

The Peacebuilders

"Keeping the ICF Circle informed; Connecting with Community of Interreligious Peacebuilders"

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Vol. III, No. 6 Bi-monthly E-Newsletter of the Interfaith Cooperation Forum of Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs Oct-Nov. 2020

Mercy Kappen, Liza Lamis speak on Religion, Femicide, and Various Forms of Sexual Abuses

On November 19, 2020, ICF held the first in a series of four sessions of the Virtual Thematic Seminar-Workshops on the Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Human Rights. ICF launched this Thematic Seminar-Workshop in line with the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence that starts on November 25 and culminates on December 10.

The first session had the sub-theme on Religion, Femicide, and Various Forms of Sexual Abuse. ICF was very happy to have Dr. Liza Lamis, the Executive Secretary of the International Committee Fellowship of the Least Coin, and Ms. Mercy Kappen, the Executive Director Vishtar Academy of Justice and Peace in Bangalore, India, as speakers. Both gave powerful and insightful presentations.

Dr. Liza Lamis focused on the harmful interpretation of the Bible that result in violence against women. She also presented Christianity's long tradition with ancient famous thinkers promoting harmful practices. She further challenged the participants to look into their own sacred texts and identify connections between the harmful practices towards women and the interpretation of sacred texts.

Religion justifies, enables and promotes abuses against women.
- Dr. Liza B. Lamis

Virtual Thematic Seminar-Workshop on "The Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Human Rights"

November 19, December 3, and 10, 2020 @ 4:00-6:00 PM HKT
November 26, 2020 @ 5:00-7:00 PM HKT



Mercy Kappen
Executive Director,
Vishtar Academy of Justice and Peace
Bangalore, India

Dr. Liza B. Lamis
Executive Secretary
International Committee for the
Fellowship of the Least Coin

November 19, 2020
Topic: Religion, Femicide, and Various
Forms of Sexual Abuse



For more details and how to
register, please click the link in
the description.

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Ms. Mercy Kappen gave a profound talk by first providing a comprehensive definition of violence against women as well as devastating current statistics of gender-based violence. She further explained common practices of victim-blaming and debunked the myths and beliefs around these practices. She further pointed out the importance of intersectionality to tackle the issue of violence against women in its complexity.

This session had thirty-two attendees, thirteen (13) males, and nineteen (19) females, who came from different religious traditions. There were five Buddhists, five Muslims, two Hindus, and twenty Christians.

On the following Tuesday, November 24th, the participants had the chance to

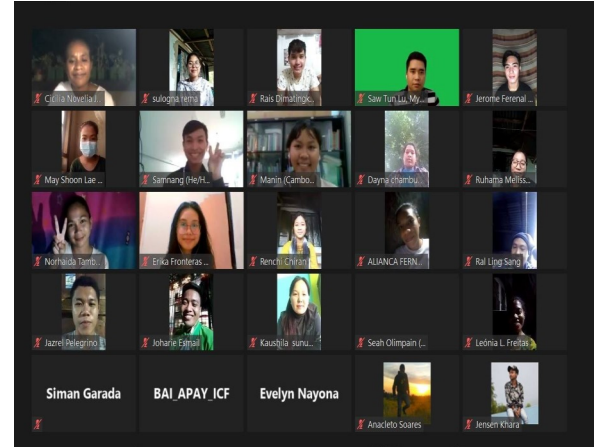
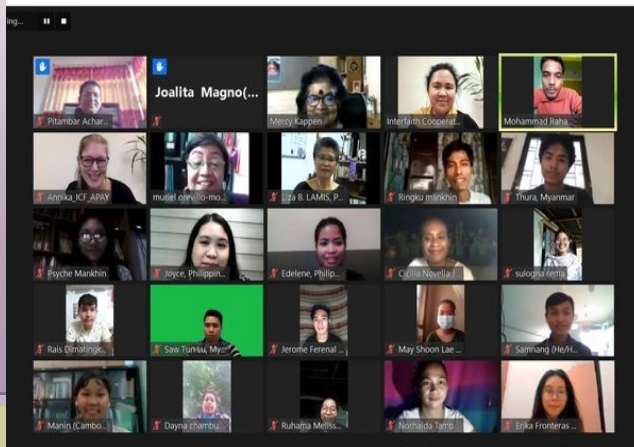
Mercy Kappen, Liza Lamis speak on Religion, Femicide . . .

meet in an open zoom to reflect and discuss the presentations together. We also take this space to thank both our speakers, Dr. Liza Lamis and Ms. Mercy Kappen, for graciously accepting ICF's invitation and giving such inspiring presentations. 🙏🙏🙏

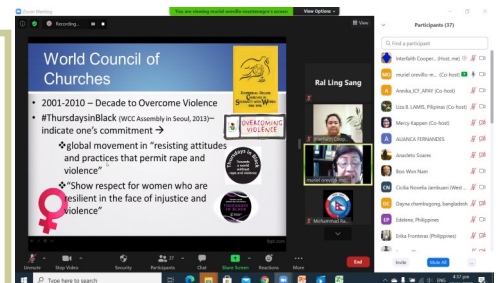
- Annika Denkmann
BftW Seconded Personnel

There are several myths and misconceptions about why sexual violence happens. Clothing, flirting, alcohol, going home alone are NOT the cause of sexual violence, as many would believe. Sexual violence is 100% caused by the sexual assault perpetrator.

- Ms. Mercy Kappen



Photos
during the
November
19, 2020
Virtual
Seminar-
Workshop.



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SOME CHALLENGES:

- ✓ **WOMEN** must read and interpret their religious scriptures for themselves with a critical feminist lens.
- ✓ **Debunk** the myth of the 'fall of man' and take men into accountability for their behavior. Men must be responsible for themselves, particularly for their sexual behavior.
- ✓ **Explore** the challenge of being a man like Jesus. What did Jesus say about women? How did he treat and work with women? how did he open up himself to the challenge of women around him? What gender images and constructs can we glean from the life and work of Jesus?

Question: You Pauline, or Christian?

Monash and George Mason Profs Share Incisive Presentations on “Religion and the LGBT Communities”

ICF held the second session of the four-part Virtual Thematic Seminar-Workshops on the Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Human Rights on November 26, 2020. The topic of this session was on Religion and LGBT Communities: “Is God’s Love Exclusive for the Straight People?”

ICF was very pleased to welcome Dr. Sharon Bong, an Associate Professor of Gender Studies at Monash University-Malaysia, and Dr. Al Fuentes, an Associate Professor at George Mason University in Virginia, USA, specializing in psycho-social trauma healing as an important component of conflict transformation. Dr. Sharon Bong started with a brainstorming exercise on what is sexuality for all participants. Then she gave a very insightful presentation on sexual ethics theory. She explained what our societies and religions perceive and deem as normal and what the actual reality and diversity of gender identities and sexual orientation look like.

Following Dr. Bong’s inspiring presentation, Dr. Al Fuentes gave a powerful personal account about growing up gay in a religious community and finding the courage to come out years later through a devastating personal loss. A fruitful discussion with



Thank God for feminists, who have pointed out to us that gender complementarity is an extension of sexism. It puts men and women, boys and girls in their place and you are punished if you go out of your place or fall out of line.

- Dr. Sharon A. Bong

Virtual Thematic Seminar-Workshop on "The Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Human Rights"

November 19, December 3, and 10, 2020 @ 4:00-6:00 PM HKT
November 26, 2020 @ 5:00-7:00 PM HKT



November 26, 2020

Topic: Religion and LGBT Communities: "Is God's Love Exclusive for the Straight People?"

Dr. Al Fuentes
Associate Professor
George Mason University



For more details and how to register, please click the link in the description.

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God's love is not limited to straight people only. God's love is open to all.
- Dr. Al Fuentes

both resource persons followed their presentations.

As in the first session on November 19, thirty-two attendees joined. Fifteen of them are males, and seventeen of them are females. The representation of participants from the different religions remains the same: there were five Buddhists, five Muslims, two Hindus, and twenty Christians.

On the following Tuesday, November 24, the participants had the chance again to meet in an open zoom to reflect further on the presentations and discuss them together. We thank both our speakers, Dr. Sharon Bong and Dr. Al Fuentes, for accepting the ICF invitation and for giving thought-provoking and insightful presentations. 🙏🙏🙏

—Annika Denkmann



Nepal Unites Distributed Food and Health-Safety Packages to Women in Rajbiraj

Nepal Unites, a youth organization, organized a food and health-safety package distribution program for the women community on October 25, 2020, in Rajbiraj-02, Saptari Province No. 2, located in the eastern part of Nepal. Each food pack contains rice, pulse or dried legumes and beans, sugar, salt, and others. The health-safety package includes facemasks, soap, and hand sanitizer.

Nepal Unites received support from Kowloon Union Church in Hong Kong. The beneficiaries were women who belong to twenty (20) families that are poor and people from minority groups. Led by the School of Peace 2017 alumnus Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman, Nepal Unites visited first the Indigenous community to identify the people who needed most the assistance.

During this program, Nepal Unites shared information on health care and personal hygiene, especially during this COVID-19 pandemic situation. The youth of Nepal Unites demonstrated to the people the practical steps of handwashing.

The people felt relieved after receiving the food items with the health-safety package.

One of the guests named Santosh Kumar Yadav said this type of movement is a helpful relief program to the poor and needy people. I found out during this program that there is a need to organize the community level program on health care and personal hygiene with the health safety package because the women are not conscious of personal health. Health has a relation to inner peace. Our organizing team will follow up on this community.

As a budding youth group, Nepal Unites is looking for some organization for partnership work together with the movement, so connect with us. 🙏🙏🙏

—*Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman*
School of Peace Alumnus 2017
National Director, Nepal Unites
nepalunites2019@gmail.com

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A Group of Women gathered to receive the Food pack and Health Safety Package from Nepal Unites.

Photo: Mohammad Ayatulla Rahaman

ICF and APAY Staff joined the 9th PPRC thru Zoom

This year, on November 26-28, 2020, the Center for Peace and Conflict Studies (CPCS) held its 9th Peace Practitioners Research Conference held virtually using the zoom platform. Upon the invitation of CPCS Director, Dr. Emma Leslie, the ICF attended the conference, although, they catch up only on the remaining two days due to conflict of schedules. More than one hundred participants from different countries attended the conference.

The annual Peace Practitioners Research Conference (PPRC) is a platform for peace practitioners, researchers, and scholars to reflect on their experiences and share successful peacebuilding practices. For the ICF staff, this was an opportunity to



Photo credit: CPCS

listen and learn from different peace practitioners across the world. This year's theme focused on "Moving beyond the Big Man Mediation and Multi-Track Diplomacy."

On the second day, Ms. Ameya Kilara, Director of South Asian Leadership Initiative at Intermediate talked about the essence of peace leadership and how does it manifest. Ms. Julia Roig, President of PartnersGlobal talked about adaptive leadership for peacebuilding organizations. The two pointed out the importance of creating a peace table in the peace process and the need to forge solidarity and to work together with the stakeholders of the peace process.

On the last day of the conference, Ms. Christine Ahn, Founder and Executive Director of Women Cross DMZ, talked about the power of civil society movements for political change. She shared her story of mobilizing the women peacemakers to call for the end of the unfinished Korean War symbolized by the DMZ. She emphasized the importance of the involvement of civil society in the peace process. Ms. Neha Sanghrajka, spoke on "Behind the Scene Mediator" as a mediator, highlighted the value of building trust in a peace process as she looked back on her experiences as senior advisor to the Mozambique Peace Process.

The conference ended with Dr. Soth Plai Ngarm's saxophone music offering "Heal the World." ្រ្រ្រ

- Baidido M. Saganding
ICF Program Officer



Photo credit: CPCS

ICF-Timor Leste Met for Strategic Planning

The ICF-Timor Leste conducted strategic planning on October 24-25, 2020, in Atabae, a town almost three-hour drive northwest from Dili. The activity was timely for ICF-TL's 6th founding anniversary. Fourteen key alumni members joined the activity that the Interfaith Cooperation Forum (ICF) supported. ICF is a project of the Asia Pacific Alliance of YMCAs (APAY). Fourteen alumni attended the planning activity.

The objective of the workshop was to explain and discuss the progress of ICF-TL activities in the country and the community, to describe their learnings and experiences with the activities conducted, and to identify the plans and visions of ICF Timor Leste. The Strategic Development Goals (SDG) of ICF-TL for 2021-2024 is important for ICF to organize activities and programs. The planners agreed during the meeting that any activities that the ICF Timor Leste will undertake should follow the plan. This came up because, in the past years, the group did not have proper planning in

organizing the activities.

The schedule for the two-day workshop with the facilitating persons was the following:

1. Introduction of the profile and the story of ICF - Julio da Costa, SoP2012;
2. Individual reflection and evaluation of the ICF-TL activity from 2015 to 2020 - Leonardo G. Marçal
3. Review of activities in 2020 - Anacleto Roberto C. Soares
4. ICF-Timor Leste's strategic plan 2021-2024 - Luis Garcia Dos Santos, SoP 2019.

During the workshop, the participants were very enthusiastic, and everyone shared their ideas to contribute to the ICF program for 2021-2024. The immediate activity for the year 2020 will be on December 4-8, 2020. The topic will be on Interfaith Cooperation with Different Martial Arts Group in Timor Leste. This will gather participants from different martial arts groups of around 20 young people from different administrative posts of the Bobonaro Municipality. The conflict that involves martial arts groups in Timor Leste has been increasing. For this reason, the ICF Timor Leste will launch this activity with the hope of a solution to end this conflict. 🙏🙏🙏

--Leonardo Gamboa Marçal
SoP2019



Leonardo Gamboa Marçal leading the discussion
Photo credit: Leo Gamboa



Group Photo of ICF-Timor Leste members
Photo credit: Leo Gamboa

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ICF-Timor Leste Won an Award during YSEALI-INpaktu Boot Camp 2020

ICF Timor Leste received the honor as one of the top three youth organizations in Timor Leste. Along with the certificate of recognition, ICF Timor Leste also won the grant of USD 1,000.00 for their project. ICF Timor Leste participated in the recently concluded INpaktu Youth (Youth Impact) Boot Camp on November 14-19, 2020, in Dili to empower the Timor Leste youth leaders on the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Representatives of fifteen youth organizations attended the camp.

INpaktu Youth Timor Leste is a youth-to-youth movement designed to empower the youth to build a sustainable future by providing small grants and a capacity-building boot camp on social innovation and development. The INpaktu Youth is one of the initiatives supported by the Young Asian Leaders Initiative (YSEALI), a U.S government's program to strengthen leadership development and network in Southeast Asia.

During the six days camp, the participants had the chance to learn about the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) and the strategies of the UN SDGs with Timor Leste. They also learned about tourism issues in Timor Leste. The Market Development Facility (MDF), an organization that works to encourage business growth in Timor Leste presented some sustainable projects related to marine and land biodiversity to preserve the



Anacleto Roberto Soares and Joalita Teresa Magno
Photo credit: Leo Gamboa

environment and natural resources. The participants also discussed youth issues in Timor Leste and youth leadership.

The participants had to prepare project ideas and give a five-minute project pitch during the camp. Anacleto Roberto Soares and Joalita Magno shared ICF Timor Leste's works in organizing young people from different faith and cultures; and its efforts to help martial arts clubs in Timor Leste to live in peace and harmony. They also presented its proposed activity on Dialogue for Transformation involving the martial arts clubs.

The fifteen organizations presented their projects, then the board of judges shortlisted the top five organizations' projects. Among the top five, the judges further selected three winners. The three organizations judged as winners were the *Laudato Si* Animator, the Millenian Youth Association (MYA), and ICF-Timor Leste.

It was a good opportunity for the ICF Timor Leste to be part of this activity. ICF-TL hopes to implement the received grant in December 2020. 🦋🦋🦋

- Anacleto Roberto Soares and
Joalita Teresa Magno,
Thematic Workshop alumni,
2020



Anacleto Roberto Soares of ICF-Timor Leste with the
other winners.
Photo credit: Leo Gamboa

Feature Article:

Celebrating the Buddhist Lent



The Monks in a Thai Sangha
Photo credit: Phra Sivone Keovilaipunya

Religions have their important celebrations and observances. Christians observe the Lenten season to do fasting, self-penitence, prayer, and almsgiving. Muslims have the same observances during the Ramadan. Hindus have their periods of observances when they fast. The most common is the Mokshada Ekadashi, on the 11th lunar day of the fortnight of the waxing moon in the Hindu month of Margashirsha (Agrahayana), that corresponds to November–December. Vaishnava Hindus observe a 24-hour fast in honor of the god Krishna, an avatar of Vishnu. In Buddhism, there is also a season that we call the Buddhist Lent.

What is the Buddhist Lent?
In Buddhism, the “Buddhist Lent” is the period when the monks begin to stay and remain in a particular temple for the whole three months during the rainy seasons. The Buddhist Lent is a time for the monks to have a retreat, and it usually starts around the beginning of July to October. The Buddhist Lent Day starts on the same day the Asalha

Bucha day (also called Asalha Puja, Asarnha Bucha, Dhamma Day), a Theravada Buddhist festival that occurs on the full moon of the eighth lunar months, usually in July. It is the most important day in Buddhism because it is homage to the Buddha. The festival also commemorates the Buddha’s first sermon on the four noble truths and the founding of the three jewels or triple gems:

- *The Buddha,
- *the Dhamma (Dharma), and
- *the Shangka (Sangha).

How did Buddhist Lent start?
According to the story of Buddhism, before the Buddha decided to lay down this special rule, once there were monks who traveled and walked across the rice fields. Consequently, they damaged the local people’s rice plants and paddies. The locals bought the news to the Buddha. The Buddha called the monks for a meeting and discussed the issue with them. As a result, the Lord Buddha designed the rule instructing all Buddhist monks to take retreat during the rainy season. From that day on, the monks have to stay and remain in particular temples for three months. They are not supposed to stay outside the temple overnight. However, there is also an exception for those who want to stay in another place, but it should not be over seven days. The monks can stay in their homes if they want to be with their parents who are ill, or when a monk gets sick, and in other special cases.

What happens during Buddhist Lent?
During the period of the Buddhist Lent (Vassa or “rain”), there are many activities that happen, although it also depends on some Buddhist countries. In Theravada Buddhist countries like

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Celebrating the Buddhist Lent (continued)

Laos, Thailand, Myanmar, and Cambodia, the festivals and ceremonies there would have minor differences. The most usual thing that all monks do during the Buddhist Lent is to take this time exclusively to practice meditation and chanting every morning and evening. They also give a sermon (dhamma talk) to people from time-to-time. On the day of the Lunar Month, the monks will gather in one temple to listen to the 227 rules or PATIMOKKHA.

The last day of the Buddhist Lent is the Pavarana, a holy day that marks the end of Vassa. On this day, the monks will gather again in one temple as a sangha, at the ordination Hall, and atone for any offense done. They will ask for forgiveness from the senior monks whom they may have offended intentionally or unintentionally in thoughts, actions, and speech.

In Laos, at the end of Buddhist Lent Day, there is a festival called "Fireboat floating," which is almost similar to the Thai Loy Krathong that all Buddhist countries celebrate. These Buddhist countries,

however, celebrate the Buddhist Lent Day at different times and dates. In Laos, the people prefer to celebrate the Buddhist Lent Day by making a small raft made of banana leaves decorated with flowers, candles, incense sticks, and float it away on the river. The floating raft is an offering to the Mother of the River, Nakha (or Naga, a giant snake) who takes care of the river. Some people also believe that this rite will let the river carry away bad luck in life and wish to bring good life, peaceful life, and happy life in return.

If you have a chance to visit one of these Buddhist countries, please do not miss this special festival called Boun Luang Heua Fai or Floating Fire Boat in the river. 🙏 🙏 🙏

- Venerable Phra Sivone Keovilaipunya
Laos, ICF Peace Institute Alumnus
2019



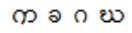
Source: Tutor2U

Gender and Religion: Why not Treat All Human Beings as Equals?

In my community, most of the people are confused about religious teachings with customs, traditions, and culture. Discriminations and abuses are of many forms and go back to people's culture and attitudes. "No Entry for Women" and "Women are prohibited entry to this sacred place." These signages are common in most of the monasteries, pagodas, and temples. We have no idea whether Buddha taught these sorts or not. People have debated upon for years, but these debates have not achieved any solution yet.

Buddhism has portrayed the Buddha through the image of a man. This leads to a question: are men the only ones who

can be enlightened and become a Buddha? Why cannot women too? In Buddhism, the nuns have a lower rank than the male monks do. Not all Buddhist traditions ordain women as monks. Even if they live in the monastery compound, they are not in the leading role. They have to pay homage to the monk. Sometimes the monks discriminate against them, and they are underprivileged in the offertory.

There was a time that favored the males when monks educate the men in the monasteries while women were expected enough to know only the ABC,  in Burmese alphabets. They were to stay at home and do all the household chores. Sadly, many women and girls do not even know that they were victims and subject to abuses or violence. Sometimes they think that being

Gender and Religion: Why not Treat All Human Beings as Equals?



Source: Tutor2U

women, they are weak and powerless compared to the men. Moreover, within marriage, they think they deserved those kinds of domestic violence as a punishment by the patriarch who makes money and feed the family. This has been in the mindset of most women until now in some parts of the country. This led to the culture of women's subordination: the men are to lead and earn a living, and the women are only to bear children and care for the household.

Like in other countries, rape cases are still increasing in Myanmar over time and are even happening in religious places. While I have limited data, the monks or priests sometimes commit these sexual assaults. Child rape, marital rape, and homosexual rape are part of these abuses. When it comes to rape case, people blame not only the perpetrators but also the victims. Usually, people criticize and blame women victims for the abuse. And that also creates a rape culture – of regarding women and those who have different sexual identity or gender orientation through offensive words, like, “Suppose your mother and sisters are in a place of the girl being raped,”

“What if I rape your mom and sisters?” etc. They say sexual abuse occur due to women's behavior and the ways they wear their clothes. In turn, rapes and sexual harassment lead to a condition of “overprotecting” the girls. Women should not wear “sexy clothes” while men or most perpetrators are free to wear what they like.

To conclude, there is a variety of forms of discrimination, abuse, and violence against women and LGBTQ++ within my community. These we must figure out clearly and critically. Do religious underpinnings and its teaching shape or cause these abuses and violence? Or, is it because of the religious followers' philosophy and preferences? Are these abusive behavior inspired by social stereotypes and cultures? Or, is it the combination of the above? 🙏🙏🙏



- Hein Thura Htet
Myanmar
School of Peace 2018

Alarming Reality: Cases of Sexual Abuse and Violence Against Women in Bangladesh are Increasing

The first session of the thematic workshop on The Intersection of Religion, Gender, and Human Rights was on “Religion, Femicide, and Various Forms of Sexual Abuse.” We heard from our resource persons how religion connects to violence against women and the reasons for sexual abuse. The resource persons shared that among the causes of violence against women and sexual abuse are religious views and political power.

The United Nations defines violence against women (VAW) as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual, or mental harm or suffering to women, including threats such acts, or coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in private or in public life.”

According to the World Health Orga-

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Alarming Reality: Cases of Sexual Abuse and Violence . . . (continued)

nization (WHO), sexual violence is a general term used to describe 'any kind of sexual act or activity, including rape, sexual assault, sexual abuse, unwanted sexual comments or advances, by any person regardless of their relationship to the victim, in any setting, including but not limited to home and work.'

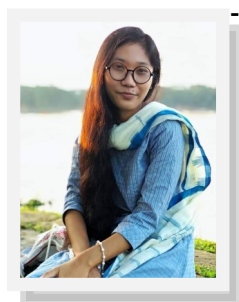
Christianity, as a patriarchal religion, does violence against women through its preponderant language for God. Today relationship between Christianity and violence is the subject of controversy because one view sees that Christianity advocates peace, love, and compassion, while it has also resorted to violence in certain instances. Peace, compassion, and forgiveness of wrongs done by others are key elements of Christian teachings.

Everyone has his or her own perspective and religious view. I think the difference in our views, in a religious way, connects with women's violence and sexual abuse. In my country, not everyone is lettered, not all people know how to read or write. The uneducated people usually depend on religious leaders or someone else when they want to know about their own religion. Not everyone explains the religious view correctly, and sometimes not everyone accepts the correct explanation. I think this is among the reasons that lead them towards violence against women. Aside from the religious view, anyone who misuses political power also tends to commit sexual abuse and violence. In most cases, the ones involved in sexual abuse are men and boys. There are many reasons for sexual abuse. Among them are misconceptions about girl's clothing, behavior as flirting, alcohol, girls walking home alone, the attitude that regard women as sex objects, toxic masculinity, having the attitude that rape is a tool of power, objectification, and the sexualization of women through religion, media, and social institutions.

In my country, in Bangladesh, violence against women and sexual abuse are increasing day by day. Bangladesh has 11,682 incidents per 100,000 people among the total population. According to the local human rights organization Ain-O-Salish Kendra (ASK), between January and September 2020, reports registered at least 975 rape cases in Bangladesh, including 208 gang rapes. Besides these cases, there are so many unreported cases of rape and other forms of violence held in secrecy. The data does not even include marital rape.

Many victims could not raise their voices for fear of reprisal, stigma, or of a society that does not care. In our Bangladeshi society, most people think that the victim is the one who provokes a man to do such things. I think the social structure of my country is the main reason for the perpetration of sexual abuse and other forms of violence against women. In my country, men dominate and women are supposed to stay at home and do the household works. Women are not free to go out to work, especially in rural areas. Women who are the victims of violence and sexual abuse usually do not get justice for themselves. Though the result is not a hundred percent, people are now raising their voices for justice for the victims of violence and sexual abuses. People are breaking the silence against violence, and this is a good sign.

Though I am a Bangladeshi, I belong to the A'chik (Garo) community. The Garos are the few remaining matrilineal communities in the world. In my community, women have the power to control our family or society. In every important decision making, we have to listen to the opinion of women. This concept, however, is changing nowadays. Both men and women are now playing an equal role in decision-making. Though we belong to a matrilineal society, women become victims of violence sometimes. Usually, in rural areas in most families, the woman is the one who earns for the family and the man is the one who takes care of children and family. In some cases, husbands without any income beat their wives for money. This happens mostly among uneducated people. Many rape cases are mostly secret of secrets. Fortunately, the victims are now breaking their silence. Women are making changes. They are raising their voice for their rights. ❧ ❧ ❧



- Pysche Mankin
Bangladesh
Thematic Workshop Alumna 2020

We Must Realize Our Mistakes



Source: Tutor2U

Time has passed by, and we all have been facing challenges from country to country, and person to person on different levels since then.

Now, we all are in a time when the entire world turns towards a different direction, demanding our attention. It has been almost a year since this COVID-19 pandemic started spreading all over the globe. It has reached into different waves while increasing its seriousness. The coronavirus has infected millions of people and brought them to death. And the toll continues to rise.

I am now living in the United Arab Emirates, a country located in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) region with only a little more than 1 million citizens and almost 8 million multi-foreign nationals. The majority of the ex-pats are there for educational and employment purposes.

Before the country discovered oil in the 1960s, the village life was simple. The country depended on a subsistence economy. People made a living relying on natural resources such as fishing, pearl diving, and agriculture. People get their milk from cows and goats. They depended on the palm trees for food such as dates, the trunks to support tents, and fronds for roofing and flooring.

Today, they do not rely on it anymore as they have created various ways of generating income for their great economy. Hospitality and tourism are among those leading industries and provide a large number of employment opportunities to many nationalities. This

situation, however, is becoming critical now as hospitality and tourism are among the worst-hit industries due to the COVID -19 and unemployment is increasing.

Many of the alien residents began returning to their home countries, but not everyone could do it due to their financial issues. Some of them are not able to afford the cost of airfare. Some countries' governments kept their citizens on the waiting list without any confirmed dates to repatriate them.

Now, the ex-pats are struggling to survive and to keep their sanity, especially in a situation of being far from their home countries and their families. There are many peace issues in this situation, not only in this country but also in the entire world.

Somewhere, something has gone wrong. Nature is now getting healthy, while we humans are in a critical time. Let us pray and work even harder to realize our mistakes and overcome them together. We need to become stronger for a peaceful and meaningful life. 🙏🙏🙏

-- Peace 🙏,
Joyson Jaffry Chelvarajah
Sri Lanka, now based in UAE
School of Peace 2018



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Reflection

What can we do to End Violence against Women?

Baidido M. Saganding
Philippines, School of Peace
2018



One Sunday afternoon, in a fast-food restaurant in Hong Kong, I met a “kababayan,” a fellow Filipina who works as a domestic helper for more than a year now. She speaks Cebuano, colloquially Bisaya, a language widely used in Visayas and Mindanao. We easily connected and shared our stories about why we are in Hong Kong. She started by sharing that she did not finish college because she married early. She left her three children in the care of her parents. Her husband, she said, is a womanizer and has three other women, with whom he also has children. While this is a common story among Filipinas working abroad, she shocked me when she said at eighteen she married to her rapist who came from a well-off family. She did not report the abuse to the police because the man’s parents asked for forgiveness on behalf of their son and married him off to her to save the family’s reputation. This happened twenty years ago. She said she never fell in love with her rapist-husband. Her two other children were also results of marital rape. As her husband continues to have affairs with other women, she never cared. She decided to leave the abusive relationship with him. The woman looked cheerful though. It could be her coping mechanism, or probably an outpouring of her newfound freedom. Legally, she did not secure an annulment of her marriage, or a court order for a legal separation. In the Philippines, the processes to secure those legalities are so expensive.

The UN Women reported that 243 million women and girls globally experience abuse by their intimate partners in the past seven years. The World Health Organization (WHO), in 2015, estimated that about 1 in 3 (35%) women worldwide have experienced either physical or sexual violence inflicted by their intimate partners or non-partner in their lifetime. Almost one-third

(30%) of women worldwide who have been in a relationship report that they have experienced some form of physical and sexual violence by their intimate partner. Out of this number of women, less than 40 percent report their experience of violence or seek help. In its 2012 study, the WHO confirmed that most abused women are not passive victims, but rather adopt active strategies for their safety and their children. Some women resist, others flee, while others choose to stay to keep the marriage. Women often have limited options in response to abuse. Among the factors that keep women in abusive relationships include fear, shame, lack of alternative means of economic support, concern for the children, emotional dependence, lack of support from family and friends, and the cultural context. Some also hope that the man will change. In Asia-Pacific Region, although 31 of 39 countries have laws against gender-based violence, the problem of violence against women continues to rise.

What is violence against women?

Violence against women is a grave human rights violation. The United Nations defines violence against women as “any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or private life.” The psychological, sexual, and health consequences of violence have long-term effects on women. Often, the stigma remains and the opportunities available to them are very limited. Worse, people blame the victims for what and why the abuse happens.

What can we do to help end the violence against women?

On November 25, 2020, the world commemorates the International Day for the Elimination of Violence against Women. It also marked the launch of the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence campaign (November 25-December 10). It aimed to raise awareness of the fact that women around the world are subject to rape, domestic violence, and other forms of violence. The UN Women collaborates with the government, different UN agencies, civil society organizations, and other institutions to raise awareness and help find ways to prevent violence against women to happen.

What can we do to End Violence against Women? (continued)

The UNiTE campaign that began in 2014 called upon the member-countries to use the color orange in the advocacy to raise awareness on violence against women and girls. UNiTE thought of the color orange as a symbol of a “brighter future and a world free from violence against women and girls.” (www.unwomen.org) We should #orangeourworld not only for 16 days but also every day. We have a big role to help end the violence against women. We should push

leaders to have the political will in implementing laws that promote gender equity and support women’s initiatives. We must listen and believe when someone shares her story of violence. We should provide a safe space for them. Ultimately, we should respect every woman and treat her with dignity! 🙏🙏🙏

On Colors and Activism to End Gender-Based Violence

Dear ICF family and friends,
Please submit your articles—news, reflections, and art works if you have any, Send your photo, and a 2-sentence blurb along with photos related to your articles.
Thanks and looking forward to receiving your articles.

Keep well and stay safe!
ICF Staff

Through time, women who had fought for equal rights, status, and power economically and politically used different colors to symbolize their advocacy and cause. In 1867, the suffragists in Kansas, U.S.A. fought for their right to vote and took the golden yellow color of the sunflower as their symbol. The author of *The Woman’s Bible* (1895), Elizabeth Cady Stanton used “Sunflower” as her pen name in her column for the newspaper, *The Revolution*. Golden yellow was, for the suffragist, the color of life and light.

In 1908, the English suffragists led by Emmeline Pankhurst and daughters Christabel and Sylvia used three colors in the emblem of their Women’s Social and Political Union: green for hope, white for purity, and purple for royalty, and instinct for freedom and dignity. In 1913, the suffragettes of the National Woman’s Party in the United States, used purple for their emblem to signify loyalty, the constancy of purpose, and unswerving steadfastness to a cause. Four years later, in 1919, the same party flaunted its giant purple flag. Then in 1920, the pro-suffrage women in Texas used the symbol of the yellow rose immortalized in the earliest



version of the folk song “The Yellow Rose of Texas” from Christy’s Plantation Melodies.

Purple. In ancient Rome, the color purple stood for royalty, status, and power. Julius Cesar, for example, used a purple cape. To dye that cape, one must extract the mucus of 12,000 sea snails called *Murex brandaris* (*Bolinus brandaris*) to produce 1.4 grams of purple dye.

In ancient times, purple also symbolized justice.

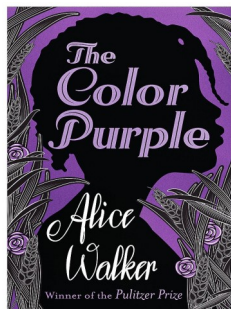


The Suffragette Flag
Source:
www.google.com

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On Colors and Activism to End Gender-Based Violence (continued)



The women have claimed the color purple for their cause. The March 8 International Women's Day traces its first humongous gathering in 1911 and its symbolic color until today is purple. Alice Walker popularized, even more, the color through her novel *The Color Purple* that graphically shows the effect of patriarchy over women.

The World Council of Churches began its advocacy in the 1980s to call upon people to wear black to support the advocacy "Towards a world without rape and violence" by using the color black and purple with the hashtag #ThursdaysinBlack. Then in 2014, the UNiTE campaign chose the color orange as a symbol of a "brighter future and a world free from violence against women and girls," using the hashtag #orangeourworld.

Surely women recognize that colors have no gender and political biases. Thus, a women's group can choose and define the color they like in line with their respective advocacies.



U.S. wartime use of defoliant in Vietnam

U.S. helicopter spraying defoliant in dense jungle during the Vietnam War, 1969.

Brian K. Grigsby, Department of Defense/The National Archives

To someone who comes from Asia like me, it is unfortunate that one color evokes a strong negative memory. It is not that I do not like the color orange – of fruits and flowers. I love salmon and I like its color! But the memory of my father's stories about Vietnam war, napalm bombs and "Agent Orange" stuck into my mind. Later, memories of Vietnam movies showing the US army spraying the cancer-causing herbicide "Agent Orange" over the forests of Vietnam lingers. Agent Orange. I have not seen it personally, but my imagination would not let go of the memory of the color. Agent Orange, the most lethal dioxin and a carcinogen, did not only defoliate the forests and poison the Viet Congs, but also poisoned the people of Vietnam - women, children, and men - combatants and non-combatants alike. It also affected the birds, fishes, and animals, and even the US soldiers. Many of them got sick until now. Thus, I do not want to erase the "dangerous memory" of that kind of "orange" - the Agent Orange - so that it will, like the cross where Jesus of Nazareth was killed, challenge people and nations to detest war and violence, and move them to say, "Never again!" 🙏🙏🙏



-Muriel Orevillo-Montenegro

INTERFAITH COOPERATION FORUM

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The Interfaith Cooperation Forum is a program of Asia and Pacific Alliance of YMCAs. It values the significance of interreligious understanding and unity. Thus, it offers opportunities for study and appreciation of the different perspective of religions on peace, and discern the role of religion in peacebuilding. Yet, considering that unpeace is brought about by many factors, including the onslaught of neoliberal economic globalization, more people experience poverty, internally displaced people are increasing as communities are destroyed, native wisdom and values are overrun by Western and consumerist outlooks, patriarchy and racism persists, and climate change is now felt as the destruction of the Planet Earth seems unabated.

Peace is celebrated as a gift from the Divine, yet, we, the earthlings have the responsibility to make peace a reality. Although its contribution may just be like a drop of water into the lake, ICF seeks to equip young people of different religious traditions, especially from the marginalized communities of Asia and Pacific, to make waves of peacebuilding actions.



From the Editor's Desk:

The Call to be an Advent People in this Troubled World

In 2020, the Christian's Advent Season begins on November 29. The Advent's liturgical color is purple. The color purple is a symbol of the pain and suffering of Jesus. Though mockingly called the "King of the Jews," the Roman Empire's soldiers along with its local puppets represented by Pontius Pilate, tortured and killed through crucifixion. The season of Advent, traditionally, is a season that calls for repentance and penitence. It is a season when Christians are supposed to remember the birth of one who suffered as a result of his solidarity with the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

December 25 of the Gregorian calendar is only an estimated date of the birth of Jesus. No one knew about the actual date of Jesus' birth. The early Christians did not celebrate Christmas. It was only in 336 C.E. that the Roman Empire, that Constantine set Christmas day on December 25. He adopted Christianity as the official religion to consolidate his power over the Empire's extended territories. Secondly, it also Christianized the Roman celebration of the "rebirth of the Unconquered Sun (Sol Invictus)." It coincided with the Roman festival, Saturnalia that marked the return of the longer days after the winter solstice. During this time, the people celebrate with feasts and exchanging of gifts.

to the message of John the Baptizer in Mark 1:3, where he cried out in the wilderness saying, "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." He said this at a time when the Temple was destroyed because of the Jewish wars and the Roman Empire put the yoke of heavy taxes upon the people of Palestine. Some even organized groups of resistance for liberation from Roman domination. Isaiah prophesied in his time that a child will be born and he shall be named Immanuel, meaning "God is with us." (Isa. 7:14) The prophecy came in the context of political upheaval when Ephraim (Israel) wanted to forge a coalition with Syria to attack Judah. But Judah also allied with Assyria. After its victory, Judah became a vassal of Assyria.

In the contexts of socio-political upheaval in Asia and around the world, that is complicated by the presence of the COVID-19 pandemic, Advent season calls upon the Christians for penitence, and repentance for what-ever complicity we have done and contributed to the suffering of the people and the Earth. May we be an Advent people. Prepare ye the way! Let the Prince of Peace reign. ❧ ❧ ❧

The Advent season's underpinnings go back

Please send us news about your Forums, Alumni programs, ICF Partner events or activities related to peacebuilding to:

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