

Stockholm Congress Panel Report: Human values

The panel on Human values heard contributions from the Chair, Dr William Vendley, Secretary General, WCRP and Vice-Chair Rev. Robert Smylie, WCRP; Deepali Bhanot, WCRP India; Ven Mettanando Bhikku, WCRP Thailand; John Onaiyekan WCRP Nigeria; Saba Risaluddin, WCRP UK; Morton Narrow, WCRP Sweden; Cherry Kingsley, Advisor (Canada); Karl E Knutson, Stockholm University (Sweden).

Introduction

The panel aimed to examine the role of values in combating CSEC.

The character and role of values

Values were recognized as being intensely personal, expressed in each person's decisions and choices. Values are also social insofar as they are held in common by a group of people. Further, particular values are embodied in the concrete orientations of our social, economic, legal and cultural institutions. Thus even seemingly value-neutral acts, when examined closely, can be recognized to be 'nested' within systems that are value-laden in relationship to the child.

The pluralism of people and communities was acknowledged: we are from different places, represent diverse cultures and societies, and are rooted in different patterns of belief. How then can we cooperate with one another?

In response to this question and as background for the panel discussion, a brief recounting of the emerging consensus on understanding the child as an intrinsic good and ultimate human value as set forth in the preparatory paper was made. In that paper, three diverse arenas of human experience – (a) international law; (b) religious traditions; (c) utilitarian notions of society – were examined in relationship to an understanding of the 'value of the child'. The emergence of broad consensus regarding the child as an intrinsic good and an ultimate human value was noted.

This consensus provided a shared starting point for a cooperative assessment of the complex social, legal, economic and cultural patterns relevant to CSEC. At the heart of the consensus on the child is an imperative that the best interest of the child should be a primary concern in all actions concerning the child.

Two spheres of action for particular communities of value

It was recognized that distinct communities of value, religious and otherwise, need to reexamine their traditions to search out their respective understandings of the ultimate value of the child; and each community of value must struggle to operationalize its core teachings on the ultimate value of the child in two distinct spheres.

First, each community of value needs to work among its own members to harmonize that community's teachings and practices with their deepest core values regarding the child.

Second, each community is also challenged to join the public discourse regarding the ultimate value of the child and public efforts to protect children.

The Convention of the Rights of the Child was recognized as expressing in public, non-sectarian terms an understanding of the child as an ultimate value. The value of the CRC as a common starting point for action was noted.

Process of the panel

To build an effective alliance of communities united against commercial sexual exploitation, it was noted that distinct communities of value need to further inform one another about the

common struggle to combat CSEC. The panel was designed to involve the reflections of an anthropologist, representatives of five major world religions as examples of communities of value, and a consultant on relevant children's issues.

Statements by panelists

Karl Eric Knutson, Professor of Anthropology, Stockholm University

The child, the conditions of his/her existence, and society's treatment of the child depend on what the child means to us. When children are regarded as refuse, they are abused. Such is the state of our world today. Development and globalization, while offering some positive results, have also resulted in a moral and spiritual vacuum. This void is filled by the religion of consumerism. Behind these distressing symptoms is a 'modern' notion of culture which is mechanized and market-oriented. Social fragmentation, aggravated by many forms of poverty – financial, social and cultural – has resulted. Perhaps most debilitating is the poverty of self-confidence which devastates many young people, making them vulnerable to exploitation.

Mr Knutson posed the question: how then can we enlist human values in the fight against the abuse of children? Some measures seem obvious: educate, strengthen legal sanctions, reinforce family and community relationships, make development more inclusive. In the end, however, more fundamental changes to our way of life are needed. The culture of self-gratification and market competition must be changed. The challenge is to help each other create a morally acceptable balance between what we believe is right and authentic and caring expressions of human pleasure, and to take steps to promote development based on positive values and human rights.

Deepali Bhanot, Reader in Sanskrit, University of Delhi, India. Ms Bhanot is Hindu

Child sexual exploitation has increased in India, particularly in the past 4-5 years. There are an estimated 300,000 child sex workers in India, a number that is increasing by 8-10 per cent each year. Although prostitution has been accepted from ancient times and flourished in India, there is no reference to the involvement of children in prostitution in ancient Indian literature. Recently concern has been heightened because of the involvement of children, many of whom are exploited by western tourists, businessmen and paedophiles. There are also, however, middle class youth who are choosing to prostitute themselves for money to buy material goods.

In the Hindu tradition, the child is the sacred gift of God and is greatly valued. But Indian culture today is marked by a degradation of morals. The human body is commodified.

Growing consumerism and the media exacerbate the problem. Declining moral values can be attributed to such problems as the breakdown of the family and marriage, and disregard for positive traditional values. Along with social, educational and legal measures to combat CSEC, positive traditions must be revived.

Mettanando Bhikku, Buddhist scholar from Thailand

Certain types of Buddhist practice share a responsibility for CSEC in Thailand on several levels. In local villages in Thailand, monks have sometimes benefited from the money returned to the community by children who have been forced into prostitution. Buddhism has at times also been taught in such a way as to keep people from understanding the social problems of the world; it has, in effect, separated them from the social reality and desensitized them to the problems of today. There is, however, an alternate and more authentic version of Buddhism that has taught engagement in social problems. This interpretation has perceived the suffering of one as the

suffering of all. This 'Buddhism for development' views Nirvana as a goal to be worked for here and now. The challenge then is to engage this original form.

Morton Narowe, Chief Rabbi of Stockholm

Virtually every contemporary religious tradition has its expression in three ideal types: fundamentalism, modernism and conservatism. The fundamentalist approach in rejecting contemporary directions or values seeks to change the present to conform to the past. The modernist will seek to interpret core values from the past to inform and shape the present, taking into consideration changes that have occurred through time and the dynamics of the current situation aimed at creating new traditions for the future. The conservative will seek to preserve the status quo, often sacralizing (?) unjust practices and strengthening skewed power relations. The outlived past then becomes an oppressive present. The current challenge is to face the true dimensions of the problem and to respond with the deepest values of our traditions. This will take creativity even as we are faithful to what is most profound in our heritages.

John Onaiyekan, Catholic Archbishop of Abuja, Nigeria

Wide consensus exists on the absolute value of the child as a human person. The task, then, is to bridge the gap between the ideals we profess and the realities that confront us. Laws, while helpful in combating problems such as CSEC, are limited in effect and no substitute for 'conviction of mind' and 'determination of will to behave well and freely' – an ideal held by many religions.

Christianity in general and the Catholic faith in particular hold that the child is sacred, created in the image of God and endowed with rights. The child is specially loved by God and the model for all. While these values represent the ideal, Christians, like others, have failed to uphold them, or in Christian language, have fallen. Christians, however, believe in redemption through Christ – grace for those who believe – and forgiveness.

Religious traditions do more than promote values. Religions also have extended communal resources that must be mobilized to bridge the gap between the real and the ideal. The challenge of the Congress is to charge societies with honestly renewing the principles and assumptions that allow and even promote CSEC. Archbishop Onaiyekan posed several questions: is this new world order better? Must the children of the poor die to repay debts to the already rich? The opportunity is before us to reaffirm our convictions and join to promote an even better quality of moral and social life for all.

Saba Risaluddin, Founder-trustee of the Calamus Foundation. Ms Risaluddin is Muslim

The Qur'an, the Muslim holy scriptures, affirms the intrinsic spiritual equality of every human being and makes it clear that the purpose of life on Earth is to strive for a just social order. In Muslim societies, children are regarded as a blessing of God. Therefore acts that deny the ultimate value of the child and undermine a just social order defy the divine will to which Muslims are called to submit. Why then do children in Muslim societies continue to suffer all kinds of abuse? In all faiths, people fall short of their values. Even worse, these values are sometimes perverted in the name of religion. Is religion then deficient, or are its followers deficient? Religion at its best allows us to reconnect with the transcendent, to underpin values, to contribute to the 'God-shaped whole' of the person and to overcome social ills such as CSEC.

Cherry Kingsley, Advisor to the Canadian Government on issues related to children and youth

Children who are exploited sexually are often viewed solely as victims. While some are powerless, many come from complex and painful situations. For those who grow up abused and uncared for, prostitution can empower the child in a paradoxical way, allowing at least a minimum of control in their lives.

Children and youth have an important role to play in defining their own futures and strategies for change. Ms Kingsley posed a series of questions regarding children involved in prostitution: how do we 'save' these children and what do we mean by 'save'? Do we really value *all* children? Do we want to protect *all* children? How do children define their own healing? How do children participate in the formation of values in society? How do children choose their own values? Can we reintegrate children when they have never been integrated or part of the mainstream?

When working with children, we must listen to children's voices and stories no matter how painful. In our attempts to heal children, it may be children who heal us.

Major points of discussion

There were six major areas of discussion:

The complicity of religious communities

A distinction was made between ideals espoused and performance. It was acknowledged that religious communities at times fall short of their deepest values and that they must constantly struggle to renew themselves in light of both their founding values and contemporary problems.

Bridging the gap between the ideal and the real

A major discussion took place on the need to operationalize value ideals. It was recognized that the 'comparative advantage' of communities of value in addressing CSEC needs to be identified and operationalized.

The need to represent other communities of value

Several participants expressed the desire that representatives of other than religious communities be formally included in future deliberations.

Economic and political factors

Participants underlined the enormous impact of economic and political factors. The importance of understanding the value orientations of these powerful forces and their impact on commercial sexual exploitation today was noted.

The media

The mixed role of the media in relationship to values was noted. The media must be better utilized to combat anti-values in relationship to the child and to promote the ultimate value of the child.

The balance of power between men and women

The impact of the suppression of women on CSEC was noted.

Conclusion

Just as we speak in different languages and from different perspectives, so also we hear through the sounding boards of our different experiences. To summarize all that was heard is therefore impossible. Several points were clear, and several questions were left to challenge.

The panel operated with a consensus regarding the ultimate value of the child. The cultural, social, economic and political forces impacting on today's world need to be examined in light of this consensus on the value of the child.

The challenge is to clearly identify the gulf between the ideal and the real. How can we understand this gulf in terms of its causes? How can we work to mobilize communities of value to work, each in their own way and together, to eliminate it?