

IAWN news



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Message from IAWN South Asia Consultation to Church Leaders

"It is clear to us that the Church has a sacred duty to challenge cultural attitudes and traditions that value girls less than boys and marginalise the voices and contributions of women, and to model positive and just relationships between women and men.

We give thanks to God for progress that has already been made in our Churches but recognise that our programmes for women and girls and policies such as quota systems for the inclusion of women in church bodies, need to be matched by a Gospel-centred openness to serving together as women and men, equally created in the Divine image.

We respectfully ask our Church leaders to stand in solidarity with us, and work with us...

From the 'Message to our Church Leaders'. Read in full at <http://bit.ly/1Yy6oMl>.

In October, IAWN held a consultation in Hyderabad, India, for the Network's Provincial Links in the Anglican and United Churches in Sri Lanka, North India, South India and Bangladesh, and a number of other women in the region with ministries among women and girls. Sadly, the links from Pakistan and Myanmar were unable to secure visas and could not take part.

A report, presentations and other resources from the consultation are on-line at <http://bit.ly/1Lki8sl>.

The Revd Ramani Dyvasirvadham, President of the Church of South India Women's Fellowship, welcomed the participants to South India:

"This conference invites us to think, analyse and then strategize. It provides us safe space to talk openly and share our pain, joy and hope. Thank you IAWN!"

The consultation was facilitated by Manisha Majumdar of the Change Alliance in India. She said:

"Thank you for inviting me to facilitate! I found the consultation unique and energising because of the women's diverse and passionate commitment, for example, in building women's leadership in communities in Bangladesh, in the stark realities of undying peace-building efforts by women in Sri Lanka, in institutionalising good practices in responding to cases of violence against women in India, and in stories of change through working with men and boys. All speak volumes.

But, it disheartened me to hear that such strong women leaders, otherwise revered by communities and government institutions, do not share equal power within church leadership. Dialogue and a sincere attempt by church leadership is desirable to yield greater awareness and fulfilment."

IAWN Convener Ann Skamp reflected that this was an important consultation, celebrating the resilience of women

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in South Asia, and enabling mutual encouragement and a commitment to each other. "Women in the South Asia Churches have many challenges in common, but they also have specific challenges, for example, in India the dowry system and caste identities, and in Sri Lanka the support urgently needed for war widows and survivors of sexual and gender-based violence.

"The Hyderabad setting reminded us that in countries where Christianity is a minority faith, it is vital to be able to live day by day in multi faith respectfulness and cooperation. It was encouraging to hear participants' stories of inter faith cooperation and sharing."

Midwives of Gender Justice

Each day of the consultation, Moumita Biswas of the Church of North India and Executive Secretary of the All India Council of Christian Women led a Bible study. She writes:

South Asian church women face many challenges, resiliently weaving their faith in a God of love and justice. Too often, patriarchal biblical interpretation is used to subjugate women and sanction violence. This is detrimental to women as three out of four South Asian women face abuse – physical, emotional or psychological.



Many biblical passages reflect how our God of love shares the pain of the marginalised and strengthens the vulnerable. Interpreting the Bible from a liberation and gender justice perspective, and applying South Asian hermeneutics, we used contextual Bible Studies to display how we may learn about women's current problems. Mark 5.25–34, about the woman who touched Jesus' cloak for healing, promotes women's reproductive and sexual health.

Just as in South Asia now, this issue was neglected in Jesus' time, because of the polluting taboo attached to women's monthly cycle.

Our Bible study highlighted the power of women even in their brokenness to seek healing. It also highlighted the important role the haemorrhaging woman played, prompting Jesus to break the taboo, and promote women's sexual health rights. This provided a place where we could give vent to experiences of violence, and also share stories of hope and resilience.

Building women's leadership

Neerja Prasad, President of the Women's Fellowship for Christian Service in the Church of North India, reflects on building women's leadership:

The truth is that in modern India, the woman has always been a second grade citizen, no matter what has been said. Rigid customs and traditions make for our gender stratified society.

Only in India do glaring and brutal gang rapes occur frequently, even while we have a woman Chief Minister. India is known as the fourth most dangerous country in the world for women. Violence against women has astonishingly grim brands – acid throwing, domestic violence stemming out of dowry, rape, harassment and many others. In a democracy like ours, equal development and welfare are key: there is no place for inequality, deprivation and violence.

Society shapes and decides its leadership. Two particular things are essential for women's leadership to thrive: community building and leadership building. Community building and social Integration are the two sides of the same coin. A community which is strong by virtue of its integrated nature develops and provides leadership opportunities for everyone. Six words shape women's flourishing leadership:

RTCFTC: Respect; Trust; Collectivity; Freedom; Tolerance; Concern.

For women to gain greater control over their lives, education and training are critical. They need vocational training and knowledge of economic literacy and human rights; training in non traditional fields of employment; advocacy; networking. We need a public awareness programme supporting women's rights.

Education and Safety for Girls

Janet Sarker, Church of Bangladesh Education Secretary, describes how her Church is providing education and security for girls:

Bangladesh has one of the world's highest primary age population, but they face many particular challenges in girls' education provision. The dowry system and early marriage (over 30 per cent marry before age 18) perpetuate the cycle of poverty. Lack of sanitation facilities, 'eve teasing', sexual



harassment and acid attacks lead to girls dropping out of school; sometimes to suicide.

The Church of Bangladesh education department meets these challenges at several levels. They emphasise the importance of girls' birth registration. They train teachers and have established boarding hostels and two nurse training institutions. They voice the girls' rights, raising awareness on human trafficking, dowry, reproductive health. At a practical level, they provide materials, separate sanitary latrines, and safe spaces for learning. They target the marginalized and slum dweller community with their programme on access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Currently they provide security to about 7500 girls.

Sri Lanka and the 16 Days

Jeanne Samuel and Deekshya Illangasinghe hope to see their Church's engagement with the 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence turn into a sustained movement for the promotion of women's human rights:

The Dioceses of Colombo and Kurunegala in the Church of Ceylon have come together to create a movement around the 16 Days of Activism and raise awareness of gender-based violence in Sri Lanka. Several parishes, with the Mothers' Union, Board of Women's Work and others, will dedicate at least one Sunday service to celebrate women and discuss gender-based violence within church and society.

Bishop Dhiloraj Canagasabey will issue a press release in three languages about the 16 days of Activism and gender justice in Sri Lanka, especially highlighting the devastating issues women faced both during three decades of war, and now post war. The Bishop will address the post war issue of female headed households and the Church's responsibility

towards women, as well as healing and reconciliation within the country.

An ecumenical service on 10 December at Karuna Nilayam known as "An Oasis of Mercy" in Kilinochchi, northern Sri Lanka, will highlight the issues faced by women especially in the North and East of the country and give an opportunity for prayer, preaching and intercession. After the 16 days, Karuna Nilayam will aim to use its teaching facilities to enable children of war to catch up on their education - currently a great necessity.



To sustain the campaign and increase awareness, solidarity and network-building, the Board of Women's Work will plan several national events around International Women's Day to recognise women's achievements and to sustain their continuing struggles within church and society.

Church activities for the 16 Days will be managed by a small informal group of female activists committed to the promotion of women's human rights. These initiatives will plant seeds that will grow beyond the 16 Days, creating not just groups of women, but a movement that we hope will be sustained.

Looking beyond Virtue, Vulnerability and Violence



Dr Susan Thomas, President of the Women's Fellowship of Madhya Kerala Diocese in the Church of South India, reflects on the IAWN consultation for South Asia and identifies some ways forward:

The meeting was a refreshing, renewing and reaffirming time for me and my ministry, and it has definitely opened up new horizons. It was really encouraging to understand that there are lots of people around me committed to the same cause and implementing creative and innovative approaches to achieve the goal. I was moved by the determination and mass participation of the Anglican women and men working for gender justice. In fact the 16 Days of Activism against violence against women and girls has challenged me to involve and support the movement wholeheartedly.

Violence against women is an issue which is constantly growing in our age. Women and women's body is owned

and this is not just a public issue but also private. Women are seen as a commodity to be used for sex or domestic work just like a pen for writing or an apple is for consuming. This attitude and mindset is seen across people regardless of their profession, wealth or degrees they hold. The statement by Jeanne Samuel from Sri Lanka "*rape is seen as an unavoidable thing*" clearly proves the above. The society and family take it for granted when violence against women is reported. Women also find it difficult to react because many a times the violation is done by their own loved ones. Women are

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vulnerable and helpless when they have to fight against their own father, brothers and husband—the very people from whom they expect love, care and protection. I think the veiling and silencing of women is the sole reason for the increase of violence against women.

In India virginity of girls is demanded, and given utter importance by the society. So by default a rape victim is considered as no longer valuable and shameful eternally, while for the rapist no such stamping is done - which is totally unfair. This attitude is yet another one which encourages violence against women. The way forward for our society is to see the women as survivors by looking beyond the virtue dimension. In this context the 16 Days of Activism is really a means of conscientization. I am planning to present it in the next Women's Fellowship Council so that we as a group can meaningfully participate in it.

Our session on "Share one thing you have done that has changed others" helped me to evaluate my ministry and I was really content to realise that I was a channel to transform some policies in our Diocese. I have started a systematic theological learning centre for women (*Divyabodhini*) in my diocese which has lasted for one year. We have the unmarried "women worker" (bible women), but it is almost on the verge of shutting down due to the unavailability of unmarried and dedicated women. Upon our request the diocesan administration has decided to appoint six women as 'women evangelists', who have completed the course *Divyabodhini*. This has given a new space for women to do ministry in the church.

The meeting, the fellowship and deliberations have given me an opportunity to think back and forth, and have strengthened and confirmed my commitment and ministry. Thank you once again, IAWN, for organising such a wonderful meeting.



The theme for this year's 16 Days of Activism against Gender-based Violence 25 November–10 December is 'From Peace in the Home to Peace in the World: Make Education Safe for All!'

More and more Anglican churches and dioceses around the Communion are using the international 16 Days to break the silence, challenge attitudes, and engage women and men in taking action to prevent and end gender based violence.

IAWN has collected lots of 16 Days resources here: <http://bit.ly/1TkysPI>.

The Anglican Communion's Women's Desk has been working with ecumenical and inter faith partners on a joint 16 Days initiative gathering multi-media resources, a daily calendar, and highlighting education and safety for girls. See 'Girls with Power and Dignity' at <http://bit.ly/1N3vZp9>.

Let us know what you or your Church has been doing for the 16 Days.

Anglicans are also getting involved in Side by Side, a new faith movement that wants to see everyone, women

and men, girls and boys, living out their innate, God-given dignity. Gender justice cannot be achieved by individual efforts alone, so it is essential to build a collective movement of faith leaders, faith-based organisations and individuals who will work together.

Part of the Side by Side strategy is to support and equip faith leaders to recognise and use their position of power and responsibility to promote gender equality. Over the next two to three years local planning groups will be organising regional workshops for faith leaders - female, male, lay and ordained. Two of these workshops have already taken place - in Sao Paulo for Latin America and Caribbean region, and in Nairobi for East Africa.



The regional workshops aim to review what faith institutions in the region are already doing for gender justice, understand the barriers that need to be overcome, and to coordinate action for building up the movement nationally.

When the new Side by Side web site goes live mid-December you will be able to find out more about this exciting movement and download resources for local adaptation.

Everyone can get involved. If you have stories or resources that would help others to transform harmful social norms, religious or cultural practices, and challenge structures and systems that prevent women and girls from participating fully in their communities, then please do let us know! Email Terrie Robinson at terrie.robinson@anglicancommunion.org

IAWN Steering Group Election

A note from IAWN news editor, Elaine Cameron:

IAWN's Provincial Links will soon be electing eight dedicated women to serve as members of the 2016–2019 IAWN Steering Group. Candidates will be elected via a process using email communication and will be representative of the geographical regions of the Anglican Communion.

As a first step, IAWN convener Ann Skamp will be writing to all Network members to ask for your nominations. Candidates will be women who are passionate about the flourishing of women in our Churches and in society and have time and energy to dedicate to the work.

Abundant blessings, Elaine
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