

WSCF women put violence under scrutiny

WSCF women from around the globe met in Manila this July to scrutinise gender injustice and violence against women.

Twenty-three women from 18 countries met for the eight day WSCF Inter-Regional Women's Programme. Hosted by the WSCF Asia-Pacific region, the conference addressed the theme, "Violence Against Women: Challenging Gender Roles and Power Relations between Women and Men"

The programme focused on theology and feminist analysis and included visits to local NGOs working with women and women's rights.

The week started out with a trust-building exercise, with each young woman sharing her own story and background influences on gender expectations and relations.

Some of the participants shared examples of deeply-rooted misogyny from within their own traditions. Ms Marlar Win (Myanmar) translated two sexist proverbs from her country and presented them to the group, "Husband is God and son is Lord" said one, and "Show no mercy to woman and cow" advised the other.

Listening as Marlar spoke, Ms Katie Weir (Australia) felt glad that sayings like those would no longer be publicly acceptable in her country. Yet at the same time, she found that women everywhere have to live up to many of the same limited roles and social expectations, "Listening to and travelling with the women at the conference confirmed for me that women the world over face very similar problems, largely due to the same fundamental attitudes that are common across cultures and societies"

Leading the first session on feminist analysis were Dr Cecilia Ng and Ms Judith Koh from Malaysia. The two started out by naming the unequal power relations between women and men in households, communities, societies, states and the global market. They went on to explain how other forms of discrimination, such as class, ethnicity and sexual orientation complicate gender inequalities.



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▲ WSCF Inter-Regional Women's Programme participants discuss gender justice. Pictured clockwise from left are: Hanna Tervantokko (Finland), Sandra Aholou (Togo), Carla Khijo (Lebanon), Tamara Bernard (Sri Lanka) and Necta Montes (Philippines).

Dr Ng and Ms Koh then put forward a number of feminist theories and used them to put the group's own examples into context.

To finish, they raised the issue of men's involvement in ending violence and explained how patriarchal society punishes those who act outside its norms.

Ms Bohdana Yuriy (Ukraine) says the feminist critique challenged her and some of her own assumptions,

"I was surprised by the question: Is it possible to be Christian and feminist at the same time? I had never thought about things from such a perspective. I studied Catholic theology for five years and never made a parallel between women's position in the world and church teaching. Of course, the church doesn't allow violence against women, but by prohibiting us from speaking in church it puts us into an inferior position and shows that we're different, less valued"

In the next study session, Benedictine nun

Mother Mary John Mananzan (Philippines) set forth the theological grounds for gender justice and gave an overview of how the church has responded to women's call for equality.

Mother Mary John looked at the varied response to feminism made by Christian women and named her own Christianity and feminist ideals as inseparable,

"I am feminist because I am Christian - because I believe all men and women are equal in the sight of God"

She also highlighted the need for feminist theology and women's spirituality to be emphasised in church teachings.

A key part of the programme led the participants out into the world of women's NGOs around Manila. WSCF's Europe Regional Secretary, Hanna Tervantokko (Finland) was moved by her visit to a women's NGO that works in the Manila slums,

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"Coming from Europe I think the whole visit was an exposure to a different reality for me. The extreme poverty, homelessness and urban poor areas were something I had never seen in my life. What also left marks on me was to realise how committed people are to various social movements and despite the lack of justice, they are still so hopeful and generous"

The participants also visited NGOs working with women survivors of domestic violence (GABRIELA) and with women who had been forced to act as sex slaves for the Japanese military during World War II (Lila Filipina House). The visit to Lila Filipina was another eye-opener for Hanna,

"This whole issue was new to me as we study very little Asian history at school in Europe. I had no idea about the topic of sex slavery during the Second World War. The stories these brave and fantastic old ladies told us were very moving and made me feel very angry. Knowing that sex and especially rape is still used as a weapon in wars proves how little humankind has learned"

The group went on to learn how thousands of women are exploited each year by the sex-trafficking trade. They considered the most extreme forms of anti-female brutality from around the world, including female infanticide, genital mutilation and socially-condoned rape and wife beating.

In the face of these atrocities, Bohdana reflected on the responsibility she feels to change the world of the future, "I believe that it is a basic human right to live without fear of physical, emotional or sexual abuse. It is a basic human right to live without the destructive forces of sexism, racism and poverty in all societies. Therefore, we should all be committed to working towards creating a society that respects and upholds these rights"

"In order to ensure that the world of tomorrow prospers without such evils as violence against women, we must stand strong and united. Not as men or women, but as humans"

The programme was attended by SCM women and WSCF staff from Argentina, Australia, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Egypt, Finland, India, Korea, Lebanon, Myanmar, the Philippines, Samoa, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Togo and the Ukraine.

A book of papers and presentations from the 2005 Inter-Regional Women's Programme will be published as part of the WSCF global book series.

WSCF appoints global Women's Co-ordinator

WSCF has appointed an Inter-Regional Women's Co-ordinator to strengthen its global work on gender justice.

Ms Sunita Suna (30) comes from SCM India to take up the role of supporting women and gender justice throughout the worldwide federation. WSCF Vice-Chair Dr Eilidh Whiteford welcomes Sunita's appointment:

"We are delighted that Sunita will be joining WSCF at a time when we are seeking to reinvigorate our commitment to promoting women's equality. Having been women's co-ordinator of SCM India for over three years, Sunita has developed excellent skills and experience to share with others in her new global role"

Sunita's Indian and Asia-Pacific experience has equipped her with a strong background in education, development and gender analysis. In addition to her work for SCM India, Sunita has attended training in gender issues with WSCF Asia-Pacific, the Christian Conference of Asia, the United Theological College (Bangalore) and with human rights organisations in South India.

In her new role Sunita will be responsible for inter-regional programmes on enabling women's leadership and strengthening equal partnership between women and men. Sunita is excited by the prospect of working at the global level:

"Working in a global scenario and networking with culturally and ethnically diverse groups in the various regions of the federation is going to be a very big challenge. I look forward to meeting young Christian women from across the globe to hear their problems and challenges and to strategise together"

Sunita looks forward to working for WSCF where she finds the gender work is holistic and forward-looking:



"I appreciate the holistic approach of the federation that sees a future for women and men in partnership. Partnership is a positive way forward to the inclusive, gender-bias free community"

As Inter-Regional Women's Co-ordinator Sunita will encourage and monitor the WSCF regions and the national SCMs on gender issues. For Sunita, the grassroots is where the change in gender attitudes really needs to happen:

"SCMs need to go that extra mile to make the gender-inclusive future a possibility. As it is said, 'Whatever does not happen locally, does not happen at all'"

Sunita will be working with WSCF regions that have shown a strong commitment to gender justice in their programmes over the last four years. Four of the six regions have run training programmes on women or gender analysis of late, including: Women Doing Theology (Asia-Pacific), Gender and sexuality (Europe) and Women's Leadership Training (Middle East).

Another region with a strong current focus on empowering women is WSCF Africa, with their 'Strengthening Female Students Commission'. Over the last three years, WSCF Africa has worked on gender mainstreaming and empowering young women in public life and decision making.

Fittingly, the WSCF Africa region will host the Inter-Regional Women's Co-ordinator in their Nairobi office. WSCF Africa Regional Secretary Ms Georgine Kengne Djéutane believes Sunita's presence will be enriching for the region,

"It will be exciting and challenging to host the first inter-regional staff member to have operated from a regional office. Sunita's being here will bring a new dynamic to strengthen our global sense of mission and the spirit of being one in the worldwide federation"

Sunita Suna takes up the position of WSCF Inter-Regional Women's Co-ordinator for an initial year long contract from November 2005.



▲ Pictured at the WSCF Inter-Regional Women's Programme in Manila are: (back from left) Katie Weir, Jacky Smith Pérez, Taumuafa Toma, Eilidh Whiteford, Dolagy Adly, Bohdana Yuriy (behind), Sunita Suna, Nadia Eriksen (behind), Sandra Aholou, Maria-Ines Alaman Bornes, Necta Montes, Lisa Nafziger (behind), Leni Valeriano, Hanna Tervanotko. (front from left) Cristina Angela Guevarra, Mpume Khanyile, Anabel Jacob, Sa Yun, Carla Khijo, Hee Won, Marlur Win and Wong Yock Leng.

North America makes a bold new start

The WSCF North America region made a bold new start at its regional gathering this July.

Twenty Christian students, WSCF staff members and ecumenical ministry professionals met at Montréal Diocesan Theological College to secure a new future for the WSCF region.

In a radical new move the meeting agreed to renew North America as a full WSCF region, complete with regional committee, regional staff and a new regional office.

Up till now the North America region has been made up of two very different national movements, the Student Christian Movement of Canada and the US Council for Ecumenical Christian Student Ministry (CESCM).

While SCM Canada is a student-led movement that has been part of WSCF since 1921, CESCM was set up in 1990 as an ecumenical body for student ministry supported by its US member churches. This has brought a dynamic to North American regional life whereby staff and students of SCM Canada have often been called on to uphold the organisation of student initiatives in the region.

In the spirit of a new start, two Co-Chairpersons were elected for the region, one each from Canada and the United States.

Newly elected Canadian Co-Chair is Mr Rick Garland, a former General Secretary of SCM Canada and participant in the WSCF global Executive Committee. Rick is currently Co-ordinator of the youth and young adult ministries programme for the United Church of Canada. He believes the new regional structures will strengthen the US movement and bring it the opportunities Canadian students have enjoyed for many years. Rick says the SCM spirit is already there to be fostered in the US:

"I have met so many American Christian



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▲ Participants at the WSCF North America regional gathering: (back from left) Jennifer Janzen-Ball, Tamara Walker, Bianca Robinson, Ken Guest, Sheilagh McGlynn, Douglas Fenton and Dan Gonzalez Ortega. (front from left) Samantha Mills-Wiseman, Christine Myers, Lara Blackwood, Rick Garland, Rufaro Gwarada and Joëlle Morgan.

students who are filled with passion for justice, for the transformative power of the Spirit to create change in this world. And yet, so many of them are limited by the overwhelmingly conservative nature of their government and in some cases, their church"

Rick sees that a stronger role for the North America region will bring the global life of WSCF closer to students in the US and give them the encouragement they need:

"I see this as a chance to create something new for American students. It's an opportunity for building up a community of grass-roots faith-based activists who will have access to the world in a way they can't otherwise"

The North America region's new Co-Chair from the USA is the Rev'd Lara Blackwood, currently Minister to Youth and Young Adults

at First Christian Church (Disciples) in Abilene, Texas. Lara hopes for a new community between the region's two countries in the global context of WSCF,

"I hope for a community in which we can all learn from one another... a community in which U.S. students can learn more about living in solidarity with oppressed peoples throughout the world... a community in which Canadian students can learn more about the realities of U.S. students who struggle for justice within the Empire... a community in which we can share our strengths, be held accountable for our weaknesses and work together for the Kingdom of God"

The North America Regional Committee plans to appoint a new Regional Secretary for the beginning of 2006.

ExCo decides on Geneva for WSCF office

WSCF's global Executive Committee (ExCo) has decided to keep the Inter-Regional Office in the Swiss city of Geneva.

The question of relocating the Inter-Regional Office (IRO) arose due to financial pressures in the 1999-2004 term, when the Geneva office came under scrutiny for its high running costs. A proposal was put forward to move the IRO to one of the regional office locations, thereby saving considerable amounts on salaries, rent and administration.

WSCF has had an office in Geneva since the 1920s and in its current location since 1985. The IRO is based in the Ecumenical Centre, home of the WCC and several other global church organisations and UN Agencies.

In 2004, the incoming ExCo set up a research process to look at the value of Geneva versus

a regional location. WSCF staff prepared research reports and the treasurer was asked to present the financial situation.

Four reports were presented to ExCo, all pointing out the benefits of staying in the international city of Geneva. WSCF Chair Dr Ken Guest affirmed the ongoing value of relationships and connections that can be made in Geneva;

"our location at the Ecumenical Center provides unique opportunities to enhance our image, meet face to face with funding partners and promote our programs"

In a document compiled by WSCF Middle East Secretary Mr Elias El Halabi, the WSCF regional staff pointed out the value of keeping an autonomous location;

"there is a need that the IRO keeps equal distance from all regional desks. Being present at the same physical space or close to any regional desk would jeopardise the comprehensive nature of the IRO"

In his report, WSCF Treasurer Mr Youhanna Kamal Shawky spoke of improvement in the WSCF finances;

"We are pleased to report that the current financial position of the federation has been stabilised. At this point we see no financial imperative for relocating the Geneva office"

The WSCF ExCo concluded that the Inter-Regional Office should remain in Geneva. The decision comes with an ExCo commitment to increase funding levels for global programmes and administration in the future.

WSCF gets ready for WCC Assembly

WSCF leaders are gearing up for a major impact at next year's WCC General Assembly in Porto Alegre. Twenty-six WSCF leaders will meet in Porto Alegre for their global Executive Committee (ExCo) and then go on to attend the WCC General Assembly.

The WSCF ExCo has decided to meet at the assembly to raise WSCF profile and contribute to the assembly's youth-focus,

"We aim to fully participate in this 'open to youth' Assembly. We can contribute empowered Christian students who are schooled and practised in ecumenism" says WSCF Vice-Chair, Ms Adèle Djomo Ngomedje. The assembly's theme, 'God in your grace, transform the world' fits well with WSCF's own renewed vision, 'to prayerfully question the global order and search for just alternatives'.

WSCF General Secretary Mr Michael Wallace believes SCMerS have much to offer to the ecumenical vision for the 21st century:

"The great thing about young people who've been involved in SCM is that they come to ecumenical gatherings as experienced ecumenists. They have considered critically what it means be a Christian today with all its theological and political implications"

Michael believes the time is right to showcase WSCF:

"For too long the story of WSCF's vitality and ecumenical activity has been untold and unheard within the wider ecumenical movement. This assembly is a golden



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▲ Pictured at the first meeting of the 2004-2008 WSCF ExCo are: (from left to right) Udan Fernando (Sri Lanka), Georgine Kengne Djeutane (Cameroon) and Hermione Kingbo (Senegal).

opportunity for WSCF to re-engage with the wider ecumenical family and for the ecumenical family to re-engage with WSCF"

WSCF will lead four workshops in the assembly's ecumenical 'mutirão' (gathering place) on the themes of Gender Justice, Empire, Migration and Students. A display will showcase the work of the federation and WSCF will host a reception for all current and former members present at the assembly.

The WSCF ExCo also plans to support the practical life of the assembly; students, staff and officers will facilitate discussion sessions, take an active part in the ecumenical conversations and lead music and worship.

During the assembly, SCMerS in church delegations and amongst the WCC stewards will join with ExCo members to lead the whole gathering in the 2006 Universal Day of Prayer for Students.

WSCF remembers Brother Roger of Taizé

WSCF was shocked and saddened to learn of the death of Brother Roger of Taizé on August 17, 2005. Brother Roger was stabbed during an evening liturgy at the Taizé community in eastern France and died soon after.

One of the outstanding figures in the ecumenical movement, Brother Roger was a leader in the Swiss SCM while a theology student at Lausanne. He went on to found the ecumenical monastic community at Taizé in 1940. The practical ecumenism of Taizé as well the music, prayers and spirituality of Taizé have had a great influence on many, especially young people, around the world. In Brother Roger we have lost a great ecumenist and SCMer. Please pray for the Taizé community.

WSCF's General Secretary Michael Wallace represented the federation at Br Roger's funeral at Taizé on August 23.

WSCF mourns Executive Committee member

WSCF was saddened by the death of the Rev'd Robert Lubwama on September 6, 2005. An Anglican priest and acting Youth Secretary for the Anglican Church of Uganda, Robert represented Uganda at the 2004 WSCF General Assembly in Chiang Mai. He was a proxy member of the WSCF global Executive Committee for the Africa region and participated in the first meeting of the 2004-2008 ExCo in Chiang Mai. He was a student at Makerere University and was children's worker in the Kamwokya parish.

Please pray for Robert's family and those near to him.

May Br Roger and Fr Robert rest in peace and rise in glory. Amen.

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If you would like to support our work financially, please send a cheque made out to the World Student Christian Federation and post it to us at the Inter-Regional office address above.

If you prefer you can contribute via a direct electronic transfer to our bank account:

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Banque Cantonale de Genève

Swift code: BCGEGHGX

If you would like to make a contribution toward the long-term movement building fund of WSCF, please make a cheque out to "WSCF Centennial Fund" and post it to the WSCF Inter-Regional Office address listed above.

WSCF Inter-Regional Office