improve children’s lives?” An agreement was reached on



three core commitments: child protection, child participation and inter-generational climate justice.

After the WCC's highest governing body endorsed the action plan, in 2017 the WCC Secretary General launched the Churches' Commitments to Children as an invitation to improve outcomes for children in church communities around the world, asking all WCC member churches to join their efforts for children's rights. The high number of responses from churches and partners to implement the Commitments to Children was unprecedented. The WCC and UNICEF designed a [mapping platform](#) where churches can request support to implement specific commitments and offer their own expertise or resources to support other churches in the implementation of child rights.⁸²

2018: Global Partners Forum for Faith Action for Children on the Move: Action Plan⁸³

The joint action plan was initiated by World Vision with 14 faith-based organizations and developed based on discussions at workshops in Geneva (May 2018), New York (July 2018), and at the Global Forum on Faith Action for Children on the Move, held in Rome (October 2018).⁸⁴ This plan represents the road map for Faith Action partners to respond and scale up collective action for children on the move. It includes specific actions—many of which are related to the child rights enshrined in the CRC—on three themes:

1. Providing spiritual support to children, families and caregivers as a source of healing and resilience;
2. Strengthening the continuum of care for child protection; and
3. Building peaceful societies and opposing xenophobia, racism and discrimination.

Pope Francis' Comments on the CRC

Pope Francis has commented on the CRC: "The acknowledgment and defense of the dignity of the human person is the origin and basis of every right social and political order, and the Church has recognized the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) as 'a true milestone on the path of moral progress of humanity' (cf. JOHN PAUL II, Addresses to the United Nations Organization, 1979 and 1995). So too, in the knowledge that children are among those most in need of care and protection, the Holy See received the Declaration on the Rights of the Child (1959) and adhered to the relative Convention (1990) and its two optional protocols (2001). The dignity and rights of children must be protected by legal systems as priceless goods for the entire human family" (cf. *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, Nos. 244-245). Pope Francis also declared that the Church adheres to the goal of putting an end to "the abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children" set by the United Nations in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (target 16.2).

2018: Abu Dhabi Declaration of the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities: Child Dignity in the Digital World⁸⁵

Inspired by Pope Francis and the world conference held in Rome a year earlier, a declaration was issued by the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities: Child Dignity in the Digital World Forum. It was endorsed by religious and spiritual leaders participating in the two-day assembly, which took place in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, on November 19-20, 2018. Participants pledged to act upon the declaration's provisions and achieve the objectives and obligations outlined

by the leaders of the seven major world religions participating in the event. Participants agreed to:

1. Unite as faith leaders and join with people of all faiths to prevent harm to children and to promote children's physical, social, psychological and spiritual development;
2. Advocate for a universal truth that no form of progress or advancement can justify any form of harm to children;
3. Foster dialogue in places of worship worldwide on the role of community faith leaders in supporting the dignity and protection of children, especially in the digital world;
4. Form and engage effectively in partnerships with leaders of every faith to address the religious implications of online child abuse and exploitation; and
5. Work to inspire spiritual and practical action and education by all faiths within their own religious leadership at all levels on how to respond to cases of child abuse and to support victims and their families.

For many religious leaders, attending the Abu Dhabi Forum was a turning point. Religious leaders and delegates pledged to join efforts to prevent child abuse and exploitation, while contributing to develop their physical, social, spiritual and emotional capabilities and potentials. The declaration presented in Abu Dhabi affirms that maintaining children's dignity is essential to any society's progress and stability and is recognized and guaranteed by conventions, laws, regulations and customs in force. These events resulted in the formation of the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities with the mission to find ways to safeguard child dignity online but also to work with religious communities to tackle other hard issues that threaten children and society such as hate crimes.

Statement by the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar at the "Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities: Child Dignity in the Digital World" Forum in Abu Dhabi, November 20, 2018

"There is no doubt that religions in the ancient and the recent times, have agreed that the children are the youth of tomorrow and the future leaders who will bear the responsibility in every nation that aims for power and progress. Muslim jurists have unanimously agreed that the Islamic legislative system is based on five purposes [of life], for which Allah has sent messengers and set legislations, namely: protecting one's religion, offspring, mind, body, and property. These five purposes constitute the foundations of any human society aiming at psychological stability and peace. The Divine Law protects these five pillars with strict rules—first, in order to apply them and, second, in order to protect them from what may tamper with them. As for the purpose of preserving the offspring, Islam has prohibited adultery, rape, indecent assault, killing boys and burying girls alive. Islam is pioneer in enacting a comprehensive and sufficient set of legislations concerning the children's rights and interests, unmatched in any other legal system. Islam pays due care to the children even before they form as fetuses in their mothers' wombs, and continues to do so until they grow into mature men and women."

CONCLUSION

The diverse religious leaders who participated in the various consultations for the development of this Study reached the following conclusion: the world's major religions and the CRC share a common vision—they aim to create a better world in which all children are cared for and can thrive. That shared goal, which implies ensuring that every child has the chance to realize his or her fullest potential, creates an important opportunity. If the international community is to safeguard the rights of the child recognized in the CRC and the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, concerted action is urgently needed. This is stated clearly in the recent report, *A Second Revolution: 30 years of child rights and the unfinished agenda*:

Without a stronger rights-based approach to children's well-being and development, the UN Sustainable Development Goals—with their twin objectives of ending poverty by 2030 and protecting the planet—will be difficult, if not impossible to achieve. The connection between the CRC and the Goals is a close one: many of the SDG targets are directly related to the Convention. Many more address issues, from climate change and inequality to good governance, that are critical enablers of the promises to children set out in the CRC. The UN's own recent assessment of the SDGs shows that many of these promises are being broken, with implementation in most areas being off-track, or in areas such as hunger, stalling altogether.⁸⁶

Religious institutions and communities, along with other key actors and stakeholders, can play a vital role in helping to realize the SDGs. This Study aims to support the meaningful work being done by both faith-based communities and child-rights advocates and to help provide a roadmap

for partnerships between them for securing the rights of all children. Nevertheless, some challenges remain before children's rights are understood in accordance with the principles and standards of the CRC, and further constructive dialogue is needed between religious groups and child-rights advocates. It is important to keep in mind in this context, as was noted in the lessons learned by World Vision's Channels of Hope (featured in chapter 4):

Engaging religious leaders and communities is most effective when done through the lens of their religious and sacred texts alongside the relevant facts, legal frameworks and statistics.

Nobel Laureate and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said this when awarded the Nobel Prize:

There is much to be done, there is much that can be done... one person of integrity can make a difference, a difference of life and death... As long as one child is hungry, our lives will be filled with anguish and shame. What all these victims need above all is to know that they are not alone; that we are not forgetting them, that when their voices are stifled we shall lend them ours, that while their freedom depends on ours, the quality of our freedom depends on theirs.⁸⁷

“

Every religion preaches that every single person is God's child and that we all are one big family.

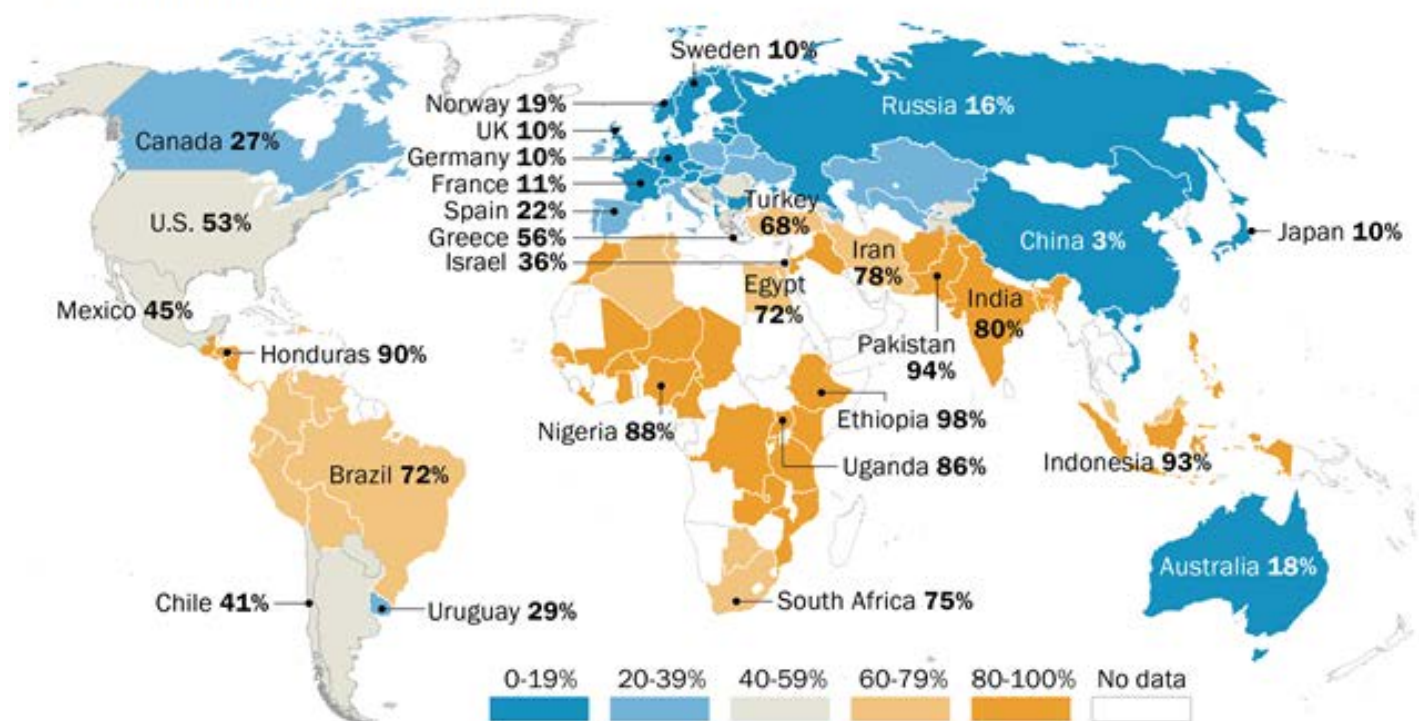
— Muslim, Hindu, Christian and Buddhist children aged 14-17 (Focus Group held for this Study in Sri Lanka)

Recommendations from a Religious Leader⁸⁸

- Get to know the CRC, to focus on the objectives of the document, the reality of the legal framework and the reality of religious values and traditions.
- Recognize that there is a space for study and then an opportunity to correct our actions, first inward and then towards society.
- Make the voices of children become actions that transform realities of death into realities of LIFE.
- Recognize that emerging issues (migration, climate change, gangs, refugees, etc.) have a great impact on children.
- Identify ways to harmonize values and religious teachings so that they are observed and put into practice in the contexts where we are called to be the Church, or community of FAITH.
- Establish a sense of urgency in the face of the need to take concrete actions to respond to the realities of violence in which children live.

Religion is very important to people in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia, Latin America

% who say religion is very important in their lives



Source: Pew Research Center surveys, 2008 to 2017.
"The Age Gap in Religion Around the World"

PEW RESEARCH CENTER



CHAPTER 2. OVERVIEW OF THE CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD



INTRODUCTION

Many of the diverse religious leaders who participated in the consultations for this Study stated that they were not very familiar with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and asked for a brief overview of the treaty.⁸⁹ They also stressed that they needed to know the CRC's main principles in order to understand the value of the treaty and its relevance to their own work, without having to understand all of the legal terminology. "Give us a simple explanation that we can use as a reference," they said.

This chapter provides an overview of the key aspects of the CRC. Also recommended reading is chapter 5, which provides answers to the most frequently asked questions about the CRC, by those consulted for this Study. For ease of reference, the following timeline is included to show readers some milestones in the development of children's rights.

Timeline – Children's Rights⁹⁰



1924

Geneva Declaration on the Rights of the Child adopted by the League of Nations



1959

Declaration on the Rights of the Child



1973

ILO Minimum Age Convention 138



1979

International Year of the Child



1989

Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted by United Nations General Assembly



1990

Princeton Conference of Religious Leaders calls for ratification of the Convention on the Rights of the Child



1990

The World Summit for Children adopts the World Declaration on the Survival, Protection and Development of Children and Plan of Action



1990

The Convention on the Rights of the Child enters into force



1990

Guidelines for the Prevention of Juvenile Delinquency approved by the United Nations General Assembly



1990

United Nations Rules for the Protection of Juveniles Deprived of their Liberty, adopted by the General Assembly resolution 45/113



1999

The ILO adopts the Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention 182



2000

Two Optional Protocols to the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted on the involvement of children in armed conflict, and on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography



2002

United Nations General Assembly holds Special Session on Children, where world leaders commit their States to specific goals for improving the prospects of children over the following decade under the banner of "A World Fit for Children"



2011

Third Optional Protocol to the Convention on the Rights of the Child on Communications Procedure adopted by the United Nations General Assembly



2015

Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations



2019

30th Anniversary of the adoption of the CRC

2.1 THE BASICS OF THE CRC

There are three major reasons why the CRC is regarded as a landmark treaty.

First, it recognizes children as subjects of rights as opposed to objects of charity or the property of adults. By recognizing children as individuals with human rights, the CRC brought about a paradigm shift in the way children are to be regarded and treated by States and their relevant authorities, as well as by other actors who have duties and responsibilities regarding the child (referred to as “duty-bearers”), including teachers and parents. States are obliged to take steps to protect the rights of all children and establish mechanisms to monitor and ensure compliance (judicial and non-judicial, including juvenile courts and ombuds for children) and to hold the duty-bearers accountable.

Second, the CRC recognizes in a comprehensive manner the civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights of children. Along with this, another key shift introduced by the CRC is that, since children are recognized as human beings with rights, they have the right to express their views, which should be heard and respected.

Third, the CRC is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in history.⁹¹

The CRC defines the child with this phrase: “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier” (Article 1). Four provisions of the CRC—articles 2, 3, 6, and 12—make up the treaty’s core guiding principles, meaning they should be applied when interpreting and implementing all other rights in the Convention:

1. **Article 2:** The rights in the CRC shall apply to all children without discrimination of any kind irrespective of the child or the child’s parent’s or legal guardians’ status.
2. **Article 3:** In all actions concerning children, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.
3. **Article 6:** Every child has the inherent right to life, survival and development.
4. **Article 12:** Children have the right to express their views in all matters that affect their lives and to be heard, while taking into account their age and the level of their maturity.

The diverse religious leaders consulted for this Study were particularly interested in the following two implications of the guiding principles. First, the right to non-discrimination (Article 2) means that all children are rights-holders within the State’s jurisdiction, and thus that none should be excluded from exercising their rights regardless of their or their parents’ or their legal guardians’ race, color, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property, disability, birth or other status. Second, the best interests of the child (Article 3) are to be a primary consideration in all matters concerning



children. These are principles that religious groups and religious institutions must also apply in their work or whenever they engage with children, for example, in religious schools and in their houses of worship. It is further recommended that religious groups who work with children adopt child protection policies in accordance with the CRC.

The child's right to life, survival and development (Article 6) requires that the authorities must protect each child's inherent right to life and take all measures to ensure the child's full development—physical, spiritual, moral and social. This specific right also means that the death penalty is explicitly prohibited for anyone under 18 under the CRC and that States must ensure to the maximum extent possible the survival and development of children. This right is closely linked to the rights of the child to the enjoyment of the highest attainable standard of health, to health services and to an adequate standard of living. Within this context, measures to ensure survival include growth monitoring, oral rehydration and disease control, breastfeeding, immunization, nutrition, birth spacing and women's literacy. Furthermore, States are urged to take all possible measures to improve perinatal care for mothers and babies, reduce infant and child mortality, and create conditions that promote the well-being of all young children.

The CRC thus provides a broad mandate to secure the rights and well-being of all children and to recognize and account for the agency of the child in all actions that concern children.⁹² The Committee on the Rights of the Child, which monitors the implementation of the CRC, reminds States in its Concluding Observations to take adequate measures to assure every child the right to freely express his or her views and have those views respected and duly taken into account (Article 12),

without discrimination. In this context, States must therefore address discrimination, including against vulnerable or marginalized groups of children, to ensure that children are assured their right to be heard and are enabled to participate in all matters affecting them on an equal basis with all other children.



The Committee further urges States to “pay special attention to the right of the girl child to be heard, to receive support, if needed, to voice her view and her view be given due weight, as gender stereotypes and patriarchal values undermine and place severe limitations on girls in the enjoyment of the right set forth in article 12.”⁹³

These guiding principles of the CRC establish a vision that every child matters, that the best interests of the child must guide decisions that affect children's lives, that governments must ensure that all children have the opportunity to develop to their full potential, and that children should have the opportunity to participate in decisions that shape their lives. Inherent in the CRC is the concept of dignity, which requires that every child is recognized, respected and protected as a rights-holder and as a unique and valuable human being with an individual personality, distinct needs and interests, and the right to have his or her privacy respected.⁹⁴

Beyond these guiding principles, the CRC provides a comprehensive framework of rights that are inherent to every child. It includes civil and political rights that extend to all persons, such as the right to a name and nationality and the right to be free from any form of violence and not to be subjected to torture, cruel, inhuman, or degrading treatment; the right to be free from various forms of exploitation (which are also a form of violence); the right to freedom of expression; and the right to access information. It also contains essential economic and social rights, including health and education rights, as well as cultural

rights. The CRC further recognizes rights unique to children which are fundamental to childhood including the right to birth registration, the right to grow up in a family environment including the child's "right to know and be cared for by his or her parents" and benefit from special protection when alternative care solutions are considered such as foster care and adoption (including *kafalah* under Islamic law). As noted in chapter 1, the breadth of the CRC has established a foundation for the development of laws, policies, and programs designed to advance the rights of all children.

Optional Protocols to the CRC

The United Nations General Assembly has adopted three Optional Protocols to the CRC, which complement and strengthen the original treaty. These supplemental provisions are optional because States can choose whether or not to be bound by them. In 2000, the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict and the Optional Protocol to the CRC on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography were adopted, significantly strengthening the international legal framework in relation to children's rights in these key areas. The Optional Protocol on the Sale of Children, Child Prostitution and Child Pornography creates a framework for addressing child trafficking and related forms of exploitation, by requiring states to criminalize such exploitation, assist children who are victimized, and implement measures to prevent such children's rights violations. The Optional Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict raises the minimum age for participation in armed conflict from 15 to 18 years old. It also enhances protections related to compulsory and voluntary recruitment of children by armed forces and extends the protections to cover recruitment by non-state armed groups.

More recently, in 2011, a third Optional Protocol was adopted—the Optional Protocol on Communications Procedure—allowing individual children or their representatives to submit complaints to the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child. This latest optional protocol provides a critical opportunity to help secure effective remedies for children whose rights have been violated. It allows for the child's complaint against a State that is party to the Optional Protocol, and when legal remedies are exhausted at the national level, the complaint may be communicated directly to the Committee. This treaty body is composed of a group of 18 international children's rights experts who monitor the implementation of the CRC and its optional protocols and report to the United Nations General Assembly.

2.2 RELIGION IN THE CRC

It is important to underscore the CRC's recognition of the child's right to freedom of religion (Article 14) and the child's right to a standard of living adequate for, inter alia, the child's spiritual development (Article 27.1). A number of CRC provisions articulate the right of the child to religious freedom. At the core of this framework is Article 14, which reads:

1. *States Parties shall respect the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion.*
2. *States Parties shall respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.*
3. *Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs may be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary to protect public safety, order, health or morals, or the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.*



The CRC makes clear that, foremost, governments must not interfere with the religious freedom of children and must defer to parents (or legal guardians) to provide guidance to children in developing their religious beliefs and identity. Paragraph 3 of Article 14 does not limit a child's

right to believe, but only limits the right to act on those beliefs if those actions could harm others. In other words, Article 14 preserves religious freedom, with the only restriction being that one cannot act in a way that would violate others' rights or public safety, order, health or morals. Furthermore, parents have the rights and duties to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her freedom of religion or belief in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.⁹⁵ In this regard States Parties must recognize the right of every child to spiritual and moral development.⁹⁶

The right of parents to guide the spiritual development of their children, and the right of children to practice their own religious beliefs, are both indispensable. The CRC treats this intersection with great care. Some religious groups have also sought to navigate this issue. The Bahá'í Faith, for example, stresses the independent investigation of reality, a principle which forbids unthinking imitation of the beliefs of one's family, ancestors, or society. Instead, every individual, regardless of age, is directed to "see with his own eyes, hear with his own ears and investigate the truth himself." Children from Bahá'í families, therefore, are not presumed to be Bahá'í believers simply because of the convictions of their parents, but rather choose their faith at the age of 15.⁹⁷

According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion or Belief, parents or legal guardians have the right and duty to direct the child in the exercise of his or her freedom of religion or belief, and such direction should be given in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child in order to

facilitate a more and more active role of the child in exercising his or her freedom of religion or belief, thus paying respect to the child as a rights-holder from early on.”⁹⁸ The Special Rapporteur has pointed out that:

*The rights of parents to freedom of religion or belief include their rights to educate their children according to their own conviction and to introduce their children to religious initiation rites.*⁹⁹

Beyond Article 14, many other CRC provisions are relevant in this context:

- Article 2 prohibits discrimination based on the child’s and parent’s religion.
- Article 30 ensures that ethnic, religious and linguistic minorities have the right to enjoy their own culture, practice their own religion, and use their own language.
- Article 15 protects children’s right to freedom of association and peaceful assembly.
- Article 17 recognizes the right of the child to access information, especially sources aimed at the promotion of social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.
- Article 27 recognizes the right of every child to a standard of living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development.
- Article 29 urges that education be directed toward developing each child’s fullest potential, ensuring respect for the child’s parents and cultural values, and “preparing the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin.”



Recognition of children's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in the CRC is consistent with the foundational values of human rights and with the tenets of the seven religions addressed in this Study. Religious freedom has been a core issue since the dawn of the modern human rights movement. In the aftermath of the Holocaust—one of the largest-scale religious persecutions in modern history—the Universal Declaration of Human Rights secured recognition of religious freedom (Article 18). The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights subsequently reinforced that recognition of the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion in a legally-binding covenant (Article 18). The inclusion of religious freedom in the CRC—as a direct consequence of the recognition of the child as a subject of his or her own rights—was a natural extension of the human rights possessed by all persons.



Beyond any specific religion, belief and conviction, the CRC requires governments to recognize the innate human dignity in every child. It demands that children be protected from torture, cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment, and other civil rights violations. It also insists that children have access to education and health care and are ensured an adequate standard of living. In short, the rights enshrined in the treaty provide a framework for ensuring that every child can develop to his or her fullest potential.

CONCLUSION

The CRC offers more than a legal mandate; it represents an ethical blueprint for all sectors of society to act upon. The Preamble of the CRC recognizes the importance of the traditions and cultural values of each people for the harmonious development of the child. The CRC sets out legal and ethical standards regarding the treatment of children, and this is why the engagement of religious leaders and communities is essential, given their enormous influence and moral authority within their communities and their vast networks. Most people around the world turn to religious guidance and support in times of acute need and crisis. The question remains, however, how to further engage religious communities so that the principles and values of the CRC are better understood and embraced by religious groups, particularly those who are working with children at the community level.



CHAPTER 3. COMMONALITIES BETWEEN RELIGIOUS VALUES AND THE PRINCIPLES OF THE CRC



INTRODUCTION

As the international community commemorates the 30th anniversary of the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), it is fitting that religious leaders and communities be invited to consider the value and significance of the CRC as an important reference for their work. In light of the positive role many religious groups play in their communities and within the family, and given their moral authority and extensive networks, there is much potential in strengthening dialogue between religious groups, on the one hand, and child-rights advocates, development workers, and humanitarian practitioners, on the

other. They could explore common values and potential areas for collaboration and action on behalf of children. Such partnerships have already proven to be strategic and powerful for achieving results in health, education, and particularly in the protection of children against violence, exploitation and abuse. How much more could be done?

Expanding these partnerships would further strengthen the work of both religious groups and children's organizations dedicated to the realization of children's rights.

Both the 2006 Kyoto Declaration and 2017 Panama Declaration (see chapter 1) are evidence of the important commitments diverse religious leaders are making to partner with United Nations agencies, children's organizations and civil society in support of the implementation of the CRC and the recommendations of the 2006 United Nations Study on Violence against Children.

This chapter considers values that all the religions considered in the Study have in common, alongside the principles enshrined in the CRC. As noted

earlier, a series of global and regional consultations were convened to inform the development of this Study. They included religious leaders and representatives of faith-based organizations who were invited to make oral statements and submit written contributions representing their perspectives, and to review the working drafts of this Study. During the consultations, religious leaders repeatedly noted the commonalities between religious principles and values and the principles enshrined in the CRC and other international human rights instruments.

3.1 COMMON ELEMENTS IN RELIGION AND HUMAN RIGHTS

The sanctity of human life is at the heart of all religions and is also enshrined by the body of international human rights instruments. This body of human rights law was initially developed in response to the human suffering and atrocities committed during the Second World War. A defining moment was the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights by the United Nations in 1948, which states, "All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights." Since 1948 this oft-quoted principle has been incorporated in numerous national constitutions and legislation around the world, bridging diverse cultures and religious traditions.

This Study suggests that the key principles of *universality, indivisibility and interrelationship of human rights*, and *non-discrimination and equality*—found in all the human rights instruments, including the CRC—are also upheld by the world's major religions. Some theologians consulted for this Study, in different regions of the world, identified religion as the primary source of these values.¹⁰⁰ In this Study's analysis of the theological grounding of

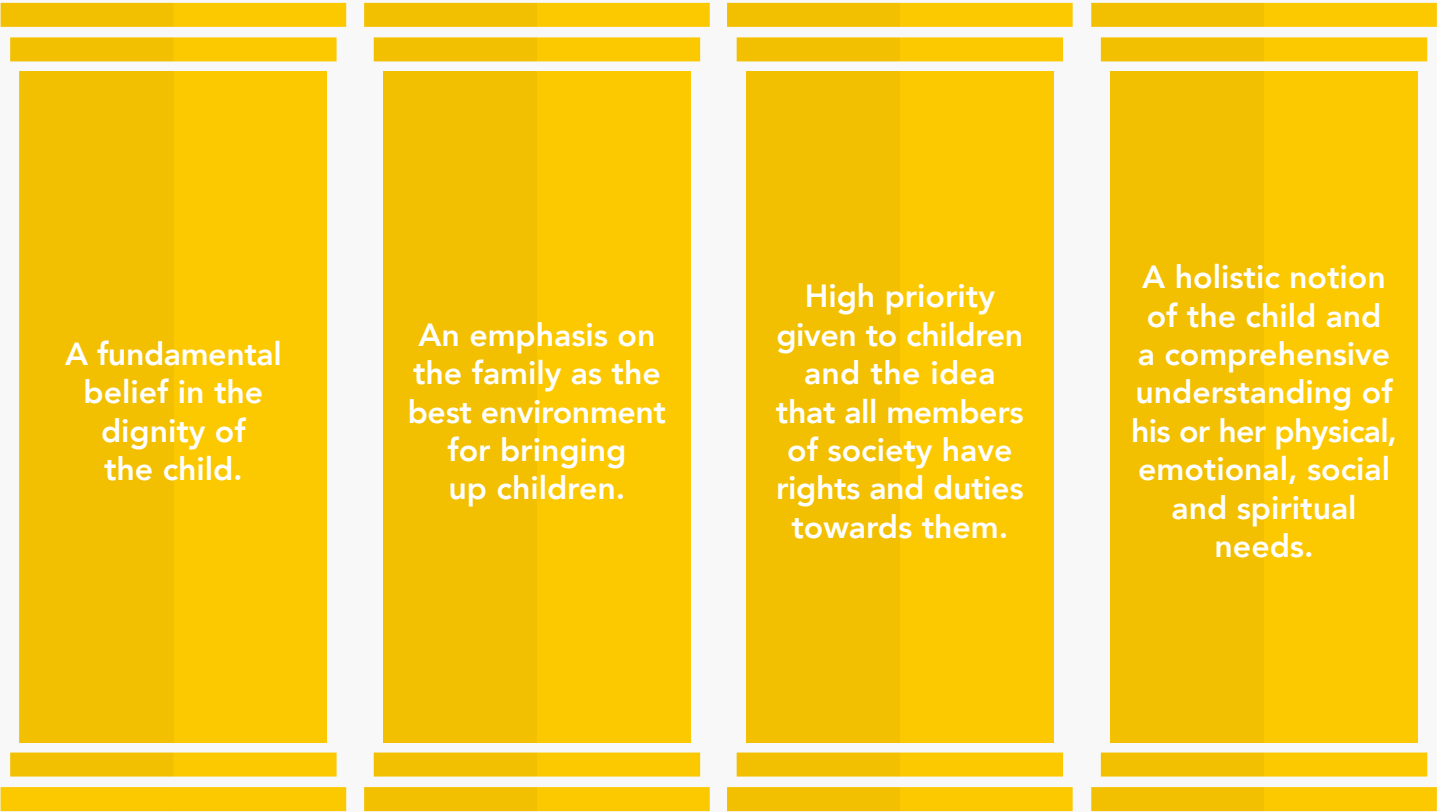
the CRC, the complementarity between children's rights and religious teachings emerged strongly, despite the striking differences between legal and religious writing styles and terminology. This point was acknowledged during the consultations with religious scholars in different regions of the world, including the one held in Beirut, Lebanon with participants from around the Middle East¹⁰¹ (see the report of the Beirut consultation in Annex IV). Participants welcomed the opportunity the consultations provided for discussion among religious leaders and child-rights advocates, noting that such consultations were uncommon and that much could be gained through further reflection, deeper analysis and engagement. Many religious leaders consulted for this Study appreciated being introduced to the CRC for the first time, noting that they had not felt compelled to read the treaty before. Many acknowledged that they had been unfamiliar with its value and significance.

The present Study concurs with several earlier findings noted below that the elements of the CRC share commonalities with the principles

found in the seven major religions considered, in particular the common belief in the equal worth of the human person, and in the dignity of all persons. A study published by UNICEF and Al-Azhar University in 2005, entitled *Children in Islam: Their Care, Protection and Development*, states that the CRC was found compatible with the authentic teachings of Islam, and cites relevant

passages from the *Quran*, the *Hadith* and the *Sunnah*. Another UNICEF publication issued in 2010, *Partnering with Religious Communities for Children*, identified elements of the CRC that reflect the values and teachings of the world's major religions. The following elements were thus pointed out as common principles linking the CRC with religious teachings.¹⁰²

Common principles linking the CRC with religious teachings



By convening in-depth consultations among representatives of diverse religious traditions and inviting them, in dialogue with one another, to interpret these elements, this Study aimed to add value in support of the earlier findings. The practice of interpreting religious norms and

teachings is an important historical experience in all religions. This interpretation can help to strengthen the complementarity of the legal framework with religious teachings found in the various scriptures and holy books.

*In light of the reading of the texts of the holy scriptures and books; the Torah, the Bible and the Holy Quran, we reach an understanding that the prophets and messengers are all graduates of a single school. Their goals and teachings converge upon developing the model of a perfect human being because God of all heavens is perfect. Therefore, the common goal of all prophets is directed towards the perfection of mankind on the grounds of ethical principles and universal values. In this way, people become a unified unit without any potential barriers and blocks that divide them...*¹⁰³

Sayyed Ali Bin Mohamad El-Amine, *The Birth of Jesus Christ and the Common Teachings between Christianity and Islam*, 1991.

As noted earlier, the consultations with diverse religious leaders and representatives of religious communities revealed that many members of this highly influential sector of society are not familiar with the CRC or why it would be useful to their work or organization's mission. This is evident in a number of fields where they are already playing a major role, such as in health and education, or as advocates for child protection, or in the context of peace building and humanitarian action.

Following discussion on the values shared by the religious traditions and the CRC in the regional consultation in Montevideo, Uruguay (March 2019), a number of religious groups acknowledged that they had been, in fact, "promoting children's rights without knowing it."¹⁰⁴ They further acknowledged that promoting their work in the context of children's rights would help to strengthen their efforts and build alliances for child protection.

This notion of "promoting children's rights without knowing it" was also emphasized during the consultation with the interreligious committee of the GNRC in Panama. One participant, for example, spoke about the global process carried out a few years ago by the Catholic Salesian congregation to place children's rights at the center of the Don Bosco Movement and to look at the Preventive System (the pedagogical system followed by the Salesians) through the lens of the rights of the child. It was noted that this was an awareness- and consciousness-raising process rather than an entirely new action, as most of the Salesian communities were already promoting children's rights, but without knowing they were doing so. In 2008, a global congress on "The Preventive System and Human Rights" was held in Rome with the participation of more than 300 people of the Salesian family. The congress was an opportunity to intentionally harmonize the Salesian practice and pedagogical framework with the CRC.

In fact, the many contributions that religious groups make in support of children's rights often go undocumented. A few examples that are better known include the work of Muslim leaders in promoting sanitation in Indonesia, which was instrumental in saving children's lives, and the engagement of Islamic and Buddhist leaders in promoting public health in Bangladesh in support



of community-based measles prevention. In 2010 in Haiti, during the cholera epidemic, religious groups representing Catholic, Protestant and Muslim communities were trained in cholera prevention and emergency care, reaching close to two million people. Notable results for children have likewise been achieved through the engagement of religious

groups in the areas of education, nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene, and beyond, in both development and humanitarian settings.^{105, 106} Much room remains for better documentation and study of the diverse contributions religious groups are making—based on their values and the principles of the CRC—to children's rights.

3.2 THE DIGNITY OF THE CHILD

Respect for the value of human life and human dignity is a fundamental principle found in all religions.¹⁰⁷ 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 fact that all the major religions value the dignity of the child in their scriptures and beliefs was well articulated at the *Religions for Peace* Eighth World Assembly (2006) in Kyoto, Japan where delegates stated:

*We find strong consensus across our religious traditions about the inherent dignity of every person, including children. This requires that we reject all forms of violence against children and protect and promote the sanctity of life in every stage of a child's development. We believe that religious communities must be part of the solution to eradicating violence against children and we commit ourselves to take leadership in our religious communities and the broader society.*¹⁰⁸

During the consultations with diverse religious groups for this Study, participants repeatedly acknowledged that, despite the religious tenets that uphold the universal respect and dignity of all human life, in practice these principles may not be consistently followed by all religious leaders or people of their faiths. Teachings are misinterpreted to justify harmful practices that are contrary to the scriptures and sacred texts. Some religious leaders highlighted the need to play a more active role in their communities in promoting those religious principles that uphold the equal value and dignity of all human beings.

Pope Francis, in his concluding address at a meeting held in February 2019 on the Church's Protection of Minors, outlined important measures to be executed by the Church stating, "The time has come, then, to work together to eradicate this evil from the body of our humanity by adopting every necessary measure already in force on the international level and ecclesial levels. The time has come to find a correct equilibrium of all values in play and to provide uniform directives for the Church." He also stated that "The Church's aim will thus be to hear, watch over, protect and care for abused, exploited and forgotten children, wherever they are. To achieve that goal, the Church must rise above the ideological disputes..."¹⁰⁹



“

We can live in harmony if religious leaders impart the right knowledge in their teachings to the children, so they understand fully about their faith and how to explain it clearly to others. And that no religion is there to disregard other beliefs/religions, but to respect.

– Girl, 13 years old, Tanzania

In the consultations with religious leaders to inform this Study the discussions on the dignity of the child led to a broader reflection of religious values. For example, Christian participants in the regional consultation convened in Uruguay expressed their understanding of how religious values are reinforced by human rights principles as found in the human rights instruments, specifically the CRC:

*Our values are based on the biblical teachings. Law, justice and righteousness are repeated concepts in the Bible. Jesus is the model of respect, values and rights. We are starting from the basis that children are the beginning of the kingdom. Our conduct based on religious values gives shape to the rights of the child set forth in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).*¹¹⁰

Similar views were expressed at the consultation held in Panama with members of the local interreligious committee of the GNRC (June 2019), which is detailed below. The consultation for the Middle East region held in Beirut, Lebanon

(August 2019), which brought together a total of 41 participants from across several countries within the Arab world—Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—who were mainly Christian and Muslim leaders, activists and academics, likewise acknowledged that similar values are contained in both Islamic and Christian religious tenets and the CRC. It was also acknowledged that:

Religion presents sacred values that are important in preserving children rights, and we should stress raising children with the correct values of religions, rather than ideological values that lead to larger generations of violence and extremists.¹¹¹

The inherent dignity of the child is embedded in the CRC, which recognizes children as “subjects of rights” with individual identities that must be respected. As subjects of rights, children’s voices must be heard and given due weight in matters that concern them, in keeping with their evolving capacities. As discussed in “Evolving Capacities of the Child”:¹¹²

The concept of evolving capacities is central to the balance embodied in the Convention between recognising 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. This concept provides the basis for an appropriate respect for children’s agency, or their capacity to act and make decisions without exposing them prematurely to the full responsibilities normally associated with adulthood. As children grow up, they have evolving capacities and a growing understanding and maturity; promoting the development of the child’s personality, talents and

abilities in a caring and protective environment will help to prepare the child for a responsible life in society.

The concept of the child as the subject of rights is further reinforced by the consideration that children should grow up “in a family environment in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding, and “in the spirit peace, dignity, tolerance, freedom, equality and solidarity.” These values are envisioned in the CRC’s Preamble (paragraphs 6 and 7) and they are supported by the religions examined for this Study. Thus, the central importance and value placed on the child as a human person in all religious traditions further support the concept of children as rights-holders.



I want my attitude and voice to be heard and I want to work together with religious leaders on children’s rights.

– Catholic boy, 16 years old, Bosnia and Herzegovina

Some religious communities consulted questioned whether the CRC addresses the responsibilities of children. In the consultation with diverse religious leaders held in Panama, some of them commented that they tend to condition the exercise of children’s rights on the fulfillment of duties by the children. One religious leader said that, for many, a mental transformation, a “conversion” and a paradigm shift is necessary to overcome this view of children’s rights. It was further acknowledged that there is a direct and complex relationship between rights and responsibilities, which has its roots in the reciprocal and mutual nature of human rights; however, it was also noted that this

exercise of assuming responsibilities can happen in a progressive manner, according to the age and maturity of the child. A 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.

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.

A review of the general doctrines of the religious traditions studied and the rights set out in the CRC suggests that the duties and moral obligations that religions have practiced and prescribed for parents and others in the family and community can be compatible with the rights of children derived from the legal framework of the CRC. As one religious leader pointed out at the Panama consultation (June 2019),

When we read the actual text of the CRC, although the language is different, we find that we agree with virtually all the provisions which underscore the duties and responsibilities of the family and community in protecting the child.

The same point was made by some of the participants in the consultation for the Middle East region in Beirut (August 2019), many of whom were reading the text of the CRC for the first time (See full report on the Beirut consultation in Annex IV).

In the multiple consultations convened with religious leaders to inform this Study, the general view was that, since they are influential leaders in

their communities and in many cases acting as counselors closest to the family, they would benefit from being fully aware of important developments in laws, policies and programs which have far reaching implications for children, their families and communities. This view is particularly relevant in the area of child protection, where, increasingly, religious leaders and communities are engaged in or being called upon to take action in the broader community to prevent all forms of violence against children and advocate against harmful cultural practices such as child marriage, female genital mutilation and corporal punishment. The need for religious groups to collaborate more deeply with policymakers and secular organizations working for children was also acknowledged, in light of the tendency of some religious actors to work in isolation. However, in this regard there was also some concern that when they do engage with other development partners, there may be a risk of being used or “instrumentalized,” which should be prevented.



Another issue of concern which is contrary to the principle of the inherent dignity of the child is the practice of child marriage, which cuts across countries, cultures, religions and ethnicities. According to the NGO, Girls Not Brides and UNICEF, child marriage can be found in every region in the world, from the Middle East to

Latin America, South Asia to Europe, and every year, 12 million girls are married before the age of 18.¹¹³ Though child marriage affects both girls and boys, this practice is primarily rooted in gender inequality and disproportionately affects young girls, who are much more likely to be married as children than young boys. Many factors can put a child at risk of early marriage, such as poverty or social norms that condone the practice or an inadequate legislative framework. Efforts to end and prevent child marriage have focused on empowering girls and their families with information, skills and support networks, educating and mobilizing parents and community members and improving access to school, as well as legal reform to make child marriage illegal (see also chapter 4).

Legal reform is taking place in different countries to end this practice. For example, in Zimbabwe, after months of deliberations, the country's Constitutional Court heard the appeals of two former child brides and ruled that marriage under the age of 18 was illegal. Important legal action has also been taken in India, where child marriage is now prohibited by law, and in Indonesia, where the government is committed to eliminating child, early and forced marriage by 2030 in line with [target 5.3](#) of the Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in 2015.¹¹⁴ This Study found that some religious leaders are already contributing to the prevention of child marriage by taking action within their communities and highlighting the ways in which child marriage is contrary to the dignity of the child and other religious teachings. This combination of religious tenets and the legal framework can be a powerful argument in preventing harmful practices.

Participants of the 5th Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), a global multi-religious conference held in Panama in 2017, recognized that religious leaders in the community can play a critical role in preventing violence against children within the family, where it frequently occurs, including violence against very young children. GNRC members' embrace of children's rights and the CRC as integral to religious teachings and values provides a strong foundation for collaboration to prevent violence against children and for action in the best interests of children.

At the 5th Forum in Panama, these commitments were welcomed by the then Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children, who emphasized the impacts of violence on early child development, stating, "Scientific research shows that early childhood stress—including exposure to violence—compromises children's development, health and education with long-term negative mental and physiological consequences."¹¹⁵



3.3 THE VALUE OF THE FAMILY IN THE WORLD'S MAJOR RELIGIONS

There is a close link between the hope of a people and harmony between the generations. The joy of children makes their parents' hearts leap and opens up the future. Children are the joy of the family and of society. They are not a matter of reproductive biology, or one of the many ways of producing them, much less their parents' possession. Children are a gift. They are a gift. Each one is unique and unrepeatable, and at the same time unmistakably linked to his or her roots. Indeed, to be a son or a daughter according to God's plan means carrying in oneself the memory and hope of a love that has become tangible by kindling the life of another human being, original and new. And for parents, each child is him- or herself, different, unique. (Pope Francis at a general audience, St. Peter's Square, Feb. 12, 2015)

In the consultations with representatives of the seven religions considered for this Study, the importance of the family was often underscored as fundamental for the care and protection of children and as the most important unit of society. It was further recognized that family relationships create duties and obligations for parents and other members of the family to safeguard the rights of the child, including the right to survival and development, health, education, protection, and family life. This is in line with CRC articles 5 and 18.¹¹⁶

Religious leaders provided further reflections on the role of the family. For example, at the regional consultation in Montevideo, Uruguay, some Christian leaders raised important questions: "Do churches need to be trained to guide members on the concept of family? We may have to accept a paradigm shift. There is so much diversity, that we

may have to recognize that the traditional family model is broken. There are new models that force us to question again the concept of family."¹¹⁷

Perspectives on the family vary across and within religious traditions, but the importance of the family is universally recognized. The contributions featured below help to summarize the religious perspectives on the diversity and universality of family life as the foundation of a child's growth and development:

Religious Perspectives on the Family

Bahá'í Faith: The Bahá'í Faith emphasizes the importance of children acquiring a sense of belonging in the community and their right to love and care in the family and community.¹¹⁸ Bahá'í writings state that "the integrity of the family bond must be constantly considered."¹¹⁹ Parental duties to provide education and address health needs and nutrition, including breastfeeding, are important aspects of adult treatment of children. Duties on education also include spiritual guidance of children. Writings on Bahá'í religious values suggest that family bonds can be strengthened when family members talk together about their concerns, with an awareness of the need for moderation and mutual respect. Perpetrating violence against children on the basis of adult authority is not acceptable.

Buddhism: Responsibilities and duties with regard to the family and in the wider community are recorded in a major Buddhist text, the *Sigālovāda Sutta*. There is a clear focus in this Sutta on the obligations of generosity, mutual assistance and support, and mutual respect

and understanding in interpersonal relations within the family, including with children. This Sutta refers to the importance of understanding and kindness in communicating with children. Gentleness and civility in speech (*peya vajja*) are valued, as is the sharing of experience by elders to counsel and guide children. A mutual feeling of equality is considered a way of earning love and respect. The mutual obligation of care between parents and children in the family is a core teaching. In the *Mahāmaṅgala Sutta*, “Care for mother and father and the cherishing of wife and children” is defined as an obligation conducive to well-being and a happy and productive life. In the *Karaṇīyamettā Sutta*, a mother’s love for an only child is the idiom used to describe the core Buddhist doctrine of *metta*, or loving kindness to all human beings.¹²⁰

Christianity: The Christian perspective on the family goes back to the story of creation, which states that God said, “It is not good that man should be alone; I will make him a helper comparable to him...” (Genesis 2:18, 23-24). God established marriage in the Garden of Eden, joining Adam and Eve to live as man and wife, and later commanded them to “grow and multiply.” Children are a gift from God: “Behold, children are a heritage of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward.” (Psalm 127:3). The first child born is mentioned in Genesis, the first book of the Bible, “Now Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, ‘I have acquired a man from the Lord.’” (Genesis 4:1) According to understandings of family based on the New Testament, the first two persons of the Holy Trinity are described in terms of family relationship, as God the Father, and Jesus Christ, his only Son. In the same way, Christians are described as children of God and brothers and sisters of Jesus Christ. Following the example of

Jesus, family life demonstrates sacrificial love in caring for and making sacrifices for one another and for others, including for orphans and widows (1 Timothy 5:8). Family is the first place where children learn about love, companionship and forgiveness (Matthew 22:37-40) and how to care for and support others. There is an emphasis on the covenant relationship between God and his family (the church). These teachings reflect the importance and fundamental nature of the family, and also indicate the breadth of what family means and how families can be constructed.



Hinduism: Hinduism values the family as the primary institution where children are nurtured physically and emotionally, and also where cultural and religious values are transmitted. Parents are regarded as a child’s first teachers (*guru*). The education of the child is a sacred obligation of parents. It is also a sacred obligation (*dharma*) of parents to provide for the needs of the child. Children are expected to honor and respect parents and to care for them as they age. One of the central purposes of marriage is nurturing a family, and Hindus regard raising a family and caring for children as one of the important ways that they express gratitude and fulfill their obligations to their ancestors and to their community for all that they have received from

them. The Hindu understanding of the family is extended to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces. The value for the child in the Hindu family is underlined by the obligation of the family to perform a series of life-cycle rituals for the well-being of the child. The purpose of these sacraments, known as *samskaras*, is to protect, to negate negative influences, and to foster goodness and divine blessings, indicating a sacred value for the child and his or her happiness and well-being in the family and community. In Hindu mythology, many divine figures are represented as happily married with families.

Islam: The Islamic perspective on the role of the family is reflected in the 1981 Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights which states that that the “institution of family shall be preserved, protected and honoured as the basis of all social life.”¹²¹ The Declaration is based on the *Quran* and the *Sunnah* and was drafted by eminent Muslim scholars, jurists and representatives of Islamic movements and thought. Islam also recognizes the mutual nature of family relationships, both the duty of parents to provide and care for their children and the duty of children to respect, care for and support their parents and elders. In Islam, the concept of *zakat*,¹²² or giving of alms, obligates believers to secure resources for children in need, including for children who are orphaned or without parental care. A sense of belonging to the community is considered important in relation to child care and upbringing.

Judaism: In Judaism, the family has been considered since biblical times to be the basic unit of the community and as “the core foundation of Jewish Life.”¹²³ This emphasis on family also means that parents have duties to provide care, meet health and nutrition needs, and ensure an

education for their children. Parental duties and children’s rights in the area of education include spiritual and moral guidance, teaching the *Torah* and guidance in the practice of the Jewish tradition. The duty to educate includes teaching a trade and life skills for self-reliance. There is also a duty for the community to care for children without families, specifically children orphaned or without parental care, a religious value also recognized as a right in Article 20 of the CRC. Judaism prohibits violence and abuse of children in the family and of orphans, emphasizing the importance of teaching compassion. In the Jewish tradition, the duties of the parents in caring for their children have long historical roots with an emphasis on the role of the father.¹²⁴ The requirements and obligations of parents are set forth in the Jewish law: providing for children’s physical, educational and spiritual needs, and that children must be regarded with care, kindness and tenderness. Childhood is described in the *Talmud* as “a garland of roses” (*Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbat 152).

Sikh Faith: The family is an important priority in the Sikh Faith, and many Sikhs live in extended families where each family member plays a significant role. Sikhs are encouraged to live as a family unit to provide and nurture children for the benefit of creation. The role of the mother is to nurture the family, providing both material and spiritual sustenance, and she is regarded as the first teacher and a model for righteous living. A Sikh father is also expected to take an active role in family life and in the upbringing of children. In the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, the Sikh Faith’s sacred text, a comparison is made between the relationship of the creator and the creation and that of father and child. The Sikh Faith is based on principles of respect and equality and, in

the teachings of the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, children are instructed to respect their parents: "If you honour your parents, your children will honour you."¹²⁵ From a Sikh perspective, parents have a sacred duty to care for and educate their children. They should have visionary hopes for their children's spiritual growth, as well as their material success. While in everyday life contexts parents may have shortcomings or be unable to recognize or fulfil their responsibilities or embody the ideals of a good parent, nevertheless the parent-child bond is deemed sacred and to be respected as God-given.¹²⁶ Sikhs understand that the unique parent-child relationship is decided by God. If parents fail in their parental duties, they are answerable and accountable to God.¹²⁷

Religious leaders have often highlighted the challenges they face in bringing religious principles and values to life and taking effective action within communities. Professor Harold Segura, Regional Director of Church Relations and Christian Identity for Latin America and the Caribbean, World Vision International, had this to say at the GNRC 5th Forum in Panama City:

A religious doctrine fulfills its purpose if and only if it translates into a source of life, harmony and well-being, reconciliation and peace. If the doctrines we teach are generating violence, or are contributing to creating disparate and unfair societies, then it is time to examine those doctrines, because they are only valid if they contribute to our personal and social life.

An overall challenge to be considered is: how can temples and churches support the family and the social agencies that guide children's growth and development? One Buddhist scholar in Japan suggests, "In a complex and fluid postmodern



society such as Japan, the leaders in the temples should not try to solve everything by themselves. They can provide spiritual support, but for practical problems, people should be referred to the experts. The temples can become a hub of this network of support."¹²⁸

The Panama Declaration of the GNRC 5th Forum recognized the importance of the family, stating:

*Children thrive and grow in trusting relationships with people who love and care for them. Ideally and for the most part, this happens within families including foster families. Sadly, it cannot be denied that the home is often the place where many abuses against children occur.*¹²⁹

A key finding is that families therefore need support to grow to become peaceful, safe sanctuaries for children and this requires elements including beyond what the state, through its institutions and services can provide to ensure such protection and care necessary for their well-being. Moreover, religious and spiritual communities can offer moral teachings and model practices to prevent, heal and reduce violence against children, such as family education in positive parenting and promoting ethical values based on their religious teachings and traditions.

3.4 THE IMPORTANT ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN THE CRC

The well-known African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child,” reflects universal values, as well as the emphasis many African cultures place on family and community. When speaking about the family in today’s world, it is essential to recognize that there are many different family configurations. In many African communities, for example, it is common for a child to be raised by an extended family. Children may spend periods of time living with grandparents, aunts and uncles. The wider community may also be involved, as children are seen as “a blessing from God upon the entire community.”¹³⁰ The extended family may permit the integration of a large number of persons into the family circle. Thus, a child may have a number of “fathers” and “mothers” who reinforce the role of caregiver and allow the child to benefit from increased attention throughout his or her development.¹³¹ The role of the extended

family in raising children is common in other cultures as well, as can be seen, for example, in the feature on the Sikh Faith in the previous section of this chapter.

Like the religious traditions studied, the CRC gives utmost importance to the family as the “fundamental group of society and the natural environment for the growth and well-being of all its members and particularly children.”¹³² Accordingly, the family remains at the center of efforts by the United Nations and civil society to support the realization of children’s rights and to help children realize their full potential.

The CRC does not define what constitutes a family but does underscore the essential and fundamental role of the family in bringing up a child. The CRC recognizes that the child should grow up



in “a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding.” The CRC Preamble as well as several of its provisions establishes that the family “should be afforded the necessary protection and assistance so that it can fully assume its responsibilities within the community.” This means that States have the obligation to enable families to care for their children. The CRC, which is composed of a Preamble and 54 articles, refers to the family in some 19 articles, also mentioning the duties of legal guardians, extended family and other persons responsible for the care of the child.¹³³

The CRC further stipulates that:

*Parents or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child's development.*¹³⁴



It obligates States to provide the necessary protection and care for the child's well-being and, in so doing, to respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents, both by refraining from interfering with parents' rights and by taking affirmative steps to assist parents through legislative and administrative measures, such as through social services, paternal and maternity leave, and child welfare allocations.

The obligation of States to assist the family in carrying out its duties to protect and care for their children is recognized in a number of provisions. The CRC underlines the role of the State, through its laws, policies and programs, to support families to remain together as much as possible, also stating that children should not be separated from their parents against their will. It requires family reunification to be dealt with “in a positive, human and expeditious manner.”¹³⁵ The exception is where it is in the child's best interests and for his or her well-being to be removed from the family environment, such as in cases of neglect and abuse.¹³⁶

The CRC further establishes that States have a duty to provide “appropriate assistance to parents or legal guardians in the performance of their child rearing responsibilities.” In order to provide assistance, the CRC recognizes that States should make available “institutions, facilities and services for the care of children.” In this context, another important related issue is that, while some religious groups may advocate for establishing orphanages, the CRC promotes family-based solutions, which is more in line with religious principles and values, as well as with what is known today about child development.

Another requirement of the CRC is that every child shall be registered “immediately after birth.”¹³⁷ This means that States are obligated to ensure the registration of every child's birth, which is a key step in safeguarding their rights and in accessing health, education, protection and other services. The CRC further establishes in Article 7 that the child has a right to know and be cared for by his or her parents, and in Article 8, that the child has the right to have his or her family preserved, which again reflects the importance the CRC

places on protecting family unity. These rights are most critical in the current context of massive-scale migration, where millions of children and their families have been forcibly displaced, where children may be separated from families and care-givers, and where they may be without documentation to support their right to an identity.

The CRC also provides that the child has a right to a name and nationality, and to preserve his or her identity and family relations.¹³⁸ However, for this right to be exercised, it requires action on the part of the State, and by parents or guardians. Ensuring that a child has a name and nationality is essential for family relations, as well as for the realization of the right to basic services, including protection services such as family tracing and reunification. Ensuring this right is particularly critical in the context of children who are migrants and/or refugees and may have been separated from their families.

States are further obligated to protect children from violence, abuse and neglect, including corporal punishment and sexual abuse while in the care of a parent or other person who cares for the child.¹³⁹ To this end, the State must take legislative, administrative, social and educational measures to protect the child including through social programs that provide the “necessary support for the child and for those who care for the child.”

The CRC includes a provision (Article 20) to provide alternative care, such as foster care, adoption, or in Islamic law, *kafalah*, in cases where the child is deprived of their family environment. With regard to adoption or other alternative care, the CRC stipulates that the “child’s ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic background” should be taken into consideration.

The duties of the State to assist the family in carrying out its responsibilities have been reinforced by the growing international recognition of families as “relevant actors in sustainable development and poverty eradication.”¹⁴⁰ This appears in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which provides an international policy framework regarding the role of the family in the context of development.

As mentioned earlier, the CRC requires States to assure children the right to express their views freely “in all matters affecting the child,” with the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with age and maturity.¹⁴¹ In this regard, the Committee on the Rights of the Child has stated that the CRC “emphasizes the need for styles of parenting, caring and teaching that respect children’s participation rights.”¹⁴²

The CRC envisions the child as an individual who is part of a family and community including parents, elders, teachers and caregivers. Consistent with the vision of creating a child-friendly environment that is loving, supportive and peaceful, the CRC establishes obligations for adults to refrain from acts of violence and abuse.¹⁴³ These values and this vision are reinforced by the world’s major religions, which recognize the family as the most important unit of society. The sacred and fundamental position of the family creates parental and societal duties to safeguard the rights of the child to protection of life, to health and education, and to protection from violence, exploitation and abuse.

Selected Religious Traditions: Children and Non-Violence¹⁴⁴

The core values expressed in many of the world's religions relate closely to the human rights principles expressed in the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Buddhism: The numerous schools of modern Buddhism all spring from the original teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, or the Buddha, which promote non-violence and prevention of harm to others. Non-violence is thus an essential feature of Buddhist conduct in the Dharma, or teachings of the Buddha. Buddhism is concerned with the welfare of all beings. The *Sigâlovâda Sutta* makes the point that if everyone develops compassion, mutual respect, courtesy and loving kindness, children will not be ill-treated. The Buddha's advice to parents is to support children to become generous, compassionate, virtuous and responsible. According to Buddhist teachings, wisdom and true compassion have the power to uproot the causes of misery and suffering in people's lives and direct them to the cause of happiness. "Some schools of Buddhism believe that wisdom may be achieved through meditational practice of self-observation. It is usually thought that compassion is exercised towards others; however, self-compassion needs to be practiced, too. It is important for children to develop compassionate attitudes towards themselves as well as others."¹⁴⁵

Christianity: Christians profess that human beings, including children, are created in the image and likeness of God and look to the example of Jesus to live their lives, as a model of love and compassion. The recorded interactions between Jesus and children demonstrate love, kindness and respect, and his saying about the consequences of causing children to stumble (Matthew 18:6) is among the most strongly worded warnings in the New Testament. Children are central to the new social order Jesus initiated. Children can express faith and reflect God's love into the world in unique ways that Jesus calls on adults to emulate (Mark 10:14 and Matthew 18:3). When Jesus reprimanded the disciples for turning away a child, saying, "Let the children come to me; do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these" (Mark 10:14), he gave priority and first place to children. The dignity, value and attention Jesus gave to children are also seen in Mark 9:33-37.

Hinduism: The Hindu tradition teaches *ahimsa* (non-violence) to all beings. *Ahimsa paramo dharma* (non-violence is the highest virtue) is a well-known Hindu teaching. In the Hindu tradition, parents regard their children as gifts from the Divine, and consider their bond as an evolving relationship over the course of many lives. Through personal example and teaching, Hindu parents are expected to serve as models for their children of love, compassion, forgiveness, duty and security. The Hindu tradition takes delight in the sacred value of children. This is often signified by the choice of a divine name such as the child-Krishna (*Balakrishna*) or the child-Rama (*Balarama*), or the naming of a girl after one of the feminine forms of the divine such as Lalita, Minakshi, Sita and Parvati. It is customary during the Hindu festival of Durga Puja or Navaratri to offer worship to the Divine Mother of the universe by honoring the girl child.

Islam: Islam views all human life as a sacred gift from God. The *Quran* repeatedly stresses the sanctity of life (*hurmat al hayat*). The life of every individual—regardless of gender, age, nationality or religion—is worthy of respect. There is no distinction made between young and old, male or female. Corporal punishment and other forms of humiliating treatment of children conflict directly with the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad, which recommend treating those who are under the age of seven as children (employing tenderness and compassion), treating those from age seven to fourteen with care and concern, and from fourteen onwards as close friends (with trust and cooperation). The Prophet Muhammad emphasized, "Be generous, kind and noble to your children and make their manners good and beautiful."¹⁴⁶

Judaism: The obligation to protect another person from harm is derived from Leviticus 19:16, “You shalt not stand idly by the blood of your neighbor.” Judaism specifically prohibits the abuse of children, stating they should not be harmed in any way, “for the very breath of children is free of sin” (*Babylonian Talmud*, Shabbat 119). The Code of Jewish Law (*Even HaEzer* 82:7A) rules that a child must be removed from his/her home if s/he is in imminent danger of abuse. The welfare of the child supersedes any right the parent may claim; this is a guiding principle in Jewish legal thinking in the area of child custody. Rabbi Moses Isserlis (16c) in his gloss on this text adds that the general ruling placing daughters in the custody of their mothers is premised on the assumption that such placement is in the child’s best interest. If, however, the court judges that a daughter would be better served in the custody of her father, she must be placed with him. Certainly, the physical safety of the child supersedes all other considerations (see *Responsa Kiryat Channah*, R. Gershon Koblentz of Metz, printed in 1685). Sexual abuse is addressed even more stringently. A parent or teacher who has intercourse with a child is considered a *rodef* (a mortal threat) and every possible effort must be made to guarantee that children are protected from the abuser. Furthermore, the ancient sages cautioned parents against generating fear in children, citing stories of children who died from such (*Semakhot* 2:5-6).¹⁴⁷

3.5 CORE PRINCIPLES OF THE CRC AND RELIGIOUS VALUES

As noted in chapter 2, the four core guiding principles of the CRC are: non-discrimination; the best interests of the child as a primary consideration; the right to life, survival and development; and the child’s right to express his or her views freely in all matters affecting the child, with those views being given due weight

in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. The fourth principle is also known as “the child’s right to be heard” and constitutes one of the participation rights of the child. A close examination of the values and teachings of the major religions reveals that they have much in common with these core principles of the CRC.

3.5.1 PRINCIPLE OF NON-DISCRIMINATION

The principle of non-discrimination makes it mandatory for States to ensure that the rights in the CRC can be claimed by all children without distinction of any kind. Article 2 provides that the CRC applies to every child without discrimination of any kind, “irrespective of the child’s or his or her parent’s or legal guardian’s race, colour, sex, language, religion, political or other opinion, national, ethnic or social origin, property,

disability, birth or other status.” While the CRC recognizes the importance of treating the child as a member of a family or community, it specifies that this identity must not result in discrimination that impairs the child’s capacity to enjoy all the rights in the CRC. This norm is related to the principle of universality that ensures all rights for all children everywhere and at all times. It also represents a challenging standard when

it comes to upholding gender equality within some communities that condone discriminatory practices based on gender. While all religions in their teachings endorse the principle of non-discrimination, there are clearly instances where gender discrimination and gender inequality has been and continues to be practiced and condoned by some religious leaders, as well as other forms of discrimination. For this Study, religious leaders were asked to reflect on any gaps between their values and actual practice in their communities with regard to non-discrimination. Highlighted below is a selection of some of these reflections.



As was pointed out by Christian leaders, Jesus displayed a common practice of crossing ethnic, class, and religious lines, confounding the discriminatory paradigms existing in his day. In the regional consultation with diverse Christian leaders and scholars in Montevideo, Uruguay, it was also acknowledged that various forms of gender discrimination have been practiced within Christianity for centuries, and they continue to occur despite being contrary to Christian teachings and values. Catholicism, which is the largest Christian denomination, teaches that “human dignity can be protected and a healthy community can be achieved only if human rights are protected and responsibilities are met.”¹⁴⁸ Despite this, some participants pointed out that some religious teachings do include gender-discriminatory language and called for further examination and discussion.

In regard to discrimination, a Christian religious leader at the consultation in Panama stressed the importance of:

Educating our faith communities about our history in order not to repeat the errors made in the past. When we forget about the past, we tend to repeat the same mistakes. That is why we need to promote integration and non-discrimination based on the knowledge of who we are, where we come from and why faith matters.

Another religious leader emphasized:

The need to search for the correct balance between reinforcing our religious identity and promoting non-discrimination and inclusiveness. The risk is that the sense of belonging generates a feeling of exclusivity that sees ‘the other’ as different from us, and this can generate exclusion and discrimination.

Similarly, the children consulted for this Study also provided concrete examples of this risk from their day-to-day lives. According to a 16-year old Christian girl in India:

In my school they insist [that we] pray Hindu mantras, but being a Christian, at those times I say my own prayer. Seeing this, a few of my classmates tease me by asking 'why will you not say our prayer? Will only your God answer your prayer?' So, there is always a chaos when it comes to religion.

Overcoming discrimination often requires challenging cultural norms that have historically degraded human rights, and religious communities have a role to play at this level, too. A group of 10-16 year-old children in India pointed out:

There are still people who see caste and creed. Higher-class people do not touch lower-class people. The lower-class people are not allowed to enter inside [some] temples or houses. There is still differentiation.

In Islam, the concept of *ibahah*, or personal liberty, which extends to all persons, corresponds to the principle of non-discrimination.¹⁴⁹ Scholars point out that there is nothing in the *Quran* and *Sunnah* to justify non-Muslim minorities in Muslim States not maintaining their linguistic cultural or religious identity, and they refer specifically to the Quranic principle “let there be no compulsion in religion.”¹⁵⁰ In the farewell sermon of the Prophet Muhammad on Mount Arafat, it is stated that:

*The Arab has no superiority over the non-Arab and a non-Arab has no superiority over the Arab. All are children of Adam; superiority comes from piety and the noblest among you is the most pious.*¹⁵¹

The concept of individual freedom in Islam is, therefore, compatible with the norm of non-discrimination in the CRC.

These values are also reflected in other Islamic sources which indicate that a parent has an obligation to educate all children, both boys and girls.¹⁵² One *Hadith* states that one should in the name of Allah be fair to all children. Scholars have described the Prophet Muhammad’s injunction in his last sermon on men and women as the basis for the equal status of women in Islamic societies, and the diverse principles that support gender equality.¹⁵³ Nevertheless, there are many examples of gender discrimination found in actual practice in Islamic contexts, such as underage girls forced to marry against their will, girls not being allowed to go to school in some countries, honor killings and the widespread practice of female genital mutilation.

In Hinduism, the principles of non-discrimination and equality arise directly from the core theological teaching about divine equality. The *Bhagavad Gita* (9:29) teaches that “God looks upon all beings equally.”¹⁵⁴ Theologically, there is no justification for gender discrimination and inequality or preferential treatment for the male child. At the same time, Hindu culture, in some instances, reflects a patriarchy that discriminates against the girl child. This culture of patriarchy and discrimination finds expression in a number of practices, for example, in the giving and receiving of dowries. This results in preferential treatment of boy children and discrimination against girls who are seen as a financial burden in many families. Although illegal in India, the problem of dowry persists along with female feticide motivated by son preference. As in other traditions, there is a gap between core theological

teachings and harmful traditional practices that are driven by longstanding social norms reinforced by systems of patriarchy and discrimination. It is critical that such contradictions be overcome and that Hindu teachings on equality and non-injury be emphasized as a basis for abandoning harmful practices. Hindu teachings on divine immanence and equality can inspire efforts to identify and overcome unjust social practices that are related to gender or caste discrimination. The daily Hindu prayer is for the happiness of all (*sarve bhavantu sukhinah*) and for all to be free from oppression (*sarve santu niramayah*).

As was pointed out by Jewish leaders consulted for this Study, in Judaism, the *Tanakh*, or Hebrew Bible, emphasizes the equality of male and female created in the Divine Image (Genesis 5:2), and the injunction “there shall be one law for the homeborn and the stranger” (Exodus 12:49) extends this teaching universally. Judaism affirms that all humanity is covenanted with God in the Noahide Covenant (Sanhedrin 56a, on Genesis 9:1-7), and the concept of caring for the vulnerable and anyone in need reinforces the norm of equality.¹⁵⁵ The prophetic literature in the *Tanakh* highlights Judaism’s universalism (e.g., Amos 9:7 and Malachi 2:10), and the Messianic era is seen as a universal reign of peace and justice (e.g., Isaiah 2:2-4). However, sociological and cultural factors have often limited the application of this fundamental teaching, as still evidenced today in certain streams of Judaism. Some cultural practices appear to be contrary to the teachings of Judaism’s sacred texts.

Sikh scholars consulted for this Study emphasized that the Sikh Faith regards all human beings as part of one family. This is evidenced by the teachings of the Sikh Gurus, who called on people to rise

above discriminatory practices in society, whether based on gender or position in the established social hierarchy. Key facets of Sikh identity (e.g., the turban and names Singh and Kaur) reinforce the teaching that every ordinary person, irrespective of social background, has dignity and worth. Sikhs are instructed by the Gurus to preserve their unique identity with compassion and commitment, and to give profound respect to the religious identity of others. In practice, the scholars said, this means that followers of the Sikh Faith should actively practice and maintain their cultural and religious identities, and respect equally and without discrimination the diverse heritage of others.¹⁵⁶ The Sikh sacred text, *Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji*, represents a kind of inter-religious and inter-human dialogue which interweaves the scriptural teachings of the Sikh Gurus and those of saintly people from other religious, cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.¹⁵⁷ The call to rise above discriminatory practices is presented as a key message. Summarizing this, the tenth Sikh Guru (1666-1708) declared:

*...Manas ki jat sabia ekai pehchanbo beyond all social and religious differences recognize the human race as one.*¹⁵⁸

According to the Sikh Gurus, human life, whatever one’s social position or gender, should be regarded as having exceptional worth. The first Guru, Guru Nanak Dev Ji, critiqued the low social status given to women.¹⁵⁹ Despite those teachings, however, the scholars reported that discrimination against and devaluation of girl children, including the harmful cultural practice of female feticide, continues in the Punjab region where the Sikh Faith emerged, as well as more widely in India and elsewhere in the world.”¹⁶⁰

The Bahá'í Faith denounces all forms of prejudice, supports the abolition of all forms of slavery, and promotes gender equality.¹⁶¹ Bahá'í teachings also advocate for girls' equal access to education, emphasizing the importance of bringing up boys to understand the idea of equality of women and men in society and the importance of respecting women and men as equal partners.¹⁶²

The fact is that discriminatory practices against children, particularly against girls, are found among practitioners of all religious traditions, despite the religious values to the contrary. The scholars consulted pointed out that these practices often have roots in the culture of patriarchy and power structures in society. This represents one of the many challenges in promoting a culture of child rights as set out in the CRC.

Buddhist Teachings Related to the Concept of Non-Discrimination and Equality

Buddhism's approach to karma and rebirth suggests that human endeavor and good conduct can overcome karma.¹⁶³ This value system rejects the idea of caste and other hierarchies. Human potential is considered the birth right of all beings. Men, women, boys and girls are all considered capable of realizing their full potential as human persons, with capacity for human development and progress through individual effort. Government leaders are seen as obligated to support individual progress to achieve the goal of well-being and happiness for all. The phrases *bahu jana sukaya* and *phito bavatu lokocha* express the idea of achieving the well-being of all people in this world.¹⁶⁴

The Buddha undermined these prevailing caste hierarchies and discrimination in his time in the Vasala Sutta, which declares that people belong to a high or low caste "not by birth but by deed."¹⁶⁵ Equal treatment with justice for all as a foundational norm of conduct in Buddhist society is recorded in the rock inscriptions of the Indian Emperor Ashoka from the 3rd century BCE. Inclusive administration and equal treatment of all subjects is the norm expected in good governance by the ideal ruler, described in the phrase "wheel [of righteousness]-turning monarch."¹⁶⁶

Buddhist values on family relations do not support preference for sons or discrimination against non-marital or adopted children. Family members are expected to fulfill their duties of care in relation of all members of the family, irrespective of whether they are children or elders, and irrespective of birth, status or gender.

By deciding to create an order of Buddhist nuns, or Bhikkuni, in his lifetime, the Buddha acknowledged the potential of women for spirituality. These values are also reflected in a Buddhist text that records the Buddha's advice to a monarch who was grieving at the birth of his daughter, stating the birth of a girl should be an occasion for celebration as "a woman child could prove (in her life) to be more noble than a male."¹⁶⁷ This egalitarian attitude to women in Buddhism enabled women to emerge as spiritual leaders in the Buddhist community and as eminent citizens.¹⁶⁸ One Buddhist scholar consulted for this Study observed, however, that this is not always actually practiced, stating that discriminatory gender views and practices are prevalent in many monasteries and temples.¹⁶⁹

3.5.2 THE PRINCIPLE OF THE BEST INTERESTS OF THE CHILD

The principle of the best interests of the child in Article 3 of the CRC states:

In all actions concerning children, whether undertaken by public or private social welfare institutions, courts of law, administrative authorities or legislative bodies, the best interests of the child shall be a primary consideration.

The relevance of the “best interests principle” derives from the importance of a child’s development in reaching his or her full potential. Assessing what is in the best interests of a child essentially requires an evaluation of all the relevant factors necessary to make a decision in a specific situation for a specific individual child or group of children. Importantly, children should also be consulted in determining what is in their best interests. There are growing efforts today to engage children in the process of making this determination when it comes to policies, programs and in court proceedings, and in keeping with their evolving capacities.

The best interests of the child is one of the core principles of the CRC and has been commonly used in deciding legal proceedings—particularly in family law and in cases of child custody,

parental visitation, foster placement and adoption—in which the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration. In some cases, the principle has been incorporated into legislation or integrated into the jurisprudence of countries as common law. In the latter case, it has been used as a norm that can modify principles of law applicable to ethnic or religious groups in a country. When this occurs, the best interests principle becomes part of a religious law, such as seen in Hindu or Muslim personal law. Parental rights of custody and guardianship may therefore be interpreted in such a way as to place greater focus on the child’s rights and best interests.¹⁷⁰



Another important consideration in this context is the role that culture plays in determining what is in the best interests of the child. In his landmark study, *The Best Interests Principle: Towards a Reconciliation of Culture and Human Rights*, Philip Alston points out that cultural considerations are an important factor in the human rights equation, although some cultural practices are difficult to reconcile with the rights of the child. Alston suggests, “In this respect, it must be accepted that cultural considerations will have to yield whenever a clear conflict with human rights norms becomes apparent.”¹⁷¹



Principles and Values of Islam and the CRC – A Perspective from One Islamic Leader

Examining the provisions of the CRC reveals numerous similarities with Islamic law. Both seek to advocate the best interests of the child by protecting and respecting his or her rights not only as a human being, but as a human being with specific needs. In Islam, children are considered a gift from Allah: "To Allah belongs the dominion of the heaven and the earth, He Creates what He wants, He gives to those He wills female children and to those He wills males or He makes them both males and females..."(Quran 42:49-50).

Among the teachings of Islam is the narration of Abdullah ibn Umar, saying: "Allah has called them righteous (*abraar*) because they honoured (*barru*) their fathers and children. Just as your father has rights over you, so too your child has rights over you. (Al-Adab al-Mufrad, 94). The Prophet Muhammad said, according to a *Hadith* (prophetic narration) narrated by ibn Umar, "...and your child has rights over you." (Muslim, 1159).

Before birth: Islam gives emphasis to the rights of the child beginning before birth, including the importance of choosing the right spouse as the parent for children yet to be born. As a fetus, the child is protected and therefore abortion is generally prohibited.

Proper upbringing: The first and foremost of the child's rights is the right to be properly brought up, raised and educated. This means that children should be provided suitable, sufficient, sound and adequate religious, ethical and moral guidance to last them throughout life. They should be instilled with the knowledge of true values, the meaning of right and wrong, appropriate and inappropriate actions, and so forth.

The Prophet Muhammad said: "Every one of you (people) is a shepherd. And every one is responsible for whatever falls under his responsibility. A man is like a shepherd of his own family, and he is responsible for them." (Bukhari and Muslim)¹⁷²

Over the years, the best interests principle has been interpreted by some courts in a relativist manner, and this has led to diverse opinions on its content and meaning depending on the local culture. Legal scholars have argued that cultural traditions ought to be subordinated to human rights norms where the two cannot be reconciled. They argue that harmful practices such as female genital mutilation and foot-binding should be eliminated on these grounds and that any cultural practice that poses a danger to the survival and development of the child should be prohibited.¹⁷³

This Study suggests that as there are linkages between culture and religion, there is a need to more clearly identify those cultural practices that are harmful to children and are also contrary to diverse religious tenets and against the best interests of the child. Thus, the principle of the best interests of the child should apply in *all actions concerning children* and it is thoroughly in concert with the teachings and values of the religions studied; it therefore follows that religious leaders and communities should also apply it to all actions related to or concerning children.

The principle of the best interests of the child is thoroughly in concert with the teachings and values of the religions studied. It follows that religious leaders and communities should apply it to all actions related to or concerning children.

This Study further suggests that applying the best interests principle will positively impact children's health, education, development and overall well-being. Religious leaders are well positioned to contribute to positive social norms and the abandonment of harmful practices and to promote practices that are in harmony with their religious principles, support the rights of children, and are in children's best interests. A noteworthy example of religious leaders contributing to the abandonment of harmful practices is the international conference convened by Al-Azhar University in 2006 for an in-depth discussion among legal scholars and doctors on female genital mutilation. As a result, a Fatwa (an Islamic legal

pronouncement, issued by an expert in religious law)¹⁷⁴ was issued by international experts in Islamic law calling for Muslims to put an end to this custom, following the teaching of Islam that forbids inflicting harm of any sort on anyone.¹⁷⁵ The Islamic scholars reached an unprecedented decision in the history of religion; a decision that encompasses the ethics of Islam, scientific expertise and human rights throughout the world. The Fatwa generated interest in many countries, triggering follow-up actions and advocacy for the abandonment of female genital mutilation and the protection of the girl child and women.

The best interests principle can thus serve as an important guiding reference for religious leaders and faith-based groups to use when evaluating the ways in which religious values are put into practice. It can be applied also when advocating that government authorities and government services take steps to create better conditions for the children in their communities.



A Sikh Perspective on the Best Interests of the Child

Sikh teachings and Sikh history encourage Sikhs to think in a deeper and more spiritual sense about what constitutes the “best interests of the child” according to different interpretations. Sikhs are also encouraged to think more broadly about the ways in which the prevailing conditions in contemporary society serve, or do not serve, the best interests of children.

Article 3 of the CRC ensures that consideration is always given as to how a particular set of circumstances or processes of decision-making will affect a child. At the same time, the term used, “the best interests of the child,” is an ambiguous one and is open to interpretation. In practice, the best interests principle is often associated with legal decision-making processes in child welfare and child custody cases, the spiritual dimension being neglected in most cases.

Sikh teachings and examples from Sikh history serve to:

- Highlight the assumptions adults make about the best interests of the child; and
- Push us to reflect on what constitutes the best interests of a child, by considering what constitutes the overall best interests of a human being and of human society.

Accounts from the childhood of Guru Nanak Dev Ji draw attention to the subjective opinions of the adults around him as to what would serve his best interests. In turn, Guru Nanak’s responses shed light on the narrow horizons of these adult assumptions. We glimpse this in accounts of his family’s conventional attempts to school him, to introduce him to work and business and to initiate him according to religious custom. On each occasion, Guru Nanak highlights the inadequacy of their attempts and underlines that to serve his best interests is to provide the kind of education, work and religious experience that will also bring spiritual fulfilment. The accounts of Guru Nanak’s life remind us to remain reflective about what serving the “best interests of the child” means in a deeper, broader and more spiritual sense.

From a Sikh perspective, then, it is critical to take a holistic view of Article 3, identifying a child’s needs to include physical, mental, emotional and spiritual needs. In practical terms, it would help to introduce terminology that identifies parental, institutional and societal “responsibilities” for meeting those needs.

Moreover, the broad social vision of the Gurus encourages their followers to consider the application of Article 3 beyond the context of family disputes and court cases. This can help bring into question the wider social culture that children are exposed to, shaped as it is today by consumerism and relatively unbridled digital technology. Such spiritual reflection can help challenge commercial trends that may be used to exploit others, fuel addictions or glorify violence.¹⁷⁶

3.5.3 THE RIGHT OF THE CHILD TO LIFE, SURVIVAL AND DEVELOPMENT

The right to life, survival and development is central to the human rights ideal. This is reflected in Article 6 of the CRC, which is linked to a range of children's rights in regard to access to health, education, nutrition, protection and shelter, which are essential conditions under which a child develops.

According to the CRC, States must adopt positive measures to protect the life of the child by diminishing infant and child mortality, combating diseases, rehabilitating health and providing adequate nutritional foods and clean drinking water. The CRC does not determine the legal moment at which life begins, leaving that determination to the discretion of individual States and their citizens to adopt their own policy on this matter.¹⁷⁷

Although the drafters of the CRC were clear that the CRC does not decide questions on the beginning of life, they also recognized the developmental nature of childhood. Thus, the Preamble specifies that the child, by reason of physical and mental immaturity, needs special safeguards and care, including appropriate protection before as well as after birth. The concept of survival and development also requires taking into account the economic, social and cultural conditions that affect the child. The concept of survival and physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development of the child is crucial to the implementation of the CRC as a whole.

A Christian Perspective: Children Are Valued by God and Deserve to Be Provided for and Protected

The Bible gives accounts of numerous instances of God's intervention to secure the survival of a child. The New Testament also records several instances of Jesus bringing a child back to life, "The boy looked so much like a corpse that many said, "He's dead." But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him to his feet, and he stood up" (Mark 9:26b-27). Indeed, Jesus' own life is saved when he is taken to Egypt for safety as an infant (Matthew 2:13).

In the Old Testament, the book of Lamentations contains a number of mournful descriptions of the pain and injustice of situations where children are dying because their basic needs are not met.

My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within; my heart is poured out on the ground because my people are destroyed, because children and infants faint in the streets of the city. They say to their mothers, "Where is bread and wine?" as they faint like the wounded in the streets of the city, as their lives ebb away in their mothers' arms (Lamentations 2:11-12; see also 2:19 and 4:4).

Protecting the vulnerable and ensuring fullness of life are critical: "Whatever you did for the least of these, you did for me" (Matthew 25:40). The prophets of the Old Testament also often testified that a fundamental aspect of following God was caring for the physical, emotional and spiritual needs of the most vulnerable, including children.

The Christian perspective on the value of human life was summarized by a delegate during the regional consultation in Montevideo, Uruguay.

*The human being is created in the image and likeness of God, which is the basis for the principle of the dignity of the person. This is the nucleus of the Social Doctrine of the Church inspired by the Judeo-Christian scriptures to attain justice and to defend the weak.*¹⁷⁸

Islam recognizes in a similar manner the child's right to life. Islam attends to childhood with care before birth, urging the mother to do all she can to prevent a termination of pregnancy with good nutrition and advising her not to fast during Ramadan when pregnant.¹⁷⁹ Education

is considered critically important for the child's development and a central requirement of the parental duty of care and nurturing. Islamic values related to protecting the child from harm and violence and ensuring personal security can be considered part of the duty to safeguard the child's right to life, survival and development recognized in the CRC.

Judaism teaches that all human life is sacrosanct and that children are valued as a divine trust and considered guarantors of the future of the community and the family. The parental obligation and duties discussed earlier indicate that the right to life includes the right to survival and development, as well as the full range of health, nutrition and education rights.

A Hindu Perspective on the Value of the Life of the Child

Hinduism recognizes the dignity of the child according to the theological teaching that the Divine is present equally in the child. Hinduism understands life to commence at the time of conception, and concern for the child's well-being is powerfully evident in traditional Hindu life-cycle sacraments that begin before the physical birth of the child. Prenatal ceremonies are followed by postnatal ceremonies including naming, first feeding and the start of education. They underline the importance of the child's identity, health and learning and inherent value. There is no religious justification in Hinduism for treating the female child unequally and for regarding her as having lesser worth than the male child.

One of the important needs of children emphasized in Hinduism is play. In the case of the child, the opportunity for play with peers and siblings is associated with delight in the innocent joys of childhood. The childhood of Krishna, an incarnation of the Divine in Hinduism, is celebrated and popularized in Hindu families. One of the names of Krishna is *makhan chor* ("stealer of butter"), describing his mischievous love for butter and his mother's failure to keep butter containers concealed from him. There are occasions when toys are part of the holy offerings made to Krishna. The delight in Krishna's celebration of play emphasizes that children must not be robbed of the delights of childhood.

This emphasis on the importance of children's play is in harmony with the CRC, which provides in Article 31 the right of the child to leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities, as well as to participate in cultural life and the arts. In numerous parts of the world this is not a reality for many children. For this reason, in 2002, the ILO launched the World Day Against Child Labour to end and prevent child labor and protect children all over the world who not only work in hazardous environments but are forced to do so.

The child's right to life in Buddhism, as in the case of other religions considered in this chapter, is integral to the rights of the child in the family and community. The obligations placed on the family and the community give priority to the child's right to life. The integration of the right to survival and development with access to basic rights to health, education, nutrition and shelter, combined with the right to protection from violence and abuse, gives a broader meaning to the child's right to life. The concepts of *ahimsa* (non-violence) and *metta* (universal love) are also endorsed in the other religions considered in this Study. They recognize the sanctity of human life, including the right to personal security and bodily integrity. There is recognition that life must not be destroyed because life is the right of a sentient being: since "life is dear to all human beings, put yourself in the place of others; kill not nor have another killed."¹⁸⁰

For Sikhs, the human life is highly valued because, in the context of the soul's transmigration, it is at the pinnacle of all life forms. According to Sikh teaching, through successive rebirths, the soul makes an evolutionary journey across 8.4 billion life forms, from matter to vegetation and animal life and eventually, with God's grace, to *manas janam*, human life. Birth as a human is seen as the last evolutionary stage before the soul is able to merge back into God. It is a golden opportunity to be protected and maximized.¹⁸¹ Moreover, human life is considered most precious because, alongside the basic drives to survive, human beings are blessed with spiritual qualities which enable them to live "in God's image." According to Sikh teachings, the human connection with the Divine is most pronounced at the time of birth and early childhood. The responsibility rests with adults to recognize and nurture the innate spiritual

attributes which children demonstrate so as to strengthen rather than weaken that connection. In historical accounts, the Sikh Gurus showed remarkable wisdom during their childhood and youth. While children are still learning and growing as humans, these aspects of Sikh teaching invite us not to underestimate children's abilities and contributions.¹⁸²

The Bahá'í Faith's values reflect the importance attached to the child's right to life, survival, development and protection from violence and abuse. Safeguarding children from these and other harmful practices is given importance in the Bahá'í Faith.¹⁸³ Once again, these values that uphold the child's right to health and education and parental responsibilities within the family are linked to the right to survival and development.¹⁸⁴

As discussed, there are differences found in this context among the religions. Nevertheless, regardless of when life begins according to a particular religion or faith, all religions believe that the moment life begins, it is sacred and deserves protection.



3.5.4 THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO BE HEARD

Respect for the views of the child in regard to matters affecting his/her life is enshrined in Article 12 of the CRC, also referred to as the right of the child to be heard. Article 12 provides for children the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them, and that their views must be given “due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.” The right to be heard is also closely related to the rights to freedom of expression (Article 13), freedom of thought, conscience and religion (Article 14), freedom of association (Article 15) and information (Article 17). Article 12 alone, or in conjunction with these other rights, is often referred to as recognizing the participation rights of children.

Participation rights are sometimes identified in legal scholarship and human rights discourse as the core of the human right of children to autonomy and agency. Children have important insights into their own lives, and their views should be granted respect by policymakers, judges, teachers, clergy and other adults who work or come in close contact with children.



I want our leaders to listen to our opinion and appreciate it.

– 12-16 year old children, Bosnia and Herzegovina



In the consultations with diverse religious leaders for this Study, it was acknowledged that religious traditions, generally speaking, do not have specific provisions on the child's right to be heard, comparable to the CRC. Some religious leaders identified a number of beliefs and practices that were interpreted by them as analogous to the right of the child to be heard. For example, it was noted that the Bible encourages an understanding of children as active participants or agents in their own lives and the lives of the church, since they are created in the image of God with gifts to contribute to their churches, families and communities. There are biblical stories of children who made significant impacts, such as David, the shepherd boy who gains fame by killing the enemy champion Goliath, a giant, with only his sling shot. There is a Hassidic story about the Mittlerer Rebbe, a learned rabbi, who would study late into the night. One night, one of the Mittlerer Rebbe's children fell out of bed, but he did not hear the crying child because he was so focused on his study. However, his father, the Alter Rebbe, heard the crying child and closed his books so he could comfort the child. The Alter Rebbe later said to his son, "No matter what you are doing, you should never be deaf to the cries of a child." This story of the rabbis was provided to illustrate the importance of adults listening to children—their questions and dreams, their fears and pain.

It was further suggested that the importance attached in Judaism to intergenerational relationship can be a foundation for strengthening the child's right to be heard. Listening to and interacting with children equips them to carry forward the Jewish religious tradition. Another familiar story in the *Talmud* records the response of a man who planted a tree known to bear fruit

after many decades. Asked why he was doing so he said, "Just as my ancestors planted this tree for their children I am planting for my children."¹⁸⁵

Related to the right to be heard is the concept of evolving maturities of the child. During discussions, references to children's evolving maturities were made by diverse religious leaders, including the requirement of consent to marriage in Islam and restrictions on the age for entering the order of Buddhist monks. The concept of a general age of maturity is recognized, for example, in Islam, where children cannot engage in certain conduct such as entering into contracts.¹⁸⁶

It was noted that Judaism has principles which support the idea of an age of maturity for decision-making, for example, by recognizing an age for service in the military and for criminal responsibility, as well as an age at which a young person counts in the community (e.g., for purposes of a *minyan*).¹⁸⁷ There are also rites of passage such as the Bar Mitzvah, which is the Jewish coming of age ritual for boys, and the Bat Mitzvah, for girls. Thus, when a Jewish boy or girl turns the age of 12, these coming of age rituals indicate that they have all the rights and obligations of a Jewish adult, including the duty to obey the Ten [Commandments of the Torah](#), which form the foundation of Jewish ethics, behavior and responsibility.¹⁸⁸

In the regional consultation with representatives of diverse Christian denominations from Latin America, including Anglicans, Catholics, Evangelicals, Lutherans and Methodists, diverse perspectives arose regarding the child's right to be heard in matters that concern him or her. Some participants stated that children in their religious community were indeed heard, "The child is

heard when he is willing to speak, not when one, as an adult, wants to force him to speak. They are encouraged to communicate and always talk. And they are truly heard, from the heart, with genuine interest.” Others opined that the concept was not fully understood in the context of religion and houses of worship. Many questions were raised by participants regarding when it was necessary to listen to children. The overall consensus was that their Christian churches did not fully provide spaces for children to participate and express their views in a matter that was meaningful for decision-making, as provided in the CRC.

One religious leader participating in the interfaith consultation held in Panama was of the view that “the first step towards the recognition of children as subjects of rights is the recognition of children in the statistics of our churches.” He remarked that “it is only in recent years that children count as members of the church,” and that this change was a great achievement and had meant a major shift of mentality for the religious leaders and adult members of the church.

During the consultations held with children in various world regions, some of them recognized their religious communities as a safe place to share their views, but noted that sometimes:

We are not free to express a view that violates the principles of our religion or our religious leaders. We cannot talk about our attitudes, because of uncertainty about the prejudices and stereotypes of our community (Bosnia and Herzegovina, 12-16 year-old children).

The children said they valued the platforms that some religious communities provide to encourage their participation. For example, Jewish children

participating in the Tenu’ot Noar (a Jewish youth movement) in Brazil expressed that they feel safer when participating in the Tenu’ot Noar:

Because we feel more free to express our views and feelings; at the synagogue we feel more restricted as you do not really know the people there and you do not want to make a bad impression (Brazil, 12-16 year-old children).

Scientific studies confirm that taking children’s views and experiences into account helps develop their self-esteem, cognitive abilities, social skills and respect for others. There is a growing body of evidence that participation of children helps adults, on the one hand, to make decisions in the best interests of the child and, on the other hand, contributes to children’s development. The participation of children also helps prepare them to take an active role in society, both as growing children and later as adults.

Good listening (*sravana*) is commended in Hinduism as essential for learning. In order for parents to help children fulfill their potential to become wise and virtuous human beings, it is vital that parents know and understand them. Conversations with children are necessary for understanding. Today there are many forces working against such communication between parents and children, including demanding work schedules and addiction to social media. Parents need to listen to their children, to know their fears and struggles, their joys and disappointments. Hinduism teaches that children will not flourish if they are not treated with respect and encouraged to express themselves. In the *Bhagavad Gita*, good speech satisfies four criteria: (1) does not cause pain to another; (2) is true; (3) is respectful; and (4) is beneficial. In the Hindu tradition, it is important

to encourage children to express themselves, but just as important for adults to teach them to do so non-violently, truthfully, respectfully and constructively. There are numerous stories in the Hindu tradition of wise and outspoken children. These include Prahalad, Dhruva, and Shankara, the famous teacher of Vedanta.¹⁸⁹

According to the contributions from the Sikh scholars consulted, the Sikh Faith teaches its followers to love each other and build a social structure based on equality and fraternity and *Sarbat-Da-Bhala*, which means “blessings for everyone,” or literally, “may everyone prosper.” This statement is repeated by all practicing Sikhs at least twice daily as part of their daily prayers and forms a very important component of the Sikh religious philosophy. The Sikh Faith teaches love and respect for parents, grandparents and society at large. The family is a training school for social, cultural, political and spiritual understanding. From the family of birth, the religious and ethical ideas are implanted in the child. The Sikh Faith, through lived examples in its history as well as in Sikh teaching, recognizes children's right to be heard and that wisdom and insight are not always dependent on age.

In Buddhism, the right to be heard can be considered within the scope of other specified values. The tolerance for differences of viewpoint, consultation and mediation in resolving problems is incorporated in the Buddhist *Sutra/Sutta* discourses and in the rock-engraved edicts of the Japanese Emperor Ashoka. A specific injunction in the *Dhammapada* and *Sigâlovâda Sutta* texts emphasizes the importance of civility, understanding and sharing experiences of adults and children as a way of promoting love and respect.¹⁹⁰ Buddhism's egalitarian approach to

education emphasizes a kind, gentle approach to teaching and learning and encourages independent thought. The Buddhist doctrinal approach emphasizes the importance to “come listen and see for yourself” (*ehipassaka*). In the *Kalama Sutta*, the Buddha advises that people should not accept views and ideas because they are articulated by sages, learned people, monks and religious leaders, but should reflect on the ideas themselves and make independent judgments. The values regarding parenting, combined with those on education, provide a context that supports the implementation of CRC Article 12 on the child's right to be heard and the related participation rights.

The consultations for this Study revealed that there is a need for further in-depth reflection and discussion before the right of the child to be heard is fully understood and accepted by most religious groups. The right to be heard is in keeping with some of the latest research. Contemporary challenges with listening to children in religious and other contexts can be met and resolved by understanding the latest findings in research on healthy child development and education. 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, and also implies that parents have the duty to respond with sensitivity to the child and the realities of the environment in which he or she grows to adulthood.

3.6 THE SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT OF THE CHILD

The term “spiritual development” has many interpretations. Thompson and Randall state that spiritual development “concerns the broad search for transcendental meaning that may be as simple as a young child’s inquiries into how the world came into being or as complex as a theologian’s metaphysical analysis.”¹⁹¹ They further note that “spiritual development invites reflections on the transcendental and the metaphysical, on values that arise from fundamental propositions concerning human character and existence, as well as on specific religious practices and symbols.”¹⁹²

The importance of the spiritual development of the child, emphasized by religious leaders and theologians during the consultations for this Study, is explicitly recognized in Article 27 of the CRC. This provision stipulates that States Parties recognize the right of every child to a standard of

living adequate for the child’s physical, mental, spiritual, moral and social development. However, the CRC does not specify what constitutes spiritual development. The parents or others responsible for the child have the primary responsibility to secure, within their abilities and financial capacities, the conditions of living necessary for the child’s development, while the state has the responsibility to support parents by providing material assistance and support programs.

Also relevant is Article 17 which recognizes that children must have access to information and material “especially sources aimed at the promotion of his or her social, spiritual and moral well-being and physical and mental health.” In addition, Article 30 specifies that the child has the right to profess and practice his or her religion and culture.



According to one Buddhist scholar, since the ultimate aim of Buddhist practice is to attain enlightenment, a stable ego is absolutely necessary for spiritual development and ultimately for attaining enlightenment. Traumatic experiences in childhood, such as violence, poverty, sexual exploitation, discrimination, lack of care, lack of love, serious illness or accident, and drastic change in one's environment, may harm the development of the ego. Lack of self-esteem and self-criticism and self-denial are also signs of unbalanced ego. The causes of these traits may be attributed not only to evidently traumatic experiences but also to factors that are thought to be normal in societies such as acute competition at school and work, and a prevalence of consumer culture that targets people's sense of inadequacy. It is therefore necessary from the viewpoint of spiritual development that children grow up in environments that are stable, caring, peaceful, and materially adequate. It is also necessary to train children to be aware of outside influences that can unconsciously affect them. Learning how to deal with their own thoughts and emotions in healthy ways is also important.¹⁹³

For Christians, one key scripture on the context of spiritual development is Acts 17:28, which states: "For in him [God] we live and move and have our being." The Bible portrays spiritual development as a journey, illustrated by Jesus's saying, "Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well (Matthew 6:33)."¹⁹⁴ Christians believe that spiritual growth is fundamental and necessary, and most churches offer a variety of Bible studies, Sunday school classes and study ministries considered essential to developing and growing a child's relationship with God. According to Christian leaders consulted for this Study, spiritual nurturing of children is

expressed in ways that encourage love for God and others, empower children, and build resilience and hope. We desire that all children would have opportunities to discover and experience God's love.

Spiritual development in Judaism is above all the knowledge of God's World and Way, and thus the training of children is seen as paramount to that end, ensuring the spiritual development and ongoing religious growth of the individual. Two thousand years ago, Judaism already had a national religious educational system (Bava Bathra 21a, see also Avot 5:21.) Education accordingly assumes a paramount and sacred place in the formation of children's spirituality, guaranteeing their posterity and the continuity of the religious community. The duty of such education is declared by the observant Jew in daily prayers morning and evening: "and you shall to teach (these principles) diligently to you children" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

Judaism gives priority to spiritual development, as described by Rabbi Mencher:

*The tendency toward spirituality is universal, transcending cultures. Human beings seem to be wired with the potential to express wonderment and seek a relationship with a transcendent being long before any introduction to organized religion. Children whisper secrets to an ever-understanding God; ask God to help them solve problems; and petition God to protect the family, friends and animals they love.*¹⁹⁵

In Islam, the *Quran* includes rules and regulations to protect the life of the child as well as to guide and organize his or her journey through life within the family and community.

The interrelationship between the child, the family and the community implies that changes or damages to one part may affect any of the other parts or the whole. Therefore, the lifestyle of the Muslim is based on cooperation, mercy and faith.¹⁹⁶ Among the duties of parents is to help the child to believe in God and to learn the basics of Islam at the earliest stage of life. Therefore, at the birth of the child, Muslim parents practice the recitation of the prayer call in his right ear and the second call in his left ear. A Muslim scholar has recommended that school programs begin with the enshrining of the *Quran* until the child develops his faith and learns the language of the *Quran*, so that the child has strong faith and virtuous behavior.¹⁹⁷

Traditionally, in Hinduism, the home is the center of religious life and practice and the place where the child's spiritual growth is nurtured. The major lifecycle rituals, for example, are all performed in the home. Hindu homes commonly have a domestic shrine where *murtis* (icons) of the Divine are kept and where daily family worship occurs. Hindu children learn ritual procedures, religious disciplines and traditional prayer from participating in such daily family worship, and Hindu parents feel a deep obligation to transmit such spiritual practices from generation to generation. One of the childhood sacraments in Hinduism, *upanayanam* (lit. "taking near"), marks the child's introduction to and acceptance of a spiritual teacher (*guru*), emphasizing the value the tradition places on the spiritual growth of the child.

In the Sikh Faith, the nurturing of children's spirituality, and the spiritual self of all human beings, is a key aim. In the history of Sikh communities worldwide, *gurdwaras* (Sikh places

of worship) have served as the institutions for learning about Sikh heritage and for fostering core faith values. A key Sikh value is to contribute to the common good, and *nishkam* (selfless action) serves as one example of promoting a wider recognition that the spiritual nurturing of children brings benefit not only to individuals but to society as a whole.¹⁹⁸

As noted earlier, some religious groups were engaged during the drafting of the CRC. The Bahá'í International Community's proposal for Article 28 (aims of education) represented a perspective that could be considered religious, faith-based or spiritual in essence. Although the proposal was not adopted it advocated for the necessity of a child's spiritual education.¹⁹⁹ The Bahá'í Faith stresses the importance of spiritual and moral education in shaping the character of children. Education is also regarded as the best means to secure children's future happiness, because "human happiness is founded upon spiritual behavior" and attaining "a lofty level" of virtues. Bahá'u'lláh describes each person as "a mine rich in gems of inestimable value" whose inner "treasures" can be discovered and developed only through education. Children should be valued for the treasures within them and encouraged to develop these capacities. The education of children is integral to the advancement of humanity. Bahá'í teachings urge parents to pray for their children even before they are born; to love and nurture them; and to educate them to fulfill their innate potential and to contribute to the advancement of civilization.

In the consultations for this Study it was also acknowledged that at times religious communities overlook the spiritual development of the child. The religious leaders who gathered in 2017



in Panama City for the GNRC 5th Forum (see chapter 1, section 5) committed in the Panama Declaration to:

Strengthen local communities by offering education on positive parenting and ethical values to help families and children develop empathy, become more resilient and grow spiritually.²⁰⁰

Consortium on Nurturing Ethical Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence

In July 2018, Arigatou International launched the International Consortium on Nurturing Ethical Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence,²⁰¹ bringing together experts working on early childhood, prevention of violence against children, education and peacebuilding, representing 15 faith-based, civil society and international organizations, religious communities and academia, to develop evidence-based and innovative approaches to integrate values-based education and spirituality in early childhood for the prevention of violence and the holistic development of children. The Consortium works together with religious leaders and communities to challenge social and cultural norms that condone violence in early childhood and support parents and caregivers in creating safe, healthy and loving environments that affirm children's human dignity. By drawing on the deepest teachings of their spiritual traditions and the latest research on child development, the Consortium provides space for dialogue and creation of convergences to mobilize religious communities to play a more active role in nurturing spirituality for a positive early childhood development.

3.7 REFLECTIONS ON SHARED PRINCIPLES, VALUES AND CORE NORMS

The major religions of the world considered in this Study have historical links and, though diverse, embrace many of the same values. The sanctity of life and value of the child as a human person is deeply embedded in all of the religions. In the focus groups with children for this Study, most of the children agreed that the religions they were familiar with share common values including loving one another, respect for others, showing mercy to the needy, devotion for worship, tolerance, and forgiveness. There are clear connections between the teachings and values of all the religions discussed and the core guiding principles of the CRC, which uphold the equal right of all children to be afforded all of their rights without discrimination, as well as children's indivisible and interdependent rights to life, survival and development and to protection from violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. Similarly, the seven religions studied all hold a belief in the fundamental role and importance

of the family in raising the child, which is recognized throughout the CRC, beginning with the Preamble, which states: "Recognizing that the child, for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, should grow up in a family environment, in an atmosphere of happiness, love and understanding." All of the religions seek an environment of love, personal security and peace, so the child can live a life of fulfillment and well-being. Their teachings reinforce the values and principles of the Preamble as well as the detailed provisions of the CRC and their implementation.

Religious teachings strike a balance between concern for the child and the duties and obligations of the family to the child with regard to the child's survival and development. Religious traditions stipulate that parents have the duty to care for and raise their children and provide protection. These rights and duties are clearly articulated by the CRC in key areas, such as the right to life, survival and development, which implies providing the child access to socioeconomic services for human development, including health, education, nutrition and personal security, as well as the right to protection from all forms of violence, exploitation and abuse.

All of the religious traditions discussed in this Study recognize the family as the most important unit of society and underscore the duties and rights in the family and the adult community in which a child lives. The CRC envisions the child as an individual who is part of a family and community acting in roles as parents, elders, teachers and caregivers. Consistent with the vision of creating a child-friendly environment that is loving,



supportive and peaceful, the CRC establishes obligations on States to protect the child from all forms of physical or mental violence, injury or abuse, neglect or negligent treatment, maltreatment or exploitation, including sexual abuse, while in the care of parents or legal guardians or others who have the care of the child.²⁰²

In some cases, harmful practices have been justified erroneously on religious grounds; they are not supported in the religious texts and often based on misinterpretations. They are also in conflict with the rights of the CRC. Consequently, there is both a religious and rights-based rationale for abandoning harmful practices such as female genital mutilation, child marriage and corporal punishment, which are sometimes defended on religious grounds. Many countries have introduced laws to prohibit these harmful practices, and some religious leaders are actively

persuading their communities to recognize that such practices are either not endorsed by religious teachings or are contrary to religious values. In sum, this complementarity between values held by all the religions and the core values of the CRC can support future initiatives to end harmful practices in ways that honor religious as well as cultural values that respect children's rights.

All of the religions, together with the CRC, reject the idea that the family can be permitted to be the site of violence against the child. The value placed on child care and nurturing with love and compassion, and the need for fostering respect between the generations, are seen in all religions. These clearly conflict with the use of violence against the child, including as a means of discipline. As noted earlier, most religious tenets are based on peaceful conflict resolution and civility, and some religions such as Buddhism



and the Bahá'í Faith uphold collective decision-making in interpersonal relations, including in the family and the community. As pointed out by the then Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children in 2017 at the GNRC 5th Forum, “Scientific research shows that early childhood stress—including exposure to violence—compromises children’s development, health and education with long-term negative mental and physiological consequences.” This message resonated with the religious leaders who gathered in Panama to address their role in ending violence against children, and the Forum culminated with 10 important commitments to children.

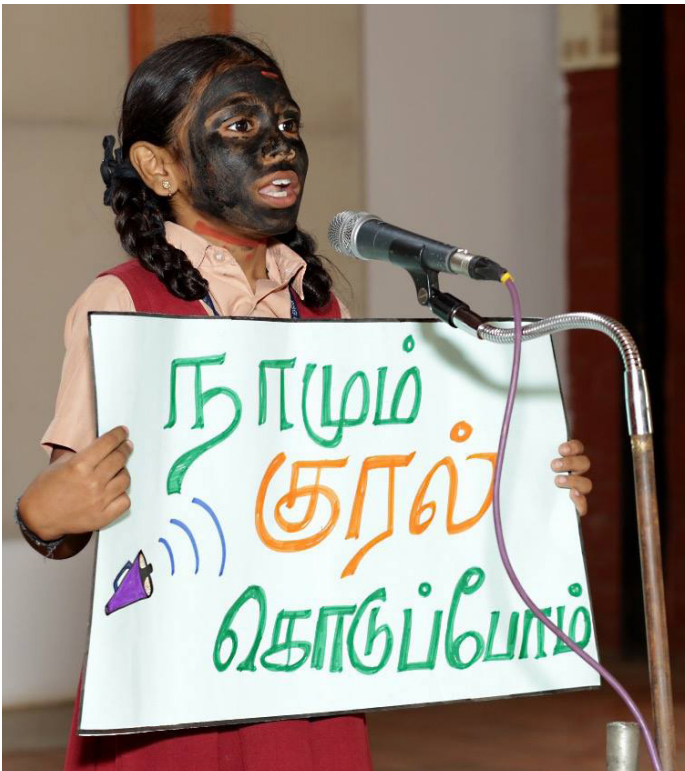
The principle of the best interests of the child, which originated as a legal concept and is well established in legal systems across the world today, is not explicitly inscribed in religious teachings. However, in the consultations with diverse

religious leaders for this Study, it was noted that many religious communities could provide spaces for interpreting the child’s best interests, thereby applying the norms and standards of the CRC to prevent conflict and protect children.

The child’s right to be heard is not specifically addressed in the religions considered and is not explicit in their sacred texts; however, some religious scholars understand it as implicitly supported by certain religious teachings. Specific practices in some religions concerning the concept of an age of puberty and maturity for decision-making can also be interpreted to harmonize with the CRC’s concept of the evolving capacities of children, thereby giving children a voice in matters that affect them and a means of responding to the contemporary environment in which they grow up.

CONCLUSION

This chapter suggests an extraordinary degree of harmony among the values of the seven religions considered for this Study. A common vision emerges, together with core conceptions of the human condition, the value placed on children in the family and community, and what is required to achieve human well-being. The practice of interpreting religious teachings and traditions is an important historical experience in all religions. When concepts and values are complementary across religious traditions, there is space for aligning the approaches to children and opportunity for cooperation on concrete action for and with children. Thus, this process of interpretation can help to strengthen the legal framework of children’s rights with religious teachings being the basis for interfaith cooperation for the holistic well-being of children.



Though a secular human rights instrument, the CRC contains well-articulated values that resonate with or derive from religious tenets. Its principles, norms and standards also align with the priorities of the world's religions. With this understanding, the CRC can serve as a useful reference for religious leaders and faith-based groups to examine the ways in which they are putting their religious values into practice.

Another positive sign for the implementation of the CRC and promoting children's rights among religious communities is the fact that both the 2006 Kyoto Declaration and 2017 Panama Declaration included commitments to children adopted by an unprecedented number of diverse religious leaders and religious groups. The challenge now is for religious communities to become familiar with the CRC, its principles and standards and to incorporate its legal framework into their work—and for child-rights advocates to pursue collaboration with religious groups to reach more children.

The reflections in this chapter are intended to help place the child at the center of the religious discourse and to inform a self-examination of any religious practices that undermine respect for the dignity of the child. This self-examination within religious communities would do well to address 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 chapter compares the values shared by the religions considered in the Study with the principles enshrined in the CRC. While it was found that religious values and human rights principles share a rich common ground, specifically how they reinforce one another is not well known to many religious groups nor to many human-rights advocates. During the consultations with diverse religious leaders, the differences in the belief systems of the religions were recognized, yet in regard to the child and the family, more commonalities than differences were acknowledged.

The CRC has been ratified by all but one country, which is an unprecedented achievement. It constitutes a powerful and effective reference for religious groups and faith actors to collaborate with human-rights and child-focused organizations. It is also an advocacy tool for encouraging government authorities to develop legislation, policies and programs that reflect the high moral values enshrined in religious texts and to guarantee an environment conducive to children's physical, emotional, intellectual and spiritual development. This is perhaps why Nelson Mandela described the CRC as a "luminous living document that enshrines the rights of every child without exception to a life of dignity and self-fulfilment."²⁰³



CHAPTER 4. RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES WORKING TO PROTECT CHILDREN FROM VIOLENCE



INTRODUCTION

As recognized in previous chapters, religious communities and faith-based organizations have been responding to children's needs since long before the concept of child rights was articulated. Discussions around children's rights, however, bring new reflections on the environment that children need in order to thrive, and therefore the values, behaviors, and conditions that should be promoted. This includes a re-examination of social norms and attitudes around children's upbringing, as well as of the services that religious communities have been providing over the centuries: what services should be offered, how they should be designed, who is responsible for providing them, and who should benefit?

Religious communities had, for example, long been some of the main providers of education. The international discourse among education experts on what type of education corresponds to the best interests of the child led to the conclusion that schools should be inclusive (ensuring that all children feel equally welcomed and respected), safe from all forms of violence or harassment, and nurturing of each child's physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual development. This includes helping them to develop a capacity to reflect on the world around them and to express their opinions. In Article 29 (d) of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), States Parties are obligated to ensure that education is directed to

“the preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples”—an aim that desperately needs support in light of the current appropriation of religious schools in too many parts of the world for the purpose of spreading violence and intolerance.

Likewise, religious communities for centuries have responded to needs for health care and childcare, opening some of the first hospitals and centers for orphans and abandoned children. A 2019 Scoping Study on the unique contributions of faith communities by the Joint Learning Initiative for Faith and Local Communities states:

Religious communities have long been at the forefront of the care and protection of children, with care for children a foundational focus for nearly all religious traditions (Robinson and Hanmer 2014; Marshall and Mui 2016). Throughout history temples, mosques, churches and other faith congregations have provided aid, direct services such as education and health care, and have reached out to and taken in orphans, neglected and abused children, and children exploited for labour and sex (Riera and Poiré 2014; Robinson and Hanmer 2014; Marshall and Mui 2016). Faith groups have also pressed for policy changes to protect children and, in humanitarian situations, have provided physical protection, cared for those who are displaced and have taken the lead in providing aid (Riera and Poiré 2014).²⁰⁴

The CRC affirms that “for the full and harmonious development of his or her personality, [the child] should grow up in a family environment,” and this has led to efforts in many countries to find family-based solutions for orphans rather than institutions. Further, in the provision of health

care, the contribution of the CRC has been again to provide guidance on how these services should be offered with respect for the dignity of every child and recognition of the child as a person with rights.

One of the areas, however, that has generated new initiatives by many religious communities and organizations is the area of child protection. When the CRC was being drafted, a number of faith-based organizations worked to ensure that protection was a key component, and then became actively engaged in activities to prevent one or more forms of violence against children. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations began to reflect on practices within their own constituencies and societies, and to launch initiatives to address those they found were in contradiction with their religious values as well as with the CRC. Some of those initiatives have sought to change attitudes and behaviors within their own constituencies—their places of worship, their schools and other institutions—while others have been devoted to promoting and ensuring the protection of children within the broader community by working with local government authorities, the schools, or other partners.



A recent comprehensive three-part study of faith actors' contributions to preventing, eliminating and perpetuating violence against children has been prepared by the Ending Violence Against Children Learning Hub of the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities.²⁰⁵ The Report consists of a literature review, a collection of case studies, and a summary of consultations with experts. The study focuses on two areas (1) the unique contributions of faith communities to ending as well as contributing to violence against children; and (2) the role of faith actors in influencing and supporting the wider community and formal and informal child protection systems.²⁰⁶

Numerous faith-based organizations have also come together—and sometimes with other civil society organizations—to launch campaigns to bring about change within the wider society. Religious leaders and faith-based organizations have thus influenced national legislation, helped to sensitize justice systems, and contributed to the creation of government programs for children who have suffered or are at risk of suffering various forms of violence. In Kenya, a group of religious organizations was even able to have an impact on the wording of the new national constitution that was adopted in 2010, coming together in a united front in order to safeguard the rights of vulnerable members of their society, including children. In short, in many instances religious leaders and faith-based organizations have helped to create a more protective environment for all of the children within their country.

UNICEF initiated in 2014 an internal mapping of its global engagement with religious leaders, religious communities, and faith-based organizations, in recognition of the critical role they play “in

promoting and enhancing the well-being of children.” The final report on this effort stated, “All faiths share the fundamental values enshrined in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), including a belief in the dignity of the child.” In all, ten religions were mentioned in the review, including the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, the Sikh Faith, Voodoo, and Zoroastrianism. Out of the 149 UNICEF offices in countries, territories and areas that were represented in the mapping, 102 reported that they worked with religious communities, and 80% of these programs were in the area of child protection.²⁰⁷

There is thus no doubt as to the important and positive role that religious leaders and faith-based organizations are playing in this area. Emphasizing this role, the then Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children, declared to participants of the GNRC 5th Forum in Panama:

*You command extraordinary moral authority. You serve as role models of compassion, solidarity and justice, helping to bridge differences, foster dialogue and influence positive social and behavioral change. You can help promote respect for the principle that no religious teaching or tradition justifies any form of violence against children.*²⁰⁸

This chapter features examples of such efforts, to illustrate the many ways in which religious leaders and faith-based organizations are working to bring an end to the various forms of violence against children. Some of the selected practices are local initiatives within one community, while others are programs that are being implemented in a number of countries. Some are interfaith initiatives, while others have been launched by a single faith group.

The practices presented here were chosen from a substantial list of initiatives that religious leaders and faith-based organizations are currently undertaking to promote and protect children's rights. The list was compiled via an online survey carried out by Arigatou International of the membership of the Global Network of Religions for Children and other key partners, as well as desk research. Of course, this list is not exhaustive, as it is limited to those initiatives which this research uncovered and on which documentation was available in the languages spoken by the main writers of this report. (See Annex VII for the list of initiatives.)

For this chapter, a number of practices were selected from the list—focusing on efforts to end violence against children—in order to illustrate the wide range of approaches being taken to address some of the most common forms of violence. Further information on the selected practices was sought by conducting direct interviews with key informants. This chapter highlights efforts against violence, but it is important to note that there are many other faith-based efforts targeting the other protections and rights that the CRC provides for children.

This chapter also refers to some of the curricula, guides, reports, toolkits, and handbooks produced by faith-based organizations for use in sensitizing religious communities to various forms of violence and providing guidance on the actions they can take to protect children. (See Annex VI for a list of these resources.)

Promoting Awareness on Child Rights

The overall purpose of the Churches' Commitments to Children (see Chapter 1) is to: support efforts by churches to prioritize children; promote collaborative efforts to improve children's lives by sharing experiences and skills among members of the World Council of Churches, ecumenical partners, and related organizations; and, raise awareness of resonances that exist between Christian responsibilities towards children and children's rights as expressed in the CRC. In keeping with the results of a series of consultations – including with children and young people²⁰⁹ – the program specifically aims to:

- Promote child protection through church communities, by ensuring a child-safe church environment and contributing to ending violence against children and adolescents in society at large, including in emergencies.
- Promote meaningful participation by children and adolescents in church activities and worship, and advocate for the recognition of children and adolescents as persons possessing agency in society at large.
- Raise church voices for intergenerational climate justice, supporting initiatives for and with children and adolescents to promote systems and behaviors within the church as well as in society at large that are eco-friendly and adaptive to the impacts of climate change.

The Churches' Commitments to Children includes references to promote understanding of the rights of children and adolescents and makes clear the resonance with Christian theology.

4.1 CREATING SAFE ENVIRONMENTS FOR CHILDREN

As seen in chapter 3, all of the major religions recognize the child as a precious gift, to be valued and nurtured. Their foundational sacred texts promote a vision of a world where people live in peace, inspired by the values of compassion and social justice. Nevertheless, in every society, there are forces that undermine these values: too many children are instead subjected to forms of violence that significantly harm their emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual development. The list is long: corporal punishment, harassment, sexual abuse, child labor, enrolment into armed groups, social exclusion, and harmful traditional practices such as female infanticide, child marriage, child sacrifices and female genital mutilation (FGM). Also disturbing to children, and at times equally violent, is the intolerance that is too often the norm between different religious groups.

The children's focus groups undertaken for this Study revealed that, in many instances, religious communities are considered by children as a source of physical, spiritual, emotional, and cognitive protection. However, they can also be the place where prejudices are imparted against those who practice other religions. One of the members of the group in Bosnia-Herzegovina stated, "I feel safe in religious areas, but I do not feel safe with other believers; they do not treat me with respect, they discriminate [against] me." A 13-year-old from Tanzania stated that, to the contrary:

We can live in harmony if religious leaders impart the right knowledge in their teachings to the children so they understand fully about their faith and how to explain clearly to others and that no religion is there to disregard other beliefs/religions but to respect.

This challenge, in many countries, is rendered even more difficult by rising religious fundamentalism, in which a return to questionable practices from the past is often promoted. Unfortunately, some of those practices, such as FGM and child marriage, are harmful to children and are in fact counter to the basic values of the religion in question.

In other countries, armed conflicts present a difficult challenge to religious communities, with the lawlessness and generalized violence that they engender. The conflicts are particularly challenging to religious leaders when they result from the use of religion by extremist groups to justify what in fact are primarily attempts to gain control. As pointed out by United Nations Secretary-General Antonio Guterres, "Terrorist organizations like Daesh and al Qaeda continue to twist religion to serve their ends."²¹⁰

In the face of these numerous challenges, many religious groups are coming together to act on behalf of children, and to remind their communities of the true principles of their religions. A number of them are also working with secular organizations as well as government authorities and services to ensure that children receive the care and protection that they need. The Churches' Network for Non-Violence (CNNV), for example, was formed in 2004:

To broaden religious support for law reform to end corporal punishment of children and other cruel and humiliating forms of violence against children and to challenge faith-based justification for it.²¹¹

CNNV works with people from all faiths to develop a network of support in creating a safe environment for children, and it has developed a series of handbooks to this end (see Annex VI). In 2010, *Religions for Peace* and UNICEF produced one of the first set of guidelines for use worldwide to support religious communities' specific work to promote children's rights and in particular the right to protection. The report focuses on violence in the home, schools, the community, the workplace, and in care and justice institutions.²¹²

The Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children

The importance of religious communities to promote and defend the rights and well-being of all children was underscored by the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children.²¹³ It was launched in 2016 with the purpose of helping to end violence against children in every country, every community and every family. The Global Partnership is a unique public-private collaboration that includes United Nations agencies, governments, industry, regional bodies, civil society, young people, advocates and champions. Representatives of religious communities are part of the Board of the Global Partnership and are critical allies in their efforts, indicating the importance of working in partnership with religious leaders and faith-based organizations for the well-being of children.

Arigatou International continues to engage with diverse religious groups in an interfaith manner, in order to build their capacity to respond more effectively to the abuse of children, and even to taboo issues such as sexual exploitation. In 2017, Arigatou International partnered with the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and

ECPAT to work together to end violence against children, including sexual exploitation and abuse, and to establish a Buddhist Network on Child Protection with other interested faith-based and secular organizations. For more than a decade, Arigatou International's *Learning to Live Together* approach to interfaith ethics education for children has been used to address violence against children in diverse contexts around the world (see section 4.3).

Other religious communities have produced their own guides. For example, Egypt's Al-Azhar University and UNICEF, in collaboration with the Coptic Orthodox Church, published a guidebook which examines specific issues such as child and forced marriage, FGM, discrimination, child labor, sexual abuse, absence of family care and children living on the street, trafficking, children in armed conflict, and violence against children online and in the media.²¹⁴

One methodology that has been proven effective is the Channels of Hope approach developed by World Vision International, as described in the feature below. These workshops provide opportunities to discuss the realities of the most prevalent forms of violence against children, with testimonies from adults who suffered from that violence as children, within the context of religious values. The methodology thus combines the "head" as well as the "heart," and involves religious leaders as well as village chiefs and elders in order to create a concerted effort to better protect their children. Activities that increase the perceived value of children and their participation in religious communities, as in this example, have been shown to be effective in decreasing violence against children.

Channels of Hope—A Training Methodology for Addressing the Most Prevalent Forms of Violence within a Community

Channels of Hope (CoH) is World Vision's signature project model for catalyzing faith leaders and communities on sensitive issues. It mobilizes faith leaders to respond to core issues of gender-based violence and child protection in their communities. Channels of Hope is designed to move the heart, inform the mind and motivate a sustained and effective response to significant issues and root causes. Faith leaders mobilize their own congregations and seek to strengthen existing community structures. The following are the three main steps at the community level:

- **CATALYZE:** Faith leaders and their spouses participate in a workshop that includes technical knowledge and a deep analysis of religious teachings that reaches to the root causes and deepest convictions that influence behavior.
- **STRATEGIZE:** Faith leaders form Community Hope Action Teams (CHATs) to create plans to address specific problems. CHATs are also empowered with information and learn about existing community support structures to report and prevent abuse.
- **EMPOWER:** Mobilization increases the technical capacity of CHATs to respond using evidence-based approaches that contribute to both reducing or eliminating harmful practices and beliefs and inspiring action to support the most vulnerable children in the community.

The Channels of Hope methodology addresses difficult and often taboo issues with faith communities including HIV, gender equality, maternal and child health, and child protection. It has also been adapted for use in partnership with Islamic Relief Worldwide, which brought in a team of scholars to reflect the breadth of Islamic teaching and diverse global perspectives. This adaptation is currently being rolled out in three countries.²¹⁵ It has also been piloted in other faith contexts. In 2017, 39 countries reported implementation of Channels of Hope focused on child protection with specific child-rights components.

World Vision has reached 455,000 faith leaders with the Channels of Hope program to date and has committed to scaling up to 150,000 additional faith leaders of multiple denominations by 2025.

Lessons Learned

- **Importance of engaging religious/sacred texts and traditions:** Engaging religious leaders and communities is most effective when done through the lens of their religious and sacred texts alongside the relevant facts, legal frameworks and statistics.
- **Need for scholars to prepare the theological framework:** To honor the multiple perspectives in any given religion, a team of religious scholars should prepare the theological framework. CoH offers participants an opportunity to engage with a range of perspectives and views from within their faith tradition, highlighting the value, dignity and rights of the child.
- **Shared faith experience:** It is important for CoH facilitators to have a shared faith experience with the workshop participants. World Vision intentionally partners with and trains faith leaders who are trusted and understand their religious scriptures and teachings in a contextually credible way.
- **Importance of training:** Due to the challenging topics, CoH uses an intensive training process for its facilitators. Facilitators are equipped in understanding both the theological framework and the technical issues surrounding child protection. CoH strives to balance facilitators in both gender (men, women) and expertise (technical sector, religious).
- **Involvement of key actors:** No one actor can end violence against children. In addition to faith and traditional leaders, service providers and opinion-makers can make an important contribution and are

essential connection points to ensure that faith community action plans are rooted in a system-strengthening approach. Girls and boys can also play an important role as agents of change.

- **Contextualization to the local culture, norms, and infrastructure:** Efforts are more sustainable and effective when the strengths of a community as well as its practices and structures are taken into consideration.
- **Use of a combination of approaches:** Because violence against children is complex, holistic approaches, which look at every aspect of a child's life and every sector that has an influence on their life, can address the diverse causes of violence and are key to ending it. Using the CoH Gender programme to complement CoH Child Protection can be effective in addressing a range of root causes.

Source: <https://www.wvi.org/church-and-interfaith-engagement/what-channels-hope>

Rev. Dr. Olav Fykse Tveit, General Secretary, World Council of Churches, had this to say in a video message for the participants at the GNRC 5th Forum held in Panama in 2017:

We know that many children are suffering from violence. We know that happens in zones of war and armed conflicts. Children most often are those who suffer the most. We also see that in areas of famine and drought. Any other problems

*we experience as human beings, children experience them, and it is even worse for them. We can do a lot together as religious leaders and as religious communities to protect children from violence, and also from violence they experience in their own homes. We should do our best. We should help our children to grow up so that they can use their gifts for the benefit of everybody for a better world.*²¹⁶



4.2 PROVIDING POSITIVE PARENTING AND GUIDANCE ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT

In recognition of the need to address violence against children within their own homes, one of the 10 Panama Commitments endorsed by religious leaders was “strengthening local communities by offering education in positive parenting and ethical values to help families and children develop empathy, become more resilient, and grow spiritually.”²¹⁷



A number of faith-based organizations have launched projects in the area of child development, in recognition of the need to sensitize their constituencies to the importance of proper

nutrition, health care and mental stimulation for children, and to the damaging impact of corporal punishment and child abuse. Some of these initiatives have also encouraged actions to prevent child labor, child trafficking, and other forms of exploitation.

In the Bala Shanti program, which is being carried out in communities in southern India suffering from poverty and marginalization, the sensitization is accompanied by various forms of support to parents, in order to lower their level of stress, improve their health, and provide them with the means to better care for their children. It is also combined with academic and life-skills programs for the children, in order to enrich their environment and enable them to break the cycle of poverty. Similarly, the Mosaik program in Bosnia-Herzegovina, featured below in section 3 of this chapter, uses a multi-faceted approach focused on violence in schools, but also including outreach to parents and other key actors in the community in order to address tensions between the different religious communities.

Ensuring a Healthy Start in Life (Southern India)

Shanti Ashram is a Gandhian organization inspired by Gandhian philosophy and human rights. Founded in 1986, it works with the religious groups represented in the local population, which are Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism and the Sikh Faith. Its Bala Shanti program was launched in 1991, with the aim of breaking the cycle of malnutrition, childhood disease, and poverty by: providing preschool-age children with education, nutrition and health services; creating a child-centered platform for advancing peace and inter-religious cooperation; providing platforms to the children to speak and to be heard about the issues related to their rights; and promoting the rights and responsibilities of children in partnership with other children, families, communities and child-related institutions.

To provide children in rural marginalized communities with the conditions for healthy development, the program offers pre-school education for 3- to 5-year-olds in nine villages, using the Montessori methodology; over 200 children are currently in the program. The children then go on to either private or public schools but also come back for what are called Children's Parliaments for monthly activities up through the age of 18; and 996 children participated in the most recent Parliament. At the same time, they receive health check-ups, nutritional supplements, and vaccinations. The Children's Saving Initiative encourages them to save money for their higher education and emergency health problems and has 1,460 active members.

The children help to organize and run the activities, which include:

- Children's Parliaments, where the children think together about issues in the community;
- Malarum Pavai, workshops for girls conducted with a health team to teach about menstrual hygiene, mental health and the changes that will occur during adolescence, including brain development (the workshops can also include life-skills education);
- Dialogue with Boys, workshops conducted with the Indian Academy of Paediatricians on the definition of masculinity, the prevention of high-risk behaviors (primarily alcohol abuse) and violence against children, especially girls, and ways in which they can become agents of change;
- Public Hearings, conducted on topics of concern with the help of adolescent boys and a moderator, which usually gather 250 adolescent boys at a time from schools and colleges, and some include parents as well;
- Learning to Live Together, workshops with both girls and boys; and
- Journeys for Unity, in which young people visit places of worship to learn about other religions; the Shanti Ashram staff visit the faith leader beforehand to prepare for the visit.

Shanti Ashram also conducts workshops with religious leaders, to discuss topics such as violence against children and child marriage. Its International Center for Child and Public Health has carried out research on child marriage, in order to counter it more effectively. Because there are many vulnerable families in the rural and semi-urban areas where it works, Shanti Ashram organizes cooking workshops where parents learn how to prepare low-cost nutritious food. It provides free health check-up for parents (especially single parents), including mammograms, for heavily reduced prices, as well as protein supplements. It has recently conducted two workshops on positive parenting, which include information on child safety, education, sexual abuse and corporal punishment (the latter is very common). The follow-up has indicated a better understanding of children's rights.

Twenty percent of the girls in the Bala Shanti project continue on to higher education.

Lessons Learned

- It is challenging to promote child rights and child participation when the environments at home and at school are very different. Engaging parents in discussions about their children's needs is difficult when parents are suffering themselves from physical and emotional violence as a result of poverty and illiteracy. Responding to the parents' needs is therefore essential.
- As a result of its activities for children combined with outreach to parents, the Bala Shanti program regularly receives requests from parents for support related to their children's well-being, such as for common childhood diseases, their social problems, economic burdens or ailments of family members.
- Parenting workshops and networking with parents should be included in all academic institutions in order to enable parents to protect their children from violence, including child marriage, and participate in providing life-skills education to their children.

Sources: <http://www.icphhealth.org/> Facebook: [Shanti Ashram](#)

Within the area of childhood development, a growing number of initiatives are focusing specifically on corporal punishment, as one of the most prevalent forms of violence against children within all sectors of society. For in many parts of the world, it has long been accepted that physical forms of punishment—spanking, whipping, slapping, even beating or tying up—are necessary in order to ensure obedience and discipline from children. Certain religious interpretations may reinforce these violent forms of punishment, such as a focus on a punitive god, whose demand for complete obedience will be met with severe forms of punishment if not respected. In addition, some argue that physical punishment is mentioned within some religious texts, and believe that it is, therefore, sanctioned and even recommended as an important means of ensuring that children abide by the precepts of their religion. For example, some Christian leaders consulted interpreted the following passage as a support for the use of corporal punishment: Proverbs 13:24 which states, “Whoever spares the rod hates his children, but the one who loves their children is careful to discipline them.”²¹⁸ Others argue, that this passage is figurative, that corporal punishment does not have its basis in the Bible and that nowhere in the New Testament does Jesus tell parents to use corporal punishment with their children.



The concept of “original sin,” which has its basis in the Bible, has been used as well to support the idea that only severe punishment can control the child’s will. There are thus often conflicts between the precepts of a religion, as explored in chapter 3, and the ways in which family structures have evolved. Given the different interpretations of sacred texts, there is a need for more careful reinterpretation by religious scholars in order to resolve seeming contradictions between the texts and children’s rights.

Physical punishment is also related to a child’s status in some cultures, where children are considered to be the property of the male head of household, whose authority is never to be questioned. Violent forms of punishment can also be the result of high levels of stress in the family, due to poverty and the feelings of vulnerability and powerlessness that often accompany it.²¹⁹ A study by an international group of experts has estimated that, in 2015, a majority of children—three out of every four in the age-group 1-14 years—had experienced violent discipline (psychological aggression or physical punishment) in the previous month.²²⁰ As a 15-year-old girl from Tanzania stated in the consultation with children carried out for this Study, “instead of asking why a child made a mistake, then counseling and guiding them, they [teachers/parents] opt for severe punishments and harm children.”

Widespread research in the modern fields of sociology and psychology has now shown that violence tends to breed more violence; in other words, children who suffer repeated physical punishment in turn often harm those around them—other children, and then later in life, their spouses, children, or others in the community. Or alternatively, they tend to be submissive, not

daring to defend themselves nor those around them—including their own children—from harm. The shame, anxiety and feelings of helplessness can also eventually lead to substance abuse, eating disorders or suicide.²²¹

Many of the religious texts used to justify corporal punishment have now begun to be reinterpreted by religious scholars, for both personal experience and research have shown that children internalize moral values of respect, compassion and self-control much better through positive examples by adults and open discussions about the consequences of different behaviors. Since these values are central to the world's major faiths, many religious leaders are now re-evaluating the individual verses which refer positively to corporal punishment in light of what is now known about the negative impacts of corporal punishment.²²²

In 2019, the International Consortium on Nurturing Values and Spirituality in Early Childhood for the Prevention of Violence held five national roundtable discussions in Brazil, Kenya, India, Lebanon and Sri Lanka. The meetings brought together religious leaders and experts on child protection and early childhood development to discuss the issue of violence against children, and introduce the latest scientific research on the impact of violence in the early years and the role of values-based education and spirituality. The roundtables produced advocacy booklets that are now used by religious leaders and communities in these countries to raise awareness about violence in early childhood and the best ways religious leaders can work with others to support parents, caregivers and educators in nurturing children's spirituality and creating safe environments for young children.

The GNRC 5th Forum reflected upon the role of religious communities and their leaders in supporting legal reforms to prohibit all forms of physical and humiliating punishment of children, as well as their role in fostering spirituality in children and caregivers as a way of preventing and mitigating violence. The 10 commitments to end violence against children participants made included the pledge to strengthen mechanisms for self-evaluation and accountability “to ensure our communities are never complicit in perpetuating violence against children.”²²³



Interestingly, some of the most successful programs have involved children as active agents for change, as in the example of the Shanti Ashram program featured above. Even young children can become active peace-builders within families, communities and schools. Many faith-based spaces have become places that equip children to know their rights and to take leadership roles by, for example, leading prayers in the house or talking together as a family about alternatives to violence.

4.3 PROMOTING INCLUSIVE, SAFE AND NON-VIOLENT EDUCATION AND VIOLENCE-FREE SCHOOLS

As mentioned earlier, corporal punishment has long been considered throughout the world as a necessary means of disciplining children, in homes as well as schools and other institutions for children. It continues to be a legal means of disciplining children in 69 countries, and in schools it is inflicted more often on boys than on girls.²²⁴ Yet research has shown that learning can be impaired by corporal punishment, since “children who fear being physically harmed by their teachers tend to dislike or avoid school.”²²⁵

Too many children also face violence from other students in the form of bullying or—especially for girls—sexual harassment. Reliable data on these forms of violence are difficult to obtain. However, according to Know Violence in Childhood, a multidisciplinary group of researchers and experts:

*Nearly one in three children reported being bullied at least once in the past two months in schools across industrialized countries and Latin America and the Caribbean. On the other hand, almost every other child had been bullied in schools across Africa.*²²⁶

According to UNICEF, close to 130 million (slightly more than 1 in 3) students worldwide between the ages of 13 and 15 experience bullying.²²⁷ Prejudice and discrimination are factors in some of the violent acts committed, as in the case of children with disabilities, those infected with HIV/AIDs, or those persecuted for reasons of sexual identity, ethnic, racial or religious identity.²²⁸ Violence within communities can also result from the discrimination and stress caused by social and economic inequalities.²²⁹

Tensions in schools can be especially prevalent in communities that have been torn apart by internal armed conflicts. As seen in the case study from Bosnia-Herzegovina, an interfaith organization, Mosaik, is working with leaders from all of the religions represented in the community to build a better understanding of their shared values, overcome past tensions, and address all forms of violence against children in the schools and in the community.

Following the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by the United Nations General Assembly in 2015, where world leaders made an explicit commitment to end all forms of violence against children by 2030, the Global Partnership to End Violence Against Children²³⁰ was launched in July 2016 with the participation of faith-based organizations. Its members include governments, United Nations agencies, representatives of civil society and the private sector, academics, and children. (The President of Arigatou International and the General Secretary of the World Council of Churches are both members of its Board.) Initiated by the World Health Organization, that same year the Global Partnership, along with eight other agencies²³¹ collaborated to develop INSPIRE,²³² a technical package of seven key strategies to end violence against children. This technical package pulls together proven strategies which, in the past, have successfully reduced violence against children. On January 22, 2019, the Partnership introduced the Safe to Learn²³³ program and the Call to Action to more than 100 education ministers at the Education World Forum in London. The Call to Action calls upon all partners to support

governments in implementing legislation and policies to protect children from violence in and around schools, including online, to strengthen protection and response within schools, to work with parents and communities to promote

non-violent behaviors, to increase the resources for ending violence against children, and to gather evidence in order to increase the effectiveness of programs.²³⁴

Addressing Violence in Schools and the Community (Bosnia-Herzegovina)

Mosaik, the Women's Association for Interreligious Dialogue in Family and Society, is an initiative of religious inspiration (Catholic, Orthodox, and Islamic). Founded in 2012, its objectives are to mobilize members of the community to work as an interfaith network to promote religious principles as one of the foundations for addressing violence against children and eradicating poverty, and strengthening the role of the family by providing opportunities for all members of the family to be involved in their activities. Mosaik's activities also contribute to building inter-religious dialogue and reconciliation within the community.

Its program is carried out on a community level in seven towns and has reached over 700 people, who are involved in Mosaik's activities during the year. The activities are organized with religious leaders and families from Catholic, Orthodox and Muslim communities with the support of the Center for Mental Health, the Center for Social Work and the police. Mosaik also cooperates with non-governmental organizations and networks working for children: Save the Children, World Vision, the GNRC, and Arigatou International.

In the first step of the program, Mosaik organizes workshops with religious leaders from the Catholic, Orthodox and Islamic communities and representatives of the police administration and mental health centers, primary and secondary schools. Also included are members of the society who can contribute to a change of consciousness because they are close to their religious institutions and are actively involved in their communities. Mosaik organizes training workshops on "Volunteerism and Activism through Religion," "Learning to Live Together," and "Preventing Violence Against Children" (physical, sexual and internet violence). Teachers, members of non-governmental organizations and young people were trained by Mosaik as facilitators in Arigatou International's *Learning to Live Together* ethics education program. In the workshops, the most important issues are identified, recommendations put forward, and next steps agreed upon to bring about positive changes in the community in the reduction of violence and child poverty, improve interreligious dialogue and encourage activism and volunteerism.

Roundtables are then organized, which are open to the public. All citizens are invited via the mass media to attend. During roundtables, religious leaders, with participants who are members of diverse religious communities, present the teachings of their religion on the importance and obligation of preventing violence against children, eradicating child poverty and respecting children's rights.

The religious communities are motivated by the fact that the program allows them to promote beyond their own constituencies the idea that religious values and obligations should be lived. Many members of the community are interested in activism and volunteerism inspired by religious principles because such actions strengthen their spiritual lives.

Members from different religions then initiate joint actions to prevent violence against children and eradicate poverty in the community. Mosaik advocates with institutions to provide better quality care for families living in poverty. Its members also visit poor families with the aim of understanding their needs and providing support in addressing them.

Students aged 12-18 years in six primary and secondary schools are involved in the development of life skills that aim to help them recognize their qualities, express their feelings, improve their communication skills and regulate their negative emotions. Mosaik encourages all children to participate in its activities, which aim to promote the optimal development of every child regardless of origin and social status.

Lessons Learned

- Persistence, joint action and continuity are required.
- Special efforts must be made to identify volunteers who in their personal life can advocate for children's rights.
- Most citizens are not aware of the fact that all religions promote the eradication of violence and child poverty.
- Cooperation with all important institutions focused on children and their well-being is the key to success.
- Quality media involvement helps to share information with a larger number of members in the community.

Religious leaders and faith-based organizations within India, Bosnia-Herzegovina and many other countries are actively working to make schools the safe places for children that they should be. Other faith-based initiatives span multiple countries,

such as the Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program inspired by the Bahá'í Faith. One of its local implementations in El Salvador is featured below.

The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (El Salvador)

The Junior Youth Spiritual Empowerment Program (JYSEP) is a global movement present in more than 150 countries. The JYSEP is inspired by the Bahá'í Faith, one tenet of which is that darkness has no existence of its own: it is only the absence of light. The JYSEP strives to give adolescents a voice in their society, to enhance their moral values, and to empower them to contribute to the well-being of their communities and the world at large. It has served as an important tool for reducing tensions between adults and children of this age.

The JYSEP was launched in 2004, and since 2016 it has been implemented in collaboration with teachers and school administrators in Dulce Nombre de María, a city in northern El Salvador. Adolescents aged 12-15 years participate in the activities for two hours a week during school hours at the public school, Francisco Gavidia. The activities include discussions, artistic expression, and community service actions; collaborative engagement with the teachers and school administrators has resulted in their participation in the community service projects, as well. At the children's request, the program has been expanded to

meetings in the children's homes, since there were time constraints that prevented longer meetings during school hours. Camps are also organized during vacation periods.

The program is designed for people from diverse backgrounds and is open to all. In Dulce Nombre de María, participants include Catholic, Protestant, Jehovah's Witness, and agnostic children. The young people recognize that there are people who do not believe in God but nevertheless lead a just and compassionate life. They also learn that it is important for there to be consistency between beliefs and actions. The junior youth group is facilitated by older Bahá'í youth and adults. Although the program does not focus on child rights explicitly, it covers all human rights, including the right to receive an education conducive to peaceful coexistence.

The right to freedom of assembly and association, for example, is reflected in the authorization of the junior youth to meet regularly. The youth who participate in the pre-juvenile groups learn that they are in an age of transition, in which they are no longer small children nor are they adolescents. This understanding is often a source of relief, and helps them to understand themselves better. It also offers a context for conversation with their families and other members of the community who can support them in their development.

The right to participation is also respected, as the junior youth decide on the actions that they want to carry out in order to improve their communities. They first explore an area of concern, carry out a needs assessment, and then engage in simple but significant actions such as cleaning public spaces or their own school. The junior youth also study concepts such as the confirmation of God in their lives, hope for a better future despite adversities, justice and human rights, the harmony between science and religion, the elimination of all forms of prejudice, the equality of rights and opportunities between women and men, and responsible decision-making.

The challenges faced in the project in Dulce Nombre de María include:

- Getting the members of the community to recognize themselves as stakeholders in the junior youth training. Young people often resist serving as facilitators of the junior groups, given the process that is required to become an "animator," as well as the level of commitment to community service that this role implies.
- The resistance of junior youth to do community service for people who would not offer any service in return. The children changed their opinions as they became more involved in the program.

Lessons Learned

- Junior youth are more responsive if they are offered a safe environment to express themselves; they demonstrate a curiosity about the world, a high sense of justice and a desire for service.
- An initiative such as pre-juvenile groups can only be sustainable if families are part of the conversations about this transformative period and the content of the program.
- The young people need to know about their rights and their responsibilities to become agents of change in their communities.

As a result of the program, the relationships between teenagers from different religious or social backgrounds that previously were tense have now developed into ties of friendship. The program has also shown that strengthening children's inherent capacity for service through small community actions is an effective strategy for preventing violence between them. This also offers them more opportunities to explore their talents and strengths and to allow others to benefit from them.

Source: <http://jysep.org/>

Because of the important role that religious institutions and faith-based organizations have traditionally played in the area of education, they can make a key contribution to creating environments in which all students feel respected and valued, and where all forms of violence are prohibited. In addition to eliminating corporal punishment, creating the conditions in which all children can learn, free of the stress created by violence, requires policies prohibiting discrimination based on gender, religion, ethnicity, socioeconomic, or any other status, as well as strategies to address bullying among students.

Discussions around the CRC and its principles can contribute to creating environments that respect the dignity of every child, a value held by all major religions. To this end, the Interfaith Council on Ethics Education for Children, an initiative of Arigatou International launched in 2004 in close collaboration with UNESCO and UNICEF, developed an intercultural and interfaith ethics education programme entitled *Learning to Live Together* (LTLT). Field-tests in five world regions via the Global Network of Religions for Children were part of the development process. The model focuses on training teachers, youth workers, and social workers to empower children to learn to appreciate and respect diversity, put themselves in the shoes of the other, reconcile their differences with others, and uphold their individual and collective responsibilities to help transform their communities together. The program is conducted in coordination with local faith and non-faith actors and in schools. The facilitators' manual is available in more than 13 languages and has been used in over 30 countries.²³⁵

An evaluation of the LTLT Programme conducted from 2013 to 2014 with implementing partners from 24 different locations in El Salvador, Greece, India, Kenya and Romania with 1,420 children, revealed that when the program was implemented systematically with the support and leadership of institutions, children demonstrated an increased capacity to manage their emotions and respond positively to issues that affect them, perceived a decrease in violent behaviours, developed stronger critical thinking and capacity to deal with conflicts, and demonstrated better knowledge and appreciation of their differences and similarities with others. Although the monitoring and evaluation did not include a control group, the qualitative evaluation methods revealed changes in children's perceptions and even stronger changes in the way educators deal with issues of diversity, violence and discipline in schools through a transformative pedagogy, thus influencing the school culture and broader relations between teachers and students as well as between peers.²³⁶

Another approach has been developed by the Bahá'í Faith. As seen in the featured project from El Salvador, the Bahá'í program is focused specifically on the empowerment of young people. Through activities carried out both in and outside of school, the young people help create school environments that are based on the principles of participation, non-discrimination, freedom of assembly and expression, and respect for the dignity of every child. The program is being implemented by Bahá'í communities in 150 countries. It has been found not only to result in a reduction of tensions between the students, but also to empower them to become agents of positive change within their communities.

4.4 PREVENTING CHILD MARRIAGE AND FEMALE GENITAL MUTILATION

A particularly contentious area where the leadership of religious authorities and faith-based organizations is vital to changing attitudes and behaviors is the prevention of child marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM). In some contexts, harmful traditional practices like these have been associated with religious teachings. Faith and Positive Change for Children, a global initiative on social and behavior change led by UNICEF, with the Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities, *Religions for Peace* and Harvard Divinity School, has developed a new framework that offers a more sustainable way of working with local faith actors for the benefit of children. The initiative uses a participatory process to forge long-term collaborations with religious leaders for social and behavior change against harmful traditional practices such as child marriage and FGM.²³⁷

The voice of religious leaders is especially needed when such traditional practices are considered by some to constitute means of protection. For example, some parents may question why the

international community lists child marriage as a form of violence, whereas, as reported by the NGO network, Girls Not Brides, the practice:

*Is driven by a variety of factors, such as: the perception that daughters are an economic burden, the consideration that educating daughters is a lower priority relative to sons, the view that marriage prevents pre-marital sex, and the fear of violence against women in public areas.*²³⁸

And yet, as noted by UNICEF:

*Child marriage often compromises a girl's development by resulting in early pregnancy and social isolation, interrupting her schooling, limiting her opportunities for career and vocational advancement and placing her at increased risk of domestic violence. Child marriage also affects boys, but to a lesser degree than girls.*²³⁹

Should their husbands pass away, many girls are left destitute because their homes and lands return to their husband's family, they have no vocational training, and in some cultures they are unable to remarry.²⁴⁰



Because of these negative consequences, and because generally the children involved have no voice in the decision, child or forced marriage is considered a form of violence to be prevented. Although the global level of child marriage has decreased by 15% over the last decade, it still occurs in all regions of the world and is the most prevalent in Sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean. In these regions, a survey of young women 20 to 24 years



of age shows that 5–12% had been married before the age of 15, and 25–38% before the age of 18.²⁴¹ Globally, an estimated 115 million boys and men, or 1 out of every 30, were married before the age of 18.²⁴² The children most at risk live in rural areas, have little or no education, and come from the poorest households.²⁴³

As a result of the growing awareness of the negative impact of child marriage, a number of religious scholars and advocacy groups have produced materials demonstrating that the sacred texts do not promote child marriage, and in many instances, emphasize that both the man and woman must be mature enough to assume the responsibilities inherent in marriage and in the upbringing of children. The guide prepared by Al-Azhar University and UNICEF, for example, after examining the Islamic texts related to marriage, concludes that customs encourage or condone child marriage, and not Sharia law.²⁴⁴ Christian Aid in Nigeria has produced a guide that states that “there are no biblical scriptures that prescribe age of marriage.”²⁴⁵ Other religious communities have focused on the root causes of child marriage, by promoting girls’ education and offering opportunities for better livelihoods.

Another practice that has long been thought prescribed by religious texts is female genital mutilation (FGM). It is estimated that over 200 million girls and women in more than 30 countries have undergone FGM.²⁴⁶ The practice of female genital mutilation is concentrated in a swath of countries from the Atlantic coast to the Horn of Africa, in areas of the Middle East, and some Asian countries, and is also practiced in some indigenous communities in Latin America, as well as pockets of Europe, Australia and North America.²⁴⁷ Yet FGM is not required by any religious texts, but is related to beliefs about womanhood and purity, and coming-of-age rituals.

Because of the physical pain and trauma caused by the practice, as well as the fact that it can lead to serious health complications including death for both a mother and her new-born, faith-based organizations and religious leaders in many countries have undertaken initiatives to educate their own membership or collaborated with other partners to raise public awareness about the harm FGM causes to girls.²⁴⁸ As seen in the featured practice from Kenya, the involvement of religious leaders is a prerequisite to convincing communities that abandoning FGM does not constitute an act of disobedience to their religion’s commandments.



Eradicating Female Genital Mutilation (Kenya)

In Kenya, over 94% of the Somali, who are Muslims, practice FGM.²⁴⁹ While other ethnic and religious communities also practice FGM as a rite of passage marking the transition from childhood to adulthood, the Somalis and other predominantly Muslim communities believe it to be an Islamic requirement, and even call it “*sunnah*,” that is, a tradition of the Prophet. It is deep-rooted in the community, and since culture and religion are closely intertwined, it has proven to be very difficult to eradicate it.

Kenya is a signatory to the CRC, the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women, the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child, and the African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights, all of which impose obligations on the government to ensure the protection of women and children against harmful cultural practices.

FGM clearly violates several rights of the child—to life, dignity, privacy, good health, physical integrity, protection from cruelty, discrimination (it only targets females)—and especially Articles 3 and 19 of the CRC, which establish the best interests principle, and States Parties obligation to protect children. Therefore, legal and administrative measures have been taken to eradicate FGM: (1) the Constitution explicitly prohibits violence against women and girls and further protects them against harmful cultural practices; and (2) several laws specifically refer to FGM, including the revised Children’s Act of 2016 and especially the Prohibition of Female Genital Mutilation Act of 2011.

In addition to providing a clear definition of FGM, this latter law criminalizes all types of FGM, its performance, assistance in its performance, the failure to report FGM incidences and the medicalization of the practice. The country has also an anti-FGM national strategy.

To enhance its implementation, the law established an Anti-FGM Board whose functions include advising the government on the implementation of the law and awareness-raising programs against FGM, including educating the communities about its medical harms.

Despite these interventions, the practice has proven difficult to eradicate, especially among communities where it is believed to be a religious practice, as the anti-FGM laws (including the CRC) are viewed as “man-made laws” interfering with divine laws, and the medical harms seen as “the will of God.”

The Population Council, an international NGO, therefore brought together religious scholars within Kenya to discuss the correct position of this practice within Islam. Referring to Sharia guidelines that are in essence contradicted by the practice, the religious scholars are now involved in a program to engage with and educate communities about FGM with the aim of encouraging them to question the practice and move toward abandoning it. The religious teachings are used to complement both the legal and medical arguments against the practice.

A toolkit for implementing this approach was produced in 2008, entitled *Delinking FGM from Islam*, and it has proven to be effective in addressing the practice. As this issue illustrates, religious principles and practices continue to be essential in Kenya to ensuring the implementation of the CRC and other international and regional instruments to protect the rights of children.

Source: Maryam Sheikh Abdi, *A Religious Oriented Approach to Addressing FGM among the Somali Community of Wajir, Kenya*, FRONTIERS, Population Council, 2007.

4.5 CHANGING ATTITUDES TOWARD SEXUAL ABUSE, EXPLOITATION AND TRAFFICKING

Children fall prey to abuse for sexual purposes in a number of different ways, from abuse by a member of a child's family or community, to their exploitation by intermediaries for financial gain. Children are also among the victims of human trafficking, including for sexual exploitation, made vulnerable by factors such as violence, family break-up, and sexual abuse. Although reliable statistics are impossible to compile, it is estimated that some 1.2 million children are trafficked each year.²⁵⁰ Humanitarian crises or conflicts, with the resulting breakdown of social structures, can increase their vulnerability.²⁵¹ The majority of the victims of all these forms of violence are girls, to a great extent as a result of social norms that promote male sexual domination.

Sexual abuse has long existed within families, institutions, and communities, but it has only in recent decades begun to be seriously addressed. Previously, there was little understanding of the

trauma that it created because of the betrayal of trust it represents by those who should have offered protection. When sexual abuse was brought to the attention of religious leaders, in the past they—like the parents—were usually reluctant to take action, for instance, not wanting to shame the victim/survivor within the community. Often, they were not sure what to do, not having any training on the best way to deal with such situations—in many cultures, there are many taboos around sexual behaviors. Most disturbingly, when the acts were perpetrated by religious leaders or clergy themselves, priority often was given to protecting the religious institution rather than the victim/survivor, even though the same behavior would have been severely condemned among their constituencies. Sexual abuse has therefore only recently begun to receive the attention it deserves, accompanying the greater understanding of its impact on victim/survivors and the many campaigns to respect the dignity of every child.

Empowering Religious Leaders to Address Sexual Abuse of Children (United States)

The New York Board of Rabbis (NYBR), the oldest and largest interdenominational rabbinic organization in the world, launched a Family Violence Prevention Program in 2005 to teach clergy how to identify and react responsively to family violence—domestic violence, child abuse and elder abuse, as well as sexual abuse and trafficking of children.

The initiative works with religious and public institutions, NGOs, government agencies, boards of trustees and communities. In parenting sessions, for example, the program might bring in the local prosecutor and child protection services as well as the local police to familiarize parents with the resources available for help. The NYBR has developed a wide range of educational resources as well as information on crisis helplines and shelters, legal assistance, medical resources, and offender treatment. The NYBR receives funding from the New York City Council for the child sexual abuse prevention training it conducts around the city, but also receives requests from religious leaders and domestic violence groups in other states.

In 2007, the NYBR added the Stewards of Children training program, which had been developed by the NGO, Darkness to Light, to address sexual abuse, molestation and exploitation of children. The NYBR added references to religious values, as well as sections on how religious leaders can talk about child sexual abuse and incorporate such information into premarital and marital counseling, to foster better prevention, recognition and response. Since it is estimated that one out of every ten children will be a victim of sexual violence before the age of 18, the aim is to break through the stigma and shame, and to create greater public awareness about the different forms of sexual violence and how to prevent and respond to them.

In order to reach as many people as possible, the program is advertised online, as well as via social media and mailing lists. As a result, the Board receives requests from synagogues, mosques, churches, and other faith-based organizations for training. It then encourages the religious leaders to reach out and invite other religious groups to join the training; as a result, 60% of the sessions have been interfaith. The local faith leader is invited to provide information on their faith or to serve as co-facilitators. This guarantees that the religious leaders are also trained. The session emphasizes the importance of creating communities of trust, pulling from different religious traditions.

In addition to providing training, the NYBR also works with congregations to develop protocols for dealing with child sexual abuse. Since all houses of worship are required to have liability insurance, this training also helps them meet insurers' requirements for child safety.

Stewards of Children is the only third-party-evaluated prevention and education program in New York that has been empirically shown effective; for every person trained, at least 10 children are safer.

Lessons Learned

- It is believed that after a training session in a congregation, those with the intention to harm a child are more likely to leave the community.
- The workshop on child sexual abuse is transformational, changing the way people live their lives. They become more aware of the risks and take precautions to better protect children as well as sharing the information with other adults.
- The information empowers adults; programs that teach children how to protect themselves are important, but they put the burden on the children. Stewards of Children focuses on adult education to better protect children.
- Resistance is very common, because of a denial of the reality that child sexual abuse occurs in all communities.

Recommendations

- Standardized programs are needed across all faiths for seminarians to learn about the vulnerabilities in communities and how to prevent, recognize and respond to child sexual abuse and forms of family violence.
- Religious leaders should learn how to talk about vulnerabilities in a sacred way; otherwise victims of abuse are left with ostracism, guilt, and shame.
- Faith leaders should build a network of social service providers when arriving in a community, to have a range of experts to call on when necessary.

Source: Rabbi Diana Gerson, Associate Executive Vice President, New York Board of Rabbis



At the GNRC 5th Forum held in Panama in 2017, one of the 10 commitments included:

*Embracing internationally agreed strategies and mechanisms to address violence against children, including the Sustainable Development Goals 16.2 on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children; Goals 5.2 and 5.3 on ending violence against women and girls; and Goal 8.7 on ending economic exploitation of children.*²⁵²

A number of faith-based organizations have now developed models of campaigns and workshops held directly with children to teach them how to protect themselves and build their spiritual resilience, as well as programs to ensure safe spaces—models such as kids' clubs, recreational

sports, pre-schools and child-rights clubs that can often use faith-based spaces. The role of religious leaders is critical because of the trust parents and communities place in their religious communities.

At the global level, the international children's charity, Viva, has produced a toolkit that brings together material developed from Viva's work partnering with 35 networks worldwide. It also includes material from the Keeping Children Safe Coalition,²⁵³ of which Viva is a member. The toolkit aims to create safe environments for children and protect them from harm from a Christian perspective. It seeks to be especially helpful to churches, ministries and Christian organizations which are looking to become safe and positive places for children. The toolkit also includes a number of child participation exercises.²⁵⁴

As seen in the featured practice below from Cambodia, sexual abuse and exploitation of children are particularly difficult to address in areas where they are associated with sex tourism, because of the profits that it generates for exploiters. Effective

efforts to break the cycle of extreme poverty include providing access to education, sensitizing communities to the risks their children face, and providing recovery and economic empowerment services for victim/survivors.

Combating Sexual Abuse and Sex Tourism (Cambodia)

The International Catholic Child Bureau (ICCB) is an international Catholic organization created in 1948 to promote the protection of the dignity and rights of children. It supports projects in 27 countries.

Children in Cambodia are exposed to sexual abuse and exploitation at a particularly high rate, and this is related to the country's high rate of extreme poverty, the low levels of education, and its strategic position in the region for sex tourism. Since 2000, the International Catholic Child Bureau (ICCB) has been working in southern Cambodia with local organizations on a number of issues. In 2014, it launched a partnership with *Opération Enfants du Cambodge*, seeking to:

- Sensitize and mobilize communities and authorities on the risks of sexual abuse of children;
- Provide training in the competencies required to detect cases of abuse and improve the judiciary treatment of child victim/survivors;
- Support resilience and the recovery of child victim/survivors;
- Reinforce children's education and their knowledge of children's rights; and
- Conduct advocacy initiatives at both local and international levels.

The population learns about sexual abuse and children's rights in schools and via support groups for children, their parents, and their communities. Supplementing the inadequate level of legal, medical, and psychosocial services, partnerships have been developed with community-based organizations to carry out interviews, and provide care, support, counseling and rehabilitation for the children and their families. These partnerships have also created spaces for listening to the children and providing leisure activities and educational therapy, which assist the development of self-esteem, a sense of identity and social skills. Human rights organizations are helping by offering legal aid and pursuing advocacy with the justice system, accompanying child victims of sexual abuse and exploitation with the support of their family and the community. ICCB creates schools for children who are at risk because they are in remote areas.

One of the key obstacles victim/survivors of sexual abuse and exploitation face when attempting to bring their abusers to justice is corruption in the justice system; abusers can bribe police officers to have the case end in a settlement rather than a criminal proceeding. The result is a lack of trust in the system. Although helpline services are available, victim/survivors and their relatives scarcely use them, for multiple reasons: (1) lack of information about the services; (2) discouragement from the unfortunate experiences of victim/survivors who were disappointed by the service; (3) and protection of the victim/survivor out of fear of negative treatment in the community.

Through its presence at the international level, ICCB contacted Rhona Smith, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Rights Situation in Cambodia, and was successful in obtaining a visit specifically focused on the rights of the child in August 2017.²⁵⁵

In total over 2,500 people—children and adults combined—benefit directly from the activities of the program. Since 2017, the emphasis has been on education, as education has been identified as a key in addressing violence against children.

Recommendations

- Document cases in order to be able to provide evidence.
- Engage in a result-based dialogue with government officials and services in order to improve their responses to sexual abuse cases and to change the system (legislation, policies and practices).
- Provide direct services to children (care, support, counseling, rehabilitation).
- Cooperate with other stakeholders (State and non-State) to maximize benefits for children.
- Conduct internal and external evaluations to improve future endeavors.

Police officers now sometimes cooperate with *Opération Enfants du Cambodge* and their partner, the Cambodian Human Rights League, to pursue cases of sexual abuse. The external evaluation of the program identified its community-based approach as well as the complementarity between local endeavors and international advocacy as its strengths. There is no objective evidence yet of a reduction in the frequency of sexual abuse, but parents and children involved in the project report reduced domestic violence against children.

Source: <https://bice.org/en/fight-against-sexual-abuse-in-cambodia/>

Over the last 15 years, the growing ubiquity of the internet with its online anonymity has led to new forms of sexual exploitation. As reported by ECPAT, the NGO network dedicated entirely to combating child sexual exploitation:

*Child sexual exploitation has soared in recent years as reflected by the ever increasing production and distribution of child sexual abuse materials due to the use of more advanced information and communications technologies by perpetrators.*²⁵⁶

According to the Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities, with an estimated 800 million children now with regular access to the internet, the risk of widespread online sexual abuse has become significant.²⁵⁷ According to UNICEF, 71 per cent of youth aged between 15-24 is connected to the internet worldwide.²⁵⁸

This is a relatively new arena, which few faith-based organizations have specifically addressed. The most significant faith-based action against online sexual exploitation has been the creation of the Interfaith Alliance for Safe Communities,²⁵⁹ which emerged following the World Congress on Child Dignity in a Digital World in 2017 organized by the Centre for Child Protection at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome.²⁶⁰ It brought together academic experts, business leaders, leaders of civil society, high-level politicians and religious representatives from across the globe, and resulted in a strategy document entitled the Declaration of Rome.²⁶¹ The Alliance includes global religious leaders, senior government officials from countries with varying religious foundations, and representatives from leading faith-based child protection and rights organizations. It hosted its first international

forum in Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates, in November 2018, to focus on how religious leaders and faith-based organizations can prevent and respond to online sexual exploitation and abuse of children. Because the use of the internet is not usually an area of expertise for religious leaders, the online abuse of children presents a significant challenge.

There are nevertheless a growing number of efforts at both the international and community levels to protect children from online abuse. In response to the need for guidance in this

area, ECPAT International and *Religions for Peace*, for example, have produced a handbook to equip religious leaders and communities to act, advocate, educate, and collaborate—both among themselves and with broader initiatives—to protect children from online sexual exploitation. The handbook sets out the major threats to children from sexual abuse online, the perspective of the major religions, and the actions that they can take to protect children from these threats.²⁶²

Protecting Children from Online Sexual Exploitation (Sri Lanka)

The Sarvodaya* Shramadana Movement is the largest community-based organization in Sri Lanka, with 26 district centers which encompass more than 15,000 villages across all of Sri Lanka's regions and ethnic groups.

Founded in 1958 and rooted in ancient Sri Lankan traditions, Sarvodaya's philosophy is based on the teachings of Buddhism and also fosters interfaith harmony in Sri Lanka's religiously diverse landscape. Sarvodaya seeks a no-poverty, no-affluence society in Sri Lanka through an integrated, holistic approach to development, which includes spiritual, moral, cultural, social, economic and political development. It provides services in a wide range of areas, from community-based disaster management, reconstruction and rehabilitation, to early childhood development and child protection, health and nutrition, youth empowerment and leadership training, women's empowerment, psychosocial and spiritual healing, and information and communication technology support.

In 2017, Sarvodaya launched a program to raise awareness on the issue of sexual exploitation online for boys and girls 12-18 years old, but mainly 12-16 years old. Most young people have access to cell phones and the internet, but have no idea of the potential negative consequences of social media. Most of the young people are in relationships, and it is common for boys to ask their girlfriends to send them sexually explicit photos of themselves—they argue that since they are planning on getting married, there is no harm. When the photos are then circulated, it is common to blame the girls, and not recognize the boys' responsibility for taking advantage of the fact that girls have been taught to defer to men. In the workshops, Sarvodaya therefore raises the question of respect and violations of another person's dignity. They empower the girls to protect themselves and to refuse to consent to activities that they do not feel comfortable with. The children are informed about the government hotline they can use to reach out to the National Child Protection Authorities, which is already sensitized to the issue of online sexual exploitation. The workshops also emphasize that it is a legal offense in Sri Lanka to have any form of sexual images in one's possession.

To bring the program to a new village, the Sarvodaya District Coordinator first meets with the *Grama Niladari*—the responsible government official—and local religious leaders to request permission to run the workshop. It is important to gain their consent, so that they endorse the program, talk about it with others, provide a room in the community center or school, and even attend the program. The religious leaders often provide space in the temples and time during the religious school program. They are already aware of the problem, but Sarvodaya helps them understand the scope and impact of this form of violence against children.

Members of Sarvodaya carry out the workshops, which last three hours, with a break and refreshments. They begin with the facts about trends in online sexual exploitation, followed by an interactive discussion about social media. The participants are then divided into groups and asked to prepare an advocacy poster. Since the teachers are present, they also learn about the misuse of social media, and can continue to follow up with the children.

Lessons Learned and Recommendations

- **Context:** Understand the context of violence in the community. Develop the framework of the workshop accordingly, taking into consideration the cultural sensitivities.
- **Language:** Be sensitive to the use of language, especially when discussions about sex are taboo in the community. Offensive words must be avoided, with emphasis instead on statistical data and the importance of child protection.
- **Importance of trust:** Sarvodaya is already well known in the country, and already enjoys the trust of religious leaders, community leaders and members, and government officers. Because of its good reputation, religious leaders have easily accepted and supported the program.
- **Consent form:** Always share a consent form, to be signed by the parents, the religious leaders or the head of the temple.
- **Child-friendly programs:** The workshop should be interactive, and not a lecture, where the children experience that their ideas and thoughts are valued. The language must be age-appropriate and culturally sensitive. It is important that the children feel that the ones responsible for the workshop are also learning from the children and their experiences. As religious leaders and/or teachers are present during the workshops, the children are usually afraid of opening up about their own experiences, so the issues should be addressed in a general way.
- **Follow up and feedback:** Currently, as the program is new, there is no ongoing contact with the children after the workshop. It would be useful to have a solid feedback and follow-up approach, perhaps through the development of a network. Feedback received from the girls immediately after the workshop indicates that they are pleased to have acquired tools for protecting themselves.

Since 2017, the program has reached approximately 1,500 people in 20 villages, of which about 90% were children. Sarvodaya plans to spread the program to as many districts as possible. They also hope to collect more empirical data on the project's impact. Sarvodaya aims to strengthen the approach and keep developing material, including animated videos and story books, which could be given out through the education ministry or at a community level.

The project has been implemented in Buddhist, Christian and Hindu communities, with the aim of implementing it in Muslim communities in the future.

* "Sarvodaya" means "the Awakening of ALL – from an individual Human Personality to Humanity as a whole"

Source: <http://www.sarvodaya.org>

Addressing sexual abuse requires a multi-sectoral approach, as shown in the example from Cambodia, in order to address the multiple conditions that make it possible: the taboos around discussing matters related to sexual behavior, a poor understanding of its traumatic impact on children, poverty, lack of educational opportunities, lack of safe play spaces and leisure activities, and ineffective or inadequate legal and psychosocial services. Religious communities and faith-based organizations can play a leading role in creating a better understanding of sexual abuse and its impact, as well as ensuring that schools, places of worship, and spaces for leisure activities are safe for children. Establishing contacts with other organizations as well as relevant public authorities and services, however, will be key to providing the medical and psychosocial attention that victims require, and bringing abusers to justice. In addition, as seen in the featured practice from Sri Lanka, the new technologies that facilitate abuse among children and young people themselves also need to be recognized and addressed, especially since they are little understood by many parents.

Faith-based organizations have been very active in addressing another widespread form of child sexual exploitation and child abuse, which is human trafficking. As stated earlier, an estimated 1.2 million children are trafficked every year, and boys tend to be trafficked for forced labor while girls appear to mainly be trafficked for commercial sexual exploitation and domestic service.²⁶³ Orphans and children without adequate family care, such as migrants and children living on the street, are the most vulnerable to trafficking.

Certain perceptions, often influenced by social and cultural norms that condone violence against children among religious communities, may actually facilitate human trafficking. Religious interpretations that support unequal gender relations can be used to condone sexual and labor exploitation, and religious communities may even choose to ignore trafficked people, viewing their situation as the result of immoral personal lifestyle choices. However, faith-based organizations have also been among the leaders in caring for the most vulnerable groups of children. They are providing immediate relief support such as counseling, health care, shelter, training in vocational skills, legal assistance, and in some cultures in cases of rape, mediation for them to be able to return to their families.

In addition to local efforts, faith-based organizations such as the Salvation Army,²⁶⁴ Caritas International²⁶⁵ and the Anglican Alliance²⁶⁶ have played important roles in international efforts to end modern forms of slavery and trafficking. Caritas, for example, works to advise migrants on ways to protect themselves from trafficking and abuse, and advocates for better legal protection. Likewise, the Salvation Army seeks legal changes that would both prevent trafficking and punish those involved, establishes places of refuge for victims, and seeks to create alternatives for those vulnerable to trafficking. In addition to these same activities, the Anglican Alliance also seeks to reduce demand for cheap goods and services based on slave labor. The Salvation Army, the Anglican Alliance and the University of Leeds are leading a Learning Hub on the role of faith in anti-trafficking, which will soon issue a comprehensive Scoping Report on the contributions of faith-based organizations around the world.²⁶⁷

4.6 WORKING TO ELIMINATE EXTREME POVERTY

Extreme poverty does not always come to mind in discussions of violence against children; the different levels of poverty children face are not always taken into consideration. Nevertheless, in recent years, it has become better understood in the human rights discourse and by development practitioners that extreme poverty in fact constitutes a severe form of violence because of the multiple deprivations suffered by children living in conditions of extreme poverty, including stigmatization and humiliation.²⁶⁸ Groups which face discrimination because of race, ethnicity, religion, gender, disability or social or other status are often forced to live in such deplorable conditions—with poor health and nutrition, little access to education, and no protection from harassment and violence—that they have little hope of ever being able to overcome such an accumulation of disadvantages to lift themselves out of poverty.

Another aspect of poverty is that many people suffer social exclusion simply due to their socioeconomic status, and the very structure of their societies keeps them in deep poverty. The families are fragile as a result of the tremendous disadvantages that they face and are unable to provide the protection and care their children need for healthy development. Consequently, in addition to high child mortality rates, those who survive are more vulnerable to being enrolled in gangs, or becoming victims of forms of exploitation and abuse such as child labor, prostitution and sex trafficking, being recruited as child soldiers, and, in some societies, child sacrifice as a part of rituals carried out by traditional healers to appease the spirits. In too many developed countries, because of the negative stigma attached to parents living

in extreme poverty as being unfit or unable to provide adequate care, children also risk being taken away from their families. Thus, providing greater support and opportunities for their families, and especially single mothers struggling alone on low incomes, would better correspond to the child's best interests and help to break the intergenerational transmission of extreme poverty.

Needless to say, the violence of extreme poverty itself breeds other forms of violence. Child soldiers have been used in at least 18 countries since 2016.²⁶⁹ An estimated 1.8 million children have been forced into prostitution or pornography.²⁷⁰ One of the forms of violence most widespread is child labor, often engaged in out of pure necessity. In the world's poorest countries, it is estimated that one in four children are engaged in child labor, which is defined as work that is detrimental to the child's health and development.²⁷¹ According to the International Labour Organization, 152 million are victims of child labor; almost half of them, 73 million, work in hazardous child labor, defined as work which is liable to harm the child's health, safety, or morals—such as mining, construction,



World Vision International

domestic service, and illegal activities. Almost half of all 152 million child victims of child labor are aged 5-11 years, and 19 million of them are involved in hazardous work.²⁷²



Some religious beliefs can be misused to reinforce the exclusion of some children, thus condemning them to poverty. For example, in some parts of the world where people believe in *karma*, children with disabilities are suspected of being punished for not having performed good deeds in a past life. In other parts of the world, religious tradition can result in forms of exploitation that will also condemn children to a life of poverty. Young boys from poor families, for example, can be sent out to beg for several hours a day in exchange for the food, housing and education promised by the *marabout* in some of the Quranic schools in West Africa. In too many cases, the boys are subjected to corporal abuse if they do not return with the required sum of money, and in many cases their education consists only of rote memorization of the *Quran*.²⁷³

On the other hand, faith-based communities in many instances are reaching out to marginalized groups such as orphans or children living on the street, such as the *Red een Kind* program described below. Faith-based organizations are often the

main providers of support in the form of meals, shelters, education and medical care for children living in extreme poverty and their families. These initiatives are critical to the daily survival of many families living in extreme poverty; however, as also noted in the feature below, they sometimes fail to help individuals and families lift themselves out of poverty in a sustainable way, and in ways that restore their dignity.

Other faith-based organizations are thus working to address the root causes of extreme poverty, by working to expand access to health services and schooling, provide decent housing, and overcome the discrimination that denies access to decent employment under safe conditions. The Bala Shanti program featured in section 2 of this chapter is an example of an initiative at the local level that is aimed at breaking the vicious cycle of extreme poverty.

Other organizations are launching international campaigns to raise awareness of the fact that extreme poverty is not inevitable and that it should be eradicated. Arigatou International, for example, is mobilizing faith-inspired resources to eradicate poverty affecting children, by addressing both the human and structural root causes of poverty. As set out in the *Interfaith Guide to End Child Poverty* developed by Arigatou International's global End Child Poverty initiative, the strategy is three-pronged: promoting theological reflection and action; carrying out interfaith advocacy for social and policy change; and supporting grassroots initiatives that alleviate child poverty.²⁷⁴ Arigatou International has also promoted the "Together We Can End Child Poverty Worldwide" campaign in more than 25 countries, under which the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty is commemorated.²⁷⁵

The Importance of Children's Participation in Advocating for Their Rights (Argentina)

The Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) is one of Arigatou International's four global initiatives; it is an interfaith network of organizations and individuals specifically dedicated to securing the rights and wellbeing of children everywhere. GNRC members in Argentina have been joining forces with different non-governmental organizations, faith-based organizations, and faith communities for the last 13 years. Members include Bahá'í, Buddhist, and Christian organizations and communities.

Particular emphasis has been given to children's right to participation and the role of the family in children's well-being and development. Since 2006, more than 1,000 children and their families have been involved in GNRC actions in Argentina. Over the years, strategic partnerships and collaboration with various faith communities, organizations and government bodies have strengthened the impact of interfaith work in advocacy and fostered intergenerational collaboration.

According to recent data* from the Catholic University of Argentina, in Argentina child poverty has risen to 62.5%; 7 out of 10 children and adolescents are poor, and 3 out of 10 live in a situation of extreme poverty. Moreover, child labor affects 10% of children between 5 and 15 years old, and 31% of adolescents aged 16 and 17, nationwide. In both age groups, the percentage doubles in rural areas. Additionally, Argentina is experiencing high levels of violence, especially institutional violence and violence carried out by police forces against children and youth.

To address this situation, in 2018 GNRC-Argentina carried out actions at the community level to empower children and youth to speak up for and claim their rights, and at the national level to encourage decision-makers to implement the most recent CRC Committee recommendations to the Argentinian government. To this end, GNRC-Argentina organized major advocacy events on the International Day for the Eradication of Poverty (October 17) and the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children (November 20). The events were undertaken in partnership with other institutions and coalitions, focusing on the follow-up to the Panama Commitments on ending violence against children, and especially highlighting the situation of violence, poverty and human rights violations affecting children and youth in Argentina.

In October 2018, GNRC-Argentina also organized an advocacy event in the national Senate with the participation of Adolfo Pérez Esquivel (Nobel Peace Prize winner), other well-known personalities, and representatives of various faith-based institutions and civil society organizations. More than 80 young people from different parts of Argentina participated in the event. The main objective was to recall the obligation of the legislators to monitor the implementation of the recommendations issued by the CRC Committee. On this occasion, the children expressed their concerns and requested immediate actions to protect them:

Every day we are victims of repression and political and institutional persecution. In addition, we face child abuse, rapes, exploitation and trafficking. The lack of access to education, decent housing, the lack of health coverage, poor nutrition and lack of opportunities condemn us to a life we have not decided to live. We face hunger. We are criminalized on the basis our social origin and condition, we are excluded.

That is why today we are here in this room and on these streets, to demand the immediate application of the UNCRC Committee recommendations.

We demand solutions and State policies that protect us. We demand that the persecution against us ends. We demand education, health, welfare and decent housing. We need a state that protects us because we are not dangerous. On the contrary, we are in danger!!!

These activities have led to an increased awareness of children's rights among children and their families. The main challenges have been at the level of communication and positioning due to the regular media stigmatization and criminalization of children coming from vulnerable communities. Advocating and raising awareness on the violation of children's rights, inequality and structural poverty is a challenge that requires greater financial and human resources. Another challenge is the lack of governance and political willingness to provide the necessary financial resources to guarantee children's rights. It becomes harder to work with public institutions, and the political polarization makes it difficult to influence policy-making processes. There is an adult-centered understanding of children's situation, but few are the spaces and participation opportunities for children to share their views about their realities, concerns, and claims. Unfortunately, only a few organizations are able to commit to delivering the resources, time and people required for children's participation processes.

Lessons Learned

- Children's participation has been very meaningful in this process of awareness-raising and advocacy for children's wellbeing. The GNRC in Argentina started with a clear adult-centered perspective on the situation of children and the required responses. Over the years, this has changed by giving children a voice in decision-making and mobilization. Participation has allowed children to become more aware of their reality and thus more engaged in the actions to claim their rights.
- Bringing about changes at the political level requires networking with key actors and opinion-makers, and developing joint advocacy strategies.

*Source: Observatory on Social Debt of the Catholic University of Argentina (UCA). 2018.

In summary, while some religious beliefs or practices can contribute to keeping certain individuals or groups in poverty, faith-based organizations have traditionally been among the most sensitive to the suffering poverty causes, and the most committed to reaching out to alleviate it with acts of charity. What the CRC has brought to the fore, is the importance of providing assistance in ways that, to the greatest extent possible, restore people's dignity by enabling them to participate in finding sustainable solutions that correspond to their aspirations and that break the cycle of

poverty while alleviating its impact. This is the approach taken by *Red een Kind* in its work with homeless youth, which is gradually bringing even public institutions to re-examine their services (see feature below). In this context of participation and dignity—as shown in the featured practice from Argentina—the participation of children and young people themselves is particularly important, not only for their own personal development, but also because it enables them to articulate their concerns and aspirations and to advocate for greater attention to their rights.

Reaching Out to Homeless Youth (The Netherlands)

Red een Kind, or "Help a Child," is an organization based in the Netherlands. Of Protestant Christian origin, its initial focus was on providing homes for orphans in Africa. More than a decade ago, it moved into community-based development, helping communities to set up "self-help" savings and loan groups through which the members support each other financially as well as in other ways, such as helping young people to find jobs.

Aware of the organization's community-based approach, a Public Health Service in the Netherlands approached *Red een Kind* with the request that they launch a project to reach out to homeless youth in the Netherlands aged 16-20 years. Most homeless young people in the country are males from poor households that are unable to provide them with a secure environment. As a result, they drop out of school and often have psychosocial issues.

With the assistance of an adviser from Tilburg University with experience in poverty-reduction programs, *Red een Kind* staff and the Health Service adapted the program for use in the Netherlands. Launched in 2017, it is based on a recognition of the intrinsic worth and dignity of every person, who all have talents that they can put to good use. The program maintained three core values:

- **A group approach:** The young people join a group, decide on their goals and the process for achieving them, and help each other to reach them. They are encouraged to express their dreams and then to develop initiatives to realize them. The staff also stresses their rights as well as their responsibilities to honor basic social behaviors, to respect each other, and to be honest.
- **Cooperation within the local context:** The groups have to function within the social context and to deal with the different services such as housing, education, employment and social protection. It is therefore necessary to collaborate with the stakeholders in the local context and at the political level. For this reason, the program must remain secular but nevertheless reflects Christian values.
- **Knowledge transfer and talent development:** The emphasis is on the transfer of knowledge, talent development and the acquisition of skills.

Lessons Learned

Challenges encountered during the implementation included the following:

- Getting people into groups is difficult because people in the Netherlands are more individualistic than in many African countries. There is little group solidarity. As a result, an even greater focus on the group as entrepreneurs is required in order to succeed. Also, letting the young people choose their own group has proven to facilitate the development of mutual trust and a social bond.
- In the Netherlands, where there is a very extensive social security system and many facilities for the poor, young people find it harder to commit themselves to the program because they perceive that they have alternatives. In many parts of Africa, people have fewer alternatives and so their sense of urgency is greater. How to mitigate this is to help the young person to look very carefully at their context, and to examine whether he/she really sees an alternative. It is also motivating to emphasize a goal toward which they can work through peer support/self-help groups.
- Professionals in social, mental health and health care services tend to quickly move into a "helping mode" rather than trusting that people can become self-reliant. This project attempts to change this within the system (and it is working), but the process takes time.

Many organizations see the program's potential, and so throughout the Netherlands other Regional Public Health Services and semi-government institutions are interested in adopting it and are piloting it. However, experience has shown that youth do not easily accept this approach when the message comes from a traditional institution. In addition, many professionals have difficulties adjusting to a non-hierarchical approach and communicating it well. The traditional welfare system is highly specialized and differentiated, and therefore very difficult to access for people with issues in multiple domains. Young people in particular cannot find their way around it.

The program has shown the importance of starting with the aspirations of young people to develop their talents, facilitating processes and solutions that they want for themselves and for the group to which they belong. Scientific studies have found that peer support systems are very powerful and show good results because they address the basic human need for connection and recognition. Putting into place such approaches constitutes a paradigm shift, and so will take time.

Source: <https://www.redeekind.nl>

4.7 RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN ON THE MOVE

Today, millions of children and their families are forced to flee their homes in order to escape from armed conflict, community violence, political instability, poverty, and climate change and natural disasters. Some children also migrate in search of better educational and work opportunities; the prevalence of child marriage and strict family control are crucial factors for girls.²⁷⁶

There are no reliable estimates on the overall level of migration due to climate change, but the International Displacement Monitoring Centre estimates that, in 2018, more than 17 million people became internally displaced in 144 countries, due to natural disasters and climate change. That number does not include those who may have crossed international borders.²⁷⁷ The International Organization for Migration expects that even higher numbers of people will be forced to migrate over the coming years due to extreme weather events, sea-level rise and acceleration of

environmental degradation—all of which have adverse consequences for livelihoods, public health, food security, and water availability.²⁷⁸

The statistics on other factors that are displacing people are equally disturbing. UNICEF reports “As of 2016, 28 million or 1 in 80 children in the world were living in forced displacement—this includes 12 million child refugees and child asylum seekers, and 16 million children were living in internal displacement due to conflict and violence.”²⁷⁹



World Vision International

The former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children reported in 2017:

*Every minute, 20 people are forced to flee their homes because of violence, persecution or conflict. Children represent more than half of the world's refugee population, with tens of thousands of girls and boys unaccompanied or separated from their families while on the move.*²⁸⁰

Hoping to find a better life elsewhere, all too often children and their families are instead subjected to violence or exploitation along their journey as well as in their country of destination. They are often seen as intruders rather than vulnerable victims at risk, and they face particularly difficult situations if they lack the proper documentation. As observed in the former Special Representative's 2017 report:

*Many children end up in crowded facilities, often together with adults who are not family members. They may find themselves in places with fast-track proceedings, and face a high risk of fast-return proceedings in which their best interests are hardly considered, along with an increased chance that they will be returned to the situations from which they have fled... While their fate is being decided, children may endure humiliation, physical attacks and sexual abuse. In many cases, they lack access to a child protection authority, an age- and gender-sensitive protection determination process, legal representation and accessible information about their rights or about ways of seeking redress for the acts of violence they may have suffered.*²⁸¹

Maintaining a family environment is critical for these children, and therefore, in keeping with the CRC, efforts to reunify them with their families

should be given paramount importance. In many countries, child protection systems need to be strengthened or put into place, and be well resourced with staff trained in communication with children as well as in the risks they face. Cross-border cooperation and information exchange are also needed to prevent the children from being re-victimized as they move through other countries of transition. At the same time, it is important to recognize that many migrant children and their families bring with them skills—and especially a resilience—that can enrich the communities in which they are received.²⁸²

Religious communities and faith-based organizations have been responding to the needs of migrants, refugees, and internally displaced persons for decades. There is now growing attention being given to the specific needs of children on the move. For example, in follow-up to the Panama Declaration on Ending Violence against Children adopted at the GNRC 5th Forum in May 2017, faith-based communities and organizations in Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador and Mexico created an Alliance for the Protection of Children to address the involvement of children in gang violence and organized crime. The Alliance advocates for an increase in investments in child protection policies, the prohibition by law of physical and humiliating punishment of children, and the protection of children on the move, as migration is one of the major consequences of the high levels of violence in these countries.²⁸³

Following the adoption in 2018 of the Global Compact for Migration and the Global Compact on Refugees by the United Nations General Assembly, more than 80 faith-based organizations joined together to launch a global movement

to end violence against children on the move. Co-organized by a diverse group,²⁸⁴ in October 2018, the Faith Action for Children on the Move Global Partners Forum met in Rome to finalize and launch their action plan. Three key themes emerged from their discussions: (1) providing spiritual support to children and caregivers as a source of healing and resilience; (2) strengthening the continuum of protection for children on the move; and (3) building peaceful societies and combating xenophobia. Three detailed evidence briefs were developed as inputs for framing a joint action plan.²⁸⁵ The coalition has now established working groups focused on strengthening local

action, building interfaith peace-building tools and providing spiritual and psycho-social support for children and their caregivers.²⁸⁶

Faith-based organizations are thus working together to address both some of the root causes of forced migration and displacement, as well as responding to the psychological trauma suffered by the children, which otherwise can have long-term negative effects on their ability to build a new, constructive life for themselves. As can be seen in the case study on a program for Syrian refugee children, these programs can take very innovative forms.

Using Creative Arts Methodologies to Reduce Psychosocial Distress among Syrian Refugee Children

Catholic Relief Services (CRS) is the international humanitarian agency of the Catholic community in the United States, working in more than 100 countries to assist impoverished and disadvantaged people regardless of their race, religion or ethnicity.

Over the last decade, CRS has used creative arts methodologies, including animation and puppet-based films, in a variety of conflict and disaster contexts globally to address the social, emotional and healing needs of children. These creative arts methodologies have been successfully used in the Philippines to address conflict between the Muslim and Christian populations as well as in Haiti after the 2010 earthquake to support children's psychosocial needs.

Building on these successes, CRS introduced puppet-based films to address the needs of children aged 6 to 12 displaced by the Syrian crisis in Turkey, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Iraq. With the help of No Strings International, a UK-based company, CRS created two films: *Red Top Blue Top* and *Out of the Shadows*. In close consultation with local faith-based partners, the films were carefully designed to create an imaginary world similar to the environment in which the children live, and deliver key messages such as accepting those who are different (*Red Top Blue Top*) and overcoming fears (*Out of the Shadows*). The films and accompanying puppet-based activities help children to become more resilient, by enabling them to recognize and understand different emotions and providing a structured forum for engaging with other children. The children also create their own puppets and interact with them to express their ideas and feelings.

CRS trains teachers, counselors, and animators to use the methodology and then to develop and implement action plans in schools, child-friendly spaces, summer camps, refugee shelters, and other child-appropriate spaces. To support the roll-out of the methodology to a range of faith-based partners across different countries in the Middle East, CRS worked with field practitioners and partner staff to develop standards

and guidance for use of the two films (in English and Arabic), guidance on training new animators (in English & Arabic) and refresher training for existing animators on the films' uses. CRS then monitors the use of the methodology and provides additional support as necessary on a case-by-case basis.

The program was evaluated in 2015; the results showed that it brought about a number of positive changes in the children. Some were related directly to the messages in the films, such as less fear of the dark and greater acceptance of others. After several sessions, the activities that followed the films resulted in greater trust and communication among the children, and therefore less aggressiveness and stronger social relationships. As a result of these positive results, the program has been expanded in response to the ongoing crisis in the region.

Implementing partners embraced the methodology and were energized to have innovative psychosocial support tools that aligned with their missions. During the evaluation, a partner staff member in Lebanon commented:

It is very important for the child to express his feelings, his thoughts, what is bothering him, especially because we are dealing with children who are traumatized by war and who have witnessed very hard things. Moreover, the Syrian children in Lebanon are not most welcome, a factor that really affects their self-confidence. As an animator, I was able to help children restore their confidence and accept their situation. I was able to detect this change when they started seeing the positive things that they have in their lives and not only the negative ones.

Lessons Learned

- **Creative ideas to keep children engaged:** Partner animators have expanded the interactive components of No Strings activities, both through their initiative and out of necessity, which enhance the methodology and activities. Animators found that children engaged more with film content when they stopped the film midway to ask what the children thought would happen next. Further, animators have found that showing small clips of the films to prompt further activities is a good way to remind children of key messages while avoiding repetition.
- **Expanded timeframe:** The No Strings methodology was introduced in the early years of the Syrian crisis as a complement to other life-saving relief (e.g., food, shelter, medical assistance) and as the situation became more protracted, the needs of children intensified. CRS worked with partners to expand the timeframe or scope of No Strings activities to offer continued engagement for Syrian children, or where possible integrated No Strings into longer-term and more holistic child-friendly and/or education programming.
- **Simplified key messages:** The evaluation found that some of the films' key messages were overly complicated for participating children. CRS revised and simplified the key messages in the No Strings manual with input from local staff and animators. CRS supported partners to ensure the messages were accessible to younger children, with separate messages created for different age groups. The revised key messages then provided a clearer basis for monitoring changes in the children during implementation, leaving evaluation to determine outcomes and impact.
- **Additional guidance** on monitoring, evaluation, accountability and learning (MEAL): In response to the evaluation recommendations, CRS initiated a follow-on learning and capacity building project to support local partners and program teams implementing No Strings and other child psychosocial support programs for conflict-affected and displaced children. CRS created a suite of guidance documents called MEAL4kids, entitled Guidance on Measuring Child Psychosocial Well-being in Emergency & Recovery Settings; Guidance on Accountability to Children; Standards for Child Participation; and Quality Checklist for Child Psychosocial Support and Child Friendly Space Programs.

For more information on CRS's child-related programs, see https://www.crs.org/research-publications/solr-search?sort_by=created&sort_order=DESC&search=children

4.8 PREVENTING THE ASSOCIATION OF CHILDREN WITH GROUPS THAT COMMIT ACTS OF TERRORISM

The involvement of children in armed conflicts, regrettably, is not new. However, their increased recruitment by groups that commit acts of terrorism poses new challenges. Prevention has become more complex as a result of the constantly evolving use of technology for propaganda and to manipulate and recruit children and young people. Moreover, children's involvement in terrorist activities, which are classified by law as serious offenses, raises questions for justice systems as to how to deal with them.²⁸⁷



There are many reasons why armed groups that commit terrorist acts specifically target children: they can be easier to recruit than adults, they are far easier to control, the prevalence of small arms makes them just as effective as adults, and they tend to arouse less suspicion when infiltrating a target area.²⁸⁸ The primary means continues to be forced recruitment, or with some measure of threat, coercion, pressure, or manipulation. Furthermore, even when a child's participation appears to be "voluntary," it is often driven by factors such as poverty, marginalization, insecurity, and discrimination.²⁸⁹ It is important to note that under the CRC's Optional Protocol on

Children in Armed Conflict, there is no "voluntary" recruitment of children under 18 by armed groups regardless of whether or not it is perceived as being voluntary.

Ideology thus seems to play a more important role for those drawn in from outside the areas of conflict, since traveling to join what is portrayed as a just cause can provide a ready-made identity, community, and sense of significance for young people. On the other hand, for children living within a conflict zone, joining an armed group may be the only realistic survival strategy.²⁹⁰

In addition to the many programs put in place by international agencies, national governments, and local communities reacting to armed groups that commit terrorist acts, individual religious leaders as well as interfaith networks have also responded to prevent the recruitment of young people. Experience has shown that religious leaders are particularly effective in working with at-risk youth because they are familiar with the arguments used by clerics associated with armed groups and, therefore, can counter them point-by-point within a sound, theological framework. As pointed out in a recent study of educational responses, "Religious leaders operate at the grassroots level and are intimately aware of dynamics within their communities," and thus they know how to intervene appropriately.²⁹¹

A number of interfaith initiatives have been launched to understand and counteract this highly complex problem. Finn Church Aid (FCA), for example, initiated in 2013 the Network for Religious and Traditional Peacemakers. This has

now grown into a global structure built of religious and traditional peacemakers, international and national NGOs, think tanks, policy centers and academic institutes.²⁹² It is active in peace-building processes, such as the five-year Regional Peace Program (RPP) launched in 2016 by The Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) with its partners in the region: the All Africa Conference of Churches, the African Council of Religious Leaders, Arigatou International – Nairobi, The Fellowship of Christian Councils and Churches in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa, and the Hekima Institute of Peace Studies and International Relations. The RPP covers 12 countries in the Great Lakes and Horn of Africa region: Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Rwanda, Somalia, Sudan, South Sudan, Tanzania and Uganda.²⁹³

The members of the GNRC from the Eastern Africa region launched in 2014 a program called Community Resilience Against Violent Extremism (CRAVE), along with an interfaith resource guide

developed with the Goldin Institute designed to prevent association with armed groups that commit acts of terrorism and transform conflicts involving mostly young people in the Eastern Africa region. Under this program, workshops have been carried out in Kenya and Tanzania involving young people, as well as local elders, women leaders, and local government representatives. The GNRC has also been engaging religious leaders in the Middle East in order to build a network to address the issue in this region.²⁹⁴

As shown below in the case study from Kenya, it is vital to work with religious leaders to address the factors that increase children's vulnerability to recruitment, as well as to develop alternative messages that can be transmitted through the media. Governments also need to provide protection for religious leaders who are outspoken against groups that commit acts of terrorism, in order for them to be able to play a visible role in countering the influence of such groups without risking their lives and those of their families.

Pushing Back Against Al Shabab and Other Armed Groups (Kenya)

The Center for Sustainable Conflict Resolution (CSCR) is a faith-based non-profit organization founded by Muslim professionals and leaders to promote peace through sustainable conflict resolution mechanisms. CSCR focuses on preventing the recruitment of children by groups that commit acts of terrorism by pushing back on efforts to manipulate and coerce children.

Groups in the Horn of Africa that commit acts of terrorism such as Al Shabab, Al Hijra and others have been indoctrinating and recruiting mainly youth and children to be a part of their militant campaigns in the region and beyond. The so-called Islamic State has also successfully recruited from the region. Child recruits have carried out attacks in Kenya and neighboring countries such as Somalia, and some have been active in theaters of war outside the region, including in the Middle East.

Individuals calling themselves "religious leaders" are alleged to be at the center of programs to target and recruit younger members of their congregations to join the wars in other parts of the world. In some cases, moderate religious leaders have been targeted, and some murdered, by members of such groups.

CSCR's flagship program, Building Resilience Against Violent Extremism (BRAVE), is an intervention to prevent terrorist acts in Kenya. The BRAVE strategy is centered on preventing the indoctrination of children and young people, as the most vulnerable group, and preventing the manipulation of religion to justify acts of terrorism in areas considered to be hot spots.

The BRAVE Messengers program targets in-school youth 13-18 years of age with the aim of generating debate, dialogue and conversations on the challenges facing them, and especially on preventing recruitment of children through coercion and manipulation. The program presents them with counter-narratives and positive narratives in order to build their resilience and discourage them from joining armed groups. It also imparts them with life skills, builds their capacity to positively influence their peers on issues related to peace, and familiarizes them with BRAVE's strategy for fighting back against the misuse of religious texts.

Another program aims at eradicating violence in religious institutions. BRAVE developed a program to eradicate violence against children in *madrasas* (religious schools) when it was realized that extreme corporal punishment increased vulnerability to recruitment by violent groups. This program was introduced following the GNRC 5th Forum held in 2017 in Panama and is intended to fulfill the commitments of the Panama Declaration.

An art-based competition, entitled *Lenga Ugaidi na Talanta*, or "Avoid Terrorism through Talent," is a competition in which Kenyan youth and children create messages and alternative narratives aimed at countering violent narratives through short films and the arts.

CSCR has also taken advantage of international days for children to campaign against violence against children. One of them is the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children on November 20, when BRAVE organizes activities involving mainly children to advocate for action to prevent violence against children, including recruitment by armed groups that commit acts of terrorism.

Lessons Learned

To effectively address the recruitment of children by groups who commit acts of terrorism, it is important to mobilize and involve religious leaders and communities. They can effectively address misconceptions and disseminate relevant religious scriptures and verses about *Jihad*.

- The formation of BRAVE networks of youth and children has made it easy for these age groups to access relevant and timely information and thus prevented the recruitment of children. Parents and caregivers have joined to ensure they know what their children learn from these interactions.
- The use of the media, including social media, to provide alternative narratives and counter-narratives through short films and television commercials is an effective way of reaching larger audiences, especially youth and children.
- Interfaith collaboration and working with faith-based networks such as the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC) in implementing important children's programs have made possible a wider and more targeted reach beyond Kenya.
- The creation of structures that guide the program's implementation, such as the BRAVE Steering Committee Against Radicalization and Violent Extremism, the BRAVE Reference Committee, and the BRAVE Advisory Committee, improves the quality and outreach to different audiences, among them children.

Source: Arigatou International – Nairobi

CONCLUSION

Around the world, religious leaders and faith-based communities throughout the centuries have been deeply involved in efforts to ensure that children are protected from the various forms of violence that threaten their very lives, as well as efforts to support their healthy development. The adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which a number of faith-based organizations helped to promote, has led to a rethinking of some attitudes and behaviors that are widely recognized as harmful to children, as well as an assessment of some of the traditional approaches to child protection. As a result, many religious leaders and faith-based organizations are developing innovative approaches for addressing the various forms of violence against children. As shown by the examples featured in this chapter, their

initiatives are shaped by the local and national context and the most prevalent forms of violence: some are focused on reform within their own communities, others are working in collaboration with other religious communities, and still others are reaching out more broadly to other sectors of society, such as child-rights organizations and government services. Many of the projects are ensuring that the children themselves are involved, for one of the significant contributions of the CRC is its recognition of children's capacity to process information, internalize positive values and behaviors, examine the world around them, and take action to improve the communities in which they live.

The CRC thus continues to prove an important guiding reference and advocacy tool for religious leaders and faith-based communities to use to help build a world that is more in keeping with their deepest values. As Marta Santos Pais, former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children, told participants at the GNRC 5th Forum in Panama 2017:

Religious leaders and communities can raise awareness of the impact of violence on children and work actively to change attitudes and practices; ensure respect for the human dignity of the child and promote positive examples of religious texts that can help bring an end to the use of violence against children; sensitize children about their rights and promoting non-violent forms of discipline and education; and strengthen the sense of responsibility towards children amongst religious and community leaders, parents and teachers.





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CHAPTER 5. FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT THE CRC AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS, WITH KEY MESSAGES



INTRODUCTION

Over the years, the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) has given rise to many questions. The questions most often raised by parents reflect a deep concern for their children, their families and their communities, and how the CRC might affect their lives. Some religious groups have also raised specific questions about the CRC and its implications for families and their communities. While the earlier chapters in this Study identified significant common ground among the world's

religions and the CRC, this chapter seeks to provide answers to some of the questions that were frequently raised in the consultations with diverse religious leaders convened for the purpose of this Study. Children who participated in the focus groups held in seven countries for the development of the Study also asked questions about the CRC and how their rights could be fully realized, and their questions were taken into consideration in developing this chapter.

5.1 RELIGIOUS VALUES AND THE CRC

1. Does the CRC envision a world different from what my religion teaches?

The religions examined in this Study teach the values of compassion, human dignity, respect, justice, peace and service to others. The core values of the CRC and most religions are very much in harmony with one another. In fact, Article 29 instructs that the education of children should be directed toward:

- “The development of respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms”...
- “The development of respect for the child’s parents, his or her own cultural identity, language and values, for the national values of the country in which the child is living, the country from which he or she may originate, and for civilizations different from his or her own”...
- “The preparation of the child for responsible life in a free society, in the spirit of understanding, peace, tolerance, equality of sexes, and friendship among all peoples, ethnic, national and religious groups and persons of indigenous origin”... and
- “The development of respect for the natural environment.”

KEY MESSAGE

The core values of the CRC—the dignity and worth of every human being, non-discrimination, respect for parents, culture, human rights, peace and understanding—echo what the major religions teach. In this regard, the core values of the CRC and the teachings of most religions are very much in harmony with one another.

2. Why is the emphasis only on children’s rights? Don’t children also have responsibilities and obligations?

Children, like all human beings, have human rights. Children’s rights derive from the human rights movement that emerged out of the devastation of World War II. The foundational idea of the movement was a push for global recognition that “All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights). The CRC changed the view of children from objects of charity or property of parents to subjects of their own rights with the same general human rights as adults and specific additional rights in light of their age and special needs. For every right, the CRC imposes a corresponding legal duty on State Parties and clear responsibilities on parents, legal guardians and/or the extended family to provide, in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child, appropriate direction and guidance in the exercise by the child of his or her rights. The CRC does not state explicitly that children have responsibilities. However, Article 29 provides that education should prepare children for a responsible life in a free society and develop their understanding of responsibilities, according to their evolving capacities.

KEY MESSAGE

Children are rights-holders. The enjoyment of these rights is not conditioned upon or subordinated to the exercise of duties or responsibilities by children.

5.2 THE CRC AND THE WORK OF RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

1. What potential value does the CRC have to religious communities?

The CRC creates legally-binding obligations for the States Parties and sets out the specific duties that governments have in relation to all the children subject to their jurisdiction. Among other things, that means religious communities can rely on the CRC and other child rights and human rights law²⁹⁵ to assert children's rights and advocate that their governments respect the rights of children in their communities. Importantly, religious communities can use the CRC to demand that States not restrict the religious freedom of children, and to call

for birth registration as a means of protecting children from exploitation, for example, child labor or child marriage, as well as to advocate for laws that prohibit female genital mutilation and other harmful practices.

KEY MESSAGE

Religious groups that are engaged in child advocacy work can use the CRC as a guiding reference to help advocate for affirmative laws, policies, programs and budgets that support the realization of children's right to religious freedom and other rights, advance children's well-being, and protect children from all forms of violence.



2. Why should religious leaders and faith-based organizations support implementation of the CRC?

Whether among human rights advocates, religious leaders, political leaders, development professionals or members of any other community—it is a widely shared goal to help build a world that supports all children and gives every child a chance to develop to his or her fullest potential. The CRC provides a legal framework for achieving this, by covering the full range of children’s rights—from civil and political rights to economic, social and cultural rights.

KEY MESSAGE

Religious leaders and communities are often greatly valued and relied upon within their communities and countries. Their spiritual capital and leadership on children’s rights can help foster broad-based support for the rights and well-being of children, which in turn can help strengthen their communities.

3. What does the CRC say about religious groups’ role in promoting children’s rights?

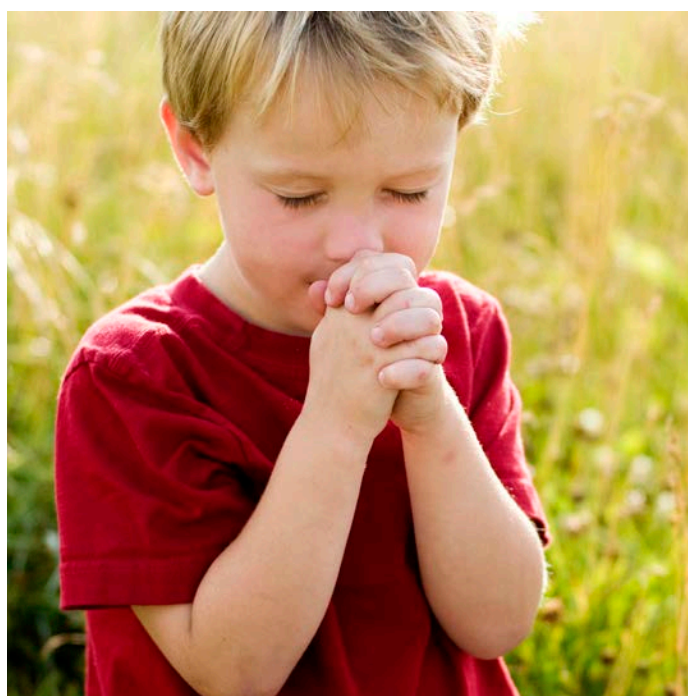
As noted above, and like most other human rights treaties, the CRC speaks foremost about the obligations of States. That said, to achieve the goals of the CRC, and of many religious communities, all sectors of society are needed to support and participate in advancing children’s rights and well-being. Religious groups can ensure, for example, that all children are enjoying their rights within their own communities and that none are excluded from policies and programs or discriminated against in practice. They can also advocate that in all

actions concerning children the best interests of the child is always a primary consideration.

The CRC Preamble underlines the importance of the cultural and traditional values of all people for the harmonious development of the child. These values are also reflected in various articles of the CRC. For example, in Articles 17, 23, 27 and 32, for each obligation that contributes to children’s individual development, social integration, standard of living and protection, the CRC draws attention to the need to consider the social, cultural, spiritual and moral well-being, as well as the physical and mental health, of the child.

KEY MESSAGE

Religious institutions and groups can play an important role in supporting children’s rights and well-being. They can also ensure that all children in their own communities enjoy their rights and that none are excluded or discriminated against in practice. Religious communities are also well



placed to provide spiritual/moral knowledge and guidance, as well as good practices, to address the specific rights and needs of children and foster their holistic development, including their spiritual development.

4. How can the CRC help religious leaders raise the status of children in the community?

Most religious groups care deeply about children and speak persuasively about their concerns regarding the welfare of children in their communities. The CRC imposes legal requirements on the State, so religious leaders and communities can use the CRC to

promote legal reform and improved policies that promote the rights and well-being of all children. Raising the status of children includes denouncing abuse and violations of their rights.

KEY MESSAGE

Religious groups can use the CRC to help highlight and denounce abuse and violations against children to the authorities, and to help end exploitation of children in their communities and countries. At the same time religious leaders, as public figures, can refer to the CRC to hold governments accountable for not fulfilling their obligations to children.

5.3 THE LANGUAGE OF THE CRC CONSIDERED ALONGSIDE THE LANGUAGE OF RELIGION

1. The language of the CRC is different from the language of religious texts. How can these differences be reconciled?

The language of the CRC is legal in nature, as the drafters employed conventional human rights language. While that language may be quite different in style from religious texts, it is vital that such technical differences do not become barriers in understanding the CRC.

It is important to recognize that language barriers occur in both directions: Some people find religious texts difficult to understand, particularly given the many interpretations by diverse sources, while others find the legal language of human rights treaties challenging. By partnering with one another and focusing on the core values expressed in passages

of religious texts or provisions of the CRC, child-rights advocates and religious groups can see beyond the differences in language and terminology and can bridge those differences with the understanding that the CRC and the world's major religions all seek to support children and promote their rights and well-being.²⁹⁶

KEY MESSAGE

With a deeper understanding of the purpose and spirit of the CRC, religious leaders and communities can develop ways to speak about children's rights in their own language, drawing on sacred texts and teachings to convey the meaning of the CRC. This can help overcome language and style barriers and bridge any gaps in understanding.

5.4 RESERVATIONS, UNDERSTANDINGS AND DECLARATIONS TO THE CRC

1. What are Reservations, Understandings, and Declarations?

When a country (referred to as a “State” in international law) becomes a party to the CRC or another human rights treaty, through ratification or accession, it assumes legal obligations under the treaty. Human rights treaties, including the CRC, allow countries to clarify and even modify the obligations they assume through Reservations, Understandings and Declarations, or “RUDs” as they are sometimes called. RUDs are submitted to the United Nations with other relevant documents at the time a country ratifies a treaty. Declarations and Understandings clarify how the country will interpret a specific provision of the treaty. For example, Article 1 of the CRC defines a child as “every human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.” The drafters intentionally did not decide on when life begins, given the range of views on that issue. Therefore, a country could submit a Declaration or Understanding indicating the state will interpret Article 1 to mean that life begins at birth or, alternatively, it can interpret Article 1 to mean that life begins at conception. Such a declaration clarifies how a government understands the treaty; it does not alter the commitment of the country in its adherence to Article 1.

In contrast, Reservations can change the legal obligation of a country with respect to the treaty under consideration. A Reservation is an expression by the country that while it accepts other requirements of the treaty, it does

not accept a particular article or requirement. For example, a country may ratify a treaty but reserve the right not to be bound by a specific provision (article) or it may accept the CRC to the extent that the CRC is consistent with some other document (national constitution or religious text), thereby modifying its commitment. It is important to know whether any Reservations have been submitted as it can change the legal effect of a treaty provision in the country that submits the reservation. Of the 196 countries that are party to the CRC, presently only 40 countries—from all regions of the world—have Reservations; many have been withdrawn over the years.

KEY MESSAGE

Reservations can change the nature of the legal obligations a country commits to when it becomes a party to a human rights treaty. It is important to understand what, if any, Reservations a particular country has submitted with respect to the CRC. This way religious leaders and child-rights advocates are aware of any limitations regarding the obligations binding on that particular country, and, importantly, can advocate for the withdrawal of such Reservations.

2. Which countries have made Reservations to the CRC on religious grounds and why have they done so?

Some states, for example, consider themselves bound by the Islamic law that guides norms related to the life of individuals and families. As a result, those states may submit Reservations

indicating that they will interpret and implement the CRC so long as it is consistent with Islamic law. As a result, some of those states submitted more specific Reservations on particular provisions, such as Article 14, which concerns the right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, as well as the right of the child belonging to a minority to profess his or her own religion.

Some Reservations are related to Articles 20 and 21, which restrict the use of adoption in the case of children who are permanently or temporarily deprived of family. These reservations specify that Islamic law does not include adoption as a course of action in caring for children. Such Reservations have been lodged even though Article 20 of the CRC includes *kafalah* (sponsoring of the child) among the ways of providing alternative family care, so that alternative care arrangements for children deprived of a family environment can be pursued in a way that is respectful of religious and cultural diversity.²⁹⁷

Another example is the Holy See, which made an interpretative Declaration and three Reservations upon ratification of the CRC. The Declaration states the position of the Holy See with regard to the CRC, affirming that it will safeguard the rights of the child before and after birth, as well as the primary and inalienable rights of parents particularly in the contexts of education, religion, association with others and privacy. The Holy See thus reiterated its position with regard to family planning, education and services. In 2014, the Holy See informed the CRC Committee of its intention to review its Reservations. Review of Reservations can present an opportunity

for dialogue among governments, faith-based organizations and child-rights advocates.

KEY MESSAGE

Religious groups as advocates for children can seek to be informed about the nature of any Reservations to the CRC submitted by specific countries and thereby constructively advocate for policies and positions consistent with the best interests of children, and for the withdrawal of these Reservations.

3. Have the Reservations to the CRC been withdrawn by many countries?

Yes, as of April 2019, some 30 countries had withdrawn Reservations, Understandings or Declarations, enabling the CRC to apply more fully in their countries. As described in chapter 1 of this Study, the Committee on the Rights of the Child typically reviews each country's implementation of the CRC every five years. During this review process, the Committee will usually encourage governments to review their Reservations and consider whether they can withdraw any or all of them. It also encourages countries to review Declarations or Understandings that might be construed as limiting children's rights.

KEY MESSAGE

Given the influence that religion, religious leaders and religious groups can play in constructively engaging with their governments, they have an important role in encouraging the withdrawal of Reservations as a means of promoting the full implementation of the CRC.

5.5 PARENTAL RIGHTS AND CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

1. Does the Convention on the Rights of the Child take responsibility for children away from their parents and give more authority to governments?

No. The CRC recognizes the family as “the fundamental group of society” and acknowledges the importance of parents and families—which is explicitly referenced in 19 of the 40 substantive provisions of the treaty—thus thoroughly upholding the primary role of parents and family. The CRC upholds children’s rights and repeatedly identifies the primary role of parents and families in children’s lives and in the realization of all of their rights. The drafters of the CRC recognized that parents are uniquely responsible for the upbringing of their children.

The CRC maintains that governments must respect the responsibility of parents in providing appropriate guidance to their children, including guidance as to how children shall exercise their rights. It also places on governments the responsibility to protect and assist families in fulfilling their essential role in nurturing children and provides that education be directed to, among other things, the development of children’s respect for their parents.

KEY MESSAGE

The goal of the CRC is not to take authority away from parents, but rather to recognize children as individuals with rights and to obligate governments to respect and ensure those rights. Parents can seek the support of religious leaders and communities and encourage them to use the CRC to hold governments accountable with respect to the rights of children.

2. What about the child’s right to be heard? What does it mean to say that children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them? Does this mean that children can now tell their parents what to do?

Article 12 states that a child who is capable of forming a view has the right to express that view in matters that affect him or her. The intent of Article 12 is to encourage adults to listen to the opinions of children and involve them in decision-making in developmentally appropriate ways. It does not give children authority over adults. The structure of Article 12 is consistent with what children themselves said during the focus groups for this Study. Research shows that many children want to be acknowledged and involved in decision-making processes, with the support of their parents and other caregivers. Research has further shown that information, experience, environment, social and cultural expectations, and levels of support all contribute to the development of a child’s capacities to form a view. Article 12 reflects that idea and does not interfere with parents’ right and responsibility to express their views or influence decisions on matters affecting their children. Indeed, Article 5 states that governments should respect the responsibilities, rights and duties of parents to provide appropriate direction and guidance to their children.

In promoting the right of children to express their views on matters affecting them, the CRC recognizes that such participation must occur in a manner that is appropriate to the child’s age and level of maturity. Children’s ability to form and express their opinions develops as

they grow up and mature, and most adults will naturally give the views of adolescents greater weight than those of a preschooler, whether in family, legal or administrative decisions.²⁹⁸

In addition, Article 12 places emphasis on legal and administrative matters concerning children. The CRC encourages governments, parents, judges, social welfare workers or other responsible adults to consider the child's views on such matters, and use that information to make decisions that will be in the child's best interests. In many countries, laws requiring consideration of children's opinions on such issues already exist.

KEY MESSAGE

The child's right to be heard does not undermine parental authority. It recognizes the potential of children to contribute to the decision-making processes, to share perspectives and to participate in a meaningful manner in the process.

3. Do other provisions of the CRC undermine parents' authority over their children?

As noted above, Article 12 gives children a right to be heard, commensurate with their capacity to form a view and their wish to express that view in matters that concern them.

In addition, Article 13 of the CRC gives children the right to freedom of expression including "freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds." This Article also limits a State's restriction on the child's right to freedom of expression. For example, a government may not restrict a child's access to religious materials if those materials are not

from the majority religion in the country. Article 13 does not mean that parents no longer have any control over what their children read and are exposed to through mass media, or access through the internet and on social media.

As discussed above, the CRC repeatedly recognizes the importance of parental guidance. Most importantly, Article 17 also states that governments should develop "appropriate guidelines for the protection of the child from information and material injurious to his or her well-being." Thus, the CRC recognizes the need for children to be protected from potentially harmful uses of the internet and social media.

KEY MESSAGE

The CRC protects parental rights and their primary responsibility for the child's upbringing and development (unless there is maltreatment of the child). The CRC recognizes that children have a voice. It promotes and protects children's rights to freedom of expression and association, with parental guidance and direction. The CRC also upholds children's right to access information, while maintaining the role of parents in providing appropriate direction and guidance.



5.6 THE RIGHTS OF CHILDREN AND THE RIGHTS OF OTHERS

1. Do children's rights conflict with the rights of their parents or other adults?

It is widely recognized that rights are interrelated and interdependent. Not only are certain rights dependent on the realization of other rights (e.g., education rights depend on the fulfillment of health rights), but the rights of individuals are also deeply interconnected with the rights of others. Nowhere is this more striking than with children's rights and the rights of their parents. If parents' rights are violated—for example, by the denial of labor rights or by being subjected to discrimination in housing or other settings—their children are at greater risk of harm. When parents' rights are secured, they are better positioned to advocate and provide for their children. Conversely, when children's rights are protected, their well-being reinforces the strength and potential of their parents and families.



The interrelated nature of rights is also evidenced, for example, in the context of women's rights and children's rights. Ensuring women's rights across a breadth of issues—from health and education, to employment and access to microfinance and other credit programs—can have a positive impact on the rights and well-being of children and families. Conversely, the realization of children's rights can, for example, empower girls and support their development into adults who are well positioned to exercise their rights. It has been argued by experts in this field that the protection of women's rights is important for the achievement of children's rights and, conversely, the protection of children's rights is important for the achievement of women's rights.²⁹⁹ Nevertheless, there are many instances in which women's rights and children's rights address distinct issues, and when the rights of one group may be questioned in relation to the rights of the other group. For this reason, the rights of women and those of children have often been promoted separately from one another. Achieving the full realization of children's rights ultimately requires that we account for the ways in which children's rights are connected with the rights of others.

KEY MESSAGE

Rights are interrelated and interdependent. This means that the fulfillment of children's rights depends in part on securing the rights of parents and other family members who support and provide for children. By recognizing the value of supporting human rights for all individuals, religious leaders and communities can achieve progress in securing the rights and well-being of children and their families.

5.7 THE CHILD'S RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION

1. Does the “right of the child to freedom of thought, conscience and religion” mean that parents can no longer require their child to accompany them to religious services or to practice religion at home?

Article 14 of the CRC upholds the child's right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This means governments may not attempt to dictate what a child thinks or believes. Importantly, the CRC also requires that governments “respect the rights and duties of the parents and, when applicable, legal guardians, to provide direction to the child in the exercise of his or her right [to freedom of

thought, conscience, and religion].” In other words, the CRC does not merely recognize the role of parents to guide their children's development in this area; it expressly requires that States respect the rights and duties of parents in this regard.

KEY MESSAGE

The CRC upholds children's rights to freedom of thought, conscience and religion, and affirms the role of parents to guide children in exercising their rights. Thus, parents are responsible for guiding their children in making decisions, with respect for the views of the child in accordance with their age and maturity.

5.8 THE CRC'S IMPACT ON CHILDREN'S EDUCATION

1. Does the CRC prohibit corporal punishment in schools?

The CRC places a high value on education, devoting two articles to this issue. Common sense would indicate that, if children are to benefit from education, schools must be run in an orderly way. However, ensuring order should not require the use of force or violence. Discipline that inflicts violence on a child is a violation of his or her right to be protected from violence (Article 19). The CRC specifies that school discipline must respect the child's human dignity. This requires school administrators to review their disciplinary policies and eliminate practices that involve physical or mental violence, abuse or neglect.

KEY MESSAGE

The CRC recognizes the importance of education in children's development and upholds their educational rights. Included in this recognition is the idea that school discipline must be undertaken in a manner consistent with the child's human dignity and best interests.

2. What does the CRC say about other school policies?

The CRC does not address specific school policies. It focuses on children's access to education, on efforts to keep children in school, and on the role of education in helping children to realize their full potential. It does not dictate how a school or education program should achieve those goals. The CRC does not address

issues such as school uniforms, dress codes, the singing of the national anthem or prayer in schools. It is up to governments and school officials in each country to determine whether, in the context of their society and existing laws, practices in these areas infringe on other rights protected by the CRC.



It is important to keep in mind four important principles. First, whatever rules are established must be without discrimination of any kind (Article 2). Second, school policies, like all policies that affect children, should be consistent with the best interests of the child (Article 3) and avoid subjecting children to violence (Article 19). Third, education should be aimed at giving all children the opportunity to develop to their full potential (Article 29). Fourth, school policies should be consistent in upholding access to education for all children (Article 28). Thus, while the CRC leaves decisions on specific school policies, such as school uniforms, to the discretion of the local education authorities, those policies must not impose a financial burden or result in some form of discrimination that would impede children's equitable access to education.

KEY MESSAGE

The CRC does not specify how schools should be managed, but rather obligates governments to develop school management policies that do not violate the rights of children. Government policies should be developed to ensure that the dignity and rights of every child are protected and respected.

3. Does the CRC dictate the content of education?

Article 29 of the CRC addresses the goals of education. Those goals, including the “development of the child’s personality, talents and mental and physical abilities to their fullest potential” and the “development of respect for the child’s parents, [and] his or her own cultural identity, language and values,” overlap with the core goals for children espoused by religions and also held by most parents. Enabling children to develop to their fullest potential is a fundamental goal of all parents and schools, and the CRC reinforces that vision. Article 29 goes on to highlight other key goals consistent with religious teachings on compassion, human dignity, tolerance, peace and understanding.

KEY MESSAGE

The CRC obligates governments to use the maximum extent of available resources to ensure that education helps every child develop to their full potential. It also encourages education that fosters respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as human dignity, tolerance, peace, and understanding—values that are enshrined in religious teachings.

5.9 THE CRC AND POSITIVE PARENTING AND DISCIPLINE

1. What position does the CRC take on corporal punishment in the home?

The CRC makes it clear that children are to be protected from all forms of mental or physical violence or maltreatment. Thus, discipline that involves such violence is unacceptable and in violation of children's rights. There is extensive research that shows exposure to violence has significant adverse consequences for child well-being in the short and long terms. Many countries already have laws defining what punishments are considered excessive or abusive. It is up to each country to review these laws in light of the CRC, with the threshold being that punishment cannot violate CRC Article 19's prohibition of all forms of violence against and maltreatment of children.³⁰⁰



Beyond the prohibitions set out in Article 19, the CRC does not specify what discipline techniques parents should use, but it strongly supports positive parenting that includes providing guidance and direction to their children. Disciplinary practices that are non-violent, appropriate to the child's level of development, and in the best interests of the child are most effective in helping children

learn about family and social expectations for their behavior. This may include learning to internalize the religious values of respect and compassion.

KEY MESSAGE

The CRC rejects all forms of violence against children and supports the role of parents and guardians in providing guidance and direction to their children. Disciplinary measures should not impose physical or mental violence or harm on the child. Adults should help children learn from their mistakes and provide a loving and protective environment.

2. The CRC refers to protection from “physical violence” yet some religious groups justify use of corporal punishment as a form of discipline—is this acceptable under the CRC?

The CRC supports the elimination of all forms of abuse and violence against children. Yet, corporal punishment continues to be a pervasive practice and remains lawful in many countries despite evidence that demonstrates its short- and long-term negative impacts on children's development. According to General Comment 8 of the CRC Committee, “Some raise faith-based justifications for corporal punishment, suggesting that certain interpretations of religious texts not only justify its use, but provide a duty to use it. Freedom of religious belief is upheld for everyone in the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (Article 18), but practice of a religion or belief must be consistent with respect for others' human dignity and physical integrity. Freedom to practice one's religion or belief may

be legitimately limited in order to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of others.” In this context, influential leaders of all the major religions have called for the prohibition and elimination of corporal punishment.³⁰¹ (See chapter 4 for more discussion and case studies on this issue).

KEY MESSAGE

Corporal punishment violates a child’s physical, emotional and spiritual integrity; universal regard for the child as a person with inherent rights and dignity should inspire religious communities to work in solidarity with others to end all violent punishment of children.

5.10 RELIGIOUS LEADERS’ ROLE IN ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN

1. What role can religious leaders play in the movement to end violence against children?

Vast numbers of children around the world regularly suffer from abuse, neglect and violence, cutting across boundaries of age, gender, religion, ethnic origin, disability, and socioeconomic and other status. Such treatment of children is contrary to the tenets of the major religions of the world, which uphold the inherent dignity of all human beings. Religious leaders can thus play a lead role by breaking the silence around violence against children using sermons, prayers, and teachings that promote respect for children. Many are already advocating for an end to violence against children and offering counseling and spiritual guidance. Religious groups often provide shelter and needed services for vulnerable children and families.

Resources referred to in the Annex of this Study can be adapted to local contexts and used to create learning opportunities. Religious leaders can use these tools to inspire their communities to reflect on religious teachings and principles promoting the care and protection of children, encourage discussions on how

violence against children is not compatible with the religious principles of human dignity, compassion and understanding, and also promote awareness of non-violent forms of parental and school discipline.

KEY MESSAGE

There is growing recognition among religious leaders and communities, as well as in other communities, of the harms caused by all forms of violence against children. Increasingly, religious leaders are advocating for an end to violence against children. It is critical that all religious communities participate in this effort and actively work to end violence against children.



5.11 THE CRC AND ISSUES RELATED TO REPRODUCTION AND SEXUALITY

1. What are the implications of the “inherent right to life” in regard to family planning services and abortion?

Article 1—the definition of the child—establishes that a child is any “human being below the age of eighteen years unless under the law applicable to the child, majority is attained earlier.”³⁰² To ensure neutrality, the drafters of the CRC agreed to adopt this final language, rather than an earlier version which included specific language on the beginning of life. Recognizing the sensitive nature of this issue, the drafters of the CRC agreed to the following position: Article 1, the legally-binding

definition of the child, would not determine the beginning of life; the non-binding Preamble would acknowledge “before and after birth”; and the formal record of the drafting history would include a note (see next paragraph) that the language of the Preamble does not affect the definition of the child. As a result, individual States Parties can proceed in ways that are consistent with their own views on the matter.

The Preamble of the CRC references the child’s need for “special safeguards and care... before as well as after birth.”³⁰³ This language was taken from the 1959 Declaration on the



Rights of the Child and reflects the widespread understanding that prenatal care affects the well-being of children. The drafters explained:

*In adopting this preambular paragraph, the Working Group does not intend to prejudice the interpretation of article 1 or any other provision of the Convention by States Parties.*³⁰⁴

In other words, the Preamble, which is not legally binding, does not suggest any particular view on abortion or family planning.

KEY MESSAGE

Overall, the CRC's position on abortion is neutral, allowing individual States to apply their own interpretation. More broadly, the CRC's position on family planning requires States

to “take appropriate measures” to “develop... family planning education and services.”³⁰⁵ In other words, deference is given to individual States to act in a way that is consistent with the object and purpose of the CRC—ensuring all the rights and well-being of all children. Individual States have flexibility to identify and pursue an approach that is consistent with both the CRC and the values of their citizens.

2. What does the CRC say about the issues of sexual orientation and gender identity?

The CRC does not speak directly about sexual orientation and gender identity; it predates many of the present-day discussions concerning these topics. However, the CRC clearly articulates its core principle of non-discrimination (Article 2), and the right of every child to have their rights ensured without discrimination of any kind. Additionally, identity is important for all individuals and respect for and protection of identity is consistent with upholding the rights of the child. Article 8 of the CRC requires that States “respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference.”

KEY MESSAGE

The CRC does not speak directly about sexual orientation and gender identity. Article 2 of the CRC mandates that governments respect the rights of all children, without discrimination of any kind. Article 8 further obligates governments to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity.





CHAPTER 6. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACTION



INTRODUCTION

This Study suggests that the tenets of the world's major religions share many beliefs and have much in common not only with one another but also with human rights and children's rights principles as recognized in the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC). This common ground is not well known or recognized by many religious groups, nor by many advocates of children's rights. Yet the commonalities offer a foundation upon which important initiatives can be built to advance the realization of children's rights and well-being of children around the globe.

The CRC provides a comprehensive legal and ethical framework for supporting children's development and advancing the rights and well-

being of all children. Its mandate supports the values that many religious and spiritual traditions have cherished for thousands of years.

As the world commemorates the 30th anniversary of the CRC in 2019, it is important to recognize that the CRC has helped foster dramatic changes and advances for children in numerous countries, at the legal, policy, budget and programmatic levels. Most importantly, it has led to markedly improved outcomes in health and education and to children's well-being. Thanks to the CRC, there is greater recognition and acceptance of children's rights and the need to raise their legal status, which in turn helps to reduce harmful treatment and exploitation of children. Yet while



there is much to celebrate at this 30th anniversary, millions of children around the globe—and in every country—are deprived of their rights and suffer all manner of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect. In sum, much still remains to be done. The challenges children face cannot be overcome without the involvement of religious leaders and their communities.

If the international community is to achieve the aspirations of the CRC and the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030—including SDG target 16.2 to end abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children—it is going to require concerted action. Religious leaders, the State and its institutions, and local religious communities, along with many other stakeholder groups, can and must play a vital role in achieving these internationally agreed goals. The children of our world deserve their very best effort.

The following recommendations for action developed by this Study's authorship team (see Annex III) are derived from the consultations with diverse religious leaders, child-rights advocates, and children that were conducted to inform this Study. Thus, they are not exhaustive. It is hoped that these recommendations will serve as the basis for additional reflection and dialogue, help to enhance cooperation among the key stakeholder groups addressed by this Study, and, as a result, promote further implementation of the CRC in the years to come.

Recommendations for Action

6.1 FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS

1. Become familiar with the CRC and children's rights.

- By deepening your understanding of children's rights, as religious leaders you can help your communities see the common ground between rights and religion, help articulate them into your sermons and activities in your religious community, and forge new partnerships. Article 42 of the CRC requires that governments make children's rights "widely known" among adults and children. As religious leaders you can help broaden understanding of children's rights among adults and children in your communities.
- By deepening your understanding of children's rights, as religious leaders you can contribute to addressing the issue of misinterpretation and harmful application of norms related to children.

2. Incorporate the CRC and other relevant children's rights law into your efforts to advance child well-being in your communities.

- As discussed in this Study, the CRC and other child-rights laws provide a legal mandate, which parents, families, and communities can use to advocate for government action that helps secure the rights and well-being of children. As religious leaders, you can refer to the CRC and use the power of its legal mandate as a tool to advance initiatives that support children and families in your communities (see chapter 4 for examples of successful practices).

- Your engagement in promoting children's rights can also lead to greater participation at the national level by civil society including faith-based groups during the required reporting process every five years by your national government to the Committee on the Rights of the Child.



3. Convene dialogues (including interfaith dialogues) and initiate awareness campaigns in your religious community about children's rights.

- Consider addressing any ongoing violations of children's rights in your communities through awareness-raising campaigns. This action may help to create or strengthen child protection systems in your country.
- To broaden the impact of the CRC and children's rights, it is critical to increase the number of individuals who understand and actively support children's rights. A threshold step is to assess one's own community. Therefore, each religious community is encouraged to initiate a dialogue on children's rights—and identify what opportunities there

are to support children's rights and what, if any, the barriers there are to full realization of children's rights in their community. A thoughtful, open dialogue can lead to greater understanding of children's rights and ultimately to action that improves the lives of children.

4. Support the right of the child to be heard and to meaningful participation.

- As religious leaders you are trusted adults in numerous communities—trusted by both adults and children. You can help support children's right to be heard (Article 12 of the CRC) and create safe spaces and opportunities for children's participation in your houses of worship.
- You can help educate adults on the value of listening to children when decisions are being made that concern them. Supporting children's right to be heard is not only consistent with

child-rights law; it produces better results for children's well-being. Many studies have shown that when children are heard, outcomes improve. Children can provide important insights into their own lives and the lives of their peers, helping you understand both what helps them and what threatens their well-being.

5. Advocate for ending violence against children and other children's rights violations.

- As religious leaders you are highly respected in your communities, and your voices carry significant weight. Yours can be a powerful voice in speaking out against child-rights violations and in advocating for the protection of children and the implementation of the CRC.
- As part of this, religious leaders are the best-positioned to question and challenge those individuals who claim a religious justification for harming children. Such acts are inconsistent with religious values, are inconsistent with the CRC, and religious leaders can lead the way in addressing them.

6. Advocate for concrete strategies in your communities to tackle systemic issues that leave children vulnerable to rights violations. Such issues include inequality, discrimination, disparities, and injustice.

- Religious leaders and communities can draw on the shared values embedded in children's rights and religious tenets to advocate against inequality, discrimination, disparities and injustice.
- Engage in activities and programs that support the holistic development of children and address the root causes of violence.



7. Denounce children's rights violations in your communities.

- There are many examples of harm to children in religious settings. For too long the response in some cases has been silence. In setting an example, religious communities should also denounce children's rights violations occurring at the hands of community members including, at times, religious leaders or within religious institutions.
- The CRC provides a roadmap for protecting children from harm. By embracing the CRC, religious organizations and communities can not only advocate on behalf of children, but also denounce any harmful acts that occur within the community and report them to the appropriate authorities.
- Religious and faith leaders can examine the governing rules of their institutions to ensure they respect the principles and standards as established in the CRC and do not permit any violation of children's rights.

8. Champion special protection and promotion of the equal rights of girls and women.

- Proactively promote special protection and promotion of the equal rights of girls and women throughout their life-cycle, and campaign against harmful practices, ignorance and superstition that perpetuate their unequal and unfair treatment and often condoned by social and cultural practices and misinterpretations of religious texts.

9. Raise awareness about the CRC among parents and caregivers in your sermons, counselling and community outreach.

- The Arigatou International led initiative—The World Day of Prayer and Action for Children celebrated yearly on November 20—provides a good opportunity to raise awareness about children's rights.



6.2 FOR CHILD-RIGHTS ADVOCATES

1. Identify and support opportunities to partner with religious leaders and communities to advance children's rights and well-being.

- There is substantial common ground among child-rights advocates and religious communities which can mutually reinforce their efforts. Many of you may see yourselves as members of both groups. Building on these shared values will have significant benefits for children. However, it cannot be only religious communities that seek to bridge the divide, where it exists. Child-rights advocates are also recommended to look for opportunities to reach out to and partner with religious leaders and communities.



- Look for opportunities to include religious communities—both their leaders and their youth and children—in your child-rights advocacy work and action plan development.
- Initiate collaboration with religious leaders to document their experiences and share lessons learned when soliciting stakeholder contributions.

2. Involve religious communities in your advocacy and in your calls to action.

- Ensure that religious leaders and communities are identified as a relevant audience in your organization's child-rights advocacy work and reports on situations involving rights violations.
- Appeal to religious communities directly in your advocacy and calls to action to help bridge gaps and facilitate greater public support for children's rights initiatives.

3. Work with religious groups for children's right to be heard and to participate.

- Child-rights advocates do critical work on behalf of children around the globe. For optimal results, consider engaging religious communities as partners to ensure that children and young people can meaningfully participate in matters that concern them.
- When children are involved in advocacy work, child-rights advocates should ensure meaningful representation of all children. In general, urban and literate children are the most included since they are easier to reach, but those living in the most vulnerable and excluded areas, or from the most marginalized communities are often neglected.

6.3 FOR GOVERNMENTS AND POLICYMAKERS

1. 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.

- Promote the holistic development of children, including their spiritual development, as part of the commitment to the fulfillment of their rights.



2. Convene regional and national conferences on the opportunities for collaboration among religious groups and human rights groups for the betterment of children's lives.

- Coordinate joint efforts with secular child-focused organizations, religious groups and children's rights groups to address children's rights from a multi-sectoral perspective.
- Include children and youth together with religious leaders in national and regional conferences on issues affecting children.
- Create more opportunities and spaces for faith actors to participate and contribute to the development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of laws and policies relating to children.

- Include religious leaders and communities in the discussions, planning and implementation of initiatives to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and targets related to children's issues.

3. Support children and their right to be heard and to participate.

- In all countries, there are numerous government agencies and ministries with mandates that cover issues affecting children. Despite the impact of government policies and programs on children, children are rarely consulted in the design, development, implementation or evaluation of such government policies and programs. Governments could do much more to include diverse groups of youth in this work, which ultimately aims to benefit children.

4. Review any Reservations, Statements of Understandings, and Declarations to the CRC declared by your State, in consultation with religious groups, with a view to withdrawing such reservations and removing any barriers to the fulfillment of children's rights.

- The review of such reservations to the CRC could serve as an opportunity for dialogue and action among the State, religious leaders and faith-based organizations, child-rights advocates, and children and youth, a process which could do much to advance the rights and well-being of children.

6.4 FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH

1. Expand your learning about and understanding of the CRC and children's rights.

- Children's rights are first and foremost your rights. By learning about your rights, you can better position yourself to advocate for and exercise your rights. You can also stand up for the rights of other children and youth. By understanding children's rights, and human rights more broadly, you can also ensure that your actions do not violate the rights of others.
- There are countless examples of children leading the way to improve conditions in their communities and countries. From tackling bullying in their schools to confronting the threat of climate change, many children and young people have proven they are powerful actors for positive change.

2. 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.

- Children have the power to effect great change. But your efforts can often benefit from support from and partnership with adults, including parents, other caregivers, teachers, religious leaders, and more. It is recommended that you seek out adult supporters of children's rights who can work with you to protect children and improve outcomes for all children.

3. Initiate activities to raise awareness about children's rights in your schools and communities.

- Gather with your friends and peers to discuss issues that affect children in your schools or communities.
- Develop campaigns in your schools and religious communities to raise awareness about issues that affect children.
- Use social media to raise awareness about children's rights.



6.5 FOR PARENTS AND OTHER CAREGIVERS

1. Learn about the CRC and how it can positively impact families and communities.
 - Parents and other caregivers play critical roles in nurturing and supporting children's development. As this Study has detailed, the CRC, and children's rights more broadly, can be a powerful tool to help protect children and support their development. Parents are recommended to learn about the CRC, to develop an understanding of the family-supportive aspects of the treaty, and to identify ways the CRC can help support your family and community.
2. Support children and their right to be heard and to participate.
 - Parents and other caregivers, including teachers, are ideally positioned to help facilitate children's participation in their homes and communities, which begins by listening to children. You can help children develop the skill set necessary to participate meaningfully, guide their access to a diverse source of materials for learning, and serve as advocates in local and national venues to ensure other stakeholders include children in decision-making processes.



CONCLUSION

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 the faith-based initiatives and children's rights initiatives can be maximized, nevertheless, a promising foundation already exists to build upon.

Reflecting upon the numerous discussions and contributions received for this Study, it is evident that further interfaith dialogue and collaboration are needed. Also wanted are more efforts 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 deep 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.

This year is an important milestone which offers an opportunity to reflect 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.



ANNEXES

I. KEY FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS WITH CHILDREN

March-April 2019

Between March and April 2019, Arigatou International undertook seven participatory and child-friendly focus groups with a total of **103** children from Brazil, Bosnia & Herzegovina (B&H), India, Panama, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Uruguay representing the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Islamic, and Sikh religions. This annex presents the key findings on children's views about religious values and the role of religious communities in supporting children's rights and development.



More Commonalities Than Differences

Most of the children consulted agreed that religions have many values in common, including loving one another, respect for others, showing mercy to the needy, devotion to worship, tolerance, and forgiveness. According to children in Sri Lanka, “every religion preaches that every single person is God’s child and that we all are one big family” (Sri Lanka, 14-17 year-old children).

Having opportunities to engage with children from other religions allowed children in India to identify not only what makes them unique but also appreciate the diversity around them:

I am a Jain and, in my religion, they teach forgiveness and to have compassion. I believe this is common with Christian teachings. (India, Jain girl, 15 years old)

However, although all religions have more similarities than differences and all religions share the same positive values and mission, they are different in doctrine and rituals (B&H, 12-16 year-old children). One child pointed out, for example:

Although we differ in a number of things, still it does not put us in conflict. Things like fasting for Muslims is 30 days and Christians 40 days; as for food, Muslims are not supposed to eat pork, but Christians do eat it; Muslims write from right to left while Christians write from left to right; Muslims devote [time] for worship five times a day and congregate on Fridays while Christians can decide how they pray during weekdays but they congregate on Sundays; as for marriage, Muslims can marry up to four wives while Christians are allowed to marry only one. Dress codes in Islam, especially for women, [state] they must cover their bodies (head) but for Christians it is not necessary. Burials in Islam do not use coffins, but Christians do. (Tanzanian girl, 13 years old)

Religious Communities as a Source of Protection

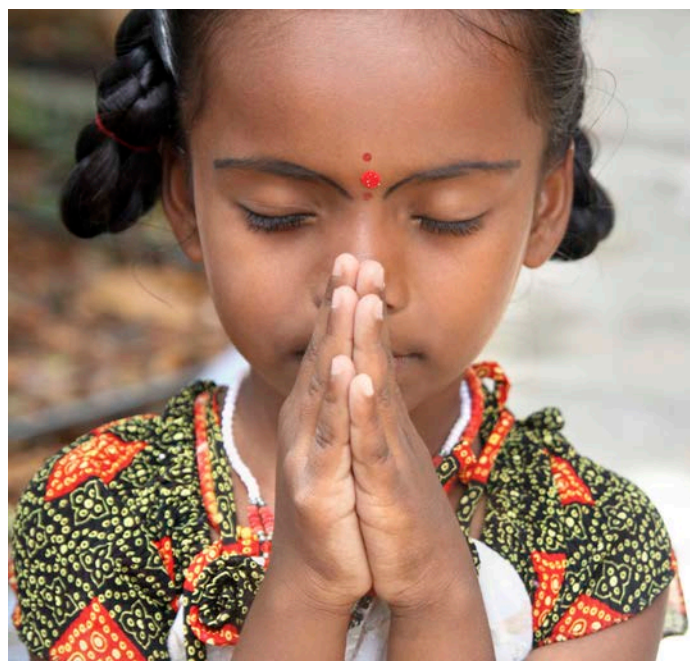
In many cases, religious communities are considered by children to be a source of physical, spiritual, emotional, and cognitive protection. Sometimes, religions are even considered one of the most powerful engines for changing human attitudes and behavior (Sri Lanka, 14-17 year-old children). According to children, their religious communities encourage them to share their talents and to serve the community (Uruguay, 12-16 year-old children), and teach them values so they can learn to live together in harmony (Panama, 11-17 year-old children). However, children “have also felt their rights violated by their own religious communities because the religious leaders are not aware of our rights” (Panama, 11-17 year-old children). In some cases, children recognize their religious communities as a safe place to share their views, whereas at other times “we are not free to express a view that violates the principles of our religion or our religious leaders,” or “we cannot talk about our attitudes, because of uncertainty about the prejudices and stereotypes of our community” (B&H, 12-16 year-old children).

The feeling of protection by and within the religious community varies depending on the people children interact with. For example, some said, “I feel safe in religious areas, but I do not feel safe with other believers [of other religions], they do not treat me with respect; they discriminate [against] me” (child from B&H). Jewish children attending the Tenu’ot Noar (a Jewish youth movement) in Brazil expressed that they feel safer when participating in the Tenu’ot Noar “because we feel more free to express our views and feelings; at the synagogue we feel more restricted as you do not really know the people there and you do not want to make a bad impression” (Brazil, 12-16 year-old children).

Living in Harmony is Not Only up to Children

The children consulted said that they value establishing friendships with children from other religions: “I have a friend that is extremely Catholic. I am Jewish. We talk, ask questions about our religions, do some research but never fight about it. It is important to be able to ask questions” (child from Brazil). Empathy and solidarity encouraged through interfaith platforms are values that give a new definition to relationships such as friendships: “During the time of fasting, when I fast my friends from other religions also fast; this defines friendship” (India, Muslim boy, 15 years old). Nonetheless, according to children, living in harmony requires more than that:

We can live in harmony if religious leaders impart the right knowledge in their teachings to the children so they understand fully about their faith and how to explain clearly to others and that no religion is there to disregard other beliefs/religion but respect [them]. (Tanzanian girl, 13 years old)



The role of religious leaders and communities in peacebuilding is crucial. For example, “some superstitious beliefs in some religions are dangerous to the children” (India, 10-16 year-old children), and in many cases they lead to the misuse of religion to justify violence. However, parents and adults also play a key role in providing new generations with opportunities for dialogue and overcoming historical hatred:

My religion is Islam. I brought to my home a student from Serbia who is of other religious affiliations than I, [and] we became very good friends. Unfortunately, she had a bad experience because [my] adult neighbors insulted her for belonging to the Serbian people and [used] hate speech towards her (B&H, 12-16 year-old child).

Children from several countries emphasized that various barriers tend to come from adults rather than from children themselves. For example, a group of children from B&H explained that “we want to hang out with other children and when we start to hang out with them; unfortunately, our parents separate us because those children are different than us” (B&H, 12-16 year-old children).

Children believe that religious leaders and communities can play a key role in tackling discrimination in different settings, including schools:

In my school they insist [that we] pray Hindu mantras, but being a Christian, in those times I say my own prayer. Seeing this, a few of my friends tease me by asking why you will not say our prayer? Oh why, [will] only your God will answer your prayer? [So], there is always a chaos when it comes to religion. (India, Christian girl, 16 years old)

Building peaceful societies often requires challenging cultural norms that have historically degraded people's rights, and religious communities have a role to play at this level too: “There are still people who see caste and creed. Higher-class people do not touch lower-class people. The lower-class people are not allowed to enter inside [some] temples or houses. There is still differentiation” (India, 10-16 year-old children).



Children's Rights in Theory versus Practice

Most of the children consulted showed some level of knowledge about their rights. In most cases, however, it was easier for children to name the rights that they were not enjoying in actual practice, than it was to discuss the provisions of the Convention itself: “The paper is wonderful; the statement that children's rights are the rights that all children have just because they are children is correct, but the reality is different” (Brazil, 12-16 year-old children).

Children's rights are not the rights that all children have just because they are children, because most parents don't know all about the Convention on the Rights of the Child. They try to raise children from the point of view of religious teachings and traditional ways. (Tanzanian boy, 14 years old)

Unfortunately, in B&H, many children do not have their rights and are discriminated against because they are members of different religions and ethnicities. Here children of Roma origin experience the biggest discrimination and violation of children's rights; for example, Roma children do not have the opportunity to go to school and get educated; also, such children are not invited to our gatherings because of their skin color. (B&H, 12-16 year-old children)

The children consulted, aware of their contexts and realities, also mentioned how the most vulnerable children are often not even granted their fundamental rights:

I am a Sikh, and in India we have a lot of orphans, and 70% of them are found in streets [begging] for money and for food. These children aren't taken into any NGO organization, but they are asked and forced to beg for their livelihood. (child in India)

The children consulted stated the hope that religious leaders and communities could make a difference in promoting positive parenting and child protection. In many cases, particularly in Tanzania, Sri Lanka and India, children expressed sentiments like this one: “Teachers/parents could punish children beyond compare; instead of asking why a child made a mistake, then counseling and guiding them, they opt for severe punishments and harm children” (Tanzanian girl, 15 years old). Although religious leaders could equip parents for positive parenting, according to some of the children, the realization of their rights is also threatened by some religious practices: “I am a Hindu, and I do not have the right to enter into the temples during my periods?! I feel this is violating my right” (India, 10-16 year-old child). Children’s

perception of rights in the consultations was also associated with having the opportunity to choose, which was not the case for some of the children: “I am a Christian, and I feel that forcing me to go to church every Sunday, is not [in accordance with] children’s rights. I want to play and be happy on Sundays” (child from India).

Key Messages from Children to Religious Leaders

Children shared recommendations on how religious leaders and communities can increase the protection of children and foster their rights. They identified actions at different levels, which, for the purpose of this overview, are organized using a socio-ecological model (see Figure 1). Most of the recommendations address the immediate influence that religious leaders and communities have on children’s lives and identity (the microsystem), followed by the role they play in strengthening children’s care environment (the mesosystem). Children also identified valuable suggestions for religious leaders to advocate for and with children (the exosystem), while acknowledging the importance of preventing the use of religion to justify harming others (the macrosystem).



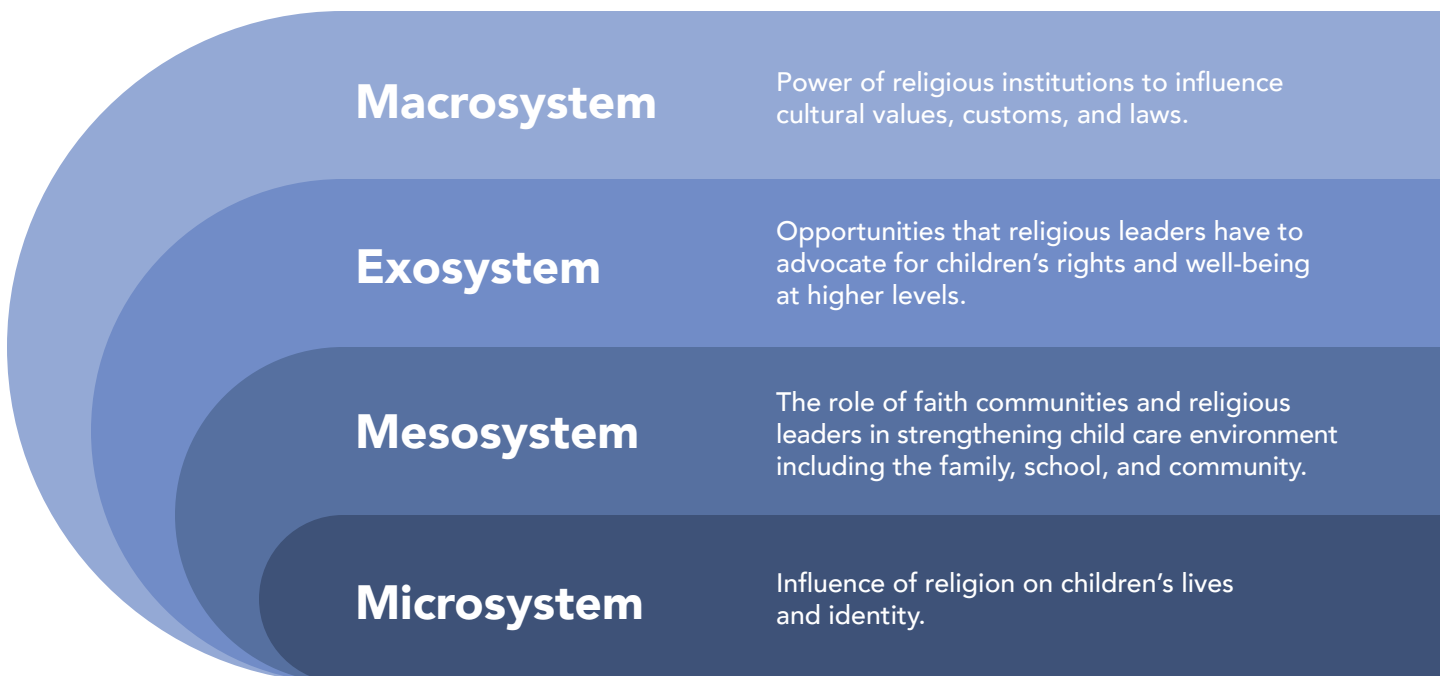


Figure 1: Socio-ecological model³⁰⁶

Microsystem: Influence of Religion in Children's Lives and Identity

- "We want our religious leaders to listen to us and to spend more time with us, not only during the religious service every Sunday." (Panama, 11-17 year old children)
- "Love to all, if there is love that will lead to practicing child rights and protect children, everyone will know what is to be done and not, so children will remain safe." (Tanzanian girl, 15 years old)
- "We want our leaders to listen to our opinion and appreciate it." (B&H, 12-16 year-old children)
- "I want to meet [people from] other religions and [from] my religion; I want to have the right to choose which religion I want to belong to." (B&H, Muslim girl, 14 years old)
- "There should be more opportunities to express our positions, and to question the religion." (Brazil, Jewish child, 15 years old)



- "Faith communities [should not] compel the children [to participate] because all the children have the right to [choose] their own religion." (India, 10-16 year-old children)
- "Religious leaders should understand their responsibility towards us children." (Tanzania, 9-15 year-old children)

Mesosystem: The Role of Faith Communities and Religious Leaders in Strengthening Child Care Environment

1. “All the religions should educate more on the rights of the children.” (Tanzania, 9-15 year-old children)
2. “Create awareness in schools and colleges [on ways] to protect children.” (India, 10-16 year-old children)
3. “Children must be given the freedom to accept or [refuse] when the practice of religion is insisted [on] in schools.” (India, 10-16 year-old children)
4. “Encourage and train teachers to end physical punishment (corporal punishment), introduce ideas for non-violent conflict resolution, and take necessary actions for children who complain about their vulnerability.” (Sri Lanka, 14-17 year-old children)
5. “The religious leaders should [...] be taught about the rights of the children.” (Tanzania, 9-15 year-old children)
6. “We want to propose the education of religious leaders, how they can approach children appropriately. We want our leaders to organize gatherings with children from other religions and to sit down with children and personally discuss their needs and feelings.” (B&H, 12-16 year-old children)



Exosystem: Opportunities Religious Leaders Have to Advocate for Children’s Rights and Well-Being

- “Children’s rights should be given priority in all places.” (Tanzania, 9-15 year-old children)
- “Speak up for all children and especially those who might need additional help or support. Religious leaders should notice when a child is unsafe outside school, [at] home or any place, and take actions or necessary steps to keep them safe.” (Sri Lanka, 14-17 year-old children)



- “I want my attitude and voice to be heard and I want to work together with religious leaders on children’s rights.” (B&H, Catholic boy, 16 years old)

Macrosystem: Power of Religious Institutions to Influence Cultural Values, Customs, and Laws

- “Religion should not be used as a tool to do wrong doings in the society.” (India, 10-16 year-old children)

II. STUDY METHODOLOGY

Principal Authors: A team of five primary authors (see Annex III) was formed in November 2018 and tasked with carrying out the research and writing of the Study, supported by several research assistants. They were selected for their professional qualifications, knowledge of religion, and their background and expertise in the CRC. The offices of Arigatou International in Geneva, New York, Nairobi, and Tokyo provided the authorship team with essential support and advice during the research and writing process. The office of the former Special Representative of the UN Secretary-General on Violence against Children provided expertise and participated in the consultations for the development of the Study.

Consultations with Experts in Religion: The Study team was guided by a number of religious leaders, theologians, and legal scholars (see Annex III), who made significant contributions and recommendations during the consultation process. The Study team's primary focus was to review and assess the common ground on children found in the seven religions and faiths—the Bahá'í Faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and the Sikh Faith—and they discussed the approach of the CRC and children's rights with scholars of these religions and faiths, as well as with child-rights advocates. Mixed qualitative methods were used to gather data. The diverse expertise and experience of the authorship team, together with the rich results of the series of consultations, allowed a historical and contextual analysis of the similarities and differences between the principles and values of the different religions and those of the CRC.

Desk Review, Research, Survey and Interviews: These processes identified positive practices from religious communities and faith-based organizations that influenced outcomes of CRC implementation at the level of programing, advocacy, networking, and partnerships. Collaborative efforts at all stages of the research and drafting helped to ensure that the analysis of the core religious values and principles and those of the CRC would be based on the foundational texts of the religions included in the Study, official declarations and statements from religious leaders, and the drafting history and text of the CRC as well as authoritative commentaries on children's rights. The desk-review process in particular enabled an analysis of religious-grounded Reservations and Declarations presented by States at the time of ratification of the CRC. Questions and concerns that were raised by various religious leaders and faith groups about the CRC during the consultations were also considered for the analysis. The desk review was supplemented by a survey sent to members of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), and interviews were also conducted with key informants.



Written Contributions: Religious leaders from and experts on the seven religions considered in the Study contributed:

- Examples of values shared by the CRC and their respective faith traditions;
- Reflections on their understanding and application of the CRC's guiding principles in their diverse religions;
- Examples of the implementation of CRC provisions and the role that religious leaders and communities have played in supporting children's rights, including the right to be protected from violence, abuse, and exploitation.³⁰⁷

Selection of Featured Practices: The selection of featured practices for the Study was based on criteria that prioritized religiously-grounded initiatives, programs, and resources—including tools, frameworks and guidelines developed for and by religious leaders and faith-based communities—that addressed child-rights issues, and taking into consideration their impact and relationship to the CRC core principles. The selection included a desk-review of several large-scale faith-based actions; an online survey to map out actions at the grassroots level; and key informant interviews to gather additional data on selected practices.

Review and Validation Process: It was important to ensure that the conclusions of this Study were thoroughly vetted by leaders and experts from each of the religious and other stakeholder groups. For this purpose, a number of multi-religious roundtables and other consultations were held in 2019, inviting religious leaders, theologians, and child-rights experts and practitioners to review, contribute to, and validate the working drafts of this report on the Study:

1. Multi-religious roundtable discussion in Tokyo, Japan (February 8-9) to review the first

working draft with religious scholars, human rights experts and some members of the Study authorship team;

2. Panel discussion on this Multi-religious Study and child rights in Geneva, Switzerland (March 6) on the sidelines of the 2019 annual meeting of the Human Rights Council;
3. Regional consultation on this Multi-religious Study and child rights in Montevideo, Uruguay (March 14-15) for Christian groups from Latin America;
4. Panel discussion on this Multi-religious Study in New York City, USA (April 10) for religious NGOs affiliated with the United Nations, with some members of the authorship team and other panelists;
5. Multi-religious roundtable discussion in Lausanne, Switzerland (May 8-9) to review the second working draft with religious leaders and scholars, human rights experts and some members of the authorship team;





6. Consultation in Lausanne, Switzerland (May 10-11) with members of the Arigatou International Advisory Group including diverse religious leaders and representatives of faith-based organizations;
7. Consultation in Panama City, Panama (June 25), with the interfaith committee affiliated with the Global Network of Religions for Children in Panama;
8. Presentation of this Study's key findings to participants of the United Nations High-Level Political Forum and two interactive panel discussions on the Study at a side event (July 15) in New York City, as part of the Kofi Annan Faith Briefings hosted by the UN Faith Advisory Council; and
9. Consultation on child rights and religion in Beirut, Lebanon with religious leaders from the Middle East region (August 1-2) held in collaboration with KAICIID.

Focus Groups with Children (See Annex I): Focus groups with children were included as part of the consultation process, thus ensuring children's voices were heard, taken into account, and included in the Study.³⁰⁸ Seven consultations were carried out with 103 children between 12 to 17 years of age from Bahá'í, Buddhist, Christian, Hindu, Jain, Jewish, Islamic, and Sikh communities in Brazil, Bosnia and Herzegovina, India, Panama, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, and Uruguay. Child-friendly participatory tools were designed and provided to support the focus group process. An ethical approach to conducting research with and by children was used, applying the Nine Basic Requirements for Effective and Ethical Participation of Children.³⁰⁹

III. STUDY AUTHORSHIP TEAM, RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS AND OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

STUDY AUTHORSHIP TEAM

Akila Aggoune, former senior official of UNICEF, and former chairperson of the CRC Committee, has worked in the Middle East and Africa and at UN headquarters in New York and Geneva. She was formally accredited by the African Union and by the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa as UNICEF Representative and also served as UNICEF Representative in Chad. She is a lawyer by profession and an expert in Islamic law. Earlier in her career she was Minister of Social Action and Family in Burkina Faso. With Al-Azhar University, she co-led the study of *Children in Islam: their Care, Development and Protection*, a 2005 Joint Al-Azhar University and UNICEF publication. She has written on children's and women's rights for several publications of organizations of United Nations, academic institutions and NGOs.

Savitri Goonesekere, Emeritus Professor of Law University of Colombo, Sri Lanka, is a distinguished academic in her country and Asia, as well as an expert in children's rights and women's rights. She is a former member of the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), is a prolific writer on human rights issues, and has published a number of books and articles, including for UNICEF. Since 2015, she has served as a member of the Board of Directors of the Global Partnership to End Violence against Children.

Janet Nelson worked with NGOs in Zambia and Tunisia under the sponsorship of the World Council of Churches. Thereafter she joined UNICEF, serving in a variety of positions for 30

years. At UNICEF, she headed the NGO Liaison Section, worked with a number of faith-based organizations, and was the Deputy Director of the Regional Office in Geneva and responsible for its 34 National Committees, as well as advocacy in industrialized countries on children's rights. She is an Executive Board member of the International Movement ATD Fourth World.

Rebeca Rios-Kohn, the Director of Arigatou International – New York, received a Juris Doctor from the University of Richmond in Virginia and was a senior staff member for UNICEF advocating for the CRC and child rights and building partnerships with religious leaders and faith-based organizations. She also served as Principal Advisor on Human Rights to the United Nations Development Programme. She co-authored *Protecting the World's Children*, a 2007 UNICEF publication, and has published a number of articles and studies on children's and human rights. She was the lead writer and coordinator of this Study.

Jonathan Todres, Distinguished University Professor and Professor of Law at Georgia State University College of Law, focuses his research on issues related to children's rights and has published extensively on a range of topics including child trafficking, the implementation of children's rights law, legal and cultural constructs of childhood, and human rights education. He is coauthor of *Human Rights in Children's Literature: Imagination and the Narrative of Law* (Oxford University Press, 2016).

RELIGIOUS SCHOLARS AND OTHER CONTRIBUTORS

Bani Dugal is the Principal Representative of the Bahá'í International Community to the United Nations. As part of the community of international NGOs at the United Nations since 1994, she is currently Vice Chairperson of the NGO Working Group on the Security Council and has served as President of the NGO Committee on Freedom of Religion or Belief, and in other prominent platforms. She holds a Master's degree (LL.M) in Environmental Law from Pace University School of Law, New York and a law degree (LL.B) from the University of Delhi, India.

Rabbi Diana Gerson is Associate Executive Vice President of the New York Board of Rabbis (NYBR). She is a graduate of Rutgers College in New Jersey and received her Master's degree in Hebrew Literature and Rabbinic Ordination from the Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion in New York City. A major focus of her work is to advance the NYBR's leadership role in confronting family violence, sexual abuse and the exploitation of children by reaching across religious communities and providing prevention education to community leaders and clergy.

Dr. Heidi Hadsell is former President of Hartford Seminary and former Director of the World Council of Churches' Ecumenical Institute in Switzerland. She has a Master's degree from Union Theological Seminary at Columbia University and a Ph.D. from the University of Southern California. She has served on several national and international boards, including for Arigatou International, and is an expert in interfaith relations. She moderated two multi-religious roundtable discussions held for this CRC Study.

Sheikh Ibrahim Lethome holds a Master's degree in Law and Islamic Shariah from Pakistan and a Postgraduate Diploma from Kenya School of Law. He is an advocate of the High Court of Kenya, a legal adviser to the Supreme Council of Kenyan Muslims, Consultant on Islam and FGM, Secretary General of The Islamic Foundation and is a member of the Arigatou International Advisory Group.

Dr. Brinder Singh Mahon, OBE, Chief Executive of Nishkam Schools Trust. He is a medical doctor working as a Consultant Interventional Radiologist at the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, Birmingham, U.K. In 2016, he was awarded an OBE by the Queen for his services to education. Under the guidance of Bhai Sahib Bhai Mohinder Singh, Dr. Mahon has served at Nishkam Schools since its inception in 2009. Nishkam Schools have achieved three Ofsted Outstanding awards and are recognized as one of the UK Government's flagship faith school providers with its multi-faith virtues-led curriculum, with schools in London, West Midlands and Kenya.

Dr. Reham Abdullah Salamah Nasr is a lecturer at the Department of Urdu Language and Literature at Al-Azhar University, Cairo, and Supervisor of the Urdu Department at the Al-Azhar Observatory in Foreign Languages. Dr. Nasr has a Master's degree and Ph.D. in Urdu language and literature. She also works at the Al-Azhar Centre for Translation and has contributed to the translation and validation of books and articles from Urdu to Arabic and vice versa. She is a member of The Egyptian Family House and has conducted workshops related to preventing violent extremism at regional and international

levels. She has made presentations on Al-Azhar to the United Nations, the European Union, OSCE (Vienna), UNDP and to presidential delegations from China and India. She was a member of the peace emissaries to Pakistan in 2015.

Rev. Dr. Masazumi Shojun Okano is President of Kodo Kyodan Buddhist Fellowship, a lay Buddhist organization of the Japanese Tendai tradition, the head temple of which is located in Yokohama, Japan. He received his D.Phil. in Sociology of Religion from the University of Oxford. He is the director of the International Buddhist Exchange Center (IBEC). The activities of IBEC include conducting research on socially engaged Buddhist movements and organizing workshops and conferences on such issues as suicide prevention, disaster relief, Buddhist chaplaincy, and anti-nuclear and sustainable energy activism. He is also an advisory board member of the International Network of Engaged Buddhists and an executive council member of the Japan Buddhist Federation.

Dr. Mohammed Abdel Fadeel Abbel Rahem is a Member of the Al-Azhar Interfaith Dialogue Centre, and Assistant Professor of Comparative Religious Studies at the German Department for Islamic Studies, Al-Azhar University, Cairo. He also teaches Islamic Law at the German University in Cairo. Dr. Abdel Rahem is the former Director of the Observatory of Combating Extremism. He earned his Ph.D. in Comparative Religion Sciences at the University of Münster, Germany, researching the freedom of faith in Islam and Christianity. Dr. Abdel Rahem has authored many publications on human rights, interreligious dialogue, and non-Muslim traditions in the Islamic context. He is experienced in preventing violent extremism and has represented Al-Azhar on this topic in many conferences in New York,

Berlin, Leon, Vienna, Geneva, Jordan and Lebanon. He is a member of The Egyptian Family House and holds a degree of Fellowship from KAICIID in Vienna.

Prof. Anantanand Rambachan is a Hindu scholar and researcher who serves as Professor of Religion at St. Olaf College, Minnesota, USA. He has a specific focus on inter-religious dialogue and is a member of the Arigatou International Advisory Group. Professor Rambachan is a Co-President and a member of the World Council of Religions for Peace.

Mercedes Roman is Advisor to Arigatou International/GNRC in Latin America and the Caribbean. A sociologist, she has worked on women's rights, children's rights and the protection of children in various countries and organizations for over 35 years. She was a member of UNICEF NGO Working Groups and United Nations NGO Committees related to the Rights of the Child, and organized the first Children's Rights Caucus for the United Nations Social Summit, during which she addressed the General Assembly. She was a member of the NGO Committee for the United Nations Special Session on Children.

Dr. Fabian Salazar is a theologian from Bogota, Colombia and Director of INTERFE, an organization that promotes interfaith dialogue and cooperation. He has also served as the Coordinator of the GNRC in Colombia.

Saudamini Siegrist served as UNICEF Senior Adviser for Child Protection in Emergencies, as Chief of Child Protection for UNICEF in the State of Palestine, and as Child Protection Specialist at the UNICEF Innocenti Research Center. She

worked in the Humanitarian Policy Unit of Emergency Operations at UNICEF on issues related to children and armed conflict. Seconded to the Sierra Leone Truth and Reconciliation Commission, she served as rapporteur for the *Children's Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report*. She co-edited *Children and Transitional Justice: Truth-Telling, Accountability and Reconciliation* published by the Human Rights Program at Harvard Law School and contributed to *The Impact of War on Children*, by Graça Machel. She holds a Doctorate from New York University and a Masters degree from Columbia University.

Bhai Sahib Dr. Mohinder Singh is a Sikh scholar and leader based in the UK. He is the co-convenor of the proposed International Peace Charter for Forgiveness and Reconciliation. He is one of fifty co-presidents and a Trustee of *Religions for Peace* (RfP) International, and also a member of the *Religions for Peace* International World Council, member of the Advisory Forum of KAICIID, and Patron of the United Religions Initiative.

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IV. ACTIVITY REPORT ON THE ARAB REGION CONSULTATION HELD IN BEIRUT, LEBANON



The Role of Religious Leaders & Institutions on Protecting Children Rights

Arab Region consultation meeting with Arigatou International for the Multi Religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child

Beirut, Lebanon
1-2 August, 2019

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

KAICIID International Dialogue Centre, in collaboration with Arigatou International held a regional consultation meeting with religious leaders, representatives of religious, academics, and civil society institutions to discuss key issues addressed in the study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child that is being developed by Arigatou International with UNICEF and various partners on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the treaty's adoption from a multi religious perspective. The study focuses primarily on the experience and traditions of seven major religions namely, Baha's faith, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Sikhism. The study takes into account the contributions by faith communities towards its implementation, some of the objections by religious communities, including the reservations that were submitted by State Parties on religious grounds.

In this context, KAICIID International dialogue center have collaborated with Arigatou International to host a regional consultation meeting in the Arab Region under the Interreligious Platform for Dialogue and Cooperation in the Arab Region umbrella to address the multi-religious perspective on the role of religious institutions and communities on preserving the rights of the child. The meeting was hosted by KAICIID International Dialogue Center in Beirut Lebanon on 1 & 2 August, 2019.

If in the name of religion children rights have been taken away, in the name of religion it will be returned.

Dr. Sarah Abdula Karim, King Saud University

The Arab region consultation meeting aimed at addressing multi-religious perspectives in the Arab Region on the role of religious communities on preserving the rights of the child, the opportunities, and the challenges facing religious communities to advocate for children rights.

Participants and Stakeholders

On behalf of KAICIID International Dialogue Center, Arigatou International and the Interreligious Platform for Dialogue & Cooperation in the Arab world, a total of 41 participants were present from across several countries within the Arab world: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, Algeria, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt. Participants religious background were mainly Christians and Muslims representing diverse range of religious communities, in addition to representation from international and local organizations i.e. UNICEF, World Vision, and Middle East Council of Churches.

Discussions and Outcomes

KAICIID Council of Parties ambassadors representatives to Lebanon participated into the consultation meeting opening session, the Republic of Austria H.E. Mr. Stefan Veit, Charge d'Affaires, the Apostolic Nunciature in Lebanon H.E. Mgr Ivan Santus, Deputy Head of Mission, Father Giuseppe Francone, 1st Secretary of the Apostolic Nunciature, and Father Marco, attendant at the Apostolic Nunciature. As well as Dr. Mohammad Sammak, KAICIID Board Member. Through the opening session Dr. Sammak have focused in his key remarks on the importance of religious institutions in preserving the rights of the child, as well the importance of media targeting children that actually contribute into

shaping their views and perception. Additionally, Dr. Sammak have emphasized that religious teachings within the Arab world context actually contributes into the child education significantly. Moreover, religion presents sacred values that are important in preserving children rights, and we should stress on raising children on the correct values of religions, rather than ideological values that leads to larger generations of violence and extremists. H.E. Mr. Veit have stated that the Holy See is in full support for all efforts for dialogue and reconciliation, and only together we can build a better future of our children, and for the next generations. Also, H.E. Mr. Veit, have acknowledged the importance of international organizations, and religious institutions work as a contributing hand with international communities towards preserving the rights of children, and promoting the shared values between religion and children rights.

A preview of the multi-religious study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child was shared with participants in advance, together with the CRC study concept note, in addition to a user-friendly copy of the CRC by UNICEF regional office in Lebanon.



The Consultation meeting was held over two days, consisting of plenary session, presentations, and working groups. The first presentation were delivered from Arigatou International Director of New York Office Mrs. Rebeca Rios-Kohn J.D. gave a presentation with a focus on the principles and foundations of the CRC study, the shared values between religion and children rights, and the role of religious leaders, and institutions in protecting the rights of the child. The plenary sessions focused on the following:

- Reflections on the CRC study from past participants into the study.
- Exploring the shared values within the Arab Region local context between religion and children.
- Factors and conditions that affect advocacy for protection of the children rights (Global, and local context).
- The opportunities and challenges of the religious leaders and institutions role in protecting the rights of children.

Participants interventions over the two days meeting were mainly focused on:

- Assurance of the sanctity of the right and dignity of children.



- The religious values on protecting children rights within the Arab Region extends further into protecting the family as a whole institution; hence, the religious view of children rights is an essential priority, specifically the rights of education, health, housing, food, safety, peaceful coexistence.. etc.
- Due to the surge of violence and hate speech that emerged from the violent crisis within several countries in the Arab World, extremists groups extended their approach to militarization of children; whereas religious leaders and institutions are committed to contribute to prevention of children's rights violations and miss-education.
- The high priority must be given to children and that the society must fulfil its duty towards preserving their rights.

Challenges and Opportunities

- The existence of common values of religious teachings does not hinder the need to examine the detailed differences between religions and their institutions in the Arab world on the one hand; and the systems of governance, constitutions and facts within the region.
- While the CRC is an adopted convention, yet, excluding societal and contextual problems remain a challenge.
- Young Families / Spouses' conflicts based on gender.
- Employment of children as tools in conflicts.
- Religious intolerance contributes to children's rights violation, together with the psychological, social, cultural, political and economic factors that challenges healthy environment for children.
- The ease of access to the international treaty's i.e. United Nations, governments, and others.

Recommendations

Participants were divided into three working groups to develop recommendations for the CRC study:

1. The study may address the importance of close collaboration with religious leaders and institutions together with policy makers to **prevent children militarization and recruitment of children in conflicts** (e.g. militarization of children within extremists' forces in Iraq and Syria).
2. Highlight the crucial role of **religious institutions and policy makers' collaboration to jointly support legalization** of early marriage prevention, children employment, and prohibition of any physical & sexual violence against children.
 - Legalization of "Honor Crimes" prevention, and criminalization of the crime actor.
 - Work on imposing a law of raising the legal marriage age.
3. The responsibility of religious communities and institutions to preserve the rights of **equal education opportunities** for children.
4. **Capacity development of religious educational institutions** in preserving the rights of children in accordance with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
5. Encouraging relevant religious institutions to work on **eliminating miss-interpreted religious heritage** that harm children and their rights.
6. Significance of the role of religious leaders to ensure that **intermediate religious education** is a right of the child in a manner commensurate with the age and surroundings and take into account the behavioral aspect of the child in the family, school and religious institution.
7. The need for religious institutions to **adopt into social media platforms** to face the dangers of modern technology on children.
8. Encouraging religious institutions to approach and work closely with social networking firms to issue an **"Ethical Statement"** aiming at preventing miss-use of technology and protect the rights of children on these platforms.
9. The need to reflect on the **reality of the religious context of each country within the Arab World**, as it indeed differ from one another.
 - Deeper focus of the rights of the "girl child," far beyond only broad children rights.
10. Develop a legal religious index to elaborate children's rights in different religious teachings covered in the study.

Next Steps

- Lunch of the Multi Religious Study on the Convention on the Rights of the Child in November, 2019.
- KAICIID International Dialogue Centre and the Interreligious Platform for Dialogue & Cooperation to explore potential areas of collaborations.

V. SUMMARY OF THE CRC³¹⁰

A summary of the rights under the Convention on the Rights of the Child

ARTICLE 1 (*Definition of the child*)

The Convention defines a ‘child’ as a person below the age of 18, unless the laws of a particular country set the legal age for adulthood younger. The Committee on the Rights of the Child, the monitoring body for the Convention, has encouraged States to review the age of majority if it is set below 18 and to increase the level of protection for all children under 18.

ARTICLE 2 (*Non-discrimination*)

The Convention applies to all children, whatever their race, religion or abilities; whatever they think or say, whatever type of family they come from. It doesn’t matter where children live, what language they speak, what their parents do, whether they are boys or girls, what their culture is, whether they have a disability or whether they are rich or poor. No child should be treated unfairly on any basis.

ARTICLE 3 (*Best interests of the child*)

The best interests of children must be the primary concern in making decisions that may affect them. All adults should do what is best for children. When adults make decisions, they should think about how their decisions will affect children. This particularly applies to budget, policy and law makers.

ARTICLE 4 (*Protection of rights*)

Governments have a responsibility to take all available measures to make sure children’s rights are respected, protected and fulfilled. When countries ratify the Convention, they agree to review their laws relating to children. This involves

assessing their social services, legal, health and educational systems, as well as levels of funding for these services. Governments are then obliged to take all necessary steps to ensure that the minimum standards set by the Convention in these areas are being met. They must help families protect children’s rights and create an environment where they can grow and reach their potential. In some instances, this may involve changing existing laws or creating new ones. Such legislative changes are not imposed, but come about through the same process by which any law is created or reformed within a country. Article 41 of the Convention points out that when a country already has higher legal standards than those seen in the Convention, the higher standards always prevail.

ARTICLE 5 (*Parental guidance*)

Governments should respect the rights and responsibilities of families to direct and guide their children so that, as they grow, they learn to use their rights properly. Helping children to understand their rights does not mean pushing them to make choices with consequences that they are too young to handle. Article 5 encourages parents to deal with rights issues “in a manner consistent with the evolving capacities of the child.” The Convention does not take responsibility for children away from their parents and give more authority to governments. It does place on governments the responsibility to protect and assist families in fulfilling their essential role as nurturers of children.

ARTICLE 6 *(Survival and development)*

Children have the right to live. Governments should ensure that children survive and develop healthily.

ARTICLE 7 *(Registration, name, nationality, care)*

All children have the right to a legally registered name, officially recognized by the government. Children have the right to a nationality (to belong to a country). Children also have the right to know and, as far as possible, to be cared for by their parents.

ARTICLE 8 *(Preservation of identity)*

Children have the right to an identity – an official record of who they are. Governments should respect children's right to a name, a nationality and family ties.

ARTICLE 9 *(Separation from parents)*

Children have the right to live with their parent(s), unless it is bad for them. Children whose parents do not live together have the right to stay in contact with both parents, unless this might hurt the child.

ARTICLE 10 *(Family reunification)*

Families whose members live in different countries should be allowed to move between those countries so that parents and children can stay in contact, or get back together as a family.

ARTICLE 11 *(Kidnapping)*

Governments should take steps to stop children being taken out of their own country illegally. This article is particularly concerned with parental abductions. The Convention's Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography has a provision that concerns abduction for financial gain.

ARTICLE 12 *(Respect for the views of the child)*

When adults are making decisions that affect children, children have the right to say what they think should happen and have their opinions taken into account. This does not mean that children can now tell their parents what to do. This Convention encourages adults to listen to the opinions of children and involve them in decision-making – not give children authority over adults. Article 12 does not interfere with parents' right and responsibility to express their views on matters affecting their children. Moreover, the Convention recognizes that the level of a child's participation in decisions must be appropriate to the child's level of maturity. Children's ability to form and express their opinions develops with age and most adults will naturally give the views of teenagers greater weight than those of a preschooler, whether in family, legal or administrative decisions.

ARTICLE 13 *(Freedom of expression)*

Children have the right to get and share information, as long as the information is not damaging to them or others. In exercising the right to freedom of expression, children have the responsibility to also respect the rights, freedoms and reputations of others. The freedom of expression includes the right to share information in any way they choose, including by talking, drawing or writing.

ARTICLE 14

(Freedom of thought, conscience and religion)

Children have the right to think and believe what they want and to practice their religion, as long as they are not stopping other people from enjoying their rights. Parents should help guide their children in these matters. The Convention respects the rights and duties of parents in

providing religious and moral guidance to their children. Religious groups around the world have expressed support for the Convention, which indicates that it in no way prevents parents from bringing their children up within a religious tradition. At the same time, the Convention recognizes that as children mature and are able to form their own views, some may question certain religious practices or cultural traditions. The Convention supports children's right to examine their beliefs, but it also states that their right to express their beliefs implies respect for the rights and freedoms of others.

ARTICLE 15 (Freedom of association)

Children have the right to meet together and to join groups and organisations, as long as it does not stop other people from enjoying their rights. In exercising their rights, children have the responsibility to respect the rights, freedoms and reputations of others.

ARTICLE 16 (*Right to privacy*)

Children have a right to privacy. The law should protect them from attacks against their way of life, their good name, their families and their homes.

ARTICLE 17 (*Access to information; mass media*)

Children have the right to get information that is important to their health and well-being. Governments should encourage mass media—radio, television, newspapers and Internet content sources—to provide information that children can understand and to not promote materials that could harm children. Mass media should particularly be encouraged to supply information in languages that minority and indigenous children can understand. Children should also have access to children's books.

ARTICLE 18

(Parental responsibilities; state assistance)

Both parents share responsibility for bringing up their children, and should always consider what is best for each child. Governments must respect the responsibility of parents for providing appropriate guidance to their children – the Convention does not take responsibility for children away from their parents and give more authority to governments. It places a responsibility on governments to provide support services to parents, especially if both parents work outside the home.

ARTICLE 19 (*Protection from all forms of violence*)

Children have the right to be protected from being hurt and mistreated, physically or mentally. Governments should ensure that children are properly cared for and protect them from violence, abuse and neglect by their parents, or anyone else who looks after them. In terms of discipline, the Convention does not specify what forms of punishment parents should use. However any form of discipline involving violence is unacceptable. There are ways to discipline children that are effective in helping children learn about family and social expectations for their behaviour – ones that are non-violent, are appropriate to the child's level of development and take the best interests of the child into consideration. In most countries, laws already define what sorts of punishments are considered excessive or abusive. It is up to each government to review these laws in light of the Convention.

ARTICLE 20

(Children deprived of family environment)

Children who cannot be looked after by their own family have a right to special care and must be looked after properly, by people who respect their ethnic group, religion, culture and language.

ARTICLE 21 (*Adoption*)

Children have the right to care and protection if they are adopted or in foster care. The first concern must be what is best for them. The same rules should apply whether they are adopted in the country where they were born, or if they are taken to live in another country.

ARTICLE 22 (*Refugee children*)

Children have the right to special protection and help if they are refugees (if they have been forced to leave their home and live in another country), as well as all the rights in this Convention.

ARTICLE 23 (*Children with disabilities*)

Children who have any kind of disability have the right to special care and support, as well as all the rights in the Convention, so that they can live full and independent lives.

ARTICLE 24 (*Health and health services*)

Children have the right to good quality health care—the best health care possible—to safe drinking water, nutritious food, a clean and safe environment, and information to help them stay healthy. Rich countries should help poorer countries achieve this.

ARTICLE 25 (*Review of treatment in care*)

Children who are looked after by their local authorities, rather than their parents, have the right to have these living arrangements looked at regularly to see if they are the most appropriate. Their care and treatment should always be based on “the best interests of the child.” (see Guiding Principles, Article 3)

ARTICLE 26 (*Social security*)

Children—either through their guardians or directly—have the right to help from the government if they are poor or in need.

ARTICLE 27 (*Adequate standard of living*)

Children have the right to a standard of living that is good enough to meet their physical and mental needs. Governments should help families and guardians who cannot afford to provide this, particularly with regard to food, clothing and housing.

ARTICLE 28 (*Right to education*)

All children have the right to a primary education, which should be free. Wealthy countries should help poorer countries achieve this right. Discipline in schools should respect children's dignity. For children to benefit from education, schools must be run in an orderly way – without the use of violence. Any form of school discipline should take into account the child's human dignity. Therefore, governments must ensure that school administrators review their discipline policies and eliminate any discipline practices involving physical or mental violence, abuse or neglect. The Convention places a high value on education. Young people should be encouraged to reach the highest level of education of which they are capable.

ARTICLE 29 (*Goals of education*)

Children's education should develop each child's personality, talents and abilities to the fullest. It should encourage children to respect others, human rights and their own and other cultures. It should also help them learn to live peacefully, protect the environment and respect other people. Children have a particular responsibility to respect the rights of their parents, and education should aim to develop respect for the values and

culture of their parents. The Convention does not address such issues as school uniforms, dress codes, the singing of the national anthem or prayer in schools. It is up to governments and school officials in each country to determine whether, in the context of their society and existing laws, such matters infringe upon other rights protected by the Convention.

ARTICLE 30

(Children of minorities/indigenous groups)

Minority or indigenous children have the right to learn about and practice their own culture, language and religion. The right to practice one's own culture, language and religion applies to everyone; the Convention here highlights this right in instances where the practices are not shared by the majority of people in the country.

ARTICLE 31 *(Leisure, play and culture)*

Children have the right to relax and play, and to join in a wide range of cultural, artistic and other recreational activities.

ARTICLE 32 *(Child labour)*

The government should protect children from work that is dangerous or might harm their health or their education. While the Convention protects children from harmful and exploitative work, there is nothing in it that prohibits parents from expecting their children to help out at home in ways that are safe and appropriate to their age. If children help out in a family farm or business, the tasks they do should be safe and suited to their level of development and comply with national labour laws. Children's work should not jeopardize any of their other rights, including the right to education, or the right to relaxation and play.

ARTICLE 33 *(Drug abuse)*

Governments should use all means possible to protect children from the use of harmful drugs and from being used in the drug trade.

ARTICLE 34 *(Sexual exploitation)*

Governments should protect children from all forms of sexual exploitation and abuse. This provision in the Convention is augmented by the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

ARTICLE 35 *(Abduction, sale and trafficking)*

The government should take all measures possible to make sure that children are not abducted, sold or trafficked. This provision in the Convention is augmented by the Optional Protocol on the sale of children, child prostitution and child pornography.

ARTICLE 36 *(Other forms of exploitation)*

Children should be protected from any activity that takes advantage of them or could harm their welfare and development.

ARTICLE 37 *(Detention and punishment)*

No one is allowed to punish children in a cruel or harmful way. Children who break the law should not be treated cruelly. They should not be put in prison with adults, should be able to keep in contact with their families, and should not be sentenced to death or life imprisonment without possibility of release.

ARTICLE 38 *(War and armed conflicts)*

Governments must do everything they can to protect and care for children affected by war. Children under 15 should not be forced or recruited to take part in a war or join the armed forces. The Convention's Optional Protocol on the involvement of children in armed conflict further develops



this right, raising the age for direct participation in armed conflict to 18 and establishing a ban on compulsory recruitment for children under 18.

ARTICLE 39 (*Rehabilitation of child victims*)

Children who have been neglected, abused or exploited should receive special help to physically and psychologically recover and reintegrate into society. Particular attention should be paid to restoring the health, self-respect and dignity of the child.

ARTICLE 40 (*Juvenile justice*)

Children who are accused of breaking the law have the right to legal help and fair treatment in a justice system that respects their rights. Governments are required to set a minimum age below which children cannot be held criminally responsible and to provide minimum guarantees for the fairness and quick resolution of judicial or alternative proceedings.

ARTICLE 41

(*Respect for superior national standards*)

If the laws of a country provide better protection of children's rights than the articles in this Convention, those laws should apply.

ARTICLE 42 (*Knowledge of rights*)

Governments should make the Convention known to adults and children. Adults should help children learn about their rights, too. (See also article 4.)

ARTICLES 43-54 (*Implementation measures*)

These articles discuss how governments and international organizations like UNICEF should work to ensure children are protected in their rights.

VI. RESOURCES, TOOLKITS, AND GUIDES FOR PROMOTING AND PROTECTING CHILDREN'S RIGHTS

INTERNATIONAL

UNICEF, Project Everyone, with support of UNESCO

- To celebrate 30 years of the CRC, UNICEF 2019 World's Largest Lesson learning resources are focused on linking the SDGs to children's rights and provide a range of meaningful activities that can be implemented to celebrate World Children's Day on 20th November. [World's Largest Lesson](#) develops and disseminates child friendly learning resources that introduce children to the SDGs and inspire them to take action.

The World Health Organization (WHO), et alia.

- INSPIRE is a set of seven evidence-based strategies for countries and communities working to eliminate violence against children. Created by ten agencies with a long history of child protection work, INSPIRE serves as a technical package and guidebook for implementing effective, comprehensive programming to combat violence. <https://www.end-violence.org/inspire>

Interfaith

Al-Azhar University and UNICEF

- Peace. Love. Tolerance. Key messages from Islam and Christianity on protecting children from violence and harmful practices (2016). <https://www.unicef.org/egypt/reports/peace-love-tolerance>

Arigatou International

- An Interfaith Guide to End Child Poverty: Inspire. Act. Change. (2017). <https://endingchildpoverty.org/en/idep/idep-resources/interfaith-guide>
- Learning to Live Together: An Intercultural and Interfaith Programme for Ethics Education (2008) <https://ethicseducationforchildren.org/images/zdocs/Learning-to-Live-Together-En.pdf>
- Prayer and Action for Children <https://prayerandactionforchildren.org>
- Community Resilience Against Violent Extremism (CRAVE) manual (forthcoming), by GNRC & Goldin Institute. For more information please email: [gnrc\(arigatouinternational.org\)](mailto:gnrc(arigatouinternational.org))

ECPAT International and *Religions for Peace*

- Protecting children from online sexual exploitation: A guide to action for religious leaders and communities (2016). https://www.unicef.org/protection/files/FBO_Guide_for_Religious_Leaders_and_Communities_ENG.pdf

Religions for Peace

- Restoring dignity: A toolkit for religious communities to end violence against women (2009). <http://www.endvawnow.org/uploads/browser/files/Restoring%20Dignity%20-%20A%20Toolkit%20for%20Religious%20Communities%20to%20End%20Violence%20Against%20Women.pdf>

Religions for Peace and UNICEF

- From commitment to action: What religious communities can do to eliminate violence against children (2010) [https://www.unicef.org/protection/What_Religious_Communities_can_do_to_Eliminate_Violence_against_Children_\(UNICEF_Religions_for_Peace_Guide\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/protection/What_Religious_Communities_can_do_to_Eliminate_Violence_against_Children_(UNICEF_Religions_for_Peace_Guide).pdf)
- Conflict, Child Protection and Religious Communities: A Review and Recommendations on Enhancing Protection through Partnership (2010) <https://rfp.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/09/Conflict-Child-Protection-and-Religious-Communities.pdf>

UNICEF

- Partnering with religious communities (2012). [https://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/files/Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children_\(UNICEF\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/about/partnerships/files/Partnering_with_Religious_Communities_for_Children_(UNICEF).pdf)

Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities

- JLI-FLC works through Knowledge Partnerships and Learning Hubs. jliflc.com

Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Encyclopedia Project Children

- http://www.bahai-encyclopedia-project.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=66:children&catid=39:teachingslaws

Christianity

ACT Alliance

- ACT Alliance child safeguarding policy (2015). https://actalliance.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/Child-Safeguarding-Policy_English.pdf

Catholic Relief Services

- Guidance on Accountability to Children—MEAL4KIDS (2018). <https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/guidance-accountability-children>
- Standards for Child Participation—MEAL4KIDS (2018). <https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/standards-child-participation>
- Guidance on Measuring Children's Psychosocial- Well-being in emergency response and recovery programming (2018). <https://www.crs.org/our-work-overseas/research-publications/guidance-measuring-childrens-psychosocial-well-being>

- Quality Checklist for child psychosocial support and child friendly spaces (2018) https://www.crs.org/sites/default/files/tools-research/meal4kids_cfs_checklist_low_res.pdf

Christian Aid

- Improving the choices and opportunities for adolescent girls: A toolkit for faith leaders. <https://www.christianaid.org.uk/sites/default/files/2017-02/ImprovingtheChoices-FaithLeadersToolkit.pdf>

Churches' Network for Non-Violence (CNNV)

- Ending corporal punishment of children: A handbook for working with religious communities (2015). <http://churchesfornon-violence.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Ending-corporal-punishment-of-children-a-handbook-for-working-with-religious-communities.pdf>
- Ending corporal punishment of children: A handbook for worship and gatherings (2015) <http://churchesfornon-violence.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Ending-corporal-punishment-of-children-A-handbook-for-worship-and-gatherings.pdf>

Compassion International, World Vision, Buckner, CBN and IJM Guatemala

- Resource Kit to Reduce Child Sexual Violence (2018). <https://jliflc.com/resources/resource-kit-to-reduce-child-sexual-violence/>

International Catholic Child Bureau

- Developing and implementing an internal child protection policy: A guide for organizations working with children (2014). <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness/rights-of-children/developing-and-implementing-an-internal-child-protection-policy>
- Preventing Ill-treatment and sexual abuse against children: Best practices in prevention and recommendations (2013). <https://bice.org/images/pieces-jointes/PDFs/4.actualites/2.publications/Bonnes-pratiques-GB.pdf>

The United Reformed Church (URC)

- Safeguarding children and adults at risk policy: Handbook for churches (2015). <https://urc.org.uk/images/safeguarding/GP4-Safeguarding-Pack-2015w.pdf>

VIVA

- Creating Safe Environments for Children: A toolkit for safeguarding children and protecting them from harm (2014). <https://www.viva.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/02/Creating-Safe-Environments-for-Children.pdf>

World Council of Churches & UNICEF

- Engaging children/youth in the implementation of the churches' commitments to children (2017). <https://www.oikoumene.org/en/resources/documents/wcc-programmes/public-witness/rights-of-children/guide-for-implementation-of-churches-commitments-to-children>

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NATIONAL

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VII. IDEAS FOR ACTION FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERS AND COMMUNITIES: LIST OF FAITH-BASED INITIATIVES TO PROTECT CHILDREN'S RIGHTS AND WELL-BEING*

INTERNATIONAL CAMPAIGNS AND PROGRAMS

Interfaith

Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC)

- The GNRC, inaugurated by religious leaders and child-rights advocates from around the world in the year 2000, is an interfaith network of organizations and individuals dedicated to building a better world for children. Members in some 55 countries develop and implement programs to protect children's rights and enhance their well-being. To get involved locally, regionally, or globally, contact the GNRC Secretariat at [gnrc\(at\)arigatouinternational.org](mailto:gnrc(at)arigatouinternational.org).

Interfaith Alliance for Safer Communities

- **Child Dignity in the Digital World** — This forum brings together the world's religious leaders from global to local levels, to address the issue of online child abuse. https://iafsc.org/application/files/2415/4165/5087/IFA_INFO_BOOKLET_ENGLISH.pdf

KAICIID

- **Dialogue for Peace** — KAICIID promotes interreligious and intercultural dialogue for and among young people. The collaboration with the World Organization of the Scout Movement (WOSM) is KAICIID's main youth program. The program's goal is to help integrate dialogue in Scouting and help the Scouts acquire the skills and confidence in dialogue and understanding of spiritual development, so that they can promote a culture of peace and create positive change in their communities. <https://www.kaiciid.org/what-we-do/incorporating-dialogue-scouts-programme>
- **Supporting Dialogue Worldwide: Multi-religious Collaboration for the Common Good (MCC)** — In Egypt, Indonesia, Nigeria, and Tanzania, KAICIID works with interreligious dialogue platforms and *Religions for Peace* counterparts to strengthen these platforms, as well as to support practical cooperation among religious communities in delivering interreligious education, child health and protection. https://www.kaiciid.org/sites/default/files/kaiciid_initiatives_factsheet.pdf

Lutheran World Federation

- The primary objective of the Lutheran World Federation Youth program is capacity-building for youth to become well equipped "Peace Messengers." An understanding of peace and conflict, as well as conflict analysis and conflict resolution abilities, are key skills for the Peace Messengers, who then go on to plan and facilitate trainings in their local communities. The LWF provides a training course book for local trainings, organizes an annual global training of trainers, and coordinates a network of Peace Messengers. <https://www.lutheranworld.org/content/youth-peace-messenger-training>

Office of the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR)

- **“Faith for Rights”** — This initiative provides space for a cross-disciplinary reflection and action on the deep connections between religions and human rights. The Beirut Declaration and its 18 commitments on “Faith for Rights” pledges to address early signs of vulnerability of children and youth to violence in the name of religion and reaffirms the right of all women, girls and boys not to be subjected to any form of discrimination and violence, including harmful practices such as child marriages. <https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/FreedomReligion/Pages/FaithForRights.aspx>

Religions for Peace

- **Youth Peace Forums, Mavela Children’s Forums and Street Kids Soccer** are programs designed to bring children and youth together to strengthen their capacities. The programs have been successful in building peaceful clubs in schools.³¹¹

Religions for Peace and UNICEF

- **Kyoto Declaration** — *Religions for Peace* and UNICEF convened a global consultation of religious leaders and experts in Toledo, Spain, to provide a religious perspective on the United Nations Secretary-General’s Study on Violence against Children and to look at ways of supporting the report’s recommendations. The outcomes of this consultation shaped the Kyoto Declaration, which has become a valuable tool for organizations engaged in multi-religious cooperation and advocacy for children. The Kyoto Declaration clearly encourages religious leaders to work together for prohibiting all forms of violence including corporal punishment, emotional and sexual violence. <http://endcorporalpunishment.org/wp-content/uploads/thematic/Kyoto-Declaration-Guide-2016.pdf>

Buddhism

Arigatou International and the International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB)

- This initiative aims to create violence-free monastic schools by developing policies to end violence against children. An important focus of the project is to build the capacity of Buddhist teachers to implement the policies. The consultations between teachers and child protection experts address local social norms and attitudes that allow corporal punishment of children at home and in schools, gender-based violence, sexual abuse and exploitation of children. They also focus on the effects of violence and sexual abuse on children’s development and the Convention on the Rights of the Child and other human rights principles and standards. <https://challenges.openideo.com/challenge/bridge-builder2/review/the-asian-network-of-buddhist-leaders-for-child-protection-in-monastic-schools>

Buddhist Global Relief (BGR)

- BGR projects are designed to provide direct food aid to people afflicted by hunger and malnutrition, to promote ecologically sustainable agriculture, to support the education of girls and women, and to give women an opportunity to start right livelihood projects to support their families. <https://www.buddhistglobalrelief.org/index.php/en/projects-en/current-projects>

INEB

- **Young Awakening inside Burma** — Buddhist Youth Leadership Training is a pilot project with the aim of empowering young Buddhists to become active leaders working for community development and peacebuilding. There is a three-year strategic plan of training for awareness raising, leadership skills, and capacity building for small project initiatives. The project attempts to promote the spirituality of the young people by introducing the concept of Socially Engaged Buddhism, upgrading their awareness of social, cultural and environmental issues and motivating them to get involved in local community development actions by introducing the concept of Sustainable Development. <http://inebnetwork.org/young-awakening-inside-burma/>
- **Youth Exchange for Peace and Social Innovation** — The International Network of Engaged Buddhists (INEB) and its network in four different countries have been exchanging their members and volunteers in order to support an organic process of learning, leading to an enriching and deeper understanding of the many factors which bring about individual and social change. <http://inebnetwork.org/youth-exchange-for-peace-and-social-innovation/>

Soka Gakkai International (USA)

- **A World Fit for Children** exhibit — The 2002 Special Session on Children of the United Nations General Assembly included child delegates for the first time in United Nations history and ended with the adoption of the resolution, “A World Fit for Children.” This exhibit was created to illustrate the principles in the resolution and to create dialogue about the rights of children throughout the world. <http://www.sgi-usa.org/newsandevents/exhibitions/ChildrenAreTheFuture-Web-Dec07.pdf>

Christianity

Community of Sant Egidio

- **BRAVO!** Birth Registration for All versus Oblivion addresses the growing issue of unregistered children and its implications for peace and stability in developing countries. The Community of Sant Egidio has adopted a programmatic approach to address the issue: they work with the concerned government ministries and departments, assist in building capacity of the civil registration systems, create awareness by educating parents and children, and adopt an approach which will create balance between the service provider (government) and the beneficiaries (people/children). <http://archive.santegidio.org/pageID/158/langID/en/BRAVO-Programme.html>

World Vision

- **Channels of Hope for Child Protection** is a methodology that motivates and builds capacity in religious leaders and communities to engage with key child well-being issues. Channels of Hope for Child Protection is an adaptation of Channels of Hope that specifically addresses child protection issues including abuse, neglect, exploitation, and harmful practices. It supports and advocates for children's rights, promotes positive discipline, strives to prevent other forms of violence against children, and fosters a wider enabling environment to strengthen both formal and non-formal ele-

ments of the child protection system. <https://www.wvi.org/church-and-interfaith-engagement/channels-hope-child-protection>

Islam

Islamic Relief Worldwide

- **Channels of Hope** — Islamic Relief Worldwide and World Vision International signed an official Memorandum of Understanding allowing IRW to develop the Islamic Version of Channels of Hope for Child Protection. IRW's Channels of Hope has been implemented in South Africa, Kenya, Lebanon, Philippines Bosnia, and other countries. https://jliflc.com/wp/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/CS3_-Islamic-Relief-1.pdf
- **Protecting Children Across the World** — Islamic Relief Worldwide has together with World Vision International invited faith leaders and experts to an interfaith facilitators' training on child protection. Christians and Muslims are brought together to discuss faith interpretations of child protection according to religious scriptures. This helps to build community faith leaders' awareness and motivation to support and advocate for children's rights. <https://www.islamic-relief.org/protecting-children-across-the-world/>

NATIONAL/LOCAL PROGRAMS AND INITIATIVES

Covenant House (USA)

- **The Outreach program** focuses on getting in contact with homeless children by visiting schools and making connections within the community. This program ensures that homeless youth know where to seek help if they need it.
- **The Crisis Care program** is designed to quickly address immediate needs, including medical care, hot showers, clean clothes, nourishing meals and a safe bed.
- **The Rights of Passage program** is a transitional living program that gives homeless youth a chance to learn how to live on their own successfully. <https://www.covenanthouse.org/homeless-youth-programs>

Interfaith

Global Interfaith Wash Alliance — Water School

- **Water School** — This recently launched program, in partnership with Swarovski, is enabling teachers' children from the age of eight to learn the principles of sustainable water management, sanitation, and hygiene. Children are encouraged to be ambassadors for the water cause so that they can pass on their knowledge to their families and communities with the aim of achieving important behavioral change. In addition, teacher training sessions help promote responsible water

management by enabling them to give their own WaterSchool classes—supported by specially developed handbooks. In addition, the WaterSchool program is providing schools in need with the toilet, handwashing and drinking water facilities they need in order to ensure the health of all children. <http://washalliance.org/wash-in-fields/>

Inter-Religious Council for Peace in Tanzania

- The Inter-Religious Council for Peace in Tanzania (IRCPT), described as the largest coalition of representatives of religious communities in the country, signed a pledge to end violence against children by taking actions such as building networks to respond to it and providing safe-havens for maltreated children. A case study also cites the IRCPT's influence on Tanzania's "Multi-Sector National Plan of Action to Prevent and Respond to Violence against Children" (<http://ircpt.or.tz>) <https://www.togetherforgirls.org/wp-content/uploads/2019.02.01-TfG-Stakeholder-Report.pdf>

Mosintuwu Institute (Indonesia)

- **Project Sophia, Mobile Library, Youth Stage** — The purpose of these programs is creating safe interfaith spaces for children and youth to meet, express themselves and develop. The programs contributed to ending violence against children by advocating for victim/survivors in 20 cases of sexual violence against children in 2018.³¹²

Nishkam Schools (United Kingdom)

- The Nishkam School Trust Education Model is focused on virtues such as compassion, humility, service, contentment, optimism, truth and forgiveness. Virtues are prevalent in every aspect of teaching and learning and are modelled by teachers and staff alike throughout the schools. This new Virtues Program is about reinforcing the whole school approach, and all staff speaking "the language of virtues." The language of virtues guides us to fundamental ways 'to use the power of language to awaken the innate virtues in pupils and thereby to bring out the best in them. <http://nishkam.ng2.devwebsite.co.uk/page/?title=How+are+we+different&pid=22>

Peace Service Center (Nepal)

- **Hindu Vidyapeeth** — The Hindu Vidyapeeth schools are founded on the belief that an education which promotes both academic excellence and training in spiritual, cultural, and moral values will best equip a child to face life's challenges and to serve humankind.
- **Shanti Sewa Ashram** — Peace Service Center, fosters selfless service of humanity through programs which strengthen the intention of peace, promote interfaith cooperation, non-violence, and spiritual and philosophical awareness. <https://uri.org/sites/default/files/media/document/2017/Shanti%20Sewa%20Ashram%20Quarterly%20%20%20Report.pdf>

Religions for Peace

- **Caring for Orphans (Liberia)** — *Religions for Peace* (in partnership with Inter-religious Council of Liberia and local RfP-Women of Faith Networks) works to care for and support orphaned children within a family and community setting and advocates for laws to safeguard their rights.

- **Making Sure Every Child Counts (Philippines)** — A program that brings together diverse religious leaders to develop key messages using religious scripture and traditions that address child protection, particularly the issue of birth registration. Within a short span of time, these efforts capitalized on the engagement of religious leaders to register unprecedented numbers of children.
- **Protecting Children from All Forms of Violence (Sri Lanka)** — To address the issue of child abuse, *Religions for Peace* is equipping and supporting its in-country affiliate, *RfP-Sri Lanka*, in channeling the influence of religious leaders in Sri Lanka toward fighting child abuse by educating religious communities in all facets of preventing and responding to child abuse and breaking down barriers to its effective reporting and detection. <https://rfp.org/act/end-poverty/rights-well-being-of-children/>

Teach Peace Build Peace Movement (Philippines)

- **Peace Heroes Formation Program** — A holistic peace education program that creates a learning environment to help nurture a culture of peace and culture of peace heroism in the heart of every child in cooperation with teachers, parents, youth and community leaders and the security sector. The programme also targets schools and communities in areas affected by conflict indigenous communities and interfaith communities.³¹³

Bahá'í Faith

The Bahá'í Community of India

- The Bahá'í community of India conducts courses focused on reducing violence against women and girls. A module called “Equal Wings” and a booklet called “Beyond Legal Reforms: Culture and Capacity in the Eradication of Violence Against Women and Girls” were developed by the community, and are used in the courses. <https://www.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/resource-pdf/UNFPA-WVA-FBO-VAWG-AP-2012.pdf>

Buddhism

Rangjung CS and Youth Development Fund (Bhutan)

- The **Child Protection and Participation** program aims to eliminate violence against children in the community, locally and globally by conducting workshops on child protection and participation.³¹⁴

Rissho Kosei-kai (Japan)

- Since the United Nations International Year of the Child in 1979, young Rissho Kosei-kai members have been conducting campaigns throughout Japan to solicit contributions from the public for UNICEF. The primary purpose of UNICEF is to provide assistance for mothers and children the world over, but there aim is also that participating in this activity, whether by collecting contributions or making donations, will help people to realize that they are all bodhisattvas by nature. In other words, the UNICEF fund-raising campaign provides an opportunity for members to practice the way of the bodhisattva. <https://rkworld.org/unicef.aspx>

Christianity

Apdej-Turashoboye (Burundi)

- **End violence against children (especially babysitters)** — The objectives of the program are: (1) To contribute to end violence against children; (2) to educate the community on their role in the children protection against violence; and (3) to advocate for the implementation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.³¹⁵

Episcopal Relief & Development (USA)

- **Moments that Matter: Strengthening Families So Young Children Thrive** — The project focuses on positive parenting and reduction of corporal punishment. This was done in several ways: (1) improving child and maternal/primary caregiver health; (2) increasing early childhood development (ECD) knowledge, skills and activism of faith and local leaders and volunteers to facilitate ECD social and behavior change among parents/caregivers and communities and manage local ECD activities; and (3) strengthening cognitive, language, social, emotional and motor skills development in children 0-3 and their parental relationships through increasing primary caregivers' well-being, and their responsive care and stimulation and positive parenting practices. https://www.episcopalrelief.org/uploaded/files/What-We-Do/2016-ECD/2016_ECD_Program_Summary_Final_web.pdf

GNRC-Ethiopia, Ethiopian Evangelical Church Mekane Yesus and Dignity for Life (Ethiopia)

- **Eradicating child poverty** — This initiative provides children with basic support occasionally and also trains them on how to protect themselves from different forms of violence on the streets.³¹⁶

Healing Ground (Nigeria)

- **Healing ground quiz** — The main objectives of the programme are: (1) to promote spiritual, mental, and emotional well-being by helping children identifying what their purpose is and living it out; (2) to positively affect the environment, community, society, church, nation and the world at large; and (3) to provide mentorship. The plenary session of the program was drug abuse, sexuality, cultism and purpose.³¹⁷

Help a Child (Child Centered Community Development programs (CCCD))

- **Child Participation (Rwanda)** — Help a Child Rwanda continues to follow children as they grow, to ensure that school-age children receive the education and support they need to overcome barriers, develop their potential, and become active citizens. <https://www.helpachild.org/programmes>
- **What's up girls?! (South-Sudan)** — Education is a crucial piece when it comes to improving opportunities for marginalized girls. This is quite a challenge in the South Sudan context, where the prevailing opinion is that “education is spoiling girls.” What's Up, Girls?! is an innovative pilot project that aims to address these cultural issues as well as other barriers to girls' education. <https://www.helpachild.org/what-we-do/what/whats-up-girls>

National Council of Churches in Australia

- The National Council of Churches in Australia has put into place a policy for local church leaders to help them fulfill their pastoral, legal, denominational and ethical roles and their responsibilities for the spiritual, emotional and physical safety of all people. It helps facilitate quality, sustainable, accessible Safe Church workshops for local leaders, both paid and volunteer. <https://www.ncca.org.au/>

World Vision

- **Channels of Hope for Child Protection (Malawi)** — Three pilot workshops were conducted in Zomba Town, Malawi, in January 2014. After preparatory work in contextualizing materials, selection criteria for participants were developed for three separate three-day workshops conducted in English in Chingale and Namachete respectively. This report is based on a field evaluation conducted to identify the impact of the CoH CP workshop intervention and related programme activity in relation to the care and protection of children. https://www.wvi.org/sites/default/files/QMU_CoH%20CP%20Malawi%20Report_Final_For%20Circulation.pdf

Youth Leaders for Restoration and Development (YOLRED) (Uganda)

- **Community parliament and school debate** — The objective of this program is to equip young people in institutions of learning with critical thinking and conflict analysis, leadership, communication skills, research and oratory skills to enable them to participate meaningfully in public life. The program also aims to provide community and young people with time and space to network, share views and exchange ideas as a means for influencing public policy and civil society advocacy agendas at both local and national levels.³¹⁸

Gandhian (rooted in Hinduism)³¹⁹

Shanti Ashram (India)

- **International Center for Child and Public Health** aims to become a nodal institution for practice, active research and global policy making by integrating primary care and public health. The unique “Hospital on Wheels” (under the ICPH Initiative) is customized to provide primary pediatric care, enable community outreach, and support public health campaigns focused on immunization. <http://www.icphhealth.org/icph-services>

Islam

Center for Sustainable Conflict Resolution (CSCR) (Kenya)

- CSCR has made a short film to counter violent extremism and terrorism which aims to give children and youth a voice in countering radicalization, violent extremism, and terrorism. The program has created awareness among children and youth, and encouraged them to use their talents not only to counter violent extremism but also to benefit themselves. It has generated calls for rehabilitation of returnees, an idea which the organization is planning to work on, in the course of the year.³²⁰

Conseil de la paix—CAP (Comoros)

- **Religious for children** — The objective of this program is to advocate for a good understanding of the CRC by religious leaders, by initiating a program of translating the CRC and teach it to educators from Quranic schools. The program has been able to allow more rights to children that previously were ignored by many religious educators and the community.³²¹

Help the Afghan Children (HTAC) (Afghanistan)

- **Holistic Community Based Child Protection System Strengthening and School-Based Peace Education** — The program objectives are: (1) to strengthen child protection prevention initiatives and quality access to child protection response services in order to reduce instances of violence, exploitation and neglect of children; (2) to reduce corporal punishment against children at schools and in families; and (3) to improve livelihoods of graduating school girls via skills training (computer and tailoring) so they can become self-sufficient and self-reliant.³²²

Islamic Relief Worldwide

- **Channels of Hope (Lebanon)** — This projects aims to strengthen local child protection systems in Lebanon. The program motivates and builds capacity in religious communities to address violence against children including various forms of abuse, neglect and exploitation. It equips them with factually correct information and insight, and guides them to be powerful change agents. <https://www.islamic-relief.org/lebanon-channels-of-hope-child-protection/>
- **Channels of Hope (Mali)** — This project facilitates the creation of secure, child friendly communal spaces. This is achieved by delivering awareness-raising and sensitization sessions to build capacity on the principles of child protection among key community figures such as faith and community leaders, as well as community-based organizations and members of civil society organizations. <https://www.islamic-relief.org/mali-channels-of-hope-child-protection/>
- **Commitment to eradicating Female Genital Mutilation (Indonesia)** — Eradicating FGM is a part of Islamic Relief's commitment to child protection as it is often performed on young girls and babies. Islamic Relief conducted a study to examine the sensitive issue of FGM in Indonesia. The field study supported previous results that FGM is seen in Indonesia as an Islamic act and is performed in the expectation of "becoming a complete Muslim." The study is also providing several recommendations to international and national governments, NGOs, and the United Nations on how to address the issue. http://www.muslimplatformsd.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/FGC_Report_IRW_WEB.pdf
- **Improving Education for Syrian Children** — Islamic Relief held a workshop together with Islamic Development Bank on improving access to education to Syrian refugee and displaced children. A number of international agencies and local community-based organizations participated. <https://www.islamic-relief.org/improving-education-for-syrian-children/>

I Can Malaysia

- **Communication Class for Rohingya Children** — The purpose of this program is to prepare children for their future, since they are deprived of education in Malaysia. The faith classes, skill classes, and math and English classes help to improve the children's quality of life and well-being.³²³

Mosaik — Women's Association for Interreligious Dialogue in Family and Society (Bosnia and Herzegovina)

- This organization is committed to strengthening and developing inter-religious dialogue. They advocate for the establishment of dialogue in the family and society. They are also committed to contributing to building civil society and to organizing humanitarian, cultural, educational, artistic and other activities designed to help women of different religious beliefs and different profiles that have the need for it.³²⁴

World Council of Religions Pakistan (Pakistan)

- **Protecting and promoting the basic human rights of religious minorities especially the children and young girls** — This program sensitizes parents and families to the CRC, especially to articles 14, 30 and 42. The children have become active and vibrant ambassadors for the CRC.³²⁵

Judaism

American Jewish World Service (India)

- **Locally-led programs** — AJWS provides grants to Indian organizations that work directly with girls and young women, educating them about their rights and organizing activities designed to build their confidence, from self-defense to photography. The grantees then support girls and young women to speak up for their rights and to take a stand together to confront injustice in their communities. Some projects also offer formal education or vocational training to prepare girls for jobs, thereby expanding girls' options and often relieving pressure they receive from their families to marry early. https://ajws-americanjewishwo.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/ECM-strat_brochure_web.pdf

New York Board of Rabbis (NYBR) (USA)

- The New York Board of Rabbis is committed to strengthening the Greater New York faith community and institutions, in the recognition and response to family violence as well as bullying, internet safety, child sexual abuse and human trafficking. NYBR engages clergy in new approaches to discussing and addressing family violence's impact on their congregations and communities through education, public awareness and understanding about abuse. <https://www.nybr.org/family-violence-response.html>

*The information on many of these initiatives was obtained through the survey conducted for this Study. For further information, and when no footnote is available, please contact Arigatou International at: [newyork\(at\)arigatouinternational.org](mailto:newyork(at)arigatouinternational.org)

VIII. THE PANAMA DECLARATION ON ENDING VIOLENCE AGAINST CHILDREN FROM THE 5TH FORUM OF THE GLOBAL NETWORK OF RELIGIONS FOR CHILDREN

May 11, 2017, Panama City, Panama

Challenged by the global epidemic of violence against children, we, leaders and members of the world's religious and spiritual traditions, girls and boys, women and men, from 70 countries, together with representatives of governments, the United Nations, and international and grassroots organizations, met in Panama City, Panama for the 5th Forum of the Global Network of Religions for Children (GNRC), from 9-11 May 2017.

Building upon the GNRC's 17 years of service to the world's children, we affirm the fundamental dignity of every boy and girl. We reaffirm the moral imperative to protect children from harm, as enshrined and protected in the teachings of all of the world's religious and spiritual communities and in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and its optional protocols. We believe in the power of interfaith cooperation to transform the world.

We grieve the fact that half of the world's children endure physical, psychological or sexual violence. It is unacceptable that every five minutes, a child somewhere is killed in a violent act.

While our religions have been actively engaged in the service of children, we also grieve that every religion at times has been misused to legitimize, justify and even perpetuate violence against children. We are accountable for these shortcomings and ask for forgiveness. Today, we stand together to reject and speak out against all forms of violence against children in every setting.

The causes of violence against children are complex and varied. They include socio-economic causes such as poverty and social exclusion, and many other deeply rooted political, cultural and familial factors. Ending today's unprecedented violence against children calls for extraordinary and urgent collaboration among religious and spiritual communities, UN agencies, international and multilateral organizations, governments, civil society, the private sector, media—and, most importantly, with children. We honor children's unique contributions to, and insights about, ending violence.

Children thrive and grow in trusting relationships with people who love and care for them. Ideally, and for the most part, this happens within families. Sadly, it also cannot be denied that the home is the place where most abuses occur. Families need support to grow to become peaceful, safe sanctuaries.

We affirm that transformed religious and spiritual communities can offer moral teachings and model practices to prevent, heal, reduce and ultimately end violence against children.

We, the participants of the GNRC 5th Forum, both children and adults, resolve to do all that we can to end violence against children.

We commit to:

1. **Listen to children** with empathy and respect, welcome their wisdom and gifts, and continue to work side-by-side to address violence against them;
2. **Ensure that our religious places are safe for all children**, and especially for the victims of violence and abuse, and vulnerable children such as those with disabilities;
3. **Increase our personal and institutional commitments** to take concrete actions to address the challenges voiced by children at this forum;
4. **Educate our leaders and communities** about the different forms of violence against children and deploy resources to prevent and address it within and beyond our communities; educate children about human sexuality and what they can do to keep themselves safe; work to safeguard children from harmful media content and engage the media in preventing violence against children;
5. **Partner with global programs** such as End Violence and make the most of existing tools for addressing the root causes and drivers of the violence children face, with a special focus on countering violent extremism, gang violence, harm to children by organized crime, and sexual exploitation and abuse;
6. **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;
7. **Identify and challenge patriarchal structures and practices** that perpetuate violence against and sexual exploitation especially of girls;
8. **Embrace internationally agreed strategies and mechanisms to address violence against children**, including the Sustainable Development Goals 16.2 on ending abuse, exploitation, trafficking and all forms of violence against and torture of children; 5.2 and 5.3 on ending violence against women and girls; and 8.7 on ending economic exploitation of children;
9. **Strengthen cooperation and partnerships across Arigatou International initiatives**, the wider religious and spiritual communities and strategic players at local, national, regional and global levels;
10. **Work to generate greater social and political will** for legislation, policies, and increased funding of programs to protect children from violence.

In all of this, we will strengthen our mechanisms for continuous self-evaluation and accountability to ensure our communities are never complicit in perpetuating violence against children, build child-safe institutions, and build evidence for the effectiveness of faith-based approaches to end violence against children.

Finally, we thank Arigatou International and its partners for bringing us together for the GNRC 5th Forum. We share the conviction that we are all responsible to every child in the world. We leave here reinvigorated and inspired by the vision of a peaceful world for all girls and boys.



ABOUT ARIGATOU INTERNATIONAL

Arigatou International is a non-profit organization which works to bring people from all walks of life together to build a better world for children. Arigatou International is “All for Children,” and draws on universal principles of common good to offer compelling new ways for people of diverse religious and cultural backgrounds to come together to address children’s issues.

Arigatou International develops and sustains unique multi-stakeholder initiatives designed to ensure that all children are treated with dignity, all children’s rights are respected, and all children have the opportunity to freely pursue their full human potential. Involving diverse partners, these initiatives emphasize both grassroots action and international advocacy.

Arigatou International has great faith in children, who actively help shape its work. Young people are deeply respected, active partners in every Arigatou International initiative.

Arigatou International holds special consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council and consultative status with the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and is a member of [Child Rights Connect \(formerly the NGO Group for the CRC\)](#). It liaises and works jointly with UN agencies and other NGOs to foster cooperation within a rights-based approach to the profound issues faced by children and youth today. For Arigatou International, the full implementation of the [Convention on the Rights of the Child \(CRC\)](#) is a critical goal and essential step on the path to a world that is healthy and just for all children and youth.

Arigatou International recognizes the vital role that religious leaders and their communities can play in fostering healthy values and supporting positive behaviors in their societies. To provide a global platform for interreligious cooperation for children, Arigatou launched the [Global Network of Religions for Children \(GNRC\)](#) in May 2000 at the first global forum in Tokyo. With global forums held in Geneva in 2004, Hiroshima in 2008, Nairobi in 2012, and Panama in 2017, the GNRC has grown to become an extensive interfaith network of faith-based organizations and people of faith who work together for the rights and well-being of children around the world.

In 2004, Arigatou International began promoting Ethics Education for Children, aiming to nurture values and ethics and empower children in order to create a world of greater justice, peace and dignity. This initiative envisions a world where children are equipped to make ethical decisions, nurture their spirituality, and make positive contributions to transform their communities together, based on values that promote respect for their own and others’ cultures and beliefs. One of its major programs is [Learning to Live Together: An Intercultural and Interfaith Programme for Ethics Education](#), developed in close collaboration with UNESCO and UNICEF and launched in 2008.

Also in 2008, Arigatou International launched the [World Day of Prayer and Action for Children](#), aiming to encourage religious leaders and people of faith from diverse religious traditions to work to improve children’s lives through prayer and actions that benefit children. Since then each

year on November 20, Universal Children's Day, the World Day of Prayer and Action for Children is celebrated in many parts of the world to raise the status of children and to promote and protect their rights by commemorating the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The Prayer and Action initiative has grown to become a year-round program of action focused on ending violence against children through dialogue and collaboration with both faith-based and other organizations.

In 2012 at the GNRC 4th Forum in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, Arigatou International launched the Interfaith [Initiative to End Child Poverty](#). This initiative mobilizes faith-inspired resources to eradicate poverty affecting children. It addresses both the root causes of poverty in the human heart and the structural causes of poverty including the unequal distribution of resources, war and violence, poor governance and corruption. It utilizes interfaith advocacy and grassroots action to overcome poverty. At the GNRC 5th Forum in Panama City in 2017, the initiative launched "[An Interfaith Guide to End Child Poverty: Inspire. Act. Change.](#)"

For more information on these four major initiatives of Arigatou International, visit the websites of the [GNRC](#), [Ethics Education](#), [Prayer and Action](#) and [End Child Poverty](#).

In 2017, at the GNRC 5th Forum in Panama City, Panama, religious leaders from all of the world's major religions issued the groundbreaking Panama Declaration on Ending Violence Against Children, which included 10 specific commitments and a pledge for follow-up and accountability.

In 2018 and 2019, Arigatou International initiated, carried out and disseminated this Study commemorating the 30th anniversary of the CRC.

Arigatou International has its headquarters in Tokyo, Japan, and offices in Geneva, New York, and Nairobi which support its global initiatives.

The bulk of Arigatou International's funding comes from donations made by individual donors in Japan who support the organization's mission. The work of the organization around the world is also supported by many volunteers, by in-kind and financial contributions from project collaborators, and by occasional project- or partnership-based grants obtained from foundations or other institutional donors.



ENDNOTES

- 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. See Annex for information about its mission.
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- 313 Ibid.
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- 319 Gandhism is not a religion but rather a series of ideas linked to non-violent resistance contributed by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi
- 320 Info. gathered through survey; for more, contact: [newyork\(at\)arigatouinternational.org](mailto:newyork(at)arigatouinternational.org)
- 321 Ibid.
- 322 Ibid.
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- 325 Ibid.



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***“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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